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Toward a Renewed Theological Culture: Introduction

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Abstract: This article introduces a series of articles analysing the current state of theology and inquiring about the possibilities of a renewed theological culture (not least within secular societies). It places theology, and more precisely, the conditions of a possible renewal thereof, in several fields of tension. Paradigmatic for secular societies is the tension between theology and the natural sciences. It is argued that theology and the natural sciences cultivate different modes of reasoning on different epistemic levels and that no competition between them has to be construed if one is not caught up in the premises of secularism. A brief summary of each of the contributions follows these initial remarks.

We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all.¹

Introduction

This issue is dedicated to the ongoing debate about the current state of theology² and inquires about the possibilities of ‘a renewed theological culture’.³ We will

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- 1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. Frank P. Ramsey and Charles K. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922), 6.52.
- 2 For an example of this discussion, see the ‘Syndicate Project on the State of Theology’ initiated by Sean Larsen and his *Syndicate Report on the State of Theology* and the ensuing debate as documented here: <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/syndicate-project-on-the-state-of-theology/> (accessed 2 September 2022).
- 3 The contributions to this issue are the fruit of a theological consultation organized and hosted by the Collegium Emmaus and the Center Faith & Society at the University of Fribourg in early 2021.

elaborate below on why such attempts at ‘renewal’ are needed – as do some of the contributions in this issue. Given this way of framing the theme, the essays gathered here explore the following questions: (a) What are new (and at the same time old) ways of doing theology that combine intellectual rigor, spirituality, and social engagement? (b) What is the role of spiritual practices – such as prayer, the study of the Scriptures, the sacramental life and so forth – for academic theology? (c) What is the future of theology as an academic discipline? (d) What contribution (if any) may theology offer toward fostering a renewed academic culture? In answering these questions, scholars from various theological backgrounds and disciplines offer their perspectives on a possible ‘renewal’ of theology in the 21st century. They are peeking beyond the chasm which seems to divide the ‘two cultures’⁴ of the hard sciences and the humanities – and especially theology.

Depending on the tradition and intellectual ‘culture’ in which one is at home, these questions may already seem to transgress boundaries that should remain in place to safeguard academia in its scientific ‘impartiality’ from any interference or instrumentalizing by the churches’ hierarchy or traditional obligations. This view is just one example from many fields of tension in which theology finds itself caught up today: next to this tension between theology’s methodological openness and its commitment to traditions, creeds, and ecclesial authority, one could add the tension between the free and independent enquiry of the ‘scientific’ researcher and her simultaneous call – as a theologian – to obedience to, and worship of, the object of her investigation; yet another is the tension between exclusive Christian truth claims and conflicting truth claims in multi-religious and pluralist societies. Other examples could be added here. Specifically, in Western countries of the northern hemisphere (where the contributors to this issue live and work), theology as an academic discipline (or rather, a cluster of academic disciplines) finds itself today in a particularly precarious situation, commonly linked with the repercussions of the complex processes known as ‘secularisation’.⁵ This challenge is connected with the tension mentioned above between the ‘natural sciences’ on the one hand, and ‘theology as an academic discipline’ on the other.⁶

4 See Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2001 [1959]).

5 See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007); for a broader contextualisation of Taylor’s account, see Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen and Craig Calhoun, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

6 We are concerned here with the renewal of ‘theology’ and cannot engage the debate about either its relationship with philosophy, or philosophy’s relationship with the natural sciences.

Theology and science: A paradigmatic field of tension?

In societies driven by secular imaginaries and dominated by economic modes of reasoning, it is increasingly difficult to justify the financial cost of theological faculties – which are visited by an ever-decreasing number of students – as they are seen as competing with highly profitable institutions advancing the ‘hard’ sciences, technology, and medicine. Thus, theology is under increasing pressure to justify itself among those other more successful and lucrative sciences. In our secular age, ‘theology’, the science of disciplined reflection about God and everything else as it relates to God, is confronted with a climate somewhere between ignorance and hostility toward any reference to or indeed consideration of such ‘a God’. Humankind’s ‘scientific’ endeavour to understand, master, control, and manipulate the world we inhabit – so goes the tale – no longer needs such an impractical ‘hypothesis’. Thus, the former ‘queen of the sciences’ has long been dethroned. Today’s theologians are forced to carve out a more humble existence for themselves, in the shadows cast by the edifice of the ‘hard’ sciences – and sometimes even ‘outside the gates’ (Heb. 13:12), so to speak. Many attempts have been made at maintaining independent territories of theological jurisdiction, be it the realm of subjective religious sentiment, moral refinement, or some transcendent afterlife.⁷ Still, secular society has fundamentally called into question any religious, moral, and specifically theological modes of reasoning. Strikingly though, these conflicts are framed not as a competition between secular and religious modes of reasoning, but between reason and science on the one hand, and revelation and dogmatic faith on the other. Where there is no room for God, there is simply no room for any kind of God-informed ‘reasoning’.

The reaction of theologians to this has often been simply to try to adapt to this new situation. Accordingly, efforts have been made to take a more ‘neutral’ or ‘detached’ stance and to make theology more scientifically viable by working ‘empirically’, and thus ‘scientifically’ – meaning here: operating with methodologies that yield some kind of ‘measurable’ output – or, at least, being ‘science-engaged’.⁸ This resulted in a growing dichotomy between academic theology and the church, on the institutional level, and between theological reasoning and other forms of spiritual practices on the personal level of the

7 For a devastating critique of such approaches, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (=Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 8), Christian Gremmels and John De Gruchy, eds. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 2010), e.g., letter from 30 June 1944.

8 On this relationship between theology and science with regards to the use of ‘scientific methodologies’, see Carmody Grey, ‘A Theologian’s Perspective on Science-Engaged Theology’, *Modern Theology* 37 (2021), pp. 489–94; see also David Bentley Hart, ‘Should Science Think?’, in *Theological Territories* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), pp. 138–52.

theologian's life. While there is nothing to be said against empirical modes of scientific research *per se*, the framing of a competition between the 'hard sciences' and their methodologies, on the one hand, and theological modes of inquiry, on the other, is problematic in several regards.

One historical reason is that the terms 'religion' and 'science' (and one may add 'theology') themselves, as they are being commonly used today, are derived from specific constellations of the 19th century and therefore cannot meaningfully be applied as timeless categories referring to a fundamental conflict.⁹ Peter Harrison keenly observes that the 'conflict myth' is also nurtured by those who advocate fervently 'that science supports religious belief',¹⁰ because in doing so, they still reinforce the specifically modern boundaries between 'science' and 'religion' (or, for that matter, 'science' and 'theology').

A second reason is theological: As the relationship between God and the world, that is, between the Creator and creation, cannot – we suggest – meaningfully be framed in competitive terms (or else one would speak rather about a demiurge than about God),¹¹ so also the relationship between a theological approach to reality and the narrower approach of the 'natural sciences' should not be framed in competition. Ultimately, this would be a confusion of orders, as the kind of knowledge gained through the natural sciences may well be integrated into theological modes of making sense of the world – while the reverse is not necessarily the case. Theology is concerned with reality's relationship with its ultimate ground and final end, and thus with the fundamental 'intelligibility' of the world – an intelligibility that the natural sciences simply need to presuppose in their operational routine. It is in this sense that C.S. Lewis, drawing on a rich Christian tradition, explains the Christian faith referring to a kind of light: 'I believe in Christianity' – he writes – 'as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else'.¹² Considered in this way, theological knowledge, that is, knowledge enlightened by the Christian faith and its historical manifestations, does

9 See Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) and Grey, 'A Theologian's Perspective on Science-Engaged Theology', pp. 489–90. Harrison writes: '[S]omewhat paradoxically, "religion" has now become a contrast case for modern science. Religion is what science is not: a kind of negative image of science, and this contrast has become important for the integrity of the boundaries of science. It follows, to a degree, that the legitimacy of modern science depends on its capacity to compensate for what once was offered by religion, or if not, in demonstrating that we can dispense with it'. (Harrison, *Territories*, p. 187).

10 See Harrison, *Territories*, pp. 197–8.

11 Kathryn Tanner has made a well-known, convincing case for a 'non-competitive' framing of this relationship in *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2 ed., 2005).

12 C.S. Lewis, 'Is Theology Poetry?', in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 140.

not necessarily compromise ‘scientific’ modes of knowledge. Rather, the knowledge of God – even if only attained *per speculum et in aenigmate* (1 Cor. 13:12) – grounds and sustains all other modes of knowing. Attaining ‘the vision of God’ is not just the goal of religious practices of *ascesis*, but also the condition of possibility for any kind of finite (also scientific) knowledge. Therefore all of these varying modes of knowing need to be cultivated because our conceptualization of anything that is in the world is ultimately dependent on our conceptualization of reality as a whole – the whole is in every part, and the universal in every particular, and we implicitly claim to know everything in any claim to know anything.¹³ It is in this sense that G.K. Chesterton argued that Thomas Aquinas could philosophize the whole world, beginning with the study of a worm. He writes that Aquinas ‘did not, like a modern specialist, study the worm as if it were the world; but he was willing to begin to study the reality of the world in the reality of the worm’.¹⁴ Thus the theological mode of knowing reality as the created gift of the Creator corresponds to confidence in the scientific knowability of reality, its laws and workings – this confidence, it must be added, does not rest on premature conclusions or the illusion of infallibility and finality in our human understanding, precisely because this would go against both the principles of the scientific method and the Christian faith in a Truth that transcends all human understanding.¹⁵

Coming back to the fundamental scrutiny of theology as an academic discipline in today’s secular climate, what seems needed in terms of a ‘renewal’ of theology is thus not only a reconsideration and integration of decidedly ‘modern’ modes of reasoning or the inclusion of ‘empirical’ methods into theological work (even though that might be fruitfully done!), but a reconsideration of what reality is, what it means and how we can know it. In this perspective, any attempt to ‘modernize’ theology does well to also ‘scrutinize’ modernity – especially its methodologically delimited approaches to knowing, conceptualizing, and modeling the ‘world’ of which we all try to make sense.

On the contributions in this issue

The six essays in this issue address the questions mentioned above from differing – and sometimes conflicting – points of view and thus provide the reader with a vivid picture of theological work today. This picture is rich with agreements and tensions, converging and diverging concerns, questions, styles, and methodologies. Most notable are the rifts in theological cultures between the United States and Europe and between the English- and the German-speaking intellectual worlds and

13 See Grey, ‘A Theologian’s Perspective on Science-Engaged Theology’, p. 494, following D.L. Schindler, ‘The Given as Gift: Creation and Disciplinary Abstraction in Science’, *Communio* 38 (2011), pp. 52–102.

14 G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Image Books, 2014), p. 66.

15 See Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

their respective theological cultures. We are fully aware of the fact that the essays, even if they touch more than tangentially on issues of minorities and questions of race, represent to a large extent well-established majority voices.

Matthew Croasmun's essay, 'Theology For the Life of the World', takes up the vision 'for the future of academic theology that serves the church and the world' that he and Miroslav Volf mapped out in *For the Life of the World*.¹⁶ Croasmun places the question of 'the good life' or the shape of 'flourishing life' in different material contexts that shape its urgency today: inequality, ecology, displacement and pluralism, and he correlates them with 'intellectual habits' which inform the conversation. He thus sketches a theology that integrates the unity of understanding, interpretation, and application practically.

In his contribution titled 'Generous Orthodoxy', Graham Tomlin traces the origin and maps the meaning of 'Generous Orthodoxy' as a particular way of doing theology. Giving attention first to 'orthodoxy' and then putting it in balance with 'generosity', Tomlin envisions a theology in which thinking with the Scriptures and creeds and living generously in the world go hand in hand and produce a public witness to the God revealed in Jesus Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit.

Jennifer A. Herdt ('Forming Humanity as a Threefold Task') analyses what she sees as the core 'theological-ethical' task: 'forming humanity' in the face of blatant inhumanity that we observe daily in the newspapers. Herdt traces this task through three modes of human self-reflection and creative action: the archaic, historicist, and evolutionary. These modes are framed by a theological *exitus-reditus* scheme, in which humankind ultimately exists as the glory of God but can also understand itself and other creatures as finite expressions of that same glory.

In his contribution ('Hope: Being Human in the Anthropocene'), Graham Ward reflects upon the 'failure' of theological reflection in light of situations that blatantly run counter to the stories, expectations and categories of Christian salvation. He asks what a theology would look like if it were articulated by those whose circumstances prevent them from a flourishing life. Ward argues that theology must integrate God's goodness and love with such harsh realities and learn from those who are living these realities daily. Such learning cannot be an abstract exercise; it needs to be an ethical-theological transformation of life, changing both perspective and behaviour.

Fr. John Behr, in 'Seeing, Embodying, and Proclaiming Christ', observes the rift between theology and the other disciplines as well as the rift within theology itself, while envisioning a more integrated view. First, Behr reflects upon the second-century martyr Blandina and her depiction by Irenaeus. He then develops an account of theology that begins with a transformation of vision, allowing theologians to see, embody, and witness to Christ.

16 Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019).

In the final contribution, ‘Thinking Faith’, Anne Käfer sets out to characterize the task of academic theology as a scientific reflection of faith, which contributes to the clarity of belief and assists its understanding among the community of believers and its communication also beyond that community. Käfer addresses two typical challenges of academic theology today: a legalistic account of a ‘vengeful God’ and a construed opposition between science and faith. Ultimately, a ‘thinking faith’ offers valuable ethical and practical insights for our pluralistic societies.

We hope this collection of articles will help theologians think in fresh, stimulating ways about their work and vocation in the contemporary context.