THEOLOGY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE
Challenges in Contemporary Theology

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Challenges in Contemporary Theology is a series aimed at producing clear orientations in, and research on, areas of ‘challenge’ in contemporary theology. These carefully coordinated books engage traditional theological concerns with mainstreams in modern thought and culture that challenge those concerns. The ‘challenges’ implied are to be understood in two senses: those presented by society to contemporary theology, and those posed by theology to society.

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Preface

I have been teaching theology of religions for some 22 years and inevitably one reflects on the institutional context of one’s intellectual work, for me, the university. This book is the result of such reflection. I hope it will interest those concerned with the future of the university in Anglo-American culture and those who believe that the university might be other than the intellectual production line in the industrial halls of late postmodern capitalist society. This book is also addressed to those who teach and study the disciplines called “theology” or “religious studies” (or “comparative religion” or “history of religion”). To the former, it is yet another voice in a growing symphony that imagines a vital public role for theology so that it may serve both the Church and the wider secular and inter-religious culture in which we live. To the latter, it is a challenge to consider a theologizing of their discipline. In the final chapter of the book I indicate how this theologizing of all disciplines is what might characterize a theologized university—a Christian university. Thus, this book might also be of interest to Christian intellectuals who may sometimes wonder what their Christian identity has to do with their university work. Hence, I address a triangular and often overlapping audience: the Church, the university, and the “public square” made up, as it is, of the former two, but also other religions, secularism, and various ideologies.

In chapter one, “Theology’s Babylonian Captivity in the Modern University,” I reflect on the sense in which both theology and the major site of its production, the modern university, have been secularized. I speak of England and the United States in what follows. This has profound consequences, two of which I explore. The first, more related to my own intellectual interests, is the birth and development of religious studies. I argue that religious studies is locked into an Oedipal relation with theology, as it is in fact a child of secularized forms of theology, and its logic leads to the demise of theology.
Concerned as I have been with theology of religions, I suggest that the reverse would be more productive. I argue for a theological religious studies, for the theologizing of a discipline (religious studies) that should properly serve theology. An example of this is found in chapter five. The second consequence of the secularization of the university and theology within it has been the fragmentation of the disciplines. The rationale for the modern university is increasingly consumerist, reflecting our Anglo-American context. And often it is the Arts subjects, including theology, that are seen as most difficult to justify in financial and educational terms: a theology degree does not obviously help one to become a good economist, nurse, or bus driver. On the contrary, I suggest that theology’s pivotal place in the origins of the university in Europe rightly implies that it, with philosophy, has the ability to unify the disciplines. I return to this unifying possibility in chapter six. The consequence of this analysis is my argument for a Christian university, rather than for internal plurality within the modern liberal university. I want to argue that theology can best serve secular society by being properly theological, capable of articulating a vision that both challenges and embraces the best of modernity. This is one virtue of theology.

I am Roman Catholic so I try to work this out in terms of a Catholic vision, drawing heavily on certain Catholic sources, even though many of the most inspiring theologians I have read have been non-Catholics. (I use “Catholic” to mean “Roman Catholic” for brevity’s sake, fully realizing that the word can be properly applied more widely.) I started this book envisaging arguments for a Christian university, but soon realized that too many denomination-specific issues had to be faced. Hence, my strategy has been to present arguments for a Catholic university, not in an ecumenical spirit, but rather the opposite. It is important first to envisage what a Catholic university might look like, and other denominations might do the same, before we Christians might work together toward a “Christian university.” Certainly, in England, this is more plausible than a denominational institution, even though historically all the major universities that were Christian were first Congregationalist, Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, or of other denominations, and then “Christian.” I very much hope that non-Catholic readers can enter into the project, realizing that glorifying Christ in the academy has to be worked from the bottom up, through our respective ecclesial communities.

In the second chapter, “Babylon in the Church: The United States and England,” I selectively test my comments about the state of the modern university in relation to the United States and England. Reading chapter one, a response might be: “what you say may be true of secular universities, but there are many church-based universities in the United States. Surely the
plurality of education you seek can be found in such contexts?” In the United States I focus on Catholic institutions primarily. Although there are glimmers of hope and flashes of brightness, I chart a slow “dying of the light,” the growing secularization of the very institutions that might challenge modernity and postmodernity’s habits of thought and practice. In England there is a very different situation. There are no great Christian universities left, even in name, as in the United States. However, the history of English universities follows some similar patterns: from church-based institutions of higher learning to secularized universities. Chapter two serves to act as an empirical fleshing out and testing of the thesis of chapter one. It leaves me with a number of further questions regarding the plausibility of the type of Christian university I am proposing, in terms of its social divisiveness, its academic freedom and accountability, and funding.

These issues are the topic of chapter three: “Cyrus Returns: Rebuilding the Temple in Babylon.” I argue that liberal modernity is in fact committed to religious plurality and diversity in society and that these goals are best served, in some circumstances, by helping religious communities to learn and practice their traditions faithfully. In the intellectual realm, this means the funding of “sectarian” universities only in so far as they are committed to the “common good” and engagement with other traditions. These two requirements are actually generated from my own theological position, but overlap with elements of modernity. Hence, my metaphor of Cyrus, King of the Medes and Persians, who helped the Jews rebuild the temple, allowing a return to Jerusalem and suggesting that those who remained in Babylon help finance the project in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 36: 22). I inspect the arguments about sectarianism, in part, to explode some of the rhetorical stances taken by critics of the type of position I’m advancing, and in part to respond to some very genuine concerns. After trying to address such concerns, I examine the complex issues of the accountability, freedoms, and funding of a Catholic university in the United States. Can the university serve the Church and society at the same time? If it is Catholic, will it not skew things to the advantage of a minority interest group in our pluralist society? And should society pay for institutions that are accountable primarily to minority communities that can often launch truculent criticism of that wider society? Part of my answer is that the accountability of theologians and others in a Church university, while a complex matter, is no different, formally speaking, from accountability in all professions and all disciplines. And most importantly, there is no clear case that academic freedom is called into question. Rather, the opposite may occur: genuine creativity and interdisciplinary research may occur in universities accountable to a unified vision of life, grace, and love.
Having cleared the ground a little, and I realize that many objections still remain, I turn to a distinctive aspect of a Christian university in chapter four, “Why Theologians Must Pray for Release from Exile,” that of prayer. At this point I abandon the rational argumentative mode of the first three chapters and will proceed as if the reader is in agreement with the basic project I’m advancing. Up until now, I have been trying to persuade those who might not share my view. This now changes and the following chapters (four–six) speak from within a model of a Catholic university to show how things might be otherwise. They are snapshots of a place that is yet to be built by ecclesial communities (together or alone) in democratic societies. They are also snapshots based on various fragmentary practices within existing Christian—and secular—universities. So in chapter four I chose prayer for two reasons. Prayer is hardly ever imagined as part of the methodology of a rigorous academic discipline. I argue that it is precisely this, both in the history of theology until the modern period, and as a necessary epistemological presupposition. Second, I trace the way in which this necessary requirement for the doing of theology actually forces a reconsideration of the traditional disciplinary lines internal to the discipline called “theology.” Theology’s own house needs a spring clean. As the argument proceeds I illustrate instances of the fruitfulness of dissolving traditional boundaries, thereby returning theology to a profounder integration with itself and with other disciplines in a manner not unknown prior to modern university “specialization.” It is this rich dynamic tradition that offers both the Church and the secular world a considered alternative to the dead ends of modernity and postmodernity, while nevertheless recognizing their great strengths.

In chapter five, “The Engagement of Virtue: A Theological Religious Studies,” I return to the discipline of “religious studies” to show what it might look like when theologized. It also allows me to draw together a number of themes. In the early chapters I argued for the practice of virtue for undertaking theology. I return to virtue in a case study of a Christian “saint,” Edith Stein, and a Hindu “goddess,” a sati, Roop Kanwar. I had argued in chapter four that the saint embodies theology, and thus the embodiment of both Stein and Kanwar is my focus here. Their theologically narrated lives generate a painful but challenging conversation regarding virtue and its cross-religious and gendered aspects. Edith Stein’s canonization caused much controversy, leading to a high-level Jewish delegation’s visit to the Pope in an attempt to block the process. A number of important Catholic theologians supported this Jewish plea. Roop Kanwar’s death as a young sati caused horror and revulsion in India and abroad. What might these two women have in common, other than their controversial lives? Virtue? This chapter also exemplifies the sense in which I believe a Christian
university and its theologians can reach outwards, engaging creatively and positively, but not uncritically, with all creation—and in this instance, Hinduism.

In chapter six, I develop this theological vision to relate to other disciplines, with philosophy, as mediator, and pay particular attention to physics and cosmology, to see whether fragmentation can be overcome. I chose physics and cosmology as they are often presented as totally unrelated to theology, a discipline that many might think would look entirely similar were it in a secular liberal university or a Catholic university. I hope to show otherwise. Thus, I try to avoid two usual intersections between these subjects: points of conflict, and the need for an ethical or religious stance regarding the use of technology. I also take this test case, not in a search for an overarching philosophy or ideology, but to see whether the unity of all creation, assumed theologically, might promote health, interconnectedness, and developments between different disciplines. In chapter three I had touched on this issue with specific reference to the vision of a “Catholic university” set forth by Pope John Paul II. Chapter six fleshes that out a little, testing papal documents in terms of a specific discipline. If the results look promising, then there are further good reasons to argue for a Catholic university. What can be said of this relationship obviously cannot simply be applied to other disciplines. Carrying out this long meticulous and complex task belongs to the Catholic university and has hardly been started. Such a university’s existence would be invaluable to the Church as it would provide the intellectual life-blood permitting a rich description of what all creation looks like from a Christian perspective. To facilitate this, alongside different views and practices of knowledge (postmodern, modern, Buddhist, Jewish, don’t knows, and so on) will structurally supports real plurality. Only then can we have the debates that are necessary to deal with pluralism, peace, truth, and justice. Without such diversity, there will be little new progress, little challenge from really different alternatives, and in Christian terms, the stifling of a theological voice in the public square.

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