Challenges in Contemporary Theology

Series Editors: Gareth Jones and Lewis Ayres

Canterbury Christ Church University College, UK and Emory University, US

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THEOLOGY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Church, Academy, and Nation

Gavin D’Costa
For Sachin and Roshan
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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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(Feast of All Saints, 2004)
Chapter One

Theology’s Babylonian Captivity in the Modern University

I Should “Theology” and “Religious Studies” Be Terminated?

Since this book is concerned with the health of theology and the Church’s engagement with cultures, it might seem rather odd to begin with a question that intimates the termination of theology within the university, the very place that is central to the future of Anglo-American theology. But as the Israelites found out, living in Babylon can have the effect of purifying the faith as well as destroying it. In what follows I shall be suggesting that theology’s location within the modern western secular liberal university is not unlike the Israelite captivity within Babylon. Theology, properly understood, cannot be taught and practiced within the modern university. This is not a view shared by all Christians, but is held by a number of post-liberal theologians and philosophers, such as Stanley Hauerwas, John Milbank, and Alasdair MacIntyre.¹

One way of noticing this Babylonian captivity is in the arguments that are conducted in the modern university about the role of theology. The view

expressed by some scientific atheists (Richard Dawkins, for example) is that theology has no place in the modern university. It is a vestige of a religious world and society which has long since crumbled and been discredited. It is a disservice to a modern research university to include such a subject in the curriculum. A similar voice is heard from some who teach in departments of religious studies. Donald Wiebe, for example, argues that a scientific, objective, rational study of “religion,” without any privilege being granted to any one religion, is the only intellectually respectable practice in the modern university. Dawkins and Wiebe have one presupposition in common, which I shall be calling into question: that there is such a thing as neutral objectivity in any mode of research, either science, Dawkins’s own area, or religious studies, Wiebe’s specialism. However, in another sense I agree with Dawkins’s and Wiebe’s conclusions, but for very different reasons. What are these reasons? In the next section of this chapter I want to look at the process of secularization, as it has affected both the university and the discipline of theology. Secularization is a much debated topic, and I use the word to connote two specific historical processes. The foundation of the universities took place in a universe with a sacred canopy, whereby people understood their practices to relate to an organic and cosmic pattern participating in the nature of reality. This reality was divinely created for the good of men and women, for the flourishing of human society, and for participation in truth and love. The modern university, with some exceptions, in contrast, develops its programs and practices without any reference to a sacred canopy. Often finance is the chief criterion, without any organic vision of the relation of the different disciplines, without any shared values regarding the good of men and women, or concerning what truth might possibly be. Augustine, well before the universities were founded, carried out a scathing critique of pagan institutions of learning: their main purpose being vanity in so far as they served purely to gain better employment, and self-promotion.

2 Richard Dawkins, Professor of the Public Understanding of Sciences at the University of Oxford, contributes to popular discussion on the matter in English newspapers. For one example, among many other debates and discussions, see The Daily Telegraph, March 16, 2002.


This removal of the sacred canopy in institutional terms is one definition of secularism and it is one reason why I believe Dawkins and Wiebe are correct. The attendant sense denotes the way in which the process of secularization both creates and is created by various intellectual presuppositions embedded in our intellectual institutions. Of course, institutions do not have ideas, people do. But, through their organization and processes, institutions always reflect ideas about the good, the true, and the worthwhile. By briefly examining the secularizing of the university and the discipline called theology, I hope at least to indicate why Dawkins is correct: theology cannot flourish in the modern university. However, I think Dawkins is also wrong for two reasons. The modern university, like modern secular societies in England and the United States, has a strong commitment to liberal pluralism: cultural, intellectual, and religious diversity. In principle, it should be committed to facilitating real diversity, as opposed to Dawkins’s impulse to be rid of it. Further, if theology can argue that it is a real intellectual discipline and requires a different sort of university for its health, and, if it were healthy, would be a contributor to the common good, then in principle, liberals should be willing to entertain funding this alternative university for the common good, and the flourishing of real pluralism. In chapter three I shall be pursuing this argument in some depth, facing a number of serious objections to such a “sectarian” proposal, not least the question of funding, and the problem of the authority under which such a university is finally accountable. In much of this I draw on the experience of Roman Catholic universities in the United States. Every country is different and internally diverse. However, because I happen to be a Roman Catholic Christian, I

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6 I deal only with universities in England, as the university system in Scotland and Wales has originated and evolved in differing circumstances. Furthermore, the Colleges of Higher Education have a different history from that of the universities, even though both are part of “higher education.” Because of this, I exclude them from consideration, despite their now forming the “new universities.” See “Religious Studies in the Universities,” covering England (Adrian Cunningham), Scotland (Andrew F. Walls), Wales (Cyril Williams), and the Open University (Terence Thomas), in ed. Ursula King, Turning Points in Religious Studies, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1990, pp. 21–67. Ireland is also excluded from this study although it presents a most interesting contrast. The university has developed very differently in Europe and North America. See on this: ed. Sheldon Rothblatt, The European and American University Since 1800: Historical and Sociological Essays, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993; and for the period before that: ed. James M. Kittelson, Rebirth, Reform, and Resilience: Universities in Transition, 1300–1700, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1984; and the two-volume work edited by Hilde de Ridder-Symoens, Universities in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1800, vol. 1, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, and vol. 2, 1996. Antonio García y García traces the history of the faculty of theology during this period in volume 1. The practice of theology in the developing world is contextually so different that I do not attempt to engage with this important field.
have focussed more on Catholic universities. This is not intended as an un-
ecumenical gesture, and I do believe that in England there is more chance
of a Christian university than a Catholic university, but it is necessary to
work out ideas and practice with some sensible focus. I very much hope that
Christians of all denominations can find something in this exploration and
bring their rich heritage to bear on the question and further the discussion.

But what of Wiebe’s proposals? At least, unlike Dawkins, he wishes to
retain the place of religion in the university. In the third section of this
chapter, I shall be arguing that his type of position is called into question
because of its methodological assumptions, shared by Dawkins: that a
neutral, objective, rational study is the only method permissible in the uni-
versity. In fact, I would wish to go further and argue that the discipline of
“religious studies,” as conceived by some of its major theoreticians, is intel-
lectually flawed, such that it, not theology, has a contestable place in the
modern research university. I want to argue that the legitimate place for the
study of religions is within a theological religious studies, such that world
religions are part of a theological curriculum. As it exists under Wiebe’s
model, it is a secular study of religions, privileging secularism, over against
the objects of study. Wiebe’s desire to escape from ideology is utterly ideo-
logical. I should make it very clear that I am not contesting religious studies’
role in the modern university; rather, I contest some forms of it, regarding
their self-description.

Two further clarifications before proceeding with my argument. In this
first chapter I shall be making apparently sweeping comments about the
modern university. I beg the reader’s patience, as in chapter two I attempt to
check these comments against empirical studies of universities in the United
States and England. For certain readers, it may be worth reading chapter two
first if they are unconvinced that there is a problem with the health of theol-
ogy. Such a reader might say two things: there are Christian universities in
the United States, so what is all the fuss about? They may add: Christians,
like yourself, argue that it is impossible to do in the modern university pre-
cisely what you are doing. Does that not show that the modern university
encourages pluralism far more than is admitted in the arguments of this
book? To the first question, I respond in chapter two that American Christ-
ian research universities have already lost their salt, or are in the process of
doing so. They retain their Christian character primarily by having a Mass on
holy days, having well-resourced chaplaincies, and being actively involved in
social work to the poor and less privileged. These features are very impor-
tant, and I think they are a vital element of a Christian university, but they
are not enough to constitute a Christian university. Many secular universities
might boast all three of these features. Further, the deeper question is, how
does the Mass, or prayer meeting, affect the curriculum, the interrelationship of the disciplines, or the research methodologies utilized not only in theology but other disciplines? Very few universities, hardly any among those studied, can answer these questions in any form of thick description. I argue, with a number of significant American scholars, that Christian universities are dying or dead in the United States. The second question is admittedly uncomfortable. Yes, I write this book with research leave from my own secular liberal university, Bristol, and my colleagues generously tolerate my writing suggesting that our department be closed down. I also enjoy good rigorous conversation with colleagues within the university who come at issues from very different angles. I am not arguing that the modern liberal university be closed, but rather that alternative universities be encouraged alongside it, to facilitate long-term serious intellectual pluralism. Such universities can train new generations in alternative intellectual traditions of theory and practice, rather than perpetuating a single non-sacred intellectual canopy. Currently there is a worrying (although predictable) homogeneity, and a real commitment to pluralism is better served by training those who are different (from the secularist) to develop their traditions rigorously. This issue will be dealt with both at the end of this chapter and in the first section of chapter three.

II On (Not) Doing Theology in the Modern University

Let me now turn to plotting the narrative of theology in its pre-university days and then from the thirteenth century, its university career, which has lasted until today. Theology became deeply transformed from the fourteenth century on, with particular seismic movements in the Reformation of the sixteenth century and the Renaissance, and the earthquake of the seventeenth century with the rise of the new natural sciences. The nineteenth century was the decisive turning point, although the seeds for that moment had been planted much earlier, with the new Enlightenment research university founded in Berlin. Theology lived under a very dark cloud.

The four aspects that I shall focus on are as follows. First, I will show how the discipline of theology becomes separated from the practices that are required for its undertaking: prayer, sacraments, and virtue. Second, in rough tandem, but not with exact parallels, I will trace how university theology became prised from ecclesial life so that it now often succumbed to alien philosophies, methodologies, and models for its very life-blood, a blood that would subsequently infect Church life. Admittedly, this has