

What Athens has to do with Jerusalem: The Wisdom of Reason, the Publics of Theology

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Abstract: This paper, specifically composed to provide a vision for theology in the University of Newcastle NSW, offers a series of reflections that suggest first, that at present the very idea of a “university” is itself under pressure and in danger of becoming meaningless; secondly, that theology, conceived broadly through a pedagogical model of *paideia*, can engage in critical conversation over the identity of the university; and, thirdly, that theology, as a university discipline, can be properly ordered in terms of an ongoing conversation.

WHEN A POST-VICTORIAN, particularly post-1992, university in the UK asks about the relationship between theology and the university, invariably it tends to do so contemptuously. How dare theology presume to be an intellectual discipline appropriate to the disciples of higher education, putting in the university space ungrounded conceptual nonsense and confused reasoning! Given its recent commitment to the study and teaching of theology that, of course, I assume, is not a position at least publicly open to the University of Newcastle. Consequently a paper like this can be offered in a spirit of inquiry and provocative disputation to open up a series of conversations on the nature of intellectual work, and in particular theologians’ contributions to the *uni*-versity.

WHEN THE UNIVERSITY SLIPS FROM CULTIVATING ATHENIAN CHARACTER:
THE END OF EDUCATION

Questions about the relationship between theology and the university, however, consistently tend to be handled in ways that do not attend to critical consideration of the key term “university”. Yet several

recent discussions would suggest that claims made for the university as an environment of freedom and responsibility, democracy and accountability, such as those made in 1964 by Mathematics Professor Alexander Wittenberg, now look distinctly antiquated – at least in a British academic environment and more broadly, given recent shifts.¹ Apparently “university” itself has become a contested term, having undergone significant modifications not merely in its practical operations but even more radically in its very *rules* of meaning and its sense of identity.

Talk of rules here may seem a little odd for a discourse about “freedom”, but by this I mean a way of providing ordered policies that is underpinned by a particular understanding or set of understandings. Such a way enables judgements to be made concerning what education is, what counts as learning and what does not; and also for what distinguishes a *university* from, say, a high school, or even further afield, a farmer’s market, a pop concert, or a cricket match. The rules are not merely descriptive of what higher educators provide, compared with cricket coaches, radio DJs, or school janitors, for instance. But they are normative and prescriptive of certain possibilities for educational performance – they bind you and me to doing certain things and not others. As Paulo Freire observed some years ago, “There is no such thing as a neutral education process.”² Education, as training, always involves a being formed in and for something. This is why it makes sense to ask questions of identification, of the identity of the self under educational formation according to the goals of educational policy. Academic policy is far from neutral and value-free when it conducts its business on the basis of what John Webster specifically calls “a particular ‘anthropology of enquiry’...an account of the intellectual life, of what intellectual selfhood ought to look like”.³

Just what the shape of the regulating anthropology has, so the argument proceeds, ironically subverts the very idea of the university itself. The educational ideology is consistently being generated by a certain set of conditions in late capitalism so that, in the words of Edward Farley, the university’s various disciplines “are no longer the primary social agents of the university’s endeavours”.⁴

1. Alexander Wittenberg, “The Relationship Between Religion and the Educational Function of the University”, in Jaroslav Jan Pelikan *et al* (eds.), *Religion and the University: The Frank Gerstein Lectures 1964* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964) 125-26.

2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 56.

3. John Webster, *Theological Theology: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered Before the University of Oxford on 27 October 1997* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 4.

4. Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) 35.

Talk of “pluralism”, “difference” and “particularity” dominates discussions of the period of late capitalism or the supposedly “post-modern condition”, and educational analysts frequently claim that with the disciplinary fragmentation, to use a cliché, “uni-versity” has become a *multi-versity*.⁵ Nonetheless, there are grounds for identifying something of an emerging “overarching metanarrative that purports to explain the reality” of the universities, and proscribe policy possibilities for them.⁶ The culture-making performance of the global economy now contains, modifies and even subverts this supposed “difference”, and in turn provides a unifying sense of “vision” that regulates higher education sensibility and policy direction, both from within and from without the universities themselves. As the Cologne Charter of the G8 summit of 1999 declares, “Globalisation is...the organising framework within which current ideas and beliefs about adult learning are given value and priority by politicians.”⁷

What is more controversial, however, and yet considerably more significant, is the evaluative reasoning applied to this condition: the linking of global free-market economics to *values*. The typical claim is that globalisation of the free markets impacts and regulates what is *done*, and it is here that the Cologne Charter’s talk of giving *priority* for educational policy consideration has its place. Yet free market apologists like Friedrich Hayek, who want to claim that the market provides the space for the exercise of freedom and is thus an ethically neutral space, fail to recognise that the global economic arrangement reaches deeper – into the very soul of society and self – since it functions as a set of values that shape identity, and, given that it is hegemonic largely by virtue of being relatively uncontested, as an ideology.⁸ For instance, Francis Fukuyama’s statement that the free markets have “succeeded in producing unprecedented levels of material prosperity, both in industrially developed countries and in countries that had been, at the close of World War II part of the impoverished Third World”, may well not be factually incorrect, but is far

5. See Robert McAfee Brown, “Theology and Education”, in Daniel T. Jenkins (ed.), *The Scope of Theology* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1965) 229-30.

6. Susan White, “A New Story to Live By”, *TransMission* (Spring 1998), 3-4 (4), cited in Craig Bartholomew, “Christ and Consumerism: An Introduction”, in Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz, *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000) 2. Cf. Steven Miles, *Consumerism as a Way of Life* (London: Sage, 1998) 1.

7. G8 Summit, *Cologne Charter: Aims and Ambitions for Lifelong Learning* (Cologne, 1999), <http://www.g8.utoronto.ca/summit/19999koln/charter.htm>, cited in Jane Thompson, “The Road to Hell...”, in Brid Connolly, Ted Fleming, David McCormack, & Anne Ryan (eds.), *Radical Learning for Liberation 2* (Dublin: MACE, 2007) 32.

8. See Richard H. Roberts, *Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 3.

from being value free.⁹ Indeed, Fukuyama's reading of neo-liberalism is so grounded in a neo-Hegelian messianic eschatology inspired by Alexandre Kojève, that Jacques Derrida, among others, is prompted to suggest that it is a "Gospel" marketed with "neo-evangelistic" rhetorical zeal.¹⁰ Hayek also predicates his proposals for the free market economy on *evaluative* ontological judgements relating to the freedom *to be*, the *good* of unfettered competition, and so on.

Consequently, more ardent neo-liberals make a *conceptual mistake* when they fail to acknowledge the markets' contingency, or notice that stress on freedom of "choice", contexts for prosperity, competitive profit maximalisation, commodification and consumability, and so on, are themselves evaluative judgements as to what is most valuable and ultimately good for, the ordered conditioning of public relations.

Now I offer these observations firstly, as an observation on the constructed and thus contingent nature of market relations; secondly, as an appeal not to fail to subject the beliefs to rigorous testing; and thirdly, as a broad description of the conditions within which the universities live, breathe and make policy decisions. Thus I offer them as a way of providing an insight into the shifting shape of the very things that condition universities' reasoning about what types of things they are, what they value as good, and what should actually drive them.

Here I want to offer briefly a few examples of frequently voiced worries concerning the cost of market driven education as it has been shaped in the UK and let that implicitly interrogate the universities of Australia. Uniting them all is something indicated in a *Times Higher Education* observation – three quarters of UK based academics believe the British government's policy encouragement of the performance-oriented culture is harming the quality of research and, we should add, student learning.¹¹

In a globalised free market economy, as sociologist Don Slater argues, "all social relations, activities and objects can in principle be exchanged as commodities".¹² It is particularly the increasingly observable reduction of education to consumer produce, on the one hand, and the universities to the capital market, on the other, that spawns

9 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History: By Way of an Introduction" (1992), www.csf.colorado.edu/mirrors/ma...t/philosophy/works/us/fukuyama.htm, accessed 28-06-01. Cf. R. Barnett and J. Cavanagh, *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

10. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) 59.

11. John Gill, "Researchers Believe Results Culture Puts Quality at Risk", *Times Higher Education* (10 April 2008) 4. Cf. Conrad Russell, *Academic Freedom* (London: Routledge, 1993) 3.

12. D. Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997) 27.

some startlingly far reaching practical implications concerning not merely the nature and goal of education, but the politics of whom education serves.¹³

For instance, the UK's *Times Higher Education* (hereafter *THE*) reports, "subject choices have become driven less by academic considerations and more by what they might lead to beyond academia".¹⁴ Students progressively develop strategic degree and course selections determined not by the principle of learning in itself or personal formation, but more by pragmatic considerations of potential results, resulting in an obsession with grades, and so-called "transferrable skills".¹⁵ As well as constituting a trivialisation of education, according to critics like Mark Cartledge, pressure is consequently applied to disciplines that attempt to maintain their academic rigour, continue to train in the pedagogical craft of complex reasoning, and finally hope to maintain operational class sizes.¹⁶

On the one hand, discipline-specific study can become fixed on entertainment value – quiz show general interest knowledge. On the other, educationalist Jane Thompson comments, "curiosity, creativity and critical thinking" become less important than utilitarianly conceived skills training, or *techné*, for a more productive and efficient workforce.¹⁷ It is for this reason, she complains, that "civil society has lost its dedicated resource for emancipatory learning, in exchange for a professional community of practice, mandated by government, to deliver a centralised vision of planned social engineering".¹⁸

Such educational technocracy is, many scholars habitually complain, a particularly bad fit for the substance of most of the Humanities. Even as far back as 1965, Stanford's then Professor of Religion Robert McAfee Brown alleged that the university's pluralistic practices themselves had come under threat from an emerging overarching educational *telos*, and it would seem that the Humanities have

13. See Richard Barnett, *The Limits of Competence: Knowledge, Higher Education and Society* (Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 1994) 4; James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield, *Saving Higher Education in the Age of Money* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005) 2.

14. Harriet Swain, "Fashion Victims", *Times Higher Education* (17-23 April, 2008) 32-33.

15. See Elizabeth Lillie, "The Humanities: From Ivory Tower to Marketplace", in Richard Barnett (ed.), *Learning to Effect* (Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 1992) 121-134.

16. Mark J. Cartledge, "Christian Ministry and the Quality Assurance Agency: An Epistemological Critique", *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies* 4.2 (2005) 38.

17. Jane Thompson, *Stretching the Academy: The Politics and Practices of Widening Participation in Higher Education* (Leicester: NIACE, 2000) 43. Cf. J. Feld, *Lifelong Learning and the New Social Order* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham, 2000).

18. Thompson, *Stretching the Academy*, 44.

been on the defensive thereafter.¹⁹ Unsurprising in this context was the announcement in 2003 by Tony Blair's then Minister for Education that the public funding of the study of medieval texts was a luxury that could not be justified.²⁰ It is this pressure that forces Humanities disciplines to produce meaningful and profitably marketable self-justifications under the guise of "transferable skills", rather than having these skills housed under the category of secondary effect.

A second broad implication is observed by Lyn Tett of the University of Edinburgh: "university knowledge can easily become a commodity to be bought by those who have the necessary economic resources",²¹ and consequently damage is done in practice to the political rhetoric of "widening participation" – the poorest are increasingly excluded from the progressively more expensive consumable product of higher education at undergraduate level, and even many of the so-called middle class are financially unable to undertake postgraduate research.

In the third place, there are significant doubts that, in Lord Conrad Russell's phrase, a market ethic of "battery higher education"²² can suitably provide appropriate care for the "customer" except insofar as care is practised as an advertising strategy. The "student as customer" is hereby reduced to an object rather than a learning subject, an object for the competitive advantage of the educational establishment (in particular its wealth and international standing). What Duncan Forrester worries about with regard to professional health care is equally applicable to issues involved in the provision of higher education: "If the market is allowed to pervade the caring professions, true caring is corroded."²³

In the fourth place, leaving aside the common practical complaints that too much time is being diverted from research to basic administrative tasks, concern is levelled at intensively market driven university management strategies. It was partly due to the professions' and business' demand for value for money that the measurable regulation by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) was instituted in the UK. The plan was that all students would receive the same generic education, no matter what discipline specific choices they make for university

19. McAfee Brown, "Theology and Education", 234.

20. See Gavin D'Costa, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation* (London: Oxford, 2005) 18.

21. Lyn Tett, "Working in and with Civil Society", in Brid Connolly, Ted Fleming, David McCormack, & Anne Ryan (eds.), *Radical Learning for Liberation 2* (Dublin: MACE, 2007) 70.

22. Lord Conrad Russell, cited in Roberts, *Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences*, 88.

23. Duncan B. Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 162.

study. The Quality Assurance Agency appears, in the words of former Cambridge Professor, Denys Turner, to exalt not “the inherent value of the knowledge pursued, but...the retail price of the skills we supply in wholesale quantities”.²⁴

In this situation university league tables become increasingly significant marketing tools, influencing a university’s attractiveness to potential students, staff and research funding. Yet academic studies frequently call into question the usefulness of such tables as strategic performance indicators and their compilation transparency, and call for debate on their use rather than their undemocratic imposition upon academia.²⁵

In the fifth place, British higher educational policy seems to have created a situation conducive to the more unhealthy forms of competition thereby reducing the sense of co-operation in a common project of inquiry. So the financial and professional implications of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), for instance, encourages departments, and individuals moving from university to university, to think in terms of accumulating a body of achieved work which is definitively “ours” or “mine”, a personal store of brownie points with which we can bargain for advancement. Such is the self-interested survivalist mentality of many contemporary academics.

Finally, the RAE has implications not merely for scholarship, but for the relation of university to society. On the first, journal rankings leaves common readership and student-focused journals competing only for second rate scholarship. Academics can become mercenary, agreeing to give public lectures on new topics only if the material is publishable. Also, expertise is compressed. Given the length of time it takes to “master” new material (time the RAE will not permit), scholars tend to venture only very slowly beyond their narrow area of expertise. Moreover, while the speed and volume of publishing increases (a monograph every 7 years!), it is worth asking whether the quality of such output keeps pace. The way the RAE reduces matters of academic accountability in an accountancy style, which operates itself in practice largely without intellectual accountability, makes the formation of such qualitative judgements difficult. Significantly too, pressures are intensified on libraries to be resourced with increasingly expensive and more numerous publications. The danger of falling behind for the recruitment of top class students is even more costly.

24. Denys Turner, “Doing Theology in the University”, in David F. Ford, Ben Quash, Janet Soskice (eds.), *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 27.

25. See Rebecca Attwood, “A Measured Relationship”, *Times Higher Education* (10 April 2008) 36-39.

On the issue of university's relation to society, peer-review research ironically dislocates scholarship from its more general public, thus leaving the general public prey to all kinds of pseudo-intellectuals, and irresponsibly impoverishing both the debate and the potential for the development of good judgement in society at large. Revealingly, a recent *THE* report was rhetorically entitled "Why Do Academics Fiddle as the World Burns?"

The shape of many of these critiques has a more general concern with the instrumentalisation of educational reason. "Education" simply, critics wager, does not do the job of educating. The problem is not so much the exclusion of the intellect, since it is quite clear that intellectually rigorous courses continue to be offered, but rather its trivialisation – the same courses may well be offered, but the ethos or conditions under which they are studied has been transformed, its values being subordinated to the harsh "discipline" of the commodifying market, and occasionally even the content has to be "dumbed down" for a mass market. "For educational pragmatists," Paulo Freire avers, "there are no more dreams."²⁶ Thus it is not so much that "the university has lost, indeed has willingly surrendered, its moral authority to shape the souls of its students", as Henry Lewis claims, but rather that it has reshaped the whole conception of what is morally possible.²⁷ For John Milbank these critical observations are unlikely to bother university managers, since "the utter incoherence and lack of ability to withstand the critical trial of reason does not matter as long as one can come up with cash and customers."²⁸ Yet, Milbank warns, fashion is a fickle wind to be blown along by – a criticism that perhaps weakly forgets that universities can adapt to new fashions. The problem is deeper.

The question is whether this thin pragmatic vision is thick enough to sustain education and, more deeply, whether it is suitably well-grounded. Let us note briefly several ethical concerns. By exalting "freedom of choice", Denys Turner declares in his study of Marx, morality is evacuated "by the overproduction of increasingly valueless choices".²⁹ Choice, moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre claims, is too flimsy and formal a moral category on which to base obligation

26. Paulo Freire, "Foreword", in D. Macedo, *Literacies of Power* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1994) xii.

27. Harry R. Lewis, *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

28. John Milbank, "The Conflict of the Faculties: Theology and the Economy of the Sciences", in Mark Thiessen Nation and Samuel Wells (eds.), *Faithfulness and Fortitude: In Conversation with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000) 40.

29. Denys Turner, *Marxism and Christianity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983) xi.

and responsibility, and thus to ground the common life of any particular society. When persons with conflicting moral positions appeal to autonomous choice as the basis for their behaviour there is no evident means available to adjudicate their conflict. Herein argument becomes little more than a contest of self-assertion, “civil war carried on by other means”, MacIntyre warns, rather than a means of achieving understanding and the kind of consensus that thinkers like John Rawls argue is vital for a society.³⁰ “[A] deficient polity” is furnished, one that reflects what Christopher Lasch calls the culture of “the minimal self”.³¹ But, according to Charles Taylor, without some “socially endorsed conception of the good democratic regimes simply cannot survive the fragmenting consequences of unrestrained liberal freedom.”³² This claim suggests that the current “ethical” disposition of the university ultimately makes ethical judgements irrational – not in the sense of true or false, bad or wrong, but simply in the sense that they are not decidable by thinking or argument. They are shaped

not primarily [by] some range of alternative beliefs about the order of things, but rather a belief that there is no such thing as the order of things of which there could be a unified, if complex, understanding or even a moment toward such an understanding.³³

The particular worries concerning this conception of education’s end is that it, first, undermines and thus ends the university as an environment for real intellectual reflection, as the university succumbs to the manipulative rhetoric and “instrumental rationality” (Max Weber), and becomes suffused by the cultural pathologies, of the *Zeitgeist*. Secondly, it undermines the university as a place for training, or even asking about what it would mean to train, students in the business of living and of enquiring after “the real”. As Farley argues, “The more our cognitive undertakings move toward the technical... and toward the uses of knowledge in pursuit of power, the more indifferent they become to questions of reality.”³⁴

30. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981) 236.

31. Roberts, *Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences*, 3.

32. Charles Taylor, “Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate”, in Nancy L. Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) 172. Cf. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 77; Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984) 14.

33. Alasdair MacIntyre, “Catholic Universities: Dangers, Hopes, Choices”, in Robert E. Sullivan (ed.), *Higher Learning and Catholic Traditions* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001) 5.

34. Farley, *Fragility*, 23.

Furthermore, this type of university fails to put to the critical test the very assumptions that underlie this cultural *Zeitgeist*. It is arguably somewhat self-defeating, then, for the university to be considered as essential contributor to “society” since what it contributes is precisely the sets of values and virtues that pressurise the notion of the commonality called “society” itself. Finally, education here becomes less a vision directed by intellectual inquiry and ethical concern with transformation of the multiplicity of poverties and more one directed toward the vested interests of power, and wealth creation. This latter set of interests is considerably less hospitable to the freedom of “pursuing the argument wherever it may lead” whenever the argument takes a path towards interrogating the systems of exclusion that the “vested interests” benefit from.

BERLIN ON PILGRIMAGE TO JERUSALEM:
CONVERSATION FOR THE BEGINNING OF EDUCATION

Of course, in order to make these critical claims about educational deformation in contemporary higher education, some alternative conception or conceptions of education, however tentatively held, must provide an evaluative touchstone – and it is in this context that I want to speak modestly about theology, and the politics of education.

Given the aforementioned reflections, it would seem that many of the Humanities’ demands in modernity for excluding theology from the academy are themselves under pressure – the Humanities continually need to justify their own university existence. It is occasionally more from the untested philosophical assumptions of many hard scientists, rather than from philosophy or the social sciences, that theology now is publicly declaimed, and frequently simplistically so – the present Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford being a particular case in point.³⁵

One very superficial justification assumes the validity of the educational logic of the market-place: profitability. While the discipline – or rather sets of disciplines, since Theology and Divinity have traditionally been the umbrella terms for various intellectual disciplines – remains very small compared to, for instance, philosophy or English literature, it is nonetheless a notably steady earner. In fact, a 2004 *Tablet* report observed a marked rise in undergraduate applications for theological studies.³⁶ And with postgraduate recruitment

35. For an excellent response to Richard Dawkins see Nicholas Lash, “Where Does *The God Delusion* Come From?”, *New Blackfriars* (2007) 507-21.

36. Christopher Lamb, “The Theology Generation”, *The Tablet* (2 Oct 2004) 16-17.

the picture is still rosier. At my former university of Edinburgh, the numbers of full-fee paying postgraduates in Divinity outstrips that of many considerably larger schools. However, justifying educational value by financial means is a precarious business, risking the wrath of the internationally unstable markets and the winds of fashion, as even traditional subjects like Chemistry in several British universities have discovered to their cost. But most crucially, any economic legitimation of theology's place at the university's high table is not only an intellectually questionable rationalisation but crucially fails to interrogate broader cultural patterns and regulating conventions.

A second suggestion dates back to the reshaping of the modern university with founding of the universities at Halle (in 1694), Göttingen (in 1737), and, even more influentially, Berlin (in 1810). Theology here was removed from considerations of *Wissenschaft*, the understanding of rationality that dominated German aristocratic intellectual life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, characterised by autonomous, critical, and creedally unimpeded inquiry. So Johann Fichte declared that because theology was founded upon revelation and faith it ought to be denied a university presence. The direction that university theology subsequently took was largely a pragmatic one, as is perceivable in the deliberations of Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant and the Silesian theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. Along with faculties of Law and Medicine, Theology served the *state*, a crucial point in and of itself, in a professional training capacity. Yet the cost was substantial. Theological education was no longer essentially required for general cultural pedagogy, but was reduced to practical schooling for Germany's ministerial candidates. Therefore, Ronald Thiemann observes, "precisely as the ministry gained professional status, the *intellectual* justification for theological education became blurred".³⁷ Theology is included through a university eclecticism rather than a coherent pedagogical system that otherwise privileged scientific or theoretical disciplines.³⁸

Yet this general perspective creates problems. Most obviously, with the subsequent cultural and political secularisation in Europe, and the separation of church and state in the US, even the place of the theology as professional training became publicly difficult to sustain. Accordingly, it was commonly relegated to theological schools, colleges and seminaries that often had only loose links with neighbouring

37. Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991) 164.

38. See Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992) 111.

universities. Theology was unable to demonstrate that it was truly *wissenschaftlich* and could have a rightful presence in the public academy in consequence. Secondly, because theology was limited to the training of clergy or church leaders, it was decreasingly available to the laity. Thirdly, theory and practice were progressively separated, thus generating a feeling that the more theoretical dogmatics and philosophical theology were abstract, and concomitantly that “practical theology” was insufficiently theologically grounded and intellectually rigorous. It is little accident that many churches from the late nineteenth century have become anti-intellectualist and that religious belief has been relegated to the *private* sphere.³⁹ On the one hand, theology could take the direction of specifying authoritatively revealed doctrines, offering dogmatics in a catechetical fashion and practical theology in applying this to concrete situations. On the other, theology could become reflection on the givenness of a pre-linguistic claim to affective experience or faith. Either way, practice and theorising become *successively* related to one another, and therein theology has steadily become alienated from its own subject-matter.

Finally, in this context theology had become pre-eminently defined by what it *did*, its social role, rather than what it *was* as critical reflection on Christian claims to know God. Theology, as a result, shifts from the Thomistic character of being *argumentativa* “between traditions of truth-claim in conversation over the truths they...hold”.⁴⁰ It changes from being work which needs no additional end than its own study. Such a move, however, is to the detriment of theology’s substantive content.

Therefore, on the one hand this clerical grounding for theology needs to be conceptually weakened and reconceived, since theological reasoning can only partially be professionally focused. Certainly, as with the other disciplines in the Humanities family, theology can provide broadly fruitful lists of “transferrable skills”. Yet, regrounding theology within the Humanities provides a theologically more adequate sense of theological education as pedagogy – what the Greeks called *paideia*, or the training in human flourishing.⁴¹ As a habit of critical inquiry, the nature of theology, or rather theologies, requires

39. See Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 133, citing James Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 842.

40. Citation from Turner, “Doing Theology in the University”, 35.

41. See Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 152-3; David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What is Theological About a Theological School* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992) 68.

it to engage in a fertile and critical conversation that tests both the formative visions driving contemporary institutional theories over the nature and value of adult education, and these institutions' contributions to considerations of human well-being as well as academic excellence.

However, before explicating this it is worth turning to David Ford's arguments offered early in his introduction to theology, especially since these offer several interesting suggestions that are worth considering when considering theology's relation to the academy. First, "It is estimated that between four and five billion of the world's population are directly involved in the major world religions, and a great many others are affected by the religions or interested in the questions they raise."⁴² At best, this is a timely reminder that subverts the more naïve construals of an "ought" from the "is" in observations made concerning Western secularisation. Religion has not, and is hardly likely on present showing, to disappear. Consequently, universities can only engage in the study of the *fullest range* of human experience and culture in its rich variety if they critically engage with human religiosity. Yet this insufficiently explains and justifies the academic study of theology, as such, since it discusses religion phenomenally and this involves, for instance, Religious Studies.

Ford's second point is that "There is an enormous amount of interest in religions in the media, usually – understandably – in the bad news." Again, by itself, this insufficiently justifies a theological introduction, since it primarily facilitates sociological and historical work, important as that is since if religions are not studied in universities, Ford claims, "they do not go away" but public debate on them can be immeasurably "impoverished."⁴³ Yet the most theologically interesting thing here is less the point concerning media interest, than one implicit within the associating of religion and "bad news". In order to speak of news being bad, of religion being harmful, one must have some sense of what good news or well-being look like. That then means that the study of religion needs to ask questions that move beyond the flatly descriptive and into the thicker ones that deal with ethics – the relation of religious performance and the good life – and thus the theological beliefs that ground and generate visions of the good. For this reason Thiemann, drawing on the social anthropologist Clifford Geertz's cultural ethnographic concept of "thick description", argues that

42. David Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 1999) 3.

43. David F. Ford, *A Long Rumour of Wisdom: Redescribing Theology*, inaugural lecture Cambridge University, 12 Feb 1992 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 15-16.

“theological inquiry is a natural component of the thick description of religious traditions.”⁴⁴

This move itself opens up important interrogative avenues, ones that demand that religions’ deepest convictions be studied, and therefore that attention be paid to all their complexities, philosophical richness, and so on. Hence Ford’s third point centres on claims concerning religions as being “about the whole shape of living”. Of course, one can study life-regulating religious convictions through the medium of psychology – that the identity making beliefs emerge from certain features of the human psyche, and can be explained on these terms. Yet only a reading which reduces the particularity of religious traditions would force the convictions through interpretive criteria developed from ideas of the good life drawn from sources external to the religious traditions themselves.

Logically even this argument emerging from Ford’s claims keeps theology in the service of Religious Studies. Yet the relation between Theology and Religious Studies can be conceived of in more interesting, dynamic, complex and conversational ways. From a Religious Studies perspective, theology should enrich the understanding of religious identities, of the religions’ various ways of reasoning and construing their meaning. Yet, without in any way wanting to deny the *relative* autonomy of Religious Studies, one can suggest that it can serve Theology by enriching understanding of religious lives and practices in their accounts of body, self, society, and world.⁴⁵ After all, Theology philosophically asks about the truthfulness of the perspectives in a way that Religious Studies does not (whether it is successful or not, of course, is entirely another and less formal matter). So Ford argues, theology

is something like ... economics ... which is not just about economic history, econometrics, and the various ways of describing, analysing, and theorizing about economies, but is also concerned with contributing to the ways economies can be shaped now and for the future.⁴⁶

This, therefore, is not the tired and conceptually confused distinction between Theology as “Subjective” and Religious Studies as “objective” inquiry, as someone like Ninian Smart, for example, thinks it is. As Ford suggestively observes, “the best centres of religious

44. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 156. Cf. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 3-30.

45. Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Problems of Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1980) 3.

46. Ford, *A Long Rumour of Wisdom*, 19.

studies...do not now usually pretend that a scholar can neutrally stand nowhere".⁴⁷

These reflections raise the issue of the medieval approach to theology's relation to other disciplines (astronomy, medicine, literature, etc.) conceived as "the Queen of the sciences" with, to cite Thomas Aquinas, her "handmaidens".⁴⁸ While the notion of theology as an organising centre to fragmented modern intellectual disciplines fairs badly in a pluralistic environment, the fear most often aroused by this "royal" metaphor most often concerns theological hegemony – even though the notion of a hegemony among disciplines stems from the Greek philosopher Aristotle. But the claim ought be understood as properly complex, rich and fruitful.

At its broadest, as *theo-logia*, theology has to do with the inquiry into meaningful God-talk. But that definition can mislead. In ancient Christian traditions God is not understood as an "object", part of the furniture of the universe. Instead, God is the context and ground of the existence of all things. In that respect, it is when the term "God" is indeed grandly objectified, as in modern Theism and much popular Christianity, and theology as God-talk becomes depoliticised or privatised (ultimately transformed into the therapy for souls), something has gone badly wrong *theologically*. The conceptual pressure applied by talk of God as Creator and recreative or redemptive agency entails that there is nothing that can properly fall outside theology's remit as all things, in some form or another, witness to the God who is the creative Alpha and Omega. As Cardinal John Henry Newman argued in 1852, "Admit a God, and you introduce among the subjects of your knowledge, a fact encompassing, closing in upon, absorbing, every other fact conceivable."⁴⁹

Fruitful theological attention can be paid here to the fourth century Cappadocian Fathers' image of the sun and its rays, with God as the divine Light too bright for direct gaze but known through the illumination and radiation of all things.⁵⁰ Should this presence of all things to theology still feel too constraining or even patently false, these theological claims at least indicate that Christian belief is not properly something private, inaccessible, or hidden from public

47. Ford, *A Long Rumour of Wisdom*, 18.

48. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I. Qu.1.5.

49. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1921) 26.

50. Such a culture-reading project has its roots at least into the Christian Platonisms of the second century Apologist Justin, and Origen a little later. From this develops the further tradition that understands *all* knowledge to be the product of divine illumination.

scrutiny in any simple sense. Theology has to take seriously what Karl Barth terms “secular parables of truth”.⁵¹

Now, when all this is said and done, one must consider what is *not* being claimed by the metaphor of theological royalty. This model is *not* hegemonic, denying the relative independence of all other disciplines. In the first place, few monarchical practices in the thirteenth century could, strictly speaking, be hegemonic *dominare*. Crucially, Western European rulers required the support of their nobles when providing troops for war and collecting taxes, and were ultimately subject to the Pope. Moreover, and this is more important, the theological conception of *monarchia* was determined not so much by the performance of earthly rulers, vying for power and influence, but by the Ruler of the heavens and the earth whose governance is displayed in the humble other-serving life of Jesus the Christ. The divine *dominus* expresses itself, then, in a non-dominating creativity that restores all ailing things back to their proper *telos* for the sake of creaturely flourishing.

The regal metaphor is, consequently, *not* a way of claiming that theologians are ever in a good controlling position to know everything, something theological hegemonists fail to appreciate. Theology may be knowledge of the whole, and therefore does not stand apart from anything; yet it is not the whole of knowledge, and thus cannot say everything. It is never complete and exhaustive, but always self-critical and interrogative. It involves the hermeneutical endeavour of continually learning to recognise the witness that all things perform to their creative ground.

For instance, theologians cannot tell medical researchers what they should discover in their inquiries. That would repeat the bad mistake made by churches at trials such as that of Galileo in the sixteenth century and the John Scopes “Monkey Trial” over the teaching of Evolution in early twentieth century America. Theologians learn of medical wisdom from those in that guild, learn history from the historians, and so on. Yet things are not even quite as simple as that admission may, on first reading, suggest. The context for claims to knowledge, the manner of research conducted, and the claims made in consequence often bear assumptions that require to be identified and tested – for example, the evolutionary biologist who claims that human beings are *nothing more* than colliding bundles of atoms, as the Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, once proclaimed to me at Formal Hall several years ago. Grand, positivistic presuppositions have been smuggled in. More recently, several Westminster MPs greeted a bill on

51. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume IV: The Doctrine of Reconciliation Part 3*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961) 3.

embryonic research with theologically illiterate cries of “it’s unnatural”, crucially failing to grasp two key theological matters. First, that this kind of talk of “nature” is itself theologically complex; and, second, that it tends to function in a quite different theological way than associations of “nature” and “the natural” with what is observable, with what seems to be, imagine.

Moreover, the theologian can test the university’s and, in fact more broadly, general society’s reduction of “the good” to something pre-thematisable and ultimately literally indisputable – most significantly the value of free choice – and thus keep teleological matters of what well-being looks like firmly on the agenda. This, when done well, enables theologians to engage fruitfully in conversations with anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, and historians, among many others, about the nature and purpose, or purposes, of education. The potential social benefits of this conversation are considerable. They include the refusal to allow the market to reduce the self simply to a “consumptive self”; the subversion of the impoverished political debates that resort to propaganda-like sound-bites; the interrogation of the power-focus of much political rule; the refusal to be blind to the determining pressures from the past; and the denial of the intensification of privileging the self.

Expressing matters in these terms, particularly through the model of “conversation” (and that includes attention *and* argument), makes for talk of theology as “Queen” in a way that should mitigate concerns over hegemonic positioning. H. Richard Niebuhr has modified the relation by replacing the image with that of theology as modest *servant* of the sciences.⁵² While this may be a useful subversion of the hegemonic directions several self-assured theologies have indeed taken, the demoting of this Queen to a subject can be misleading for two reasons. First, as noted earlier, it improperly imagines that that service is something *additional* to divine *monarchia* rather than something expressive of its very nature.⁵³ Secondly, it can misplace the notion of theology as hermeneutical, as generative of an outlook on all things and thus the training for the formation of judgement. Here theology is certainly not unique in the Humanities – equally the philosophical positivism driving much science develops a perspective on all things. Even on some questions of larger significance, distinctive Christian commitments can produce agendas, questions, or

52. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960) 93-99.

53. Pope John Paul II speaks of theology “as a servant ‘queen of the sciences’”. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), cited in D’Costa, *Theology in the Public Square*, 191.

conclusions that overlap with, and on occasions look almost identical to, those of some others' commitments. Thus what makes theology educating should not entail the isolation of a separate sphere of understanding. For this reason, then, theology can and does use and is well served by good historical, classical, philosophical, sociological, scientific, literary, and so on, studies. While Divinity Faculties themselves in the nineteenth century fragmented "theology" into four areas defined for ministerial training,⁵⁴ good theology can indeed offer something of a model for disciplinary integration.

At its best this set of claims about theology as a hermeneutical endeavour is what Alasdair MacIntyre's claims about the "traditioned-ness" of moral reasoning can enable one to say. His critics' worries over his talk of the "incommensurability" of traditions, of the narratives that shape the reasoning of these communities, is something of a distraction from this point. Argument and disagreement involve complex and lengthy inquiries into the *Sitz im Leben* of that over which one disagrees, the different perspectives that shape how we determine what counts as "evidence", justification, and shapes our arguments. Theology is a hermeneutical endeavour, a way of perceiving, of developing insight so that it not so much the case that the believer and unbeliever "know" different things, as such, but rather that they have different horizons of expectation from which emerge different formative influences on their judgement. The claim from the theologian is that she, to cite Charles Wood, "is actually able to discern more in the situation than the other is because...[she] has acquired, through appropriate experience, the sort of conceptual background that permits a fuller reading of the evidence".⁵⁵ It is this that enables conversation, debate, and argument to continue as something imperative to the human enterprise of inquiry.

It is important to stress that this type of claim locates the problem of reasoning less in advocacy as in *bad* forms of it, and it is essential that criteria for such a distinction are most carefully produced.⁵⁶ After all, one would not *necessarily* worry about a feminist teaching women's studies, a neo-liberal teaching economics, a Tory teaching politics, an American patriot teaching American history, and so on. The

54. Kelsey sees the roots of this in seventeenth century Pietism's understanding of theology as a movement from revealed sources (scripture), through the extraction and systematisation of these sources as to their doctrinal content (theology), to clarifying doctrine historically (church history), and finally to application of doctrine in ministerial practices (practical theology) [232-3].

55. Charles M. Wood, *An Invitation to Theological Study* (Valley Forge PE: Trinity Press International, 1994) 43.

56. See Farley, *Fragility*, 78; Turner, "Doing Theology in the University", 26.

responsibility of the theologian is to good judgement, sophisticated understanding, fair representation of the plurality of perspectives, and rigorous argument, none of which has as its specific end the “deepening of faith” as such or operate via the institutional inspired propaganda known as *apologetics*. Of course, this is true of all academic endeavour, but the theological claim that being a Christian involves a conversion into God’s truthfulness makes for a very particular shape of theological ability. Given that this is the case, the theologian will need to facilitate *a reading in and with*. This is a kind of critical empathy that refuses to reduce both the faith traditions’ life-involving texts to a set of “data” and one’s engagement with these sacred works to a hermeneutical self-assertion.

Emerging from this, among some other things, is the claim that theology’s relation to other disciplines is dialectical (or at least, if a particular construal of “dialectic” is here envisaged), and thus conversational, and it is so not because it is forced to be so by other disciplines but because a “conversational” sensibility arises from the very nature of convictions about God, creation, truth, reconciliation, Spirit, redemption, and even “sin” and idolatry. Contradictory claims between the disciplines may lead to a proper retesting and rethinking, and this disagreement would enable one or other to be reformulated thus stimulating new research. But what form the conversation can and should take is not specifiable in advance, or in abstraction from concrete and actual forms of conversational performance. As Thiemann declares, “people of faith do not enter...[the public] realm with a divinely authorized program of policy prescriptions. Religious persons bring a set of fundamental convictions and orienting principles to public debate, but the specification and application of the resources of faith to particular situations can only be determined *in situ*.”⁵⁷ Whatever occurs, talk of theology as “conversational” enables a theological sensibility to ripen that is not desperate for any self-comfortingly secure space, or any powerfully self-assertive engagement, but is rather other-directed in its truth-seeking, honest in its inquiry, humble in its self-understanding, interrogative as well as celebratory in its mood, and more messy in its presentation. It refuses both to mitigate the real density of difference and to end provisionality by sublimating richness to the tidiness of the systematically final. For whatever theological “conversation” means in practice it does not necessarily in theory mean coming to consensus.

57. Ronald F. Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996) 169.

WHAT CAN ATHENS AND BERLIN DO FOR JERUSALEM?

Thus far the focus has been on what one might call “the contribution of theology to the university”, but now it is time to reflect on the question from another angle, one that might be called “the contribution of the university to theology”. If academic theologians as *theologians* can force the university to think more carefully about its own assumptions, not least in caricaturing religious traditions, the university can help theologians as *academics* to think more carefully about theirs and to engage in theologically constructive conversations about the nature of theological reasonings, complexity and ignorance, and the dangers of ideological distortion. This is an important way to put things, for it suggests that critical inquiry and Christian faith properly belong together, so that it becomes impossible to imagine that theological education “is some special activity separated from the total life of the Christian Church”.⁵⁸ The Church does not have an education to give, but *is* an education.

It is, of course, precisely this cultivation of critical and sophisticated theological reflection, reason and judgement that is characteristically lacking in many contemporary Christian communities, especially as these societies emerge from the loss of any sense of theology as ordinarily relevant to training in Christian wisdom.⁵⁹ As Turner argues, “there are plenty of *Christian* forms of idolatry, and complacent Christians”.⁶⁰

If the perspective of many forms of secular reasoning is to equate “faith” with an as yet unjustified claim to knowledge, and theology contests that reading of what is meant by faith and knowledge, the perspective of particular instances of Christian communities is to equate “faith” with an absolute knowledge determined by affectivity. Here academic theology, when attentive to concrete particularities, can test the claims of so-called “faith” by attending to the history of the notion and to the Christian traditions that have understood any separation of faith from “knowledge” to be a distortion not only of faith but of reason as well.

58. Stanley Hauerwas, “The Gesture of a Truthful Story”, in Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis, and Colin Crowder (eds.), *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: A Reader on Theology and Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 97.

59. Theology has largely become “a specialist affair which is neither useful nor necessary for the Christian as Christian”. [Immanuel Hirsch, *Geschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie* (Güttersloh: Wohn, 1968), vol.4, 53, cited in Farley, *Theologia*, 65]. Cf. Farley *Fragility*, 88.

60. Turner, “Doing Theology in the University”, 36.

However, when churches seek to construe themselves in ways that foreclose possibilities of self-reflective conversation, and thereby claim a pure and safe pre-reflective space, theology can provide a critical exploration of the rich substance and ambiguous history of the churches' own witness. Theology, in other words, can restore an appropriate and anti-ideological sense of *nescience* and *lifelong learning* by attending to the critical pressure of the churches' own memories of divine power revealed in the brokenness and concealment of an event of crucifixion. The warning of St. Paul to the Corinthian church, when the latter was making grand claims to be living in the presence of the fullness of resurrection life, was that consummated life was "not yet" (see 1 Cor 13:9, 12). This is where a proper self-reflexive openness to the possibility that what one claims to be "authentic Christian practice and teaching" may indeed not be, and what is demanded is the deepest commitment to potentially painful habitations of truthfulness and honesty.⁶¹

At least in theory, the university is in a good position to be honest in a way that is possibly less the case with entirely independent theological and bible colleges (and theological seminaries). The types of advocacy characteristic of these colleges can make it more difficult for them to resist temptations, whether consciously felt or not, to take intellectual shortcuts. What often emerges is apologetic commitment, and this is arguably a manifestation of a failure to intellectually engage in appropriate honesty, and thus in rigorous self-testing, through attentive reading and wide ranging discussion.⁶² As Wood admits,

The pressure of academic or ecclesiastical expectations may force a premature closure to judgements without the reflection which they rightly need, and even without any clear sense of the problem to which a given judgement is supposedly a solution.⁶³

In this regard, although there are no guarantees of success, the university's wide-ranging conversations and plurality of conversationalists potentially serve as a valuable environment for encouraging *ecumenical* theological formation. And, indeed, it is in this contribution to Christian church-life that the university can play its socially responsible role. It can do this by firstly shaping the quality of judgement of those responsible for the nurture and guidance of the rest of the community; and secondly aiding in the clarificatory testing of

61. James Buckley, *Seeking the Humanity of God: Practices, Doctrines, and Catholic Theology* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992) 42.

62. Of course, these temptations exist among the theological student body even within the universities and colleges.

63. Wood, *Vision and Discernment*, 82.

Christian claims in order to ensure a more reflective transmission of Christian life and thought from generation to generation.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION: A CONVERSATIONAL THEOLOGY FITTING FOR THE CITIES
OF THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

It is important to notice that the form of theology's contributions to the academy is not unique to it – it shares in the types of description that run across disciplines; it engages with its own intellectual contexts or histories in the way in which many rich studies of philosophy, politics, sociology, for example do; it offers constructive debate, argument and disagreement in a manner common to the humanities; and so on. Where theology differs from these other disciplines, of course, is in its substantive engagement in deep reasoning concerning the forms of rationality operative in the Christian traditions. In paying critical attention to matters of instrumentalising forms of reasoning about meaning theology becomes not incompatible with the university *qua* university. Instead its incompatibility is with any and every university that permits nonreligious aims to impoverish the exploration into the deepest and most expansive claims to the formation of identity and the shaping of desire in the contemporary world. It is unsuited to the university that succumbs to values that truncate and even deform commitment to asking potentially transformatively deep questions of truth and well-being of the social.⁶⁵ Precisely because the university is “a major institution that fosters the cultural and intellectual life of nations”,⁶⁶ culture and civilisation are themselves at stake here. Theology, then, can critically contribute, first, to asking in Irish educationalist McGlynn's radical Marxian terms, whether or not “The goal of adult education” is “to transform unjust structures and systems in society through collective action for social change”; secondly, to reflect on the nature, development and embodiment of *sophia*; and, thirdly, to call visions which subvert this radically transformative wisdom “*sin*”.⁶⁷ Moreover, what theology is

64. The point is not to suggest that all in the churches are themselves to become theological scholars or even know what theological scholars are doing as such, but rather all are required in their Christian lives to develop appropriately Christian judgement. See Wood, *An Invitation to Theological Study*, 29-30.

65. None of this, it must be emphasised, is to say that a university is only truly being a university when it has a theology department, even though Newman describes this state of affairs as “an intellectual absurdity”. Newman, *Idea of a University*, 19.

66. D'Costa, *Theology in the Public Square*, 215.

67. W. McGlynn, cited in David McCormack, “Demanding Reflexivity: Lazy Ozzie and Other Stories”, in Brid Connolly, Ted Fleming, David McCormack, & Anne Ryan (eds.), *Radical Learning for Liberation 2* (Dublin: MACE, 2007) 96.

in the business of contending, even if hedged by all the right kinds of qualifications that prevent improper euphoric fluency, is that in conducting its business well it witnesses to the ground of all things, and that for the sake of creatures' healing.