

(Un)wise Theologians: Systematic Theology in the University

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Abstract: Systematic theology is primarily pursued within the university, but the effects of that setting have not yet been given the theological attention that they need. Some theologians who have sought to consider theology's marginalization in the university argue that theology ought to reclaim its status as queen of the sciences, or should order the relations of other disciplines to each other and to itself. Using 1 Corinthians 1:18–31, this article argues that these moves transform academic theology into a discourse of wisdom rather than foolishness. Humility, unmastery and foolishness in relation to God become ways of claiming authority in relation to the neighbor. Further, such claims fail to recognize, and thus to counter, the nature and depth of the distortive effects of theology's presence inside university contexts structured by discourses, and to an extent practices, of scarcity. In conversation with Martin Luther and Karl Barth, I outline an alternative, non-defensive theology that admits its own foolishness: its participation in history's incompletions, its need for eschatological verification, and its vulnerability to the desire for mastery. Such a theology could struggle more effectively with its own failures.

In reflecting on the nature and task of systematic theology in this article, I argue that theology needs to pay more attention to the setting and context within which theology is typically pursued today, that its setting affects systematic theology in ways theology often has difficulty accounting for, and that some influential strategies that do take theology's context into account end up frustrating rather than advancing the very aims they believe theology ought to seek. In the introduction, I give a brief and programmatic justification for approaching the nature and task of systematic theology from this direction. I then proceed to a sketch of the effects that concern me most, before turning to

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an examination and critique of two attempts to think seriously about the place of theology. In the conclusion, I outline one possible alternative.

The setting that I have in mind is, of course, the university, in the many forms that it takes in an age of globalization. This is not to deny that theology is and can be done outside the university, but it is to take seriously the actual context in which most theologians ply their trade. The relevant context is not just the university itself, however, but universities as they come to see themselves within larger contexts, especially financial, that put pressure on unprofitable parts of the university, as well as on faculty and students generally, in terms of innovation, excellence, time and money. While theologians recognize and debate the ambiguity of theology's position in relation to the research university, that recognition is often tempered by interpreting such pressures as ancillary, best countered by the virtuous formation of the individual theologian. Imagining virtuous formation as a counter neglects, however, the concrete materiality of these pressures, especially the insusceptibility of global capitalism's effects to intentionality or virtuous practices of any kind.

An immediate counter-question to this starting point can presumably be expected. Is not the object of theology God (though God is not an object)? If so, does that not imply that to approach the nature and task of systematic theology in this way risks a fundamental distortion? Let the first point be granted. To the second, one might counter with the historicity of human existence and activity, including the theological task. Systematic theology is itself arguably a product of the modern university (more on that anon). But whatever relation between principles, sentences, *summa*, *loci* and systematics one might posit – whether development or discontinuity – the case can be made that theology must be done in the concrete context the theologian inhabits. That is, theology is done by actually existing humans. And most actually existing humans who do systematic theology today do so in the context of colleges, universities, seminaries and schools of divinity, which face the kinds of pressures that are my concerns in this article.¹

This investigation is thus prefatory, in a significant way, to the real question of the nature and task of systematic theology. Yet it is not merely prefatory. The theologians examined recognize, though in my view inadequately, the significance – and temptations – for theology of its relation to the university. My hope is that this examination – itself too cursory and inadequate – might encourage a more fundamental reordering, one in which systematic theologians would develop better strategies for making the conditions of possibility of their work visible and theologically salient in new and deeper ways.

When considering theology's oft-lamented marginalization in the university, some theologians argue that theology ought to order and rule the production of knowledge in the research university, and that non-theological disciplines are simply inadequate because they fail to consider the relation of all things to God.

1 The pressures on those who pursue the task of systematic theology in the context of religious houses are different enough that they fall outside the scope of a short article.

But I argue that when Christian theology claims to be queen of the sciences, ordering and ruling the production of knowledge in the research university, it positions itself as a discourse of wisdom and so as a discourse of the ‘Greeks’, thus making itself into *something* according to the logic of 1 Corinthians 1–2 (the point of departure for my analysis) – the kind of something that God will make into nothing. In response to such overblown claims for theology and for the task of the Christian theologian, I offer an internal critique of theology’s desire to set itself up as the arbiter of other disciplines instead of attending first and centrally to its own failures and incompletions. I argue that systematic theology needs to make its own situation an object of theological inquiry in a different way than it has typically done. By confronting the depth of the deformations to which theology is susceptible in the university, a theology chastened in this way can offer its contributions to the world as gifts rather than *Gift*.²

The claims in 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5 that guide this argument run as follows: the wisdom of the wise and prudent is destroyed; the scribe and the disputer (or scholar) are rendered irrelevant (vv. 19–20); the ‘Greeks’ are seekers after wisdom (v. 22); God chooses the foolish in order to confound the wise (v. 27); God brings *what is to nothing* while choosing *that which is nothing* (v. 28) so that no one may boast (v. 29). This sequence of claims implies, I believe, that assertions of the priority of theology in the contemporary academy make theology a discourse that God brings to naught.

When theologians propose a change in the relationship between theology and other disciplines in which theology would order the relationship of other disciplines to each other and to itself, or enlighten other disciplines about their inadequacy in light of the methodological naturalism on which they are premised, they risk making theology into a discourse of wisdom in two ways. One, by transforming theology into a practice of (purportedly humble) mastery, and two, by establishing theology prudentially inside contexts structured materially and imaginatively by scarcity. In the former case, theology tries to master other disciplines, not just by defending itself against critiques from them, but by going on the attack against them. In such attacks, theology situates itself in relation to the wisdom of those who are wise, placing itself on a continuum with them and so, in an indirect and inverted sense, identifying with them. In the latter case, theology as a discipline functions also as a form of self-securitization and self-assertion in ways determined by the nature of the university in times of scarcity. In terms taken from the Corinthians passage, theology becomes a form of prudence in relation to the right ordering of life inside a particular social system with its own values of excellence. I then discuss sociological as

2 Following Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 203: ‘What a person wants is salvation. What he creates is disaster. This is also true, and especially so, of the pious who are faithful to the law.’ Quoted in Ian A. McFarland, *In Adam’s Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 24.

well as theological reasons not to position theology in such ways, and counter some potential objections to the analysis offered. Finally, I suggest that a non-defensive theology of failure, incompleteness and foolishness that accepted its marginalized status in the university could better name, analyze and respond to the challenges that are the concern of this article.

Theology in the research university

There are two especially important aspects of the situation of theology that determine the discipline's current structure. These pressures are not unprecedented, but the existence of the university 'amid the force fields of capital',³ and the expansion and simultaneous defunding of universities that has taken place in the Euro-American academy under neoliberalism's reign, has made them more present to consciousness, thereby intensifying their material impact even further. The first is the ambivalent relationship of theology to other academic disciplines, and so also to the research university as such. The second is the notable increase in competition among theologians (connected to the dueling pressures of expansion and contraction in higher education), along with the pressure to produce ever-greater quantities of published research and to have prominent profiles that attract students and research funding.

Although it is impossible not to oversimplify materially in a brief description, the familiar story of theology's marginalization in the transformations of the university over the past several centuries provides the context needed for the rest of the argument.⁴ In concert with the establishment

3 David Hollinger, 'Money and Academic Freedom Fifty Years after McCarthyism: Universities amid the Force Fields of Capital', in P.G. Hollingsworth, ed., *Unfettered Expression: Freedom in American Intellectual Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), pp. 161–84.

4 For further reference, see among others Thomas Albert Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown, eds., *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Gerard Loughlin, 'Theology in the University', in I. Ker and T. Merrigan, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 221–3; William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Gavin D'Costa, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy, & Nation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 6–18; Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth Century Germany: From F.C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

of the modern university (taking Friedrich Schleiermacher's involvement in the founding of the University of Berlin as paradigmatic), some theologians sought to make their work more recognizably *wissenschaftlich*, a response simultaneously driving and complicated by the fragmentation of the discipline into (roughly speaking) historical-biblical, practical and constructive studies. Often understood as the heyday of retreat and accommodation, theologians retained cultural relevance through historicism and insistence on consonance between the forms in which the gospel is expressed and broader cultural changes. In a parallel development (taking Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield of Princeton Theological Seminary as paradigmatic), theologians fought to hold onto as much as possible of what they had once had. They resisted the implication that scientists like Charles Darwin, or biblical scholars using the tools of the so-called higher criticism, could dictate the limits of Christian belief. Both of these alternatives transformed theology into a defensive practice in relation to the rest of the university, however constructive the writings of theologians in either camp may have been.

This situation has now changed, again according to the standard story. Theology is no longer a discourse that needs to accommodate itself to the received conditions of disinterested, scientific validity in a research university, nor need it carve out an entirely separate sphere for itself in which it might reign supreme in a kingdom of one. The intellectual developments once denominated by the now-unfashionable label 'postmodernism' have put scientific standards themselves to the question, particularly the idea that it might be possible to bracket all committed perspectives within any area of study. Engaged studies resembling constructive rather than historical studies exist in multiple academic departments, especially ethnic, gender and sexuality studies.⁵ That said, theology still comes in for particular opprobrium, not only because its object (God) is presumed to be unknowable or non-existent, but also because theology is in the main pursued by believers committed to what many see as a deeply unjust tradition, the Christianity that in one form or another is frequently held responsible for the making of modernity through the slave trade, colonialism, the wars of religion, and the concomitant rise of the nation-state and transition to full-fledged capitalism.⁶

5 Mark Jordan, 'Religion Trouble', in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13 (2007), p. 573.

6 This ethical aspect of theology's marginalization in the university has not yet received the attention it deserves, though it is often most visible in the anxieties of influence and origin that drive religious studies to maximize its self-distinction from theology and Christianity. John Webster's 'clusters of reasons' for the marginalization of theology include 'the marginalization of moral and religious conviction' and acceptance of the standards of *Wissenschaft* or methodological naturalism, but he says nothing of the role played by ethical critiques of Christianity; see John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 12–13 and p. 16.

Rather than accepting these developments, some theologians instead seek to reconquer lost colonies. Several influential theologians construe theology as an offensive vanguard rather than rearguard action. They argue that the validity of the university depends on theology's role, even dominance, within the university, which reflects theology's capacity to order knowledge into a coherent whole. Such theologians claim pride of place for theology in the university. Rather than accepting its marginalization by other disciplines,⁷ or pursuing its own separate ends (as many other fields do), theology ought to rule or at least reshape the university as a whole, and structure knowledge-production within it.

Since the world depends on, and participates in, God as Creator, Reconciler and Consummator, the argument runs, any investigation of the world that abstracts from or sets aside the world's relation to God will be unable to achieve its own ends. Seeking knowledge of the world in such a way sets aside just *that* which makes the world what it is. Theology's position as 'the contemplation of the final cause and consummation of all paths of knowledge',⁸ in David Bentley Hart's words, is taken to mean that theology cannot be just one discipline among others in the university. Theology must have priority, or must claim an all-embracing status for itself, in order to be faithful to the object of its knowledge. To bracket any sphere of inquiry as inaccessible to theological determination would be to deny the dependence of the world on the one who orders it into a unified whole.

John Webster rightly avers that 'Reflection upon the place of theology in the university requires ... a theology of theology, and a theology of the cultural acts and institutions of the *civitas terrena*'.⁹ He recognizes that theology's location in the university matters to its practice, so he looks to identify the principles according to which theology is pursued generally, and the effect of the university on that pursuit. 'Theology is a comprehensive account of all things in the light of God', so theology illuminates not only the nature of things but the nature of intellectual inquiry itself.¹⁰ The revelation given to redeemed intellects 'generates actual knowledge, not just its possibility'.¹¹

7 Webster dismisses such acceptance as a 'lesser calling' since theology's 'content [would] be supplied by natural religion rather than by the wisdom which comes down from the Father of lights', John Webster, *Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), p. 172.

8 David Bentley Hart, 'Theology as Knowledge: A Symposium', *First Things* 163 (May 2006), p. 27.

9 John Webster, *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, 2 vols. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016) (hereafter *GWM*), II, p. 157. See *GWM* II, pp. 165–7 for Webster's brief summary of the contemporary university situation.

10 Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 181. See also *GWM* I, p. 213 and p. 224; II, pp. 141–4, and John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 11–12.

11 Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. ix; similarly in *GWM* I, pp. 217–18.

Webster admits that reason is fallen and limited, but he avers that ‘any talk of reason’s depravity ... must be set ... under the sign of redemption’.¹² Presuming that one of the reasons for the marginalization of theology in the university is the assumption that intellectual pursuits are utterly self-generated rather than God-related, Webster emphasizes that the intellect does not move ‘with absolute spontaneity or originality’. Rather, ‘God moves ... the proper power of the intellect in its dependent but real spontaneity; God moves from within, not simply as a causal force from without’.¹³ This potentially uncontentious compatibilism opens up into a much wider claim: if the ‘work of the intellect’ belongs within ‘the economy of God’s illuminating presence and gift’, then ‘to study the humanities is to participate in this movement’.¹⁴ Webster justifies this move, following Bonaventure, by defining theology as ‘not a “faculty” but ... a mode of thought, prayer and holiness which permeates all acts of intelligence’.¹⁵ That definition suggests that any devout student of the world is also on some level a theologian, but Webster claims rather more.

Although ‘theology is not competent to make direct recommendations’ to other fields, such as ‘prescrib[ing] methods of historical study’, theology is nonetheless ‘an exercise of apostolic intelligence from which we may legitimately expect instruction about what it means to be and think as a creature’.¹⁶ Despite the admission that theology is always *in via*, theology knows ‘what [it] has been given to know... and what it knows it seeks to commend’ to others.¹⁷ Any recognition of significant disagreement among theologians is absent here,¹⁸ as is the perhaps more significant implication of the admission that, since theology ‘participates in our fallen condition ... [and] knows only in part’,¹⁹ theology in truth does not yet know what it knows. The line where knowledge stops can be known only in relation to the whole, and it

12 Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 125. Webster typically discusses these dynamics in terms of mortification and vivification; see, for instance, *Confessing God*, pp. 64–5 and *GWM II*, pp. 104–5.

13 Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 188. See also *GWM II*, pp. 144–7.

14 Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 187.

15 Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 181.

16 Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 189.

17 Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 189.

18 Webster discusses disagreement elsewhere in the book; conflict is ‘*sin against peace*’, which can only be recognized by ‘the moving of the mind by the Holy Spirit’, Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 161. Theological controversy is allowed when ‘it is a work of charity, ... an exercise in common discernment of divine truth ... and ... when it arises from and tends toward peace’, Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 166. Notably, significant disagreement about the nature of the theological task is ruled out. Webster terms such disagreements ‘fundamental divergences about the gospel’, which imply that there is no shared task for divergent theologians since they are not faithful to the same God: ‘In such cases concord must wait for conversion to the truth’, Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 169.

19 Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 189.

is just that whole that theology does not know. As Herbert McCabe points out, even ‘shar[ing God’s] knowledge of [Godself]’ would of necessity ‘to us ... look like darkness. So that our faith seems like ... an increase of ignorance’.²⁰ On a different matter, G. Egner responds to McCabe with the claim that, in theology, ‘not only is our linguistic medium inadequate; it is inadequate to the task of drawing bounds to its inadequacy’.²¹ But that unknowing is, for Webster, enfolded within a confident reliance on divine action and regeneration that places a heavy burden on the sanctification of the theologian.²²

John Milbank moves well beyond the claim that all other disciplines cannot fully know the objects of their study if they do not know them in relation to God. Milbank maintains that since ‘other disciplines ... claim to be about objects regardless of whether or not these objects are related to God [, they] are ... for this reason about nothing whatsoever’.²³ Unless organized under or by theology, other disciplines have no objects of study. A stronger acclamation of the wisdom of theology in distinction from the foolishness of the world could hardly be imagined. Indeed, Milbank’s founding claim in *Theology & Social Theory* is that ‘the pathos of modern theology is its false humility. ... If theology no longer seeks to position, qualify or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology’.²⁴ Milbank insists that theology’s status as ‘a master discourse’ is grounded in its ‘non-mastery’ which alone is ‘able to position and overcome nihilism itself’,²⁵ since theology recognizes participation in God as a form of mediation between the infinite and finite particularity. Such assertions come to a head in suggestions that theology ought to be the queen of the sciences. In such claims, the status of theology as a discourse of the ‘Greeks’ becomes evident.

Theology transforms itself into a discourse of mastery and wisdom by going on the attack against other academic disciplines. These attacks are often directed against the critiques of theology and Christianity brought by the masters of suspicion, who play significant roles in some of the discourses against which theology defines itself. The autonomy of such discourses is

20 Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 1987), p. 20.

21 G. Egner (P.J. FitzPatrick), ‘More Thoughts on the Eucharistic Presence’, in McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 155.

22 See John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 26–8, for a more general account of sanctification, and *GWM* II, pp. 152–6 for a description of regenerate intellectual life.

23 Milbank’s claim is a ‘counter-claim’ to the assertion of the ‘secular atheist, or agnostic, consensus’ that theology is about nothing. John Milbank, ‘Theology and the Economy of the Sciences’, in M.T. Nation and S. Wells, eds., *Faithfulness and Fortitude: In Conversation with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), p. 41.

24 John Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 1.

25 Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, p. 6.

undone by the re-crowning of theology, but this strategy alone does not suffice; theologians also go on the attack in order to invalidate those who seek to invalidate them. In this move, theology claims mastery for itself by subsuming all other discourses under the banner of 'discourses seeking mastery'. Newly emboldened to counter-attack, these theologians no longer retreat behind demythologizing or the death of God. As Milbank puts it, theology will only be 'on secure ground if it adopts the most extreme mode of counter-attack: namely that unless other disciplines are (at least implicitly) ordered to theology (assuming that this means participation in God's self-knowledge ...) they are objectively and demonstrably null and void'.²⁶

Counter-attacking sometimes means out-narrating, telling a story that is purportedly so much more beautiful, comprehensive, clear and compelling that others will find themselves drawn, almost irresistibly, to see the world the way theologians describe it. Counter-attacking might also mean out-arguing: identifying all the weaknesses of an opponent's argument – perhaps through ungenerous or reductive readings – thus proving the superiority of 'the' Christian approach to whatever issues are in play. (That 'the' Christian approach is itself contentious within Christianity is then assumed as yet another virtue demonstrating the bankruptcy of less aggressively certain Christianities.) Counter-attacking often proceeds via genealogical undermining: such-and-such a concept (tolerance, for instance, or human dignity, or peace) or such-and-such a discipline (the social sciences), or such-and-such a social structure (the university) originally derived from within Christianity; after giving up the Christian contexts and commitments that originally determined them, these concepts or institutions seek to be self-grounding in a way that none of them can be. The implication is that Christianity alone can ground concepts such as universal human dignity, or can build a firm conceptual edifice that will not dissolve into nihilism and incoherence. The cleverness and apparent intellectual sophistication of these styles of argument, with their grand narratives and heavily footnoted descriptions of decisive turning points in the thought of one or another deplored scholar, renders them both exciting to many readers and difficult to counter.

Even ostensibly humble descriptions of the unmastery of the theologian in relation to God can transform into dramatic claims for theology's capacity to rule. Rowan Williams elides faith and its object in so smooth a way as to be almost unnoticeable. He argues, first, that faith is valid only if it 'looks to

26 Milbank, 'Theology and the Economy of the Sciences', p. 45. See also p. 53, where he suggests that a 'neutral stance' in relation to other disciplines within a theology and religious studies department (a stance that does not admit that 'the department is still – as a whole and primarily – committed to theology') will lead to the eradication of 'theology as an academic venture'. Other disciplines should not just accept but welcome such theological 'hegemony', for without it they too will disappear (p. 54).

something beyond the state of my – or anybody’s – consciousness, only if it shows itself to be answerable to ... what it does not have under its control’.²⁷ The humility of this position is then belied by Williams’s further claim: faith ‘must believe, passionately and argumentatively, that it [faith] is capable of opening to human beings a new possibility of unillusioned, unafraid living. It must see itself as a gift and as judgement’.²⁸ Suddenly faith, rather than its object, opens such a possibility; faith, rather than its object, gives and judges. In this way an argument for the mastery of unmastery is made: although the faithful person submits himself devotionally to the judgement of God, he nonetheless retains a God-like capacity in relation to the neighbor. Indeed, the former grounds the latter.

John Webster argues similarly that a theology that sees itself as a ‘gift which comes down’ ought to ‘trust ... that its exegetical and dogmatic resources are adequate’ to provide ‘a comprehensive account of the nature and ends of intellectual activity’ as well as ‘of the ways in which humane studies are an element in the moving of created intellect by God’.²⁹ This would return theology to ‘her’ rightful position, although ‘she’ would refrain from exercising ‘her’ power unrighteously: ‘The queen of the arts is gentle and modest, not a high-handed dominatrix.’³⁰ Webster even worries, based on the same Corinthians passage that structures my argument, that theologians will underrate rather than overestimate the rational capacities God has granted them, since only ‘unredeemed reason’ is brought to nothing.³¹ Elsewhere, Webster praises Zacharius Ursinus for his simultaneous humility and confidence as a theological teacher. While Ursinus knows himself to be unequal to his object of study, he also knows that God works through the weak, and that God speaks *certain* truths through ‘the Church’ and the Spirit,³² setting up a similar relationship between recognition of weakness and fallibility in relation to God and aggressive certainty in relation to the neighbor.

Here we part ways. Given theology’s self-understanding, theologians ought perhaps to see themselves as humble and foolish interpreters of a truth unknowable by human insight alone. But it is difficult to follow Webster on the nature of such humility and the consequences it has for the relationship

27 Rowan Williams, ‘Faith in the University’, in S. Robinson and C. Katulushi, eds., *Values in Higher Education* (Glamorgan: Aureus Publishing / University of Leeds, 2005), p. 35.

28 Williams, ‘Faith in the University’, p. 35. Similarly, Webster, *Confessing God*, p. 29.

29 Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 172, p. 171.

30 Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 189. The gendering of the personification of theology disguises the fact that the exercise of ‘her’ authority is massively dominated by male human beings. In *Confessing God*, for instance, Webster himself cites only one woman theologian, and two women in total, out of more than eighty names.

31 Webster, *Domain of the Word*, pp. 125–6.

32 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 107–11.

between theology and other disciplines. There is a positive correlation between humility and certainty: as (asserted) humility increases, so does the certainty of assertion and, consequentially, of rulership – not always directly, but often via triangulation. Theology is able to rebuke the university because of its relation to God, the virtues of its practitioners, and its capacity for self-critique, pursued with ‘confidence, vigour, and intelligence’.³³ I am suspicious of just this correlation.

The need to outdo other storytellers, to defend one’s territory, is a response to the way the masters of suspicion accuse theologians of idolatrous bad faith. ‘No, we’re not, you’re nihilists!’ theologians counter. Such a counter-attack refuses the painful recognition of theology’s own idolatrous tendencies. Theology has idolatrous, bad-faith elements. Not all Christian theology at all times in every way has confused God the Father with the father (Freud), or has been generated by a desire to turn becoming into being because of an ungrounded will to mastery that resents its lack of mastery (Nietzsche), or proved nothing but a mystification and justification for unjust social relationships in the present (Marx). But theology also *has* been and done all these things. These are real temptations for theology, just as the discourse of humility is often the most naked form of the will to power. Understandably, theology wishes to respond to such uncomfortable critiques by positioning itself as a discourse of wisdom, of plenitude, and as the only mastery that is unmastery. But in refusing to make the inevitability and seriousness of such theological failures a programmatic concern, theology loses the ability to act in full recognition of itself as a discourse of foolishness. Rather than simply *asserting* its own foolishness and unmastery in relation to God and the virtues of its excellent practitioners, theology ought to structure itself and its relations to other disciplines in ways that actually embody such a recognition. Theology that accepts its own foolishness serves the ends it seeks more effectively than when it strives to outdo its critics in the ways I have described.

The university in the age of austerity

Before developing an account of theological foolishness, the critique just developed can be intensified by turning from the issue of the relative ordering of disciplines to each other to the material effects of the university on the theologian. Inside the university, no sharp contrast between theology and other disciplines is possible. Both those who seek to excise theology from the university, and those who commend its dominance, fail to recognize the blurry distinctions between theology and other fields within the university. Theologians trained in university settings and teaching there, like those we have considered, depend heavily on insights from other disciplines in

33 Webster, *Confessing God*, pp. 24–9, here p. 29.

order to do their own work. Conversely, many thinkers in fields other than theology work at the boundaries between theology and other disciplines, most commonly intellectual history, philosophy of religion, and the numerous discourses sometimes characterized under the designation 'theory'. Even if this were merely the effect of Christian dominance in Western intellectual history (and I would contend it is not), theologians work *inside* the university, without the possibility of clearly separating its practices from their own.

Theology cannot but be affected by its position inside the modern university: it comes to value what the modern university rewards.³⁴ The research university is structured ever more intensely by discourses, and to some extent realities, of scarcity, as well as by emphasis on positional goods. The university values what is new and groundbreaking; it values the originality ascribed to a single scholar; it values radical programs or critiques of existing structures, discipline-shifting paradigms; and it values productivity of a measurable sort (publications), especially in prestigious venues. The more radical and counterintuitive the program, the more it may be rewarded. These values therefore affect not only the shape theology takes as a profession, but also the influence and attention granted certain kinds of theological projects – at least in the short to medium term, the time periods within which such rewards have the greatest impact on behavior.

Nevertheless, theology does not wish to submit fully to these strictures: theologians remain critical of just these logics of scarcity, individuality and competition, and of the marketplaces that engender and sustain such structures. Theologians often hope that their projects are determined in fidelity to the object of their study. But none of us can claim a purely good will for ourselves. Given the logic of scarcity, the proliferation of sub-disciplines, and the hunger for the new and unique in academic marketplaces currently, an unusual project – especially if it goes against the grain of standard readings in the particular academic discipline to which it belongs – secures one's position within the very structures theologians spend their professional lives and intellectual energies critiquing.³⁵ Theology requires an enormous investment in terms of intellectual energy, time and sacrifice of productive years on the labor market. All the pressures associated with the financial constraints of pursuing doctoral work in the humanities are exaggerated for theologians, whose average remuneration (due to their employment in so many smaller, church-related institutions of higher education) is lower than that of the vast

34 The problems identified here could not be solved by moving theology out of the university into some other form of community-support for life and labor. That sort of move is another form of repristination that pretends that theology could render itself immune to structural deformations.

35 As D'Costa admits, *Theology in the Public Square*, p. 5.

majority of other academics.³⁶ The pressure to distinguish oneself within a field offering shrinking rewards becomes ever more intense. The impetus to situate oneself within a formal or informal ‘school’ of thought enjoying a period of attention and prestige is also strong, since such ‘schools’ offer access to a ready-made array of opportunities for networking, publishing, conference presentation and so on.³⁷

Theology, as a result, becomes a practice of self-protection. Theology, due to the logic of the marketplace, is – not *only*, seldom *only*, but *also* – a discourse of securitization, of prudence and wisdom.³⁸ That theology is a discourse of wisdom is already evident in its position inside the university, an institution that explicitly seeks wisdom and knowledge. Theology as a discipline, as a career, even as a vocation, functions partly as a form of self-securitization, as a (somewhat) prudent way to live a well-ordered life in the world.³⁹ The cleverness and originality of any individual contribution to the discipline become modes of access to the increasingly weak forms of self-protection that late capitalism’s privatization of risk requires: retirement savings, health

36 The *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported in 2017 that the average salary for new assistant professors in theology and religious vocations at four-year institutions in the United States in 2016 was \$57,794, approximately in line with English, history and the performing arts. See <https://www.cupahr.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/FHE-2016-2-Digit-Average-Salaries-Tenured-and-Tenure-Track.pdf> (accessed 22 May 2019). The average is somewhat inflated by university-related seminaries and divinity schools. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated the median wage at \$71,890 for *all* postsecondary teachers in philosophy and religion, which is somewhat inflated by the conflation of philosophy and religion into a single category. See <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes251126.htm> (accessed 21 May 2019). While these salaries are far higher than the national mean wage across all professions (\$52,960 in 2018, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nat.htm#00-0000 (accessed 21 May 2019)), they do not take into account the relative impact on lifetime earnings overall or the temporary impact of lower income during the extended duration of training in theology. For white women and people of color, these constraints – along with the well-known impact of children and singleness on academic prospects for women – are so strong that they may combine with the disciplinary conservatism of theology to deeply depress the number of women and people of color in the field.

37 The sudden explosion in recent years of genealogically oriented doctoral dissertations diagnosing the origin of nihilism in one thinker or another in the Western canon is best approached as part of such a development.

38 Webster commends just these strategies. He recognizes the dangers posed by money and prestige, but offers a prudential and to my mind far too abstract and unrealistic account of how such dangers may be avoided in *GWM* II, p. 169. Webster is, of course, thinking of the wisdom of God, but my argument is that the wisdom at play is far too often that of the world.

39 A yet stronger critique could be made from the reality of competition among Christian institutions of higher learning for financial resources, students and prestige, but since my focus is on theology in relation to the research university, I leave that critique for another time.

insurance, disability insurance, mortgages and rent in increasingly tight housing markets, payment of student loans, saving for college if one has children and so on. More desirable yet, because intrinsically scarce (as positional goods), may be the tangible rewards that follow the production of new and exciting research programs: a special session on one's book at the American Academy of Religion meeting, a prestigious professorship at Oxford or Yale, or a book award from *Christianity Today*. Permanent posts at elite institutions tend to go to those who have generated just such new programs, as do speaking invitations, awards and honorary degrees.

Theology participates in a kind of marketplace, a marketplace that takes ambiguous forms in relation to the various forms of capital in play, a marketplace that is never totally visible as such, yet a real marketplace.⁴⁰ Denial of the way the marketplace affects theology creates a bad-faith naïveté and a claimed innocence in which theologians exempt themselves from the need to examine the forces that affect the content of their own theological proposals. As long as Christian academic theology refuses in this way to make its own status as a discourse of wisdom and prudence a part of its theological inquiry, instead claiming that theology needs repositioning and a return to its royal position at the apex of the research university, it will continue to cloak the way it is affected by logics of scarcity.

A non-defensive theology in the university

Theology ought to take its own failures much more seriously than it does in these counter-attacks, and these failures ought to affect the claims theology makes for itself as a discipline. Refusing sustained attention to theology's failures forbids the recognition of the place of Christian theology within a world of scarcity, of competition for recognition and social and material goods. Claiming a need to defeat theology's opponents does not really oppose the logics of competition and violence: it simply reintroduces competition, mastery and scarcity in cloaked form. In rejecting accusations of idolatry and bad faith by turning them on one's opponents, one invites their application to oneself. In reasserting theology's mastery as a discourse of non-mastery, theologians move past legitimate critiques of theology all too quickly. Rather than tracing linkages between textual Christian orthodoxy and the disasters that resulted in theological gifts being transformed into *Gift* (poison), theologians argue that theology went wrong at some historical point that can now be fixed by

40 Indirectly, but with increasing intensity, another element plays into this: the need to attract donors for private universities (in the United States), and state funding that depends on positional excellence (as seen in the Research Assessment Exercise in Great Britain or the Excellence Initiative in Germany; in Great Britain and Germany, unlike in the United States, many publicly funded universities offer instruction in theology).

speaking rightly of participation and analogy, or that theological failures are effects of individual lack of humility and submissiveness in relation to magisterial or creedal authority, or that well-formed theologians simply will not be very susceptible to the dangers described.

In truth, theology's failures are not merely occasional, but both structural and theologically significant. If theologians accept the negative side of this diagnosis, that theology too seeks wisdom, mastery and prudence, and cannot free itself from those desires, they might instead recognize that theology both is and ought to be a discourse of foolishness and failure. Theology might then be the sort of discourse in which God makes something out of nothing, as 1 Corinthians suggests.

We have already considered the impact of the university's structures of validation on the sociology of theological knowledge-production. In this regard, a partial antidote may be administered to the discipline if it accepts, instead of fighting, its sidelining in the modern university. This sidelining has salutary effects for theology, first simply as a reminder that there is realistically no way for theology to regain its status as queen, but second, and far more importantly, because it requires theologians to admit that they *would* like more power than they have, which opens the door to developing practices of resistance to their own desires for mastery. The theological, rather than sociological, reasons for accepting that theology is a discipline of failure and incompleteness are therefore the most important for the confessional theologian. Negatively, one might refer again to theology's idolatrous tendencies. Theologians sometimes pretend that they only stand accountable to God, or perhaps also to magisterial and creedal authority; thus, no one else can call them to account for their own failures and desires for mastery without being subjected to accusations of infidelity, nihilism or unbelief in return. The result is assertorily established invulnerability to critique, combined with a rather ugly tendency to denigrate numerous forms of humanistic reflection. Positively, genuine theological humility requires theologians to admit rather than deny the distorting effect desires for mastery and practices of prudence have on their work.⁴¹ The masters of suspicion and Christian theologians agree on at least one point: that the human being is not the master of her own desires, and that she is not transparent to herself in any simple fashion.

There are, however, noteworthy resources from within certain strands of Christian theological reflection that could generate an alternative vision of a

41 The theologians discussed might object here that the problem of wisdom applies only to theology's opponents, or to – at most – non-confessional theologizing. Based on 1 Cor. 2:6–16, they might argue that theologians have the mind of Christ (v. 16) so that their theologizing may be thought to take part in God's self-knowledge, as implied by the role of the Spirit in sharing God's knowledge of Godself with believers (vv. 10–13). Such an argument repeats the basic claim and defense already critiqued.

theology that, rather than pretending that it alone can safely practice mastery, would instead be a gracious guest or non-defensive presence in a university. Such a theology would pursue a methodologically and substantively open-ended search for knowledge and learning of all kinds, while seeking to join with others in imagining and enacting ways to make research universities more just structures without destroying livelihoods and dissipating the resources that make a life devoted to theology, or to humanistic reflection, possible to begin with.

Such a theology might be developed in conversation with Martin Luther and Karl Barth, two sophisticated diagnosticians of the tendency of Christians to deny the depth of their own distorted desires. Barth maintains that ‘tolerance, and ... a theological consideration of religion, is possible only for those who are ready to abase themselves and their religion together with man, with every individual man, knowing that they first, and their religion, have need of ... a strong forbearing tolerance’.⁴² That ‘religion is unbelief’ ‘above all affects ourselves also as adherents of the Christian religion’.⁴³ The knowledge of God as Lord is given to believers ‘as religious men’, that is, in unbelief, *not* ‘in the activity which corresponds’ to that knowledge, that is, faith.⁴⁴ Luther insists that the knowledge of the crucified Christ be given to the believer in such a way. The distinction between a theologian of glory and a theologian of the cross hinges on the tendency of the theologian (identified, according to Luther, as fool who claims to be wise, Rom. 1:20, 22) to believe oneself capable of recognizing the invisible things of God in the visible.⁴⁵ To prefer wisdom to foolishness and good to evil makes one an enemy of the cross of Christ.⁴⁶ Knowledge, wisdom and money all play a role in generating the ‘lust of life’ that can only be controlled by running in the opposite direction, that is, by fleeing one’s own lust for power and honor. Yet that flight cannot be performed by one’s own strength or by doing what is in one (echoing the Heidelberg Disputation differently)⁴⁷: the self has no power to ‘crucify’ the self. One’s own *claimed* humility and unmastery can do nothing, then, to ensure that one is a theologian of the cross rather than a theologian of glory, for the believer’s tendency is to ‘misuse the best in the worst manner’.⁴⁸ Theologians as a guild and individually would be better equipped to relate to one another as well as to their ambiguous position inside modern research universities if they were to take this tendency in themselves seriously.

42 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 pts., ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75) (hereafter *CD*), I/2, p. 299.

43 *CD* I/2, pp. 299–300.

44 *CD* I/2, p. 301.

45 Martin Luther, ‘Heidelberg Disputation’, in *Luther’s Works*, volume 31: *Career of the Reformer I*, trans. H.J. Grimm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1957), p. 40, p. 52.

46 Luther, ‘Heidelberg Disputation’, p. 40.

47 Luther, ‘Heidelberg Disputation’, pp. 53–4.

48 Luther, ‘Heidelberg Disputation’, p. 41.

The critique offered by Barth and Luther can be supplemented by positive reasons to revalue a theology as a discipline of failure, incompleteness and foolishness. These positive reasons derive from classical motifs of creation and eschatology, as well as from the logic of the 1 Corinthians text itself. The result would be, rather than counter-attacks, a *non-defensive* theology of failure and foolishness. A theology of failure and incompleteness recognizes that it is only with the grace of God and at the eschaton that its claims will be finally validated.⁴⁹ Indeed, they may very well *not* be validated, for believers may be told on the last day that the Lord does not recognize them (as suggested by Mt. 7:21–3). Such a theology will have a different approach both to the marketplace of ideas and to its relations to other disciplines. A theology that recognizes its own proclivity toward failure, and its own incomplete status prior to the eschaton, will offer its propositions tentatively rather than dogmatically (in the non-theological sense of the latter term). Instead of using its own subjection to God's judgement to exercise mastery over other disciplines, such a theology would worry more about its own desire to proclaim the judgement of God on the other.

Classical Christian accounts of creation insist that God creates human beings as historical creatures, which means not only that humans are always *in via*, but that human life is always in a state of incompleteness outside of eschatological fulfillment. Because theology, faithful to divine self-revelation though it may wish to be, is not identical with such revelation, it too cannot but participate in such incompleteness. No theological system can then claim finality either for itself or for its claims with any specificity; but such incompleteness should be considered good, since temporality, movement and change are intrinsic to the goodness of creation as such. Theology's incompleteness is one of its virtues rather than a fault. Such a theology will also give up the attempt to control the relation of other disciplines to each other. Those theologians who believe that nothing can truly be known, in some ultimate sense, if its relationship to God is bracketed, might then have to admit that they do not yet know what they themselves do not know. A theology adequately attentive to change and historicity would not commend its own certain knowledge to other disciplines, especially not in order to order the relations of other disciplines to one another. Instead, it would rejoice in the ability of other disciplines to illuminate the world from different directions than theology itself does. Such a theology would also seek to learn especially from disciplines that study the

49 This theme is crucial in Pannenberg's theology: 'The finitude of theological knowledge ... is grounded especially in the time-bound nature of this knowledge. ... the deity of God will be definitively and unquestionably manifested only at the end of all time and history', Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* volume I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 54. As a result, all theological statements have the status of hypotheses and provisionality until the eschaton (p. 56). Pannenberg does not draw the same conclusions on this basis that I do.

world as a whole, as well as human beings, with attention to diversity and change.

Finally, note the logic of divine action suggested in the text that structures my argument. See 1 Corinthians 1:28a: ‘God chose what is and despised in the world, even the things that have no being in order to bring to nothing things that have being.’⁵⁰ The logic of this statement is directly opposed to the structure of being on which claims to mastery depend. If the wisdom and foolishness of the cross is the logic of choosing things that have no being, then any claim to wisdom or rulership that is grounded in the *participation of things in divine being* must be set aside. Theology ought not, perhaps, actively to seek to be ‘low and despised in the world’, for that entails a risk of Nietzschean tricksterism of the bad-faith variety, but – assuming that it *is* low and despised in some ways – it ought to accept that status while admitting how much it is bothered thereby. If Karl Barth is right that ‘grace and judgment are ... for both Jew and Gentile in the very best that they can do, their worship of God’,⁵¹ then the target of a theology of failure and foolishness is the theologian, not the theologian’s opponents.

A theology of failure and foolishness applied first and last to itself requires theology to take up a non-defensive position in the university. Decisive theological reasons for applying such critiques first and last to the practice of theology itself are available, and, I argue, more in line with the logic of divine foolishness described in the 1 Corinthians passage. Such a non-defensive position does not seek to colonize other disciplines by instructing them in their proper ends or by accusing them of being about nothing. For the text instructs theologians that God sometimes chooses what is nothing for God’s own ends, and it is not the business of the theologian to determine when God is doing just that. What academic Christian theology needs is not repristination but *theological therapy* for its desire for recognition. That is the task systematic theology needs to take up.

50 Following Alexandra R. Brown’s translation in ‘Paul’s Apocalyptic Cross and Philosophy’, in J.B. Davis and D. Harink, eds., *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), p. 115.

51 *CD* I/2, p. 306. Barth emphasizes here that ‘because Christ was born and died and rose again, there is no such thing as an abstract, self-enclosed and static heathendom’ and by implication no stance from which the Christian theologian may permit herself to pronounce as though such a thing exists.