



CHAPTER SIX

The Epistemology of Theology

When discussing the relation of science and religious faith in the theological discipline, it might help us to refer to the general theory of culture in the first part of this study. From this we can make three relevant observations.

Secular and sacred theologies are both cultural products. As such, they are symbolic representations of reality that do not allow direct access to the realities they represent. As symbolic structures, they are reductions of reality enabling access and understanding, but also limiting such access. Both cultural systems have been developed for specific reasons and to achieve specific aims. Because both have been fairly successful in achieving their aims, they have been able to maintain themselves over long periods of time. They both demand to be treated seriously.

From general systems theory we also know that intellectual systems, like many other dynamic systems, tend to stabilise themselves. This tendency can be called *homeostasis*.⁵⁶ They have to do this because of constant changes in the environment. One of the ways in which systems stabilise themselves is by controlling their own feedback. They tend to disallow any information into the system that could jeopardise it. In the operation of systems *this control of feedback may go too far*. When receiving traumatic feedback a point may be reached when no new information is allowed into the system. At such a stage the system closes and atrophy sets in. Systems tend to present themselves as closed systems, but the 'big lie' they often convey is that they are indeed closed. When we apply this theory to secular and sacred theology as competing intellectual systems, it is probable that both exhibit this feature: trying to close themselves in an attempt to maintain homeostasis.⁵⁷ It should not be surprising to observe that secular and sacred theologies both seek to establish themselves as comprehensive explanations of reality.

Another property of systems of symbolic representation is also relevant. Over time systems are not able to maintain homeostasis. At some point they begin to deconstruct themselves. No matter how powerful and absolute those systems might appear to be, they are all subject to the inexorable increase of *entropy*.⁵⁸ Whereas simple systems might maintain themselves for seemingly indefinite time (for example mathematical systems), complex intellectual systems have much shorter shelf lives. Eventually those aspects of reality that they fail to represent, or aspects that they

block out, take their 'revenge'. Moreover, when a certain system is presented as the *only* one, the closure implied leads us to suspect authoritarian motives.⁵⁹

The reason for perceiving a conflict between sacred and secular study of theology may therefore be that both present themselves as closed systems. Realising this might prevent theologians from judging the incommensurability between these systems at face value. An analysis of their specific functions and thereby also of their limitations may serve to clarify the matter.

When secular theology, by means of historical analysis, finds that the resurrection of Jesus Christ cannot be verified, and sacred theology maintains that the resurrection is fundamental to theology, this seems to be a total contradiction. Both positions are in vigorous competition for the same intellectual space. Nevertheless we do find individuals who can participate in historical-critical research on the resurrection and at the same time proclaim the resurrection of Christ. From a historical-critical point of view they can say that the resurrection seems to be unlikely; from a point of faith they can say that it is the cornerstone of their theology and that nothing is impossible for God. Thus we find that the so-called Jesus of faith and the so-called Jesus of history appeal to one and the same individual.⁶⁰

The empirical fact that individuals ('dialectical theologians') are found who can be quite at home with either system leads us to the next question: How is this possible? Does this not compromise the intellectual integrity of such theologians?

Coping with conflicting intellectual systems

For insight on how humans cope with conflicting systems, one may turn to general insights from psychology for illumination. Psychology teaches that human cognition rebels against incommensurabilities. Natural reactions to this may range from indifference to denial, to compromise, to open conflict or to psychological disintegration as coping mechanisms. In terms of the resurrection controversy, one can expect the following reactions:

Indifference	'The issue is not that important'
Denial	'There is no real conflict'
Compromise	'Let everyone adhere to his/her own logic'
Open conflict	'The other side is dangerously wrong'
Disintegration	'It is true / it is false'

Let us first look at the last mechanism, 'disintegration'. Humans tend to construct a range of personality roles (ego states, cognitive states). With normal individuals

these roles function as different *channels* that can be changed according to the demands of the situation. When under extreme duress, these different roles are severed from one another, and erupt into a multiple personality disorder. In such a case the internalised personalities lose their ability to communicate with one another. In theological conflict we obviously have to do with differently constructed ego states when the same person can participate in an academic debate that finds the resurrection to be an invention of the early church and also preach the resurrection from a pulpit as the cornerstone of faith. It would seem too extreme to suspect some kind of 'multiple personality disorder', however.

The regulation of the conflict between sacred and secular becomes more productive when we investigate the positions of compromise and dialectical positions. Here the theory of *cognitive dissonance* might provide relevant explanations. This theory is based on the observation that people will go to great lengths to maintain consistency in their beliefs, attitudes and actions. Whenever these are inconsistent, a motivational state is produced that triggers mechanisms to bring cognitions back into a consistent relationship with one another. People will tend to override previous positions in an attempt to cope. Could this explain why at many university faculties a peaceful compromise (model 3) exists among methodologies that are otherwise intellectually suspect?

There is another perspective, however. As we know from experiments in *hypnosis*, no normal person under hypnosis can be forced to act against his or her deep values. We also know that the deep values and long-term interests of the individual and society will default when a certain system seeks to violate this. The human individual who from one point of view can pursue secular history (or sacred history) will only do it up to that point where it becomes obstructive to his or her wellbeing.

In summary then, a person may cope with conflicting cognitive systems by relating them to different ego states. This being so, one can assume that conflict will only be manageable up to a certain level and that such a person will tend to harmonise differences to eliminate conflict. Let us now construct a hypothesis on the ground of these considerations. Although the conflict between sacred and secular approaches might elicit reactions of indifference or denial, there are equally good reasons to accept that *where the same theologian sometimes 'switches' channels between the two strategies, it is related to ego states that are differently constructed, and that are activated at different times and for different reasons.*

Ego states, channels and rationalities

For our analysis of the tension between sacred and secular theology this might be relevant. Could it be that at a deeper existential level the same person may not experience an irrevocable conflict between sacred and secular approaches to

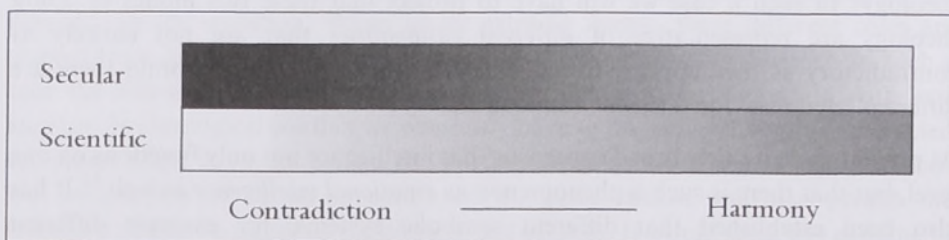
theology? In such a case we will have to project that these two modes of doing theology are representative of *different rationalities* that are not entirely as contradictory as they appear. It could be that within the human brain there are different 'channels' for different rationalities.

At present there is fairly broad consensus that intelligence not only functions on one level, but that there is such a phenomenon as *emotional intelligence* as well.⁶¹ It has also been established that different symbolic systems, for example different languages, can be processed in different areas of the brain. Such a theory would fit in with our epistemological theory that different symbolic systems are used for different purposes. Systems that seem to be incommensurable on a rational level may possibly be harmoniously accommodated on an emotional or existential level. *Thus the perception that secular and sacred history are contenders for the same intellectual space may be based on an inadequate understanding of human rationality and the levels on which it operates.*

This takes us beyond the famous 'leap of faith', by means of which rational human – beings according to Søren Kierkegaard – had to depart from the secular to arrive at the sacred. If the secular-scientific mode of thinking were the only dependable mode, then there would have been no other way to arrive at a position of faith except through a plunge into an irrational abyss. But if we could understand the scientific mode as just one of many possible modes for approaching reality, then the 'leap' becomes a matter of 'switching channels', which is quite normal human behaviour. When switching channels, some transference of one system to another is bound to occur. Such transference has been poorly researched, but may point the way to a better understanding of hermeneutics. Here questions become relevant such as, 'What happens to a 'sacred' theologian at a secular faculty (and vice versa)?'

If this hypothesis is correct, then apparent contradictions arise from a misunderstanding of human rationality aggravated by homeostasis in intellectual systems. Then we would realise that the two models for doing theology are not engaged in a duel but in a duet!⁶² Then our focus will have to shift from the opposing and apparently excluding viewpoints to the deep existential values of the theologian (or theological community) that regulate the deployment of these different modes of doing theology. If human beings use different systems of symbolic representation for different purposes, we shall have to ask why and when these different modes are deployed. Thus the scene is set for a 'neo-existentialism' that demands somewhat less 'fear and trembling' than conventional existentialism.⁶³ It would be more in line with the playful irony of certain brands of post-modern thought.

In such a case we shall have to imagine the interface of the two modes of doing theology in terms of gradual changes:



It might be that the more often homeostatic systems are 'demythologised', the more open and the less exclusive they will become and the more opportunity there will be for creative interaction. This type of approach has been described as a 'soft' epistemology that allows for blurs at the edges of our frames of knowledge.⁶⁴ In terms of the issue of the sacred or secular practice of religion it does not mean relativism. It does mean that there should be an attempt to reach out to those on the other side of the divide.

The real interests of the theologian

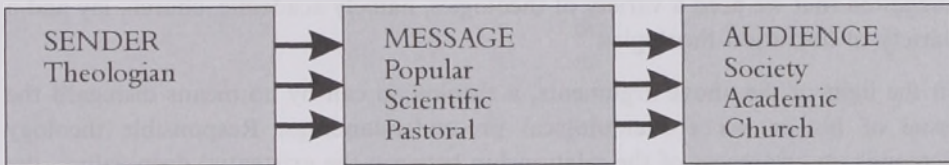
An investigation into theological epistemology cannot be complete without examining the position of the person involved. We have already intimated that a theologian might operate from a system of deep values that inform the different rational strategies that are followed. This means that who the theologian is and where he or she stands become highly relevant.

Since an objective knowledge of reality is not possible, a theologian has to concede that his or her basic orientation, with all its limitations, has a bearing on the theological work produced. Factors such as age, gender, social status and cultural heritage play a role. It is, of course, presumptuous for any individual to assume that he or she knows precisely who he or she is. Stating one's orientation either to motivate or relativise one's theological positions might be a question of 'protesting too much'. Those pre-understandings that we might be aware of may represent only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Pre-understandings that are consciously held and pursued can be refined by reflection. However, it is impossible to deal with *those pre-understandings that scholars are not aware of*. These can only be discovered in an interactive and open debate with other scholars in the same discipline and in other theological disciplines and in other traditions of interpretation. In the final instance people need other people to assist them to realise who they are. In this way, the slogan of African 'ubuntu' – 'people are people through other people' – acquires a noteworthy methodological application. Thus sacred and secular theologians need one another. Such interaction is much too important to be left to chance, but should be institutionalised on many different levels.

Theology and power

A further aspect to consider is *power*. Whenever a system is presented as being 'closed' (knowing that no systems can be closed indefinitely), it is an indication that power interests are at play. All systems of symbolic representation, even theoretical ones, aim at manipulating reality. Closed systems do this in a more direct and insistent way. Therefore the power relations within which theologians find themselves inevitably condition their pre-understandings that call for analysis. Values, attitudes and interests that lie outside their field of interest drive all scientific enterprises. Since no method is neutral or innocent, the specific methods, objectives and outcomes will always be related to the perspective of the research tradition and community that it comes from.

In theology such factors play an important role, since theology and religion encompasses human existence in its widest dimension within its scope. Therefore when theologians 'switch channels' when communicating to different audiences, we have to examine the power relations involved. The diagram below shows the relationship between different theological messages and their conventional audiences.⁶⁵



Audiences and interlocutors

The notion of different audiences introduces a powerful idea into theological epistemology. If a specific theological message is constructed to communicate with a specific audience, then it follows that the audience conditions the (conscious *and* subconscious) pre-understandings of the theologian. The specific audience with its problems and power relations becomes the *interlocutor* of the theologian in the process of theological production.⁶⁶ Such interlocutors or focused conversation partners can either be real people in dialogue with the theologian, or more often, an abstracted, implied audience.

This aspect should have been obvious, had it not been obscured in Western theology because theology was believed to be an objective and neutral discipline with rules that could be universally applied, and outcomes that would be universally valid. In the light of present epistemology we need to exercise more modesty. We should still grant the status of knowledge to tested opinions that have survived all

objections and criticisms, but we can only have a limited confidence, though no final certainty, that our knowledge will sustain all future assaults.

The notions of audiences and interlocutors serve to expose the contextuality of the theological discourse involved. It was only when seriously challenged by the emergence of liberation and other third world theologies that the fuller implications of this became clear. Much of twentieth-century theological production was aimed at the problems of secularisation and the so-called sophisticated, 'modern' non-believer. Thus Western theology assumed its dialogue partners to be Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and their kind.

The tacit agenda of most of recent theology was to impress thoughtful non-believers with convincing historical arguments. The historical-critical agenda as such was directed to provide answers to questions raised by this type of 'modern' interlocutor. Contemporary theologies have challenged this and forced a shift to the marginalised as interlocutors: to the poor, the exploited, women, oppressed blacks, marginalised third world peoples and repressed cultural groups. What these recent theologies attempted was to establish some connection between the strategy of Western theology and exploitative practices and strategies of Western cultures. In a noteworthy article on the multifaceted future of theology, John B. Cobb, Jr, suggested that we need a variety of theologies, namely academic, church, lay and a variety of liberation theologies.⁶⁷

In the light of the above arguments, a theologian can by no means disregard the issue of his or her epistemological pre-understandings. Responsible theology demands an awareness of the relationship between the existential deep values, the process of theological production, the type of discourse and the interests of the audience and interlocutors. And since there might not be rational access to many elements of theological pre-understanding, the responsible theologian will in principle remain open to criticism and resolutely committed to dialogue with those who think in a 'completely different' manner. Such are the demands of theology as a scientific enterprise.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Theological Process

PART THREE

Theology as Dialectical Process

The primary dialectic

The primary dialectic is the process of theology itself, the process of the theologian's thought and action. Theology is developed and lived as a process of thought and action, with the theologian's thought and action being the primary dialectic. It is the process of the theologian's thought and action, the process of the theologian's thought and action, that is the primary dialectic. The theologian's thought and action are the primary dialectic. The theologian's thought and action are the primary dialectic. The theologian's thought and action are the primary dialectic.

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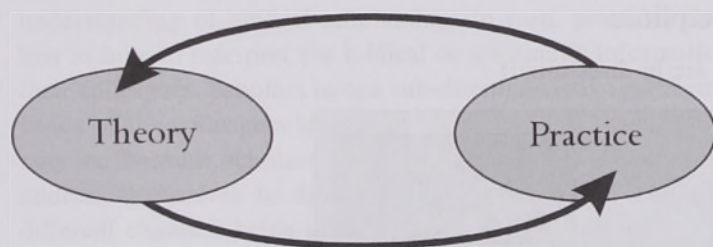
CHAPTER SEVEN

The Theological Process

In this final section we shall investigate the fundamental processes involved in theological production. The focus of our attention will be the different elements of the process in their relation to one another. We shall also ask how the cultural theory and epistemology discussed in the previous sections can foster an understanding of theology as a scientific enterprise.

The primary dialectic

Like scientific activities in general, theology depends on the primary dialectic between theory and practice. Theories are developed and tested in response to practical problems, while practical solutions are explained, analysed and organised in terms of theories. It is the primary concern of the responsible theologian to observe this dialectic and to remove obstacles that impede the flow of information in this process. This might occur when either element is undervalued or becomes so dominating that the exchange of information between the poles of the dialectic is undermined.



The secondary dialectic

In theoretical deliberations a theologian has recourse to analytical and synthetic tools. Past and present theories are critically analysed, while new theories are developed through systematic reflection. We can describe the interaction between *analytical* and *synthetic* activities as a secondary dialectic within the broad theological process. What was said in the previous paragraph about keeping the dialectical process on course also

applies to this secondary dialectic. Overemphasis of the analytical dimension will impede the formation of healthy and viable theories just as much as a dominance of systematic reflection will undermine analytical activity.

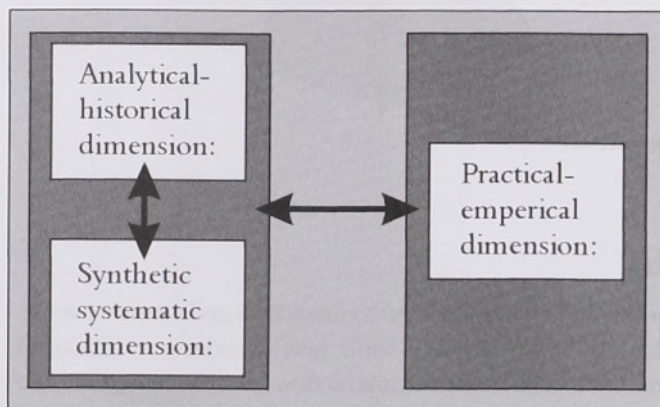
The relationship between historical, systematic and practical subjects

In the development of theology all these elements have found their place in theological institutions. Traditionally the historical subjects, including biblical subjects, form part of the analytical disciplines; systematic or fundamental theology (dogmatics) is associated with synthetic activity, while practical subjects are concerned with the empirical aspect.

In a time that specialisation in these subjects has become acute, it is necessary to reflect on their respective places within the theological discipline as a whole. In some cases the theological sub-disciplines tend to lead lives of their own without any visible accountability to the other elements. Reflection on this dialectical relationship is also necessary to counter a simplistic view that the disciplines are perceived to stand in a closed, linear relation to one another. According to the latter view, the Bible is first studied, then systematised and eventually applied in practice. Such a view suppresses the complexity of the interaction between the various elements and leads to an authoritarian and imperialist theological culture where there is no space for true innovation.

Diagram: the relationship between the main theological sub-disciplines

(Note that the arrows are bi-directional)



Inherently these dimensions are mutually dependent and can never be separated. All theological activity can be placed somewhere within this diagram. All the many types of theology differ only in focus and the degree to which these aspects are integrated. This applies both to broad theological traditions and to the manner in which theology is done within conventional faculties of theology.

Thus one can describe the strategies of different theological traditions with reference to their entry into the dialectical process. Roman Catholic and orthodox Protestantism traditionally began with the systematic aspect. Evangelical fundamentalism focused on the Bible and largely tried to bypass the systematic aspect. Orthodox Christianity and indigenous forms of Christianity as found in the African Independent Church Movement began with the practical aspect and considered the other aspects only as they related to religious practice. This explanation is, of course, too tidy but it serves to illustrate general trends.

Within the theological institution, research may begin in any of the practical, systematic or historical sub-disciplines, but should eventually be conducted with cooperation of all the others. Thus we find that theological specialists do not keep to their own sub-disciplines. *Biblical scholars* write books on practical issues such as faith and preaching. *Systematic theologians* write commentaries and hymns. *Practical theologians* write commentaries and theologies. As it is represented, this system appears deceptively simple. In reality there is room for massive misunderstandings between representatives of the various sub-disciplines. Biblical scholars are sometimes at a loss when trying to understand why systematic theologians do not take them seriously. If they are frustrated by the ahistorical use of the Bible in textbooks on systematic theology, this applies even more to biblical applications in the practical subjects. The way Scripture is used in church order, hymns, church art, and even pastoral counselling is often contrary to the understanding of biblical scholarship. In turn, practical theologians may be at a loss as how to interpret the biblical or systematic information that is presented by their colleagues. Scholars in one sub-discipline may find themselves talking over the heads of the colleagues in another sub-discipline. Much of this misunderstanding may be because scholars of various sub-disciplines knowingly or unknowingly address themselves to different audiences (thus we have a further example of different channels being used).

Usually external factors such as the structure of the university or the constraints of the denominational tradition impose some semblance of coherence on theology as whole. Nevertheless it is impossible to work in one sub-discipline without presupposing views on the others. Biblical scholars, for example, work with an implied systematic view of theology, while systematic theologians work with an implied understanding of the Bible. In the ideal seminary, school or faculty of theology both parties will recognise the need for each other in order to clarify their own pre-understandings, which are often naïve.

It seems that currently a grand synthesis between the theological disciplines is not possible, or advisable. What can be done is to remove the logjam obstructing the dialectical flow between theory and practice, between analytical and systematic approaches. This also implies that (Western) theology has to be self-critical of its traditional *explicatio/applicatio* model, according to which Scripture is studied, refined and systematised into doctrines and applied practically.

In spite of lip service to the opposite, this approach is still dominant in most institutions in the Western world and beyond. The basic structuring of faculties and learning programmes still implies that the finding and application of essential truth can be achieved in two separate stages. This appears to be an intellectualist, elitist and idealist procedure implying certain authority structures. It is also conservative. Regardless of how progressive the intentions, in reality the structure moves in the opposite direction, producing an endless stream of biblicist reactions. Where to go from here is not altogether certain. Shall we turn the system upside down, beginning with orthopraxis? This is not without methodological problems. Or shall we begin with practical theology as the 'crown of theology' (Schleiermacher)? Do we need a radical break or gradual modification? But then, who are the 'we' and who are the 'they'?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Theoretical Theology (1): The Historical-Analytical Dimension

Historical analysis is an integral part of all scientific research, though it is often invisible in the natural sciences. In contrast to the natural sciences, in the human sciences one can hardly find any piece of research that does not have a lengthy preamble on the 'state of research' of a specific problem. Historical research is an integral part of the theoretical labour that goes into the advancement of knowledge. It serves among other things to define the field of study, to sharpen the focus on the work, to hone the apparatus for the research. By nature the historical disciplines are more analytic than synthetic.

Because Christianity is a historical religion, this dimension receives particular emphasis. 'Historical religion' means that its faith is based on a revelation in a particular historical context. This also means that the 'eternal' truth of Christianity can be accessed as it becomes manifest in a particular, concrete, cultural-historical context.⁶⁸ Universality is revealed in particularity, in the same way that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn could use *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovitch* to describe political oppression as a universal phenomenon.

The scope of historical investigation

All facets of theological activity are integrally related to and dependent on historical analysis. While all theologians would agree that biblical history is a *sine qua non*, theology also demands the historical analysis of a wide range of other fields. Because of the global scope of theology, in principle no field can be excluded. The fields for historical analysis that are eventually chosen would be those that are most productive. Conventional disciplines such as church history, history of doctrines and history of religions (religious studies) fall under this heading, but the history of philosophy and culture may also be included.

The specific tools for investigation will enhance the competence to access and unlock the basic resources and to analyse them according to the best available methods. In principle the same variety of methods of analysis can be applied to all fields of historical investigation. Virtually all of the many different secular methods of analysis can be useful to the theologian. These might range from the

conventional to the most radical literary, sociological, psychological methods. The more critical and self-critical that such methods are, the more useful they are. Historical texts are to be examined by asking the most radical questions without restrictions. In the name of truth and honesty not even 'sacred dishonesty' can be tolerated. Can it be that being ultimately critical and at the same time being existentially committed are but two sides of the same coin?

While it is also important for systematic and practical theology, hermeneutics is of special significance when analysing the historical dimension of theology. This also involves an analysis of the scholar's own biases that come to the fore from time to time. Among these are those created by denominational tradition, the media of communication, the modern concept of linear time, the myth of historical progression, scientism and rationalistic individualism.

Does theology require a special method of analysis?

The question whether theology employs a special method derived from its own subject matter has been an issue of extended debate. It also touches on what was said above about the relationship between the secular and sacred study of Christianity. The answer depends on the type of approach one adopts when assessing the role of theology as a scientific discipline. From a systemic point of view, there can be no objection to adopting the methodology used in other human sciences. Theological students can study the fields mentioned above in secular departments and should be encouraged to enter the respective disciplines as taught in other university departments. Theological learning programmes should provide for a substantial number of modules from other disciplines. This is necessary for theology to escape imprisonment in a 'Christian ghetto'.

However, for logistical reasons, such studies might vary in their usefulness for theological enquiry. The reason is that subjects need to be approached in such a way that they are accessible to theological enquiry. For this purpose, analyses need to focus in particular on the *history of theological and religious ideas and applications* as they are implied in the respective fields.

Is there a difference between the methods employed by a secular historian and those used by a theological historian? There could be, but they also differ in focus. The primary audience to which the scholarly work is addressed determines this focus. The secular historian produces materials that serve the economic, political and social interests of society. The church historian produces materials that serve these interests, but also the interests of the church and other religions. Whereas it is perfectly legitimate to conduct a sociological analysis of biblical material, to the theological faculty such technical analyses are of use only if they are related to the history of theological ideas and applications.

A 'richer' view of history

The theologically minded historian is therefore not required to adopt some kind of superstitious belief in miracles. However, the historian who serves the needs of theological research has to avoid a minimalist (historicist or reductionist) view that only recognises events as they are comprehensible to people today. Such a view of history leads to the elimination of vital perspectives that are needed to analyse the history of ideas.⁶⁹ If 'Ockham's razor' (*non sunt multiplicanda entia praeter necessitatem*) is narrow-mindedly applied to the history of the Bible, theology becomes a minimalist enterprise: reports of the miraculous and unique are downplayed as being superfluous and of secondary importance.

Rather than reducing the New Testament era or subsequent history to a limited number of 'historical facts', the focus should be on the development of theological ideas within their contemporary settings. For example, rather than discarding the episode where Jesus walked on the water as 'un-historical', the focus should fall on how this report came to be woven into the fabric of the social and theological textures of the time.

Reports concerning historical events are to be understood within the cultural paradigm of the time in which they originated. This goes much further than merely a study of the background or immediate context. It reaches back to an understanding of the worldview expressed and analyses the range of historical receptions within different contexts. This is a vital aspect of the theological historian's task.

The Bible: history of early Christianity

The primacy of the Bible

Regardless of divergent views on the authority and inspiration of the Bible, all theologians would agree that it is the primary and original document of Christianity. It contains the original witnesses regarding the historical events that are foundational to the Christian faith. No theology is conceivable without an analysis of the Bible. In the discussion above, the relationships among the historical, systematic and practical subjects were the focus of attention. As a historical subject, biblical analysis stands in a dialectical relationship to systematic theology and together with systematic theology it maintains a dialectical interaction with practical theology. Although some traditions (for example the radical Pentecostal tradition) have sought to bypass the systematic component in doing theology by trying to apply the biblical message directly in the life of the church, it can be pointed out that they have not managed to escape an implied systematic theology. The manner in which the Bible is studied is always deeply influenced by systematic and practical considerations.

Our purpose with considering the role of the biblical subjects is not to prescribe a certain approach, or to give an overview of all the different options. It is to outline the role of the Bible in the broad theological field.

Purpose of biblical subjects

Different schools of thought motivate differently the purpose of biblical studies within the theological discipline. What can be said without controversy is that the church has a vested interest in understanding the Bible as testimony to the will and purpose of God. (Unless someone asks, 'Whose Bible?') By interpreting the Bible and meditating on it, believers receive authoritative instruction in faithful living. The interests of secular society, and academic society, are to understand how this process works and affects them. From a theological viewpoint biblical studies serve to unlock the Bible for systematic and practical reflection and application. In order to serve this purpose the Bible needs to be analysed in terms of a history of theological ideas.

Beyond the basic tools: knowing why and how the Bible is studied

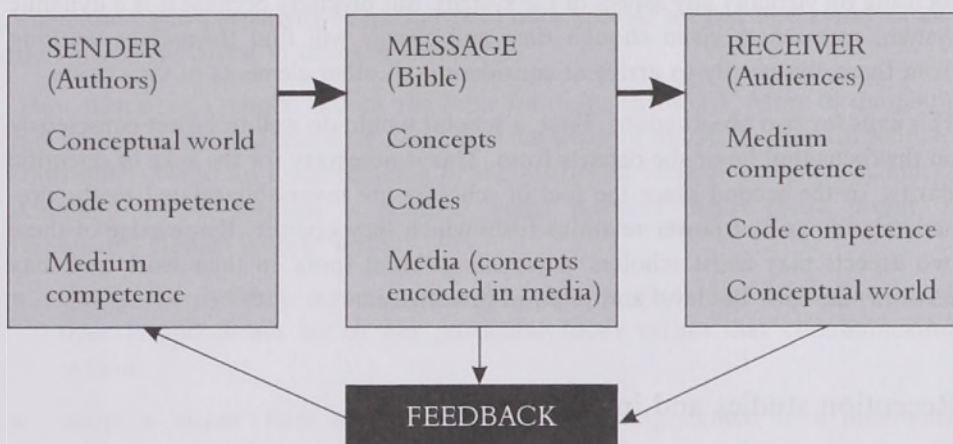
How the Bible is to be studied so that it becomes useful to theology in general is a question to which different traditions and schools provide different answers. There is consensus, however, on some of the basic tools. These include tools for establishing the best text of the Bible (textual criticism) and for understanding the meaning of the Bible (linguistic, lexical and syntactic studies). Beyond these, a great number of analytical methods have been introduced. Among these there are historical and literary methods. Thus the Bible is subjected to rhetorical, semiotic and structural analyses with new methods being explored from time to time.

The wide range of materials in the Bible itself and the range of possible methods render it impossible for one person or even a team of people to master all methods and to apply them. It is quite easy for a biblical scholar either to become perplexed by the plethora of methods and perspectives or to become so much encapsulated by a specific method that sight of the 'big picture' is lost. Some of these methods are more productive than others for achieving certain objectives. As explained to me by a colleague, one has to regard the methods used for biblical analysis in the same light as a carpenter would regard his tools. When selecting a saw to cut a certain piece of wood, there are many different types that will do the job. But some may be more effective than others. Some will destroy too much of the wood; others may consume too much time. There may not be a single best tool. Likewise, methods for biblical exegesis are merely limited tools for achieving limited results. For the study of the Bible it therefore becomes important for the theologian to establish *why* the Bible is studied and to ascertain the best methods for this purpose.

The Bible within a communication system

The first task of a biblical scholar on a theological team is therefore to locate and identify his or her own academic approach within a broader framework. One way of doing this is in terms of a communication theory, which can be represented as below.

How biblical messages were originally communicated



The diagram suggests that biblical authors transmitted messages by encoding specific concepts in specific media of communication (for example manuscripts). Audiences received these messages by reversing the process: by employing their media competence to decode the messages in order to receive the concepts into their conceptual world. Negative feedback during the process of communication required the repetition and reformulation of subsequent messages. It is in such subsequent responses to previous messages that we can observe the beginning of a process of conscious reflection that eventually developed into theology.

Practically all methods of studying the Bible can be located within the system represented by this diagram. Some examples may illustrate this. From the time of the Church Fathers to the Scholastics, study was restricted to a review of *concepts* (and themes) in the Bible. As research developed, the history of religions-school focused on the *conceptual worlds* of the senders and receivers. Form criticism introduced the study of *codes* (forms) in the Bible. Structural and literary approaches discovered *codes* in the Bible as they function on many different levels. Textual criticism began a study of the *media* of communication, which has recently

developed into *media studies* on the Bible. Reader-oriented and reception studies (audience criticism, etc) concentrated on how the message is received by their original audiences.

Pre-understanding and focus of the theologian

Since we have to do with a dynamic system of communication, it is impossible to design a 'perfect method' for investigating Scripture. A scholar may begin by focusing on virtually any aspect of the system. But precisely because it is a dynamic system, researchers given enough time and energy will find themselves working from there, eventually to arrive at considering all other elements in the system.

This calls for two observations. First, a scholar would do well to reflect consciously on the focus that he or she departs from. This is necessary for the sake of scientific clarity. In the second place the foci of scholars are invariably related to the pre-understandings and power relations from which they operate. Knowledge of these two aspects may assist scholars in revealing 'blind spots' in their work and may serve to fine-tune the level and pitch of investigation.

Reception studies and interlocutors

What has been said about interlocutors in the theological process in general particularly applies to biblical research. In the recent past, academic institutions have almost exclusively conducted research with the church, the academy or the 'sophisticated non-believer' in mind. In our present world it has become of vital importance to consider other interlocutors as well, for example the poor and marginalised, people from traditional third world cultures, women and the ecumenical world..

From the diagram it is clear that the receivers (audience), their reception and the feedback they provide form a vital part of the system of communication. In a somewhat metaphorical overstatement it was said that 'the reception is the message'. We can now re-state it more concisely by saying that *the reception is a vital systemic element of the communication process*. After the formation of the biblical canon, this process of reception did not come to an end. The continuing reception of the Bible by succeeding audiences is one of the central foci of church history.

Summary: unlocking the Bible for doing theology

In the light of the above arguments, we now ask: 'How does a biblical scholar unlock the Bible for doing theology?' This is the task of biblical scholars who understand themselves to be part a broader theological team. No biblical scholar can afford the luxury of retreating into the ghetto of purely technical analysis, regardless how groundbreaking and fundamental such analysis might be. The lack of consideration for the dynamics of the system that he or she is involved in inevitably leads to an acontextual activity and represents a form of 'biblicism', where the basic documents or background data become an end in themselves and are entirely explained in terms of themselves.

'How then does a scholar unlock the Bible for doing theology?' More to the point, this translates into the question, 'How can the work of individual biblical scholars contribute toward an understanding of the history of ideas in early Christianity?' Although no set formula is possible, some pointers might prove useful. A responsible biblical scholar would:

- clarify the dynamic contemporary relations in which the biblical messages operate and locate his or her particular focus within that communication system
- adopt a 'richer' view of history, instead of being limited to a minimalist perspective of historical research (allowing for an existential-pneumatic approach besides a historical-critical one)
- enter into the world of the first authors and audiences and gain competence at decoding the message in approximately the same way as those audiences (developing an 'emic' or paradigmatic view as an alternative to an 'etic' one)
- show and analyse the dynamic impact of theological ideas on the audiences (showing how 'horizons of expectancy' are modified by the messages)
- formulate the analyses in such a way that they are accessible to systematic and practical theologians.

In summary one can say that a perspective gained through biblical study is 'optimal' if it is accessible and useful to other theological sub-disciplines.

Other historical disciplines

In principle any cultural field can be the subject of historical analysis by theologians. The interests of the theologian and his or her audience will dictate the field itself and the focus and level of inquiry. If these fields are investigated only for propaganda, this is bound to be a sterile exercise. Theology also has something to contribute to other subject fields. In the past some significant intellectual

developments in other disciplines (for example philosophy, literary interpretation and sociology) were pioneered in the theological field. Theology conceived as a systemic enterprise is likely to make an even greater contribution.⁷⁰ Responsible investigation will engage in a constructive dialogue with the real issues in the respective fields. While all the hermeneutical guidelines for critical analyses developed above are to a greater or lesser extent applicable, there are specific interests to be pursued in each field

The history of Christianity (church history)

No theologian can afford to 'skip' over 2000 years of Christian history when interpreting the Christian message for today. This discipline is therefore of vital importance. However, church history is not always presented in a format that serves the purpose of theology. Often this discipline is presented within the context of a 'grand narrative' that serves sectional purposes and distorts the data. This approach is exemplified in a history that begins with the origins of the universal church and follows developments, every time narrowing its scope until the special tradition or denomination of the historian comes into view. Such an approach serves to motivate and justify the present and inevitably reinforces denominational bias. Other grand narratives may demonstrate the superiority of specific Christian traditions or justify a variety of religious nationalisms. They may even demonstrate the superiority of Western or African Christianity, or of Christianity as religion. To counteract such tendencies, these implicit biases should be brought into the open and the historian should deconstruct such tendencies, pointing out the closures. What is needed is a global history of the church, something that does not exist at present.⁷¹

Regarding contents, church history to become useful to theology should investigate the reception of the Bible and the Christian message among different succeeding audiences, thus presenting a history of Christian ideas. Beyond the empirical data, it should critically investigate the manner in which religious and theological ideas operate. If the pre-understandings that shaped Christian history are not understood, they are bound to take their revenge by subconsciously controlling the present understanding.

A more recent and relevant development of historical studies is the study of contemporary receptions of Christianity in civil and popular religions. With the downscaling of historical studies in secular society (as at present in South Africa and elsewhere) it becomes all the more important to empower pastors and preachers as future community leaders with an adequate understanding of history.

History of dogma

As a subsection of the history of Christianity, the history of dogma focuses on the formation of creeds and confessions. For the witness of the church in the present it is important to understand how these came about and their intrinsic meaning. A valuable contribution of this study is to debunk the semi-ideological or supra-historical status that many confessions have achieved. Instead of presenting confessions as 'ahistorical myths', these should be understood within the dynamical historical context in which they originated. In this manner their strengths and shortcomings are elucidated. Questions such as, 'When and why did the church find it necessary to formulate this confession?' should be addressed. In this way the history of dogma becomes open territory for theological enquiry and can assist in the contemporary reformulation of the witness of the church.⁷²

History of religions (religious studies) and history of culture

A review of world history reveals that Christianity is one of the most universal expressions of human culture. For this reason, and also on powerful theological grounds, one can accept that in principle it remains radically open to wisdom from other traditions. At the same time Christianity exercises a fundamental critique of human religion. One could say with some justification that the teachings of Jesus implied the 'end' of human religion. Wherever religion degenerates into closed systems that promote inhuman practices and the abuse of power, these are to be exposed in the light of Jesus' Gospel of grace.

The theological analysis of other religions has double foci. On the one hand Christianity needs the wisdom from the other traditions to fulfil its own destiny. This statement may seem contrary to Christian practice in the past centuries, but its validity can easily be demonstrated from Scripture and history. From its beginning the Christian tradition has shown a remarkable capacity for assimilating elements from other traditions. So, for example, as early as apostolic times use was made of Hellenistic conventional morality to illustrate Christian living. At a further stage Platonism and Gnosticism were assimilated into Christian thinking. Although assimilation is always a double-edged sword, with positive and negative aspects, I wish to make the point that these assimilations did not happen by accident. Some forms of assimilation went too far, but assimilation was part of the original design.⁷³

Another focus of the theological analysis of other religions is to de-mythologise them by critically examining the demonic aspects found in their systems. While guarding against becoming a closed system itself, the Christian message has the function of exposing the closures in all other systems.

The analysis of other religions is part of the larger enterprise *of understanding the systems involved in a holistic manner*. This is necessary if we want to avoid


comparing 'apples with pears' when dealing with other religious systems. No final method can be prescribed for analysing religion in general. As stated above, at present no consensus exists with regard to an adequate methodology. The best any scholar can do is to take adherents of other religions seriously and seek, together with them, a common ground. This 'common' ground can never be a 'metaphysical' formula that applies to all conditions at all times. It is something that has to be sought and agreed upon in specific cases where specific religions enter into serious conversation with one another for common causes, for example fostering world peace and human rights.⁷⁴ Whereas unity is not possible between religions, harmony is. To state the same in different words: *solidarity has to be sought in practical human contact and co-operation rather than ideological convergence.*

Although the search for consensus might prove impractical, convergences can be established. Seeking the common ground while preserving the difference, then, is one of the major tasks of the historian of religion. This enterprise is only in its initial phase and is accompanied by a great deal of misunderstanding. It is, however, of vital importance to theology if it is to emerge from the sterile 'Christian ghetto' where Christianity is only to be defined in its own terms. Exploring a common discourse is demanded by the Christian religion for its own sake, especially for the sake of loving its neighbours and enemies, which is central to the cause of Christianity. 'Loving the enemy' in this case means 'to reach out in an embrace to the completely other'.⁷⁵

To my knowledge there is no need for a fundamental dichotomy between the mission of the church and dialogue with other religions. A Christian example of dialogue and mission working in unison is the conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan women in John 4. This example shows how a respectful dialogue leads to a new religious discovery. The mission of the church is to witness to the Gospel for the sake of the regeneration of humanity. To state it more pointedly, Jesus of Nazareth did not aspire to making people 'Christians' but to restoring their original humanity. Such a witness can only be presented in the context of a sincere dialogue in which the humanity of all dialogue partners is fully respected. If the emphasis is on convincing others to acknowledge a predetermined set of intellectual propositions, then we have to do with an unchristian imperialism that defeats its own objective.

A critical analysis of other religions is not only necessary for the sake of humanity and for proclaiming the love of God to all nations, but also for understanding aspects of the Christian religion that would otherwise escape our knowledge. An example of how knowledge of other religions can enrich our perspective is found in the Epic of Gilgamesh. An understanding of the myth of the Flood as reflected in the Epic helps the theologian to interpret the Flood narrative in the Book of Genesis. From the Epic one learns how widespread the fear among Near Eastern peoples was that a deluge would destroy the world. This assists the theologian in

relating the story of the Flood in terms of general human fears and hopes. It also helps to locate the genre of the story in the survival epic. Comparison with modern survival epics, for example *Star Trek*, shows that this is a category that contemporary people can understand and relate to. Such comparisons enable theologians to interpret the biblical materials in much wider contexts, and at the same time to uncover the *proprium* of the biblical message.⁷⁶



CHAPTER NINE

Theoretical Theology (2): The Systematic-Synthetic Dimension

Systematic theology and the scope of religion

According to the general theory of religion, it has the function of providing meaning in a chaotic world, to socialise people within structures of meaning and to solve problems related to global meaning. These aspects also apply to the Christian religion. The task of systematic theology is to critically examine how religious expressions serve these goals. The content of the Christian religion is explained, analysed and organised with this in mind.

Systematic theology therefore includes all aspects of theoretical reflection on the Christian faith. It assists Christians in the development of confessions, the formulation of theological ethical principles, adopting apologetic positions and refining a theological theory of culture and reality. In the process religious systems are monitored and assisted, and problems are solved. It also has the task of identifying the implicit systematic theology in the other disciplines and refining them through critical investigation.

The contextual nature of systematic theology

Regardless of how abstract or wide in scope systematic theology might seem, one must remember that it is always a partial enterprise covering a part of reality and directed at a specific audience for a specific purpose. All the hermeneutical caveats put forward in the above sections apply to systematic theology. Therefore the Karl Barth's 'church dogmatics' and Paul Tillich's 'systematic theology' differ from sermons only in volume and intellectual pitch. In principle there are no qualitative differences.⁷⁷ The same may be said of most commentaries on books of the Bible, where some synthetic-systematic reflection on the Christian faith is implied.

The theological task of systematic theology

The narrower task of systematic theology is to assist the church in formulating a relevant witness to the love/grace/sovereignty of God.⁷⁸ It is in assisting such a process of ongoing interpretation that systematic theology earns its true colours as a

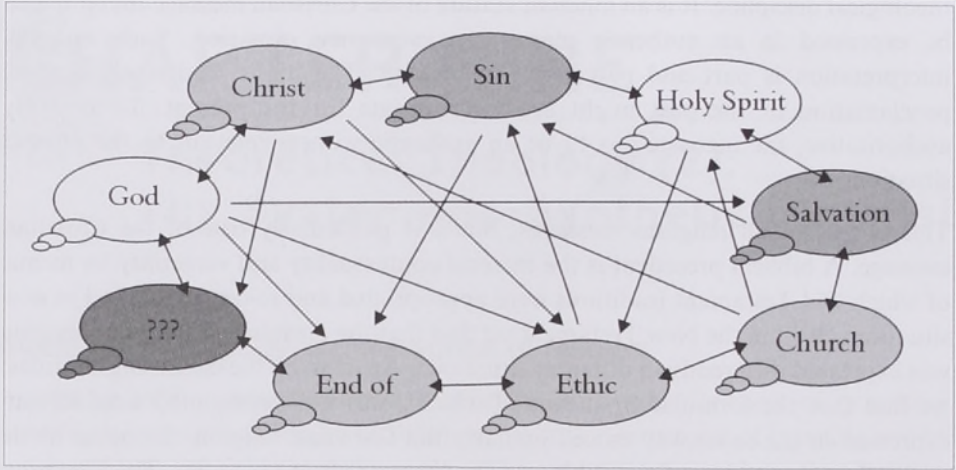
theological discipline. It is an inherent feature of the Christian message that it has to be expressed in an authentic manner in every new situation. Such ongoing interpretation is part and parcel of Christianity. The 'right' and 'authoritative' proclamation of the past might be inappropriate for the present. To be truly authoritative, the message has to be an authentic witness relevant to the present situation.

This is true of all religious messages, but it is particularly true of the Christian message. A biblical precedent is the extreme contextuality and versatility by means of which Old Testament traditions were appropriated and re-contextualised in new situations. Within the New Testament we find that the meaning of Jesus for his time was expressed differently in different situations. Apart from the christological titles, we find that the formulae by means of which Jesus was proclaimed were seldom expressed in the same way twice. Similarly the Christian religion can never abide merely by a recitation of the Bible and its direct application to life. The Christian church and message are served by systematic theology when it assists proclamation in such a way that the audience is authentically confronted by the love of God in Christ and puts love for neighbours into action.

The conventional divisions of systematic theology

The traditional presentation of Christian doctrines reveals serious shortcomings. Usually systematic theology is divided into sub-disciplines such as dogmatics, symbolics, apologetics and theological ethics.⁷⁹ The traditional presentation of themes deals with them in linear order (for example doctrines of God and creation, christology, pneumatology, hamartology, soteriology, ecclesiology, ethics and eschatology). This arrangement still forms the basis of most curricula, but is subject to serious shortcomings. It is an abstraction that promotes ahistorical and acontextual understandings.

When considering these themes in linear order it is important to note two common fallacies. The first is the notion that these items are supposed to follow one another logically and can be investigated separately. In reality the relationship between the different items defies all linearity. The manner in which one item is conceived co-determines how all the others are understood. For example, an evolutionary view on creation will inevitably determine the view on the end of the world, theory of salvation, sin, etc, and vice versa. We thus have to observe a systemic network, as represented below:



A second fallacy is the illusion that systematic reflection can be an intra-biblical or intra-theological exercise. In reality the 'raw materials' of systematic reflection are twofold: constant inputs from historical analyses; and constant inputs from the practical field. Where these inputs are lacking, systematic theology degenerates into a sterile, alienated enterprise. Systematic theologians who only study the writings of others on systematic theology are worthless to their subject. It becomes a closed circuit that needs to be prised open through critical reflection. For systematic theology to emerge from the 'ghetto', it needs the scientific humility to listen to the many voices coming from outside the system.

Overcoming the essentialist fallacy

Another pitfall of systematic theology is trying to distil theological 'essences' through some process of reasoning or another. Reason has a definite role to play in the theological process, but the formulation of abstract, cognitive rules to represent the reality of faith is doomed to failure. The problem is not only that human reason does not have access to essential or ultimate truth, but that *the Christian truth cannot be rationalised in terms of one or more central ideas*, regardless of how pervasive and convincing they might be. This feature of the Christian truth is derived from the fact that it is based on historical revelation. Even central doctrines such as the Trinity or the Two Natures of Christ have to be understood as rational constructs that serve to guard the divine mystery rather than as referring to a reality accessible to human reason.

The history of systematic theology and religious philosophy evidences a long list of attempts to arrive at revelations of the ultimate principle behind the Christian religion. One can state with certainty that these proposals reveal more about the *a*

priori positions of the particular scholar than about the Christian truth. Here is a list of such *a priori* positions of religious philosophers from the past, all related to some prior intuitive commitment (adapted and expanded from Tillich 1967:9):

Essential idea of Christian message	Scholar
Cosmic person	Brightman
Absolute spirit	Hegel
Cosmic whole	Hocking
Beyond subjectivity and objectivity	James
Identity of spirit and nature	Schelling
Universe	Schleiermacher (feeling of absolute dependence)
Being in itself	Scholastics
Universal substance	Spinoza
Value-creating process	Whitehead
Progressive integration	Wieman

It is not surprising that each scholar eventually ‘discovers’ his or her own *a priori* to be supported by the evidence considered. This is because the type of rationality they employ lands them in a *closed* hermeneutical circle: the position that intuitively functions as a starting point is eventually ‘discovered’ through scientific procedures.

A systemic approach renders such an exercise unnecessary. Human knowledge, conceived as a historical system, does not arise from one particular root that can be accessed by rational means and would explain all other aspects. It provides for a plurality of partial perspectives that form part of an ongoing process of communication. *A priori* positions (pre-understandings) play an important role by acting as a vehicle for the scholar to participate in the system, but they stand to be constantly modified by the system in which they participate.

An exercise: a theology of love

The question remains whether any idea or set of ideas can be identified as central to Christianity. In the argument above, a negative answer to this question was assumed. However, this does not eliminate the need for attempting a formulation that would fit the bill for the specific time and context of a specific theologian. If all knowledge is partial, it does not mean that the systematic theologian should shy

away from producing coherent syntheses. What is produced can never be a final product that would exhaust the subject, but it is nevertheless necessary for us to make new constructions to arrive at authoritative statements of our faith in the *hic et nunc*.

An example of such a construction of Christian theology is found in a relevant and interesting article by Paul Ricoeur that was published in 1996. In it he develops the idea that Christian love is necessary for the maintenance of justice in the world. Love and justice operate in a dialectical relationship. 'Should the ethics of communication not accept the supra-ethical assistance of a love that obliges?' he asks.⁸⁰ By grappling with two of the most important themes of humanity today justice and love and by exploring their religious and Christian dimensions Ricoeur enters into a rich dialogue with present-day culture. This is the type of constructive theology that is needed.

An authoritative synthesis of the Christian message which I can subscribe to might present itself as follows. It could start off from the Christian notion of neighbourly love, which extends even to the enemy. This was the radical demand that Jesus put to his disciples according to the Scriptures and was demonstrated by his death on the cross. God, as the Father of Jesus, is revealed as the source of this love, and the Holy Spirit as the enabling power. Salvation then means to be transformed by the unilateral love of God, through his Son.

From this point of departure one can proceed to define some of the other topics. Sin prevents people from practising love; the Church is the community transformed by the pro-active love of God and the locus where love for the enemy is cultivated. Mission is witnessing to this love and by doing this transforming the world. In this synthesis love, as a pro-active and transforming social force, becomes the point of contact between the secular and sacred worlds. Since unconditional love is also a theme in at least four other world religions, it also provides a solid basis for entering into dialogue with and witnessing to other religions.

The arguments and considerations above may provide the reader with an idea of how a systematic theologian arrives at a synthesis. One can also ask whether this is good theology? In defence of this construct, one may argue that it complies with a number of criteria for 'good' theology. Let us first list the criteria before discussing some of the aspects:

- It has a broad biblical, cultural and social base.
- It introduces the category of revelation.
- There is a paradox that implies transcendence, and prevents a *theologia gloriae*.
- It addresses a basic human need.
- It has the potential to precipitate deeds and to make a difference.
- It is open-ended, allowing for input from a radical other source (the enemy).

- It draws a sharp distinction between good and evil.
- It can be extrapolated in terms of a wide range of doctrinal issues.
- It operates on individual and social levels.

An analysis of culture shows that this is a viable concept (but then again, only for a specific audience at a certain time). It is relevant not only to personal relationships, but also on a global scale where the future of the planet is threatened by broken relationships between nations, races and social classes. Today the non-violent mediation of conflict and the management of emotions remain unsolved problems.

Biblical analysis shows that this concept of 'enemy-love' has a broad textual base and is also found close to the central biblical themes (for example the suffering servant of the Lord, forgiveness and God's action toward human beings). Analysis of the concept of love as portrayed by Christianity also reveals a paradox: love for the enemy defies its own regular definition, for enemies are to be hated. Yet this paradox finds historical confirmation in Jesus, who loved his enemies. Thus the paradox introduces a sense of transcendence. If Jesus is the image of his Father, it means that God's love is qualified as love for his enemies. Further reflection might focus on the function of this paradox. Could it be that the paradox intentionally stimulates creative action?

Empirical observation reveals that this kind of unilateral love has a salutary effect; it restores relationships. When practised it gives the one who is giving the love a new sense of self, and appeals to the better nature of the 'enemy'. But there is a problem. Sometimes the love is rejected by unbearable enmity and discrimination. Does this mean that the rule of 'loving the enemy' has only limited application in the face of gross injustice and oppression? Here ethical issues come into play. In the light of over-population, can we say that some unborn foetuses are our 'enemies'? And does 'enemy-love' provide for the possibility of a 'just war'? In this case then, theology needs to develop short- and long-term strategies for abolishing enmity. That love for one's enemy is a quality of God makes this an essential value for the believer, one that has to be consistently pursued in spite of all empirical setbacks. Further empirical feedback raises theoretical concerns. If God is a God of love, why all the enmity in the world in the first place? And if the church has had this message for so long, why is it not evident in much that the church has done?

From a systemic point of view this can never be a final construct and is in constant need of being tested and supplemented by similar designs built around other concepts and themes. But there can be no doubt that this is *an* authoritative interpretation of the Christian message and likely to be part of the religious agenda of most Christians. The point where this trope of Christian religion develops a need for theological reflection is when a believer runs into problems in an attempt at 'loving the enemy' (when, for example, he or she faces martyrdom). Further questions are then asked: 'Is this really what God wants? What else does God

require? Will a sacred theologian love his or her enemy better than a secular theologian? In seeking answers, theology also assists the development of new strategies in the never-ending ebb and flow of theory and practice. In the exploration of these questions the systematic theologian has a powerful ally in the philosopher.

Philosophy and theology

Philosophical reasoning is part of the scientific apparatus of the theologian.⁸¹ The discipline of philosophy is *critical* by definition and serves mainly to clarify the questions humans ask and to explore the limits of our conceptual apparatus. Though philosophy can never escape the ontological question, by definition it can never advance an answer either, for the philosopher has to remain detached forever.

From this, the difference between theology and philosophy should be clarified. Religion is the institutionalisation of strategies for global meaning that have developed heuristically. Theology is the scientific examination and interpretation of those strategies. Because of this focused interest, theology temporarily suspends its critical facility at a certain point in order to provide for specific needs at a specific time. Decisions have to be made, even with limited information; life has to be lived, even with limited resources.

Although philosophy can never go beyond the hypothetical, theology does.⁸² Philosophy can, for example, explore the implications of 'loving your enemy' and it can argue for the relative superior morality involved, but at the point where it is explained and motivated as a divine imperative, it becomes theology. At this stage closure takes place, because closure is the prerequisite for action.

Christianity at its worst

The systematic theologian also has an apologetic function. This function is exercised not by proving Christianity to be unique or the only true religion, but by examining the positions of those who oppose Christianity. Systematic theologians are therefore in a position to redress misunderstandings and to expose false arguments and presuppositions. For focus, they need inputs from practical theology that will point the way to issues that should be examined.

When dealing with an atheist, for example, the systematic theologian needs to take full note of the criticism levelled against the Christian religion. Christian claims to possess absolute truth may indeed disempower human creativity and rational thinking. The church can be held responsible for obstructing scientific inquiry and democratic government or for reinforcing divisions in humanity. It might be alleged that religion encourages compartmentalised thinking, or merges with ideologies and systems of power, strengthening reactionary forces in society. 'Why does it so often

happen,' a systematic theologian might ask, 'that the most conservative party in local congregations manage to become the interlocutors of the preacher or the synod?' Such criticism, and the social, political and economic interests that support it, is the 'raw material' of systematic theology. Often theology is threatened by a tendency to make the past the sole object of its study – an enterprise that inevitably leads back into the 'Christian ghetto'.

To fulfil their task systematic theologians constantly have to identify and break through the closed hermeneutical circuits that threaten to alienate themselves from the world outside. To do this, it is not enough to address the literary arguments of its interlocutors, but to engage them as persons. It is not enough, for example, to question the agnosticism of Stephen Hawking or the atheism of Richard Dawkins, as found in their writings. They have to be 'met in person'. To assist in this kind of engagement fresh inputs from the practical disciplines are of vital importance.



CHAPTER TEN

Practical Theology: The Empirical-Practical Dimension

Traditional scope and sub-disciplines

Of all the theological disciplines practical theology is closest to the needs of the church and more subject to the 'market forces' in the religious world. Traditional practical theology focused on the practical implementation of the Christian religion in all its dimensions. Curricula in the practical subjects include church growth and management, church order, homiletics, liturgy, hymnology, evangelism, missiology, catechism and Sunday school, pastoral and youth counselling and a host of other sub-disciplines. The traditional secular ancillaries to these subjects are social work, sociology, psychology, communication science and even speech and drama.

Place within the theological dialectic

The conventional view is that practical theology has to be concerned with the application of the truth found in the Bible as interpreted by systematic theology. In the light of systems theory as explored in this study, it is clear that such a view is an oversimplification of the theological process. The dialectic between practice and theory implies that scholars in the historical and systematic disciplines conduct their work from certain pre-understandings that are deeply influenced by the practical aspect of theology. There can be no theoretical work without some practical understanding.

On the other side of the scale we find that scholars in practical subjects often presuppose a theoretical framework that is not consonant with recent developments in the theoretical disciplines. The hymns and liturgical calendar, for example, could be based on a view of Scripture that does not stand up to the latest research in the historical disciplines.

Church order may be grounded on a biblicist interpretation of Scripture. Evangelism and missiology can be taught without an understanding of the best systematic insights on the subject. Homiletics might still be taught in the *explicatio/applicatio* mode. Methods for Bible study might presuppose an ahistorical and acontextual biblicism. Sometimes the logic employed in the practical subjects seems strange and distorted to scholars in the other disciplines. From their side practical

theologians might feel that the work done in the other fields does not meet their needs for building up the congregations. All this can be ascribed to an insufficient flow of information in the dialectical process.

Contribution to other disciplines

It is clear that practical theology does not have to be only on the receiving end of theology, but that it also has much to contribute. This is what we shall be looking at now. The most general contribution of practical theology to the theoretical disciplines is to *supply them with real and relevant interlocutors*. It would be of no use if the historical and systematic disciplines only focused on academic interlocutors from their ancillary subjects, or even worse, only on interlocutors of the past as documented in the literature. Theology has to focus on the present, although it should be firmly grounded in tradition. To church history and biblical studies, practical theology supplies information on the reception of the Bible and the Christian message. To the systematic disciplines it supplies information about the real problems that need to be solved.

The question now is how can practical theology supply this information about interlocutors, receptions and problems in a productive way? Should this be left to the informal 'osmosis' of ideas in faculty tearooms, or is this an aspect that needs to be built into the theological process? There are some structural adjustments that may facilitate this process, for example by the exchange of lecturers from one department to teach modules in another. Providing emerging theologians with a well-balanced education requires that the flow of information between theory and praxis should be optimised. Whatever the case may be, it seems that this should be made one of the priorities of the practical discipline, that is, to devise methods and means to supply relevant feedback to the other disciplines.

The nature and quality of such feedback also deserves attention. This is the point where practical theology has a vital contribution to get theology out of the Christian ghetto. This concerns the scope of the fields from which information is gathered. Whether the scope is limited to the environment of a specific denomination, ecumenical fellowship or society in general, it is bound to make a significant difference. The same applies to whether the information is only gathered to promote the interests of the Christian faith in a narrower sense, or whether it is done in the interests of humanity. Literary research and interviews might yield good information, but with the advance of methods for empirical research this seems to be the field that now needs focused attention and development.

Empirical method

Today empirical studies have entered a new dimension, with psychology and sociology leading the way. Controlled tests have been developed for understanding the communicative aspects of preaching, as well as ascertaining the modes of spirituality and the type of faith held by individuals and society. Methods of empirical investigation include detailed sense observation, making predictions, designing experiments, applying inductive confirmation, inventing and testing contingent generalisations, theories and laws. Processing of data by computers has rendered this a sophisticated activity.

At this stage, practical theology has only made the first advances in this direction.⁸³ We conclude this section with an example of how empirical-practical observation has led to a new development that has affected the whole theological field in recent times. It concerns liberation theology and the family of theologies that came into being as a result of this innovation.

An example of innovation through empirical observation: liberation theology

Since the 1960s liberation theology has involved theologians and lay people in the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions as well as a wide range of government officials, economists and sociologists. The liberation theologies that emerged (Black Theology, Latin American Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology) all responded to some form of social oppression. The basic problem addressed was the observation that Christianity was ineffective in dealing with these kinds of oppression.

Liberation theologies all began with the *empirical* observation that the Christian faith apparently faced an inability to position itself regarding different forms of social and political oppression. Experience had shown that at times Christianity was not only tolerant or ignorant of certain forms of oppression, but it actually promoted and entrenched these. Much of the theological activity in the latter part of the twentieth century was devoted to this problem. If one takes a global view of the development of liberation theology, it now seems only logical that such a shift in attention would occur. Eventually the empirical observation led to a re-thinking of systematic theology and the historical-critical investigation.

Preparing the ground for liberation theology

The ground for the new development in theology had already been prepared by post-war Western theology, which opened the door to concentrated reflection on the social implications of the Christian faith. In response to World War II and growing secularisation, theologians explored the socio-political dimension of Christianity. The Christian faith was criticised for restricting its message to the

salvation of the individual and neglecting the transformation of society. The church had to resume its prophetic function as an institution of social criticism. It had to redefine its message within a secular context.

Theology became serious about exploring the world 'from below', that is, from a general, humanist perspective. The debate about the influence of hermeneutic 'pre-understandings' that began in the 1930s served as a powerful tool in this development.

This set the stage for liberation theology. The humanist category 'from below' was soon redefined in terms of a *sociological* category. 'From below' came to mean 'from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed'. It was also found that 'mainstream' Christianity's lack of social involvement not only derived from a distorted pre-understanding, but that the Scriptures and confessions of the Church as understood at the time promoted this lacking pre-understanding. Previously it was thought that Christianity had only failed in the *application* of its message, but now the *message itself* was subjected to a radical criticism. In the light of this, European theologies were found to be individualist, theoretical abstractions: the one-sided and individualist pre-understanding of Christianity restricted its vision for socio-political regeneration. The historical-critical method with its ideal of a value-free and neutral investigation of Scripture was held responsible for perpetuating injustice. So too the doctrine of an unchanging, transcendent God (conceived in terms of Greek philosophical categories), who lives 'out there' in a heaven far removed from the affairs of mankind. It is telling that the famous phrase, 'pie in the sky when you die', which has become part of contemporary theological jargon, was only coined in 1911.⁸⁴

Criticism of conventional theology

This development meant that both the systematic and historical dimensions of theoretical theology came under fire because of empirical-practical observations.

Instead of historical-critical analysis, Christianity was now subjected to a radical social analysis in which the intellectual tools of Marxism proved useful. The view adopted from Marxism was that the most fundamental dichotomy in society is the divide between rich and poor, and since the rich are by definition rich because of the exploitation of the poor, the only way to resolve poverty is for the poor to engage in a revolutionary class struggle. According to the theory of economic determinism, all intellectual property was seen as an extrapolation of socio-economic conditions. But did the Bible itself champion the poor, or did it speak on behalf of the powerful?

Liberation theologians argued that Christianity could not avoid an analysis in terms of the class struggle between rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed. To redress

past indifference, a new form of Christianity had to adopt, as its pre-understanding, a bias toward the poor. Through such a 'preferential option for the poor' Christianity could withdraw its support for the capitalist systems that were responsible for impoverishing and exploiting the Third World.

Contextual aspects of theology

An analysis from the point of view of the class struggle exposed the intellectual bias of most of Western theology as a way of remaining neutral and perpetuating economic and social privilege. To counter this, it was emphasised that theology can never be a collection of timeless, culture-transcending truths that remain valid for all time. Rather, it is an ongoing, contingent exercise that is always 'done' in context. The way of doing theology pointed out by liberation theologians was to involve Christianity in revolutionary action on behalf of the poor. Orthopraxis had to replace orthodoxy. Empirical theology was anointed to lead the other disciplines in a very specific way.

A new theology and a new ethic

This involved exposing and countering the strategies of oppression that were institutionalised and internalised by Christianity. Structural violence had to be countered by revolutionary action.

This then led to a radical redefinition of traditional Christian concepts such as the church, kingdom, sin, salvation and incarnation in terms of their socio-political utility. Jesus' divinity was sought in his exemplary identification with the poor: his incarnation represented God's total immersion into humanity's struggle against oppression. 'Whenever I see a guerrilla with an AK-47, I see Jesus Christ,' Rev. Canaan Banana, theologian and former president of Zimbabwe, declared.

Later developments

One of the most important new developments in liberation theology resulted from a shift in perspectives on socialism. In Eastern Europe socialist states collapsed, and none of the socialist experiments in the Third World proved to be successful. In contrast, free-market economies in the Far East brought relative prosperity to their peoples. This led to a revision of the determinist idea in terms of which society is primarily defined as a class struggle. What remains if the poor are not going to be liberated through a socialist revolution?

At present Western-style democracy is gradually being accepted as a legitimate weapon against oppression. At the turn of the millennium about 70% of all the

countries in the world were nominal democracies and the question has shifted to: 'What happens after democracy?' Emphasis is placed on inclusiveness, minority rights and the participation of the marginalised in civil society. Together with this development, the previous legitimisation of violence in the class struggle has also led to second thoughts on this issue (generating questions such as: 'Can a Christian who justifies the use of weapons exhibit the love of the Crucified?'). In the late 1990s the demands and deficiencies of global capitalism brought new elements in play.

In traditional European theology such political shifts would have had little to do with theology, but for liberation theology this new reality alters the pre-understanding through which Christianity is being interpreted. At present liberation theologians are moderating their positions on social analysis and renewing their focus on spirituality and biblical exegesis as a way to implement a preferential option for the poor.

Contribution of liberation theology

Empirical involvement with problems of Christian pre-understandings, as witnessed by liberation theology, contributed to an irreversible renewal in the systematic and biblical disciplines. The development of liberation theology shows the profound influence that empirical approaches can exercise on theology. *Further developments also show that a serious consideration of the historical and theoretical aspects cannot be neglected indefinitely.* In this third millennium Christianity will continue to redefine itself with reference to universal religion and universal social and personal values.

A lasting contribution of liberation theology to theology in general is that it took the concept of pre-understanding a step further, showing both its power and deficiencies. Previously it was well understood that interpretation is guided by pre-understandings. The advances in empirical theology served to bring conscious and sub-conscious pre-understandings that had previously been suppressed into the open. The inability of theoretical theology to solve the problem of oppression and poverty was relayed to its limited pre-understanding. The problems experienced with the first attempts at a theology of liberation also showed that a rigid pursuit of a specific pre-understanding leads to a closed hermeneutical circle where the interpreter projects his or her own ideas into the subject and eventually only establishes what is already known. To be really constructive the interpreter must allow his or her pre-understanding(s) to be constantly modified by new empirical information.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Summary and Conclusion: Getting Out of the Ghetto

Although to date 'classical' liberation theology has not been officially accepted by any church denomination and it is unlikely ever to happen, it has upset conventional theology in a decisive manner. It has turned theology on its head by unseating the priority of orthodoxy over orthopraxis. From a systemic point of view, it has usurped the dialectical process by insisting that it should be directed primarily 'from below', that is, taking its agenda from the bread-and-butter needs of the poor and the oppressed. As the demand to make the church and theology part of the class struggle becomes toned down further, we shall probably see liberation theology becoming more open to the dialectic of theory and practice. As this happens, liberation theology will become less of a closed system and more open to dialogue and interaction with other types of theology.

Classical liberation theologians will undoubtedly object to this development, insisting that dialectical theory itself is at fault, but I wish to propose that liberation theology (in an attempt to counteract classical theology) initially neglected the dialectic by not allowing enough feedback from the empirical-practical dimension.⁸⁵ It turned out that a mere application of the biblical exhortations to assist the poor was not enough, but that inputs from the empirical dimension had to be more radical and the theoretical labour had to be more focused on the present reality. This does not diminish the fact that liberation theology was highly successful in exposing conventional theology as locked up in a 'Christian ghetto'.

At the end of this essay one has to consider some concrete guidelines for Christian theology. I hope to have contributed somewhat to clarifying the role of religion and theology in relation to culture in general and science in particular. I also hope to have shown how a systemic understanding of the issues involved can provide a framework for thinking creatively and progressively about the subject. This is especially important at a time that standards and norms are being determined for the subject field and institutions for theology and religious studies are being restructured not only in my country, South Africa, but also at many places around the globe. This need not be traumatic for the theology, but can be an opportunity for growth.

A theology of our future evolution

The human race has not only significantly adapted its environment through cultural achievements, but we are on the threshold of determining the processes of our own biological evolution. Now, more than ever, the future rests in human hands. It will take some time, but somewhere in this third millennium we may gain the capacity to alter our genetic makeup and that of all other living creatures. This raises prospects of altering our intelligence and lifespan.⁸⁶ Every single surrealistic dream of the religious imagination of humanity seems to be almost tangible. Creating lions and lambs that 'lie together in peace' is almost within our reach. Smart computers and cyborgs that imitate humans both in their good and evil aspects are on the agenda. Shall we programme these creations to act in a Christian or demonic manner?

Because of *in vitro* fertilisation the conception of human life without the sexual contact has been wrested from myth to become part of reality. This is a process that will gain in momentum. Sometime later in this millennium we might conquer the laws of gravity and be able to fly like angels or walk on the water. We may come to understand the report that Jesus walked on the water of Gennesaret in a new light. The question whether Jesus had actually walked on the water will grow pale before the question whether we ourselves will be able to or would want to walk on water. The theological question that will become ever more pressing is: 'In W/whose image and according to which models are we going to reshape our world and ourselves?' *This could very well become the ultimate theological question of this millennium.* It is in this regard that the ideals and imaginings of religion, especially the Christian religion, become ever more important. The question whether we are heading for Teilhard de Chardin's Omega state, where all of creation approaches the likeness of Jesus Christ,⁸⁷ or whether we are heading for an apocalyptic catastrophe will become ever more important. More than de Chardin ever could have imagined, we will acquire the capacity to shape history according to our own dreams. What seemed to him a historical inevitability is something that is almost within our reach that is, if we wish to realise it. If Christian theology is to make any significant contribution, it has to gear itself to addressing these issues.

Open schools, faculties and seminaries in service of an open society

Of course, many problems regarding the restructuring of theology as a discipline remain unresolved and the basic positions, divergent as they are, will remain intact for the foreseeable future. However, there are some indications of preferences that should be exercised. It is also clear that the basic dialectic of the theological discipline between historical, systematic and practical aspects has to be fostered and enhanced for the sake of theology and the world, if not out of obedience to God and his Kingdom. As

with every network there are different paths to the same ends. The following are merely some guidelines developed from the arguments put forward in this essay.

The first guideline is to structure theological institutions in such a way that the *widest possible spectrum of theological voices* is heard. This is the primary outcome of our argument for a dialectic of different rationalities. This means that, as far as it is practical, theological faculties should resemble the ecumenical macrocosm of theological strategies within a given context. In turn, the open theological institution should reflect the character of a microcosm. The variety of both lecturers and students representing differing voices should be limited only by the necessity of maintaining a scientific ethos at given institutions.

Besides the differing theological voices, there are *non-theological voices* that deserve to be heard in the interest of the theological dialectic. These 'other voices' should be allowed to speak for themselves. For example, there is no reason that representatives of Islam should not be allowed to explain the intricacies of their own heritage to theological students. The same applies to incorporating significant voices and perspectives from minorities and previously marginal groups, as well as experts from secular disciplines. This will ensure a variety of interlocutors.

To introduce 'other' theological and non-theological voices to the dialectic, a fine balance will have to be struck between maintaining academic excellence and applying the necessary affirmative action. Where affirmative action is practised, it needs to be done in a transparent and responsible manner, with proper disclosure to the contributing churches and taxpayers and not merely to create a superficial image for the sake of obtaining public recognition. This seems necessary to prevent the formation of new exclusive 'ghettos'.

Another guideline for enhancing the theological dialectic is to employ special measures to *encourage and ensure empirical inputs* from the practical theological disciplines. The end-consumers of theological products need to be taken seriously by allowing them a say in determining the focus of the theological enterprise. Project management should not terminate before the implementation stage and the delivery of viable products to the end-users.

At many institutions an *inter-disciplinary research methodology* requires to be re-invented to enhance the theological dialectic. Too many projects are conducted on an individual and random basis, and too many dissertations land on shelves where they are merely gathering dust. Other disciplines should be treated as more than ancillaries.⁸⁸ A good metaphor would be not to see the twosome (that is, theology and the other disciplines) 'as queen and ladies-in-waiting but twins, even Siamese twins'.⁸⁹ Without suppressing individual creativity, broader projects involving researchers from the various theological and other disciplines should become the normal way to conduct research.

A further matter to be considered is to *integrate secular modules* into theological research (and learning) programmes, and also to present theological modules in secular programmes. Theology must make a serious contribution to the other disciplines. One field in which this should happen is hermeneutics; another is ethics. Theology and the sciences have a shared ethical responsibility that requires them to be the object of joint research. Of special importance are joint projects in social development studies, including the exploration of indigenous knowledge systems, sustainable livelihoods and the preservation of ecosystems.⁹⁰

One of the most important outcomes of this essay is to present strong arguments for 'open' *theological faculties*, that is, faculties not focused on the interests of only one church denomination. Open faculties and seminaries are needed for open societies. This does not mean that participating churches cannot demand or even supply their own modules in some of the learning programmes. When such modules are presented within the larger context of the theological dialectic, they are bound to gain in profile and meaning. This also affects the composition of staff at the faculties. Until now the amount of academic in-breeding that has occurred at theological faculties in many countries is enough reason for official investigations.⁹¹

The final guideline involves the many smaller colleges that present theological courses. In the light of the systemic nature of theology, it is apparent how becoming involved in *larger theological clusters* can enhance their endeavours. They are in need of being integrated into broader programmes where the full scope of the theological dialectic can work to their advantage.

In conclusion one must observe that the Christian religion and theology today are in constant danger of remaining or becoming closed systems. Strong tendencies exist for theologians to lose themselves in a debate with the past or with imaginary, idealised interlocutors. I have argued that it would be contrary to its own nature and original agenda for Christianity to become encapsulated in an intra-Christian, intra-church or even an intra-religious debate. The scope of the Christian message is creation itself and humanity in its widest definition. The Christian religion has the potential to be an open system: open to culture, religion and science in the full sense of the word. Only when this is taken seriously can theology serve its purpose of assisting the Gospel, while allowing scientific scrutiny at the same time. In view of the global importance of the Christian message, this seems to be a point to ponder as theology advances in its third millennium.

NOTES

Introduction

1. Citation in Evans, Evans & Roozen, 1993:5.
2. The 'globalisation' or 'internationalisation' of religious and theological studies is a trend that is gathering force in the USA (according to research by Hart 1991:777). Also elsewhere the needs for modifying the Euro-American patterns of study are being felt.
3. Statistics quoted from the 1998 *Yearbook of the Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
4. The same antipathy against theological studies at large public universities that Hart (1991:732) registered in a US survey is manifest in South Africa.
5. In his research on the position of theological and religious studies at US tertiary institutions, Hart found that none of the defenders of theological studies (as subject at public universities) opposed the 'social-scientific', 'objective' or 'value-neutral' study of religion (1991:733).

Chapter One

6. Discovery Channel on DSTV South Africa, 21 November 1999.
7. What is called 'symbolic representation' here is sometimes also called 'symboling' (see article on 'culture' *Encyclopædia Britannica online* www.eb.com:180/bol/topic?tmap_id=51795000&tmap_typ=dx accessed 26 January 2001).
8. In general four phases in the learning process are distinguished: simple reflexes, conditioned reflexes, instrumental action, symboling activity. Only humans are capable of the last type. See article on 'culture' *Encyclopædia Britannica online* www.eb.com:180/bol/topic?eu=118246&sctn=4 accessed 26 January 2001.
9. Article on 'language' *Encyclopædia Britannica online* www.eb.com:180/bol/topic?eu=114866&sctn=12 accessed 26 January 2001.
10. This point has been elaborated in great detail by the great systems philosopher Niklas Luhmann (1995).
11. A striking example of this was the proposal of a spherical carbon molecule by Buckminster Fuller long before it was discovered in reality.
12. For this idea I am indebted to E. O. Wilson (1992).
13. This is the subject of the so-called nonzero logic, which seeks to disprove the logic of 'the survival of the fittest' (see R. Wright 2000).
14. These four categories correspond to general semantic categories.
15. When considering this, it appears that humans have always inhabited 'virtual reality'.

Chapter Two

16. This was the point of Thomas Kuhn's classic book on *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962).
17. Kuhn's work on scientific revolutions has shown that the development of science is not the gradual process that Karl Popper had assumed.
18. This might be one of the strongest reasons for interdisciplinary research: one never knows where the creative spark will come from.
19. This is the so-called falsification theory, popularised by Karl Popper.

20. Cf. the book by G. Soros on *The Crisis of Global Capitalism* (1998) for a lucid differentiation between systems. He defines the global economy as a complex system in comparison to many simple, natural systems.
21. Kuhn 1962.
22. Theology is generally understood as the 'critical understanding of the content of [Christian] faith' (Latourelle and Fisichella 1994:1060). However, I have not found anyone who noticed the parallel of theology/religion with natural science/technology. From the time of Abelard *theologia* became a *quaestio*. This represents a transition of theology from being a study of doctrine to becoming a discipline of science (Latourelle and Fisichella 1994:1061).

Chapter Three

23. As found at the cave of Regourdou in Montignac, Dordourgne, France (basis for the exhibit in the Ice Age Mammals and Emergence of Man Hall, National Smithsonian Museum for Natural History, Washington, DC). See also the finds at the Shanidar cave in the Zagros Mountains of Iraq as presented on the Internet at www.robinsonresearch.com/ANTHRO/PHYSICAL/Neandertal3.htm, accessed 30 January 2001.
24. See Burkert (1996) for a pioneering perspective on the biological foundations of human religion.
25. I believe this to be the best description of what religion is. This is a generic summary of previous theories on the nature of religion that are strikingly listed by R. Niebuhr: 'Religious man is magic-making man (Malinowski), fearing-man (Hume), and man directed toward the unconditional (Tillich), he is man shuddering before manifestations of the numinous (Otto), devoting himself to and denying himself for the sake of universal ideal-energies, like loving and dealing justly and other virtues (Dewey). Religious man is feeling his absolute dependence (Schleiermacher), man arrogantly seeking deity and deification (Barth). He is man homesick for a primeval time (Eliade), myth-making man (Cassirer), and man giving himself to transcendent beauty (Jonathan Edwards)' (1972:33, also cited in Fiorenza 2000:33).
26. Note, for example, how often the word 'religion' ('latreia', also used for 'worship') is used to denote the practices of the Judeans in the books of the Maccabees (1 Macc 1:43).
27. This is the position of Mircea Eliade, who said that 'it would be hopeless to try and explain religion in terms of any of those basic [that is, social, linguistic, economic] functions' (1958:xiii).
28. This is my own chart. See Latourelle and Fisichella (1994:831) for a brief review of distinctions suggested by other scholars.
29. W. Cantwell Smith uses 'faith' as a generative category for developing an integrative theory of religions (1989:181ff). However, he weakens his position by failing to define faith with regard to religion and culture.
30. See Hussey and Colich (1990) for a review of literature on the emic/etic distinction. The pair of terms were first used by Kenneth L. Pike in 1954 with reference to linguistics and anthropology and since the 1980s have been applied to many other fields, including religion.
31. This contrast can also be described as a dichotomy between those who restrict the study of religion to the knowledge of religion and those whose concern is for the truth of religion (cf the findings of Hart 1991:734).
32. Schleiermacher, the father of contemporary hermeneutics, was acutely aware of this. His solution to this 'problem' was to opt for an emic approach. He asserted that Christianity could only be studied via the concrete experience (that is, of 'total dependence') of an existing community (see discussion in Fiorenza 2000:9-10, 29). Schleiermacher's attempt

at solving the dichotomy between emic and etic approaches did not find its due appreciation because Barth misunderstood his approach as a reversion to humanism (see the argument of Fiorenza 2000:7-34). A contemporary representative of the emic option is Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who wishes to abolish the concept of 'religion' in favour of two separate concepts, namely 'a personal faith' and 'a cumulative tradition' (see article on 'Religion I: definition' in Latourelle and Fisichella 1994:823).

Chapter Four

33. For example, I am unaware of any Muslims, Hindus or Jews calling themselves 'theologians'. While this is true of South Africa, it might also be the case elsewhere.
34. Quote from Thomsen (1982).
35. The only exception to the rule is Wilfred Cantwell Smith, particularly in *Towards a World Theology* (1989), where he makes a brave attempt at developing 'a history of religion in the singular'. To further this view he abolishes the concepts of religion and theology altogether and focuses on 'faith' as a trans-cultural phenomenon.
36. For a review of articles on the development of the science of religion in various parts of the world, see a list of abstracts on the issue in *Science of Religion* www.uni-marburg.de/fb03/religionswissenschaft/journal/sor/sor_articles.html accessed 2 February 2001.
37. Cf Francis Fiorenza's serious consideration of Chidester's thesis that not only the definition of religion, but also the methodology of comparative religion are representative of an oppressive, imperialist, Western discourse (Fiorenza 2000:17, 20, 30-32).
38. Cf Fiorenza (2000:10) on the lack of consensus regarding what religion is.
39. Religious studies may include any of the following sub-disciplines: religious psychology, religious sociology, religious phenomenology and philosophy of religion.
40. Antes (1993) reports that Christianity and Judaism are still exempt from being subjects in religious studies ('Religionswissenschaft') in Germany. He advances the view that a singular methodology needs to be developed.

Chapter Five

41. The historical-critical study of Scripture began with the publication in 1678 of *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament* by Richard Simon, who because of this was expelled from the French Oratory (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition, p 1503).
42. Cf Hart (1991) for an extensive review of how contemporary lecturers in the disciplines of theology and religious studies in the USA position themselves. The general impression from his comprehensive survey is that theological studies at public institutions are under pressure to make way for religious studies (1991:731). It is not far-fetched to assume that different positions on the relationship between faith and a critical approach to religion lie at the bottom of the division.
43. This was the position of Karl Barth, who has set the tone for much of the theological reflection on religion in the previous century. This position is also eloquently stated by John Henry Newman, who enters into an extensive discourse on the status of theology as a university discipline. His main point is that theology represents a system of cognitive principles that are central to culture. In the interest of knowledge-for-the-sake-of-knowledge it would be 'unphilosophical' to exclude theology from the academy. Writing in 1852, it is noteworthy that Newman does not distinguish between religion and theology (cf Newman 1959:61-103).

44. This question is asked by P. Tillich in the introduction to his famous *Systematic Theology* (1967:10).
45. I am informed by American colleagues that there are a small number of prominent theological schools in the US in which it is virtually policy not to appoint Christians as teachers.
46. The word *dogma* does not have to be understood in a negative sense. Sometimes it merely refers to the natural process of formulating a dynamic and relevant Christian witness.
47. Carrette (1999) presents a digestible anthology of writings by Foucault.
48. For example, in his trilogy *Rome, Lourdes, Paris*.
49. I am well aware the Pannenberg's position is more sophisticated than this. However, this is the manner in which many have understood his highly original and creative reconstruction of Christian theology.
50. I borrowed this formulation from Dr Patrick Henry, director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, Saint John's University, Minnesota.
51. See *Encyclopaedia Britannica CD Rom edition 1994-1999*, 'Thomas Aquinas and Thomism'.
52. Ninian Smart makes a strong point for 'empathy' as a necessary tool of the historian of religions (1987:4,14-18) though he does not manage to go as far.
53. 'Most of us who teach in theological schools seek to be bilingual as we live in both church and academy' (W. Brueggemann in Frazer, Frazer and Roozen, 1993:xii).
54. I use the concept 'secular' theologian hesitantly, realising that few will use it to describe themselves. In Heimbeck (1969) we find a synonymous concept: 'natural theologians'.
55. This idea is from Dr Patrick Henry.

Chapter Six

56. The concept *homeostasis* comes from the biological field, where it indicates the process whereby an organism or cell maintains internal equilibrium through a system of control mechanisms activated by negative feedback.
57. In an entirely different sense Hegel (following Herder) also emphasised the 'organic' nature of social wholes and the incommensurability of different historical epochs.
58. As applied to information systems, the definition for entropy given by the *Free Online Dictionary of Computing* is: 'A measure of the disorder of a system'. It further explains: 'Systems tend to go from a state of order (low entropy) to a state of maximum disorder (high entropy). The entropy of a system is related to the amount of information it contains. A highly ordered system can be described using fewer bits of information than a disordered one. Shannon's formula gives the entropy $H(M)$ of a message M in bits: $H(M) = -\log_2 p(M)$ [Where $p(M)$ is the probability of message M] (1998-11-23).'
59. Does anyone have the right to teach a religion or worldview as if it is the only legitimate and true one with which everyone should comply? (Smart 1987:125). Ultimately our own belief system, however just and fair it may seem to us, is a construct that remains fundamentally open to change. This does not mean that we should not have beliefs that we feel strongly about and that we wish to promote globally. There is a most delicate middle ground between an anarchistic relativism and an imperialistic moral authoritarianism.
60. Karl Barth did not take his distinction for viewing theology 'from above' and 'from below' this far. However, we find in this distinction extensively elaborated in his *Church Dogmatics* (especially in his Christology) the seed of such a full-blown dialectical approach. In view of his general thinking, Barth would rather qualify as a 'sacred' theologian.
61. See book titled *Emotional Intelligence* by Goleman (1995).

62. Cf the title of a book on a similar topic, *Duel or Duet?: Theology and Science in a Postmodern world* (1998), by J. Wentzel van Huyssteen.
63. Somehow this argument brings us back to Kierkegaard. He observed that the individual finds himself always stretching to attain ascendance over his existential limitations in his absorption in God, but at the same time he is always thrust back upon himself by the incommensurability of this relationship. His conclusion was that man only finds salvation through a paradoxical inversion of the rational values of speculative philosophy and through the 'leap of faith' in the crucified Christ. It was this conclusion to a 'leap of faith' beyond the rational that later found its secular counterpart in existentialism as a philosophical movement.
64. Smart 1987:125.
65. This is a widely held idea that was popularised by D. Tracy.
66. See article 'Theology from amidst the victims' by Jon Sobrino in Volf, Krieg and Kucharz (1996:164-175). Here we find a challenge to Western theology to accept the victims of society as interlocutors.
67. Cf. the article by Cobb in Volf, Krieg & Kucharz (1996:196-206).

Chapter Eight

68. Cf. article by Fisichella, who refers to the paradoxical source of theology: 'Faith as the basic point within which thought is born, so determines the context of the quest that this is already understood and accepted as an established truth and not one that has to be proved' (Latourelle and Fisichella 1994:10621).
69. See McCutcheon, especially part III on 'Reductionism and the study of religion' (1999:127–214).
70. Bernard Lonergan is on record as saying that 'if theology is to be the queen of the sciences, not only by right but also in fact, then theologians have to take a professional interest in the human sciences and make a positive contribution to their methodology' (*Insight* p 743). Quote accessed at website www.loyno.edu/physics/jcarter/quotes.htm on 5 February 2001.
71. Cf. Gonzalez (1996), who has been laying the foundation for such a project. Instead of the word 'global' Gonzalez prefers to use 'truly catholic'. The latter expression is used in contrast to 'universal', which implies uniformity (in Frazer, Frazer and Roozen, 1993:22).
72. The study in Afrikaans by Prof Willie Jonker (1994) on the Reformed creeds is exemplary.
73. This point was eloquently made by W. Cantwell Smith, who said that the histories of religious communities can not only be understood better, but 'in the end can be understood only in terms of each other: as strands of a still more complex whole' (1989:6).
74. A case in point is the agreement between representatives of the major religions on a global ethic. One should not understand the declaration on a global ethic at A Parliament of the World's Religions as anything more than an agreement that was convenient at a specific time and place. See the writings of Hans Küng (1996, and article in Volf, Krieg and Kucharz, 1996:267–283).
75. Miroslav Volf (1996) has argued this point admirably.
76. W. Cantwell Smith gives one of the most striking examples of the transfer of materials from one religion to another when he discusses the story of the Christian saints Barlaam and Josafat (1989:7–11). As it turns out, the figure of Josafat goes back to Siddharta Gautama. Thus he comes to the conclusion that for a thousand years Buddha was a Christian saint.

Chapter Nine

77. Here 'sermons' are understood as products of critical, scientific labour.
78. This statement is made in contrast to the traditional view that systematic (or dogmatic) theology has the task of analysing 'dogma'.
79. This is more or less true of both Roman Catholic and orthodox Protestant traditions. Cf also Justo Gonzalez in Frazer, Frazer and Roozen (1993:22).
80. Cf the chapter on this issue by Ricoeur in Volf, Krieg and Kucharz (1996:284–298).
81. This was not always appreciated; until the middle of the 13th century the works of Aristotle were prohibited at the University of Paris.
82. It is truly remarkable how complicated and unproductive the reason-faith debate has become. In the Catholic world, for example, a shift is reported to a concentration on the 'transcendental constitutedness of reason in its intersubjective, historical nexus of language and communication'. This leads to the unresolved question, 'Is the *a priori* for faith given in linguistic structures or in the power structures of society?' Because there is no agreement on 'comprehensively valid' standards, no convincing treatment of the problem exists, cf article 'Reason/faith' by Verweyen in Latourelle and Fisichella (1994:814)..

Chapter Ten

83. In South Africa the most eloquent exponent of this approach is Prof. Hennie Pieterse (emeritus), practical theologian at the University of South Africa
84. Joe Hill, US labour activist, coined this term.

Chapter Eleven

85. It is interesting to note how classical liberation theologians have been reformulating themselves in more moderate terms. One need only browse through the articles of Sobrino, Gutierrez and Cone in Volf, Krieg and Kucharz (1996) to observe this phenomenon.
86. Michio Kaku, in his riveting book, *Visions* (1998), speculates on a time scale for future scientific developments.
87. De Chardin saw this as an irreversible process that demanded only human consent (Latourelle and Fisichella, 1994:1025–1032). Others view it as a possibility that depends on human action.
88. M.-M. Campbell of the Theological Faculty of the University of Montreal notes that Christian theology in the West is reverting more and more to the human sciences for the practical elaboration of its discourse. However, he says, 'il n'y a pas de chapitre théologique élaboré qui fonde le statut des sciences humaines comme source théologique' (cf Campbell 2001:9).
89. Quote from Thomsen (1982). Campbell (see bibliography) suggests that the relation between theology and the other sciences should be seen as similar to the co-dependent relationship between grammar and linguistics.
90. These categories correspond with some of the most important research fields identified by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (see www.nrf.ac.za).
91. This does not mean that all institutions have to be the same, or that denominational or other special traits should be suppressed. It is rather a matter of establishing creative conditions by enabling meaningful exchanges between theological scholars, whether at the same institutions or at different institutions. A great deal of interaction takes place through academic societies.

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In a time that 'we are experiencing a massive reorganisation of cultural patterns owing to globalisation' and the impact of historical Christianity is declining' this essay by Prof JA Loubser invites the reader to rethink the place and function of theology as a discipline.

The various issues are analysed succinctly and trenchantly in three parts: 'Science and religion as cultural expressions', 'The place of theology within a theory of culture', and 'Theology as dialectical process'. Part 1 investigates the nature of culture, religion and science. It discusses culture in 'its primordial and developed stages and the symbolical reconstruction of reality through mental concepts represented by secondary media' (Preface).

In part 2 the author concentrates on the role of theology within a theory of culture. This section is subdivided into 'Theology as scientific culture', 'Theology and faith' and 'The epistemology of theology'. He distinguishes between sacred theology, secular theology, partially compromised theology and dialectical theology and insists that consistent empirical research must take primacy of place in order to raise the current state of theology from the 'ghetto of meaningless, pious, basically unconcerned, embedded scholastic dispositions' (Preface).

The third part looks at the relationship between the historical, systematic and practical dimensions and their position within the context of the theological discipline. The emphasis is on the mutual dependency of these subjects, because separation results in a distorted vision that is ultimately harmful.

The author concludes with the need to think creatively and progressively about the role of theology in the third millennium, particularly at a time that standards and norms for the subject field are being re-determined, and institutions for theology and religious studies are being restructured in many parts of the world. **'The Christian religion has the potential to be an open system: open to culture, religion and science in the full sense of the word. Only when this is taken seriously can theology serve its purpose of assisting the Gospel, when allowing scientific scrutiny at the same time'** (Summary and conclusion).

This book will be of great value for senior theological students and of interest to the general reader for its breadth of vision.

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