

THE FUTURE OF SOUTH AFRICAN THEOLOGY: SCANNING THE ROAD AHEAD

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Abstract

In order to survey the road ahead for South African theology, it is necessary first to look back to the road behind us. We espoused the contextual method during apartheid, but are we now trapped in a method no longer appropriate to our new context? A sweeping look at the distant past reveals a dualistic conceptual path emerging from ancient Greece, leading via Descartes and Kant to modernity. The efforts of Schleiermacher and Kant only served to increase the growing bifurcation in our conceptual road. Recent attempts to beat the bifurcation have been seen in the work of process theologians, James Gustafson, the narrativists, Alasdair MacIntyre and John Milbank. A more promising way forward, with more affinity to African thought, may lie in the work of the phenomenologists. Of particular significance are Merleau-Ponty's view of perception as participative, and Husserl's notion of "intersubjectivity". A road ahead, characterised by the prefix "inter", promises to lead towards cohesion and away from the bifurcations and dichotomies of the past. In order for theology to flourish it must be interdenominational, interfaith, intercultural, international, interdisciplinary and interactive.

Key Concepts: Modernity, phenomenology, intersubjectivity, theology

Introduction

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full on his wonderful face,
And the things of the earth
Will grow strangely dim,
In the light of his glory and grace.*

Most of us are familiar with this chorus, much loved of Sunday schools and pietistic Christian gatherings. I have chosen it as a reference point for a consideration of the state of theological study and theological education in present day South Africa for reasons that will become clear.

Devotional writer Trevor Hudson, while speaking from a strongly evangelical position, is passionate in pointing out that "the things of the earth" do not "grow strangely dim" for those who follow Jesus but, rather, they "grow strangely clear"¹ His Wesleyan theology leads him to see the necessity of the Christian life being lived in loving, caring engagement with "the world". If sanctification, growth in holiness, development of Christian character,

¹ Trevor Hudson in an address to the triennial Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, meeting in Port Elizabeth, July 2001.

indeed relationship with God, are to take place at all, they must be worked out in this world of relationships – with other human beings and with the natural environment. Hudson's point is that whatever is done in the world as an outworking of Christian faith has a clearer purpose, a keener motivation than if it were done without reference to Christ. His claim is that in turning one's eyes on Jesus the world, with its complexities, tragedies, and daunting moral obligations, becomes "more clear".

Academic theology has travelled a long and winding road to bring us to where we are today. Consider, for example, the effect of one seventeenth century philosopher on our opening chorus. To sing: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus", in the light of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* would have three major results. First, "your eyes" would refer to the eyes of an individual – the "your" would be emphatically singular – it could be sung only as a solo. To be even more precise, "your" would have to change to "my", because it refers explicitly to the solitary experience of the knowing subject. Second, it would be understood that the seeing activity referred to is not the sensory activity of seeing, but the mental activity of contemplating. Third, the song would end after the first three words, because all I can be sure of is that I am engaged in the activity of contemplation. Apart from that subjective mental activity, all else may be illusion. So, with these qualifications, and with Descartes as the conductor of the one-person choir, I sing: "Turn my eyes..." and there I stop. Such singing has echoed in the halls of academic theology from the seventeenth century to the present. It was lusty and confident at first, not because it conveyed anything very interesting, or anything inviting heartfelt allegiance, but because individuals could be certain of what they were singing about. Not surprisingly, it is now muted and in a minor key.

What does the future hold for theology in this subjective, solitary climate of thought, and for South African theology in particular? In order to attempt an answer, we must have a good understanding of the present condition of theology, and in order to understand the present, we must look at the past. In fact, the past is the only place we *can* look! By what route have we come to be where we are?

The Road Behind Us

Much of the attention of the Theological Society of South Africa, in recent years, has focused on our experience in South Africa – our experience as a nation and in our respective churches. Ours is a highly idiosyncratic history, one that has brought much pain but, at the same time, has provided theologians with an interesting and alluring context. Probably more than most of our international counterparts, South African theologians have an interesting history, colourful in the way that a king of dubious moral quality, like Henry VIII, brings colour to English church history! It is both good and necessary that we never lose sight of our particular past. Through the struggles of church and theology in that context and our reflections on them we bring our distinctive contribution to the development of theology as a whole in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

We learned from the Latin American theologians of the 1960s and 1970s the methodological importance of context, especially in contexts of gross social injustice and oppression. We espoused the contextual method. We then found ourselves drawn into contextuality as into a conceptual vortex. We have grappled with our particularity to such an extent that we are in danger of becoming insular in our field of vision. To play on one of Charles Villa-Vicencio's book titles, South African theologians, even those who were active in the struggle for social justice, are in danger of remaining trapped in apartheid and

its aftermath.² For a second time in recent years my colleague, Tony Balcomb, has sounded a warning that our theology is not what it should be. His first warning was that we were no longer speaking theologically. We were clearing our theological throats but failing to say anything of substance.³ His focus now is on contextual theology since the end of apartheid, and he enquires provocatively into the “crisis of success” of the contextual theological method. In similar vein, I have described elsewhere a trajectory in South African theological ethics in the past two decades and have argued that much of what passes for theology is no longer theology.⁴

We would indeed be trapped in our context if we had no clear perspective on the place of our theological enterprise in the wider scheme of theological development. We must remember that theology does not have its own conceptual apparatus and always functions within one or other philosophical framework. As these frameworks of thought come and go through the ages, each replacing its predecessor as a more adequate means of accounting for human life and thought, the task of theologians is to rethink their faith in the light of new frameworks. Without a sense of this conceptual road behind us and of our current place on that road, we are driving blindly into dense fog. We have no way of knowing where we are or how to find a way ahead.

To describe the road behind us adequately is obviously beyond the scope or intention of this future-orientated paper. We glance back to the past merely to locate ourselves and to enable us to consider our future more clearly. Briefly, however, and at risk of superficiality and caricature, the following observations may be made, beginning with the distant past.

1. *The avenue of the ancestors* led from the Pythagoreans (internal mathematical structures and outward appearances), via Plato (the eternal forms and passing instances) and Aristotle (substance and accidents). This ancestral avenue was clearly a double track. It issued in a direction of thought that construed the world in dual terms. The various forms of Gnosticism in the two or three centuries after Christ, developed this dual direction into sophisticated schemes. Not only were matter and spirit seen as being separate from one another, but they were regarded as being in irreconcilable opposition to each other.
2. *The paths of our patriarchs*: While Augustine came to reject the sharp dualism of the Manichees with its regard of all things physical as evil, he retained a strong neo-Platonic sense of duality. Leading from Augustine through modern Protestant theology is a dual carriageway tending to separate the spiritual from the physical, with a concomitant devaluing of the physical world.
3. *The Cartesian cul de sac*: What Descartes did was to reinforce duality through his epistemological enquiries. In his attempt to ground knowledge in certainty, he foregrounded the knowing subject. *Cogito ergo sum* – the only certainty I can have is that I am engaged in the act of thinking. This led to the individualism and subjectivism that has characterised Western philosophy and theology ever since. As Cartesian thinking gained in influence, so it became increasingly difficult to retain a place for the human community and the objective world. The British empiricists, Locke, Berkeley and Hume, struggled unsuccessfully to offer a satisfactory account of perception as the

² Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid: A Socio-Theological History of the English-speaking Churches*, (New York: Orbis, and Cape Town: David Philip, 1988).

³ Anthony O Balcomb, “Is God in South Africa, or are we still clearing our throats”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 111, (November 2001), 57-65.

⁴ See R Neville Richardson, “On keeping theological ethics theological in Africa: The quest for a (Southern) African theological ethics.” *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 21 (2001): 361-378.

bridge between the subjective and objective worlds. Kant and his followers reinforced the dual highway by distinguishing *noumena* from *phenomena* and asserting that there could be no direct knowledge of things in themselves. Kant also enthroned the individual as free and sovereign in rationality and moral awareness, but locked individuals into their own separate spheres.

4. *The motorway of modernity* is a dangerous place for Christian faith and theology. The traffic is fast and is no respecter of persons. Its main feature is a great fork in the road. Down one side of the fork lies the only reality – the empirical world. Yet this is also a devalued world, open to abuse and exploitation by humans. Individuals are driven by the need to succeed in a quantifiable way as provided for by the mechanisms of the free market. Community needs are given consideration from time to time, but it is difficult to establish a strong sense of some genuine common good that is more than some (usually veiled) version of self-interest. Religion struggles to survive in this post-Enlightenment climate of thought. Given the triple focal points of individualism, subjectivism and materialism, any appeal to transcendent authority has a hollow ring. Where is God between rampant subjectivity and objectivised, abstracted devalued nature? Where is the Bible, and where is Jesus, in the face of historical scepticism? Where are the people of God, the church, given the marginalisation of tradition and the rule of the individual over the communal?

Alternative routes on the motorway of modernity were taken by Friederich Schleiermacher and Karl Barth. Schleiermacher, in the nineteenth century, led us down the road of subjectivity (“the feeling of absolute dependence”). His attempt was admirable – to give expression to the givenness of our existence. Unfortunately, he ended up in the dead end of individualistic subjectivity, as is evident in the line of liberal Protestant theologians that followed him (Ritschl-Harnack-Herrmann-Bultmann).

As a reaction to Protestant liberalism, Karl Barth, in the twentieth century, went down the road of objectivity. For him, God was *totaliter aliter*, the Wholly Other who comes to us by means of a revelation entirely of God’s own initiation. Our ability and experience play no part whatsoever in the process of knowing God and God’s creation. There is absolutely no natural theology and no revelation-free moral knowledge. The all-important revelation is from outside our subjectivity. Barth’s protest was also admirable, and he was correct in seeing the need to reassert a God who is beyond ourselves. Unfortunately, Barth tried to achieve this by roaring up the off-ramp of objectivity (or divine subjectivity, as some prefer to call it), which was as much a *cul de sac* as the off-ramp of human subjectivity.

Beating the Bifurcation of Modernity

In the twentieth century many theological travellers have recognised the unsatisfactory structure of the road on which they have found themselves and the unsatisfactory theological directions in which it takes them. They have, in their different ways, tried to straddle the dualities, or have even attempted to hold together the bifurcation in the road. A small, personal selection of these is as follows:

Process Theologians, like AN Whitehead, John Cobb and Norman Pittenger, commendably bring the focus of theology closer to a scientific understanding of the universe and its structure. They pioneer a way of thinking about God that is closely related to the observable natural processes, rather than alienated from them as in traditional Christian orthodoxy. Important and therapeutic though this approach is, it leads to a serious blurring of the distinctive nature of Christian faith and seems to flirt with pantheism.

James Gustafson first looks inward to the church as a human community in *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*.⁵ Later in his career he looks outward in *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*.⁶ He considers ethics against the vast background of the post-Copernican universe and puts our arrogant subjectivity, which imagines itself to be the centre of the physical and moral universe, into the perspective of the findings of modern cosmology.

It cannot be denied that the basic trend of the Christian tradition has always viewed God's grace and goodness primarily in terms of his grace and goodness for man [sic.]... Theologians and ethicists have shown remarkable myopia in not taking into account the inference that can be reasonably drawn from some of the most secure knowledge we have of the creation of the universe, the evolution of species, and the likely end of our planet as we now know it.⁷

Endorsing the observation of Ernst Troeltsch, Gustafson charges that we have not yet taken the implications of Copernican astronomy fully into our theological thinking. We must move beyond our geocentricity and anthropocentricity, and must grasp the immensity of a universe in which we humans are not the physical centre. This approach puts humanity firmly in its (very small) place, bows humbly in the face of divine sovereignty, generates a powerful ecological ethic (our privileged stewardship of a world not our own), and narrows the gap between the human and animal worlds.⁸ These are notable achievements, but they lack a sense of history and of peoplehood (ecclesiology).

The *Narrativists*, including Hans Frei, Stanley Hauerwas and James McClendon set out to recover history, eschatology and communality. This seems to be a necessary therapy against the bifurcation of modernity into individualism and abstract universalism. A narrative approach has the double effect of privileging history with its particularities of people and events over abstract concepts, and of reinstating communality over individual experience. This effect is strongly therapeutic in modern theology, restoring both scripture and church to the centre of the picture. On this view, there is a mutually reinforcing dynamic between scripture and church, for scripture as authoritative narrative needs its community as much as that community needs its narrative. Such an understanding of narrative moves us beyond our individual selves to a sense of being persons-in-community, thereby making for a kind of transcendence. Yet this transcendence has its limits, and a fundamental limit is picked up by Nigel Biggar in his criticism of Stanley Hauerwas. Biggar's view is that Hauerwas contributes significantly to many important aspects of modern theology, but that he curiously seems to lose sight of God.⁹

Alasdair MacIntyre laments the loss of the holism of Scottish moral theology in which the university principal, who was usually the professor of moral theology, was expected to sum up the whole curriculum at the end of each academic year.¹⁰ The assumption was that theology made it possible to see reality as a whole – to provide “the grand narrative”. The

⁵ James Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961).

⁶ James Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, Volume 1, Theology and Ethics, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁷ James Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, volume I, 97.

⁸ Concerning Gustafson's narrowing the gap between humans and animals, see his appreciation of the work of Mary Midgley in *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, volume 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 282, 285.

⁹ Biggar's criticism of Hauerwas is referred to by William J Meyer in “On keeping theological ethics theological”, *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, volume 19, (1999), 37.

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

rise of empiricism especially through David Hume, led to the corrosion and eventual demise of this confident holism. When he proceeds to suggest a way of recapturing what has been lost, MacIntyre points, in the ethical field, to the premodern figure of St Benedict.¹¹ Can the premodern social dualism of monasticism, however, provide a helpful paradigm for the post-modern world?

John Milbank fires a blast against the sellout of theology to empiricism. Social theory, he claims, was not compelled to go the empirical route, but it chose to do so. Consequently, theology that takes modern sociology seriously (as does all contextual and liberation theology) should not be surprised to find itself becoming trapped in empiricism and, in the end, falling foul of Feuerbach's anthropological trap – merely reflecting ourselves back to ourselves ("If men were birds, God would be ornithomorphic"). Milbank offers a tough but accurate diagnosis of the plight of modern theology.¹² But Milbank's positive cure, like that of MacIntyre, seems inadequate when he points us back to the premodern Augustine.

Two general points stand out in an overview of these brave attempts to drive against the traffic of modernity. First, they are all to be commended, for they all seek a much-needed therapy for the present weak state of theology. Unfortunately they all, to a greater or lesser degree, fall short of achieving the heroic goal of establishing a more adequate theology on the basis of a more helpful philosophical framework. Second, and of concern for us who seek to develop our theology in Africa and for Africa, they are all Eurocentric.¹³ Of course, this is to be expected because the problems they address are all emphatically the products of the West. It is the West that has built the road on which we are all travelling. Can we find a better way ahead for South African theology, a way closer, for instance, to the holism of African tradition, in which there is no bifurcation between the physical and the spiritual, the immanent and the transcendent, the individual and the community?

Does the broad school of thought known as *phenomenology* perhaps offer some pointers to such a new, better road ahead? While also a Western product, it represents a further brave attempt to beat the bifurcation of modernity, to heal the deep wound left by Descartes and Kant by its thoroughgoing attempt to hold subject and object together. Whether or not it achieves this ambitious goal is a matter of ongoing debate among philosophers, but it does seem to hold out the hope of integrating the individual in the community, the spiritual and the physical, the human and the divine. Of particular interest is Merleau-Ponty's view of perception as "participative". By this he envisages more than the knowing subject engaging with its object – he offers an astonishing account of how the object plays an active role in the knowing process. David Abram expresses this approach as follows:

My senses connect up with each other in the things I perceive, or rather each perceived thing gathers my senses together in a coherent way, and it is this that enables me to experience the thing itself as a center of forces, as another nexus of experience, as an Other... Once I acknowledge that my own sentience, or subjectivity does not preclude my visible, tactile,

¹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed., (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

¹² John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). For a brief, aggressive statement of his position as regards the theology in the modern university, see his "Theology and the economy of the sciences" in *Faithfulness and Fortitude: In Conversation with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas*, Mark Thiessen Nation and Samuel Wells, eds. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 39-57.

¹³ Terms such as "Eurocentric", "Western" and "the West", are wider than mere geographic references. They all refer to the cultural and philosophical developments that arose in the European Enlightenment in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and subsequently spread, mainly through the vehicle of colonialism, to the rest of the world. They are finding new spheres of influence and forms of expression in the recent emergence of the phenomenon named "globalisation".

objective existence for others, I find myself forced to acknowledge that *any visible, tangible form that meets my gaze may also be an experiencing subject, sensitive and responsive to the beings around it, and to me.*¹⁴

Not only does this account fly directly in the face of the Descartes-Kant notion of the isolated, rational, knowing subject in a world of objects unknowable in themselves, it also points towards a new possibility for understanding revealed knowledge – that our knowing is not entirely of our own making, but that the knowing process is initiated, at least in part, from outside of ourselves.

Merleau-Ponty's predecessor in this approach, Edmund Husserl, used a term for this general approach to knowing, a term which points to the active role of the object together with the subject in the knowing process. His term "inter-subjectivity" may suggest to us some important practical building materials for a great new interstate freeway to a flourishing future for theology.

A Freeway to the Future

For our road ahead I would suggest that we seek ways that are cohesive rather than divisive, ways that in both their concept and their method turn away from the bifurcations, dichotomies and binary opposites of the road behind us. For theology to flourish it seems that it should highlight the relatedness indicated by the prefix *inter*, and should aspire to display the following main characteristics.

1. *Interdenominational*: While the fragmentation of Christianity into denominations is a fact of the modern church and cannot be wished away or forced into some great scheme of unification, it seems obvious that for the Christian faith to flourish in an unfriendly, often disdainful secular society, it will have to operate in a less fragmented way. Christian faith has come to mean too many things and to take on too many institutional forms to be intelligible in today's society. At the very least, the various Christian groupings will have to get to know each other better in the local scene. This is most likely to happen if they collaborate together in some mutually agreed upon programmes. The slogan of the Life and Work movement first coined about eighty years ago still carries much promise – "doctrine divides, service unites".
2. *Interfaith*: Our South African society, while largely Christian, is made up of many vibrant and energetic religious groupings. Instead of regarding these other groupings as a threat, Christian theology should be open to interaction with them. As we get to know the other faiths better, so we understand our own faith more clearly and profoundly and gain perspective on its place among the other faiths. As we in South Africa become more developed in the area of interfaith collaboration and understanding, we will be in a position to contribute to theology in those other parts of the world where there is no similar awareness and sensitivity.
3. *Intercultural*: One of the greatest challenges facing church and theology in Southern Africa is the need for sound intercultural relations leading intentionally to the indigenisation of the Christian faith. The future of Christianity in this part of the world depends on a good job being done of the indigenisation process. Two obvious factors add to the complexity of the challenge. First, there is the sheer multiplicity of languages and cultures, which make natural gravitating together in worship and other social activities difficult. Second, the process has been complicated, even bedevilled, by

¹⁴ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 62, 67, (my emphasis).

political and economic inequities and injustices which began with that nexus known as “colonialism”, and became more sharp and severe with the apartheid policy. The fact that church and theology were embroiled in the struggle both for and against colonialism and apartheid has created a rocky road for indigenisation. While Christian missions have been remarkably successful as far as numbers of Black Christians are concerned, we are still a long way from enjoying a church and theology that is settled into intercultural patterns of life and operation. In terms of historical time, we are still in the early stages of such development, but that should not be an excuse for shirking the challenge. Proactive measures are certainly called for.

4. *International*: When we looked back to the road behind us, we recognised, with the help of Tony Balcomb, the danger of becoming so contextual that we find ourselves still “trapped in apartheid and its aftermath”. We must guard against our thinking becoming parochial and losing its catholic perspective. The slogan emerging from ecological programmes is useful for the future of South African theology: “Think global, act local”. Our church life and theology should be constantly enriched by our place and participation in international networks.
5. *Interdisciplinary*: At two levels, theology has been fragmented in the modern world. First, its own sub-disciplines are divorced from each other. Edward Farley offers a powerful account of the fragmentation of theological study, which he sees as finding expression in the loneliness of scholars and their alienation from their natural allies, their theological colleagues. Theological study began as the pursuit of a unified goal – that informed sense of the divine which Farley names *theologia*. He proceeds to trace the growing alienation of the discipline from its object, and the fragmentation of the discipline into the four-fold encyclopaedia of disparate disciplines (Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology, Church History, Practical Theology). This occurred especially in order to follow the model of the various branches of scientific study in the universities of nineteenth century Western Europe.¹⁵ If the intention was to impress the other disciplines, theology was sadly misguided and mistaken. It is clear, even in recent South African experience, that theology’s prestige and then its place in the modern university have been radically undermined. An appropriate response to this salutary experience would surely be to find imaginative, creative ways of interacting with the various non-theological disciplines – and not only limited to those decided by some undeclared authority to be “cognates” of theology (such as sociology, anthropology, and economics).
6. *Interactive*: It is important that theological study move out of its ivory tower and find ways of relating to and participating at significant points in human society. I will mention three areas of interaction with which I am familiar. First, I am involved in a module in the final year of the Bachelor of Theology degree at the University of Kwazulu-Natal named “Theology and Society”. This module is designed to forge links between the academic study of theology and selected social issues. Students are divided into small groups a particular social issue on which to focus their study, such as social reconciliation, democracy, HIV/Aids, gender, African culture. All students in the class cover all of the issues by means of lectures, readings, written assignments, and the reports of the other groups. What makes the module distinctive is that each group is allocated a “placement” in which contact is made and time spent with people and

¹⁵ Edward Farley offers a powerful account of the fragmentation of theological study, which he sees as expressed in the loneliness of scholars and their alienation from each other. See his *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

institutions who are operative in their chosen field. A required minimum number of hours must be spent in the placement, and a verbal group report is made at the end of the semester. Finally, individual essays reflecting on the placement experience must be submitted. Central to the objective of this module is that students should develop insights and skills to be able to engage society theologically. The vision is that they will continue to practice such engagement in such a way that it becomes a process of lifelong learning. Second, and more important than interaction with “social issues”, is interaction with churches. For theologians to pursue their study in isolation from living communities of Christian faith would be akin to geologists doing their work in isolation from rocks! Our relation with the churches may be either constructive or critical, but the churches are our constituency and we stand or fall by our existential interaction with them. Social analysis as well as the calling of the Christian life itself – draws us into engagement with “the poor and needy” among Christian communities. Third, in South African theological education there should also be interaction between our institutions, both seminaries and universities. As a matter of great urgency, we should be searching together for positive, creative and collaborative plans of action. The Theological Society of South Africa is one hopeful forum, but its small numbers are themselves indicative that something is not right.

Our Present Path – How are we Getting Along?

It is of great concern that, by and large, the above considerations do *not* describe the directions taken by theological education in South Africa in the early years of the twenty-first century. Our theological education cannot be said to be *interdenominational*. Indeed, we have regressed alarmingly in this aspect. The past decade has seen the sad demise of such visionary ecumenical enterprises as the Federal Theological Seminary and the Divinity Faculty of Rhodes University. After contributing significantly to the health and welfare of theological study for some decades, neither of these landmark schemes survived to contribute to the new democratic South Africa.¹⁶ Subsequently, churches have faced with devising emergency measures for the training of their clergy and, in general, have retreated into their denominational ghettos.

If our theological institutions fail the test of Christian ecumenicity, they certainly fail the *interfaith* requirement too. It seems an obvious necessity in our multifaith society that our theological programmes find ways of including an interfaith dimension. How *international* are we? Some of our more senior researchers have managed to establish international research contacts, and exchange programmes enrich the academic experience.¹⁷

¹⁶ The Federal Seminary which opened in Alice in 1963, closed in 1993, having relocated to Pietermaritzburg in 1978. For a recent reflection of the closure of the seminary, see Philippe Denis “Fedsem ten years later: The unwritten history of an ecumenical seminary” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 117, (November 2003) 68-79. The Faculty of Theology at Rhodes University began its operations in 1948, and closed in 2000.

¹⁷ It has become common in the past decade or so for universities to develop international exchange agreements for their students. I am aware of others, but will note two postgraduate programmes best known to me. First there is the African Theological Fellowship, which operates on an axis between the Akrofi-Christaller Centre in Ghana and the School of Theology at the University of Kwazulu-Natal. This project facilitates the movement of students and lecturers from throughout Africa between the two institutions. It issues in Masters and doctoral degrees from KwaZulu-Natal. Second, there is the International Network for Advanced Theological Education (INATE) which links theological institutions in Brazil, Costa Rica, Canada, South Africa, Norway, Hungary, India and Hong Kong. The benefits of these programmes are not immediately evident, but one must assume that they will be highly significant for Christian leadership and international relations in the long term.

Certainly our student bodies are certainly more international than they were ten years ago, but to what extent do our activities impress on our students the worldwide presence of the church? Surely the neglect of this emphasis is a serious weakness in an age of globalisation – whether or not we favour the economic and moral aspects of globalisation.

Closely related to the regress into single denomination seminaries, is the retreat into compartments of watertight *disciplines*. To some extent this has been offset by the “unit standards” approach of the statutorily-decreed “outcomes based education”. The effectiveness of syllabi constructed in this manner, however, is yet to be proven. Are they dancing to the tune of secular educational planners, or are they genuinely profound attempts to recover the kind of theological integration that Edward Farley envisions? If they are expressions of the latter, motivated by and generative of a holistic knowledge of the divine, they may well prove to be lasting contributions to the development of theological education. If the former, they are time serving, and it is predicted that their time will be short lived.

A striking instance of positive *interaction* is the recent engagement between cosmology and theology. After centuries of strife, since Copernicus and Galileo were first seen as challenging doctrinal orthodoxy, some physicists are now seeking vigorously and determinedly to demonstrate the importance of theological depth for the vastness of their findings.¹⁸ Surprisingly, a corresponding move has been made from an unlikely theological source. One of the modern theologians who most emphasises Christian revelation and throws Christian distinctiveness into its starkest relief, Stanley Hauerwas, has recently moved in the direction of suggesting a possible meeting point between revealed theology and natural theology! Citing none other than the greatest modern exponent of revealed knowledge, Karl Barth, Hauerwas suggests that Barth’s total rejection of natural theology had much to do with his protest against Hitler and the nazification of Christianity.¹⁹ In other words, Barth’s apparent opposition to natural theology was as much a matter of historical contingency as anything else. Hauerwas goes on to argue that Barth was in fact an exponent of natural theology, but only within the context of God’s revelation in Christ. Declaring his intention Hauerwas announces:

I will try to convince you that Karl Barth is the greatest natural theologian of the Gifford Lectures – at least he is so if you remember that natural theology is the attempt to witness to the nongodforsakenness of the world even under conditions of sin.²⁰

¹⁸ Building on the work of such modern scholars in the field of science and religion as Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke and John Polkinghorne, South Africans George Ellis and Peter Barrett have made major contributions to the science-theology relationship, with George Ellis being awarded the Templeton Prize for 2004. See George F.R. Ellis and Nancy Murphy *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); and Peter Barrett *Science and Theology Since Copernicus: The Search for Understanding* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2000).

¹⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2001), 170. This work represents a new note in Hauerwas’s impressive corpus, a note that may easily be seen as a departure from the strongly anti-Enlightenment stance of his previous work. The fact that he even entertains the idea of natural theology is almost certainly due to the fact that this work is the published form of his 2001 Gifford Lectures, a famous and prestigious international lectureship dedicated explicitly to the advancement of natural theology. With typical intellectual dexterity and not a little theological chutzpah, Hauerwas claims Barth as his champion in upholding natural theology, but only by locating it within Christian revelation! He explains: “It was in fact Barth’s Christological reflections that forced him to reconsider the possibility of a natural theology – a surprising development, perhaps, in the eyes of many defenders and critics of natural theology. Yet if what I suggested is true...that is, that natural theology makes Christian sense only as part of the whole doctrine of God – then Barth’s recovery of natural theology as a Christological theme is exactly what we should expect.” *With the Grain of the Universe*, 158-159.

²⁰ Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 20.

While Hauerwas almost certainly bends the usual meaning of natural theology to suit his purposes, his account of Barth on creation is astonishing in that it brings Barth's revealed theology very close to being an interface with the quest of those cosmologists who now seek theological connections for their observations. Even more astonishing is the following inspirational claim.

For Barth, all of creation, and not humans alone, testifies in gratitude to the grace of the creator. Only God's revelation in Christ distinguishes humans from the rest of creation. "Man has been called to present to the Creator the gratitude of the creation," Barth says, but this does not mean that there are not other beings who, perhaps in a more perfect way than human beings, present gratitude to the creator. Accordingly, Barth observes, "we are certainly not always wrong, if we believe we hear a song of praise to God in the existence also of Sirius and the rock crystal, of the violet and the boa-constrictor." For Barth, we differ from the violet or the star only to the extent that our gratitude to God can take the form of knowledge and service.²¹

One is tempted to discern here a path of thought not far removed from the participative perception and inter-subjectivity of the phenomenologists. Could it be leading to a new and positive interaction between science and religion? Could it be taking us away from the choking, restrictive bifurcations of the past onto a new, unified road? Certainly, it seems to turn us away from modernity's bifurcation between the human experience and the natural world, and from theology's separation of revelation from reason, to a healthier, more unified understanding of our existence.

Where should such holistic, integrative, interactive study find an institutional home? It is difficult to imagine any other home than the modern university or a seminary very closely related to and actively participating in the multifaceted life of a modern university.²² A seminary on its own is simply not designed or resourced for such complex interactions. Correspondence-based courses of theological study may be designed to embrace a broad range of disciplines and interests.²³ Such innovative curriculum planning is creative and forward-looking in its intention, but it is difficult to see how it would provide for genuine interaction. There is a limitation that lies in the fact that, like a seminary, a correspondence-based institution does not locate the student in the place where a wide variety of study and research is happening. A university, by definition, is an institution comprising many and varied areas of learning. Precisely such variety is a minimal necessity for interactive theological study of the kind this essay envisions. Theology could offer no more valuable service to our universities than to be a catalyst for interdisciplinary enterprises. Such a development has the potential to rescue the universities from being victims of their own isolated specialisations. If we add to such an integrative role the contextual awareness that has come so strongly to the fore in recent theology, then theology could also play a leading role in actively integrating our state universities with the communities they are morally obliged to serve.

²¹ Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 167.

²² In my experience, the "Houses of Studies" model in operation at the School of Theology of the University of KwaZulu-Natal is the best expression of this close seminary-university relationship.

²³ The newly proposed curricula of the Theological Education by Extension College (TEEC) based in Johannesburg are interdisciplinary by virtue of the "unit standards" philosophy which they follow. Such education by extension certainly has a vital role to play in the development of theological study in the context of Southern Africa with its far-flung, poverty stricken population, and merit strong support for this reason. Simply stated, they make theological study possible for those who would otherwise find it impossible.

Yet, is the modern university not an institutional expression of the very forces that we earlier saw to have led to such difficulties for theology – a temple of the Enlightenment? Most obviously and crudely stated, one has merely to see how the erstwhile “queen of the sciences” now struggles to keep her foot in the tradesman’s entrance. Institutions once founded primarily for the study of theology now vigorously exclude theology from their precincts. Are state-funded South African universities rapidly on their way to becoming like their state-sponsored counterparts in the USA and shutting the door on the study of theology?

The above considerations on the “freeway to the future” for theology obviously envisage and require a close working relationship with a modern university. What are we in South Africa to do as that relationship becomes increasingly endangered? A concluding cautionary word must be spoken at this point concerning a potential pitfall for theology on the road.

White Lines and Cats’ Eyes

In a time of great challenge for Christian theology, a time when it is not unthinkable that the state education system might shut its doors to theological study, some hard decisions may have to be made. The above considerations make it abundantly clear that theology flourishes in a contextual mode and in vigorous interaction with society, with the church, and with non-theological disciplines. Such integrative activity may be desirable, but circumstances may make it an impossible dream. Theology’s engagement with human culture may take many forms, as indicated in Richard Niebuhr’s classical models.²⁴ As we have seen, the great highway of thought onto which we have been called to pursue our theological journey has been a dual highway that separates faith from culture, the spiritual from the physical, and the human from the rest, as our first section showed. In such a context it seems absolutely vital that whatever form theological interaction takes in its engagement with culture and society, it is guided by its primary commitments. The more our ability to see theologically becomes clouded and obscured, the more we need to look for lifesaving guidance such as that provided by white lines and cats’ eyes on our highways. These devices allow us to proceed, albeit cautiously. All drivers know that in conditions of poor visibility the temptation to stop is not a good one. To stop can be as dangerous as to proceed too fast. Surely we need to reconsider our basic aims, our reasons and motives for being on this road, and for making this journey.

Ultimately, whether in South Africa or in some other context, whether ten years after apartheid or at some later time, the task of the theologian must be the same. To express this task, I choose the motto of a Christian women’s movement: “To know Christ and to make him known”.²⁵ Here is a dual challenge – that of understanding and of communication. Our success or failure as theologians must be measured according to our performance in understanding “Jesus Christ for us today” (to borrow Bonhoeffer’s phrase), and in passing on our understanding effectively to others – usually the younger generation. The thesis of this essay is that the way ahead for theology must be in participative interaction among Christian denominations, with other faiths, with other disciplines, and in engagement with the “concrete realities” of our social life. Yet this must always be within a commitment to our particular faith tradition. When we lose our particular vision and our faith commitment, we lose our way. We speed down the freeway and forget why we are doing so or where we

²⁴ H Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

²⁵ The motto of the Women’s Auxiliary of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

are going. We lose our sense of vocation, and are attracted away by the lure of more “meaningful” (and better paid!) jobs. It is then time to say again to the theologian:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus

Look full in his wonderful face

And the things of the earth will grow strangely clear (!)

In the light of his glory and grace.