

Article

Materially Dispossessing the Troubled Theologian

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Abstract

Linn Tonstad's paper, '(Un)wise Theologians', identifies a theological approach that puts pressure on its ability to handle its materiality sufficiently in a number of ways. However, following the trajectory of Tonstad's discovery of "the deformations to which theology is susceptible in the university" and elsewhere, a supplementation is required to specify where its thesis needs more rigorous development. Firstly, the paper's argument locates what Tonstad describes as "self-securitization and self-assertion" in a form of a subjectivity characterisable as a docility making possessive form of divine givenness, and it draws the papal encyclical *Fides et Ratio* into Tonstad's critique of the theology of John Webster to make this case. Secondly, Tonstad's appeal to the reparative mode of contextualisation necessitates a differentiation to be made between modes of what is commonly called 'contextual theology' since there are forms that shelter under this umbrella term that echo the subjectivity of that which Tonstad uncompromisingly critiques. Thirdly, while '(Un)wise Theologians' only lightly indexes a reparative direction properly "chastened" theology, a kenotically interrogative sensibility may prove to be sufficiently capacious for the critical conduct of "theological therapy". If so, then it can function to constantly trouble the theological in an appropriate manner without flight into a premature dematerialised fixation point.

Keywords: critical thought; revelation; interrogative mood; absolutism; doctrine; contextual theologies; reason; kenosis



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1. An Introduction In Media Res

Effusively addressing the bishop of Iconium, Basil the Great opens his treatise *On the Holy Spirit* by commending Amphilochius' "love of learning and... industrious character" (Basil 2011, p. 27). The language used here lauds the ecclesiastic's theological investigative approach, p. "I delight very much in the carefulness and sobriety of your idea that not one of the words that are applied to God in every use of speech should be left uninvestigated" (Basil 2011, p. 27). Basil then draws a contrast between the appropriately attentive search "for truth as a remedy for ignorance" and the practice of those who listen and "question us to find fault" (Basil 2011, p. 27).

No one conducting a theological inquiry would dispute Basil's sense that the practice is one of disciplined thinking, an activity of reason. Indeed, as Nicholas Lash observes, "Right from the beginning, Christianity had been, fundamentally and centrally, an educational affair. To be a disciple is to be a learner; that is what the word 'disciple' means. All Christians are apprentices in the knowledge and the love of God" (Lash 2008, p. 288). The question instead is whether, as Basil exhorts, the theological intellect progresses in its piety "towards knowledge" in a way that "must overlook nothing" (Basil 2011, p. 27). If, as the bishop of Caesarea claims, "Likeness to God... cannot come without knowledge, and knowledge

comes from teaching”, under what conditions is the doxa produced (Basil 2011, p. 27)? Basil does not address this issue. That his treatise engages in a pneumatological study could reflect the way appeals to the pneumatic frequently function as an “aura” and thereby as an evasion of the critical (Adorno 1973, p. 6). Spirit-talk, in other words, can be produced as a stabilising signifier and therein as one that involves jargonising tactics by which “the Church repeatedly seeks to secure a faith that is not vulnerable to judgement and to put cross and conversion behind it is manifest in every century of Christian history” (Williams 2000, p. 83). The question, then, may be framed as where it is that reason, in media res as it may otherwise be, begins and ends in “the acquisition of piety” (Basil 2011, p. 27).

It is here that Linn Tonstad’s paper, ‘(Un)wise Theologians’, identifies a theological approach that puts pressure on its ability to handle its materiality sufficiently in a number of ways (Tonstad 2020). However, following the trajectory of Tonstad’s discovery of “the deformations to which theology is susceptible of in the university” and elsewhere, a supplementation is required to specify where its thesis needs more rigorous development (Tonstad 2020, p. 496). My paper provides three areas of supplementation, all by way of contributing to the thesis that theology requires a self-dispossessive form of subjectivity conducted in the interrogative mood.

Firstly, the argument of the paper locates what Tonstad describes as “self-securitization and self-assertion” in a form of a subjectivity characterisable as a docility making possessive form of divine givenness, and it draws the papal encyclical *Fides et Ratio* into Tonstad’s critique of the theology of John Webster to make this case (Tonstad 2020, p. 496). Secondly, Tonstad’s appeal to the reparative mode of contextualisation requires a differentiation to be made between modes of what is commonly called ‘contextual theology’ since there are forms that shelter under this umbrella term that echo the subjectivity of that which Tonstad uncompromisingly critiques. Thirdly, while ‘(Un)wise Theologians’ only lightly indexes a reparative direction properly “chastened” theology, a kenotically interrogative sensibility may prove to be sufficiently capacious for the critical conduct of “theological therapy” (Tonstad 2020, pp. 496 and 511, respectively). If so, then it can function to constantly trouble the theological in an appropriate manner without flight into a premature dematerialised fixation point.

2. “Who Will Guard the Guardians?” (MacKinnon 2016, p. 208): Contesting the Assertively Insertive Religion of the Event

It might seem odd to critique *Fides et Ratio* in the context of a suspicion over the kinds of conditions that sustain a mode of theologising that functions as an evasion of self-reflexivity, as a “refuge from the critical rather than a pressure towards the critical” (Williams 2000, p. 126). After all, by setting itself the task of speaking of reason, the papal encyclical in theory opens itself to a range of reflections on the nature and function of reason. Moreover, by situating reason in God and not in the circumscribed contexts of human capacity and its reflections on God, John Paul II resists the kinds of theologies that are isolated from thinking well about other things and does so as a matter of *theological* responsibility. Nonetheless, while it would appear to be an ill fit for reflecting on Tonstad’s concern, not all is as well as it may seem to be.

After providing distinctly generalising and conceptually imprecise prefatory comments about unfolding “human consciousness”, the encyclical glibly asserts that people want to know the truth, and when they are presented with it change their minds (John Paul II 1996, p. 325): “The desire for knowledge is characteristic of all people” is a claim offered numerous times from chapter two onwards (John Paul II 1996, p. 330). Apparently, “No one wants to be deceived” (John Paul II 1996, p. 333).¹ Leaving aside any material

contestation of the encyclical's pronouncement, what is notable here is that formally the rhetoric exhibits a masking function: it hides the fact that there is conceptual *dispute* and perspectival *difference* on the issue. The encyclical already suggests the legitimacy of Terry Eagleton's claim that "human existence is at least as much about fantasy and desire as it is about truth and reason" (Eagleton 2003, p. 4). One consequence is that *Fides et Ratio* exemplifies a distinctive discursive context in which there is a flattering privileging of ecclesial thinking, and this situates the material within a predominantly apologetic performance. The danger, of course, with certain forms of apologetics is that they can take intellectual shortcuts as a result of efforts to compel their target audiences through the use of reason in a way which, in practice, works as self-assertion and an evasion of difficult interruptions posed by attention to real complexity. Nicholas Lash explains what is at stake: "the mood of apologetics is assertive, rather than interrogative" since "The apologist sets out to teach rather than to learn, to prove or refute rather than to enquire, to give rather than to receive" (Lash 1981, p. 5).²

Lash's criticism of the apologetic mood occurs in his book on Karl Marx, in which the plea is made for theological readers to pay attention to the range of challenges offered by Marx's work. This asks, among other things, the question of what happens to faith-full theologies when reason's claims take a divergent direction and even exercise substantive suspicion over theological claims. The point here is that a certain form of apologetic sensibility can too easily displace self-reflexivity, especially in terms of how attention to difference can be a provocation for learning.

Talk of "Unmasking superstitions" might leave *Fides et Ratio* some scope for developing just such a healthy, reparative self-critical interrogation (John Paul II 1996, p. 336). The document, after all, continues, "Faith without reason ends up in myth and superstition" (John Paul II 1996, p. 341). Moreover, it equally speaks of all truth being God's truth, and of philosophy as being "one of the noblest ways to ask the question of life's meaning and to sketch an answer" (John Paul II 1996, p. 326).³ Nevertheless, few of these critical terms are unpacked and tested, and the exposition is underdetermined in consequence. Moreover, this admission is sandwiched between a reference to *Romans* 1, vv. 21–32 with its claim, according to *Fides et Ratio*, that the philosophies or "the natural knowledge of God and . . . the voice of conscience . . . often had lapsed into idolatry", and the assertion of faith *directing* reason whereby faith is *obedience* to God's revelation (John Paul II 1996, p. 336). What is uppermost, then, is a theological account of rationality situated within the framework of "the obedience we must render to God's self-revelation" (John Paul II 1996, p. 329).

The implications of this approach are manifold. Firstly, while the notion of obedience is common to the Christian tradition, and it would appear odd to contest it by simply appealing to its antonym, the term remains significantly theopolitically consequential should it be made without substantive qualification. When well-ordered, obedience language has a distinctive epistemic context, and the critique of John Webster's theology of givenness in Tonstad's paper does not adequately acknowledge this setting. For Webster, what is problematic is a range of approaches that imply inappropriately that the eventfulness of God's Self-revelation can be controlled and possessed.⁴ In this regard, when Alister McGrath describes the emergence of early Christian doctrine, his use of language of "capture" to explain how doctrine responds to its "new way of thinking, imagining, and living" is both clumsy and misleading since it can all too easily lend itself to images of confinement as much as, if not more than, the notion of providing a consistent articulation (McGrath 2024, p. 2). Webster, however, is heavy-handed in his own way when he turns his attention to accounts of human creativity (and presumably theological projectionism), what he occasionally terms "invention" (Webster 2012, p. 144). From an account of theology as a derivative act of faithful reasoned description, he criticises "conceptions of the systematic

task as open, free and cumulative learning” (Webster 2012, p. 135). Of course, talk of ‘openness’, just as with any rhetoric of ‘fluidity’, otherness, and so on, does need to be appropriately contextualised so as to critically differentiate them from their use within the hegemonic market economy (see Žižek 2001, p. 116; Eagleton 2003, p. 16.). Nonetheless, without a substantive theological account of agency within this notion of faithful freedom, the rhetoric can too readily be heard as an obligation generated by enforced submission.

Webster’s lengthy erasure of the role of curiosity in theological activity does not mitigate this serious suspicion. Refusing to engage in the kind of prolegomena that specifies the possibility of the theological, Webster maintains that a well-ordered theological prolegomena is a “derivative task” that involves “the contemplative exercise of tracing what is the case, and explicating how and why it is so” (Webster 2012, p. 134). Accordingly, he draws a contrast between “the virtue of studiousness” and curiosity, which is a “corruption” of studiousness (Webster 2012, p. 193). Working from Thomas Aquinas, curiosity becomes a category reserved for the description of the distorted volition. The distinction Webster provides is clear enough but rhetorically awkward and thereby potentially and gravely misleading, given that the terms are not normally antonyms in typical parlance. Christian learning, Webster takes it on himself to explain, is “Not, surely, [the] steady accumulation of knowledge by the exercise of skills, but conversion and sanctification, of which the conflict between studiousness and curiosity forms part” (Webster 2012, p. 193). Why refuse to speak of Christian activities within the disciplining of God’s sanctifying act as learning ‘skill’? The overwhelming of the discourse by passifying terms offsets ‘skill’ as a creaturely activity of faithful learning. Webster even speaks of the God-knowing creature’s “docility” (Webster 2012, p. 142).

For its part, what *Fides et Ratio* challenges is any purely immanentised model of subjectivity that fails to follow obediently the way of God’s Self-articulation. Yet it does so without specifying the relationship between responsiveness and spontaneity. It is satisfied with using vague generalisations about *fides* and *ratio* that only superficially provide for theology’s substantive engagement with reason because these terms are simply bound to the logic of the self-assertively secure ecclesial subject. After all, the encyclical rhetorically trades on having reduced talk of ‘faith’ and other expressions of revelation’s receipt, just as Webster does with ‘theology’, to singularly depictable matters devoid of any contestability in, or troubling with, their use. This assertive framing of matters in terms of homogenising particularities would fall into Tonstad’s suspicion that “Any recognition of significant disagreement among theologians is absent here” in this kind of approach (Tonstad 2020, p. 500).⁵

Without offering sufficient rhetorical hesitancy, talk of faith as *obedience*, as a *receipt* “of the ultimate truth of human life”, to that which is given lends itself to notions of discursive givenness, passivity, and docility (John Paul II 1996, p. 326). It is this pacification of human agency, when it is combined with a rhetorically self-confident noetics, that lends itself precisely to an intensified point of human possession and control of God’s commerce with the world. This is what grounds the encyclical’s assertive form of apologetics. Its discursive move sets up a story of the Fall through accusing reason of its sinfulness, and, crucially, ennobling the church to be the conditions for its repair, since it is in the church that the demands of the givenness of God’s presence are received and obeyed. Accordingly, the church’s teaching office can help ride in to save reason’s day. “The church”, the encyclical announces, “bears a message coming from God. . . a message that has its origin not in the church’s own thinking, but in God” (John Paul II 1996, p. 328). At one point, this is put particularly provocatively: “If people fail to recognize God, it is not because they lack the means; it is because of their sinful unwillingness” (John Paul II 1996, p. 331).

This is a rather convenient rhetorical tactic that deflects from consideration of any possibility that the church can engage in distorting the witness to the truth of God in Jesus Christ, so that the failure to “recognize God” may well be a failure to perceive God in and through ecclesial performance. The discursive mode is one which avows a revelatory *insertiveness* that articulates itself in a rhetorical triumphalistic mood. What this appears as, rhetorically, is a discursive practice of theological *assertiveness* that operates as if the recipient is transparent to herself as a purely unobtrusive reflection of God’s Self-revelation. Leaving aside for now Tonstad’s appropriate questioning of the theologian’s ability to be “transparent to herself in any simple fashion” (Tonstad 2020, p. 508), there is a concerning political consequence with this discourse. In the terms of Leszek Kolakowski, when revelation becomes “simply the absolute in the order of cognition, a collection of positive and unquestionable data, our means of communicating with the absolute” (Kolakowski 1968, p. 19). “Revelation is therefore destined to be the textbook of the inquisitor” (Kolakowski 1968, p. 19). The Polish Marxist philosopher, then, connects an account of revelation as givenness with the purity of its undistorted receipt. The sensibility of this gesture embeds absolute authority in the performance of authoritative absolutism. Tellingly, Webster, for instance, does speak rather comfortably of “ecclesial reception” with the politics of assertive power (Webster 2012, p. 136). It is here that the continued practices of all manner of abuse, many of which have been rooted in just such a sensibility marked by powerful appeals to others’ need to be unquestioningly obedient, should function as a rude awakening for those slumbering in illusions of ecclesiality’s role in divine healing. Shaken from what Erich Fromm calls the “unrestricted egotism” or narcissism of the subject, the church particularly owes, in the words of Elie Wiesel, “a debt to the dead” and to those who have suffered at its hands not least because in the practices of moral failure it continues to perpetrate “a failure of humanity” (Fromm 1981, p. 41; Wiesel 1990, pp. 37 and 11, respectively).⁶ For those suffering from various forms of Christian abuse, what is hidden behind ecclesially triumphalistic rhetoric is no theologically insignificant matter. In fact, what is “oppressive about social forms” of the theological is “the psychic difficulties they may produce” (Butler 1990, p. xxv).⁷

It is in this vein that Nicholas Lash offers a trenchant critique of the history of Christian “absolutism” (Lash 1982, p. 153). For him, “absolutism” functions as a strategy for imagining that we have somehow managed to grasp and articulate truth. This, he continues, is a distinctive theological problem: “the absolutist *incorrectly* supposes that the way in which we have succeeded in making things to be *is* how they ultimately and appropriately are. The absolutist construes truth as reality *grasped*, as possession to be preserved against the ravages of time and change. The absolutist is an idolater” (Lash 1982, p. 153).

Such an absolutist and totalising sensibility therefore finds it difficult to avoid a politically significant form of unaccountability over the claims it makes with an attendant appeal to its enactment of a faithful truthfulness. Moreover, and secondly, its positioning of those on whom obedience is foisted is enjoined too neatly into agential passivity, an act of conformist submission. Rowan Williams explains that the discursiveness of the theological as a given is in “danger of trivializing the whole of theological anthropology: [that] they have little or nothing to say to the *humanum* as such” (Williams 2000, p. 109). While this is certainly no minor matter, it is insufficiently blunt. The matter is less one of trivialisation than of distortion. Theologies of virtuous submission can be neatly enacted in practices of uncritical conformity, even if the act of obedience should provide a feeling of safety and protection. This constitutes an impoverishment of humanity, what Fromm calls “crippled character”, since it “implies the abdication of my autonomy and the acceptance of a foreign will or judgment in place of my own” (Fromm 1981, pp. 2 and 19, respectively). It is here that theology capaciously contributes to the generation of conditions of suffering. There-

fore, Tonstad asserts, there needs to be “the painful recognition of theology’s idolatrous tendencies” (Tonstad 2020, p. 504).

Thirdly, there is no indication of the theological implications of secular knowledge and inquiry, of philosophy as an approach to speaking truthfully in such a way as to be a condition for theology’s learning beyond. This point is not the rather banal one that speaks of philosophy being “a way to come to know the truths of human life [that theology builds on] and as a help to understand and to communicate the faith” (John Paul II 1996, p. 327). The very terms of this perspective on secular knowing have been set by faith, and, consequently, what emerges is a pressure on reason to be *directed*, situated, within the theological. It is “Faith”, the encyclical proclaims, that “allows reason to know correctly what it seeks to understand” (John Paul II 1996, p. 331). Reason is summoned to take its place within God’s calling since “[M]en and women are always called to a truth that transcends them” (John Paul II 1996, p. 327). Without this, reason is distinctly limited and misdirected: “Under the weight of so much knowledge reason has—little by little—lost the capacity to lift its gaze any higher” (John Paul II 1996, p. 327). It is precisely this kind of sensibility that, when directed towards the nature of theology’s engagement with the university, provokes Tonstad to complain that “some theologians argue that theology ought to order and rule the production of knowledge in the research university, and that non-theological disciplines are simply inadequate because they fail to consider the relation of all things to God” (Tonstad 2020, p. 495).⁸

It is in this regard that Webster draws universities into a story of the Fall. But he does so in a way that he does not do with his talk of the church or the theologian within the university. “As an institution of the earthly city, the university bears all the marks of hostility to God’s end for human life and intellect” (Webster 2016, p. 168). While, of course, theological accounts of reason may well need to refer to universities’ distortion and regeneration, and that these are to be drawn into ascetic activities of the human person as she is transfigured by the presence of the vivifying Spirit of Christ, it remains the case that “we do have to be permanently fearful of illusion” in theological reasoning itself (Lash 1982, p. 154). Yet neither Webster nor John Paul II, at least in *Fides et Ratio*, are sufficiently attuned to sustaining a recognition of the need for “stripping away of the veils of self-assurance by which we seek to protect our faces from exposure to the mystery of God” (Lash 1982, pp. 152–3). The latter text does offer the occasional gesture that, if developed appropriately, could help with this task: “our vision of God remains impaired by the limits of our understanding” (John Paul II 1996, p. 329). The problem is that these moments are not sufficiently well developed. Instead, the pre-eminent sensibility permits a form of speech so assured that even if, as Webster claims, “Theology is a work of the regenerate mind directed by God towards God”, the sense is that vivification has already been finalised, accomplished, given so that for “theology remaining theology” it depends on “the existence of sanctified theologians” (Webster 2016, p. 172). In this way, it becomes particularly challenging to resist equating the theologians’ voices with that of God’s, something Webster fails to spend much time on anyway, other than by offering the occasional nod towards the need to conduct theology “repentantly” (Webster 2012, p. 144). After all, he maintains, theology takes its shape within the salvific disclosiveness of God. “Systematic theology”, he announces, “is an exercise of reason in the domain of God’s saving and revelatory goodness to creatures” (Webster 2012, p. 133).

When Webster does admit “finite incapacity” it is not to properly mitigate the theologian’s self-assertive confidence but rather to explain the occasioning of divine Self-accommodation that “bridges divine *scientia* and the work of created intellect” (Webster 2012, p. 138). In fact, he consequentially announces that it is “Far better to talk of the limitations of systematic theological intelligence in terms of the nature of its matter rather

than the iniquities of its practitioners" (Webster 2012, p. 144). Primarily, any theology witnessing to the eternal abundance of the inexhaustibility of the divine needs to recognise its *never-to-be-completed* participation within that plenitudinous mystery. Any appeal to the eventful livingness of divine agency cannot presume to be in any better position to recognise the novum of divine givingness than to possess a divine gift that overcomes the self-grounded sectarianism of the theological without further substantially clarificatory work being performed. Christine Helmer, for instance, proclaims that the divine event is the ground for theological nescience. "The deepest ground of doctrine's epistemic humility is the recognition that the theologian stands before a divine reality that is capable of rejecting human efforts and of shattering human expectations with novelty" (Helmer 2014, p. 165). On her reading, doctrine "has come to an end when by definition it cannot say anything new and when the sole measurement of doctrine's significance is its contribution as the authoritative enforcer of the church's identity" (Helmer 2014, p. 19).⁹ Helmer, however, is unable to explain how the event is to be recognised as *new*.

Yet, the hamartiological reflection on knowing provides an irreducible further hesitation. The distorted, corrupted, and perverse nature of reason entails that even within any talk of God's coming to speech, there needs to be a never ceasing interrogativeness, a self-critique. Only a problematic eschatology finalises, stabilises, and prematurely excludes, and this is what Žižek regards as Christianity being irreducibly prone to providing.¹⁰ After all, as the C6th–C7th writer John Climacus in his *Ladder of Divine Ascent* writes, "Our mind is the instrument of knowledge, but it is very imperfect and filled with all sorts of ignorance. This is a fact that cannot be disguised" (Climacus 1982, p. 89). In other words, it remains a theological task to articulate the complex nature of revelatory reception without evasively masking real difficulty. It would be conceptually odd to evacuate the very conditions that contour faithful reasoning as if they can be adequately construed in a politically innocent fashion, as if subjectivity is banally free of materiality. The gift of likeness to God, or piety, as Basil claims, has been learned in and through others in the mode of "teaching" (Basil 2011, p. 27).

Webster and John Paul II fail to acknowledge any need to practice careful attending to divergent perspectives, nor of even provide any substantive gesture towards the chastening interrogations that can emerge from perceiving oneself in the mirror of others. For instance, when Webster speaks of theology done in repentance he particularistically limits the guidance to "the prophets and apostles and the tutelage of the saints, and with prayer for the Spirit's instruction" (Webster 2012, p. 144). The consequent impression the heavy-handed rhetoric of givenness/receipt provides is of a securely self-sufficient discipline that is set over and against other disciplines in such a way as to take shape antagonistically through either an intensive self-confinement or as an opponent in conflictual relation to them. Tonstad laments that "Theologians sometimes pretend that they only stand accountable to God, or perhaps also to magisterial and creedal authority. ... The result is assertorily established invulnerability to critique, combined with a rather ugly tendency to denigrate numerous forms of humanistic reflection" (Tonstad 2020, p. 508).

It is in this vein that Webster admits that "Christians cannot escape a measure of estrangement from their neighbours who do not make the Christian confession; the estrangement is such that those neighbours may sometimes view Christian conceptions of the intellectual life with amusement, disdain or even hostility" (Webster 2016, p. 156). For this sensibility, it remains distinctly challenging to speak honestly, without resorting to vacuous clichés, of theology's accountability to the common good. That common is, instead, designed and imposed by the authority of a tribe among a plethora of competing groups, each parading "pretensions of permanence" (Fowl and Jones 1991, p. 110).

For John Paul II, talk of a relativising plurality in fact constitutes a problem for “the truth”, since “If something is true, then it must be true for all people and for all times” (John Paul II 1996, p. 333). It is this that drives his concern with what he singularly calls postmodernity, reductively proclaiming it to have a nihilistic effect (John Paul II 1996, p. 354).¹¹ Webster does something similar with modernity and what he calls “secular reason” (Webster 2012, p. 140).¹² With a sweeping gesture, a multiplicity of interrogative accounts is subsumed under a single category and dismissed by what is assumed to be faith-directed reason. There is no effort to engage in, or even at least to gesture towards the possibility of, appropriate attention and conversation for the sake of making common cause with a range of philosophical perspectives. Accordingly, the space to hear a range of critical concerns regarding the production of ecclesial knowledge has been foreclosed. Work that can aid in the business of ecclesial/theological self-interrogation becomes lost, work that does not function as suspicion for suspicion’s sake, as some theological apologists might aver, but that offers suspicion in an intellectually therapeutic mode.¹³

To be clear, the problem with the material, then, is such that it cannot be addressed by rather platitudinous complaints that systematic or dogmatic theology is impractical. After all, *doxa* (teaching), or maintaining the discipline of conceptual consistency and following the pathways of the theological, is itself already a substantively irreducible belief-laden practice.¹⁴ Such a concern with doctrine, at its best, can function as a protest against the ways in which doctrine is put when sustaining practices of self-interest, unjust exclusions, and all manner of immutable authority. Nonetheless, at its worst, it becomes “intellectual[ly] slothful” and therefore uncritical of the conditions within which practices take shape (Lash 1976, p. 79). In that form, the criticism arises from the kinds of dislocations of subjectivity from consideration of their conditioning, so that the privileging of practice arises from assumptions shared by an imagined brutally indeterminate free agent.

Nor is the problem one that is adequately addressed by facile lamentations over the difficulty of academic theology. That this even invites comment indicates that something has gone badly wrong not only with practices of theological education but with the formation of rather self-indulgent critics of complexity and difficulty. If theology is concerned with the irreducibly dense reality of things in their creaturely participation within the infinite and inexhaustible mystery of grace, then pleas for a simple discipline reveal both a crucial mistake and a narcissistic perspective (since all meaning must be clear to the theological student). Consequently, Lash exhorts that “if the Christian community is really concerned with truth, rather than with reassurance, then it should demand of its academics that they be fearless in enquiry and quite uncompromisingly rigorous in their standards of exploration and argument” (Lash 1982, p. 151).¹⁵

What is more interesting, though, are the suspicions that certain approaches to theology function to “still the interrogative temper” under the seemingly self-deprecating cover of correspondence to the presence of the Self-revelatory God’s way with and in the world (MacKinnon 2016, p. 194). What consequently emerges from John Paul II, at least in *Fides et Ratio*, and Webster is something approximating an authoritarian rhetoric that veils human complex realities and the constructive roles of agency, displacing that agency with more passifying determinations of the categories of reception, curiosity with studiousness, and so on. Theology takes truth-telling into the universities, just as John Paul II postulates faith directing reason, for which philosophers, the Pope pronounces, are informed they should be eminently grateful.¹⁶ The challenge, then, is to repair theologies informed by what MacKinnon typologically criticises when he announces that “From Caesar the church of Christ learned to speak with the accents of Caiaphas” (MacKinnon 2016, p. 170).

3. On Not Identifying Body Language

Tonstad urges those theologians intent on making grand claims about theology's knowledge production and regulation to spend time vigilantly "attending first and centrally to its own failures and incompletions" (Tonstad 2020, p. 496). What has been suggested in her critique of Webster, which the section above has developed a little further and drawn *Fides et Ratio* into in addition, is that a quite distinctive theological discourse arising from a form of subjectivity of gift-reception—this subjectivity takes shape in agencies of activity-passivity that are too simplistic and undialectically imagined. It is here that "theology as a discipline functions" far too easily and neatly "as a form of self-securitization and self-assertion" (Tonstad 2020, p. 496). A self-securing theologising is a *theological* problem, never mind a political failure to resist a tribal sensibility, built as the latter is on an authoritarian climate nihilistically imbued with "assertions of power and desire shorn of concern for accountability to truth, justice, consequences, or futurity, not merely ethics" (Brown 2023, p. 11). The assertive theological mood, under these conditions, reflects an "attempt to exercise epistemological or practical power in the political or knowledge domain, the effect is a special kind of corruption" (Brown 2023, p. 16). Yet a critique of the approach to a theology grounded in a subjectivity of pure transcendental insertiveness not only requires an interrogation of its theological claims and their implications, but a deeper reflection on its very social bonds and materially determinative commitments. It is with the chastening results of just such an interrogation in view that Tonstad offers "not repristination but *theological therapy*" for its wellbeing (Tonstad 2020, p. 511).

What does this involve? A well-conceived theology appropriate to its contemporary place in the research university needs to be, Tonstad continues, "a non-defensive theology of failure" (Tonstad 2020, p. 497). This claim, however, needs to more precisely articulate the nature of this 'failure' since not all failures are the same nor morally equivalent. Some failures are simply those produced by a lack of appropriate skill or by careless mistakes. Likewise, Tonstad's talk of a theology that is aware not only of its "incompletion" but also its "foolishness", while it implies a reference to 1 Corinthians 1 v.23, needs more precision to circumvent the results of simple performative mediocrity or incompetence (Tonstad 2020, p. 497).

More promising is Tonstad's gesture towards vigilance, which involves listening to multiple perspectives. From this, the reparative move reveals that Webster's (and John Paul II's) work improperly evades its creaturely materiality. In other words, Tonstad refuses to be swayed by theological jargon, in the words of Adorno, that of a "reified prior to living experience" in its complex multiplicity (Adorno 1973, p. 15). For Adorno, "Theology is tied to the determinations of immanence", whether it admits that with appropriate integrity and traces that impact or not (Adorno 1973, p. 12). Accordingly, Tonstad recommends more appropriate forms of contextualisation. By this, she means "the setting and context in which theology is typically pursued today, that its setting affects systematic theology in ways theology often has difficulty accounting for" (Tonstad 2020, p. 494). This claim, too, is quite vague, especially since Tonstad immediately adds "that some influential strategies that do take theology's context into account end up frustrating rather than advancing the very aims they believe theology ought to seek" (Tonstad 2020, p. 494). The implication is that not all contextual theologies are alike, even if they do tend to refer to themselves with the singular moniker 'contextual theology'. Frequent references to 'contextual theology', then, depict an untroubled monolithic enterprise that veils its own plurality.

This section will identify two self-professed contextual theologies that, in crucial ways, fall prey to a similar set of problems as those grounded in the theologies of givenness/docility. They operate from a decontextualised and stable subjectivity.

The first example comes from a paper by Bill Ashcroft. It asserts that “All theology is culturally and socially positioned, so that a universal theology is a myth” (Ashcroft 2014, p. 9). Of course, a critic may well comment on the irony of such a sentence being delivered in such assertively finalising and universalising terms. The irony is certainly not something Ashcroft worries about, since he makes the further finalisable claim that “With the disappearance of the Pauline-inspired community of the early church, the supernatural began to wane. Paradoxically, the active presence of the Holy Spirit did not seem to survive the institution of the church” (Ashcroft 2014, p. 16). The judgment on where the Spirit’s presence is evident and imperceptible is offered with an air of simple authority rather than reasoned through substantive rational argument. He then takes it upon himself the permission to locate this supernatural *Spirit-uality*. The Spirit presents itself in African thought wherein “The spirit world is a mirror of the world of the living” (Ashcroft 2014, p. 16). From here, Ashcroft seeks to educate the pneumatically impoverished Western church. In fact, the rational gains of the Enlightenment, something which as an academic in an Australian university Ashcroft not only benefits from but engages in through trying to write a rationally persuasive text, are even offset by the appeal to Christian charisma: “To enter this transcultural space the Western church has to unlearn the habits of rational modernity to see other worlds in this one” (Ashcroft 2014, p. 16).

Less noticeably problematic is Stephen Bevans’ influential book, *Models of Contextual Theology*. According to this work, contextual theology is “a way of doing theology in which one takes into account the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the church; the culture in which one is theologizing; and social change within that culture” (Bevans 1992, p. 1).¹⁷ The book attempts to reductively summarise what it has presented as a series of disparate theologies: “Theology that is contextual realizes that culture, history, contemporary thought forms, and so forth are to be considered, along with scripture and tradition as valid sources for theological expression. And so today we speak of theology as having *three* sources or *loci theologici*: scripture, tradition, and present human experience—or context” (Bevans 1992, p. 4).¹⁸ What is meant by “source” is not explained, and the impression is that the assertion circumvents the ability to appreciate the way interpretive norms are generated and function in the act of engaging with any source or material for study.¹⁹ At the very least, this indicates the use of terms as mystifying jargon, thereby failing to unpack their complexity. Bevans’ unhelpfully generalising use of “source” language continues when he claims that “While classical theology understood theology as something objective, contextual theology understands theology as something subjective. By *subjective*, however, I do not mean relative or private or anything like that but the fact that the human person or human society, culturally and historically bound as it is, is the source of reality...” (Bevans 1992, p. 4) Care needs to be taken to use the language of subjectivity well. After all, as Francis Fukuyama explains, over recent decades, religion as the context for subject-formation has become subjectivised in a particularly individuated and internalised form. “If therapy became a substitute for religion, religion itself took an increasingly therapeutic turn” (Fukuyama 2018, p. 99). Subjectivity as identifying personhood, Fukuyama explains with reference to the study of Philip Rieff, becomes “a void... now being filled by psychoanalysts using therapeutic techniques ‘with nothing at stake beyond a manipulatable sense of well-being’” (Fukuyama 2018, p. 97). For Fukuyama, this valorisation of individuated interiority is not merely a superficial response to real problems, but even a distraction from real healing of those problems in which an intensive appeal to one’s own “own lived experiences” can “become a cheap substitute for serious thinking” about the causes of injustice (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 111 and 115, respectively).

These critical reflections are not incidental to reflecting on Bevans’ construal of contextual theology since his judgment, like that of Ashcroft, echoes much in “liberal theology

which appeals to some isolatable core of encounter, unmediated awareness of the transcendent, buried beneath the accidental forms of historical givenness, a trans-cultural, pre-linguistic, inter-religious phenomenon" (Williams 1986, p. 197). Any turn to bodies with their 'lived experiences' may seem to be better able to secure an articulation of materially concrete particulars.²⁰ Yet this too would slip into modes of argument "from bodily characteristics to ontological essence" and crucially fail to recognise that experiences and "representations of the body go beyond the merely morphological to reflect entire cosmologies" (Ross 1998, p. 109; Graham 1995, p. 126, respectively).²¹ Bodies, experiences, senses of interiority, and so on are not socially free-floating domains that ground praxis. On the contrary, they, as social products, are interrelated in all manner of complex ways that provide them with many of their vulnerabilities, not least formations through being "inscribed in a market economy of planetary exchanges that commodifies them to a comparable degree and therefore makes them equally disposable" (Braidotti 2013, p. 71). Graham, therefore, argues that "Although we are in a fundamental sense our bodies, bodily identity has already been enscribed and demarcated for us. . . . Modern times see bodies as fixed, and culture as imposed, changeable and alien" (Graham 1995, p. 127).

Bevans' approach suffers from a series of substantive assumptions. Firstly, he announces that "There is no such thing as 'theology' there is only contextual theology; feminist theology, black theology, liberation theology, Filipino theology, Asian-American theology, African theology, and so forth" (Bevans 1992, p. 95). What this rhetoric does is homogenise contexts by reducing any prospect of them being internally diverse. Accordingly, Thompson rhetorically asks, "what makes a Filipino theology Filipino or Australian theology Australian? Are 'Filipino' or 'Australian' sufficiently stable adjectives to identify what would constitute a theology for those contexts?" (Thompson 2007, p. 95)²² This concern needs to be emphasised. In a globalised world, what does it mean to refer to such geographically specific terms as though they are sufficiently culturally hermetically sealed as to be differentiated? Are cultures not unstable, "their boundaries" being leaky, "porous and ambiguous", given that they "can [and do] look beyond themselves" (Eagleton 2003, p. 62)? Bell Hooks explains that what is precisely challenging about diversity is that "it requires that we shift old paradigms, allowing for complexity" (Hooks 2015, p. 71). For a theology that lauds contextuality as a move towards being responsible to the multiplicity of voices, misidentifying the need to pay more granular attention to particularities is troubling. Of course, Bevans' reductive homogenising move here is in good theological company since this rhetorical moment echoes a difficulty that grounds George Lindbeck's influential interpretation of doctrine in *cultural-linguistic* terms. Where his image is useful is in terms of gesturing towards the notion of doctrine as conditioning (Lindbeck 1984, p. 33). Lindbeck's account functions best when taken as a refusal to separate beliefs and the lives those beliefs regulate and are, in turn, informed by. Nonetheless, any overdetermination of the continuity and consistency of a singularly articulated and monolithic (a culture, Christianity) is problematically reductive. Moreover, it rhetorically flattens the way lives are lived out of doctrinal claims in radically disparate ways: from self-interest all the way to self-dispossessing service, from robust belligerence to rigorous refusal to engage in hostile practices, from intensified nationalism to uncompromising cosmopolitanism, and so on.²³

A second question arises from Eagleton's explanation that "Culture is a set of spontaneous habits so deep that we can't even examine them. And this, among other things, conveniently insulates them from criticism" (Eagleton 2003, p. 59). Should cultures be stabilised—rendered immune from leaking and morphing in contact with other cultures—then an account of what *critical engagement* with them might look like becomes difficult to determine. Bevans, for his part, does not even bother to contemplate such a necessary practice. After surveying several quite disparate and conflicting approaches, he

opens his conclusion with the claim that “each of these models is a valid one, and so none can claim hegemony” (Bevans 1992, p. 139) This statement disables the development and exercise of critical judgment, even if that process of discernment is profoundly chastened to enable more careful listening to the complexities and particularities of differing claims and perspectives than theological judgments can sometimes do. Whatever their good intentions for refusing exclusionary practices, simple appeals to ‘inclusion’ are too glib as well as indiscriminately vague to be helpful.²⁴ What, if any, are the limits of inclusion? In the strategic planning of a lab experiment on the structure of a viral chain, should historians *qua* historians be consulted for the progress of the research? Should doctrinal theologians? Should the research team’s neighbours? Should a public consultation team be hired to collect the opinions of the general public? These are, of course, absurdities. Yet what is the overlap between this and a situation in which a senior and prolifically published academic in a theological school complains that a doctoral student has not cited enough majority world scholars when the subject matter was the specific study of a mid-20th-century European theologian? At its best, inclusion is the necessary expression of a moral concern, a political refiguring of practices for an expansive understanding of human dignity.

A third question is this: how does Bevans suitably position himself to view cultures and determine that they are “valid” (Bevans 1992, p. 139)? How is Bevans, a white American Catholic priest, suitably qualified to not only speak for, but also to homogenise, feminist theology, liberation theology, Filipino theology, Asian-American, Australian theology, and so on? Adorno claims that the notion of “universal humanity. . . is ideological”, but this is true even of speaking universally of cultures and of any particular culture without attention to their specificities. (Adorno 1973, p. 53) It is precisely his failure to understand the considerable implications of the differences between models that encourages Bevans into the simplistically undemanding assertion that “indigenous Christians are able to reflectively construct their own local theology” (Bevans 1992, p. 140). The problem is that he, not helped by the concerning imprecise and misleading generalities reduced to clichés, remains colonisable by that which he is criticising. As Thakur argues, “The problem is that any imagination of a new incarnation of postcolonial theory cannot free itself entirely from Eurocentric habits of thinking” (Thakur 2016, p. 3). Appeals to contextualisation, consequently, whether they appeal to individuals’ experiences, histories, bodies, cultures, faith, and so on, can be no less a remarkably convenient tactic to insulate one from critical reflection than assertions about the receipt of the divine gift, the leading of the Spirit, the sanctification of the community, among other things. Yet it becomes clear that Bevans shortcuts the potential for a radical theological interrogation when his own procedure is that of *translation*: to imagine a Gospel that is contextually *expressed*. Drawing short of recognising the implications of what the claim would mean if taken consistently, he insists that “As our cultural and historical context plays a part in the construction of the reality in which we live, so our context influences the understanding of God and the expression of our faith” (Bevans 1992, p. 4).

A fourth question presses Bevans’ account of contextual theology with regard to its political outcome. The difficulty is that appeals to allowing contexts to speak, to self-articulate, can too neatly become disconnected from socially liberative practices of struggle and strategies of resistance. Bell Hooks makes it clear: “Naming the pain or uncovering the pain in a context where it is not linked to strategies for resistance and transformation created for many women the conditions for even greater estrangement, alienation, isolation, and at times grave despair” (Hooks 2015, p. 32). In that instance, such appeals are reducible to a bourgeois quality.²⁵

4. Whose Theological Failure, Which Form of Incompletion?

Tonstad's critique of a mode of theologising that legitimates pressures towards providing a "form of self-securitization and self-assertion" is offered in the context of theology *as a university discipline* (Tonstad 2020, p. 496). The paper urges theology to acknowledge "its marginalized status in the university". However, this can be potentially limiting and somewhat misleading. The implications of the critical account of a self-interrogative theology attentive to its blindnesses, frailties, and incompletions are not merely consequential for theology in a distinct environment but for conceiving of the very nature of the theological as a mode of rational reflection itself (Tonstad 2020, p. 497). Theology, as a disciplined mode of truth-telling, cannot be conducted in a seminary or another context as if it could legitimately evade being held rationally accountable in the way that theology in a good and rigorous university is.²⁶ It is more helpful, then, that Tonstad speaks in virtue-language, explaining that "Theology's incompleteness is one of its virtues rather than a fault" (Tonstad 2020, p. 510). Therefore, it is concluded, "theology's failures are not merely occasional, but both structural and theologically significant" (Tonstad 2020, p. 508). Talk by theologians of the chastening that can be provided by the range of disciplines and intellectual perspectives, of the service the university can provide to the church and its theologising, is unacceptably glib when it is conducted from a place lacking in precisely those critical intersections at their most intellectually intense. Through the very administrative structure of disciplines, even the isolated geographical positioning of their delivery, never mind in the intellectual interests of non-theological academics, universities foster theology's self-securing intellectual isolationism and marginalisation in a way that cannot be the case as easily when a theologian is exposed to daily or weekly intellectual interrogation in college Senior Common Rooms or in the dining halls.²⁷

Tonstad's reparative move occurs through confessing the need for theology to attend "first and centrally to its own failures and incompleteness" (Tonstad 2020, p. 496). Is this a nod towards something like a well-educated ignorance? The point here would, then, still require a distinction between ignorance as a disciplined condition and ignorance as the delusions of falsehood. After all, without unpacking the rhetoric appropriately, talk of failure misses the array of failures, many of which are the failures of incompetence rather than of a groping in the dark as informed by the nescience of eschatological provisionality, or incompleteness. Something more intellectually interesting, though, occurs when the paper criticises theology's masking of the way it is "affected by logics of scarcity" (Tonstad 2020, p. 507). It is anxiety over scarcity, Tonstad suggests, that impresses the desire for possession, finalisation, and foreclosure. What is needed, then, to speak with Judith Butler, is "the movement beyond the logic of owning and disowning" since "that takes the Other out of the narcissistic circuit of the subject" (Butler 2004, p. 149).

While Tonstad's paper does not spend much time articulating this alternative perspective, it is the theme of theological dispossession, as framed through the gesture towards theology as a series of "contributions to the world as gifts", that is ripe for theological development here (Tonstad 2020, p. 496). Again, this is a category that requires qualitative work to differentiate it from a number of uses, since there are accounts of *kenōsis* that empty the divine out without reserve into historical processes. Moreover, and arguably more consequential, there are uses of language that entail "that dispossession constitutes a form of suffering for those displaced and colonized and so could not remain an unambivalent political idea" (Athanasίου and Butler 2013, p. ix). Dispossession in this latter vein belongs to a sacrificial or possessive/waste-disposal economy bound to the logics of scarcity worked out through the power that subjects some to abjection, depriving them of their recognisability as agential subjects or features contributing to it, and providing a subjugating conditioning normativity that imposes a disciplining of the parameters of

intensive vulnerability and alienation. As Athanasiou explains, it “is often summoned to legitimize an abdication of political responsibility for social forms of deprivation and dispossession” (Athanasiou in [Athanasiou and Butler 2013](#), p. 5). However, the category in Athanasiou and Butler’s hands functions as a form of resistance to the possessive subject that underlies practices of the capitalist system and its attendant imperialism. As the former argues, “dispossession stands as a heteronomic condition for autonomy, or, perhaps more accurately, as a limit to the autonomous and impermeable self-sufficiency of the liberal subject through its injurious yet enabling fundamental dependency and relationality” (Athanasiou in [Athanasiou and Butler 2013](#), p. 2).

What is at stake is the very notion of subjectivity. It is in this vein that ‘dispossession’ can become a category of political consequence that contributes to framing proper practices of resistance to modalities of violence expressed from a subjectivity conditioned for self-interest and, therein, the evading of responsible accountability to others. It does this by attending to the demarcation of “the limits of self-sufficiency”, thereby generating a capacity for responsible agency ordered towards an alterity that involves the recognition of “us as relational and interdependent beings” (Butler in [Athanasiou and Butler 2013](#), p. 3). Accounts of autonomy that privilege, in practice, the power of the will that is inequitably distributed are simply predicated on a refusal to acknowledge the irreducibility of interdependency, of subjectivity as alterity. Butler explains: “we are dispossessed of ourselves by virtue of some kind of contact with another” (Butler in [Athanasiou and Butler 2013](#), p. 3). Subjects are not full of themselves, replete with noetic and moral innocence, completion, and proprietary self-control. Instead, they are always dispossessed and reconstituted in some way through history with a plenitudinous multiplicity of exposures. Accordingly, Athanasiou maintains, “dispossession implies our relationality and binding to others—in all its subtleties of anguish and excitement—but also our structural dependence on social norms that we neither choose nor control” (Athanasiou in [Athanasiou and Butler 2013](#), p. 92). The point here is that subjectivity’s alien encounters are not episodic, momentary, or surpassable. Instead, their inexorability “can and does reveal one basis of relationality—we do not simply move ourselves, but are ourselves moved by what is outside us, by others, but also by whatever ‘outside’ resides in us” (Butler in [Athanasiou and Butler 2013](#), p. 3). Rather, the subject’s consciousness of itself, its agential “choices and deliberations”, are contextual in the sense that they have settings that inform them prior to their own operations, and that continue in complex ways throughout the history of the subject’s performance (Butler in [Athanasiou and Butler 2013](#), p. 4). The subject, then, is a discursively complex socially-personally dense poesis rather than “an autological and self-contained individuality” (Athanasiou in [Athanasiou and Butler 2013](#), p. 71). It is inexorably interdependent, situated, precariously vulnerable to the thanatising logic of being disposed of, and this requires a repoliticisation of heteronomic subjectivity beyond the normalised production of the possessive accumulative liberal self that accedes to the privatisation of its self-interest. Consequently, Jean-Luc Nancy claims, “each people has an identity, or rather *is* an identity, for one cannot own an identity” ([Jean-Luc Nancy 2015](#), p. 33).²⁸

It is crucial to note, here, that the form of *power* being troubled does not have its contrast in any simplistic rhetoric of *weakness*. For this reason, loose appeals to the ‘weakness’ of God and persons need particularly judicious handling lest it simply fail to operate as a substantive repair of the category of power when hijacked by the power of the self-secure sovereign subject in the capacity for the enforcement of its particular will. In fact, in the context of thinking through dispossession as a biopolitically significant resignification of subjectivity by appropriate phenomenological attention to the constitutive significance of alterity, Butler explains in a gesture to Rosa Parks, the refusal to *give up*, or be disposed of,

one's seat is an appropriate "act of civil disobedience, . . . an enactment of refusal to stay in, or to move to, one's assigned proper place" (Butler in Athanasiou and Butler 2013, p. 22).

Athanasiou and Butler turn their attention to the nature of education in the context of the neoliberalisation of universities, the conditioning or subjecting of the academies to the privatising rationality of the market that commodifies knowledge as something to be expensively acquired and possessed, and the disciplining corporate governmentality exercised through systemic practices of accountability to "regimes of knowledge commercialization, quantitative assessment, auditability, and benchmarking" (Athanasiou in Athanasiou and Butler 2013, p. 188).²⁹ Under these anti-intellectualising conditions, critical thinking "is cast as a hazardous surplus to the entrepreneurial university" and the humanities, at best precarious, and at worst "redundant" (Athanasiou in Athanasiou and Butler 2013, p. 188). Here, Donald MacKinnon's paper on the role of a kenotically self-aware 'Theology as a Discipline of a Modern University' now appears somewhat archaically quaint in the sense that it is grounded in an account of universities driven, at least broadly, by a vision of the liberality of *Wissenschaft* and John Henry Newman. Of course, this was published in 1972, and in the context of the University of Cambridge, one of the few educational institutions that still remains positioned to mitigate some of the neoliberal pressures on the soul of higher education. It now requires considerable effort and practical struggle to articulate a vision wherein, to use Lash's words, "Universities exist to deepen understanding and, thereby, to serve the cause of wisdom" (Lash 2008, p. 298). The setting for appropriate theological work in the contemporary corporate university may be less its place *within the disciplines* than its *common critical cause* with the disciplines as critical contributions to identifying, and thereafter contesting and resisting, enculturating political pressures conducive to engendering mechanisms of deceit impoverishing honest talk of flourishing.

Yet MacKinnon's warnings to theologies unkenotically formed do retain currency. Being situated within the complex materiality of a witness formed to God's way with the world in a "Jesus [who] belongs to history, [who] is a man of flesh and blood", and whose own way in the powers of self-interest in his time was inescapably bound to suspicion, rejection, and execution (MacKinnon 2011, p. 2). MacKinnon presses the burden of being honest to the complexity of making theological claims, to being accountable in one's efforts to speak truthfully. What that entails, if reflection follows the "theological duty to ask these [critical] questions about Him", is a resistance to any and every effort "to cut Christian faith loose from its historical roots" and ongoing conditions (MacKinnon 2011, p. 2). Practices of evasion of the rigorously interrogative mood are a distinctly "perilous gambit" since efforts to seclude the faith from appropriate critical examination constitute a failure of theological honesty (MacKinnon 2011, p. 2). When MacKinnon reflects on this in the context of the frequently voiced criticisms of the theological as an appropriate disciplining of the intellectual imagination that he recognises the need for theology to be exposed to criticism. Otherwise, "It is as if religious belief held one prisoner in a kind of fundamental dishonesty, as if it were a compulsion to intellectual cheating of which one was powerless to cure oneself" (MacKinnon 2011, p. 5). Accordingly, MacKinnon has little patience for "the devout, who are often inpatient [*sic.*] of the checks exact scholarship imposes upon their spiritual exuberance" (MacKinnon 2011, p. 2). If Christian faith is to imagine itself to be true to the way things are, and to consequently make truthful claims as well as to be seen to do so, it needs the kind of exposure that can, or should, be provided by contexts within which critical thinking can flourish. For MacKinnon at the time, this was the university. Herein, without the isolation of cognitive reinforcement from like-minded faculty or the intellectual sort-cuts externally imposed by ecclesiastical authorities, is "where Christian belief is tested to destruction" through "the most meticulous scrutiny" (MacKinnon 2011, p. 4).³⁰

The theologian, consequently, for the sake of intellectual integrity, needs to cultivate a healthy critical interrogativeness as a purificatory virtue of intellectual accountability, and that to the point of being in a “self-consciously exposed position” (MacKinnon 2011, p. 6). This, at least if it is done with appropriate honesty, “preserves the theologian from the kind of elaborate make-believe encouraged” by, and for, the interests of ecclesiastical authorities (MacKinnon 2011, p. 9).³¹ What this means, among other things, is that the discipline of a well-ordered theology constantly practicing integrity alertness is engaged in self-critical interrogation without compromise. Only then can the theologian, MacKinnon maintains, be confidently compelled to “learn [how to] to call nonsense by its name, and acquire an impatience alike with a facile positivism and a spurious ecclesiastically inspired apologetic” (MacKinnon 2011, p. 4).

5. Inconclusive Theologising

In Williams’ terms, ‘catholicity’ as an ecclesial category provides one substantive form of exposure that necessitates the interrogative mood. “‘Catholic’ teaching is what keeps nothing back, leaves nothing out that could contribute to our healing” (Williams 1992, p. 30). In contrast, however, several prominent theological strategies do indeed leave out much that is required for the kind of interrogative exposure that would contribute to its well-being as having a truth-telling role within discourses of flourishing. They “end up frustrating rather than advancing the very aims they believe theology ought to seek” (Tonstad 2020, p. 494). Tonstad’s study traces this intellectual frustration through Webster’s theologising, although it does so in a way that requires exerting the pressure of suspicion more deeply by tracing the subjectivity that grounds the theology of givenness/docility. My own paper identifies this in John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio*, despite the encyclical’s efforts to articulate a substantive use of philosophical reason for the theological imagination. Both corpora, as they unfold a failure to generate and sustain a substantive account of the theologian’s materiality, succumb to a perennial temptation in human perception: “We surround ourselves with devices for not seeing—increasingly so, ironically, as we acquire better means of information” (Williams 2003, p. 89).

Theological practices that express something of the “history of authoritarian mystification” do not end there, however (Williams 1992, p. 33). Consequently, a second development that is required of Tonstad’s thesis is her appeal to contextuality. There are forms of contextual theologising that are grounded in the kinds of subjectivity that result in their production of improper theological judgments that express insufficient attention to their own discursivity, that impose their own voices on a multiplicity of concrete particulars, and that practice their own forms of evasion of the critical within a “euphoric fluency” (Williams 1986, p. 147).³² This too would, to adapt Žižek’s worry about finalising and absolutising a body of material, fail to recognise that they function to “obfuscate God’s impotence” and replace it with human potency (Žižek 2024, p. 36).

Any chastening of the theological sensibility needs to be deeply informed by “asking how we can least stupidly talk of God” (Williams 1992, p. 33). This too, though, requires a third supplement to Tonstad’s thesis on the nature of theology’s situatedness as one among the disciplines: the purgative dispossession to cultivate a healthily interrogative mood that is better informed, meticulously attentive, rigorous, patient, perennially penitentially fragile, and conversationally discriminating so that it “can delve through the dense layers of self-deception which prevent us from seeing the situation as it really is” (Eagleton 2003, p. 132). Such a thing may well be, in the words of Adorno, an “almost insoluble task” (Adorno 1978, p. 57). Theology, however, continues to exercise ways of constructing a stupefying blindness to its own intellectual blindnesses in such a way as to render the divine impotent by an obfuscatingly controlling theological totalisation.

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Notes

- ¹ Slavoj Žižek, in contrast, claims that “The large majority of humans will never awaken to the crisis, they will again and again invent fictions (even fictions of a catastrophe) that will enable them to go on as usual” (Žižek 2024, p. 263). The urgency is for the moral imagination to take seriously the reality and nature of its conditioning.
- ² According to Michael J. Buckley, “There is no progress in understanding when philosophic history or theology become tactics” (Buckley 1987, p. 17).
- ³ At its best, this has the potential to question the adoption of a *theological positivism* and the consequent seclusion of the theological within its own carved out, intellectually sovereign, terrain. Instead, theology would a way of reading, a wisening of perception, a hermeneutic.
- ⁴ This is only partly implied by Webster’s warning against conceiving of revelation in the way it shifted into, and that is as “an arcane process of causality whereby persons acquire knowledge through opaque, non-natural operations” (Webster 2003, p. 12). That critique is offered by way of addressing the implications of the dogmatic misidentification of *divine* rather than human action.
- ⁵ *The New Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* does not even include a chapter on the nature, role, and origins of doctrine as if this is an uncontested field within theology and something intellectually unassailable. (Allen 2023).
- ⁶ Kathryn Tanner declares that “Christians have deployed beliefs about God and the world to shore up the social and political status quo and thereby to dampen any thought of the possibility or the need for social or political change... Christians have used beliefs about God and the world to prevent the inequitable character of social and political relations from being seen as such... Finally, Christians have employed beliefs about God and the world to hamper development of the attitudes necessary for outrage against injustice and sustained efforts to remedy it” (Tanner 1992, pp. 1–2). The issue may be deeper than this sense of use and abuse of Christian beliefs. What is it about those beliefs and the practices that explicated them, that have been conducive to doctrines being used in a way Tanner deems inappropriate? A more rigorous reflection would consequently demand not that false religion be neatly contrasted with true religion, but that the problem be more adequately traced back into the possibilities inherent in the traditions themselves.
- ⁷ Here Žižek’s disgust over the rhetoric of neoliberalism fits well in a critique of ecclesial rhetoric: “what makes the liberal Western powers so unbearable is that they not only practise exploitation and violent domination, but that, to add insult to injury, they present this brutal reality in the guise of its opposite, of freedom, equality and democracy” (Žižek 2017, p. 149). “Self-righteous humanity, in the midst of a general inhumanity, only intensifies the inhuman state of affairs” (Adorno 1973, p. 54).
- ⁸ An example of this is Ben Myers’ paper that makes a problematic case for theology’s inclusion in the university due to it being serving and supporting “Christianity in society” and its being teleologically “oriented towards Christian leadership in society” (Myers 2021, p. 494 and 484, respectively). For a critique of the socio-political and theological naïveté of what amounts to an appeal for public support for Christian educational self-referentiality, see (McDowell 2023).
- ⁹ According to Thompson, “This is a slightly problematic formulation since it implies that language is distinct from reality, which is exactly the opposite of Helmer’s constructive position (as will be seen). Her legitimate concern in this particular remark might be better stated as a concern that doctrinal language has been presented as the sole and truncated point of access to God’s reality” (Thompson 2020, p. 175). Thompson’s point is too restrained. Helmer’s approach assumes the space for a pre-linguistic subject. While she does attempt to refuse a mono-directionality, it still emerges in the direction her approach takes since what she is concerned to leave room for is ungrounded novelty: “The relation between experience and language is more intimate than a standard one-directionality that expresses a prior experience or an experience that is thoroughly structured by language so as not to admit novelty. Experience, if it is interpreted at all, is ‘more than’ its interpretation. Language is asymptotic in its attempt to capture experience” (Helmer 2014, p. 135).
- ¹⁰ “Christianity replaces the logic of Exodus, of an open-ended voyage without any guarantee as to its final outcome, with the messianic logic of the final reconciliation—the idea of the ‘perspective of Last Judgement’ is foreign to Judaism” (Žižek 2001, p. 137). See Richard Kearney’s criticism of the “facile idea that we were ignorant and have now seen the light, that all faith was delusion but we have finally reached the ‘end’ of religion and are free at last” (Kearney 2016, p. 9).

- 11 James K.A. Smith suggests that because the “condition of being relative—being dependent, being contingent—is also synonymous with the conditions of creaturehood,” relativism is “just a name for the human condition, the *ethos* of creaturehood” (Smith 2014, p. 180, cited in Thompson 2020, p. 127). That, however, is a rather odd and misleading interpretation of ‘relativism’ even if it does awkwardly attempt to retrieve the substantively laden term as a way to describe circumscription and the perspectivalism it necessitates.
- 12 Webster too easily dismisses Kant’s suspicion over the political operations of heteronomy and of the responsibility for cultivating thinking when he asserts that “Kant opposed enlightenment and tutelage, considering the latter to be servility and lack of resolution in the life of reason. To look for intellectual direction from another is to say ‘I need not trouble myself, I need not think’. But for regenerate intellectual life, this is not so; in the school of divine instruction, intelligence *flourishes*” (Webster 2016, p. 153). What Webster does not do, and this is telling without being compelling, is situate Kant’s critique in the emerging intensification of national sovereignty and its insulation against critique. Geoff Thompson echoes this problematic sensibility when he claims that “the religious person’s deference to an external authority was an affront to the understandings of human dignity and autonomy prized by the Enlightenment” (Thompson 2020, p. 83). Leaving aside the simple reduction of some broad and overlapping early modern sensibilities into the singularity of “the Enlightenment”, what this claim misses is that it was not heteronomy as such that posed the moral and political problem for Kant as much as the political passification of the public that heteronomous agencies engaged in providing, and which the emergence of critical attention or thinking was to expose and contribute to the reparation of.
- 13 As Michel Foucault argues, the critical attitude is “not accepting as true what an authority tells you to be true, or at least it is not accepting it as true because an authority tells you it is true. Rather, it is to accept it only if one thinks oneself that the reasons for accepting it are good” (Foucault 1996, p. 385). Foucault lends this liberative significance when he encourages, as an act of critical resistance, “the art of voluntary inservitude, of reflective indocility” (Foucault 1996, p. 386).
- 14 This difficulty is not helped by the kinds of undialectically formulated claims such as the following from James K.A. Smith: “Discipleship is more a matter of hungering and thirsting than of knowing and believing” (Smith 2016, p. 2). Beliefs are not only practices, but they practically matter. As Thomas F. Torrance explains, “the mind of a human being constitutes what the Greeks called the *hegemonikon* or the governing principle, for it is the mind that governs or directs our behavior as human beings” (Torrance 2000, p. 197). Therefore, Bruce L. McCormack argues, “the ‘practical’ is actually embedded in the ‘theoretical’ and may only be distinguished from it where the ‘theoretical’ has been wrongly construed” (McCormack 2000, p. 147).
- 15 Something has gone wrong, then, with Gerald O’Collins’ appeal to theological simplicity when he claims that “Few of us need reminding of that academic theology which can get lost in abstract concepts and hair-splitting analysis—far from the simple directness of the gospel message” (O’Collins 1980, p. 13). Moreover, the title of Charry’s paper ‘The Academic Captivity of the Church’ is concerning given the failure of churches to be rigorous about their self-reflexivity (Charry 2000). After all, the last thing one hears in public is a complaint that the churches are too informed, and that they therefore need to dumb down their engagements. It is certainly not a complaint that gets made in public universities outside of theological departments.
- 16 See (John Paul II 1996, p. 341): “In making this discernment [about philosophical opinions that are the concern of the church], we bishops have the duty to be ‘witnesses to the truth,’ a service every philosopher should appreciate.”
- 17 A similar claim can be found in a book by Victor Ezigbo (Ezigbo 2021, p. 1)
- 18 Ezigbo claims something similar: “If theologians are conditioned by their contexts, no theology is context-free. Yet. . . [s]ome disregard the context of a Christian community in favor of other sources such as Scripture, church tradition, and reason” (Ezigbo 2021, p. 5).
- 19 At least Ezigbo recognises the need to be *critically* engaged (Ezigbo 2021, p. 11)
- 20 See (Rogers 1999, p. 238): “Bodies. . . are one of the ways in which Christians ought to take particulars seriously.”
- 21 Cf. (Copeland 2010, p. 13): “the cognitive mapping, interpretations, and practices of” subjectivity and any feature that makes for that subject (experience, consciousness, embodiment, joy or trauma) are informed by their emergence “from historical and social construction and replication.” Even if one were to speak with Rogers that “Technically, Christians should say that the body of Christ is the primary analogue of the word ‘body’ in their discourse, the use from which others derive their sense”, that body is far from being an empty signifier but is attributed all manner of meaning even before that regarded person offers any effort to reorient one’s impression (Rogers 1999, p. 240).
- 22 In a recent article, Peter Howard asks not merely about the history and diverse forms of theology done in an Australian environment but moves in a distinctly perilous fashion towards proclaiming that “The ongoing challenge has been, and remains, to develop an Australian theology that is both emplaced and for, not simply of or in a secular age” (Howard 2024). The shift from having a mere few sentences earlier speaking about the “multifaceted” nature theology conducted in Australia to a rhetorical homogenisation (Australian theology). The crucial question is what sense such nationalised talk can have in a world marked by the intersections of scholarly learning through globalised communications. Moreover, had the article been more careful it would have recorded the ongoing intellectual impact of non-Australian scholars in Australian institutions which adds to the globality of information flows. [Publication projects by John McDowell, a British theologian, and Scott Kirkland, a New Zealand theologian, are listed under Australian contributions—a simple factual error that misses the very point of global engagements and learnings in the globalised contexts of the subjectivity of theologians in Australia].

- 23 Likewise, while the depiction of doctrine in terms of grammatical rules serves to emphasise doctrine as a regulative ideal it nevertheless fails to attend to the rich ways in which lives force rethinking of doctrinal development and the normativeness of doctrines. Despite his qualifications early in the book, Mike Higon takes just such a monodirectional approach as Lindbeck: “Believing is always embodied in the knotted patterns of life that people weave together in particular locales” (Higon 2020, p. 125). What, if any, is the logic of lives lived that could contest the very doctrines that supposedly provide the setting and conditions for living out those claims?
- 24 Mrinalini Sebastian, reflecting on the work of Homi Bhabha, explains that “those who occupy the margins of a society, those who are in the periphery of the Empire, are not necessarily natural allies of one another. A critique of simple, nonconflictual identity politics is central to Bhabha’s articulations about representational politics” (Sebastian 2012, p. 162). Sentimental rhetoric is not a substitute for logical looseness and sloppy talk. Even notions of diversity need to be carefully handled since it can become a self-legitimizing value that can circumvent political struggle. “There are times when what is needed is not diversity but solidarity. It was not diversity that brought the apartheid system in South Africa to its knees, or plurality that toppled the neo-Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe. Not all solidarity, to be sure, is to be affirmed. But postmodernism’s lack of enthusiasm for the idea, along with its callow assumption that all forms of unity are ‘essentialist’, is a sure mark of its post-revolutionary character. Ethnically speaking, diversity is a positive value, but this should not lead us to overlook its role in consumerist ideology” (Eagleton 2016, p. 31). After all, “As Marx points out, no mode of production in human history has been as hybrid, diverse, inclusive and heterogeneous as capitalism, eroding boundaries, collapsing polarities, merging fixed categories and pitching a diversity of life-forms promiscuously together. Nothing is more generously inclusive than the commodity, which in its disdain for distinctions of rank, class, race and gender will nestle up to anyone at all, provided they have the wherewithal to buy it. Capitalism is as much an enemy of hierarchy as cultural studies” (Eagleton 2016, pp. 32–33. Cf. Braidotti 2013, pp. 15, 58).
- 25 Many ask for others to inclusively listen to their voices in such a way as to permit the integrity of that voice to be maintained. Yet there can often be the kinds of dismissive and ill-informed assertions about others that exhibit a residual Manichaean othering. Geoff Thompson’s appeal to K.H. Ting is an example of this practice. King apparently provides “aids in illuminating” God’s creative and redemptive work (cited in Thompson 2020, p. 93). Yet one of those is how theology allows Ting “to critique pessimistic Augustinian/Calvinist anthropology”. This reductively homogenises the Augustinian tradition and dismissively flattens the complexity of these theologies of grace. This textual imprecision serves to generate a straw figure that gets perpetuated from one critic to another with troubling sense of difficulty. The result is an uncritical “aura”, to use Adorno’s category (Adorno 1973, p. 6). The formulaic repetition of this jargon “spares people the trouble of thinking about the metaphysics which it has dragged with it, or about the content of what has been stated” (Adorno 1973, p. 11). Adorno regards this form of social mimicry as bound to a bourgeois temperament, a “collective narcissism” (Adorno 1973, p. 15). As Wendy Brown complains, “it is far easier to mobilize people around easy scapegoats for their difficulties than in response to the invisible forces that order this world, powers humanly made but not in human control. . . Scapegoating works on the surface” (Brown 2020, p. 542).
- 26 This does raise some practical challenges given that the seminary or university of theology model generates academic theological work at something of a quite substantively sizeable intellectual distance to the intellectual work being conducted elsewhere in the academy. There is a challenge too for theology within the public university itself since, after all, even here “theology is in the main pursued by believers” (Tonstad 2020, p. 498).
- 27 It is in this context of divesting interest as far as possible that gives meaning to a certain way of speaking of scholarly objectivity. On this matter, (see Brown 2023, p. 79); Eagleton 2003, p. 132. Nicholas Lash: “if we appeal too exclusively to internal, material criteria of authority, then we shall be in danger of substituting our standards and our experience for the authority of God; and thus of reducing Christianity to no more than another variant of liberal humanism” (Lash 1976, p. 12).
- 28 Why? Because, Nancy explains, “behind this people, its language, its customs [*coutumes*] or stitching [*couture*], there are always other peoples and other languages, other ways, other inventions” (Jean-Luc Nancy 2015, p. 33). Cf. Butler: “this sensibility is neither mine nor yours. It is not a possession, but a way of being comported toward another, already in the hands of the other, and so a mode of dispossession. To refer to ‘sensibility’ in this sense is to refer to a constitutive relation to a sensuous outside, one without which none of us can survive” (Butler in Athanasiou and Butler 2013, p. 95).
- 29 For more on this, see (McDowell 2023).
- 30 “[T]he integrity of the Catholic university is threatened by the tendency of ecclesiastical authorities to confuse responsibility with control” (Lash 2008, p. 301).
- 31 Lash insists, the notion of authority, conceived as it has tended to be, within modern discourse of the effulgence of the sovereign subject. “[I]f we appeal to too exclusively to external, formal criteria of authority, then we shall be implicitly appealing to the authority of a God who is simply alien to human experience, who simply contradicts it and stands over against it” (Lash 1976, p. 12).
- 32 Due to the residual essentialist and anthropological binarisms, talk of embodiment still struggles to understand the relation of inward and outward. Geoff Thompson cites Madathilparampil Mammen Thomas to the effect that “our mission is to make clear that salvation is the spiritual inwardness of true humanization, and that humanization is inherent in the message of salvation

in Christ” (Thompson 2020, p. 98). The appeal to Thomas here is to utilise the notion of humanisation as a way of speaking of the practical conditions and consequences of doctrinal work. Yet to define humanisation in terms of ‘spiritual inwardness’ is to miss its import in political struggles for recognition, dignity, equity, and so on. Inwardness still functions as a binaristic signifier. Should Thomas mean by this something more like personhood (identificatory consciousness, desire, etc.) then matters are not made any better. What is missed is the overlapping or social interrelatedness that the *salus* redemptively addresses. Thompson continues with Thomas what a citation that only appears more adequate: “Salvation itself could be defined as humanization in a total and eschatological sense. And all our struggles on earth for the fragmentary realization of man’s [sic] humanity point to this eschatological humanization as their judgement and fulfilment” (Thompson 2020, p. 99, citing Thomas). To begin with, this does not make clear how the meaning of the previous citation is to be refigured and therefore can appear to be simply supplemental, the addition on a list that enables the prioritisation of the “spiritual inwardness” over the “total and eschatological sense” since appears first on the list. Moreover, the contrast between earth/heaven and fragmentary/complete can function, without significantly careful handling, not as ways of grounding ongoing critical struggle but rather de-agentialising dissatisfaction with the seriousness of contemporary struggles.

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