

Gerrit Brand

IS *FIDES QUAERENS* *INTELLECTUM* A SCHOLARLY ENTERPRISE?

SOME THOUGHTS ON CONFESSIONAL THEOLOGY AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

In the context of reflection in South Africa about the place of confessional theology at public universities, and in critical conversation with positions defended by thinkers like Hans Albert, Gerhard Ebeling, Ben Vedder, Vincent Brümmer and Gijsbert van den Brink, a case can be made for a legitimate place at public universities for a theology that goes beyond merely describing and analysing faith to evaluate religious points of view and suggest new ways of expressing faith drawing from a specific faith tradition, thereby serving not only the academy and broader society in general, but also specifically a faith community. Such a case can even be made within the narrow confines of a modernist understanding of what constitutes true academic scholarship, given the centrality of the notion of intersubjectivity within such an understanding.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his address at a welcoming ceremony shortly before his inauguration as vice chancellor of the University of the Free State, Jonathan Jansen said that he would recognise transformation as having occurred at the university if, among other things, “the faculty of theology was known as the faculty of religious studies and included a department of Islamic studies” (*Die Burger*

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2009 – translation mine). This is an enigmatic comment, not only because the study of Islam, rather than, say, African traditional religion, is highlighted as the hoped for outcome of successful transformation, but also because the desired terminological shift from “theology” to “religious studies” can be interpreted in at least two ways.

One possibility is that it corresponds to Jansen’s wish that the faculty in question should become a home for theological reflection not only on the Christian faith, but also on other religious traditions – a multi-religious faculty of theology. After all, the word “theology” is associated primarily, though not exclusively, with the Christian tradition, even though, in principle, there is no reason why a theological approach could not be applied to any view of life (see Brand 2002: 32). Perhaps the fact that the word “theology” seems to suggest the Greek *Theos* (God) also renders it inappropriate as a designation for the study of non-theistic traditions like Buddhism. On the other hand, it could be pointed out that the alternative concept “religious studies” also raises questions, *inter alia* because an adequate definition of religion, or a clear distinction between the religious and the non-religious, is a shifting target, and because ideologically the concept is inextricably linked with the rise of the nation state and the associated myth of a neutral public space (see Brand 2010).

Nevertheless, if Jansen’s yearning were indeed for a multi-religious faculty of theology, it would not necessarily encounter much resistance from Christian theologians. He would be able to appeal, *inter alia*, to a Reformed theologian like Gijsbert van den Brink (2004: 343-344) who on occasion has argued for the desirability of just such an arrangement. On the possibility of Islamic theological training at Dutch faculties of theology, Van den Brink writes,

Christian theologians would have no reason, in my view, to fear such a scenario, since it would enable them to give shape to the public character of their task (p. 344).

(Since the publication of Van den Brink’s book, Islamic theology has been incorporated into the theological faculty of the Amsterdam Free University where he is based.) Understood in this way, Jansen’s comment is not particularly controversial.

However, a different interpretation of Jansen’s preference for the term “religious studies” is also possible. According to that interpretation, the proposed terminology would not merely echo the idea that Islam or other views of life and traditions could be studied at faculties of theology, but would add a distinctive point to it, namely that theology in the traditional sense does not belong at a public university. “Theology in the traditional sense” refers not only to a theology that aims to present religious convictions (in whatever

tradition) as fully and accurately as possible, but also to critical evaluation by judging such convictions with reference to certain normative criteria, and constructing innovative conceptual models in the light of that.

Precisely this critical and constructive aim of theology – daring to take a position on the truth or validity of religious beliefs – distinguishes it from, say, comparative religion, history of religions and religious studies. Ferdinand Deist (1984), for example, defines systematic theology as the “critical description of the basic doctrines of the Christian religion and the philosophical inquiry into their foundations and validity”. This definition can also be applied to theology in general, i.e. to the different theological disciplines considered as a unity (on the unity of theology, see Smit 2008:422). Theology in the traditional sense, as especially Protestants often describe it, is “confessional” since it seeks not only to investigate the confession or witness of communities of faith, but also to help shape them. As Anselm classically defined it, it is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding – and not merely seeking to understand faith.

The question whether Jansen really wants to suggest that the time for confessional theology at public universities has passed, or should pass, is of less importance for the purposes of this article than the fact that some could interpret him in this way, for this helps to remind us that the legitimacy of the claim of theology to academic status, and therefore its place at public universities, has often been questioned during the modern era. Jansen’s enigmatic comment offers an opportunity for revisiting a challenge that, in the past 15 years, has confronted theology in South Africa more than ever before, given the outspokenly “secular” nature of the post-apartheid state and the associated goal of inclusive public institutions.

2. CHALLENGING THE ACADEMIC STATUS OF THEOLOGY

While this question has only recently become urgent in South Africa, it is far from new. In the German context, for example, Hans Albert argued already in the 1960s that theology did not deserve its place at public universities because it could not meet the standards for true academic status set by critical rationalism (see Albert 1969 and 1973 – translation mine). His particular concern is that theology as he understands it cannot tolerate unrestricted criticism, since it is bound to traditional authorities like the Bible and church doctrine. He is also critical of what he calls “the theory of the double truth” – the view that the truth with which theology is concerned cannot be submitted to the same kind of testing applicable in the empirical sciences. Albert’s distaste for theology is so strong that, when he wants to criticise the hermeneutics of

his day, he does so by calling it “the continuation of theology by other means”. However, whereas he offers an alternative (and in his view more promising) approach in the case of hermeneutics – hermeneutics as the “technique of understanding” – he has no such hopes for theology. For Albert, the only valid way to study religion involves testing religious claims as scientific hypotheses and inevitably finding them wanting.

This kind of portrayal of theology as the epitome of unscientific irrationality has recently found popular expression, for example in the works of authors like Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel Dennet (2009) and, in South Africa, George Claassen (2007). It is based on a certain understanding of rationality (see Brand 2011) and science that is highly questionable, especially given the “newer” philosophy of science as opposed to the “older” type, which the aforementioned authors subscribe to (see Van den Brink 2004:190-281). Here, however, I do not want to comment on this “older” concept of science, but rather argue that, even within the demands of this outdated, anti-religious scientific ideal, confessional theology or *fides quaerens intellectum* can be defended as an academic discipline. My strategy is analogous to that of Andrew Chignell when, in his contribution to a recent publication on “analytic theology”, he tackles the Kantian challenge to theology not as, say, Alvin Plantinga does, by critiquing Kant’s arguments (or lack thereof) (2000:3-66), but by trying to show that, contrary to what many contemporary theologians assume, “we can engage in substantive analytic theology, even by Kantian lights” (Chignell 2009:135, quoted in Graham 2009; see also Ward 2009:76-88). The thesis I want to defend is that, even in the dim light of an outdated modernist scientific ideal, confessional theology is defensible as an academic and hence university subject.

3. UNPACKING THE CHALLENGE

Why would theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* not belong at a public university according to the “older” understanding of what academic scholarship entails?

One possible reason follows from the historical and conceptual link between this scientific ideal and the idea of a neutral public space where, as Stanley Fish (2010) puts it, only “secular reasons” may be offered in defence of a position. The university is then seen as one of many such public domains. The assumed binary opposition in this case is that between “secular” and “religious” reasons. The latter, i.e. “religious arguments”, do not belong in the public domain, and therefore not at a public university, for such domains must be secular, with “secular” being understood as “non-religious”. Both political and epistemological arguments are advanced in defence of this model: A neutral public space is necessary because religious difference would otherwise

lead to conflict and violence, and the latter is a result of the fact that people can never come to agreement on religion because religion does not rest on generally accepted premises.

As I have already indicated, I am not convinced that the concept of “religion” can be delimited clearly in a way that would distinguish it from the non-religious or “secular”. However, here I will assume the distinction, however it might be conceived, and simply take “religion” to mean “Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, et cetera”. Let us assume, then, that arguments based on these and other religions should not be advanced in the public domain, but should be confined to the private domain. Would it then follow that confessional theology – a theology aimed not only at describing, but also at critically evaluating and helping to shape the contents of religious faith – does not belong at a public university?

Some theologians think so and, therefore, try to define and reform their discipline in such a way that it no longer functions like theology in the traditional sense, namely theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*. The critical and above all the constructive – what one might call the prescriptive – dimension of classical theology is then abandoned, so that only the descriptive element remains. After all, to prove the accuracy of a description, one does not require “religious” arguments. Literary studies, historical inquiry, sociological surveys and, in principle, other such more or less empirical research methods can be applied and judged by anyone, whether “religious” or “secular”; hence the flight to descriptivism in contemporary theology – a trend that has been identified and critiqued by several observers (see e.g. Jeffner 1987:37-38; Ritschl 1986:79; Brümmer 1992:24 *et seq.*; Brand 2002:32-33).

Theologians then try to play it safe, for instance by studying the ideas of other theologians from the past or even of the present, but never taking the next step of entering, as participants, the discussion in which those other theologians participated. Alternatively, they analyse the religious language of non-academic believers as one would study a foreign language, but without judging its correctness. The question is no longer, as in the past, how the Trinity should be understood or whether justification is through faith alone, but rather how, say, Barth’s understanding of the Trinity compares to that of Schleiermacher or what kind of life orientation is expressed by the forensic doctrine of justification.

A recent example of such a descriptive approach – albeit with a strong hermeneutic focus – is the position of Ben Vedder, according to whom academics who study religion should “ponder the phenomenon of religion and attempt to understand it and then interpret it to their public” (Vedder 2006 – translations mine). With such an “interpretative approach”, says Vedder, “we attempt to understand what people are doing when they behave religiously”.

“The hermeneutic of religion is first of all an interpretation of what is said in religion” (p. 6), and this interpretation must be undertaken “on the basis of a general, i.e. a rational, intelligibility” (p. 8). According to Vedder, those who undertake the interpretation in this manner, adopt “neutrality with regard to agreeing or not agreeing with the faith contents thus presented”, and therefore “never adopt an ... affirmative position” or “express subjective agreement”. “Therefore, the ... interpretation remains formal and neutral with reference to what it renders intelligible with regard to religion” (p. 8-9). In accordance with this analysis, Vedder repeatedly uses terms like “neutral”, “external” and “distanced involvement”.

To be sure, Vedder writes as a philosopher of religion, but he does so in a Dutch context where philosophy of religion is traditionally taught at faculties of theology, and thus as a theological subject. Moreover, it is clear from his formulations that he regards his descriptive-hermeneutic approach and the associated banishment of “subjective agreement” as applicable beyond philosophy of religion, since in his opinion it is implied by the essential nature of the university and is therefore binding for all disciplines, and certainly for theology. He asks, “Can academic formation thus teach us what kind of attitude we should have towards religion?” Then he answers,

The university is not the place for religious formation, but it can be a place for research and reflection on that which presents itself as religious (Vedder 2006:5).

Gerhard Ebeling, in his reply to Albert (Ebeling 1973), also points to hermeneutics as the appropriate method for theology. It should be kept in mind, however, that it does not necessarily follow from a hermeneutic approach as such that no normative judgments may be made about the contents of interpreted beliefs (see Thiselton 2007: 3-176). In his account of a hermeneutical approach, Vedder goes so far as claiming that religious language and behaviour are misunderstood when interpreted as making truth claims, for their real function is to express an approach to, or attitude towards, life. Thus, the doctrine of justification by faith is not intended to state truths about God’s way of acting towards believers, but rather to express an expectant attitude towards the possibility of a happiness beyond our control (Vedder 2006:10-12).

However, Vincent Brümmer (2008:167-182), who also views theology as a hermeneutic enterprise, points out that, in Wittgensteinian terms, faith as a form of life, and the language game of prayer that expresses it, cannot be interpreted accurately without understanding the tacit presuppositions that constitute it and that cannot be denied within the language game in question. Thus, for example, thanking God presupposes that God exists, is personal

and acts in the world. (For a Wittgenstein interpretation closer to Vedder's position, see Phillips 1994.)

Yet, even if this were accepted by Vedder, I suspect that he would still maintain that academic interpreters of religious language and behaviour should not indicate agreement or disagreement with what is expressed in religion, but should simply clarify it. Is this a valid stricture? From Vedder's account, it is clear that he sees the rationality and objectivity of academic statements as consisting in "general ... intelligibility" and the fact that a "broader community" is addressed – i.e. in inter-subjectivity.

4. RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE

However, Brümmer, in his account of the characteristic criteria by which theological constructs are to be judged (criteria like consistency, coherence, intelligibility, plausibility, relevance and adequacy), argues that, though always to some extent person relative, these criteria can be inter-subjectively applied in the sense that arguments in terms of them in principle can be followed, refuted and advanced by anyone (Brümmer 2001; see also Brand 2002:35-57, 195-219).

One does not need to be a Christian believer to judge whether the doctrine of the Trinity can be expressed coherently, whether divine action in the world is rendered implausible by the discovery of law-like regularities in nature or whether belief in a loving God can be relevant to social ethics, to name some arbitrary examples. When inconsistencies, clashes with the findings of the natural sciences or irrelevances are identified and pointed out as part of the analysis of religious beliefs, such judgments are still "objective" in the sense of being inter-subjective, as is the case with critical judgments in mathematics or, say, philosophy of language. Is disagreement with the content not expressed legitimately in such cases? Moreover, just as political philosophers do not only critically evaluate political ideologies and policies, but also suggest and argumentatively defend alternatives to them, theologians could also point to ways in which logical or conceptual difficulties may be resolved creatively. Whether the one making such judgments and suggestions is a believer or not is immaterial, for the arguments on which the judgments and suggestions are based are inter-subjectively intelligible.

To this, it might be objected that pointing to conceptual problems in a religious language game and suggesting, as an academic, that they may be resolved by making certain conceptual adjustments is something quite different from explicitly doing so as one participating in the specific tradition in question. For example, to claim from an observer's point of view that social doctrines of the Trinity are inconsistent with monotheism and that this does

not apply to the Augustinian version of the doctrine is not quite the same as arguing that God is in fact triune in the Augustinian sense. The latter can be called “church dogmatics” – it is confessional; the former is simply objective scholarship. However, as far as this is the case, it must be admitted that the difference between the two is vanishingly small. Again, it is widely accepted, even among modernists, that political philosophers or philosophers of science may propose and defend alternative political and scientific practices without thereby doing violence to the academic status of their work.

Doing theology in this way can serve faith communities (whether or not that is the intention) by providing them with conceptual options that they can accept or reject. At the same time, it can serve the academy by providing knowledge about and insight into the language and practise of faith communities, and it can benefit the wider society by making this knowledge and these insights available to whoever may be interested or can make use of it. David Tracey’s “three publics” (Tracey 1981:3-46) can thus be addressed simultaneously by doing just one kind of theology – a theology that can rightly be characterised as confessional, as *fides quaerens intellectum*, insofar as it is practised and received by those who share in the confessional traditions being studied. Even from the point of view of a modernist understanding of science and rationality, then, confessional theology can be argued to deserve its place at public universities. In all likelihood, this finding will be confirmed even more strongly if considered from the perspective of the “newer” philosophies of science and a more critical analysis of concepts like “religion” and the “secular”.

In closing, I would like to add a proviso. My conclusion that confessional theology can be defended as an academic discipline even from the perspective of a modernist epistemology and philosophy of science does not imply that any and every type of confessional theology can therefore be practised legitimately at public universities – just as an argument for the legitimacy of, say, philosophy as an academic discipline does not imply that everything going under the name of philosophy should be accepted as a university subject. More specifically, theological approaches in which “confessional” is taken to mean that certain presuppositions (for instance the infallibility of Holy Scripture or the verity of a specific denomination’s confessions) may never be questioned within theological enquiry (see e.g. Van Till 1969; Bahnsen 2009) cannot be defended on the basis of the position I have developed here, and will be subject to the criticisms of Albert and others. The reason for this is that, within such fundamentalist¹ versions of confessional theology,

1 I use the word “fundamentalist” purely descriptively to refer to a version of foundationalism (the demand that all knowledge claims be based on a solid foundation of undeniable facts) – namely that version which regards certain religious beliefs as the incorrigible foundation from which the search for truth must start.

inter-subjective arguments are allowed only within strict limits so that certain convictions cannot be examined critically. Whether the situation with regard to such theological approaches must be judged differently from the perspective of the newer epistemologies and philosophies of science (which I doubt), is a question that lies beyond the scope of this article.

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