

## Twelve theses on the place of Christian theology in multi-disciplinary conversations<sup>1</sup>

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I dare to offer the following reflections on the place of Christian theology in multi-disciplinary conversations in order to invite further reflection.

1. Christian theology, in conversation with numerous other disciplines (the various sciences, history, philosophy and the arts), each with their distinct focus, participate in a *common* task of sense making (Brian O’Connell) – helping the societies in which we are situated to understand the world in which we find ourselves, analysing what has gone wrong, and helping societies to respond to contemporary challenges.
2. From the perspective of other disciplines, Christian theology may well be understood as a particular school of thought (a “philosophy”), a way of looking at the world in which we find ourselves, one that is guided by some core assumptions (as is the case in other philosophical schools), that may help to illuminate some dimensions of reality but will inevitably distort others. There should be room for such perspectives at the table of multi-disciplinary conversations (Wentzel van Huyssteen), especially given the influence of various forms of Christianity in shaping the world, for the better but also for the worse.
3. This common task of sense making is one in which Christian theology can make a substantive but rather limited contribution. On intra-theological terms this common task is one of understanding

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the “whole revelation of God” (Herman Bavinck). The substantive contribution that Christian theology can make is to approach this common task of making sense of the world around us on the highly particular basis of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ through the Spirit (see below). This contribution remains limited in the sense that it would not do to offer soteriological answers to ontological questions (Arnold van Ruler). The task of “philosophy” (in the broader sense of the term) is therefore much wider than that of Christian theology (again Bavinck). When it comes to ontological questions on what the world is like, Christian theology is a minor player amongst many others in the field.

4. On intra-theological terms the task of other disciplines is *more important* than its own task (crucial though that may be) – in the same way that the church does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of the well-being of the whole world – where the reign of God is to come. We do not become human in order to become Christians; we need to become Christians in order to be human again (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, also John de Gruchy). On this basis Christians belong to the world (shared with other creatures) before they belong to the church (again Bonhoeffer on Christian worldliness).
5. In this common task of making sense of the world in which we find ourselves, Christian theologians may well be asked to explain what they bring to the table that is distinctive. Such explanations (or public translations – Heinrich Bedford-Strohm) may be offered in non-theological categories albeit with the proviso that the danger be heeded of fitting Christianity under some other umbrella concept (religion, spirituality, civil society) – and in the process translating it into something less than what it is (as Karl Barth might say). The Christian faith is not unrelated to such categories, one may say, primarily because the triune God is confessed to be not unrelated to the world in which we live. In order to avoid a reductionist and self-secularising approach (Wolfgang Huber), one may say that Christian faith, hope and love employs a wider, more encompassing lens to offer a Christian view of the world as a whole. This is one that brings into play not only the social construction of *reality* (Peter Berger) but also constructions of *ultimate reality* (Paul Tillich and others).

This requires a non-reductionist recognition of various forms of *transcendence* (George Ellis and others). Notions of transcendence and of ultimate reality are necessarily socially constructed, typically very particular and therefore form part of immanent reality (Klaus Nürnberger and others). However, if this entails nothing but a social construction, it is a construction of nothing less than that, which is ultimate. What is truly ultimate cannot be captured under another umbrella. It is also not possible to juxtapose two or more versions of the ultimate since that would by definition challenge the ultimate status of each. At the same time, what is truly ultimate will necessarily remain an ultimate mystery. Christian theology therefore need not and cannot avoid speaking about God, precisely in conversation with other disciplines. What is immanent is discovered and appreciated only through the emergence of notions of transcendence. It is only in reaching the edge that the centre can be recognised.

6. While it is possible to offer a Christian view of the world (e.g. re-describing and ascribing it as the household of the triune God), it is impossible to develop a comprehensive Christian worldview (contra neo-Calvinist views) governing all aspects of reality if this is to be a re-description of *the world* as we experience it and know it also through other disciplines. Any discussion of worldviews (whether in the context of African traditional worldviews, neo-Calvinism, ecological discourse, the sociology of knowledge or the philosophy of science) should heed the reminder that it is impossible to view the world as such (or to adopt a “holistic” perspective). Nevertheless, religious constructions of *ultimate* reality cannot be reduced in sociological terms to a set of relationships or in ethical terms to a way of being in the world.
7. In a Christian context the “social construction of ultimate reality” (a term that is best used with hesitation) is approached on the basis of highly particular clues to the ultimate mystery of the world (Eberhard Jüngel). For Christians, the best available set of clues to that mystery is found in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ (others would find such clues elsewhere). The mystery of the world is expressed in the core conviction that the world belongs to the triune

Creator, that the world is the household of God. The cosmic scope of this conviction needs to be rediscovered again and anew in highly particular contexts and conversations. Each place may thus become the centre of the universe. The set of clues that Christians have found may provide a sense of orientation and direction for an on-going journey, but remains nothing more than a clue to a mystery that ultimately cannot be fathomed. At best we are led into that mystery (John de Gruchy). This suggests the need for apophatic theology but also indicates the limits of the common attempt at making sense of the world in which we find ourselves.

8. A Christian way of looking at the world around us (e.g. seeing it as the triune God's household) is scandalously counter-intuitive, is typically offered polemically and critically (Oepke Noordmans), and yet may offer profound insights in conversation with other perspectives. It may be contrasted with "warped" views of nature (Howard Snyder), for example in terms of a romanticised and all too leisured sense of beauty, one-sided Darwinian views on nature as "red in tooth and claw", capitalist views on land as nothing but real estate and pantheist views on nature as something so sublime that it ought to be worshipped. It makes a difference to see a piece of land as nothing but a toxic rubbish dump or seeing it nevertheless as God's own garden. In the human sphere it makes a huge difference to see the victims of history (and the perpetrators too!) as part of God's family (Desmond Tutu). Accordingly, the beggar at the door is nothing but my brother, the prostitute on the road my sister and the rapist my uncle. One may argue that the radical inclusivity of Jesus' Galilean ministry is one of the distinguishing features of Christianity. It is radical because it calls upon those who are themselves excluded to include others in the household of God whom they may prefer to have excluded. Remarkably, the victims of history are called to conversion in order to see God's magnanimous grace. The genius of Paul's ministry was to recognise that this message is not restricted to Galilee of Palestine but has equally radical implications for the inclusion of Gentiles. This disturbing inclusivity is being rediscovered in different contexts. For example, the vision that the whole household of God includes all

other forms of life is being discerned amidst contemporary economic injustice, various forms of violence and environmental destruction.

9. The plausibility of a Christian way of looking at the world and of what's wrong in the world is undermined (for outsiders and insiders alike) whenever there is too much cognitive dissonance with what people otherwise know, believe to be the case and deem to be valuable. This requires sufficient "traction" between Christian beliefs and insights emerging from other disciplines (Philip Clayton). Such traction does not imply verification or falsification but there needs to be at least some congruence if Christian theology is to contribute to the common task of sense-making, if the perspectives it offers can indeed help to make sense of such insights, to help others to see what would otherwise not be recognised. The need to examine the plausibility of the Christian faith (i.e. from the perspective of insights emerging from other disciplines) is also important for the sake of the Christian faith, namely to remove false (intellectual) stumbling blocks so that the true scandal of its core message may be communicated as clearly as possible.
10. It would be inappropriate to take theological short cuts to introduce revealed truths into multi-disciplinary debates. For example, it is inappropriate to offer an a priori (revealed) *diagnosis* of the malaise of the human condition, or to analyse the triple problem of poverty, unemployment and inequality, or to uncover the root causes of environmental destruction) before the "patient" is properly examined. The task of sense making is an on-going one that has to take into account changing circumstances (reading the signs of the time), emerging knowledge, new insights and other relevant (philosophical) perspectives. The (limited) contribution that Christian theology can make to inter-disciplinary conversations cannot be made in advance, before such conversations take place.
11. The lens that is employed in Christian contributions to the common task of sense making may be valuable for other disciplines in a real but limited way besides the particular perspectives that Christian contributions bring to the table. The mere presence and persistent

participation of theologians may sometimes help to emphasise the significance of particular issues on a common agenda.

12. Given the “wider lens” that is employed, theologians together with philosophers and scholars of religion, may help to recognise, analyse and critique the most basic assumptions embedded in various schools of thought in other disciplines. For example, the vocabulary developed in the Christian tradition can aid the common task of offering a diagnosis of what is wrong in the world. In addition, the Christian tradition may facilitate sensitivity for the moral visions, goals, values and rules that are embedded in research programmes in other disciplines. Such contributions may not always be significant and may therefore not be valued, but to ignore such sensitivities would be to the detriment of any other discipline in the long run.