In this article, I take my own position within an ongoing debate about what place (if any) Christian theology should have within the secular university. Against both “secularists” and “sectarians,” I argue that we can and should locate the study (teaching and learning) of theology squarely within the secular university, once we cease to demand that all academic study within the secular university be framed by a narrowly defined and overly constrictive “secular perspective.” Freed from the controlling dogma of the “secular perspective,” theology in the secular university can proceed unhindered in its quest for knowledge, following the classical method of “faith seeking understanding,” while still remaining remarkably inclusive of, and respectful toward, those who do not share specific theological commitments.

MY MAIN GOAL in this article is to show how Christian theology (hereafter, just “theology”), so understood as a tradition-dependent form of intellectual inquiry, occupies both a coherent and advantageous place in the secular university, broadly understood to include any university or liberal arts college that has no official religious affiliation. In doing so, I take my own position within an ongoing debate about what place and role (if any) theology should have within the secular university.

*Paul A. Macdonald Jr., Department of Religion, Bucknell University, 13 Coleman Hall, Lewisburg, PA 17837, USA. E-mail: paul.macdonald@bucknell.edu. I wish to thank several anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions and critical feedback on previous versions of this article. Thanks also go to the members of the Department of Religion at Bucknell University for many enlightening and stimulating discussions on the place of theology in the secular university.

1I am therefore not including within this category Christian universities or colleges that may be secular or secularized to varying degrees.
university. In the first section of the article, in order to familiarize (or refamiliarize) the reader with the main contours of this debate, I map out some important, representative positions, deliberately placing them along a spectrum ranging from a hard-line “secularism” to a hard-line “sectarianism.” In the second section of the article, I begin to engage these positions critically, as well as defend my own position. My main argument here goes as follows: once we cease to demand that academic study within the secular university be framed by an all-encompassing “secular perspective,” which narrowly restricts and even threatens to undermine the full pursuit of knowledge in the secular university, then we have every right, against what both secularists and sectarians suppose, to include theology as part of the quest for knowledge that occurs within the secular university. We also have every right to deny that including the study of theology within the secular university requires subordinating it to any “secular perspective.”

In the third section of the article, I continue to defend my own model for studying theology in the secular university based on a classical conception of theology as “faith seeking understanding.” According to this model, studying theology entails practicing the discipline of theology by engaging in the very tradition-dependent forms of critical reasoning that undergird it, with the goal of inquiring into the possibility and nature of theological truth. It also entails, or encourages, bringing one’s own “faith” commitments, theological and otherwise (i.e., whether Christian or not), to the practice of doing theology so as to better understand the rationales and truth-claims that theology advances. By the end of the article, then, having defended a more permeable conception of the secular, and a view of theology as a “faith”-based but also critical and open-ended form of intellectual inquiry that generates varying levels of knowledge, I show how the study of theology can and should occur with verve and effectiveness in the secular university.

THE DEBATED PLACE OF THEOLOGY IN THE SECULAR UNIVERSITY

Hard-line secularists argue that theology has no place in the secular university; and one main argument for their position is that “private” religious commitments, of the sort that traditionally have undergirded the study of theology, have no place in “public” academic study or

---

2I am not using the terms “secularist” or “sectarian” in a pejorative sense, but only as a way to denote specific viewpoints on the place of theology in the university.
intellectual life. The late Richard Rorty, for example, argues that “religion” (by which he means religious or theological belief) should be kept out of public life generally because it is an attempt “to make one’s own private way of giving meaning to one’s own life—a way which romanticizes one’s relation to something starkly and magnificently non-human, something Ultimately True and Real—obligatory for the general public.” From a pragmatic point of view, then, religion (particularly in its fundamentalist form) is coercive and even destructive: religious fundamentalists find “various . . . ways of making their neighbors miserable for the greater glory of God.” Rorty also claims that religion, in its more benign form, still “needs to be privatized [since] in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper.” Here, Rorty thinks that religion, even if it is not coercive or destructive, is still pragmatically counterproductive: religious believers thwart public, political conversation on issues of shared concern by introducing premises (such as “abortion is against the will of God”) and citing sources (such as the Bible) which carry no traction for others trying to further such a conversation. On Rorty’s view, the “Jeffersonian compromise,” itself the product of the “central secularizing message of the Enlightenment,” allows the private practice of religion in a pluralistic society but simply insists—and rightly so, he thinks—that such practice should be quarantined from discussions of public policy.

While completely unwilling to mix private religious commitment with public academic study or intellectual life, a Rortian secularist would presumably take no issue with “religion” treated purely as an object of intellectual interest and inquiry. For the secularist, in fact, a central achievement of the secular university is the establishment of the academic study of religion, or religious studies, which surpasses the study of theology (it is claimed) insofar as it offers (or at least aspires towards) a description and evaluation of religion in all of its complexity and variety, freed from the controlling, and hence restrictive, influence of theological doctrine or dogma. Religion and theology, therefore, stand in opposition: not only does the study of theology contradict the study of religion; it actually seeks to undermine it. According to Donald Wiebe, “theology, when it commits itself to the existence of the Ultimate, constitutes a form of religious thought which cannot complement the academic study

---

^4 Ibid.
^5 Ibid., 171.
^6 Ibid., 170.
of religion but can only ‘infect’ it.”

In Wiebe’s view, if the study of religion is going to be truly “academic,” and hence worthy of study in the university, it must function like a scientific enterprise that “aims at public knowledge of public facts.” The religious “facts” that Wiebe have in mind are, of course, not the facts that science investigates but the facts of human experience and culture, which remain, however, “scientifically warrantable” and “intersubjectively testable” insofar as they can be empirically observed, described, and then explained using various theoretical principles or frameworks borrowed from other relevant disciplines in the academy. Thus, Wiebe explicitly denies that the academic study of religion is “a religious or metaphysical enterprise” that concerns itself with “divine mystery” or the “quest for some ultimate meaning or truth.”

Such decidedly theological pursuits are also decidedly non-academic because they always are bound up with the subjectivity (private beliefs and practices) of religious adherents, and they concern postulated realities (the divine or “the Ultimate”) that lie forever beyond the realm of the empirically observable or testable. In short, in Wiebe’s view, the academic study of religion confines itself to “‘objective’ knowledge of a particular aspect of human culture.”

The main target of criticism of both Rortian and Wiebean secularists, then, is not “religion” per se but “theology,” which indeed poses a threat to secularism on at least two counts. First, theology has traditionally refused to confine its reflection to human belief and experience and unabashedly has issued forth assertions or truth-claims about the divine and the transcendent: it is, in short, the science of God and not religion. Second, as secularists rightly note, theology traditionally has not made a distinction between private belief and public reasoning: in its classical (ancient and medieval) form, it follows the formula of “faith seeking understanding.” Now, I am not ignoring the obvious fact that much of theology in its distinctively modern form has gone the way of religious studies in becoming anthropocentric, having made the human subject, and hence human belief and experience, the primary object of sustained theological reflection.

Many theologians, I suspect,

---

7Wiebe (1999: 155). Wiebe thinks that religious studies as a discipline still has not fully jettisoned the presence or influence of theology in its efforts to become a true science or Wissenschaft, which for Wiebe constitutes a fundamental “failure of nerve” (1999: 156).


9Ibid., 410 and 412.

10Ibid., 412. He reiterates these claims in Wiebe (2008).

11Ellen Armour, for example, claims that since “Man the Knower” and his double homo religiosus (qua object of study) may be dying along with modernity, it behooves theologians “to walk through the looking glass, as it were, that divides Man the Knower from (and binds him to)
like scholars of religious studies (or as scholars of religious studies) would consider themselves fully (or at least mostly) “secular” in Rorty’s sense or “academic” in Wiebe’s sense. But this does not alleviate the suspicion, and even hostility, that some members within the secular academy, including religious studies, still hold toward theology as a discipline. Wiebe, for example, claims that theology is intrinsically driven by at least some sort of a priori (and thus often hidden) commitment to “an independent subject matter—that is, God, the gods, the Transcendent, Ultimate Reality, and so on.”

The study of theology is therefore inescapably caught up with the sorts of claims and commitments that the secular university cannot consider or accommodate.

Others, however, flatly disagree with this claim. Eugene Rogers, for example, sees the incorporation of theology within secular religious studies departments as entirely possible, and even necessary. On the model he offers, Rogers claims that theology, far from being a totally sui generis academic discipline, is analogous on some level to anthropology (itself, of course, a prevalent theoretical approach within the academic study of religion). It is the study of “well-developed, indigenous, higher-order metapactices” within Christianity, and specifically, the “higher-order, critical, native models” of intellectual inquiry that are indigenous to or “naturalized” in actual Christian communities.

The theologian, then, qua anthropologist and member of a secular religious studies department studies the practices (particularly the intellectual ones) that are indigenous to or naturalized in Christian communities and ideally converses with native informants, particularly those who “excel at articulating their practices” and hence share skills with the anthropologist.

The ultimate goal in engaging in ethnographic evaluation is to assimilate and learn these indigenous practices, or naturalized forms of reasoning, so that one can teach them to others as well as further one’s own understanding (and presumably, that of the guild) in one’s own critical and constructive writing and research. In this sense, Rogers says that both the academic theologian and native

---

13 Rogers (2006: 366–367). Delwin Brown also compares theology with anthropology, but unlike Rogers, assigns academic theology the primary role of understanding and assessing intellectual practices or “religious ideas” in their communal contexts—thereby making theology a study of the community rather than the reasoning that goes on in the community. See Brown (1994).
Christian thinkers engage in a project that is “thoroughly Anselmian,” insofar as “they practice certain skills in order to understand.”\(^{15}\) The “faith” they each possess, then, is only relevant to the extent that “each has enough to seek understanding.”\(^{16}\) This in turn means, “theology is a skill that can be taught, gained by practice rather than conversion.”\(^{17}\)

In a similar vein, Gavin Flood argues that there seems to be plenty of room within religious studies and hence within the secular university for the study of theology, since religious studies serves (or should serve) “as an arena that gives legitimacy to traditions’ self-inquiry within a framework of rational discourse.”\(^{18}\) Flood argues that we should think of academic theology (whether Christian or not) as second- and third-order rational discourse: second-order discourse is the critical reflection of a given religious tradition on itself—the tradition itself is first-order discourse—and third-order discourse is critical reflection on second-order discourse consisting of “forms of secular reasoning, disciplines, methods, and methodologies developed within the western academy.”\(^{19}\) Moreover, “it is the degree to which traditional theologies accept forms of secular reasoning that determines their degree of participation in the academy.”\(^{20}\) The study of theology would then presumably consist of teaching and learning both a second-order discourse, which includes particular forms of reasoning (think of Rogers’s claims about naturalized forms of reasoning), and a third-order discourse, which provides the critical tools for comparing competing theologies (or traditions) as well as evaluating and even correcting the forms of reasoning at work in theology qua second-order discourse.\(^ {21}\)

David Ford also has blankly asserted that “Our religious and secular world needs theology with religious studies in its schools and universities.”\(^ {22}\) In part, Ford defends this claim by pointing to the make-up of the modern university itself, which, like the world that we live in, is not exclusively religious or secular but is a complex mixture of both the religious and the secular. Western universities tend to treat the world as if it were wholly or mostly secular (or perhaps better, “secularist,” divested of the presence and influence of religion), but in doing so clearly ignore

---

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 368.
\(^{16}\) Ibid.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 370.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 55.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 56.
\(^{21}\) Flood further discusses the role of religious studies in offering a “corrective reading” of religious traditions in Flood (2005: 65–70).
\(^{22}\) Ford (2005: 761).
the fact that “hundreds of millions of people (in fact, the vast majority of the world’s population), including a great many students and academics, see reality differently.” Thus, ideally, “there should be universities that are complexly religious and secular in modes that reflect, reflect on, study, discuss and are responsible towards our religious and secular world in appropriately academic religious and secular ways.”

Here, Ford argues, theology and religious studies in fact share mutual responsibilities: first, responsibility toward the academy, or promoting “excellence in the study and teaching of texts, history, laws, traditions, practices, institutions, ideas, the arts and so on, as these relate to religions in the past and the present”; second, responsibility toward religious communities, which includes educating members of those communities as well as providing settings where interreligious study and dialogue can take place; and finally, responsibility toward society, which entails engaging issues of public concern (in politics, law, the media, education, and so on).

Moreover, in Ford’s view, theology can and should play a fundamental role in enhancing the university’s role (which it often ignores or discards entirely) in debating “vital issues transcending specialties, such as the relation of knowledge to power, rational justification and the nature of truth.” Ford describes this sort of more comprehensive, holistic academic pursuit as the “search for wisdom,” wisdom being “about insight into the many-faceted complexity of reality combined with right practice within it.” The search for wisdom (admittedly so difficult to quantify) also entails engaging the sort of broader, deeper questions of “meaning, truth, beauty and practice” that are posed with particular clarity and force by the world’s religions, and which therefore inevitably surface through any sustained academic study of the world’s religions. Theology, too, of course, deals with these sorts of “big” questions, which is why Ford thinks that the full integration of theology with religious studies and hence within the larger university is necessary. Thus, “academic” or “public” theology, as Ford defines it, “seeks wisdom in relation to questions, such as those of meaning, truth, beauty and practice, which are raised by, about and between the religions and are pursued through engagement with a range of academic disciplines.”

---

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 13.
26 Ibid., 33.
27 Ibid., 40.
28 Ibid., 25.
29 Ibid., 4. Italics are in the original text.
On the other end of the spectrum, hard-line sectarian theologians make their own arguments for keeping theology out of the secular university. In his recent book, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy, and Nation*, Gavin D’Costa argues that theology is currently being held in “Babylonian captivity” by the secular university, and in particular by religious studies, which requires the suspension of “one’s own beliefs, attitudes, and values, in order to avoid contaminating objective description with personal prejudice such as one’s own personal religious commitment.” D’Costa argues that this questionable methodology, born out of Enlightenment rationalism, is antithetical and even harmful to the proper study of theology as rooted in virtue and even more specifically prayer “as its epistemological presupposition, precisely because theology is primarily concerned with a communal love affair with the living God . . . . Without prayerfulness in students and teachers of theology, the university cannot produce theologians.”

In developing this claim, D’Costa further argues that theology, like other intellectual disciplines (including the sciences), is a tradition-dependent form of intellectual inquiry, and prayer facilitates the proper initiation into or “cohabitation” with the dynamic, living tradition undergirding theological inquiry thereby also enabling loving “cohabitation” with theology’s formal object, God, as well as the Christian Church. By doing so, the theologian also grows in love, and love engenders true knowledge or wisdom—correctness in theological judgment—which is what the theologian, as a servant of God and the Church, seeks.

There is also the perceived danger among sectarians about where the academic study of theology, if it is divorced from what D’Costa calls “cohabitation,” will inevitably lead. Paul Griffiths argues that since the divine is utterly unique, theology’s methods of inquiry are also utterly unique. “God,” he writes, “is neither an item in nor an aspect of the cosmos. He is the creator of all that is, seen and unseen: He who called the cosmos into being out of nothing, and He whose essence is by definition unknowable to human reason.” Consequently, theology cannot proceed following reason alone but must rely fundamentally on faith, which is itself based on divine revelation, as proclaimed by the Church. When it operates independently of faith and the revealed truths of faith, theology not only becomes impoverished but also runs the

---

30 D’Costa (2005: 23). Here, he is referring explicitly to the practice of *epoché*, or “bracketing,” in phenomenology.

31 Ibid., 112.

32 Stoner et al. (2006: 25).
dangerous risk of veering off into idolatry. Griffiths readily admits, then, “that theology is not for everyone. It is not a public discipline. It is a work of the Church, a work of the faithful, an elucidation of what God has revealed and the Church does its best to understand and teach (speaking now of its Catholic variety).” D’Costa entirely concurs, and in fact concludes that theology cannot survive within religious studies or the secular university. In fact, he argues that it must become the foundational discipline in a new sort of Christian and specifically Catholic university (since current Christian universities are also plagued by secularization) that not only houses religious studies but also informs and unifies all levels of intellectual inquiry in the various disciplines of the university.

Even more stridently, David Hart argues that the main reason for excluding the study of theology from the secular university is that secularization has sundered the state’s rightful subordination and accountability to the Church as a sacral authority, the result being not only the privatization of religion but also the emergence of the modern state as an absolute, corrupt power that has made itself the sole authority on moral, legal, and political matters. Consequently, Hart writes, “So when I say it is not obvious that theologians should desire the restoration of their discipline in the modern university, it is not because I believe in a wall of separation or because I am a Christian separatist . . . . It is because I simply find it impossible to grant that the modern secular state is anything other than a frequently wicked perversion of social order.” Furthermore, since the secular university, as a function of the modern state, reflects this perverted (or we could say, inverted) social order, then it cannot rightfully acknowledge theology’s autonomy and authority as an academic discipline: “it is not natural to theology that it should function as one discipline among others, attempting to make its contribution to some larger conversation; as soon as it consents to become a perspective among the human sciences, rather than the contemplation of the final cause and consummation of all paths of knowledge, it has ceased to be theology and has become precisely what its detractors have long suspected it of being: willful opinion, emotion, and cant.”

John Milbank makes a comparable, albeit even more radical, claim: theology must retain a hegemonic role in relation to other academic
disciplines—a feat impossible within the modern, secular university, as it is currently constituted—because without theology, these disciplines cease to treat their respective objects of intellectual inquiry for what they really are: inherently and inescapably related to the very being of God, who is their ultimate source and cause. Theology, then, far from being a form of nihilism—"a fantasiing about the void"—as its secularist (atheist and agnostic) opponents hold it to be, proves to be the one discipline able to stand against nihilism. Theology not only helps organize and relate other academic disciplines; it alone is capable of making them intelligible. Without theology "all other disciplines, which claim to be about objects regardless of whether or not these objects are related to God, are, just for this reason about nothing whatsoever . . . . Thus for theology, other disciplines . . . are, precisely as secular disciplines (although they will nearly always possess also an implicit and redeeming supernatural orientation) through and through nihilistic."

Having surveyed a range of positions on the place of theology in the secular university, we are now in a position to address the critical questions that the advocates of these positions raise. The main question before us is the following: is there indeed a genuine place for the study of theology in the secular university, and if there is, what should the study of theology in such an environment look like? In answering this question, I argue against both secularists and sectarians, and draw on the resources other thinkers provide in defending my own position for the study of theology in the secular university; a position based on the classical model of theology as "faith seeking understanding."

DEBUNKING THE "SECULAR PERSPECTIVE": THEOLOGY AS KNOWLEDGE

Both hard-line secularists and sectarians, I contend, rule the study of theology out of the secular university for largely the same reason: one cannot study theology, at least in its traditional form, from a
“secular perspective.” The phrase is evocative and apt, I think, because it is one way of distinguishing the sort of academic study that occurs in the secular university from the sort of academic study that occurs in the Christian college, university, seminary, or divinity school. 40 That is to say, the former is framed by a “secular perspective,” while the latter is framed (to varying degrees) by an explicitly “Christian perspective,” or specifically theological commitments. But this, of course, begs the question: what does it mean to engage in academic study from a “secular perspective”? 41 There are a number of ways to define the “secular,” and so far I have deliberately avoided entering into this discussion in order to remain within the argumentative scope of the article. 42 Nevertheless, for our present purposes, we can make the following helpful distinction: in its inclusive sense, “secular” simply means “religiously neutral,” or perhaps better, “religiously diverse.” Thus, the “secular university” is religiously neutral or diverse in the sense that its constituents possess any number of religious commitments or no religious commitments in particular. There is no one religious viewpoint that is taken for granted by those who participate in secular academic life. 43 In its exclusive sense, “secular”—or perhaps better, “secularist”—means “purged of the presence and influence of religious commitment or belief.” Thus, on this view, the “secular university” fosters intellectual inquiry that is decidedly non-religious or non-theological and hence does not bring personal religious or theological commitments into play.

40 Again, I realize that the various institutions I collectively designate here as sectarian may still be secular to varying degrees, even though they have explicit religious affiliations.

41 I most recently encountered this phrase when one of my students said that he was taking my class to learn about Christianity from a “secular” and “scholarly” perspective. According to James Stoner, the phrase also appeared in the political arena in 2004, when the Supreme Court ruled in Locke v. Davey, 540 U.S. 712 (2004) that the State of Washington should continue to endorse a statute explicitly excluding the study of theology from qualification for state scholarship support—that is extended to vocational training in every other field. As Stoner reports it, although Justice Thomas dissented from the decision, he still reinforced the idea that “devotional theology” (Chief Justice Rehnquist’s term) should be distinguished from “the study of theology from a secular perspective” (Justice Thomas’s term). Stoner argues that while Thomas’s dissent “leaves room for a future legal challenge to the reigning academic orthodoxy that equates emotion and religion, to the exclusion of reason,” it is still built on the majority assumption “that religious commitment (‘devotion’) automatically disqualifies any knowledge claims from the realm of the scholarly, academic debate that universities seek to foster” (2006: 524–525). I should also note that I am influenced by Stoner’s defense of theology as knowledge, which he summarizes in Stoner et al. (2006: 21–23).

42 Charles Taylor, for example, describes the rise of the secular in the modern West as “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (2007: 3).

43 I owe some of the wording here to Jeffrey Stout, who distinguishes between “secularized discourse” and “secularism”: only the latter denies theological assumptions and expels theological expression from the public sphere (2004: 93).
Now, in this the latter sense, while the “secular” is not necessarily anti-religious or anti-theological, it is still defined in opposition to the religious and the theological. Those who identify as “secular” or “secularist” in this sense seek to work outside of and even transcend the realm of the religious and the theological, or all religious and theological perspectives. To see how this is the case, it is helpful to reflect on the secularist’s view of religious studies, which, according to Wiebe, is supposed to provide “public knowledge of public facts” or “objective knowledge of a particular aspect of human culture.” And by “public” or “objective” knowledge Wiebe clearly has in mind the sort of knowledge that comes from investigating religion as an object of pure intellectual interest and inquiry, which one looks at or views critically and scientifically “from the outside,” so to speak. According to this position, then, obtaining public, objective knowledge of a given religion (including the various components of that religion) hangs on assuming a critical perspective that totally transcends the particular perspectives possessed by its adherents as well as those possessed by the critical inquirer (the one who is engaged in academic study). True objectivity requires true transcendence, since the scholar as well as the student must bring their skills of critical analysis to bear on the aspects of the religion that are the objects of pure intellectual interest and inquiry. Thus, the greater the critical distance, the greater the level of objectivity, and the greater the level of objectivity, the greater the opportunity for engaging in genuine intellectual inquiry and gaining genuine knowledge.

The metaphor of “distance” here may be troubling to some, given its association with the widely discredited concept of a “God’s-eye view” or “view from nowhere.” But it still fittingly describes the way in which secularists like Wiebe seem to think that genuine academic knowledge is achieved: bracketing or ignoring particular sets of commitments marked by interiority, subjectivity, and hence partiality so as to attain a higher, more neutral plane of objectivity where the universal “facts” one seeks to know are more readily accessible and “in view” for all. Thus, this “secular perspective,” as I am calling it, even if it is not absolute, is not equal to one perspective among many: if it were, then it could not retain any right to offer universal knowledge, or a true level of scholarly enlightenment. Instead, by virtue of transcending any and all perspectives within the university (religious and otherwise), it provides (or hopes to provide) a singular vantage point—presumably

44In marshalling the critique that follows, I am drawing on some specific philosophical resources: Nagel (1979, 1986) and McDowell (1998).
located somewhere within the secular university itself—from which to engage in critical reflection and carry out intellectual inquiry. In other words, the “secular perspective” claims to be all-encompassing: it excludes all particular, local perspectives (constituted as they are by particular, local commitments) so as to provide a clear, unimpeded path to genuine knowledge and truth.

But can the “secular perspective” in fact deliver what it promises? So that we may answer this question, consider the following illustration. One of the central goals of the secular university, broadly speaking, is to obtain a deeper, more penetrating knowledge of the human being, or the “human,” which encompasses the entire sphere of human life, behavior, and creative activity. While each of the various departments and divisions in the university (ranging from the humanities to the natural sciences) makes its own contribution to such knowledge, it remains the ultimate goal of the university (or those working within the university) to synthesize these various contributions, adding to the university’s overall body of knowledge about the “human.” This description of what goes on in the university is fine as far as it goes (at least on a general level). However, once we become drawn in by the idea of the “secular perspective,” we are forced to amend it, postulating (either explicitly or implicitly) an external vantage point—some objective conception of the “human”—toward which the study of the “human” in the university should progress, and which, when reached, will furnish us the truly objective knowledge of the “human” at which all of our intellectual inquiry is aimed. Pursuing such knowledge requires that we then move beyond the broad realm of human belief and experience with which we are all familiar in order to achieve a clearer, surer, more comprehensive self-knowledge or “view” of what the “human” really is.45

It is not difficult to see, however, how this project quickly can become self-defeating: the more we transcend our own subjectivity in our collective intellectual pursuit, the more we loosen our grip on important aspects of the “human,” which in turn means that, despite our initial hopes, the more we seek to converge on the vantage point, the more “we” as humans fade from view. So even presuming we were able to reach the vantage point (and it is not at all clear that we could

45For the example to work, the “human” does not need to be construed in a robustly metaphysical sense, as denoting some essence or ideal. Moreover, “objective” knowledge in this context may also just mean enlightened consensus concerning what every educated member of the secular university agrees the “human” is (presuming all have reached the external vantage point together). I take this way of thinking about objectivity to be more amenable to Rortians, even if “objectivity” as a concept has not been eradicated entirely and replaced with “solidarity” instead. For more on this latter distinction, see Rorty (1991).
anyway), would not we discover that those aspects of ourselves that we had hoped to “see” or understand more clearly were actually no longer recognizable as such to us, since we had transcended the very perspectives in which they were already “in view?” Consequently, would not we also discover the “secular perspective” on the “human” to be so impoverished or vacuous that it failed to qualify as any sort of perspective on the “human,” and for that matter, a perspective on anything at all? Thus, the following conclusion seems inescapable: there is no “secular perspective,” no all-embracing epistemological position or frame through which truth may be discerned or knowledge may be achieved in the secular university.

In making this claim, I am not bowing to postmodern skepticism (in fact, as I will argue later, the insight on which it is based is thoroughly pre-modern): denying that there is a single vantage point or “secular perspective” within the university does not also entail affirming that there is no genuine knowledge whatsoever, or that all efforts to attain such knowledge in the university are in vain. The secularist worry, I suspect, is that if we abandon the idea of the “secular perspective,” then we must give up the entire idea of objective intellectual inquiry, or the academic study of subject matters such as religion altogether. Knowledge and truth become relativized, as we are left with partial, competing perspectives and truth-claims, and no way to adjudicate them. But why should we think this? In loosening the secularist’s stronghold on objectivity, we do not give up on knowledge and truth, but instead open up the possibility of pursuing knowledge and truth through multiple, diverse lines of intellectual inquiry, all unencumbered by the restrictive epistemological frame wrongly imposed by the “secular perspective.” Or, as Nicholas Lash puts it, we have given up the even larger illusion

that the human grasp of truth could ever be other than tradition-constituted. We are not incapable, as human beings, of making sense of things, of speaking truth and acting with integrity. But all these things we do from somewhere, shaped by some set of memories and expectations, bearing some sense of duty borne and gifts that have been given. All sense, and truth, and goodness, are carried and constituted by some story, some pattern of experience, some tradition.46

What should frame the various lines of intellectual inquiry that run throughout the secular university, including religious studies, is therefore

---

not any “secular perspective” but rather what Lash calls the “story,” “pattern of experience,” or “tradition” (and I will argue shortly, authority) in which they originate and by which they are framed. Again, it is not a matter of having to choose narrative over reason or truth, but realizing that “narrative comes first, and . . . the formal systems we construct—whether in philosophy or science [and we could add, religion]—are coloured, shaped, determined, by the story-telling soil from which they spring.”

These claims may sound familiar to many, but they are worth repeating, since they constitute reasons for placing the study of theology squarely within the secular university: that is, an inclusively secular university now able and willing to support all tradition-constituted or narrative-based knowledge and truth seeking, which theology purports to be. Thus, against what both secularists and sectarians suppose, I argue that there is no reason to exclude theology from the secular university, once we have sundered the secular university’s relationship with the “secular perspective.” There is also no reason to subordinate the study of theology to the “secular perspective” within the secular university either. I suspect that such subordinated study would try to explain how theology is shaped by various historical, social, psychological, and political influences; perhaps it would focus primarily on the broader intellectual context and sources from which theology emerges and on which it is based. As such, this conception of theological study would purport to be purely “objective” in order to meet the demands imposed by the “secular perspective.” And yet, we must ask again, how informative of theology would it really be? An approach to studying theology that seeks to transcend as far as possible the particular perspectives of actual theological practitioners, including their own personal beliefs and tradition-based forms of reasoning, ends up losing its critical “grip” rather than strengthening it, since it is within particular theological perspectives that the particular beliefs and patterns of thought one is seeking to study are already “in view” for genuine, thorough examination and analysis.

Given this, we must now consider what sort of knowledge the study of theology in the secular university yields; and here, to start, it is helpful to return to the mediating models that Rogers and Flood offer. Rogers rightly contends that studying theology requires more than merely observing and explaining how Christians reason (from the “outside,” as it were); it also requires practicing how they reason—that is, reasoning along with actual theologians, both past and present. Like

47 Ibid., 18.
a foreign language (which it is for many if not most in the secular university), theology consists of its own distinct vocabulary and set of grammatical rules that can be learned through classroom study rather than native upbringing. To study theology, then, is to gain the skills needed to speak, think, and ultimately reason like a theologian—that is, to think, speak, and reason like a particular native speaker, whether one claims native identity or not.48

Flood is also certainly right to claim that academic theology is not only second-order discourse but also third-order discourse: it can and should absorb a certain degree of “secular reasoning” so that it can practice a healthy form of self-criticism and thereby strengthen both its own internal self-understanding and its comparative relationship to other secular disciplines. Being trained in theological (second-order) and non-theological or secular (third-order) rational discourses also enables the academic theologian (whether teacher or student) to engage in higher levels of critical reasoning, most notably, critical assessment. And critical assessment can take many forms: comparing and contrasting different approaches and arguments within theology, evaluating the merits of those approaches and arguments in terms of coherency, persuasiveness, and explanatory power; and even analyzing the Christian worldview, including its major truth-claims, as a whole.49

We must note that all of the cognitive activity going on here in the study of theology—teaching and learning multiple languages or rational discourses, acquiring and practicing certain highly developed intellectual skills—is still ultimately tradition-dependent, rooted and informed, at bottom, by a particular narrative, the Christian narrative, or the first-order discourse that Christians speak. Engaging in such cognitive activity therefore cannot occur at some external vantage point or neutral plane of objectivity because it requires being habituated into the very tradition-dependent forms of thought and reasoning that theological practitioners, for whom Christian faith matters, employ, as well as other critical forms of thought and reasoning that the western, secular academy, with its own distinct intellectual tradition, employs. It is indeed theology, properly speaking, and not some abstracted or distorted version of theology

48The point is Rogers’s, but I am also drawing on Lindbeck (1984) in making it.
49Critical assessment also surely includes a level of critical intervention, or what Paula Cooey describes as the process of “constructing and deconstructing traditions with particular reference to their central symbols,” most notably, the central concept of God (2000: 40). But critical intervention should not be the final aim of critical assessment, not only because there are constraints within theology itself for making and unmaking its central concepts, but also because, as I suggest here (and go on to argue), theology traffics in truth-claims (not just symbols or concepts), which also deserve critical assessment.
siphoned through the “secular perspective.” And yet, it also clearly constitutes a viable academic enterprise, and certainly yields knowledge of its own sort, gained through genuine academic study.

Rogers and Flood, then, certainly help us see how theology can function harmoniously in the secular university and religious studies more specifically without being subordinated to any “secular perspective.” But, they do not properly consider, and therefore do not help us see, how theology, once freed from the controlling influence of the “secular perspective,” also can and should challenge and expand the scope of academic study within the secular university and religious studies more specifically.

As we already have seen, one chief area that religious studies has traditionally policed or excluded from the scope of academic study in its effort to be purely “public” or “objective” is the very question of theological truth. Ford, who we already have seen champions a broad conception of theology as the “search for wisdom,” rightly argues that religious studies’ traditional hostility or at least unwillingness to consider the question of theological truth, or more broadly questions of “meaning, truth, beauty and practice” as part of the search for wisdom, is entirely unjustified because it is entirely arbitrary. Ford’s point, in part, is that theology’s inquiry into its own subject matter (certainly within Christianity) entails reference to God; and God, or at least the question of God, “transcends the boundaries” that religious studies, or any other discipline, aims to draw in order to circumscribe or “fix” its subject matter. Moreover, Ford argues that since “religion” is primarily not a controlled object of study but a lived practice, then in studying religions one inevitably encounters the search for wisdom that runs throughout them. And the question of God, which theology addresses, is one important aspect of this search. Thus, Ford calls for “a reconstitution of the priorities of theology and religious studies to allow for the full question of truth”; and while “it is not easy to realize this institutionally . . . it is better to risk doing so than to continue with a constricted religious studies which is impoverished by its inhibitions in relation to the largest questions of truth and practice raised by its own field.”

We also can put Ford’s point here this way: if it is true that critical reasoning is essential to the study of theology in the secular university, as I claim it is, then it not only is arbitrary but also unnatural to draw a boundary around where such reasoning can and cannot lead. As a general intellectual rule, one cannot divorce critical reasoning from truth seeking (again, unless one does so arbitrarily); and this is especially the

51Ibid., 725.
case with theology, whose practitioners employ critical reasoning in order to explain and understand the truth of their commitments. Furthermore, the question of theological truth is far too important for religious studies or the secular university to continue to bracket or ignore, especially when members of the secular university community, who teach and take courses in religion, and/or are adherents of the world’s religions (including, of course, Christianity), continue to raise it in their personal and academic lives.

How might we legitimately raise the question of theological truth in the secular university? On the basis of what I just claimed, the most appropriate and natural context seems to be when members of the secular university—in the classroom, for example—are engaged in critical reasoning about theological subject matters; or, when the theologians one studies in the classroom raise the question of theological truth in their own work. Certainly, raising and contemplating the question of theological truth does not also require answering it; engaging in this sort of inquiry may only entail weighing reasons for and against theological truth, which generates its own form of theological knowledge. But neither should the student or scholar be prevented from addressing and answering the question of theological truth directly, presuming she does so with the aim of opening up rather than closing off further academic conversation and debate. Engaging in this simultaneously respectful and stimulating intellectual practice is what we would expect any member of the secular university to do, especially in highly contentious, speculative fields of inquiry.

If this invitation to open and pursue the question of theological truth in the secular university still seems unfitting, consider the following helpful comparison. As trained scientists, physicists investigate what the nature of physical reality is at both its micro- and macro-levels, and in doing so, make highly reasoned, but often highly speculative, and hence highly disputable, claims and theories about their subject matter (at least for the community of academic physicists). And the study of physics in the university entails, in part, learning and discussing what these various claims and theories are. However, what if the study of physics in the secular university was limited to learning what these various claims and theories are? What if the truth-value of those claims and theories was left entirely untouched? As David Ray Griffin argues, if this were the case, then

Professors of physics would report what physicists (working outside the university structure, of course) had said about the real existence of electrons, neutrinos, and so on, but the professors would not raise the question of the truth of these claims . . . . [However] such an approach
to physics in the university would, of course, be absurd. It would mean
that the university would cease to be a locus for progress for the
understanding of the universe.\textsuperscript{52}

The idea here is that since physics professors and their students in the
secular university are justified in openly discussing particular truth-
claims and theories about the nature of physical reality (including the
universe as a whole), so as to enable progress in understanding physical
reality, then theology professors and their students in the secular uni-
versity are also justified in openly discussing particular truth-claims and
theories about the nature of divine reality—claims and theories which,
we should note, are \textit{also} highly reasoned, but also highly speculative,
and hence highly disputable.

This is not to say, of course, that physicists and theologians share
the same critical methodologies, or that the claims physicists make and
defend are on par epistemically with the claims theologians make and
defend. The point here does not concern the epistemic status of truth-
claims but the epistemic entitlement of those who make those claims: if
physicists raise the question of cosmological truth, for example, within
their own sphere of intellectual inquiry, then theologians are entitled to
do likewise within their own sphere of intellectual inquiry.

This example is also illuminating insofar as it highlights what I take
to be the most important, albeit most controversial, feature of theology
in the secular university: theology as an inescapably \textit{metaphysical}
undertaking.\textsuperscript{53} Ford points us in this direction—he invokes the concepts
of “meaning, truth, beauty and practice”—but he chooses not to define
them, or name their referents. That is to say, he chooses not to address
the more difficult and more pressing question: where does pursuing
questions of “meaning, truth, beauty, and practice” ultimately lead us?
Or more pointedly, where do the ultimate answers to (or, we could say,
grounds of) these questions ultimately lie?\textsuperscript{54} To properly address \textit{these}

\textsuperscript{52}Griffin (1991: 11).
\textsuperscript{53}As Sarah Coakley points out, theology therefore cannot be reduced to or collapsed into
religious studies entirely: “if we want to keep questions of ‘God’, ‘truth’ and metaphysical ultimacy
robustly in play in our theological discourses, we also need to defend \textit{in some form} the traditional
distinction between ‘religious studies’ and ‘theology’, like it or not” (2005: 48). Coakley’s aim is not
to remove theology from religious studies, but rather to preserve the important “dialectical \textit{frisson}”
that exists between them.
\textsuperscript{54}Denys Turner puts it nicely: “Our grip on the theological as a human discourse lies therefore
in the questions we can ask; but what count as the answers must lie unsayably beyond those
limits . . . . Hence, insofar as questions of this sort press themselves upon us . . . . they press upon us
an unknowability about things, a sense of the world as mystery,” which I would add, is a mystery
not only about the world but also about the divine, or the world as related to the divine (2005: 38).
questions requires inquiring unabashedly into the very nature of truth, beauty, goodness, and even divinity itself—or, the very nature of God—and this task, I contend, is essential not only for theology, but for the secular university itself. Inquiring about divine reality is certainly the pursuit of a robust form of knowledge, and knowledge is what the secular university must not only produce but also always seek.

THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY AS AN EXERCISE IN “FAITH” SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

As we saw above, sectarian theologians claim that the study of theology cannot occur in its requisite fullness within the secular university. Even though I have aimed to defuse this objection, in part, by showing how the secular university can and should include multiple, tradition-dependent lines of inquiry like Christian theology within its curriculum so as better to promote and enrich its own pursuit of knowledge and truth, I imagine that some sectarians remain unconvinced. Is not Christian faith and its attending practices ultimately needed to carry out the academic study of theology in the requisite fullness, and if so, then how can academic study of theology intelligibly proceed in the secular university, which by definition, is free from any particular ecclesial basis or ties? Or, put another way—and this is a question D’Costa raises for Ford—is “public theology,” as studied in the secular university, really theology (i.e., Christian theology) after all, or is it, in fact, “an imaginative, rich, and creative form of religious studies,” a subtly crafted, secular academic discipline?

These are indeed important claims and critical questions, which we now need to consider in more detail. To start, recall D’Costa’s claim that “the type of tradition-specific theology that I am advocating requires prayer as its epistemological presupposition, precisely because theology is primarily concerned with a communal love affair with the living God.” Since theology springs from a living tradition, D’Costa

55Gordon Kaufman argues that engaging in “critical theology” from a “pluralistic” or “dialogical” perspective requires endorsing a conception of religious truth as “pluralistic” or “dialogical”; i.e., truth as “a living reality that emerges from within and is a function of ongoing living conversation among a number of different voices” (1991: 45). But pursuing the question of truth in a pluralistic, dialogical way does not require reducing truth to an intersubjective experience or phenomenon. In fact, treating truth—theological truth in particular—as “radically pluralistic” (1991: 46), rather than as objective and transcendent, seems to undermine the whole point of debating the question of such truth in the first place.
56D’Costa (2005: 75).
57Ibid., 112.
argues, prayer, along with the loving “cohabitation” with God that it engenders, is the only genuine point of access to this tradition. Without prayer, the study of theology becomes a “positivist examination of Christian history.”\textsuperscript{58} Moreover, prayer guides the study of theology to its desired end, the true knowledge of God: prayer, again, enkindles love, and “love is the lamp of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{59}

Having already traversed some significant argumentative ground, we should see that what D’Costa is offering us here is a false alternative: the prayer-based study of theology, which yields genuine theological knowledge, or the secular “positivist examination of Christian history,” which does not. Why should we be forced to choose between these two alternatives? One can endorse D’Costa’s claim that prayer and love are significant and even primary epistemological presuppositions or points of access to the study of theology as tradition-dependent intellectual inquiry, without making the further claim—which I think is unjustified—that they are the only epistemological presuppositions or points of access to such study. For example, D’Costa rightly cites Thomas Aquinas as claiming that there are two types of theological wisdom: one type of wisdom results from the supernatural work or gifting of the Holy Spirit, along with supernaturally infused virtues, such as love; the other type of wisdom results from (in D’Costa’s words) “the hard workings of the intellect, with requisite training.”\textsuperscript{60} And yet, inexplicably, D’Costa seems completely unwilling to acknowledge with Aquinas that this latter sort of wisdom is also epistemologically valid, insofar as it is the fruit of a rightly trained mind working from the right epistemological starting points: what Aquinas calls the “first principles” or revealed truths found in sacred doctrine (\textit{sacra doctrina}). As Rogers points out (since he also cites Aquinas), the study of theology does not necessarily require the Spirit or infused virtue but “faith” in the larger sense of a willingness and ability to practice certain skills, or subject oneself to hard, academic study, drawing on and engaging the principles of Christian revelation—even if one does not accept those principles as revelation.\textsuperscript{61} Given this intelligible alternative, D’Costa needs to offer reasons (which he does not) for why proper habituation in the study of theology cannot also occur through something like intellectual \textit{apprenticeship} in the secular university.

\textsuperscript{58}Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{59}Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{60}Ibid., 128. The controlling passages in Aquinas can be found in the \textit{Summa theologiae} I.1.6.
There is an implicit argument here, which I now need to make explicit, for making room at the secular university for the study of theology as “faith seeking understanding,” or perhaps better, “faith” seeking understanding. In the classical (ancient and medieval) Christian tradition, theologians followed “faith seeking understanding” as a rule of intellectual inquiry for at least two reasons. First, since God, the subject matter of theology, is utterly transcendent, then it is difficult if not impossible for the mind to grasp God or the revealed truth about God using reason alone. Consequently, as Augustine argues, it is first necessary to believe those truths that remain “unseen” under the direction of the requisite authority, which for Augustine is the Christian (Catholic) Church.  

This should come as no surprise, Augustine says, since faith or belief rooted in authority is the proper epistemic attitude one must take toward a great number of proposed truths (e.g., facts of ancient history) about which one cannot ever attain indubitable, first-hand knowledge using reason alone. Thus, the truths proposed by the Church should be approached no differently, especially since they express mysteries that cannot be readily understood without first committing to study them with at least a measure of faith.

Therefore, second, faith is necessary because it disposes the mind to gain a better understanding or knowledge of the divine that would otherwise not be available to it. Augustine states plainly that “Authority demands belief and prepares man for reason. Reason leads to understanding and knowledge.” So Augustine affords reason the primary role of furnishing depth of understanding or knowledge to what we believe in faith even if we only can achieve full understanding or knowledge, and thus perfect happiness, in the life to come. In theological matters, then, faith enables the proper use of reason, since divine truth only can be cognitively attained “gradually step by step.” More specifically, faith is necessary because it makes the mind more supple and willing to inquire into divine truth: we become more “fit to receive the truth” by first believing what we are told. Just as “every kind of scholastic discipline, however humble or easy to acquire, demands a teacher or

---

62 See in particular Augustine’s De utilitate credendi and De fide rerum invisibilium, as well as Book VI of his Confessiones, written some years later. I am not claiming that earlier, patristic theologians did not also employ “faith seeking understanding,” only that Augustine is really the first Christian thinker to make this practice explicit.

63 Augustine, De vera religione 24.45. All translations of Augustine are from Augustine (1953).

64 Augustine emphasizes this point in his Retractiones 1.14.2. “For in this life,” he writes, “knowledge, however great, does not mean perfect blessedness, for that which is still unknown is incomparably greater.”

65 De util. cred. 10.24.
master if it is to be acquired,” so the study of theology, which deals with things that remain “unseen,” demands a teacher or master—in this case, the Church, as appointed by God as the custodian of divine truth—to whom we must first submit in faith and from whom we must learn so that we can continue to grow in our understanding and knowledge of God.66

Augustine’s conception of theology may seem exclusively sectarian; but in fact, his greater epistemological lesson has definite applicability in the secular university. As members of various academic disciplines, we all have our epistemic authorities to which we freely submit: those sources, rules, standards, and thinkers from which we derive certain commitments and on the basis of which we continue to hold those commitments. I contend that for many (if not the vast majority) of the commitments we hold, even in our own academic disciplines, it is not a matter of whether they are grounded in an authoritative teaching, broadly construed, but which authoritative teaching they are grounded in: authority, in whatever form, plays an irrepressible and invaluable role in our personal and professional epistemic lives.67

Furthermore, the process of evaluating our most basic commitments is both ad hoc and piecemeal: not only is it not possible to evaluate our most basic commitments wholesale, which would require suspending any field of inquiry in its entirety; but also, intellectual inquiry, for the most part, cannot proceed without those commitments in place. In our own academic disciplines, we largely reason in light of what we believe, which means that our most basic commitments provide both a critical framework and critical impetus for carrying out intellectual inquiry.

Even hard-line secularists like Rorty admit (when pressed) that authority plays an important role in shaping our most basic convictions, intellectual and otherwise. In his lively, well-known exchange with Nicholas Wolterstorff on the role of religion in public life, Rorty finally acknowledges that responsible theists like Wolterstorff have the

66De util. cred. 17.35.
67Interpreting Augustine, Alfred Freddoso concurs: “So in the end the crucial issue for Augustine was not whether to make a faith-commitment qua inquirer but rather just which such commitment to make” (2002: 26–27). Griffiths also discusses the importance of authority (along with hierarchy, tradition, and community) for religious reading, particularly insofar as religious reading requires “some acknowledged constraints upon what and how religious readers should read and compose” (1999: 63). Griffiths also argues that “authority of this kind is present in all human discursive practices” (1999: 63) and that if “tradition-specific reading skills are not practiced, then much knowledge (and probably all the most important knowledge) … remains unavailable” (1999: 74). It is unfortunate that Griffiths does not employ this rich epistemology of religious reading in order to defend the study of theology in the secular university, as I am aiming to do in a comparable way.
right by both “law and custom” to express political views in the public square, citing authorities like the Bible, just as he has the same right to do the same citing John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*. Of course, Rorty remains convinced that Mill is the *superior* authority since he thinks that liberal democracies function better overall when citizens have non-religious bases for their political views. Nevertheless, his *own* strong appeal to authority remains: “I should be delighted if the U.S. became a society which was self-consciously and openly utilitarian in its understanding of the purpose of legislation and public policy. If we secular humanists have our way, the liberal democracies will eventually mutate into societies whose most sacred texts were written by John Stuart Mill. But there is a long way to go before that ideal is reached.” This is no overstatement: Rorty blatantly acknowledges not only that certain authorities *can* play a decisive role in influencing how we think and act—say, in creating public policy in liberal democracies such as our own—but that they *should* do so. His own democratic “ideal” is not free of authority but founded on it.

Of course, Rorty is not arguing that we should appeal to authority for authority’s sake: “I would not consider myself to be seriously discussing politics with my fellow-citizens if I *simply* quoted passages from Mill at them, as opposed to using those passages to help me articulate my views. I cannot think of myself as engaged in such discussion if my opponent *simply* quotes the Bible, or a papal encyclical, at me…. What should be discouraged is *mere* appeal to authority.” Again, for Rorty, the problem with *merely* appealing to authority is that it stymies, rather than stimulates, political conversation and debate. On the basis of “empirical” grounds, he thinks religious believers are prone to do this, especially given the presence and influence of authoritarian “ecclesiastical organizations.” This is why “religion should be pruned back to the parish level” and hence still privatized to a significant degree. We could dispute this claim further; but regardless, insofar as Rorty (at least implicitly) acknowledges that authority can play an important, *positive* role in political, and more broadly intellectual life, he cannot consistently deny the religious believer the right to invoke it. Just as Rorty’s “faith” in Mill helps him articulate his views, and therefore

---

70Ibid., 147.
71Ibid., 148.
72Wolterstorff takes issue with this, asking why religion in particular must be privatized or “shaped up” according to Rorty’s expectations. See in particular *Wolterstorff* (2003: 136–139).
engage in further political debate, so the Christian’s faith in the Bible helps him articulate his views, and engage in further political debate.

Once again, I think we can draw important parallels here with intellectual life in the secular university, and the study of theology in the secular university more specifically. As in the political realm, and the life of the mind more broadly, studying theology requires having “faith” in certain authorities—sources, rules, and standards of theological reasoning—so that theological reasoning can proceed and genuine understanding can be achieved. This “faith,” however, need not be sectarian: i.e., it need not entail explicit theological commitment but rather basic trust in the authority of the ones who teach—most notably, the theologians one studies—in order that one may, in Augustine’s words, “become fit to receive the truth” or the understanding one gains gradually through engaging in theological inquiry. Finally, one can accept certain theological commitments (Aquinas’s “principles”) at least provisionally in “faith” for the sake of argument (or for the sake of learning) as one would accept certain axiomatic “givens” in learning a mathematical proof. In doing so, one grants that theological commitments play an integral role in theological reasoning as a basis for such reasoning; and that without those commitments in place, the study of theology cannot take place. In this qualified sense, we can still affirm with Augustine that “there is for souls no certain way to wisdom... unless faith prepares them for the use of reason.”74

“Faith” enters into the study of theology at the secular university in another important sense. Taken holistically, theology offers a sweeping narrative about divine action in human history, from creation to redemption to the final end of human history and the world. In telling this sweeping narrative—however differently they tell it (which are really different variations on the same theme)—theologians also raise and address perennial questions about God, the human condition, the nature of good and evil, as well as the meaning and purpose of human history and the world. These questions, which by no means are limited to theology, are inescapably value-laden, and thus are extremely difficult to address from within a neutral critical framework or with total critical as well as personal distance. “Faith,” again taken more holistically as including basic, background beliefs about God, the human person, and the world, thus inevitably informs the study of theology at the secular university insofar as it provides a critical framework for properly

---

73 De util. cred. 10.24.
74 De util. cred. 17.35.
addressing these value-laden questions. Once again, I argue that the study of theology does not stop at critical summary or even critical assessment of various theological rationales, but also inevitably leads the rational inquirer, whether theologically oriented or not, to consider the coherency, persuasiveness, and overall explanatory power of the Christian narrative or worldview (as I often call it) as a whole; however it is articulated or conceived. And yet, at this heightened level of analysis, and in seeking this heightened level of understanding, where the question of theological truth is very much in play, one must be both critically and personally engaged: how can one test, challenge, or endorse a particular worldview without comparing it, on some critical level, with one’s own?

The argument I am mounting here affords theological practitioners, like non-practitioners, the right to incorporate their own faith into their study of theology (and any number of academic disciplines). The argument rests on two main grounds. First, since it is the case that we all make faith-claims, whether they are theological or not, which we cannot defend in a non-circular way but which nevertheless inform the way we reason, then it once again becomes arbitrary and unfair to deny the theologian, as a member of the university community, the basic epistemic right to voice those commitments when engaging in theological inquiry. Second, if we take one of the hallmarks of intellectual life at the university to be the free exchange of reasons, which again includes those faith-claims that we cannot defend in a non-circular way, then the theologian should express his own faith-claims as reasons precisely so as to enhance, rather than stymie, intellectual life at the university. In other words, either every member of the university community is entitled to voice his or her own commitments as reasons (we should add, in the appropriate settings, and in responsible ways), or no one is. And if no one is, then how do we not run the risk of preventing members of the university community from furthering rational discourse on important, pressing intellectual matters? Silencing theologians on matters of intellectual importance would potentially undermine the collective project of making significant advances in the

---

75Here, Jeffrey Stout offers a direct rejoinder to Rorty: “If the reason for excluding the expression of religious commitments is that they create this type of discursive impasse, then the only fair way to proceed is to exclude the expression of many nonreligious commitments, as well. But if we go in this direction, Rorty’s view will require silence on many of the most important issues on the political agenda” (2004: 88). Rorty’s “policy of restraint,” so fairly extended to prohibit all citizens from expressing faith-claims as reasons for the positions they adopt on important political matters, “would itself be a conversation-stopper” (2004: 89–90).
university’s intellectual life, especially its broader quest for knowledge and truth.

The opposite fear is that allowing theologians to voice their commitments, even in a critically informed way, would still require silencing non-theological voices, either not giving them the opportunity to engage in genuine intellectual conversation with theologians or leaving them out of the conversation (or more accurately, monologue) altogether. But this need not be the case: as a partner in dialogue, the non-theological practitioner can engage in what Jeffrey Stout calls “immanent criticism”:

Immanent criticism is both one of the most widely used forms of reasoning in what I would call public political discourse and one of the most effective ways of showing respect for fellow citizens who hold differing points of view. Any speaker is free to request reasons from any other. If I have access to the right forum, I can tell the entire community what reasons move me to accept a given conclusion, thus showing my fellow citizens respect as requesters of my reasons. But to explain to them why they might have reasons to agree with me, given their different collateral premises, I might well have to proceed piecemeal, addressing one individual (or one type of perspective) at a time. Real respect for others takes seriously the distinctive point of view each other occupies. It is respect for individuality, for difference.

According to Stout, citizens in a democracy who occupy diverging points of view nevertheless can engage in meaningful democratic discourse on issues of shared concern by not only voicing their own reasons, religious or otherwise, from the point of view they occupy, but also by showing why their opponents who do not share that point of view should do so based on the very reasons that their opponents allow to be reasons. Thus, in the context of secular university life, a non-theological practitioner can engage in theological reasoning of a sophisticated sort, and therefore actually “do” theology, by practicing immanent criticism: that is, showing other theological practitioners why they each should accept his or her own non-theological point of view based on the practitioners’ own argumentative premises and terms. And as Stout points out, this need not be an adversarial activity; in fact, quite the opposite: practicing immanent criticism shows real “respect for individuality, for difference,” since it requires “taking seriously the distinctive point of view each other occupies.” Practicing immanent criticism

is of course something that the theological practitioner also can do as a way of showing respect for those in the intellectual community who do not share his or her commitments. That is, the theological practitioner need not argue solely on his or her own terms; he or she also can and should argue on the non-practitioner’s terms in order to make his or her own theological commitments and rationales more compelling.

All of the arguments I have been making in this section also should serve to defuse the sectarian worry that theology within the secular university will inevitably be assimilated into the other disciplines—religious studies in particular—withouit remainder. The study of theology in the secular university as I am defining and defending it is tradition-dependent and “faith”-filled, insofar as it requires its academic practitioners to submit to the requisite theological authorities and invites and even encourages its practitioners to voice their own commitments—theological and otherwise—as part of the free exchange of reasons and pursuit of knowledge and truth that should regularly occur in the university’s intellectual life. However, I suspect that for the fully entrenched sectarian this is still not enough: in any university setting, so the sectarian argument goes, theology is not content, in David Hart’s words (from above) to “function as one discipline among others, attempting to make its contribution to some larger conversation.” Instead, theology, as “the contemplation of the final cause and consummation of all paths of knowledge” must function as the “queen of the sciences.” Milbank is even more imperialistic: without theology, academic study within the university not only suffers but also falls apart entirely, for it ceases to be about anything real or substantive at all. Thus, either theology occupies its place as “queen,” standing as the only bulwark against nihilism, or it occupies no place at all.

Once again, we are faced with an unnecessary, and I think, false alternative; one born of the sectarian’s fear that divesting theology of its status as “queen” also entails divesting it of its status as knowledge, reducing it to “willful opinion, emotion, and cant” (Hart’s words) or “fantasising about the void” (Milbank’s words). Such a fear, however, is not only extremist but also entirely unjustified: as I argued above, the secular university, properly understood (divested of its connection to the “secular perspective”) has every reason to include theology as a knowledge-producing discipline within its curriculum, and no reason not to do so. So even though the secular university may not honor theology’s status as “queen,” it must recognize theology’s status as furnishing a robust form of knowledge. Any imperialistic move on the part of the secular university to exclude theology from the secular university is itself not only extremist but also entirely unjustified.
The sectarian’s larger claim, which we also need to address, is that only theology is capable of properly integrating and relating the university’s disparate disciplines. For Milbank, this entails denying that other disciplines are capable of yielding knowledge and discovering truth in their own right—a claim that is extraordinarily difficult to defend both empirically and philosophically. However, not all sectarians construe theology’s role as the “queen of the sciences” in the same way. For example, as D’Costa argues, while the role of theology in the university, along with philosophy as a mediating discipline, is to safeguard as well as promote the university’s collective (rather than fragmented) pursuit of knowledge and truth, it also must respect the individual ways, within the various disciplines, that the pursuit of knowledge and truth occurs. So understood, theology, along with philosophy, “facilitates the intellectual co-ordination (and sometimes questioning) of the methods and findings of the disciplines, while never questioning the legitimate autonomy of any.”

In this sense, theology is not only “queen” but also “servant,” since it seeks to relate, challenge, educate, but also respect those disciplines as unique, individual spheres of intellectual inquiry. In response, I see no reason why theology cannot play an analogous role as “servant” in the secular university, even though it cannot claim any disciplinary right to be “queen”—“sibling” is perhaps a more adequate term to describe its relationship with the other disciplines in the secular university. First, the very presence of theology and theologians in the secular university reminds members of other disciplines of their own need to pay adequate scholarly attention to the theological dimensions of their own disciplinary study and work: even a rudimentary theological knowledge, which theology of course can provide, helps both scholars and students better understand their subject matters in disciplines such as philosophy, art history, literature, history, politics, and even physics, which deals with intellectual questions for which at least some metaphysical speculation is required (e.g., the causal origins of the universe).

Second, while theology in the secular university also should respect the autonomy of the secular university’s constituent disciplines, and recognized disciplinary boundaries, it certainly can and should still press the secular university and its various disciplines to overcome any inveterate tendency toward fragmentation and the compartmentalization of knowledge and truth seeking—the secular university’s own version of sectarianism. Just as other disciplines can challenge theology to sharpen...
and better defend its own forms of reasoning and the truth-claims it advances, so theology, chastened by the requisite dose of epistemic humility, can aid other disciplines in their own intellectual pursuits, pressing them to consider deeper dimensions of rationality and truth, even as disclosed by their own methods and conclusions. That is, theology actually can free the secular university to better pursue in its own true and noble end—the acquisition of a truly universal knowledge.79

Finally, recall Griffiths’ warning above that theology, once it has ceased to be a work of the Church and the Christian faithful (and thereby abdicated its own proper self-understanding) will produce not only an impoverished but also a false knowledge—i.e., a secular simulacrum of authentic theological knowledge. I certainly share Griffiths’ concern here, because there is always the danger that the study of a discipline like theology will become distorted, or even undermined entirely, once it has been severed from the tradition or narrative in which it originates and from which it flows (especially when it is put in the life-draining stranglehold of the “secular perspective”). But on the model I am proposing, the vital connection between the academic study of theology and its lived practice in the Church is embedded in the tradition-dependent, authority-based theological reasoning in which all members of the secular academy can participate; and more than that, is embodied in actual theological practitioners who inhabit the secular university and engage in such reasoning from the explicit standpoint of Christian faith. Thus, as long as the secular university commits itself to including theology as an essential part of its own quest for knowledge and truth—which it should—and Christian constituents of the secular university choose to contribute to that quest in their own work, in service to both the university and the Church, then sectarians such as Griffiths have no grounds for withdrawing the study of theology (or Christian theologians, for that matter) from the secular university.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this article has been to articulate and defend some important, normative claims about studying Christian theology in the

79I am influenced here, of course, by John Henry Newman, who argues that a university cannot exclude theology as a form or “branch” of knowledge without also ceasing to be truly universal, or able to teach truly universal knowledge. “A University...by its very name professes to teach universal knowledge: Theology is surely a branch of knowledge: how then is it possible for it to profess all branches of knowledge, and yet to exclude from the subjects of its teaching one which, to say the least, is as important and as large as any of them?” (1996: 25).
secular university. First, I denounced the idea that academic study in the secular university must be framed by the sort of “secular perspective” that claims for itself the exclusive right to provide objective knowledge, since such a perspective proves, upon closer analysis, to be devoid of any meaningful content. Consequently, second, I also defended theology as its own tradition-dependent form of critical reasoning, knowledge production, and truth seeking, which means that studying theology in the secular university is remarkably consonant with a traditional but nonetheless fluid conception of theology as “faith” seeking understanding. In conclusion, I also hope that the claims I have advanced in this article will spark further dialogue and debate on all fronts (secularist, sectarian, and in-between). Since theology is studied in secular academic environments, it behooves both those of us who do study it in those environments—secular liberal arts colleges and universities—as well as those who study it in other academic environments—Christian colleges, universities, seminaries, and divinity schools—to inquire further about the viability of theology as a secular academic discipline and the secular university as a viable intellectual context in which the study of theology, in all of its fullness, can continue to take place.

REFERENCES


Flood, Gavin  
2005  
“The Study of Religion as Corrective Reading.”  

2006  

Ford, David F.  
1997  

2005  

2007  

Freddoso, Alfred J.  
2002  

Griffin, David Ray  
1991  
“Professing Theology in the State University.”  

Griffiths, Paul J.  
1999  

Hauerwas, Stanley  
2007  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher/Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Journal/Book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>