



BRILL

Of Subjunctives and Apologetics: A Response to Judith Wolfe

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I would like to thank my colleague Judith for her profound and expansive lecture, that I have benefitted greatly from engaging with. She starts from a definition of theology, to give an account of the place of theology within the university, emphasizing both the role of theology in establishing the possibility of academic engagement with the world through its metaphysical claims, and the unitive function of theology, using the example of interdisciplinary engagement with psychology. She moves on to narrate the difference that makes to the central functions of the university, discovery and dwelling, and finally, using eschatology as an example, to explore how this is all relevant to wider society.

Judith's references to philosophy doing at least some of the same work as theology indicate an awareness that some – within the modern Western university, perhaps most – hearers will instinctively engage her claims as if they were made in the subjunctive mood. If – but only if – the core claims of theology happen to be true, then it does bring the benefits and implications she identifies. If instead the Christian doctrine of creation is not true, for example, then the claimed metaphysical grounding of the possibility of academic engagement becomes at best of no worth, and perhaps even genuinely harmful to the mission of the university, in providing misleading hope.

There is perhaps a stronger argument that is implied, but undeveloped, in Judith's lecture – that the possibility of the university as commonly conceived depends on conditions that theology alone can guarantee. Even if developed, this would still unfortunately fail: the historical entanglement of the Western university with Christendom means that all such an argument would prove, if it were prosecuted, is that our loss of shared faith should lead to the abandonment, or at least transformation, of our idea of a university – a conclusion that many recent jeremiads lamenting the state of the contemporary university might be seen to support.

When Judith turns to the unitive function of theology in the university this point becomes particularly troubling: given that the central claims of theology are widely contested (or perhaps widely dismissed, and only occasionally contested), then an argument that a university needs them to be true to function without becoming deformed is a particularly challenging one for those of us who have committed our lives to the university. As I have noted, Judith indicates in her mentions of philosophy – and perhaps in her image of theology as ‘a’ – not ‘the’ – ‘tentpole’, that other metaphysical groundings are available; Islamic theology would do the job as well, I presume, not being an expert in it. Again, even if an argument were available that showed that Islamic theology could not do the job quite as well, that would only be a demonstration that our idea of a university needed to change as a result of our loss of shared Christian faith.

That said, the intellectual temper of the West, at least, is presently anti-metaphysical. Judith’s argument might draw support from a well-established theme in the history of science, first argued in 1930 by Michael Foster, that natural science became a possibility because of various commitments arising from a medieval nominalist doctrine of creation. Even assuming this to be true, however, the contemporary analyst can argue that the demonstrable success of natural science is sufficient reason to accept any conditions necessary for its practice, and so we do not need to accept any metaphysical claims, other than those explicitly required for the scientific method to work, to do science. Such a pragmatic, rather than metaphysical, approach seems to suit the spirit of the age – which claim remains significant whether we think of it as a recommendation or a fairly damning criticism.

Similar arguments may be made about Judith’s perceptive and thought-provoking arguments about eschatology and society at the end. Absent any shared agreement on the truth of Christian doctrine, the most such arguments prove is that a satisfying account of human destiny needs to fulfil certain criteria – to sublimate successfully cessation and fulfilment, for example – and Christian doctrine does in fact do this. (Of course, could one prove that no other possible set of ideas did the same, the argument would be stronger, but that seems an impossibly difficult demonstration to make.)

Now, we could imagine a lengthy and patient series of such arguments that formed an apologetic – demonstrating again and again that core theological claims meet rather precise conditions that we have determined are necessary for an adequate account of human life. Colin Gunton essayed something like this regarding the doctrine of the Trinity in his Bampton lectures, a

widely-celebrated work.¹ That is not what I take Judith to be doing here, however: she does not offer any, really, of the extensive examples necessary to make an argument of this sort..

Let us acknowledge, then, that the argument Judith offers unashamedly assumes the truth of theology: assuming the discipline of theology is what Judith narrates it to be at the beginning of the lecture, including a shared agreement on the truth of certain doctrinal claims, then our discipline's own account of its significance for the university and for society will be as she describes it. This demands we address the subjunctive I began with, however: why should anyone outside of our discipline take seriously our internal accounts of why we are important?

The intellectual temper of the West, at least, is presently anti-metaphysical. We might decry that as a failing, but must accept it as a fact. A public account of why our discipline matters cannot build on metaphysical claims that most of our contemporaries will disregard.

As Judith acknowledges, the public arguments that carry weight today are technological or sociological. The former are no use to us, but the latter are: we can answer the question of the relevance of Christian theology in university and society by pointing to the numbers of people in university and society who own the label 'Christian,' and by claiming that our discipline narrates something important about their self-understanding.

This will not be trivial, but must remain an *ad hoc* apologetic move: the intellectual coherence of our discipline demands that our internal account of its relevance is something like Judith sketched; but to convince others, in our present intellectual climate, we must make a different case externally. The case is easy to sketch, although harder to prosecute. We start, simply, with the acknowledgement that about 30% of the world's population currently self-denominate as Christian, and that historically Christian identity was determinative for the development of many cultures that are studied in the university. On this basis we will develop a claim that to understand either history or contemporary societies, an academically-serious understanding of Christian identity is vital.

Developing this claim will require us to engage in some challenging debates with forms of practical theology that invoke notions of espoused theology or local theologies to relativize dogmatics as an exercise in Christian self-narration; such arguments will be politically-sensitive at times, but can certainly be made.

¹ Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Again, this strategy is necessary *ad hoc* apologetic, formed to – or perhaps better deformed by – the peculiarities of our particular culture. If it is successful, it will be because it has mimicked the liturgies – or theurgies – of the idols. The history of our discipline teaches us well enough that basing theology on what is briefly culturally acceptable is always a mistake, so we must not replace the account Judith has given with the sort of sociological arguments I have sketched here. They are a contingently-necessary apologetic, not an alternative basis for the discipline.

What we should do is what Judith calls us to; what we must also do is what I have briefly sketched here.