

Religion and Change

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Religion and Change

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Judith Wolfe

Reading the Signs of the Times: Theology and the Question of Progress

This conference is about change in the widest sense, but it seems to me to be particularly interested in change as progress. To what extent is progress a coherent category and a possible aim? How do we think about it practically and metaphysically, and what is the role of religions in it? These are the questions I want to focus on, speaking from my particular position as a Christian theologian, but inviting those from other standpoints – either disciplinary (religious studies) or religious (Jewish, Muslim, Eastern religions) – to contribute their perspectives in the discussion period, and of course throughout the conference. I first want to reflect on the ways ‘progress’ has become an intractable term to us – something that too often achieves fulfilment only at the expense of those whom it is intended to fulfil –, and then to use Christian eschatology as a tool for thinking about this intractability and about possible responses.

I want to start in *medias res*, at a time we just about remember, about 120 years ago. This was a time, when the ambition for progress in theology was tightly linked to an ideological understanding of all history as a movement of progress towards physical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual perfection. Thinkers like Hegel and Fichte saw God, described as ‘Spirit’ (*Geist*), as working in and through history to bring the world to the full realization of its potential: physical (through evolution and medical innovation), moral (through ever wider extension of the golden rule), intellectual (through education and research), and spiritual (through mission and nation-building). Progress was experienced as a process of self-realization of the whole world (led, of course, by Germany), which for some included that of God himself.

As early as the later 19th century, this magnificent idealist understanding of progress was widely criticized, and the catastrophes of the 20th century brought it to ruin. Most historians since Leopold von Ranke have been sceptical of the idea of progress in history: how can one tell a single, overarching developmental narrative when actors, events, and perspectives are irreducibly plural and often at odds? Within this view of history as fragmented and contingent, the question of progress in religion or theology has been unmoored from questions about progress in other fields. More than that, progress can only be understood, not to mention achieved, by identifying target goods and moving towards them. One of the most urgent questions of the 20th century has been whether it is possible to identify unified target goods that are capable of coordinating the efforts of everyone, or rather everyone that ‘matters’. Over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, we have come to see

target goods as irreducibly competitive. This means that they require either intentional segregation or the violent prioritization of some goods over others. To segregate means, for example, to atomize or silo off scientific disciplines or to relativize moral frameworks and cultural customs; to prioritize violent means, for example, to impose a total regime or work towards trans-humanist goals such as the ‘singularity’.

I want to look more closely at one domain in which the intractability of progress is especially acute. In scientific research and the academy, the ideal of progress is now paradigmatically associated with the natural sciences and with resulting technological advances. These advances rely on the existence of physical and chemical realities which are intelligible and manipulable. We can make progress towards the discovery, understanding, and exploitation of these entities by accumulating information and by improving methods and tools. However, it is not at all clear whether progress in that sphere is compatible or in conflict with progress towards target goods in other spheres. The potential conflict was powerfully expressed by Romano Guardini (*Letters from Lake Como*), Martin Heidegger (*The Question Concerning Technology*), C.S. Lewis (*The Abolition of Man*), J.R.R. Tolkien, and others. According to these thinkers, there is a conflict here which amounts to a crisis of the meaning of ‘truth’. On the one hand, the breakdown of organisms into their component material and energy, and the exploitation of that material and energy for extrinsic ends, is in some sense ‘true’ to reality: it succeeds, it works. On the other hand, such atomization and exploitation are ‘false’ to what these organisms are: they destroy their particularity and integrity. How do we deal with this?

Pragmatically, we have dealt with it by letting the two stand side by side in the university. The university holds, or should hold, a practical balance between what we might call research and education. We, in the UK, are used to seeing research and education primarily as our two income streams. But they are something much more profound, and both are at the heart of what the university or the academy is about.

The university is a place of research. We might define research as the pursuit of truth, wherever it may lead. The university is also a place of education. Now, what is education? Education is the formation of a person who knows how to think and how to live. To believe that education is both possible and desirable requires a basic trust both in the value of the person and in the existence of a shared world in which teachers seek to orient both themselves and their students, and into which they then release their students so that they might discover and inhabit and mould that world.

Research and education are not separable from one another, because they aim at two dialectically related goods: I have elsewhere called them discovery and dwelling. On the one hand, both learning and research have to be oriented towards

discovery, towards truths, regardless of their use to us. On the other hand, as long as we are human, discovery must lead back to dwelling – to living in the world with each other and ourselves. We cannot fully or ultimately abstract our knowledge from ourselves, because the truths, which we try to discover, are part of a world we have to inhabit. Learning and research always occur against the horizon of the double question: ‘What kind of world are we dwelling in? – And how should we then live?’.

This lived world is not simply the world of scientific discovery; it is a set of conversations and practices, determined by questions and priorities shaped over centuries. This is why reading and knowledge have to be ever-repeated: just like faith in the Christian tradition, they have to be received and appropriated anew by each person and generation. The arts and humanities, including theology, are vital to the pursuit of knowledge not only because they discover new facts and create new data (though they sometimes do that), but because they directly address this aim of education and research, to dwell well in a world. They transmit the conversations, texts, and artefacts that have shaped our life world, and which we need to receive, engage creatively, and sometimes overcome in order to inhabit and mould it.

The sciences – particularly those employed in the service of technological innovation – discover and create possibilities in the world that sometimes outstrip our ability to live with them. This is the case now, when information technologies and (especially) interventions in what we had considered immutable nature have advanced so rapidly that we no longer find ourselves in a world we recognize. The steep rise in mental health problems in the West, despite near-unprecedented prosperity, shows that we have not yet figured out whether and how we can inhabit this new world. So, although science and technology extend the parameters within which we act, they do not answer the question of dwelling for us, but only make it urgent. The humanities can offer a vital counterweight here. But (and here is a big ‘but’) in reality, they often do not.

This is because we live in a world in which the ideal of education, and the idea of the human soul on which it depends, is no longer self-evidently coherent. Those of you familiar with English poetry will know the famous 19th century poem ‘Dover Beach’ by Matthew Arnold, an elegy to the fading of religion and a panegyric to the enduring power of poetry and of love. Hearing the long, withdrawing roar of the ‘sea of faith’, the poet promises to be true to his love amid the confused battles sweeping the world that has been left bare by the ebbing of religion. To the poet Matthew Arnold, and to those who followed him, the strength that endures is the sturdiness of human love, along with poetry’s capacity to draw thought from nature, give form to formless anguish, and span epochs. In the universities of the late 19th and early 20th century this new humanism became the soil of a study of the Arts and Humanities untied from theological frameworks. To the sciences’ rapidly advancing inves-

tigations of nature, these subjects provided a counterweighing defence of culture. But there are strong indications that in recent decades, the Humanities have experienced a crisis similar to theology's before them. To many people now, the concept of a human soul – of the human virtues, sentiments, insights, and traditions on which the humanities traditionally relied – seems as implausible and unnecessary as the concept of God. Matthew Arnold's faith in humanity is experiencing its own Dover Beach moment.

This is because the rise of technologies does not leave ideals of soul intact. The Enlightenment and its inheritors pride themselves on asserting that humans are distinguished precisely by being ends in themselves rather than fulfilling the goals of others, even God – in other words, by their particularity and integrity. Whereas nature is determined by effective causality, they argue, the will or spirit directs itself by intention. (Existentialism was, of course, a radical expression of this sense that life must be wrested from its intrinsic meaninglessness by acts of will and purpose, by achieving particularity and integrity.)

However, it is becoming increasingly clear that this second sense of human purpose, which is so fundamental to the modern West, may erode itself from within. For a long time now, we have come to suspect (as expressed so forcefully by Richard Dawkins and others) that what we regard as our own personal desires and goals are in fact genetically coded mechanisms for the perpetuation of our genetic material: mechanisms for survival and propagation which have little to do with will or personality – with particularity and integrity – as we experience them. At the same time, especially since the aggregation of 'big data', we have become more and more aware of the ways in which these desires and instincts, which guide people in choosing their 'purposes', can be conditioned and manipulated by external forces. In other words, the Western dream of humans as self-determined, free to create and choose the purposes they pursue, seems more and more like an illusion which is thrown up by our own sub-personal instincts and desires, which can in turn be manipulated by those who crack their codes and learn how to trigger our desires, fears and disgusts. Much of our economy is intended to serve the wishes of the consumer; but these wishes are themselves constantly manipulated by the system which is meant to serve them. Similarly, our political systems are in large part meant to ensure the flourishing of those whom they protect; and yet, they manipulate feelings of fear, resentment, and rivalry to dictate what counts as flourishing.

One of the dilemmas we end up with in this situation is a painful sense of contradiction between our experience of ourselves and how we seem to work in fact. We are at risk of thinking that the way we experience the world – what we regard as our own wishes, purposes, and decisions – is fundamentally illusory: that behind it all are sub-personal and super-personal forces that manipulate us like puppets on

strings. This is the vision of reality played out in cultural artefacts like the Matrix films; but the films, though portraying an escape from the invisible ‘matrix’ of manipulation, may of course themselves be another layer of manipulation, playing on our instinctive desires for truth and freedom for the sake of box office earnings. On the one hand, this painful sense of contradiction between our experience of life and what lies behind it seems inescapable. On the other hand, it is unliveable. The acute and overwhelming mental health crisis in the Western world is in part the result not merely, as I suggested above, of technology temporarily outstripping our ability to live with it, but of a sense of life as unliveable, as fundamentally at odds with itself.

The idea of a human soul, and so of meaningful conversations across time, makes sense only if that soul is responsive to something beyond it. Humanism in itself is unstable. Lose faith in God, and you will lose faith in humans as well. We can see this as a brute anthropological datum, something that needs to be acknowledged and taken in the stride of a progress that entails overcoming the idea of the human, even at our own expense. Or we can see it as indicative of the reality of God. And is not the radical commitment to truth that is reflected in the first stance itself evidence that the mind is responsive to something beyond itself, not merely self-serving? At least part of us wants truth, even if we – the very idea of the human – must die for it.

This lecture is not the place to argue from the unliveability of a life in which deception and truth are conceptually indistinguishable to the reality of God. Instead, I want to encourage you to confront the questions raised by our situation boldly, and I want to offer a conceptual toolkit from within theology for thinking about the idea of progress within a complex environment.

This conceptual toolkit is the cluster of thought we call eschatology – the study of the last things. I have said above that the aim of education is dwelling – to live well in the world. But I have also said that such dwelling may be reliant precisely on not merely dwelling in the world: on an element not merely of homeliness but also of uncanniness. Scientific atomization may make dwelling conceptually non-sensical even when it strives to make life ever more frictionless. But philosophy and religion suggest that dwelling well is possible only against a horizon of something other or more than the mere self, or even the mere community. For Martin Heidegger, this was death itself. Humans are essentially self-reflective; and according to Heidegger, death is the condition of the possibility of that self-reflexion. This means both that we could not see ourselves if we were not mortal and that, conversely, we cannot see ourselves truly except as mortal. For the Christian tradition, too, dwelling, especially ‘dwelling with God’ is not a straightforward idea: it means living faithfully in the here and now, certainly; but above all, it refers to a future which is both like and radically unlike the present. In the Scriptures, to dwell with God is a

promise of the end times: a promise of resurrection and of a new Jerusalem. Living well in the world depends on living in orientation towards that future: being-unto-death in Heidegger's account; living towards eternal life in the Christian.

These are eschatologies: They are accounts of life in which the question 'how should we then live?' is radically determined by the end towards which life tends – in which our identity or our history is fundamentally defined by our future. Some theologians and philosophers call this the primacy of the future. It can seem that eschatology is no longer relevant in our post-Christian age, but one of my arguments is that this is not so.

For most of Christian history, the biblical promise of Christ's Second Coming, followed by the resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgement, and the advent of the heavenly Jerusalem, guided people's understanding both of their own actions and of the times they lived in. That promise had both a moral and a historical dimension. Morally, it set all actions within the purview of an omniscient judgement to come: regardless of current inequalities and deceptions, at last the all-seeing God would weigh all deeds and judge all people equitably. Historically, it ordered all events within a divine drama leading through anguish to triumph: suffering, humiliation, and persecution were no more than the biblically foretold birth pangs of the messianic kingdom. Throughout Christian history, religious conflicts arose from disagreements of how to rightly map biblical prophecy onto the present time: whether, for example, the Pope should be understood as the vicar of Christ presiding over the thousand-year messianic reign preceding the second coming, or as the Antichrist beguiling the faithful. But these disputes did not touch the explanatory framework itself. The pressing religious question, in other words, was not how the drama of life and history was plotted, but only what role each person or group was playing in it.

The Enlightenment, challenging the reliability of revelation as a source of historical and metaphysical knowledge, inevitably changed this. After all, the last things were paradigmatically *revealed* knowledge. It was from Jesus' sayings and actions, and from biblical (and sometimes extra-biblical) prophecy, that the divine plan of salvation and judgement was known. The Enlightenment crisis of revelation was therefore, perhaps foremost, a crisis of eschatology. If Christian morality and world history were determined by their end, and the reliability of knowledge about that end was radically in question, how should one continue to talk about moral and historical action?

One of the guiding assumptions of my work (already argued in various forms by Karl Löwith, Jacob Taubes, and others) is that eschatology as a structuring frame of historical and moral thought did not become obsolescent with the Enlightenment; it was merely reworked. In other words, the standard philosophical narrative that post-Enlightenment philosophers made eschatology obsolete by formulating theo-

ries of ethics and of history that no longer depended on a divinely ordained end is too simple. Rather, eschatology was secularized in the precise sense of a transposition of the eternal into the saeculum, the age of the present world. If the crisis of revelation was a crisis of eschatology, the rise of secularization was, among other things, a transposition of eschatology: a multi-faceted endeavour to immanentize the eschaton.

There are explicit eschatologies, such as Kant's grounding of ethics in the *summum bonum* or Heidegger's being-unto-death, which deliberately anchor life in an expected end. In the political sphere, messianic promises and socially engineered utopias form the staples of political eschatologies. There are also implicit eschatologies: ways of orienting oneself in the world which are informed by expectations that remain inchoate. The story I sketched earlier, of the abolition of the concept of humanity by humanity's own scientific progress, is itself such an implicit eschatology, which can be made explicit, but affects lives whether or not it is made to do so.

In short, eschatological expectations do and always will form an indispensable part of the way we understand and experience the shape of the world and our place within it. They function as the horizons against or towards which movement is possible and makes sense. Without them, there would be no intelligible movement:

What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down?¹

When the sceptics of the early 20th century rejected the large-scale, quasi-religious eschatologies of Hegel and (in some places) Marx, at least some of them thought they were bravely giving up on all coordinating systems; but that was not the case. Individuals and communities (including national communities) never lack but always hold more or less adequate eschatologies.

Some of these eschatologies are consciously catastrophic. But most are utopian in some form or other. One of the most striking things about these utopian eschatologies is that they mark deep-seated desires, but (and if I am honest, I think this is one of the basic curses of human existence) cannot help but pursue them in such ways as to destroy their objects.

Heidegger's call to being-unto-death, of course, does so intentionally. Human existence, for him, simply is to live not towards fulfilment but towards its impossi-

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Translated, with Commentary, by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books 1974, 181.

bility. And yet for all its heroism of finitude, his tale depends for its pathos entirely on the assumption of a desire to transcend finitude which he cannot and does not attempt to account for. The passionate acts of ‘shattering oneself against death’ or bearing its ‘affliction’ which characterize authentic human existence² are predicated on a contrary longing which Heidegger’s analysis assumes as consistently as it obfuscates it.

Historico-political eschatologies, by contrast, usually pursue collective fulfilment. Yet, they achieve it, if at all, only at the cost of redefining out of recognition either ‘fulfilment’ or those who obtain it. This is most obvious in those political theologies on the left and right that tend towards totalitarianism. The German Catholic convert Erik Peterson, almost unknown in English-language scholarship, was an incisive critic of such systems’ failures to observe an ‘eschatological reserve’ (*eschatologischer Ausstand*), and his thought has not yet been exhausted as a resource for the future.³ More complex collective eschatologies, including ascendant varieties of transhumanism, also pursue fulfilment, but acknowledge that this fulfilment is likely to bring ‘the end of the world as we know it’: it is not humans, but their successor AIs, who will inherit the kingdom.

This suggests that what I have described earlier as the unliveability of our technological present is in fact part of a larger pattern, which we might call the antinomy of eschatology: the irreducible tension between end as fulfilment and end as dissolution.⁴ Not only in a technological utopia, but in any total aspiration, fulfilment seems to come at the expense of that which it is meant to fulfil.

This is already the case for Kant and Hegel, whose eschatologies I referenced earlier as some of the most influential modern eschatologies based not on revelation but on philosophical reasoning: in Kant’s case, the changeless *summum bonum* which grounds ethics, and in Hegel’s, the final state of wholeness. Kant admitted that it was a scandal to the imagination that there should be a state without change.⁵

2 Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell 1978, §§ 46–53.

3 Erik Peterson, *Theological Tractates*. Edited and Translated by Michael J. Hollerich. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2011.

4 See Judith Wolfe, Eschatology, in: Joel Rasmussen/Judith Wolfe/Johannes Zachhuber (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017, 676–695, here 691; Judith Wolfe, The Eschatological Turn in German Philosophy, in: *Modern Theology* 35 (2019), 55–70; here 57.

5 Immanuel Kant, The End of All Things, in: Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*. Translated and Edited by Allen W. Wood, George Di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, 217–233; here 227.

For a being which can become conscious of its existence and the magnitude of this existence (as duration) only in time, such a life – if it can even be called a life – appears equivalent to annihilation.⁶

And yet, the final purpose of existence, the *summum bonum*, can only be imagined as a static end, not as an infinite progress (because every stage of such a progress would be deficient by comparison to the next and therefore could not warrant contentment).⁷ We cannot get away from positing this static end point, even though we also cannot imagine it without imagining it as the annihilation of life itself. Similarly, for Hegel, the identification of philosophical knowledge with *wholeness* – with

comprehending nothing less than the entire system of consciousness, or the entire realm of the truth of spirit⁸

– is in profound tension with the philosopher’s other commitment, namely to

both knowledge and being as in their very essence dialectical and teleological processes of becoming,⁹

whose vitality lies precisely in their dynamic of growth, and for which stasis would spell death. Stanley Rosen pointedly sketches this antinomy when he writes that

if we achieve the Hegelian science of totality, we must cease to become human.¹⁰

I want to spend the rest of this lecture looking more closely at Christian eschatology in relation to the fractured self of our technological present and at the antinomy of secular eschatology more generally. The expectation of the *eschata* – of resurrection, judgement and eternal life – is rooted in biblical and credal statements that the dead will rise, that Christ will judge them, and that he will gather his elect unto life everlasting. However, these claims are not *arbitrary* data of revelation, though their fanciful, sometimes even lurid, depiction throughout history can make it seem so. Rather, they define the very fabric of creation and humanity as Christi-

6 Immanuel Kant, *The End*, 227.

7 Immanuel Kant, *The End*, 228.

8 Georg W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977, § 89.

9 Daniel Berthold-Bond, Hegel’s Eschatological Vision: Does History Have a Future?, in: *History and Theory* 27 (1988), 14–29; here 16.

10 Stanley Rosen, *G.W.F. Hegel. An Introduction to the Science of Wisdom*. New Haven: Yale University Press 1974, 279; see also Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Translated by J.H. Nichols. Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press 1980, 158–160, n.6.

anity envisions them. In this system, creation is a gift expressing the love that is the trinitarian life of God. The human vocation is to be drawn, at the last, into that triune life of God: that love between Father, Son, and Spirit which defines the divine nature or life, and overflows into the creation of a non-divine world. However, this ‘deification’ is not a calling that is attainable by human capacities. This is because ‘to be like God’ does not consist (as Adam and Eve were tempted into believing in the Genesis myth) in achieving autonomy, but in being drawn (and I quote Thomas Aquinas here)

above the condition of [our] nature to a participation of the Divine good.¹¹

Therefore (and this is Aquinas again), although ‘man by his nature is ordained to beatitude as his end’, he is ordained to *attain* this end ‘not by his own strength’, but only by the ‘help of grace’, which draws him into the love of God.¹² This grace is poured out through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ; as the Church Fathers never tire of saying, ‘God became man so that man might become god’.¹³ Death, once the punishment for sin, was here transformed from within into a means of sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ and so moving toward that life with God which is the innermost human calling.

This dynamic sublates the antinomy of eschatology, because it embraces both dissolution and fulfilment, and understands each through the other – Cross through resurrection, and resurrection through Cross. The New-Testament promises of the kingdom, in other words, are not simply utopian: they do not project a linear (or even a dialectical) completion of human potentiality. Instead, they require the death of the old Adam and renewed birth with Christ, ‘the firstborn from the dead’.¹⁴

This death and re-birth with Christ mark the distinctively Christian interpretation of the claim, appearing in both the Jewish and Christian canons, that humans are ‘created in the image of God’. For St Paul and St John, this means not merely that humans are like God, e.g. in being rational, but that they are united with Christ, who is the ‘image of the invisible God’. Both authors describe this union in language of sight. Thus, Paul writes to the Corinthians:

Now that Christ has been revealed, we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 110, a. 1.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 114, a. 2.

¹³ E.g. St. Athanasius, *De incarnatione verbi* 54.3.

¹⁴ Col 1:18; see also Rom 5:18, 1 Cor 15:22.

Curiously, Paul regards this not merely as a present but ultimately as an eschatological reality. The transformation he describes will not be complete until the eschaton. Thus, Paul also writes:

Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known (1 Cor 13:12).

And John echoes,

Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

In other words, the New Testament authors imagine a future time when humans will see Christ face to face at the *parousia*; and it is then that they will also understand themselves in relationship to and reflection of him.

This is, in some ways, very far from an intuitive anthropology. Contrary to the assumption of a basic and immediate epistemological access to the self which is prerequisite to all other knowledge, here, St Paul projects knowledge (or vision) of *God* as the most direct form of self-knowledge. In the eschaton, St Paul suggests, humans will know themselves not by reflecting on themselves but by beholding God and being beheld by him. There is also an obverse side to this. If humans cannot see themselves entirely accurately in self-reflection, then this is also because the deepest wellspring of their identity is to be created, sustained, and called in love. There is no 'I' apart from that 'I' as loved by God, and there is no accurate view of that 'I' except as loved. This, too, is part of the sense of St Paul's vision:

We now see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known (1 Cor 13:12).

This vision of humans as existentially incomplete complicates what we might say about dwelling in the world, because it bespeaks a restlessness that is not contingent but constitutive of our existence in this world. In our relationship to ourselves, this should modulate our expectations; in our relationship to others and the world, it should modulate our attachments. But the theological account is carefully calibrated: The human desire for completion is one that neither rests content within the world nor stands over against it: all human relationships of love anticipate it, and all care for the world prepares for it.

I began by reflecting on the 19th century ideal of overarching progress and on the fracturing of that ideal by the early 20th century. I talked about the experience of an irreducible tension between competing ideals, which made the very notion of progress problematic, partial, or potentially violent. I focused more closely on the competing ideals of human dwelling in the world on the one hand and atomization

for the sake of discovery and mastery on the other; and I talked about their unstable coexistence in the contemporary university. I then argued that the tension between these ideals was in some ways not particular to our own time but part and parcel of what I called the antinomy of eschatology, namely that goal towards which a system strives to is often at once its fulfilment and its dissolution – or, to put it differently, that it is very hard to pursue something in such a way that it will not destroy either the object or the seeker. I then reflected theologically on Christian eschatology, which in one particular way makes sense of this antinomy and presents a vision of human identity as resting not in oneself but in reflecting and responding to God.

I have spoken as a theologian rather than a scientist of religion, and my arguments have been philosophical and theological ones. It is a separate question whether and how such arguments can be made fruitful within the study of religion, but I encourage us to try. More generally, in this Academy, both approaches to religion – theology and religious studies or science of religion – are strongly represented, and I hope very much that we can learn from one another without immediately seeing each other either as unserious or as threats. This is difficult, because the driving assumptions of the two fields can be directly opposed. Religious studies or the scientific study of religion tends to begin from the assumption that explanation must be ultimately naturalistic: human behaviour follows patterns that are explicable in naturalistic terms and generalizable across domains. Religious experience is therefore analyzable as a variety of hyperactive agency detection or as a resolution of mental prediction error that over-prioritizes schematic priors over sense data; religious institutions are social hierarchies whose roles and dogmas are prestige carriers that can be analyzed functionally without remainder. Christian theology, by contrast, as I have shown, tends to begin from the assumption that belief can transform people at the deepest level because it reveals a world that transcends the structures that are basic to the naturalistic conception of human psyche and society: above all, the conditions of scarcity that animate evolutionary and social dynamics. Theology's basic claim is that, on some level, the world is or can be radically different than it appears through a naturalistic lens. It is a matter of theological debate where that level is primarily located: in the individual, in communities, in the past, or hoped-for future. It is also a matter of debate what the exact nature of this radical difference is. I have given a brief picture of the difference as seen through the lense of Christian eschatology.

In this situation of polarity, it is important not to insist on premature closure from either side. Real dynamism can come from remaining open to each other. Religious studies scholars remind theologians not to turn a blind eye to the common psychological and social dynamics operating in religious people and communities. If the cognitive processes at work in charismatic prayer resemble those at work in certain types of aesthetic experience, or if the social hierarchies of religious orders

display the same risks and failure modes as those of insular societies, theologians cannot ignore these insights. Conversely, theologians like me ask scientists of religion to be methodologically agnostic rather than naturalistic. Even if religious scientists are sceptical of the metaphysical claims made by theologians, their encounter with these alternative explanatory frameworks may yet spur new discoveries. The difficult problem of consciousness, for instance, may not be solvable on current scientific paradigms, and theology is one of the domains generating alternative hypotheses.

In closing, therefore, I want to advocate a more modest vision of progress, which trusts in the dynamic force of theology and of dialogue. Dynamic, from Greek *dynamis*, strength, means both ‘force producing motion’ and ‘force in action’. Theology should be both force producing motion and force in action. It should be generative of new light and change in other disciplines (producing motion) and also take into itself the discoveries of other disciplines (in action). We can build on many examples of theology as a force producing motion, both historical and current. In science, the comprehensibility of the cosmos that is assumed by a theistic account of creation propelled ‘natural philosophy’, i.e. scientific enquiry; in society, the New-Testament-ideals of equality and mercy created radically new social and political systems, which are still developing; in psychology, the Trinitarian view of God as three persons in essential relation propelled views of personhood that have defined our civilization. Such theological impulses are not only historical, but also current: In philosophy, the experience of transcendence encourages new research into how we encounter reality (both in analytic and in continental thought); in political theory, eschatology is catalyzing new theories about history. There are also, of course, many examples of theology as a force in action, affected by other domains. Historically, study of other cultures and religions has forced theologians to think in more differentiated ways about groups which they had been happy to generalize about earlier, and thus effectively to exclude from their theologizing. Ongoingly, evolution is making us think very seriously about equations of natural fact with divine will.

In this sense, the place of theology and religion in the university can also be that of a tentpole: a field that both enables and seeks open-ended conversations with other subject areas, because of a conviction that we inhabit a shared world, and that that world admits of investigation. This also means that theology is (not necessarily in every instance, but in basic orientation) interdisciplinary. Because theology relates people and fields to each other, it must be responsive to their questions, discoveries, and challenges. If theology seeks to understand not just one narrow subject matter but a shared whole, then, it is only as good as its understanding of the world which it seeks to illuminate. And such understanding can only be achieved by open, critical, and constructive conversation with people from differ-

ent backgrounds. This is an endeavour that counts as ‘progress’ on many different maps of meaning, and I encourage us all to pursue it together in these days.

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