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Letters to a Young Theologian

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Contents

Introduction • 1

On Ways to Theology

1. Hanna Reichel • 9
2. Jürgen Moltmann • 15
3. Miroslav Volf (I) • 21
4. Michael Welker • 25
5. David Fergusson • 31
6. Nicholas Wolterstorff • 34

On Hermeneutics, Reading, Writing

7. Richard Kearney • 47
8. Piet Naudé • 54
9. Karen Kilby • 59
10. Stanley Hauerwas • 64
11. Miroslav Volf (II) • 74

On Ways in Theology

12. Jan-Olav Henriksen • 81
13. Katherine Sonderegger • 87
14. Christoph Schwobel • 92
15. Paul T. Nimmo • 104
16. Kevin Vanhoozer • 109
17. Bram van de Beek • 120
18. Daniel Migliore • 130
19. Wolfgang Huber • 138

On Flourishing, Blossoming, Liberating

20. Miroslav Volf (III) • 145
21. Robert Vosloo • 150
22. Ellen T. Charry • 157
23. Emmanuel Katongole • 164

- 24. Mitzi Smith • 170
- 25. Traci C. West • 178
- 26. Allan Boesak • 182
- 27. Willie James Jennings • 193
- 28. Adam Neder • 204

On Healing, Wholeness, Dignity

- 29. Rachel Muers • 211
- 30. Denise Ackermann • 217
- 31. Catherine Keller • 224
- 32. John de Gruchy • 230
- 33. Michael Mawson • 234
- 34. Douglas F. Ortati • 245

On Public Life, Science, Interreligious Dialogue

- 35. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm • 253
- 36. Graham Ward • 262
- 37. Gijsbert van den Brink • 269
- 38. Alistair E. McGrath • 280
- 39. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen • 287

On Fun, Joy, Imagination

- 40. Johan Cilliers • 301
- 41. Cynthia L. Rigby • 307

Introduction

By the way, it would be very nice if you didn't throw away my theological letters. . . . Perhaps I might want to read them again later. . . . One writes some things more freely and more vividly in a letter than in a book, and often I have better thoughts in a conversation by correspondence than by myself.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "To Eberhard Bethge, Tegel, July 8 and 9, 1944"

Letter-writing is a great way to do theology.

—John de Gruchy, "On Locusts and Will Honey—Letter Writing as Doing Theology"

Although there have been many books with the title *Letters to a Young . . .*, the title of this book by no means speaks for itself. In fact, all five of the words in the title—*theologian, young, a, to, and letters*—are significant.

I will begin with the end of the title, with *theologian*.

With theologian, I have in mind those interested in *why* we study theology; in what it means to *study* theology, to really study *theology*; in what makes *theology* *theology*; in what it means to *be* a theologian. Why do many say that studying theology is an odyssey, a pilgrimage, a sojourn? Where to does this lead? What will we have to look out for? Who do we listen to, what do we touch or taste?

With theologian, I also have in mind those who *are* theologians, those who would *want* to be theologians, those interested in theology and the *doing* thereof, particularly those doing theology in and through *these* letters.

first of all seeking to gain something for yourself by being a theologian but rather if you're looking for something great to lose yourself in.

Best,
Miroslav

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Notes

1 This text, like most things I write these days, has benefited much from the community of scholars with whom I work at the Yale Center for Faith & Culture: Drew Collins, Matthew Crossmun, Karin Fransen, and Ryan-McAnnally-Linz. Like many things in life, theology is best enjoyed in collaborative company with those who do and enjoy it as well.

2 If you want to read my tribute to him, see "A Death of a Friend," in *Against the Tide: Love in a Time of Petty Dreams and Persisting Enmities*, by Miroslav Volf (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 209–11.

Michael Welker

Ways to Theology and Ways in Theology

There are several ways to reach the decision to start studying theology. It can be influenced by, for example, experiences of vocation or religious revival. It can be conveyed by role models in the family, among friends, at school, or in church. Or an interest in God and God's work and the desire for their deeper understanding can trigger the decision to study theology.

Perhaps amazingly, a firm personal faith is not an indispensable prerequisite.¹ Probably the greatest Christian theologian of all times, the apostle Paul, writes in his letter to the Philippians, "Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:12 NASB1995).

These words address perhaps the most important prerequisite for studying theology. Not an unshakable subjective faith but the serious readiness to better recognize Jesus Christ, God, God's Spirit, and God's work and to exchange this knowledge with other people should stand at the beginning of the study of Christian theology and continue to accompany it. All academic work in theology should also serve this search for knowledge.

Truth-Seeking Communities

A student of Christian theology belongs to two truth-seeking communities—namely, a religious community (usually with an ecclesiastical profile) and the academy (with a humanities profile). But what are truth-seeking communities?

Truth-seeking communities are not groups of people who grope around as if in a fog to discover any more or less interesting things and events as supposed truths. Neither are they associations in which people claim to have finally found the truth—with the claim that they must now offer it to all other people without compromise or even force it upon them.

Truth-seeking communities are communities in which substantiated claims to truth are raised, expressed, examined, and put up for discussion. In religious communities and in the academy, the student of theology encounters such truth-seeking and truth-representing communities—in a shared joy of discovery and a shared sense of responsibility. A wonderful experience!

The scene of Martin Luther before emperor and empire at the imperial diet in Worms in 1521 has often been conjured up as a shining example of the representation of truth claims in theology and the Church. There, in the midst of all the attacks and threats from church and politics, he is said to have spoken his famous sentence, "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, God help me! Amen." Is this not a wonderful expression of certainty of faith and deep awareness of truth? Unfortunately—no!

We don't even know for sure whether Luther actually said this sentence. The words certainly attested to are these: "If I am not overcome by obvious arguments of reason and testimonies of the Scriptures, then I am overcome and my conscience is caught in God's words!" Perhaps this was followed by a "God help me! Amen." It is precisely this combination of a firmly tested conviction and a readiness to learn, not a rigid, subjective certainty, that characterizes truth-seeking communities. They make firm claims to truth and indicate under what conditions they are prepared to put these claims up for discussion and then possibly change them: "If I am not overcome by obvious . . . reason and testimonies of the Scriptures . . ." The aim is to consolidate, broaden, and deepen knowledge, not encourage stubborn dogmatism (bossiness).

Truth claims can be supported in different ways. On one hand by subjective certainty, which is stated, for example, in the words, "Here I stand . . ." but such certainty can be based on deception. This is vividly expressed in the German evening song: "Do you see the moon standing there? It is only half visible and yet is round and beautiful." Claims to truth can, on the other hand, be supported by agreement and consensus in the community. However, it should be noted that even large communities can err, that they can be seduced and—intentionally and unintentionally—are

even themselves seducers. If truth claims are made, they must be examined for correctness, coherence, and rationality—even if their correctness and coherence sometimes have only limited range and validity. These limits of scope also apply to empirical and historical evidence. That is why we need not only study, education, the exchange of knowledge and experience, the joy of discovery but also constant critical examination and self-examination in the study of theology and in academic and ecclesial theological practice.

Sources of Critical Theological Examination and Self-Examination

Henco van der Westhuizen asked, What should the students of theology be looking for, what should they listen to, what should they avoid? What can prevent them from becoming good theologians?

All serious theology students should be wary of the so-called simple, ultimate, supreme thoughts about God, which are meant to complete and spare them the pursuit of a deeper knowledge of God. They should also beware of empty and clouded ideas of God, which try to convince them that not knowing is the truly pious, the humbly believing way to God. The abstract opposites of faith and knowledge, understanding and feeling are poison for theology and for a mature faith.

All students of theology should—both in their faith communities but also vis-à-vis all other religious or religion-critical communities—firmly insist on this statement: only a God who reveals himself is a true God. A so-called God who does not reveal himself at all is, at best, a thought idol, devised by obscurantists and the domineering. Dullness and thoughtlessness are not attitudes of faith.

To adhere to God's revelation, however, requires modesty. The fullness of the living God—God's preserving, saving, and uplifting creative work—can be so overwhelming that escape from it into simple, empty thoughts of God can appear like a lifeline.

The awareness of being part of truth-seeking communities in which we are all witnesses is comforting and helpful. Our knowledge of God always lags behind the fullness of the living God and the divine Spirit; it does not exhaust the richness of divine revelation. Nevertheless, the respective, quite perspectival, and fragmentary testimonies contribute to the shared knowledge of truth as long as they refuse the deceptive simplifications and empty ideas of God.

In Christian faith, it is the christological, the biblical-theological orientation, and the orientation toward the working of the Holy Spirit that keep theology and faith on the paths of true knowledge of God. These orientations are the reliable sources of testing and self-examination.

God has revealed Godself in Jesus Christ—in the pre-Easter Jesus and in the risen and exalted Christ. This source of revelation is opened up in the testimony of the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, the thorough study of the biblical traditions is a major task of the study of theology. The biblical traditions have been developed over centuries and in very different times and environments. A solid historical and philological education is very helpful in understanding the many different contexts in which they were written.

Many people are disturbed by the polyphony of biblical truth claims. In them, Jesus is depicted in continuity and discontinuity with Moses. He is represented in continuity and discontinuity with the prophetic "men of God." He is the one filled with the Spirit of God from early on. He is essentially the Crucified and the Risen One. He is the Son of God from eternity to eternity. What applies now? Does not this polyphony contradict all claims to truth?

A very decisive task of the study of theology is to convey the knowledge that it is precisely in this polyphony that the liveliness of Jesus Christ and his saving work are grasped. Not only the testimonies of the New Testament but also the other biblical traditions—prepared, collected, compared, related to one another, coordinated, and tested against one another over at least a thousand years—refer to the liveliness of God and the richness of divine activity. They open up a great variety of individual and communal experiences with God in situations of greatest need and despair but also in joyful experiences of liberation, freedom, and peace.

The study of theology also helps students and those who profit from their studies reflect not only critically and self-critically but also gratefully and enthusiastically on the immense radiant power of the biblical testimonies and the divine Spirit in history and today. In doing so, the anchoring of theology in the academy, especially in the worldwide network of research universities, is of utmost importance. It imposes on theology the responsibility to examine and prudently represent its claims to truth in the world of multidisciplinary science, in the world of international and interreligious conflicts and relations, in the web of diverse ideological, political, and ethical concerns and claims.

Pure Academic and Pure Ecclesiastical Theology?

The high praise of an academically trained and cultivated theology is unfortunately not shared by all religious communities and certainly not by many religious skeptics. Many religious skeptics fundamentally deny that theology is capable of academic work. Some religious communities shy away from the critical voices of the academy and of science and would like to replace academic self-examination with the instructions of religious leaders. They may point to the threat of one-sidedness in the academic search for truth, to educational processes that alienate the students of theology from their childhood faith, from the piety of their youth, and ultimately, from the authorities at home and in religious communities. These tensions must be endured for the sake of the search for truth, but they do not always have to be decided unilaterally in favor of the academy.

With due respect for our passion for an academically cultivated theology, we must experience time and again that some theologians distinguish themselves as historians, language experts, or specialists in religious studies, in the philosophy of religion, in sociology, or in all possible fields of psychology. A purely academic theology, however, misses the full range of tasks of theological existence and ultimately leads to a disintegration of theology. Does this mean that all theologians should be pastors at the same time?

The double qualification and double service in church and academic practice is a great asset. Those who choose this dual ministry face the vastness and liveliness, the tribulations and joys of truth-seeking communities in all their fullness. Any academic theology should pay great respect to truth-bound church practice and be able to understand and identify itself as a service also to church practice.

But just as a purely academic theology is an endangered theology, so is a purely ecclesiastical theology that does not face academic critical self-examination often endangered. It is all too easily subject to church-political and power-political interests of so-called religious leaders and interest groups. The churches, which were completely corrupted in German fascism and South African apartheid, are a deeply deterrent example of self-satisfied churchliness. However, academic self-examination alone could not prevent these ideological and demonic developments. What helps in this muddled situation?

X The event of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, which is central to Christian faith, should make all students of theology aware of the ways of prophetic vigilance. Jesus Christ is crucified in the name of the world power Rome. But he is also crucified in the name of the ruling religion, a topic that many religious communities like to suppress. He is crucified with reference to the Mosaic law and justice and with reference to the Roman law and justice. He is crucified in the name of fickle public morals and opinion, which soon cry "Hosanna!" and then again cry "Crucify him!"

Theologians, academically educated and spiritually educated, are called, according to Karl Barth, to a "watchmen's office opposite the guards."² In critical and self-critical, biblically trained, and christologically oriented academic and spiritual education, they can take on this great task—in the joy of liberating truth.

Ever yours,
Michael
Heidelberg

Notes

¹ That is why we should not draw too sharp a line between theologians and laypeople. Unfortunately, there are superficial theologians who may have made a career after their studies. And there are so-called laypeople without an academic degree, but with a great spiritual education and a nobleness (great formation or education) of the heart, whose theological insight is clearly superior to that of many a church leader and professor.

² Translated from Karl Barth, *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe: Band 19: Vorfrage Und Kleinere Arbeiten 1922-1925* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1990), 678.

David Fergusson

There are many ways of coming to faith, and it would be unwise to be too prescriptive about any one of these. Strategies that advocate a single approach quickly become too restrictive—these overlook the myriad stories that can be told of how the grace of God has worked in our lives. We can find faith through friendship, the example of other Christians, the influence of parents and teachers, uplifting worship, the power of preaching, reading a Gospel, a crisis in our lives, or more probably, some combination of these. The mirror image of this is the sad diversity of accounts that can be offered of how faith is lost and the church forsaken. Sometimes this has more to do with the lack of love or friendship in a congregation or the gradual weariness of unwelcome burdens imposed upon the faithful few. Although a crisis of belief can occur when, for example, a student enters a philosophy course at university or someone reads a book by an avowed atheist, there are many other reasons why faith is abandoned over the course of a lifetime.

So it goes with theology. There are different points of entry. For some of us, the call to ordination led us into theological study followed by a sense of vocation to teach. I include myself in that group. For others, the deep questions posed by theology have exercised a lifelong intellectual and spiritual fascination, while the liberating potential of theology can inspire social action and personal transformation. Or perhaps the spiritual force of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Barth, or a contemporary figure of significance sparked an enthusiasm that blossomed into a lifetime of study. Again, the likelihood is that some combination of these is obtained. The various contexts of theological study across the world also alert us to its diverse functions and the disparate reasons people have for enrolling in a course of study. For me, one of the most enriching features of teaching theology for over thirty years has been the age range of my students and