

## Farewell to Theology?

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At least since Augustine's *Confessions*, the theological task and the theologian's self-articulation can be seen as somehow intertwined. The fact that academic theological discourse often obscures this link is no argument against it. All writing presupposes an "I," and theological writing is no different. Indeed, theology, as I shall define it below, demands an "I-Thou" relationship precisely because it is a dialogue that extends through time and space. The following essay, then, aims to navigate the fraught waters of a theologian's self-conception and the public discourse of theology. Different modes of argumentation—personal reflection and propositional discourse, in particular—will be required, and this blending is itself part of the argument.

After eleven years in academic theology, four in post-doctoral positions, I have changed course. I left a job at the University of Cambridge and began attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing. I use the metaphor of "changing course," but that is not quite right. Perhaps a better one would be that of perspective. Then it would be clear that I aim to address the same issues, but from a different angle. The following argument is my attempt, as a Christian theologian, to make sense of this shift, whether of course or of perspective. It would certainly be perfectly acceptable to write fiction simply as a hobby, and even then to see it as somehow a means of engaging with broadly theological issues, but as a theologian who remains committed to the theological task, I think I can go further and argue that the act of fiction writing can itself be, from the start, a properly theological endeavor. In fact, if the following articulation of

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the theological task is in any way correct, a shift from the theological academy to creative writing might well allow me to have a greater theological impact than remaining only within the guild of academic theologians.

I would suggest the following as a preliminary, basic definition of the academic discipline of theology: To teach Christian doctrine is to introduce one's students into an historical and ongoing conversation about who God is. Because I speak here of "Christian" theology, the term "God" refers particularly to the God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. In addition, the term "conversation" presupposes a group of people. Historically speaking, those engaged in this conversation—that is, in reflection on who the Christian God is—are part of the group of people who worship the God being discussed, that is, "the church." But to be clear: the academic discipline of theology is not to be confused with the liturgical practice of the worshiping body of believers. It is instead a reflection on that practice, one step removed from the actions that arise from belief in this God. For that reason, it is possible to engage in the reflective conversation without believing any of the premises on which it is based, but because the worship of the church gives rise to certain questions, and because the discipline of theology reflects on these questions, theology and the life of the church are ultimately intertwined and inseparable. At this stage, it seems helpful to appeal to Karl Barth's language: theology is the church's "self-test."<sup>1</sup>

To speak of the "church" in such a monolithic way poses an immediate problem: if our eyes are to be believed, such a unified entity does not exist. In this context, it must suffice to make a theological claim that will be accepted by many—but certainly not all—denominations. Even the Roman Catholic Church can say about other churches that "in some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup> One might formulate it in the following manner: there is a reality, "the church," that comprises a multitude of "churches" precisely because they all worship the same God.

In its worship and liturgy, this church seeks to grow in understanding of the God who raised Jesus from the dead. This attempt is possible because God has made himself known, and in so doing, has initiated a relationship with his creation. To grow in understanding of God is

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. I, part 1, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 2.15.

therefore to grow in love. We can see the interrelationship between knowledge and love of God in the very structure of the church's worship. Week by week, day by day, the church gathers in God's name—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to hear a word from this God and to receive a foretaste of the kingdom he has promised. Upon hearing the reading and proclamation of the word, we demonstrate our love for one another as we pass the peace, and we demonstrate our love for God as we worship him by singing praises and receiving the bread and wine he offers. We are sent out into the world in the very peace we have heard proclaimed and in which we participate. This structure points to the twofold aspect of the church's love. The members of the church gather to demonstrate their love for God, and they disperse with a mission to love their neighbors as God loves them. In other words, we might say that the members of the church participate in God's act of loving the world. (I probably need not point out that the church fails to live up to that statement more often than not.)

The discipline of Christian theology—if Barth's definition is correct—sits at one remove from this practice, reflecting upon the reasons for its existence, attempting—as it were—to keep the church honest, but precisely because it engages with the worshiping practice of this church, theology becomes itself a form of the church's self-articulation, of its self-understanding. Barth himself suggests that, in theology, the church “faces herself with the question of truth.”<sup>3</sup> A survey of the Christian theological tradition would verify this point. For instance, to take a very early example: there was an interplay between the worshiping life of the fledgling Christian religion and theological decisions about the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. The church worshiped a human person, Jesus of Nazareth, while claiming to worship the one God of Israel. The theological reflection on this apparent contradiction arose from the practice of the worshiping church while also sitting at a remove from it. In the end, the conclusions reached about Jesus' relationship to the God of Israel affected the way the church spoke about him in its worship.

To claim that academic theology is intertwined with the ongoing life of the worshiping church is, of course, an idealized statement. I would even suggest—painting with broad strokes—that a fundamental difference between the theological reflection of much of the Christian tradition and the theological reflection that occurs in today's

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<sup>3</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, 2.

academic environment is that the explicit connection between academic theology and the worshipping church has been severed. To take an example from my own research: one can note the proliferation of what has become known as “theological interpretation.” Some biblical scholars and theologians argue that biblical interpretation has for too long been under the influence of a strict historical reading of the text. What the academy needs—so the argument goes—is to reclaim the properly theological, and thereby churchly, rationale for biblical interpretation. The fact that scholars continue to find it necessary to make such an argument demonstrates the point nicely: the academic practice of biblical interpretation has become, at least in some iterations, something other than the church’s self-test. I do not mean to suggest that academic biblical interpretation of this sort is necessarily a bad thing, nor that all of it looks this way. Still, biblical studies as a discipline began as an overtly theological one. The fact that some scholars feel compelled to argue for returning theological (that is, churchly) commitments to academic biblical interpretation demonstrates the ongoing and intertwined relationship between the worshipping church and the academic, theological task. Equally, it demonstrates how tenuous the link actually is between the academic discipline of theology and the worshipping church’s self-test. This fact suggests it might be suitable to look elsewhere—even to less traditional theological disciplines—to perform the work.

If the preceding description of the theological task is accurate, then I as a theologian am now in a place to articulate ways in which pursuing an MFA is not necessarily a farewell to theology and, more than that, ways in which writing fiction may well prove at least as suited to the theological task as more propositional, academic forms of theology.

I should stress that I do not intend here to offer a theology of literature, nor a theological aesthetics. To use the language of Richard Viladesau, the description that follows might categorize fiction as a “text *of* theology” as opposed to a “text *for* theology,”<sup>4</sup> but my aim is even less ambitious than that. I simply want to point out that—in the theologian’s self-articulation of the task—writing fiction can have the same interrogative function as propositional theology.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art, and Rhetoric* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2000), 123–164.

Barth himself suggests, "There is no utterly necessary, no absolutely prescribed method of Christian dogmatics."<sup>5</sup> In context, he refers to the ordering of the topics in those specific lectures, but, by acknowledging that the ordering and format are historical, he suggests they can be questioned. If that is the case, and if the basic premise of the discipline of Christian theology is its connection to the ongoing worship of the church, then one might suggest that the Christian writer is—at this level at least—positioned to help perform the church's self-test. In other words, the novelist who reflects on the church's worship and proclamation through prose participates no less in the ongoing, historical, theological conversation than the theologian using more propositional forms of theological argument. There are, of course, many ways that non-Christian novelists can be read as posing questions that the church needs to answer, but that moves us in the direction of a theological approach to art, making fiction a "text *for* theology," which is precisely not my point. My goal remains modest: I want to describe the Christian writer as engaging in the theological task from the start, as a writer of fiction.

By depicting the world as it is, in all its messiness, the writer "with Christian concerns" (to borrow Flannery O'Connor's phrase), like the Christian theologian, puts the question of truth to the church.<sup>6</sup> The discipline of theology pursues this question at one remove from the church's ongoing worship. In the same way, the writer pursues the same question. The difference is not one of degree, nor is it one of kind. The Christian theologian, in propositional argument, submits the church to its self-test; the Christian writer, in prose and in story, submits the church to exactly the same test. The difference is one of mode.

One might object that this definition opens up any (Christian) reflection on the teaching and practice of the church to the descriptor "theology," and that seems more than acceptable. True "theology"—in the sense of "thoughts about God"—only occurs properly in the context of worship where Christians enact and proclaim what they believe. The determining factor here is simply that the reflection consciously engages in the historical and ongoing conversation

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), 26.

concerning the Christian God. This engagement presupposes that the writer is familiar with the tradition and the church's worship. Equally, it presupposes an audience to whom the texts are directed.

So much for the argument that fiction writing can be adequately described as an act of theology. What about the suggestion that one might have a greater theological impact by pursuing an MFA and a career in fiction than by remaining solely within the theological academy?

If theology is the worshiping church performing a self-test, then theological texts must have some impact on the day-to-day life of the church. Of course, this impact will take different forms. Let me state once, for the record: I am not calling for an abolition of the theological academy. One theologian may write the most obscure, philosophically laden tome, and—because of the academic work she has done—contribute weekly and daily in tangible ways to her congregation. Even if no one bothers to read her work, it will have had an impact. Another might publish extensively on ancient liturgical practice and serve on the liturgical committee of his denomination, contributing to the ongoing worship of the church in light of his academic research. But for the theologian who wants her texts read by the worshiping church, who sees the texts themselves as contributions to the church's ongoing self-test, these academic avenues may prove far too disconnected from the day-to-day life of the church.

That has been my discovery, at least. I embarked on a Ph.D. to answer questions that seminary posed about the necessity of more historical forms of biblical interpretation. I rather earnestly—if not arrogantly—thought my answers to those questions might be of some use to the worshiping church. But what I discovered was humbling: the church already had the answers in the way it utilized the biblical texts in its liturgy. The academy had posed faulty questions. My Ph.D. was a three-year process of unlearning acquired habits and of relearning and improving forgotten ones. And I seriously doubt the book that emerged from it will change any priest's mind, if she finds time in the midst of the busyness of ministry to spend hours reading tortuous arguments about the target audience of an ancient Latin text. In fact, she would probably benefit more if she just read the text for herself. And no layperson without an interest in academic theology and its specialized vocabulary will even look at my book. If he did, he would find it unhelpful, and if he is anything like my mother, he would find the points all rather obvious.

Of course, there are many other things I learned during my stint in the theological academy that I might not have learned elsewhere.

For instance, I would not trade anything for all the time I got to spend with St. Augustine. I continued to research and to write academic theology, content for it to have an indirect impact on the church through the knowledge and skills I could bring to the pulpit and to my local community. Moreover, I took great joy in being able to introduce students to the historical conversation that is theology, initiating them into a discussion about something true. Even if they did not buy the premises—"Can I take this course if I'm an atheist?" "Of course you can; you'll probably do better than most of the Christians"—they could learn the skills of interpretation, and they could begin to grasp the origins of the ways of thinking that even now form the Western, English-speaking mind.

But once I found myself in post-doctoral positions that involved little—if any—teaching, I had to reevaluate my approach to theology. It continued to bother me that I wrote texts that would never be read by those for whom I thought I was writing, forcing me to ask how I could best participate in the self-test of the church through my written words. For years, I had been writing fiction on the side. I saw my academic theological work as inherently more theologically productive than the fiction. This, in spite of the fact that I found more provocation to my thinking in Cormac McCarthy than in any number of theologians. (When, for instance, John Grady Cole kills a doe, sees her eyes glaze over, and thinks that "the blood of multitudes might ultimately be exacted for the vision of a single flower," the theologian is confronted by a very real, and violent, world; some reflection on the problem is demanded by the text's duration and accumulated force.<sup>7</sup>) In spite of the fact that a theologian and former archbishop as influential as Rowan Williams engages as seriously with Dostoevsky and Flannery O'Connor as he does with theologians and philosophers.<sup>8</sup>

Disconnected from teaching students, I realized, slowly and over time, that the propositional discourse of my Ph.D. and my academic publications was no less isolated from the living church than my fiction writing. Moreover, I found that writing a novel allowed better reflection on the way suffering can fracture a person's identity, sending one into faith while causing another to forsake it completely. And I do not appear to be alone. To name one example: Dostoevsky, more than

<sup>7</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 282.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2008), and *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006).



any theologian, provokes the theodical reflections in David Bentley Hart's *The Doors of the Sea*.<sup>9</sup> If anecdotal evidence is anything to go by, more Christians read John Updike, Graham Greene, and Marilynne Robinson than read Barth or Augustine. Certainly, I would want to encourage them to read these towering figures of the tradition, but if theology in a textual form is itself a self-test, then I want people to read what I write, and fiction may well prove better suited to the task precisely because it will be read by a wider audience than academic theological treatises.

A worry might arise at this point: such a position comes dangerously close to propaganda. Writers such as Robinson, Updike, or even Greene do not conceive of their task in the way I suggest a theologian might. They, one might say, are writers who happen to be Christians. While their books might well engage with explicitly theological topics, or even with priests, ministers, and theologians, the writers themselves do not necessarily conceive of their fiction as part of the theological task in a different mode. Flannery O'Connor might be the American writer who comes closest to the conception for which I have here argued, and even she worries about self-identifying as a "Catholic novelist": "When the Catholic novelist closes his own eyes and tries to see with the eyes of the Church, the result is another addition to that large body of pious trash for which we have so long been famous."<sup>10</sup> For O'Connor, the Christian writer is pulled between the concerns of the church and the concerns of the art of fiction. She argues that the writer is freed by her faith and trust in God to view the worst of "concrete, observable reality," so freed in fact that it might lead to work that is not "suitable for everyone's consumption"; in which case, she says, it is the church's responsibility to censor the work. This censorship, to be clear, is nothing more than a vehicle for the freedom of the writer to pursue her own view of the world.<sup>11</sup> O'Connor worries that by bypassing concrete reality and writing stories with the aim to teach through them, the writer does nothing but craft propaganda.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," in *Mystery and Manners*, 180.

<sup>11</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer," in *Mystery and Manners*, 148.

<sup>12</sup> O'Connor, "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," 187–190.



It is “often troublingly difficult” to distinguish between propaganda and art,<sup>13</sup> but the distinction remains important. Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell suggest that propaganda is a “subcategory” of persuasion in which there is “an attempt at directive communication with an objective that has been established a priori.”<sup>14</sup> Persuasion, in contrast, is “reciprocal” and “seeks voluntary change.”<sup>15</sup> That is, propaganda sets out to convince without providing counterpoints; it aims to shut down the very conversation I have argued is at the heart of the theological enterprise.

If the Christian theologian seeks to engage in this historical and ongoing conversation by writing good fiction—that is, fiction that is art and not propaganda—then the theologian-as-writer must always be conscious of the messiness of the created order. As O'Connor puts it, the Christian writer need not “tidy up reality”: “Open and free observation is founded on our ultimate faith that the universe is meaningful, as the Church teaches.”<sup>16</sup> The theologian-as-writer aims to interrogate the church's worship and teaching by depicting the world in which the church finds itself in all its messiness. As Erich Auerbach says when discussing Dante: “After St. Thomas scholastic philosophy was in need of poetry. Ordering reason reaches a certain end point . . . when it is no longer able to express itself, to perfect and resolve itself, except through poetry.”<sup>17</sup> (One might object that I am speaking of prose, while Auerbach highlights poetry, but the distinction between verse and prose is not at issue in Auerbach's work.) For him, Dante has peopled his world with recognizable humans, while Thomas has not; Dante created characters who “stand in sensuous concreteness.”<sup>18</sup> I would suggest that it is precisely this notion of populating a fictional world that separates theological propaganda from theological art. Just as the theologian must provide valid arguments and counterpoints to them in propositional discourse, so must the theologian people the fictional world with real, recognizable characters. One thing any

<sup>13</sup> William S. Lewis, “Art or Propaganda? Dewey and Adorno on the Relationship between Politics and Art,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no.1 (2005): 42.

<sup>14</sup> Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, fourth edition (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 7–8.

<sup>15</sup> Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 32, 38.

<sup>16</sup> O'Connor, “Catholic Novelists and Their Readers,” 178.

<sup>17</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 72.

<sup>18</sup> Auerbach, *Dante*, 88.

theologian who has attended to the world knows is that the lives of people are messy. Real people are not types. They do not conform to a priori categories. As in good fiction, so in good theology written in the fictional mode: the characters must stand up and walk from the page. They must breathe.

Precisely in trying to depict the world in all its messiness, the theologian performs the church's self-test by reminding the church that our lives are lived in a realm of uncertainty that is sometimes not accounted for in propositional theology. One might say, in other words, that there comes a time when propositional theology needs some form of art as its complement. Or, in the terminology I have suggested: propositional theology would benefit from theology done in another mode if for no other reason than that theology—at its best—recognizes that it is only ever approximate. It can never settle. Fiction, precisely by refusing proposition and engaging with living, breathing characters in a world recognizably like our own, makes this continual approximation evident.

The real difficulties are practical. It is debatable whether or not O'Connor managed to perform the task she set for herself. One reader might feel she failed as an artist, another as a Catholic. If I aim to write fiction as a mode of theology, that bifurcation is the very thing at issue. The risk always exists that the work—because of its theological bent—will have the appearance of propaganda. Likewise, the risk exists that the characters run away with the piece, obscuring the self-test the theologian has undertaken to perform. My attempted remedy to this issue has been to study theology with theologians and now to study fiction with writers.

So here I end, at the start of a new beginning. If eleven years in academic theology took me to the point where embarking on an MFA seemed theologically judicious, I will make no guesses as to what the future might hold. I can, at the very least, state that this change of perspective does not amount to a farewell to theology. It is, if anything, an attempt to be faithful to the very academic discipline I appear—at least for the moment—to have departed. The real question is whether I will be able to hold these two perspectives in tension so that good theology emerges in the form of good fiction. For the time being, I can only continue attempting to put this theory into practice, but my own attempt—even if it ends in failure—is really nothing more than a contribution to an already existing practice. For

example, Rowan Williams argues that Dostoevsky's and O'Connor's novels arise precisely from their Christian interrogation of the world, and these works have provoked and continue to provoke Christians—ordained and lay—to thought. They are, in other words, contributing to the church's self-test; their works are themselves now texts within the theological conversation that is the church. More than that: these texts have also engaged those outside the church's walls.

Once this happens, the work of fiction becomes more than the church's self-test. The self-articulation of the theologian-as-writer that I suggest above is only a starting point. As a work of art, the fictional theological text is a thing, an object. Separated from its author, it must be interpreted, contemplated. It resists distillation into concepts and formulae, into proposition. It is here, perhaps, that yet another strength of theology in the mode of fiction can be seen: it can challenge different readers in different ways, whether within the church or without it. But here I must break off, having reached the point where an author's self-conception no longer matters, where the reader—whether churchly or not—must take responsibility.

