After Method

Queer Grace, Conceptual Design, and the Possibility of Theology

Hanna Reichel

WJK Westminster John Knox Press
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

"Hanna Reichel has written the best book on theological method in a generation. With rigor, creativity, and compassion, Reichel makes an often-dull topic exciting, even effervescent. This book accomplishes the seemingly impossible: it makes Barthians want to read queer theology, and it makes queer theologians want to read Barth."

—Vincent Lloyd, Professor, Villanova University

"Method will not save theology. It can't even save itself. But Hanna Reichel's brilliant book invites us to a better theology on the other side of methodological absolutes. Through careful attention to Marcella Althaus-Reid and Karl Barth, *After Method* diagnoses, undoes, and transcends some of the deepest divisions in the field of theology today. Reichel's book is not just a preface to theology; it is a major theological event in itself."

—Ted A. Smith, Charles Howard Candler Professor of Divinity,
Candler School of Theology, Emory University

"Lucid and elegant, *After Method* clears and creates a much-needed space for creative play in contemporary theology. Reichel deploys conceptual design theory as a potential solution for all the ways theologians have (wrongly!) believed method can save us (or, at least, save our discipline). This approach is not to give theologians another supposedly stable method to copy but, rather, to invite us into a stance of epistemological humility. *After Method* liberates theology toward the methodological promiscuity it so desperately needs and liberates us poly-methodologists toward the forms of playful accountability we so desperately desire. Reichel's work will be cited by any genuinely innovative theological project for years to come!"

—Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, Associate Professor of Contextual Education
and Theology, Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology

"At a time of disciplinary ferment and self-scrutiny in theology, Reichel raises a series of searching questions about its purposes, practitioners, audiences, and effects. In challenging familiar curricular distinctions, they gesture toward a more integrated and pragmatic approach that seeks to serve the church more effectively. Replete with insights, this creative study deserves widespread attention."

—David Fergusson, Regius Professor of Divinity,
University of Cambridge

"Few, if any, in the academy today are equipped to engage the range of theological and theoretical interlocutors as Reichel has in this book. With great clarity and wisdom, *After Method* forges a groundbreaking path. Conversant in Reformed, Lutheran, queer, and Latin American liberation theologies, Reichel offers both an insightful introduction to methodological differences across a range of theological perspectives and a stunning exposure of their similar commitments and pitfalls. *After Method* further develops a new theological discourse and vocabulary where queer ideas and lives are not fringe exceptions but are brought to bear on the most powerful and formative proposals in Christian faith. We need this book!"

—Lisa D. Powell, Professor, St. Ambrose University

"Reichel's *After Method* offers a breathtakingly virtuosic programmatic orientation for theology today to attend courageously to the reality of God. This is constructive theology at its best, infused with deep systematic theological commitments to the Protestant doctrine of justification and deftly deploying queer theory to discover grace outside the fixed walls of organized existence. With fierce clarity Reichel challenges theologians to practice theology with an open-minded honesty and expansive vision for an 'otherwise' in our challenging times."

—Christine Helmer, Peter B. Ritzma Professor of the Humanities,
Northwestern University

"This book is pathbreaking. Reichel is indeed after method—in many ways. Convinced that method cannot save, as many mistakenly believe, there remains the hope that it can still deliver valuable affordances. The book's argument is therefore designed—intentionally, skillfully, artfully, playfully, care-fully, craftily, logically, insightfully, authoritatively—as a conceptual guide on such a way to do better theology. It shows ways to do theology that will be less violent, less complicit in falsehood, and less arrogant and self-assured than much of what we know and do. It offers an intriguing invitation to come along on this way of doing theology—to journey together with others, often strange and unexpected faces, including outsiders; to experience the surprise of recognizing much that seem so familiar yet now suddenly new and exhilarating once more, like law turned into life, swords into plowshares; to become sensitive to false promises of trails in the forest leading nowhere or worse, to destruction; to richly receive that alien grace that awakens hope for what may become possible and provides reorientation in the dense forest. For those of us doing theology—whether in church, academy, or public life—this guide on how to get along—and how not to get along!—will offer much discernment and delight on our shared journey. Many readers may feel strangely reassured, comforted, and at home—yet also somehow subverted, even shocked, and strangely surprised with every twist and every turn: the route was clearly designed with that in mind and for that purpose. This book is simply trailblazing—in so many ways."

—Dirk J. Smit, Rimmer and Ruth de Vries Professor of Reformed Theology and Public Life, Princeton Theological Seminary

"In this rich, energetic, and wide-ranging account, Reichel argues for a thoroughgoing reconception of theological method. Reichel calls for diverse and creative queer destabilization rather than theological attempts to maintain control and focus on one's own righteousness. Weaving together constructive and systematic approaches and calling on theology to try not to save itself via methodological immaculacy, Reichel remains committed to an irreducible grounding in the reality of God and the world, and hope for chastened yet expectant futures."

—Susannah Cornwall, Professor of Constructive Theologies, Director of the Exeter Centre for Ethics and Practical Theology, University of Exeter

"Reichel is assuredly not the only one who is restless and longing for a different kind of theology, and in grappling with and pursuing that longing—in cruising that longing—they have given a great gift to the rest of us. Rejecting the terms of the methodological conflict between systematic and constructive theologies, Reichel promiscuously engages both, proposing a messy, indecent (queer) reorientation. *After Method* offers, dare I say, a better (approach to) theology—precisely as it promises nothing of the sort."

—Brandy Daniels, Assistant Professor of Theology, Co-Director of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies, University of Portland

"What if critical reflection on theological method, on the possibility of theological knowledge, offered something more than a cleared throat, a sharpened knife, or a soul in despair? What if, indirectly, almost accidentally, it yielded real theological substance—hints of sin and grace, shadowy images of Christ and salvation, a stammering witness to the eschatological itinerancy of a Christian life? What if these methodological reflections unmasked the sinful folly of every theology that tries to redeem itself, epistemologically speaking, by whatever method? And what would a theology look like that resisted the temptation to save itself, that broke free of the standard options—systematic or constructive, dogmatic or liberationist, truth-tracking or justice-seeking—by making each contend with each? Funded by a resolute theological realism and an antipositivist account of truth and value, could this nonconforming theology bear witness to God's queer grace? Hanna Reichel poses these questions and many more in this brilliant, important, provocative book."

—John R. Bowlin, Robert L. Stuart Professor of Philosophy and Christian Ethics, Princeton Theological Seminary

"Weaving between and together systematic and constructive theologies, Karl Barth and Marcella Althaus-Reid, the dogmatic and the liberationist, Reichel casts an exciting vision for what is possible when theologians are freed from their enthrallment to method. Where methodological dogmatism has reinforced divisions within theology and estranged theologians from the God they want to describe, Reichel's 'desoteriologized' understanding of method draws on design theory to help theologians find a way back to describing our messy reality and the God who exceeds all attempts at naming. *After Method* is energizing and challenging in the best way."

—Natalie Carnes, Professor of Theology, Baylor University

"Reichel's work brims with creativity and provocation, asking readers to consider again the design, use, and affordances of Christian doctrine. By insisting that theologians attend carefully to the ethos of the development and deployment of doctrine, this study invites us all to do better by both our subject matter—the God of the gospel—and all those who matter to our God."

—Philip G. Ziegler, Professor of Christian Dogmatics, University of Aberdeen

"*After Method* is many things at once: an impassioned rejection of the tired binary of 'systematic' and 'constructive' theology; an extended love letter to a deliciously odd theological couple; a guide for traversing the landscape of Christian thought without becoming lost in methodological cul-de-sacs. Even more, *After Method* is an erudite, humane, and imaginative example to us all. Reichel showcases a mode of reflection wherein responsiveness to context, attention to the grace of revelation, and the imperative of liberation are no longer treated as competing goods but entangled obligations—or, better, opportunities—whose negotiation can foster the emergence of 'better theology.'"

—Paul Dafydd Jones, Professor, University of Virginia

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Acknowledgments

The question of theology has accompanied me for a while now, and in conversations across a variety of different contexts. If this book is an attempt to reconcile them and make sense of myself across them, it reflects not a definite conclusion, let alone a final word, but rather my ongoing participation in these conversations.

In this effort, I am primarily indebted to my students, who have kept challenging, stretching, and inspiring me in these past years to spell out my understanding of theology in response to the many questions they have raised. The students of the Doing Christian Theology course have pushed me to think harder about the value of different approaches to the theological task, different modes and styles of engagement, and the need to be able to attend to forms of critique and construction that do not neatly fit into the categories afforded by the inherited theologies and their frameworks. A highly energetic study group titled "Is an anti-racist theology possible?" has challenged my epistemological commitments in light of the (more-than epistemic) exclusions they effect. The students in my Theologies of Order and Chaos and Feminist Epistemologies courses have helped me reexamine our doctrinal constructions with an eye to their affordances and materialized ethics. These classes also became spaces for experimenting and playing with theological method in redesigning theology in diverse epistemic ecologies. Wes Willison first introduced design theory into my theological imagination and inspired my explorations on the topic. Micah Cronin challenged me to take queer grace—the queerness of grace and the grace found in queerness—more seriously than either Barth or queer negativity alone will. The intellectual conversation with PhD candidates Samuel Davidson, Charles Guth III, Rochhuahthanga Jongte, Heather Ketchum, Gary Burl McClanahan, Mary Nickel, Eric Tuttle, and Nicola Whyte, and their own wrestling with how to do theology in attention to pressing contemporary issues and epistemological challenges has been a constant source of learning and insight to me.

Colleagues have offered community along the way. John Bowlin, Mark Taylor, and Jonathan Tran read early versions of my proposal and provided helpful corrections and encouragement. Eric Barreto, David Chao, Keri Day, Lindsey Jodrey, Erin Raffety, Nate Stucky, Linn Tonstad, Ben Menghini, and Micah Cronin read chapters and supplied critical and constructive feedback. David Fergusson, Julia Enxing, and Henco Van der Westhuizen invited me to present and discuss the emerging book with their research seminars. Mark Jordan gave me back my faith in humanity at a crucial moment. Dirk Smit has throughout reminded me to go beyond the "sharpening of knives," while also modeling what it means to take the work that theology *does* (beyond what it *says*) seriously as a material rather than merely methodological question. Michael Welker has been a steadfast inspiration toward an unapologetically realistic theology in disciplinary as much as in interdisciplinary conversations.

I am immensely grateful to all those who have helped me get the work *done* and into this final shape. To Brandy Daniels and Elaine James for writing accountability sessions. To Ulrike Guthrie for developmental editing and attention to voice and composition. To Samuel Davidson and Eric Tuttle for editorial assistance. To Ben Menghini for pointing me to the cover art, to Jacob van Loon for his permission to use it. To Princeton Theological Seminary for financial and institutional support. To Bob Ratcliff, Daniel Braden, and José Santana, who have thoughtfully accompanied the completion, publication, and marketing with Westminster John Knox Press. To Ulrike Bornecke for love and childcare when I was wrapped up in wrapping up. To Moritz Menacher, who patiently provided moral and logistical support because, in his own words, "I know that if you don't finish this, you'll be insufferable." To Joshua and Junia who were puzzled that even as I had written so many words, they might not be the right words yet.

The sustained and sustaining conversation with Benedikt Friedrich and Thomas Renkert has been the intellectual *ecclesiola* that has nurtured this book more than anything else. Among many other things, Benedikt Friedrich has kept pushing against my temptations toward negativity, insisting on a theological commitment to the "better" even after critiques of progress and teleology, while Thomas Renkert's ingenious theorizations of salvaging, labor, and care have provided much-needed nuance for the "third use" of method. Their companionship has stretched and expanded my theological imagination and enriched my own journey as it coalesced into this book. It is dedicated to them.

Introductions

"WE NEED BETTER THEOLOGY!" DO WE, NOW?

> Good theology is pleasing to God and helpful to people.
>
> —*Karl Barth*[1]

> Bad theology kills.
>
> —*Kevin Garcia*[2]

> Selah.
>
> —*the psalmist*

We need better theology! That statement, while providing the motivation for this book, comes with baggage: optimism, naiveté, and problematic assumptions. Let us unpack some of that baggage.

Better? First, the call for *better* theology indicates that things are *bad* in theology. Theology is in crisis and has been for a while, and this is hardly surprising since a lot of the work theology is doing in our world is highly problematic. In short, *better* theology is needed because there is a lot of *bad* theology out there.

Bad theology, some will say, is at work in unreflective, uncritical, and ahistorical forms of faith. Bad theology is at work in excessive optimism about human rationality and scientific objectivity. Bad theology is at work in the promises of earthly prosperity or transcendent rewards in exchange for unwavering belief. Bad theology is at work in the projection of overly human sentiments onto our images of God. Bad theology is at work where any political movement is directly and unequivocally identified with the work of God in history.

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[1] Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 196.

[2] Kevin Garcia, *Bad Theology Kills: Undoing Toxic Belief & Reclaiming Your Spiritual Authority* (Independently published, 2020).

Bad theology, others will say, is at work in systems of oppression, injustice, and discrimination. Bad theology is at work where suffering is justified as God's will. Bad theology is at work in the identification of bodies, desires, and feelings with sin. Bad theology is at work in myths of universal progress, betterment, and respectability. Bad theology is at work in all the "us-vs.-them" myths from Christian exceptionalism to imperialist white supremacist capitalist ableist cisheteropatriarchy and extractivism.

Any individual claim in these litanies might be debated, of course, but bad theologies exist, and need to be addressed, because, as Kevin Garcia puts it starkly, *Bad Theology Kills.* This claim is not so much a proposition as it is a diagnosis. "Bad theology" is not the subject to which the action of killing is (correctly or incorrectly) predicated; *that* a theology is bad is the verdict passed upon it in discernment of its fatal effect. This may sound simplistic. But "bad theology kills" is still one of the most compelling shorthands for diagnosing bad theology that I have found and not far from the Gospel warning, "Thus you will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:20):[3] If it bears bad fruit, it is a bad tree. If they behave like "ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15), they are bad prophets. If it kills, it is bad theology. Whatever else can be said about a theology, if it has systemically harmful and potentially even fatal consequences, then there must be something wrong with it. We need better theology.

Need? We are living in a world in ruins, to a not insignificant extent caused by ruinous theologies. Bad theologies are not only a problem for the vocational theologians, for those working in diverse ministries, not even only for those who believe in them. Believers and unbelievers, nonhuman animals and the creation at large are affected and wounded by many a bad theology and are thus in deep need of *better* theology.

In light of the atrocities with which theology, especially in the dominant forms of Western Christianity, continues to be entangled, we might also ask (as many do today): Do we *need* theology at all? Would the world not be better off *without theology* altogether? But while we might de-institutionalize critical practices of reflecting on implicit theologies, that does not mean they will go away; they will just remain unexamined. Theology is always already there, explicitly or implicitly. It is operative not only in our faith commitments but also in our cultural practices, political structures, and societal systems—and it is not going anywhere. In the so-called West alone, centuries of critique, speculations about secularization and post-secularization, societal and demographic changes, and postmodern disillusionment have not done away with theology, nor will the work of the critic achieve that in the future. The question therefore is not *whether* we need theology or whether we could just as well do without it. The question is *which* theologies will be operative and *to what uses* they will be put.

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[3] Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations follow the NRSVue translation.

This is not to say that theology will save the world, or even make it better. It is to say that all leveling to the ground or rebuilding itself also has implicit or explicit theological shapes that might be subjected to analysis and discernment. How do we live in these ruins, if not by attending to their distinctly theological formation? What can we rebuild from the rubble? Can we at least remove some of the theological bullets that have been shot at people and are bleeding them out? In which theological swords may we recognize repurposed plowshares, and which devices of war might we yet be able to turn into instruments of peace?

Theology? But what is even meant by *theology* here? The litanies above do not exclusively point to reflective systems of belief in the scholarly or disciplinary sense of that word. They certainly are not all explicitly laid out in dogmatic treatises, nor do they necessarily remain within what Western Protestantism has considered sound doctrine. But if theology is concerned with God and with the shape of the relationship between God, self, and world, then a lot of cultural formations and political commitments contain implicit assumptions that are distinctly theological and might benefit from explicit forms of theological reflection.

People are always already engaged in articulating these implicit theologies in words and deeds, in practices and habits, in conversation and conflict with those around them. Implicitly or explicitly, they wrestle with assumptions and experiences, with conflicting interpretations and ambiguous implications, and often articulate their own position over and against other implicit theologies in a deliberate attempt to mitigate what they perceive to be “bad theology.” They do so through practical demonstrations, performances and liturgies, through textual reasoning and faithful inquiry, through verbal, emotional or physical violence, through reflections on practice and culture, through apologetic or ecumenical, polemical or irenic conversation across difference, and, *sometimes*, even through methodologically disciplined scholarship. The shape of the life of any person expresses and generates, implicitly or explicitly, distinct beliefs about God, self, world, and the shape of their relationship—and these beliefs in turn have real effects on our being in the world, for better or worse; they *matter* not only existentially and spiritually but also materially, ethically, politically, culturally, and ecologically.

Theology is thus not the domain of a distinct professional class or educational elite but done by all who pursue *better* understanding, clarification, reflection, and critique. Alongside the "priesthood of all believers" that the Reformers claimed, we might thus also postulate a common "theologianhood" to which neither baptism nor a confession of faith marks a determinate threshold. But there are also those persons who make the examination of the theological dimension of our existence their vocation. The Reformers conceived the relationship between the priesthood of all believers and ordained ministry as a division of labor that allows for a more focused, educated, and reflective proclamation of the Word, and more intentional administration of sacraments. We might also conceptualize the relationship between a general theologianhood and professional theologians as such a division of labor: some people specialize in asking these questions intentionally and intensively, invest time and resources to train for this purpose, and sustain this inquiry over significant periods of their lives.

The professional theologian thus does not own theology. The professional theologian is merely the person who comes late to a conversation that is already going on. That person's work will partly attempt to make an intervention in ongoing conversations, partly engage in meta-observation about these conversations, partly catch up on its minutes, partly attempt to fine-tune and restructure such conversations, moderating escalating arguments and misunderstandings and doing the kind of damage control that will allow them to sustain the conversation. The professional theologian is the person who devotes time and training to explicit reflection on how to do theology *well*—even as what that means might be subject to debate.

We? In my claim that *we need better theology*, the "we" is thus twofold. In one sense, this book arises out of the firm conviction that the world at large is affected by all sorts of bad theology and needs, deserves, and longs for *better* theology. Maybe this is true even of God: regardless of where we stand on divine passibility, even God might deserve, and crave, *better* theology. In this sense, the aim of the book is as broad as can be.

But both the road this book sketches and the audience with which it converses are much narrower than "God and the world." After all, it is not my intention to save the world, or to save it alone. The ambition to save and be the savior is but another iteration of bad theology, as is the ambition of the comprehensive scope. Many who should be in this conversation remain unaddressed, and much that needs to be said is not articulated here. Others will be better able to make these other kinds of interventions, address these other audiences, and say these other things. I believe, however, in local responsibility.

One of the possible "we"s in need of better theology are thus the (professional) theologians. "We need better theology" is then not a grandiose claim but rather the self-conscious utterance that those of us whose professional role it is to tend to the shape of theology need to do *better* in light of its haunted and haunting state. But even such doing better is not for our own, the professional theologians', sake at the end of the day. Instead, it asks what is demanded of us where we stand, for the sake of God and the world.

Better? The aspiration toward a *better* theology, too, might sound optimistic, defiant, or even self-assuredly triumphant—but it is intended as a simple comparative, relative to wherever we find ourselves. I am wholeheartedly convinced of the necessity to fight bad and death-dealing theologies, and equally convinced that theology has something better to offer. I am, however, for reasons that will become clearer soon, quite skeptical of our ability to perform the exorcism Garcia calls for, and to achieve "good theology."

The Christian language of salvation and repentance that has surfaced throughout this section is not a rhetorical one: At the heart of my argument lies the conviction that sin affects the work of the theologian as it does all human enterprises. The theologian is not alone in such a diagnosis. Critical theorists like Adorno and Horckheimer famously also maintain that "there can be no right life in the wrong one."[4] While *metanoia* is always needed, it can never be "achieved" once and for all but is a perpetual movement in which all of Christian life, including the work of the theologian, unfolds. Justification and sanctification are ongoing; they can never become a linear progress or simple progression, let alone reach perfection.

The call to do *better theology* emerges from the insight into bad theology while recognizing that theology will never be perfect and maybe not even unequivocally good. The question can never be, What is the *right* theology? or even How does one do theology *rightly*? Nor is "better" here meant to indicate an essential quality, rather, it is a relational and comparative one. Never determined once and for all times, it can only be discerned contextually. Instead of trying to achieve "good theology"—whether as "correct" theology in correspondence with the truth, or as methodologically justified "rightly done" theology, or as ethically perfected "morally excellent" theology—Garcia's call reorients us to start with and attend to problematic effects. Instead of attempting to do justice to dominant methodological standards of orthodoxy or orthopraxy, we might ponder: Maybe it is the theology that is not doing justice to reality—neither to the divine reality it purports to testify to, nor to the human reality of actually living people. Maybe adherence to method does not get us closer to the truth or to justice, to union with God or to community with one another. Maybe we ought to seek specific, limited, local improvement for specific ills, rather than delude ourselves in striving for the perfect form or perfect content. This wrestling marks the book.

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[4] Theodor W. Adorno, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2010), 42, translation adapted.

At the end of the day, this is therefore less a book on theological method than a book on the ethics of doing theology *after method*—a call for "doing better" even as we know we will never "be good." Nevertheless, recognizing our sin and in gratitude for grace, we are called to "go forth and sin no more" (John 8:11) wherever the insight into a particular sin has dawned.

ACCIDENTAL THEOLOGY: LESSONS FROM UNBELONGING

Theology always emerges out of concrete experiences, and much theological insight happens to us by accident. A theological term for this might be "grace." The variation of "We need better theology" that I was handed when I started teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS) was the charge "We need a better *Intro to Theology* course." It quickly became clear to me and the colleague who were charged with this task that in the face of longstanding division and discontent in the department, the implicit task was to *do better.*

Known as a bulwark of faithful Reformed Theology, PTS is more recently aspiring to be a progressive spearhead and training ground for people far beyond the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The department had a long history of fervent disagreement and hard-baked divisions between different claims to the "right" theology, both within approaches and between "doctrinal" theology and "cultural" theology, between "historical" and "constructive," between "dogmatic" and "political" approaches. For more than a decade, several attempts to redesign the introductory course had led to nothing but further divisions. It had also added considerable confusion to the students whenever two co-teaching professors flatly contradicted one another or openly denounced each other's approaches as wrong. I have heard several accounts of de-conversions not just from the faith but also from a vocation to theology of those who got caught between the fronts: taken aback by the polemical and combative discursive culture they encountered, and disabused by professional gatekeepers of the calling they felt to intellectual work, these students were eventually deprived of their desire to seek deeper understanding in theological inquiry.

As my colleague and I envisioned a new introductory course, we knew that any adaptation of the existing syllabi would only lead to more turf wars—who had now gotten their way, who had gained or lost ground. So, instead, we started from scratch. One of the first things we implemented was an initial reflection paper, in which the students reflected on the understanding of theology with which they arrived at Princeton: what they understood theology to be and do, and in what ways they were already part of theological conversations. Across the responses, two things stood out. First, the majority of students were absolutely baffled by (and slightly panicking over) the prompt to think of themselves as active practitioners of theology. Second, a significant number of students had strongly negative associations with the term theology: it stood for something rigid and judgmental, or something abstract and academic, in either case, something both intimidating and alienating. These associations obviously were not caused by our local feuds. They had more to do with a broader perception of theological culture that students seemed to share across diverse geographical, educational, and denominational backgrounds.

Their responses caught *me* by surprise. This was, after all, a cohort of seminarians, and *Princeton* seminarians at that: in short, highly qualified, highly motivated graduate students, self-selected and admissions-curated, all faithful, professing Christians, passionate about serving God and the world, and seeking study and training to equip themselves for such work. How could it be that for so many of them, the term "theology" itself engendered only negative images, and that most of them felt uneasy with being identified as theologians?

Diving further into their responses suggested layers of answers. Many of these young people associated "theology" with things that had actively hurt and scarred them or their communities: women had been told they could not use their gifts to serve in the ways they felt equipped, queer and trans folx had had their desires and identities denounced as sin, people of color had had their experiences and perspectives denied, first-generation academics had experienced theology as a realm of class privilege and gate-keeping. Beyond these experiences, there was a widespread perception that theology was theoretical and academic—not simply abstract and irrelevant to live issues, but actively hostile to people who did not have the correct answers, did not speak the right language, and, scandalously, were *asking questions*.

In response to such experiences, students felt acutely that theology was not *for them* in at least a twofold sense: It did not invite them to participate in its endeavor but actively excluded them, and it did not offer them anything life-giving, illuminating, or rewarding. At the same time, these very students were wrestling deeply with theological interpretations of their experience, their churches, and their Scriptures—they just did not see this work as "doing theology," let alone understand themselves as theologians.

Increasingly, I came to recognize, in the sentiments among my students and in the divisions of my guild, the characteristics of a good family fight in which everyone is always losing. And yet, in these same tensions I also strangely found myself. Strands that had long been disjointed in my own formation and my own biography suddenly stood in such stark contrast that, paradoxically, I began to reconcile them for the first time.

Long before I ever read a theological book in my life, I was formed in a theology that I only learned to spell out, put into technical terms, and associate with particular schools of thought much later. While such is true for seemingly everyone, this is the shape this in-formation took for me:

As a child, I grew up in the tumultuous heart of Caracas, Venezuela, and as a young adult, I worked in the barrios of the Gran Buenos Aires in grassroots organizations loosely shaped by a militant liberationist Catholicism. Before I had ever parsed Luther's "justification by faith through grace alone," I had seen the futility of righteousness and the failure of works. I knew the violence and agony that myth inflicts on those who experience themselves as "unable" to "make it." Before I studied colonial history, I knew the brutal footprint the church had left on the Americas and of the complicated complicity of salvation and domination. Long before I was familiar with the concepts of Liberation Theology, I felt in my bones that a loving God cannot be satisfied with promising spiritual or transcendent peace, but aches and groans for justice and flourishing of all people in this life. Long before I had read Barth's Romans commentary, I knew that only a God who was *totaliter aliter* could save the world and that any grace worth its name necessitated a whole lot of judgment to set things right.

Were these what, with Juan Luis Segundo, I would later learn to call "pre-theological commitments,"[5] emerging from my personal relationships with people who lived at the margins of global neoliberal capitalism, a commitment that there must be something more for them? Would these pre-theological commitments later simply set me up for alignment with certain theological positions over others? Or was my experience deeply informed by implicit theologies that had trickled down from dogmatic conceptions through teaching and preaching and become habits of mind, hermeneutic lenses, and practices of solidarity of the ecologies and communities that shaped my understanding? Or had I simply stumbled upon the same fallenness of the world, the same need for redemption, and the same grace of God that theologians in all ages have recognized in diverse expressions and simply formulated in different ways?

But why think of these interpretations as mutually exclusive? If we are serious about the God we profess, then there can be no pre-theological experience; at most, there may be a pre-*theologized* experience, always already experience of and in and with God's world, its unredeemed shape as well as its glimpses of salvation. And if we are serious about the God we profess, then doctrine, on the other hand, is not an abstract self-contained truth about eternal states but speaks about the world as it really is. Nor can it be unidirectionally operative from theology to reality, as if theology was there first to then be applied to real life. It always emerges out of concrete experiences of misery and grace in the world, articulates their interpretation, and needs to remain legible and re-translatable as such.

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[5] Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976), 39.

From my own experiences, I knew in my gut that theology *mattered*—for better and for worse, that theological differences make a difference, and that different experiences engender different theologies. On the one side, I saw how, defiantly or quietly, a fierce spirituality drove the community organizers I worked with—most of them themselves illiterate, uneducated, and living in extreme poverty—in their work to not only survive but also to build movements with and for others and to build a better future that they might never live to see. Did their belief sustain them in the face of the everyday grind, disappointment, betrayal, violence, and historical hopelessness? Or did their experience somehow fund this stubborn faith and the commitment to a wholly other God who was wondrously at work in the vulnerable life all around them? On the other side, I balked at how the church hierarchy in Argentina had been hopelessly complicit in the dictatorship. Had their theology not protected them from the seductions of power and fear, or had their privileged position generated a theology that justified it, even saw in their survival a greater good over the lives that they abandoned and betrayed? In any case, theology *mattered*: It was part of the differences that made a difference, for better or for worse.

What drove me to study theology, then, was a desire to understand more clearly that mattering, as well as to understand why it could take so widely divergent shapes in roughly the same context as well as convergent expressions across different experiences. I knew I could read up on historical, political, sociological, cultural backgrounds, but I needed the discipline of theology, as reflection about God and the world and everything in between in their interconnectedness, to make sense of this reality at large. I needed theology as a grammar of faith to better articulate the reality, convictions, and commitments from which I came. And I needed theology as critical normative intervention to be able to speak back to them, to have a word to offer them, to find resources with which to confront these realities, to resist them and . . . to change them.

And, roughly speaking, this is still how I understand the intellectual practice of doing theology in an academic setting: as the specific movement of parsing out, articulating more precisely, and critically reflecting on the shape and the meaning of the relationship between God and the world that is *already there,* and of the words and images that people are *already* employing to describe it. One may associate this movement with the traditional vision of *fides quaerens intellectum*, or a "making it explicit." At the same time, that parsing out, organizing, and reflecting also serves a specific pedagogical and preparatory function: to understand something better that will then be put to use in practice. The aim of understanding lived theological interpretations better will also identify needs for clarification and intervention and prepare for the same. One may associate this movement with the traditional vision of theology as a *scientia practica*, or a "making it implicit" once more, forming understanding into practices, habits, and frames of mind.

I started studying theology because I wanted to go into ministry, to make a concrete difference in the world. I came from community organizing and went straight to classes in Hebrew Bible and Practical Theology because of the prophetic traditions and because of concrete skills in which I was interested. From there, I was drawn to doctrine, because I became intrigued in the nuances of what those texts and practices witnessed to, how it all made sense, how it all belonged together. From there, I migrated further to what the Germans called *Fundamentaltheologie*, i.e., something like the philosophy of science for theology, and what in the English-speaking world is often summarized under the vague term "theological method." What prompted this move to further abstraction was the increasing need to reflect more deeply out of a desire to be able to do theology *better*.

As my trajectory went from practical questions to more theoretical territory and yet the next meta-level, I accidentally became a theologian. I say accidentally, because I had never set out to make theology a career, I had always considered theology as a resource for a practice, a language and imaginary of this practice, an equipment and preparation for a practice. But I discovered that *doing theology* itself was also a practice—an intellectual practice of doing things with words, with mental images, with texts, with traditions, with experiences, with cultures.

I fell in love with the practice of doing theology, the textual discernment and reasoning, the wrestling with critical questions, the development of thought in conversation, and, most importantly, the teaching: accompanying people who wanted to make a difference on the ground in people's lives, equipping them to articulate their experience in theological terms, and in turn to be able to *use* theology to speak back to their experience. Even so, my movement into further abstraction perfectly embodied the systematic, the theoretic, and the meta, and I became a professional theologian. And as such I discovered that there was not only a need to theorize for *better* practice, there was also a need for a *better* practice of theory, in order to do reality justice, both practically and theoretically, ethically and epistemically.

I began my academic study of theology in West Germany in the 2000s. The formation I received there somehow made quite different explicit connections from the ones with which I had arrived from my lived experience of theological communities in Argentina. They were so different that I (much like my students later at Princeton Theological Seminary) did not see them as participating in the same conversation, nor did I think of contrasting them as distinct theological styles or approaches. This possibility only surprised me in hindsight, much later.

In the West German academic context, the systematic paradigm of doing theology reigned supreme. Other, more "engaged," more "contextual," or more "experiential" approaches were eyed as latently or manifestly ideological, as more interested in justice or ethics than in truth, and thus ultimately "less academic" and "not sufficiently theological." Indeed, "the theological" was practically identified with the systematic method, and detached, "objective" reasoning with scholarly rigor.

In my formal theological training, I was taught that any passion for justice and social change was works-righteousness (the utmost heresy from a Lutheran perspective!) and that concern for the ultimate has to relativize and override any penultimate concerns, lest the latter become idolatries. I was taught that, yes, bad things had happened in the history (and present) of the church, but that these bad things were *abuses* of theology or a *lack* of theology in the first place. Such bad consequences therefore were "downstream" consequences of being *insufficiently* theological. Theology determined practice, not the other way around, and it was impossible for good theology to have bad consequences.

Theology obviously mattered here, but the guild assumed that one had to start with theology, and get it right, and that then all else would follow. The concern for practice, for implications, for consequences was often suspect—an ideological trap that would lead to projection *upstream*, and thus result in bad theology. If there was an alternative to such rigorous systematic theology, it could not consist in engaged scholarship, but only in something even more "meta," more "objective," supposedly less ideological because even less committed to the dogmatic content it studied: the historical approach to theology that confined itself to reconstructing rather than being constructively involved in the theological grammar. From that vantage point, even the commitment to the faith of the church, let alone to the existence of the God it proclaimed, would seem naive and unscientific.

On the other hand, despite the relative aloofness of twenty-first-century German theology, I was aware that strongly engaged theologies existed: liberation theologies, feminist theologies, post- and decolonial theologies, and queer theologies. But in turn it seemed as if such "contextual" approaches had nothing but disdain for systematic theology: denouncing it as not only complicit in systems of oppression but also hopelessly their product, their mouthpiece, and their puppet. I found myself time and again deeply resonating with both their critiques and with their practical investments, which I perceived as fundamentally driven by *theological* concerns and insights. I also found myself grieving that no small number of these latter approaches actively distanced themselves entirely from doctrinal commitments.

Ironically, it was only at Princeton Theological Seminary, a flagship seminary of the Reformed tradition with a reputation for academic rigor, an institution that prided itself on seamlessly integrating "faith and scholarship," and a "Reformed and Ecumenical" identity, that for the first time I was able to articulate my two histories—my formative experiences and my academic education—as one. Here I felt the tensions between both "sides" so acutely, here the wars between different approaches were so existential, and here I found myself weirdly so alone time and again identifying with both "sides" concurrently, that I counterintuitively gave up trying to make sense of their manifest, hostile, and live divisions, decided to give up trying to "get it," and decided instead to focus on the "doing" of theology—despite the theologians.

I confess that to this day I do not understand the distinction and division between liberation theology and systematic theology. I do not understand the distinction and division between contextual and doctrinal theology, between constructive and historical theology, or between dogmatics and ethics. I do not understand the distinction and division between practice and theory that the guild both celebrates as a hallmark of rigor and practitioners in the church lament.

This book, then, presents my deliberate refusal to understand the distinctions and divisions that all sides have tried to teach me for so long. I have given up trying to understand them. In fact, I no longer desire to understand them. Instead, I insist on reading them together. I take my legitimation from a resolute theological realism: If God is real, and if this is God's world, these divergent and often conflicting fields can only be different responses to that same reality, different testimonies to it. At worst: mutual misunderstandings. At best: a division of labor.

This refusal to understand the divisions grows out of my experiences of unbelonging throughout my life: existentially committed to, but not firmly rooted in, appreciative of but not identifying with any of the places, the schools of thought, the genders, the cultures I have traversed, having found in all of them great value and insight, yet in none of them my origin or destination, my happiness or my home. This book, then, embarks on an exercise in deliberate, even strategic misunderstanding out of faithfulness to this shared reality and out of commitment to do the kind of theology that *matters.*

I did not only become a theologian by accident, I also wrote this book by accident. In summer 2020, I was invited by an international journal to contribute an article on the nature and the task of theology for its anniversary edition. As I started writing, the frustration of the state of the field, the insight from my colleague's and my wrestling to design a better introductory course for our students, and the disjointed bits and pieces of my own theological biography suddenly started to coalesce. I began articulating my conviction that we are always already engaged in doing theology, and that much depends on doing theology in such a way that it makes room for the suffering, wrestling, and joy of real people in their concrete experiences, and in such a way that it makes space for grace. When I had written the first 30,000 of the 5,000 words assigned, I realized that this was more than an article. This would need to become a book.[6]

Maybe it is deeply ironic that out of frustration with methodological divides, I would add another book on method, against method. Maybe my attempt to bridge systematic and liberationist theology, theological and ethical commitments, Reformed and queer trajectories will make little sense to anyone but me, and the attempt to speak in "both" of these languages will result in alienation from both. But maybe I am not the only one who is dissatisfied with these disciplinary divisions, who is not able to make their home in any paradigm or method because important things immediately slip out of sight, and who is haunted by the feeling that in all their differences, these approaches point to a shared reality and wrestle with it in their own ways. Maybe I am not the only one who is restless and longing for a different kind of theology, one that would stop being overly concerned with method, and instead attend to the questions that *matter.* If that happens, I would not consider it an accident. I would consider it grace.

UN/JUST METHOD: HOW DO WE KNOW . . . CHRIST?

What does it mean to know God? "*Hoc est Christum cognoscere, beneficia eius cognoscere*"[7] ("to know Christ means to know Christ's benefits") was Philipp Melanchthon's claim in his *Loci Communes*, the first "Systematic Theology" in the sense of the modern genre, and, incidentally, the first proposal of theological method in the Reformation.[8]

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[6] Chapters 1, 2, 3, 7, 8 of this book expand the sketch in Hanna Reichel, "Conceptual Design, Sin and the Affordances of Doctrine," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 22, (2020): 538–61.

[7] Philip Melanchthon, *Commonplaces: Loci Communes 1521* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2014).

[8] Melanchthon himself called his *Loci* "mea methodus," Philipp Melanchthon, *Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider, CR 1 (Halle: Schwetschke, 1834), 366. Luther also referenced the book as such: "*Methodus tua gratissima est; nihil est, quod mea penuria tuas opes hic moneat; prospere procede et regna,*" Martin Luther "Nr. 428 Luther and Melanchthon. Wartburg,

In his introduction, Melanchthon cautions against speculation about the nature of God. It is through his works that Christ is known, through the benefits he imparts to us, through the use to which he is put. Only by understanding how Christ benefits us are we able to articulate both grace and sin, only from there to draw out true knowledge of God and of the human being, and only from there can insights into the nature of Christ and the nature of God be formulated. Melanchthon's programmatic dictum became a shibboleth of Protestantism.[9] Barth judged,

> With particularly painful clarity we are faced here by the rift which divides the Evangelical Church. Those who are at loggerheads here can neither understand nor convince one another. They not only speak another language; they speak out of a different knowledge. They not only have a different theology; they also have a different faith.[10]

Should theology be fundamentally concerned with who God *is* in Godself or with what God has done *for us* in history? Should Christology be done "from above" or "from below"? Is the primary purpose of theology *noetic* or *ethical*? These questions signal some of the variations the rift has taken in the meantime, running through debates as diverse as the ones between Erasmus von Rotterdam and Martin Luther,[11] between Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth, and, in our day, between doctrinal and liberationist theologies.

The tragedy of the divide is, of course, that it is false—both ontologically and epistemically speaking. Both "sides," respectively, have typically asserted its falsity—maintained that who God is *is* no other than God for us, that the work of Christ is no other than who Christ *is*, that the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity. Both sides have also maintained that Christ is definitive for our knowledge of God and for our knowledge of ourselves, i.e., that who God is *is* revealed in Christ's work for us. What remains as divisive is the order in which different parties want to read the equation, its sequence or direction, in other words: What has divided theologians is the question of *how to proceed*: theological method.

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9 September 1521," In *WAB 2 (1520–1522),* ed. Joachim Karl Friedrich Knaake, 382–87, (Weimar: Böhlaus, 1931), 382: 3–4.

[9] Cf. the very informative study by Jan Bauke-Ruegg, "'Hoc est Christum cognoscere beneficia eius cognoscere': Melanchthons 'Loci Communes' von 1521 und die Frage nach dem Proprium reformatorischer Dogmatik. Ein Lektüreversuch." *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 42, no. 3 (2000).

[10] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 425.

[11] Wilhelm Maurer, "Melanchthons Anteil am Streit zwischen Luther und Erasmus," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 49, (1958): 89–115.

The insistence on the direction of the reading is not trivial. Much is at stake, because much can go wrong. In any given variation of this conflict, both sides have seen fundamental theological commitments endangered by the one-sidedness of the respective other. But what if we read Melanchthon's *Hoc est* as strictly pointing to the epistemic *site* of theology: the incarnate word of God in Christ, which as such is both God's self-revelation (who God is) *and* good news (what God is for us)? The starting point itself thus already includes a bi-directional definition, and bi-directional consequences. Only by knowing Christ are we able to recognize his benefits. But also, it is from Christ's work that we see who Christ really is. Only by knowing Christ and the grace found in him are we able to understand our own situation of misery and sin. But also, our experiences of misery and grace are what points us to Christ. Only by knowing Christ are we able to talk about who God the Father and the Spirit are. But also, our Trinitarian theology allows us to delineate properly what we see happening in Christ.

In Melanchthon's own theology we can observe an intricate web of mutual, and at times "irritating identifications"[12] of different theological touch points and insights with one another, raising the question whether all of theology is ultimately only tautology and rhetoric. This, however, is precisely where the *beneficia Christi* develop their force: functioning as the one concrete, irreducible anchoring point of theological reflection. They are where heaven touches earth, and thus the starting point, end point, and point of return of all theological reflection. "Knowing Christ through his benefits" thus describes the core of the knowledge to which Christian theology points.

But *how* do we know Christ and his benefits? Of course, this is again where theological approaches differ. By reading and interpreting the Scriptures, say some. By experiencing the grace of Christ in our lives, say others. Both of these are important routes. Without in any way challenging either of them or their necessary conspiration, this book takes a different route. It looks at theological method. More precisely, it looks at the issues that ensue when theology tries to establish itself by way of method, and it tries to draw out the precise shape of these problems theoretically and theologically. Rather than trying to deduce an "adequate" method from the subject matter of theology—which ultimately means presupposing a certain theology, deducing a method from it, by way of which we then reinforce the presupposed theology—I will look at the problems that ensue when we try to establish one. Rather than investigating christological claims directly, we look at the conditions of the possibility of our knowledge on the ground, or rather, as it will turn out, at the factual disarray of such pursuit.

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[12] Bauke-Ruegg, "Hoc est Christum cognoscere," 288–90.

I then ask what these findings imply, theologically. By investigating the shape of epistemological issues, the book thus takes an explicitly anthropological, even anthropopragmatic approach: It starts with the human being and the conditions under which we attempt to gain knowledge, rather than with God. Its wager, however, is that if the *beneficia Christi* are real, they will not simply solve our problems at the end of the day, but they have always already responded to the condition in which we find ourselves. Thus, those benefits will already assert themselves in the shape of the problem that we draw out. In short, the wager is that at the end of this epistemological, anthropological road, something like an implicit Christology will come into view. Rather than presupposing that we know who Christ is and what the nature of Christ's benefits are, we will trust that examining in depth the shape of the problems as they present themselves to us—while not giving us a complete account of Christ by any means—will nonetheless give us an inverse shadow image of the *solus Christus* that the Reformation has asserted.

Some more clarifications are in order. First, on terminology. Throughout this book, I use the language of "Systematic Theology" and "Constructive Theology." I understand these terms not as descriptions, much less as definitions of differing approaches, and more as the discursive *framing devices* as which these terms function in a lot of contemporary discussions to categorize existent theological approaches according to main theological and epistemic commitments and resultant methodological frameworks. At least in the European, USian, and Latin American theological contexts I have inhabited, the categories of "Systematic Theology" (or "doctrinal theology," "dogmatics," "classical theology" etc.) and "Constructive Theology" (or "Liberation(ist) Theology," "Contextual Theology," etc.) function as boundary drawings: positively identifying main commitments that characterize a given theological approach and negatively marking an "other" who thereby is denounced as "not sufficiently theological" or "not sufficiently critical," respectively. Definitions might characterize the one as primarily "truth-seeking," the other as primarily "justice-seeking"; the one as primarily indebted to the doctrinal tradition of creeds, confessions and theological deliberation of confessional churches, the other as primarily indebted to the contextual experiences and struggles of particular communities; the one as primarily organizing faith-claims into rationally defensible systems, the other as primarily disrupting dominant structures with subjugated knowledges.

These categories are types at best, and caricatures at worst. Even as many theological approaches would identify themselves strongly with one or the other term, many—and I would say, the *better*—versions of "both" would understand these two sets of commitments and concerns to not be mutually exclusive and indeed rather intertwined. Throughout this book, I attempt to demonstrate that the *best* versions of what is typically considered "Systematic Theology" and the best versions of what is typically considered "Constructive Theology" can come to remarkably similar insights about the shape of truth and justice, and can function as allies to each other in their pursuit. I am not saying that they necessarily do or have to, only that it is possible for them to work this way, and that personally, I find doing so to be mutually beneficial in service to the project of "better" theology.

Throughout the book, I will thus use the terms "Systematic Theology" and "Constructive Theology" strictly and strategically to frame "types" for heuristic and diagnostic purposes—not to give a nuanced or accurate account of any individual actually existent position. My wager is that doing so will help identify the particularities of different theological *epistemes* operative within different theological methodological frameworks. To remind the reader of this typological rather than descriptive use, I capitalize "Systematic Theology" and "Constructive Theology."

In order to traverse the width of the divide, I choose such main interlocutors as will typically be conceived as exclusively representing one "side" with even a significant hostility against the other. Karl Barth and Marcella Althaus-Reid figure as exemplars of the systematic and constructive commitments in doing theology, respectively. Presumably, both would object to this categorization, but as per common practice, dead authors do not get a say with regard to the conversations in which they participate. They are chosen not so much as "representatives" of Systematic Theologians and Constructive Theologians, but because both distinguish themselves by a reflexive, self-critical deployment of the respective paradigm as well as a certain levity (which their respective followers often curiously lack): Their complete commitment to their *Sache* at the same time gives them all the liberty of not taking themselves or their method too seriously.

With his monumental and authoritative oeuvre, Karl Barth represents one of the pre-dominant dogmatic "systems" of Western theology. Barth's theology is marked by his firm but not uncritical commitment to the Scriptures, by a thorough appreciation and engagement with the history of doctrine in the ecumenical church, its creedal and doctrinal consensuses, and by a Christocentric commitment which allows him to reorganize a lot of the language he has inherited in "reforming" ways. Importantly, he is a theological "realist"—and critical of theological idealism as idolatry (primarily identified in the elevation of religious experience). His theology is thus decidedly post-critical: It takes the major modern critiques of epistemology and religion into account and even radicalizes them—the intellectual critique of Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, as well as the existential, political, and theological disillusionments with modernity in the wake of World War One. As such, Barth's Systematic

Theology is rather post-systematic than pre-modern. It continues to function as a theological "grammar" in many branches of Protestantism and beyond.

In its scandalous irreverence, Marcella Althaus-Reid's critique of theology's dominational entanglements continues to be one of the most critical intersectional proposals in Constructive Theology. Her queer-feminist, materialist, decolonial intervention is equally indebted to and critical of liberation and feminist theologies, expanding and radicalizing them in decisive ways. Marked by a syncretistic mix of high theory, folklore, and sexual storytelling "from below," her radical critique of dominant theologies is always in service of liberation—queer and indigenous people's as much as God's own. Her approach is thus similarly post-critical and committed on the constructive side as Karl Barth's is on the systematic one. I therefore lift the two of them up as standing for the best work the respective "types" have to offer, striving to demonstrate how, despite obvious and undeniable differences, the contrived types are not antagonistic projects.

In line with its primary commitment to coherence and unity, the Systematic side will primarily be represented by one theological system, namely constructed from within Barth's theology and the theology of the Reformation he adopts. In line with its primary commitment to experience and struggle, the Constructive side will be better represented by a variety of voices than by a single interlocutor. A less unified archive will serve to contribute important insights and invectives on the Constructive side, with particular attention given to interlocutors from (post-)Liberationist theology and queer theory—without any pretension or aspiration that they should individually or collectively represent the Constructive "side," just like Barth obviously cannot speak for Systematic Theology at large.

Importantly, I will read both Barth and Althaus-Reid, both the Systematic and the Constructive, both the doctrinal and the queer approach, as deeply rooted in a theological realism and pursuing decidedly *theo*logical projects, that is, as speaking of (1) the scandalous reality of the wholly other God, (2) the true humanity of the human being, and (3) the relationship between them. I will read both of them as attempting to speak truth by doing justice to these realities. Construing a common ground this way will allow to better distinguish the different scientific epistemes with differing frameworks of accountability and theological "quality control."

This book, then, is written from a dual commitment: to the reality to which Systematic Theology at its best tries to witness, and to the reality to which Constructive Theology at its best tries to do justice. In short: to God and the world, to both of their stubborn, slippery, challenging realities, to the transcendence and immanence of both. Working toward a *constructive* way of taking such difficulty into account *systematically,* this book, not only in its argument, but even in its structure and its language, will thus perform an experiment, a kind of Feyerabendian wager. Following Feyerabend's studies in the history of science, it will assume that any attempt of doing justice to these realities (whatever that may mean) can only be achieved by *breaking* with method rather than by following it, and that such bold procedure can never be justified in advance, only rationalized in hindsight in light of its insights.[13]

Making "both sides'" contentions against one another my business, this book then is as much a lived Constructive Theologian's as it is a trained Systematic Theologian's self-reflection and self-critique. It assumes and points out the impossibility of doing theology *rightly*—and moves beyond it. Organized as a conversation in two voices—the Systematic-theological, dogmatic, confessional voice, prominently represented by Karl Barth, and the Constructive-theological, queer, decolonial voice, prominently represented by Marcella Althaus-Reid, the book wagers that beyond all their difference, there might be significant overlaps in the theological and material *realities* to which they ultimately testify and to which they are committed, and that in the interference patterns between them, constructive insights might thus emerge. Identifying with central commitments of Systematic and Constructive theological work, respectively, and disregarding their supposed mutual exclusiveness, it draws on the theology of the Reformers as much as on queer critique, and eventually hazards a foray into design theory and philosophy of information. Through a material-historical contextualization of the different paradigms and through a doctrinal assessment of epistemic sin, the redemptive potential of any methodological program is thoroughly called into question. But the recognition that no method may be able to "save" theology does not mean that we cannot do "better" than we are doing at any given time and place. By refusing the appearance of epistemic incommensurability produced by adherence to differing methodological programs, the book harnesses the best insights Systematic and Constructive Theologies have to offer in their mutual critique and gestures toward a "better" theology—one that relies on localized close feedback-loops instead of universal truth-aspirations.

Claiming and drawing out the architectural metaphor operative in both constructive and systematic approaches, the book plays with an understanding of theological work as *conceptual design*, responsibly ordering and structuring given materials for a purpose. A more realistic *adaequatio ad rem* for theology results. On the one hand, such an understanding of theological work heightens the stakes and demands the expansion of theology's critical standards to encompass not only cognitive and logical criteria but also the practical effects and uses of doctrine in an ethic of affordances. On the other hand, the honesty, humility, and solidarity generated through the failure of method liberates theology to a more playful and tentative cruising of different approaches. Equally demanding and self-relativizing, the resultant ethos is better able to do justice to the reality of the world and the reality of God than doctrinal orthodoxy or methodological orthopraxy.

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[13] Cf. Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, ed. Ian Hacking (London; New York: Verso, 2010).

This book is a book on theological method, or more precisely, an intervention against method on theological grounds. The shared name that a dogmatic and a queer account have for this problem is that of "law." Both approaches develop nuanced accounts of the problem of law and its theological significance. The law that is complicated between the two accounts is method as "law" of theology—a law that indeed quite in keeping with the structure devised by the Reformers can serve in a first "use" to navigate human finitude and curb sin, can secondly function as a mirror of sin that drives the believer into despair, and thus prepares them to accept an external grace that is already there, yet thirdly retains an orienting function in the life of the believers, in sanctification rather than justification.

The book is thus divided into three parts: "Part I: How (not) to get along" examines the epistemic deadlock between Systematic Theology and Constructive Theology, in which they mutually identify one another as "bad theology" according to their different, and ultimately incommensurable, methodological paradigms (chapter 1). A "provincializing" analysis sheds light on their strong reaction as due to constraints and requirements in different epistemic ecologies and puts the two approaches in relative solidarity with one another without resolving their conflicting standards. Their different contextual navigations of the problems presented by divine ineffability and human finitude is both prompted and challenged by the fallenness of theology itself. Marcella Althaus-Reid's indictment of T-theology's decency is complemented by Barth's threefold account of the sin of theology. A *primus usus legis*, or first use of method can be discerned in the disciplining and punitive functioning of mitigating different forms of bad theology in keeping with different epistemic requirements (chapter 2).

"Part II: How (not) to lose hope" takes the reader on a tour through the failure of theological method that drives theologians of both Systematic and Constructive varieties into despair. Structured around Barth's three (impossible) ways of doing theology as sketched in *The Word of God as the Task of Theology,* and drawing on Liberation theology and queer theory for Constructive-theological complements, this part demonstrates how attempts to achieve perfection by way of method can serve as a mirror of sin and either lead into despair or also to the insight of the need for grace—the traditional *secundus usus legis*. Challenged to radical honesty about its own failure to achieve "good theology" and its ongoing and ineradicable complicity in forms of “bad theology,” theology has to realize methodically that method cannot save it (chapter 3).

But impossibility is not all there is: Theology always already comes from realities of divine grace and queer holiness, which become revelatory as they resist and exceed its articulations. They prompt a theological realism that takes both sin and grace seriously and follows God’s own movement to “become real.” Queer grace results in a twofold commitment to the reality of God and the reality of real human beings. It spells out stubborn excess, messy solidarity, and indecent honesty as the queer virtues that obtain when applying the reality principle to faith, love, and hope (chapter 4). Driven by grace beyond despair toward a third use of the law, the distinction between law and gospel—which structures the conception of the book as a whole—is subsequently critically examined and partially redesigned through several interpretive loops on Kafka’s parable, *Before the Law,* making use of some helpful metaphors from design theory in the process (chapter 5).

“Part III: How (not) to do better” experiments with theological method *after* method as a kind of *tertius usus legis,* third use of the law. Design theory becomes a particularly fecund interlocutor in my own pursuit as a shared reference between “systems” and their “construction.” No longer invested in the attempt to save itself, justify itself, or to conclusively establish its own righteousness, a use of method *after method* is re-oriented to the “outside” of any theory and its “outsiders.” Such a queer use may consequently draw on diverse methodologies. It will “cruise” hermeneutical circles without an ultimate commitment to any one of them—recognizing them as means rather than ends, to be used rather than enjoyed in themselves, and aspire to “sideways” rather than “upward” growth (chapter 6). It reflects on the uses of doctrine and its conceptual affordances and investigates several case-studies for constructive conceptual redesign through this lens. It inquires into the possibility of user-oriented hermeneutics, learning from outsiders and “misfits,” and allows for the “queer use” of doctrine in remedial practices of repurposing and recycling that might turn swords (like the doctrine of sin, or atonement theology) into plowshares (chapter 7). Finally, it more systematically draws out the resonances between design theory and theology through the central metaphor of conceptual design as the construction of habitats, suggesting the use-orientation of design to guide a method *after method* that is pragmatic and subtle, materially and ecologically grounded, attentive and caring (chapter 8). A conclusion loops back to Paul Feyerabend’s epistemic anarchism as well as to the lens of the *beneficia dei* as opened up in the introduction.