

The Clown of the Sciences: Theology at the Secular University

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Some ten years ago I was stopped by another student in the hallway of Amsterdam's VU University and asked to complete a questionnaire, the exact nature of which I have completely forgotten. What I do remember is the look upon his face when I answered the question, "What are you studying at this university?" with "Theology". His look was not just one of surprise, but wonder of a more desperate kind: he didn't know what 'theology' was. Here was an intelligent student of about twenty years of age, at a university founded by Abraham Kuyper, of which theology was the founding faculty, who did not know what it was. Of course I explained it. Yet his bewilderment did not end there: "Is there an academic field that studies 'God'?" he asked. Was I not joking? This article addresses the question of the role of theology and theologians in a secular environment, such as a university. Due to social changes theology is no longer the self-evident 'Queen of the Sciences', but is challenged to review its position among sciences, which often look with suspicion at its purposes. Instead of calling to reclaim the throne, and drawing on the historical figure of the Fool, it is argued that theology (or, rather theologians) should redress themselves as 'Clowns of the Sciences'. By way of a conversation with the propositions of James McClendon and Stanley Hauerwas, a comic framework is set out that makes fun of the Queen, and thereby allows theology to participate by its oddity. Towards the end, and with the assistance of the prophet Jonah, a preliminary outline is made of the Clown's Speech.

Keywords

Theology; university; secularisation; Stanley Hauerwas; James McClendon; humour; clown

Introduction

In September 2016 a symposium was organised at the Vrije Universiteit (VU) in Amsterdam with the hardly subtle theme: 'Does Theology belong at the University?' A question that – already by the sheer fact of being raised – underlines the changing context in which theology as an academic field finds itself. During this decade, the universities of Utrecht and Leiden have already closed their respective theology departments. Just as my encounter with the student in the hallway displays, the place of theology at secular universities is becoming increasingly uncommon. Theology has evidently lost its self-

evident place.¹ Last year the VU renamed its Faculty of Divinity (in Dutch *Godgeleerdheid*) – literally translated ‘learned of God’ – ‘Religion and Theology’ to manifest its broader scope of research, which is less focused upon producing academic church ministers. It is but a consequence of the changing relationship between the university and the church, due to the changed role of the church in Western society at large. In the words of Harvey Cox, ‘The daughter has grown up and moved out—for good.’²

Theology as the so-called ‘Queen of the Sciences’, it seems, has left the academic building. Of course, there are many respectable theologians who have made valuable arguments to demonstrate the added value of academic theology for general scholarship and society. Most of these concentrate on the internal scientific sustainability (methodology and argumentation) of theology, or the social function of research on religion and the human search for the ‘good’ life.³ However, the question of *manner* or *posture* is left open. If no longer the Queen, which *character* should theology play? To stay within the metaphor, can it still participate as one of the princesses? Or, does it at least have a room in the palace called university? Put differently, if authority is understood here as ‘to be able and reputable to speak truth to power’,⁴ in what way can theology speak authoritatively at a secular university? Baptist theologian James McClendon, as discussed below, assessed that theology can no longer claim a dominant position as source of ultimate knowledge. It rather should develop a humbler attitude. Yet McClendon also emphasises theology’s unique scope of research, arguing it to be ‘a science of convictions’ underlying all other sciences. However, the effort to stay ‘relevant’ seems the most important incentive to

¹ See Gerrit Neven, ‘Theologie in een seculiere tijd’, in *Van God gesproken: Over religieuze taal en relationele theologie: Opstellen aangeboden aan Prof. dr. Luco J. van den Brom*, ed. by Theo Boer, Heleen Maat, Alco Meesters, and Jan Muis (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2011), pp. 202-216. An example is the critical report published by the Dutch Royal Academia of Sciences, that observes a lack of priority for theology and religious studies in society and government, see *Klaar om te wenden...: De academische bestudering van religie in Nederland: Een verkenning* (Den Haag: Koninklijke Academie van Wetenschappen, 2015), pp. 14-17.

² Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 1965), p. 217.

³ See for example Nancy Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion; Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1990); Mark William Worthing, ‘Theology, Queen of the Sciences’, *Concordia Journal*, 20, no. 4 (1994), 402-414; Alister E. McGrath, *The Science of God: An Introduction to Scientific Theology* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2004), esp. pp. 17-33; Gijsbert van den Brink, *Een publieke zaak: Theologie tussen geloof en wetenschap* (Boekencentrum Essay; Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2004), pp. 13-25, 196-206, 337-360; Erna Oliver, ‘Theology: Still a queen of science in the post-modern era’, *die Skriflig*, 50, no. 1 (2015), 1-7; Joshua Searle, *Theology after Christendom: Forming Prophets for a Post-Christian World* (Eugene: Cascade, 2018), esp. pp. 61-86; and recently, Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019).

⁴ See Martin W. Bauer, Petra Pansegrau and Rajesh Shukla, ‘Image, Perception, and Cultural Authority of Science—By Way of Introduction’, in *The Cultural Authority of Science: Comparing Across Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas*, ed. by Martin W. Bauer, Petra Pansegrau and Rajesh Shukla (Routledge Studies in Science, Technology, and Society; London/New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 3-21.

stay at the university and retain the throne. His colleague Stanley Hauerwas offers a somewhat different perspective, when advocating to take theology's oddity more seriously.

Expounding on the course set by Hauerwas, my preliminary proposal here will be to portray theology as 'Clown of the Sciences'. While I am aware that clowns come in different sizes, colours, and faces – for example the frivolous *August* or the more sincere *Pierrot* with its characteristic tear – I take my starting point for what a clown is, or should be, from the semi-biographical movie *Patch Adams* (1998). It displays a medical doctor who from experience has come to know that medical treatment is more than physical care and requires more than 'scientific' knowledge of medicine and diseases. So, my argument is not to write off any attempt to show or prove theology as a real science, but rather to take a different direction – Nineveh. By following the prophet Jonah we will find theology's inner clown.

Doctors, Clowns, and Fools

In *Patch Adams* we are introduced to the origins of the now familiar practice of hospital clowning by the vision and efforts of medical doctor and clown Hunter 'Patch' Adams, which he later further developed in his *Gesundheit! Institute*, founded in 1971. During his medical studies, Adams' playful approach to the study of medicine is a thorn in the eye of his ambitious roommate. When 'Patch' asks him why he doesn't like him, his roommate answers: "Because you make my effort a joke. I want to be a doctor! This isn't a game to me. This isn't playtime! This is serious business." His different approach gets Patch almost thrown out of medical school by one of his professors. When asked for the reason, the professor replies: "Because what you want is for us to get down there on the same level as our patients to destroy objectivity." He ends his rant with the words: "Is this all a big joke to you? Get out of here!" The clownish performance of Patch Adams at a medical faculty offers a great illustration of the collision between theology and the sciences.

Clowns are generally known for their playful foolishness. They do not possess institutional authority, nor do they claim power for themselves.⁵ Clowns 'are supposed to stand in the margin of cultural normalcy and decency. They are excluded from civil society due to their appearance,

⁵ See for example Eli Simon, *The Art of Clowning: More Paths to Your Inner Clown* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, [2009], 2012), pp. 4-5; and Paul Bouissac, *The Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning: Rituals of Transgression and the Theory of Laughter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 171-173. I am fully aware of so-called 'horror clowns' who can terrorise neighbourhoods, as for example in Stephen King's book *It* (1986) – exploiting 'coulrophobia', a morbid fear of clowns.

personae, and performed behavior.’⁶ They fail and by failing they are uniquely suited to hold up a mirror to society and its powers.⁷ The origins of clowns go back to the early civilisations of Egypt and Rome, where the Fool played before the emperors, and as jesters at the royal courts of medieval kings.⁸ Their task was not only to bring entertainment and laughter, but also to provide critical reflection: ‘mock rule’.⁹ These figures were ‘licensed’ to speak the truth to power and provide ironic critique to the state, the church, and society, not on the basis of official law, jurisdiction, reverence or esteem, but through ‘folly’.¹⁰ The Fool, thus, represented and produced a counterworld, a ‘foolish’ perspective on reality, displaying the incongruities and fallacies of life and society, including the monarch. Jestors and fools played the comical mirror-image of kings. The relative ‘freedom of speech’ granted to them was balanced by their social position at the margins of society, living by their wits:

In this marginal world, the fool enjoyed a strange freedom (the German *Narrenfreiheit*). In word, song, and action he was allowed to debunk both religious and secular authorities (though, obviously, there were occasions when some of the authorities lost their tolerance and suppressed the folly). A key theme in folly was inversion.¹¹

The authority of the Fool, in short, is not based on the vantage point of strength, power, or superiority, but on vulnerability and marginality. Accordingly, some authors such as Kevin Vanhoozer have described the role of the theologian in terms of ‘the Fool’.¹² Doing Christian theology is a participation in the story of ‘the folly of the cross’ as the apostle Paul so aptly states (I Corinthians 1.18-2.5).¹³

⁶ Bouissac, *The Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning*, p. 176.

⁷ Simon, *The Art of Clowning*, pp. 6 and 11: ‘In a flash, a floundering clown can transform frustration into triumph, impotence into brilliance, and panic into joy.’

⁸ See Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), pp. 65-86.

⁹ Conrad Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith: A Celebration of Life and Laughter* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1981), pp. 40-41.

¹⁰ See Jessica Milner Davis, ‘The Fool and the Path to Spiritual Insight’, in *Humour and Religion: Challenges and Ambiguities*, ed. by Hans Geybels and Walter Van Herck (London/New York: Continuum, 2011), pp. 218-247; and Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, p. 73.

¹¹ Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, p. 74.

¹² See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), pp. 438-441; and *Faith Speaking Understanding* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), pp. 185-188; Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 139-157; Rein Nauta, *Paradoxaal leiderschap: Schetsen voor een psychologie van de pastor* (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2006), pp. 188-189; and Olof de Vries, *Alles is geschiedenis: Bouwstenen voor een baptistische geloofsvisie uit de dogmatiek van Olof H. de Vries*, ed. by Henk Bakker et al. (Utrecht: Kok, 2015), pp. 50-52.

¹³ See Jan Martijn Abrahamse, ‘Satire and the Cross: Upsetting Theological Discourse’, forthcoming.

Following the example of *Patch Adams*, theologians should not only be good doctors of the church.¹⁴ They must be great clowns and discover the healing powers of laughter, for ‘a cheerful heart is a good medicine’ (Proverbs 17.22).

Game of Thrones

The changing place of theology at the university is connected to secularisation or life in a ‘secular age’, as Charles Taylor typified our times.¹⁵ Secularisation is not an easy concept and there are many interpretations. Recently the Dutch philosopher of history Herman Paul defined secularisation as a grand narrative to explain certain social phenomena within the Western context, such as decline in church attendance, diminishing faith in the existence of God, the marginality of religion in the public space, and the collapse of (religious) institutions.¹⁶ All these developments may be joined in ‘a turn to the *saeculum*’: they generate a world in which human desire finds its fulfillment entirely within the spectrum of the here and now. Secularisation, as Paul shows, is not so much a matter of the mind, but of the direction of our hearts – where our desires are born. There is no longer a self-evident notion of ‘the *beyond*’. That is also why the student was so surprised. He would never consider studying something outside the scope of the natural. This exclusive orientation on the *saeculum* reshaped human interest and therefore the concept of real ‘academic’ knowledge. Owen Chadwick, in his book on secularisation, writes: ‘Science and Religion were blown up into balloon duelists, Science meaning all knowledge, Religion containing no knowledge, and the two set side by side, with know-nothing using sabre to keep know-all from his place.’¹⁷ Academic knowledge, therefore, is *secular*; it confines itself to the limits of the natural world, accessible by empirical exploration. For the empirical world liberates from the necessity of accounting for existence on the basis of metaphysical beliefs. It finds its certainty in the knowledge of science, in the understanding of the laws of physics, ‘[n]ot as the humble and submissive slave of a supernatural master, nor as the helpless toy in the hands

¹⁴ See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘What Are Theologians For? Why Doctors of the Church Should Prescribe Christian Doctrine’, in *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church’s Worship, Witness and Wisdom* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), pp. 49-71.

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007); cf. Gobert Buijs, ‘Hoe seculier zijn we eigenlijk? Kennismaken met *A Secular Age* van Charles Taylor’, *Soteria*, 33, no. 4 (2016), 1-15.

¹⁶ See Herman Paul, *Secularisatie: Een kleine geschiedenis van een groot verhaal* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), esp. pp. 7-14; and *De slag om het hart: Over secularisatie van verlangen* (Utrecht: Boekencentrum, 2017), pp. 7-20.

¹⁷ Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Gifford Lectures; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 167-168.

of heavenly powers, but as a proud and free son of Nature'.¹⁸ Theology – in the sense of accountable speech about God – has become, henceforth, an (irrational) alternative to scientific research. For science offered an alternative framework of mind that made the biblical narrative unintelligible. Additionally, religion became socially unacceptable due to its subjecting morality that comforted people to accept the status quo:

throw off God (not because anyone has disproved him but) because we are against authority and God is part of authority, supreme in authority. God was moral code. God meant resignation, and resignation meant acceptance of tyranny.¹⁹

Academic knowledge liberates from moral pre-suppositions and metaphysical authorities and refuses 'to be content with an uncritical reception of traditional ideas. 'A certain awe still surrounds reason as a critical power, capable of liberating us from the illusion and blind forces of instinct, as well as the phantasies bred of our fear and narrowness and pusillanimity.'²⁰ Taylor speaks about the coming of 'exclusive humanism' changing the atmosphere, putting an end to a naïve acknowledgement of things transcendent. The age of reason displaced religion as a legitimate source for ethical understanding, and therefore as a true form of education, due to its subjecting morality and unscientific basis. In short, '[t]he onslaught was more ethical than scientific; and that was the source from which its passion flowed'.²¹ Academic education, a source of progressive knowledge – '[f]aith is stationary, science progressive'²² – became a vehicle for emancipation and liberation from intellectual and religious oppression. As such, education has become a source of individual redemption.

The university has become 'a game of thrones' in which theology lost its ruling, due to an exclusive humanism. To be 'learned of God' has become a joke to science. After all, to succeed in modernity is to 'free oneself' of existing patterns of tradition. Education henceforth is celebrated as a 'liberation' of pre-existent moral schemes. As a result, theology or the 'artist formerly known as Queen' lost its throne.²³ To proceed we need, as Patch Adams says, "to treat the patient as well as the disease".

¹⁸ Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind*, p. 171. Cf. Roger Scruton, 'What Ever Happened to Reason?', *City Journal*, 44 (1999): 'The postmodern university has not defeated reason, but replaced it with a new kind of faith—a faith without authority and without transcendence, a faith all the more tenacious in that it does not recognise itself as such.'

¹⁹ Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind*, p. 86.

²⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 9.

²¹ Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind*, pp. 155-156.

²² Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind*, p. 167.

²³ See Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, pp. 43-45.

God Save the Queen

James McClendon, in the third part of his three-volume systematic theology, titled *Witness* (2000), reflected extensively on the role of theology in society, especially in relation to the ‘secular university’. This wording he considers ‘oxymoronic’,²⁴ since, as he rightly points out, universities are historically grown out of the church as a gift to society ‘to constitute a *powerful practice*’ besides state and church in support of the wider Christian social order.²⁵ The Enlightenment, however, changed the self-evident character of this relationship, suddenly postulating the question of why Christianity should have a place at the university.

To make his case, McClendon reformulates the question, relying heavily on the work of Cardinal John Henry Newman.²⁶ The question should not be *whether* Christianity should play a central role at a university, but when universities claim to study life in all its facets, then they cannot in a credible way exclude certain ‘convictions’ from their curricula. Hence, McClendon’s argument is that the rightful place of theology at the university is the university’s own calling to research and investigate all of life. Theology has its place, not only as an aspect of life, but also since theology itself requires interaction with other fields of study. Theology is present as ‘a science of convictions’ which examines ‘the deep assents constituting a people of conviction, connected (in theology’s intent) *to whatever else there is*’.²⁷ Accordingly, McClendon argues, when theology is taken up among the sciences, it will be subject to the scientific checks and balances like any other science.

But what does theology have to offer? First, it brings ethical reflection, questioning the reductionist views of knowledge prevalent in modern societies, which are focused on value and pragmatics instead of beauty. A beauty which cannot be found in the exterior aesthetics of the university but in its core business: teaching, to challenge, to explore, and to stretch minds. Based on John Howard Yoder’s *Body Politics* (1992), McClendon describes the ethical task of theology in terms of conflict resolution, interethnic inclusiveness, economic levelling, etc. Second, theology brings doctrinal reflection, reminding the university that it is not god and explaining how the God of Israel cultivated modern sciences. Third, theology can serve as ‘meeting place’ for conversations about life and convictions. In short, McClendon describes theology as a reflective science, examining and

²⁴ James Wm. McClendon, *Witness* (Systematic Theology, vol. 3; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), p. 389.

²⁵ McClendon, *Witness*, p. 391. Italics original.

²⁶ See John H. Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1999).

²⁷ McClendon, *Witness*, p. 402.

questioning the moral and ideological frames from which they are exercised, thereby undermining science's objectivity.

Toward the end of his 'plea', McClendon goes so far as to suggest that theology represents a unique science which provides exchange of ideas among the sciences, as a sort of unifying bridge bringing all sciences together as 'university'.²⁸ Since there is 'theology' in all sciences, theology as a distinct 'science of convictions' forms the basis of all.²⁹ The idealism behind McClendon's idea – which does appear somewhat awkward, considering his general emphasis on concrete practices³⁰ – was apparently also clear to himself. With some good sense of irony, he dubbed his concept 'University of Utopia'.³¹ To McClendon, theological education is not different from any other art and science, since they all are concerned with and based upon convictions. In his view, the university itself, as a community of learning, continues to be *theological*, not only from a historical perspective, but also essentially, since it is occupied with the whole of creation. Theology, as a distinct field within this broad spectrum of theological studies, is there to remember the whole of God: 'Theology in doing so recalls that the university is the church's ancient gift, really God's gift' (James 1.17).³²

It seems that McClendon still aims to 'safeguard' theology as a 'fundamental' field of study. You can almost hear him crying, *God save the Queen!* He rightly dismantles modernity's self-proclaimed objectivity but fails to face the insignificance of theology as a whole today. To picture theology as a *supra*-science of convictions, as 'one science to rule them all and in convictions bind them', sounds too much like an attempt to resurrect the Queen. In addition, by describing the relationship between theology and the other sciences as representing *divinity* versus *creation*, he oddly enough echoes his own despised 'Clergy-Laity Divide'³³ and, moreover, acknowledges the differentiation created by modernity.

Making Fun of the Queen

Another example of reassessing the role and place of theology among the sciences can be found throughout the publications of Stanley Hauerwas. A

²⁸ McClendon, *Witness*, p. 412; cf. Worthing, 'Theology, Queen of the Sciences', 412-414 (p. 414), who makes a similar argument: 'It is precisely because this appraisal of theology as a universal science brings together all the other sciences that theology can, with justification, understand itself not just as a science but even as "queen of sciences."'

²⁹ McClendon, *Witness*, p. 414.

³⁰ See McClendon, *Ethics* (Systematic Theology, vol. 1; Nashville: Abingdon Press, [1994], 2001).

³¹ McClendon, *Witness*, p. 414.

³² McClendon, *Witness*, p. 418.

³³ See Jan Martijn Abrahamse, 'The Stripping of the Ministry: A Reconsideration and Retrieval of Robert Browne's Theology of Ordained Ministry' (Ph.D. Dissertation, VU University, Amsterdam, 2018), 44-47.

renowned theological ethicist, he has written in various articles and essays about the role of theology at the university, particularly in his collection of essays *The State of the University* (2007), in which he notably criticises attempts ‘to justify the inclusion of theology in the university as one more specialized form of knowledge’.³⁴ Different from McClendon, Hauerwas, though he too declares his appreciation of Newman, does not think that theology as ‘the project of “pulling it all together”’ is a fruitful strategy, since he fears it ‘could be a nostalgic attempt to reclaim the habits of Christendom’.³⁵ Rather, he happily embraces theology’s placement at the bottom of the food chain: ‘Accordingly theology is only a “Queen” of the sciences if humility determines her work.’³⁶

Earlier Hauerwas engaged this question in a witty essay called ‘Christians in the Hands of Flaccid Secularists’ (1998). Instead of coming with an apology, he takes the ‘secular’ understanding of knowledge as an argument to underline the oddity of theology among the sciences. For in theology not all positions are ‘interesting’, since it is not about useful ‘information’.³⁷ He tells two stories. One time an editor of a nation-wide popular magazine asked Hauerwas to contribute. After some consideration, he proposed the aforementioned title – ‘Christians in the Hands of Flaccid Secularists’ – for the average Christian a funny play on Jonathan Edwards’ famous sermon. However, the editor didn’t ‘get it’ and Hauerwas therefore concluded that it wasn’t going to work: ‘I told the editor, “I do not know how to write even half-serious theology for people who no longer have sufficient knowledge to tell which God it is that they no longer believe in.”’³⁸ The second story narrates an encounter Hauerwas once had at Duke University, talking with scholars about professional ethics among the university’s tenured staff. He saw himself faced with the question of how to introduce yourself as a theologian – spending your life thinking about God – to scientists who spend their life studying empirical objects:

So I began by remarking that it was not clear that I should be among this group of academics, because I am not an intellectual. I am a theologian. Theology names an office of a community called the church and is in service to that community.

³⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledge and the Knowledge of God* (Illuminations: Theory and Religion; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 6.

³⁵ Hauerwas, *The State of the University*, pp. 30-31.

³⁶ Hauerwas, *The State of the University*, p. 31.

³⁷ Cf. ‘The problem is how do you teach theology in universities to students who have been thought to think, like this bright young editor, that, in the name of being educated, all positions are “interesting”. Theology for such people cannot help but be more “information.”’ Stanley Hauerwas, ‘Christians in the Hands of Flaccid Secularists: Theology and ‘Moral Inquiry’ in the Modern University’, in *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Scottish Journal of Theology: Current Issues in Theology; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 203.

³⁸ Hauerwas, ‘Christians in the Hands of Flaccid Secularists’, p. 203.

So as one who occupies that office I am not free to think about anything I want to think about.³⁹

These funny examples of self-mockery not only identify the so-called ‘elephant in the room’ – theology’s lack of (moral) objectivity – but also point to the problematic character of academic freedom by placing it in the context of servitude: What justifies research? Who are served by it?⁴⁰ So doing, Hauerwas calls into question the university’s self-evident self-relevance as ‘knowledge for knowledge’s sake’, independent from traditions of knowledge.⁴¹ However, Hauerwas observes, the presupposed objectivity of such a position is no longer tenable.⁴² Since theology is anything but objective science, its oddity ‘freed’ it to once again take up its original task and ‘show the difference that God makes about matters that matter’.⁴³ In a way, he concludes, theology is today more ‘free’ since it no longer has to bother with sustaining or supporting so-called Christian powers: ‘so we can now take the risk of teaching theology, if we are able, as edification’.⁴⁴

The particularity of Christian theology as a ‘free discipline’ is a main theme in his *magnum opus* – the outworking of his Gifford lectures in 2000 at the University of St Andrews, *With the Grain of the Universe* (2001). Arguing from Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, he argues that the knowledge of theology is connected to a particular form of living.⁴⁵ Christian speech about God not only requires to be ‘learned of God’ – having the conceptual skills – but also to be transformed by God, learning the moral skills appropriate to a life of worship. Theology, hence, is first and foremost a ‘discipline’ before it can be considered a science.⁴⁶ Theologians are themselves the empiric testimony, or rather ‘witnesses’, of the truthfulness of learning.⁴⁷ That theology is about witness also makes schooling in the knowledge of God participatory instead of individual. In other words,

³⁹ Hauerwas, ‘Christians in the Hands of Flaccid Secularists’, p. 204; cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 19: ‘I am not in service to a state, or a university, but rather I am called to be faithful to a church that is present across time and space.’

⁴⁰ Cf. Hauerwas, *The State of the University*, p. 134: ‘The questions that are seldom asked at universities because we do not know how to answer them are: “What is the university for?” and “Who does it serve?”’.

⁴¹ See Hauerwas, *The State of the University*, pp. 108-121.

⁴² Hauerwas, *The State of the University*, pp. 122-135.

⁴³ Hauerwas, ‘Christians in the Hands of Flaccid Secularists’, p. 214.

⁴⁴ Hauerwas, ‘Christians in the Hands of Flaccid Secularists’, p. 215.

⁴⁵ See Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), pp. 173-204.

⁴⁶ Of course, in Hauerwas’s argument the church is the necessary ‘community of discipline’ schooling Christians in the tradition of witness; see Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: As Study in Theological Ethics* (Trinity Monograph Series in Religion, vol. 3; San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975), pp. 229-233; cf. Abrahamse, ‘The Stripping of the Ministry’, 215-222.

⁴⁷ See Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, p. 212: ‘Witnesses must exist if Christians are to be intelligible to themselves and hopefully to those who are not Christians, just as the intelligibility of science depend in the end on the success of experiments.’

intelligible speech about *this* God needs to be mirrored in a community of learners ‘free’ from the need to justify its practice by non-theological standards (*viz.* self-referential and self-justifying). Hence, the way theologians themselves are present at the secular university is part and parcel of the theological endeavour.

Only recently Hauerwas more explicitly connected the oddity of theology as ‘free discipline’ more prominently with humour as a way of doing theology. In an essay ‘How to Be Theologically Funny?’, included in his book *The Work of Theology* (2015), he argues for the retrieval of the funny side of theology: ‘Humor is not the only mode of entertainment the discourse of theology can take, but it is surely the case that we – and the ‘we’ means most people – are often attracted to speech and writing that is funny.’⁴⁸ Certainly in a post-Christian age, theology should seek to be – ‘as good stories should be’⁴⁹ – entertaining. First, since jokes have the ability to bridge differences and bring both ‘teller and hearer’ into the same realm as they require common experience. Second, jokes allow us to ‘comprehend the unexpected and absurd aspects of life’.⁵⁰ They thereby testify to our finite existence and limited understanding. And third, humour can have subversive character. Jokes are the power of the weak against the strong, which ‘cannot be acknowledged exactly because subversion is betrayed by being acknowledged’.⁵¹ Humour stimulates the imagination of those confronted with exclusion and marginalisation. Hence, humour provides the subversive yet control-less authority Hauerwas seeks to navigate theology in a secular environment:

The subversive character of humor often expressed in joke is an undeniable reality. Those who use humor to subvert the pretensions of the powerful often have little to lose. One might think the eschatological character of the Christian faith would make Christians a people who have learned to live ‘loose’. To be able to so live is made possible by the recognition that the use of humor in a defensive or attack mode is indicative of people enslaved by fears. Christians can risk being subversive because they believe there is a deeper reality than the world determined by fear.⁵²

And so, Hauerwas concludes that with the downfall of Christendom in our day and age, we might also rediscover a Christian sense of humour.⁵³ He finds his kindred spirit in Karl Barth, who recognised the eschatological force of humour and laughter as a refusal to take the present world with

⁴⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), p. 233.

⁴⁹ Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, p. 206.

⁵⁰ Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, p. 238.

⁵¹ Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, p. 239.

⁵² Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, p. 244.

⁵³ ‘If, as I suspect, we are coming to the end of Christendom we may as Christians discover we have a sense of humor.’ Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, p. 244.

ultimate seriousness – humour as a protest and announcement of the new future, and as a way of perseverance and acceptance of our limitations. As Hauerwas comments: ‘Rather, the way he taught himself to do theology is itself a testimony to the humor necessary if theology is to be a free discipline.’⁵⁴

I think Hauerwas has put on us on a helpful track, by, quite literally, *making fun* of the Queen. Humour fits those who don’t fit in, and allows theology to participate by its oddity, or foolishness: a foolishness that liberates theology from the temptation to fit in, while thereby losing its ministry of witness. Hauerwas reshapes our question: we should not ask how ‘theology’ is present, but how theologians themselves are present at the university.

Finding Our Inner Clown

I would like to continue this road and rewrite the tragedy of theology into a comedy by redressing theology into the Clown of the Sciences. Maybe not by putting on a red nose, but rather by searching for the theologian’s ‘inner clown’.⁵⁵ For this, we need help from the prophet Jonah. He will be my unwilling assistant for the next act and paragon of the ‘clownish theologian’. The ironic jokes in the Book of Jonah are so obvious that its comic intent is widely attested.⁵⁶ It has been dubbed a theological comedy, a satire, or gentle parody, on Israel’s prophethood, the calling of Israel to be a blessing for the nations (cf. Genesis 12.1-3), or prophetic proclamation of end-time salvation for the nations. Jonah is therefore a perfect example for us to find our ‘inner clown’. The story’s irony enables us to dismantle our theological pretensions, and helps us retrieve the ‘playfulness of the text’, as Joel Kaminsky has put it.⁵⁷ The playfulness of the Holy Scriptures’ own narratives overcomes a deadly seriousness – certainly among those who call themselves Bible-believing Christians – leaving its redeeming jokes often completely lost in

⁵⁴ Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, p. 248.

⁵⁵ I borrowed this idea of ‘inner clown’ from Simon, *The Art of Clowning*, xx: ‘If your clown is knocking on the door to your soul, you should listen to her. “Break out”, as you call it, figure out who your core clown is, and then play, play, play.’

⁵⁶ Cf. Thomas Jemielity, *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), pp. 15-16, 24. See further Hans Walter Wolff, *Dodekapropheten 3: Obadja und Jona* (BKAT, Bd. XIV/3; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1977), pp. 58-64; Phillip Cary, *Jonah* (SCMTCB; London: SCM Press, 2008), pp. 17-22, 30-34; Philip Peter Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah: A Theological Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), esp. pp. 33-34; James D. Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea-Jonah* (SHBC; Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2011), pp. 401-410; Kevin J. Youngblood, *Jonah: God’s Scandalous Mercy* (HMSCS; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), pp. 25-45; and Gregory R. Goswell, ‘Jonah Among the Twelve Prophets’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 135, no. 2 (2016), 295-299.

⁵⁷ Joel S. Kaminsky, ‘Humor and the Theology of Hope: Isaac as a Humorous Figure’, *Interpretation*, 54, no. 4 (2000), p. 363.

translation. I have listed five playful ironic moments in the narrative of Jonah – there are more to be found – that will help us to recover our inner clown.⁵⁸

The opening of Jonah echoes the opening of many other prophetic books (1.1-2). Yet, is slightly redacted for didactic purposes.⁵⁹ Like good slapstick, Jonah makes himself ready but runs the other way. Called to go ‘up to Nineveh’, he goes ‘down to Joppa’, even all the way ‘down into a ship’. And, when the waves come crashing in and the fierce and experienced boat crew call upon their gods (1.5) – a time when one might need a prophet of Israel! – our man is in a deep sleep. But now comes the real pun. After they’ve awakened Jonah and inquired about his theology, he responds with no lack of self-confidence and seriousness: ‘I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land’ (1.9). The funny thing about Jonah is that he is so deadly serious and still fails to see what the boatmen grasp immediately: If this God is indeed the creator of all sea and land, why bother running away? Jonah, the Hebrew prophet, turns out to be the schlemiel of the story.⁶⁰ He does not see the irony between his statement and his actions. Yet this clown of a prophet turns out to be the vehicle by which these ‘pagans’ come to know the God of Israel (1.15). It’s the irony of grace, which finds the boat crew but misses Jonah who is tossed in the water. Can somebody sink even deeper?

Although clearly not the prophet we would expect, the Book of Jonah never becomes cynical. Not silent about the evil of Nineveh (1.1-2), the focus is to our surprise on the folly and the hypocrisy of Jonah. Although Jonah is quite a character, maybe the worst prophet ever, we never resent him. Deep down in the sea he finds himself swallowed by a sea monster – almost sleeping with the fishes – and there he finds God. And, as you do when you find yourself in a fish, he composes a beautiful psalm, pure poetry, in which he sings about his conversion. He might be a Hebrew prophet, he now knows that ‘Salvation comes from the Lord’ (2.9). He may be baptised, yet he is not done (1.8). Even God seems to be sick and tired of Jonah: ‘And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land’ (2.10).⁶¹ Inconsumable, spat out in order to recommence his mission to Nineveh, here called a city *of* God (3.3).⁶² Jonah is pretty minimalistic in his message and

⁵⁸ Cf. Conrad Hyers, *And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), pp. 91-109.

⁵⁹ See Annette Schellenberg, ‘An Anti-Prophet Among the Prophets? On the Relationship of Jonah to Prophecy’, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 39, no.3 (2015), 353-371 (pp. 366-367).

⁶⁰ Derived from the Yiddish word ‘shlemiel’; a stupid, awkward, or unlucky person, and a common archetype in Jewish humour. See for example Sanford Pinkster, *The Schlemiel as Metaphor: Studies in Yiddish and American Jewish Fiction*, revised edn (Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press), p.199.

⁶¹ Youngblood, *Jonah*, p. 114.

⁶² Youngblood, *Jonah*, p. 131.

his effort (3.4), as if purposefully sabotaging the mission in order to give Nineveh the slightest chance of grace. He is more concerned with himself than the fate or fortune of Nineveh.⁶³ His ridiculous behaviour is absurd, but this funny little man ends up taking down a city. In fact, he is one of the few prophets who crossed boundaries – as clowns do⁶⁴ – and prophesied outside his national borders. Of course, the irony is clear: where Jonah needed to hear his message twice, Nineveh listens the first time (3.6-9). The whole story of Jonah testifies that the so-called ‘other’ can be part of divine self-closure; encountering others is a way through which the ‘insider’ learns and receives a fuller understanding of God.⁶⁵

The prophet eventually withdraws to a hill overlooking the city of Nineveh. Where you would think the story should have ended with the conversion of the people of Nineveh, it continues with a marvellous episode about a confrontation between God and his prophet. Jonah cannot live with a God who forgives his enemies, those nasty Ninevites (4.3). Then God pulls a joke on him. He grows a tree in whose shade Jonah’s anger melts like snow in the sun. When God takes his revenge upon the plant, Jonah is in tears. His grief over the bush is in stark contrast to his willingness to see the city burn. And then the Book of Jonah suddenly ends with God’s question, almost as if addressing its readers: “Should I not be concerned about that great city?”

Jonah is a great help in finding our inner clown. The story dismantles the superiority of grand theological claims that are not supported by life testimony. He might be a Hebrew prophet, yet his life shows he has yet much to learn about the God he confesses to worship. The awkwardness of his robust claim to the boatmen stands in contrast to his minimalist prophecy to Nineveh. Nonetheless, when he is ‘turned around himself’, being spat out and smelling like rotten fish, the great city takes heed when faced with this ‘countered world’. Furthermore, Jonah enables us to develop a healthy form of self-mockery. The book provides a godly mirror of modesty.⁶⁶ And, ‘it ain’t pretty’. Jonah is humbled, not by sheer humiliation, but by comically showing that the joke is on him. His tragedy becomes a comedy of salvation. That is the hope resounding in the words: “Should not I pity that great city?” Despite all his silliness, the book of Jonah opens our eyes to see what God is doing in other places and through other peoples. Where Jonah assumed that nothing good could come out of Nineveh – the empire where evil ‘never

⁶³ See Schellenberg, ‘An Anti-Prophet Among the Prophets?’, p. 357.

⁶⁴ Cf. Simon, *The Art of Clowning*, p. 6: ‘Clowns bridge worlds.’

⁶⁵ See Ryan Patrick McLaughlin, ‘Jonah and the Religious Other: An Exploration of Biblical Inclusivism’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 48, no. 1 (2013), p. 84; and Patrick J. Reimnitz, ‘Fish Out of Water: The Book of Jonah Among the Minor Prophets’, *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa*, 38, no. 1 (2014), 25-26.

⁶⁶ See Cary, *Jonah*, p. 17: ‘Jonah is a ridiculous excuse for a prophet—the holy man as screwup—and we are just like him.’

sleeps’ – he learns God’s compassion for a godless city; the same compassion that gave Jonah a second chance.

The Clown’s Speech

So, what does Jonah do for the theologian? What does a clownish theologian look like when playing at the university? Let me offer some traits to help theologians ‘come into character’. First of all, theologians need to be modest as they have ‘God’ as their object of study. ‘Laughter is thus appropriate to Christian humility; by it we remind ourselves of our finitude. It saves from pretentiousness and pomposity.’⁶⁷ Conrad Hyers writes in his book *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith*: ‘Whether acknowledged or not, the theologian is in the clumsiest of possible positions. The importance of the office notwithstanding, the very ultimacy of the object of inquiry makes of theology the highest form of foolishness.’ Due to its absurd study, a theologian’s speech should be more like stuttering, conscious that ‘we only know in part’ (I Corinthians 13.12).

Second, theologians should not take the lead, but become vulnerable by making fun of themselves: ‘When people make fun of their own values, when religious people tell religious jokes, they are in a playful manner conscious of the frailty of their values.’⁶⁸ Vulnerability is the ultimate witness to a counterworld. The contesting character of theology, embraced especially by free church theologians,⁶⁹ comes by weakness, not by strength or superiority. Clowns, after all, do not mind being laughed at, or made fun of; that is what makes them clowns! Theologians thus combine truthfulness with vulnerability. Likewise, theologians seek wisdom in foolishness, strength in weakness, hope in a cross, unity in diversity. Harvey Cox puts it like this:

When the Christian in the university criticizes the university he must do it from the reference point of a community which is not an expression of the culture’s own accomplishment. But the churches can provide that community only if they are not subject to the vested interests of the culture, if they speak from the strength that comes from weakness and with the power that only powerlessness allows. The churches in short live under the cross if they are the church. The university is the embodiment of wisdom. But the cross is foolishness to the wise.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Fred D. Layman, ‘Theology and Humor’, *The Asbury Seminarian*, 38, no. 1 (1982), p. 14.

⁶⁸ Walter Van Herck, ‘Humour, Religion and Vulnerability’, in *Humour and Religion: Challenges and Ambiguities*, ed. by Hans Geybels and Walter Van Herck (London/New York: Continuum, 2011), p. 201.

⁶⁹ See Jan Martijn Abrahamse, ‘“Dumb Dogs that Cannot Bark”: The Puritan Origins of Preaching Revival’, in *Baptists and Revivals: Paper from the Seventh International Conference on Baptist Studies*, ed. by William L. Pitts (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2018), pp. 288-303.

⁷⁰ Cox, *The Secular City*, pp. 234-235.

Theology is in the right place when it has become the ‘laughing stock’ at the university.

Third, theologians need to be open toward all areas of life and creation.⁷¹ To be a clown is not to hide behind a red nose, nor should we hide behind ‘red letters’ of Scripture. Not only since every clown needs an audience, but also because a clown’s own performance is made together with the audience.⁷² As soon as theologians shut off the outside world, they lose perspective on what God is doing and teaching them through, notably, the research and developments in the sciences.⁷³ This engagement is not a strategy for acceptance or relevance, but to pursue its own vocation: to be learned of God. The same goes for what happens in the arts, popular culture, literature, and current affairs.⁷⁴ Theologians, hence, should not seek narrative isolation, but investigate the stories people are confronted with in everyday life: what does it mean to live with the story of Scripture in a pluralist society?

Fourth, theologians should draw attention to the oddities of human life: its limitations, pleasures, and its wonder. Theology addresses the themes of life that go *beyond* empirical measurability.⁷⁵ It relativises hard science, as well as science’s relativity of life.⁷⁶ Theologians destroy objectivity when they, like clowns, hold up the mirror of joyfulness. For example, Miroslav Volf’s penetrating question to Kant’s progressive idea of knowledge: how should we live to avoid dying of improvement?⁷⁷ In *Patch Adams* the resentful roommate eventually turns to Patch when having trouble with a patient who refuses to eat:

Now, I know everything there is to know about medicine. I’ve studied relentlessly. I guarantee you I can outdo, outdiagnose any attending [physician] and surgeon in this hospital. But I can’t make her eat. You have a gift. You have a way with people. You know, they like you. And if you leave, I can’t learn this way.

⁷¹ See Stefan Paas, *Vrede stichten: Politieke meditatie* (Boekencentrum Essay; Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2007), pp. 50-54. A stimulating example is the recent reflection upon the effects of evolutionary theory/theories for aspects of Christian faith about creation by Gijsbert van den Brink, *Reformed Theology and Evolutionary Theory* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2019), forthcoming.

⁷² Cf. Simon, *The Art of Clowning*, pp. 3-4.

⁷³ Cf. Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, p. 81: ‘theology will have to enter into a truth-seeking conversation with the sciences’.

⁷⁴ See for example Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Guides to Theological Inquiry; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), esp. pp. 61-92; and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘What Is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture’, in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 15-60.

⁷⁵ Van den Brink, *Een publieke zaak*, p. 352.

⁷⁶ See Karl Barth, ‘Theologie en de hedendaagse mens’, in *God is God: Voordrachten 1930-1960*, trans. Nico T. Bakker (Kampen: Kok, 2004), p. 30.

⁷⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 278-279.

To be learned of God involves the search for joy and wonder about the gift of life. Theologians, therefore, should be kidding, in the sense of ‘making a kid’ out of us: asking life questions, asking for the ‘why’ and the ‘wherefore’, reaffirming our curiosity about life’s meaning and purpose.⁷⁸

And fifth and last, theologians should take life seriously, with all its discrepancies.⁷⁹ Conscious of the life between brokenness and *shalom*, between evil and salvation, they anticipate a new world.⁸⁰ Humour ‘challenges the dominant tragic worldview that confines humanity to a stoic acceptance of current conditions of existence’.⁸¹ The joy of surprise of things going differently than we expected, than our wildest dreams, is a joy of liberation (Psalm 126.1-2).⁸² Through humour we anticipate the redemption of the world, from which our world receives its ultimate order and meaning, as Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

This faith is not some vestigial remnant of a credulous and pre-scientific age with which ‘scientific’ generations may dispense. There is no power in any science of philosophy, whether in a pre- or post-scientific age, to leap the chasm of incongruity by pure thought... Faith is therefore the final triumph of the incongruity, the final assertion of the meaningfulness of existence. There is no other triumph, and will be none, no matter how much human knowledge is enlarged.⁸³

Theologians are articulators of hope, as the comedy of salvation enables them to see past the confinement of the ‘not yet’. Humour can be a prelude, maybe not of faith itself,⁸⁴ but of a new world coming from God, recreating our human tragedies.

Conclusion

The student I met in the hallway truly ‘got it’. To study God at the university you must be joking. Theologians are ‘the clowns among the scientists’. Like clowning, theology should be entertaining. If it has a place at the university, its self-deprecating authority is a pointer to God. It takes guts to be

⁷⁸ See Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, pp. 11-34.

⁷⁹ See Fred D. Layman, ‘Theology and Humor’, *The Asbury Seminarian*, 38, no. 1 (1982), 16-17.

⁸⁰ Cf. De Vries, *Alles is geschiedenis*, pp. 50-52; also Helmut Thielicke, *Das Lachen der Heiligen und Narren: Nachdenkliches über Witz und Humor* (Stuttgart: Quell Verlag, [1974], 1988), esp. pp. 162-180.

⁸¹ Cf. Kaminsky, ‘Humor and the Theology of Hope’, p. 373. cf. Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, expanded edition (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 79: ‘At least for the duration of the comic perception, the tragedy of man is bracketed. By laughing at the imprisonment of the human spirit, humor implies that this imprisonment is not final but will be overcome, and by this implication provides yet another signal of transcendence—in this instance in the form of an intimation of redemption.’

⁸² See Jan Martijn Abrahamse, *Breekbaar halleluja: Onderweg met de pelgrimspsalmen* (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2018), pp. 86-93.

⁸³ Reinhold Niebuhr, ‘Humor and Faith’, in *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1946), pp. 129-130.

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, ‘Humour and Faith’, p. 111.

defenceless and vulnerable. My hope for theology, in order to be theological – a ‘learned’ speech of God – is that God makes fun of the Queen, and that we as theologians will be like Sarah and cheerfully proclaim: ‘God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me’ (Genesis 21.6).⁸⁵

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⁸⁵ Cf. Kaminsky, ‘Humor and the Theology of Hope’, p. 366.