Theology’s *munus triplex*? Reconsidering theology’s relationship to the sciences

**Abstract:**
Despite the complicated history of exchange between theology and science, the relation between the two can perhaps be summarized succinctly by Ian Barbour’s influential taxonomy: conflict, independence, dialogue, or integration. This article explores an alternative route by demonstrating how three recent theologians (Barth, Van Huyssteen, and Webster) offer recognizably distinct visions for Christian theology’s interdisciplinary encounters which can be characterized respectively as prophetic, priestly, and royal. A second section of this article discusses the fruitfulness of adopting a *munus triplex* approach to the interdisciplinary question, as well as anticipating potential objections to transferring the ‘offices’ of Christ to the task of theology.

**Introduction**

*There is a fundamental difference between religion, which is based on authority, and science, which is based on observation and reason.*

*Science will win because it works.*

In this quote, one of science’s more well-known advocates expresses not only his own view, but perhaps a commonly held opinion among people living in countries where science has made considerable advances in describing the observable cosmos. This optimism for science’s explanatory power is not exclusively a modern phenomenon either, for the question of what science has to do with religion, broadly understood, dates at least to Plato’s reflections on

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geometry’s potential to influence an individual’s soul. An apparent commonality between Plato and Hawking is the sense that the benefits humanity stands to gain in the encounter between science and religion are relatively unilateral: the more science ‘wins’, the better situated we will be to understand the universe and our place in it. Without denying the profound contributions of scientific inquiry, this essay calls into question the one-sidedness of the ‘science and religion’ exchange.

More specifically, this article intends to demonstrate how the writing of three recent theologians (Karl Barth, J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, and John Webster) offer generative resources for articulating theology’s relation to non-theological fields of inquiry. More particularly, and as the title suggests, an analysis of these three will yield distinct visions of this interdisciplinary relation, in which Barth, van Huyssteen, and Webster can be understood to portray theology in *prophetic, priestly, and royal* terms, respectively. Towards this end, relevant work by each theologian will be synthesized to outline the main contours of their thought on this subject and how these visions can be understood to map on to this three-fold framework. A briefer second section will argue that adopting a *munus triplex* approach towards theology’s interdisciplinary encounters has potential to mitigate problematic tendencies in contemporary efforts to address the issue. This section will also anticipate and respond to potential objections to transferring a Christological construct onto an understanding of theology’s interdisciplinary interaction.

1 The prophetic, priestly, and royal roles

As this article seeks to explicate how these three theologians can be understood to offer distinct perspectives on theology’s relation to non-theological fields of inquiry, two caveats are in order:

1) While this section will make every effort to reflect clearly each theologian’s thinking concerning theology and the ‘sciences’, given the substantive engagement that each of them has

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had with this topic, what is found below will be more suggestive than exhaustive, and 2) to argue that they can be read towards these ends is not to insist that they must. So while I intend to show how each demonstrates a marked tendency towards a particular ‘office’, all three recognize that theology’s relation to non-theological disciplines is not one-dimensional. Put otherwise, the descriptive efforts of this section will be oriented towards constructive ends.

1.1 Prophet

Barth’s reflections on theology’s relation to the sciences, broadly construed, range across several writings, but they can be found primarily in the years leading up to his work on the Church Dogmatics.³ When one considers his thinking as a whole on the matter of theology’s relation to the non-theological, three prophetic themes emerge: 1) theology’s ambiguous place in the academy, 2) a focus on ultimate reality, and 3) ‘crisis’ theology.

1.1.1 Theology’s ambiguous place

The biblical prophets had a complicated relationship to the surrounding cultures in which they fulfilled their vocation: they both belonged to the communities in which they ministered and, simultaneously, found themselves alienated from those same communities as a result of their ministry. Barth’s description of theology’s relation to society, and the university as a microcosm of it, resembles this dual sense of ‘belonging’ and ‘alienation’ characteristic of the prophets. Barth observes that theology can and does display various so-called scientific characteristics: it has its own object, path of rational reflection, and ability to furnish reasons for that path.⁴ Thus, on the basis of its peculiar scientific character, theology ‘has its own place

³ However, as will be seen below, the first volume of the Church Dogmatics continues to show an interest in theology’s prophetic task.

alongside other human undertakings of the same or a similar kind.\textsuperscript{15} And yet, Barth suggests that theology’s very similarity to the sciences calls into question its place among them. The other sciences could, in principle, take up theology’s object as their own thereby making theology an unnecessary duplication of efforts.\textsuperscript{6} Barth’s point is not so much that the sciences could possibly do the work of theology, but rather to emphasize that theology is an undeniably \textit{human} undertaking. Even if theology seeks to ‘work in its own special way and in the highest spheres’, it does not have special access to divine knowledge which would make it somehow superior to other intellectual endeavors.\textsuperscript{7} As such, theology’s inherent inability to offer anything unique to the scientific community calls into question its right to exist there.

Despite the similarities that exist between theology and the sciences which paradoxically exert pressure to both include and exclude theology from the sciences, Barth seems to suggest that it is on account of theology’s unique and peculiar character that the university continues to uncomfortably permit its continued presence. He surveys the route taken by a number of his predecessors (e.g. Schleiermacher, Schweitzer, Luthardt, Herrmann) to establish theology’s ‘science’ by rooting it in various forms of human experience, and not surprisingly Barth finds their efforts lacking.\textsuperscript{8} Crucially for Barth, theology’s scientific character is dependent on that which lies \textit{outside} of human subjectivity, namely the Word of God as God’s own revelation in infinite subjectivity.\textsuperscript{9} Barth counter-intuitively argues that the

\textsuperscript{5} CD I/1, p. 5.


unpalatable character of divine revelation’s presumed vulnerability to human subjectivity, which most would think merits its exclusion from the sciences, is precisely that which warrants its inclusion. He reasons that despite the sciences’ confidence in explaining human existence, the university has an ‘uneasy conscience’ which theology’s peculiar theme assuages by reminding that the academy’s pursuits might serve a purpose which transcends its mundane existence.10 Thus, for Barth, theology’s admittedly unusual scientific character and its somewhat uncomfortable location in the university need not deter theology from fulfilling its vocation. Not unlike the biblical prophet whose primary loyalty lies outside of the community it serves, theology’s classification as a science is inconsequential, because it has its own task to fulfill regardless of the scientific community’s recognition of its significance.11

I.1.2 Addressing the ultimate

Another reason biblical prophets continually found themselves at odds with their own community was that they insisted on reminding their listeners that their first allegiance was to the one revealed to them as YHWH, which is to say that the task of the prophet was to direct the nation’s attention away from the merely contingent—no matter how pressing circumstances might appear—towards the ultimacy of God’s self-presentation. As alluded to above, Barth suggests that theology’s precarious existence in the academy is due to its insistence on speaking about divine reality as opposed to the merely phenomenal to which the sciences are predisposed. He observes that people do not come to the theologian for insight into the ordinary problems of human existence, because people are more or less well-equipped to answer those questions for themselves. Rather, the theologian is sought out for answers to ultimate questions concerning life, death, and the reality of God, questions which present themselves on ‘the boundaries (Grenzen) of humanity’, where the existential needs of humanity


11 Cf. CDI/1, p. 8.
and issues of ultimacy weigh the heaviest.\textsuperscript{12} This need for answers at the boundaries is not, however, only humanity’s problem in a general sense, but by extension these same questions exert pressure on the academic community which ‘stands in an existential need that is identical to the need of the rest of humanity.’\textsuperscript{13} The sciences are capable of enquiry into a nearly endless number of questions that humanity may have about its own existence, but it is on the other side of creaturely existence where the sciences reach their limits.

This prophetic concern for addressing issues of ultimate reality (i.e. God’s own self-presentation) is clarified as Barth argues that theology’s lineage should be traced through Kierkegaard, Luther and Calvin, Paul and then, finally, to Jeremiah.\textsuperscript{14} Thus Barth finds in Jeremiah a paradigmatic figure who provides the contours of what it means for theologians to faithfully execute the task of directing humanity, including those within the university, towards ultimate ends—namely, the service and worship of God.\textsuperscript{15} What gives theology its prophetic character is its attention to a unique object, God’s self-revelation, which the other sciences are theoretically able but unwilling to address. Passively, theology’s very presence in the university can serve as a sign or ‘an echo, a corrective, a reminder of eternity.’\textsuperscript{16} More characteristically, however, Barth will describe theology in its more active role and its determination to disregard those scientific conventions and presuppositions which would risk leaving the ultimate unaddressed. In theology’s prophetic mode, its speech foregrounds God’s self-disclosure in such a way that questions of ultimate reality cannot be avoided.\textsuperscript{17} In the same way that a prophet’s ministry was understood to be a disruption of the status quo, Barth sees theology as

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\textsuperscript{13} Barth, ‘The Word of God as the Task of Theology’, p. 180.

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Barth, The Word of God as the Task of Theology’, p. 183.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Barth, ‘The Word of God as the Task of Theology’, p. 182.

\textsuperscript{16} Barth, The Göttingen Dogmatics, p. 50.

\textsuperscript{17} Barth, ‘The Word of God as the Task of Theology’, p. 181 (emphasis his).
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fulfilling a similar role in the university as it bears witness to the same divine disruption experienced in God’s becoming a human. Barth further insists that the announcement of this divine advent is not only intended for an ecclesial setting but has relevance for the university’s ‘lecture halls’ as well.18

I.1.3 ‘Theology of Crisis’

Barth’s early theology has been referred to as a ‘theology of crisis’, and this crisis theme continues to confirm the prophetic shape of Barth’s vision for theology in the academy.19 In Barth’s reflections on theology’s place in the university, it is the already mentioned ‘existential need’ which places the various disciplines of the university in a crisis. In discussing the futility of human efforts to come to terms with its existence, Barth rather infamously resorts to mathematical language to suggest that the university finds itself ‘keenly aware of the minus sign that stands before their entire parenthesis.’20 This negation of the sciences’ efforts to make sense of reality is grounded in the possibility of encountering God’s self-revelation as a limit concept which confounds and eludes their attempts to grasp reality.21 The awareness of this crisis does not leave the disciplines simply with an epistemic riddle that one might choose, or as easily not choose, to consider. This ‘minus’, according to Barth, creates a ‘dilemma that extends over the entire range of actual and possible human circumstances’, and the theologian’s fulfillment of her vocation serves as ‘a distress signal’ which alerts the academy of its precarious situation.22

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22 Barth, ‘The Word of God as the Task of Theology’, p. 179.
As suggested already, the other disciplines could possibly have adopted ultimate reality as their theme, but an ‘emergency’ situation issues from their unwillingness to address issues of ultimate concern, and it is in this context that theology functions as a prophetic voice in the wilderness.\textsuperscript{23}

While the rhetoric may have cooled some in the years between ‘Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie’ (1922) and \textit{Die kirchliche Dogmatik} (1932), the underlying sense of crisis persists. Barth reiterates the familiar theme that the scientific disciplines (historians, philosophy, psychology, etc…) could have chosen to take up the task of theology by making ultimate questions their primary concern, and that this would have made theology’s place within the academy superfluous.\textsuperscript{24} However in actuality, which seems to be Barth’s persistent concern, ‘the other sciences have not in fact recognised and adopted the task of theology.’\textsuperscript{25} Other disciplines might occasionally endeavor to address theology’s object, but they seem to miss the crucial issue by seeking to understand this object from the standpoint of their own presuppositions and methodology which inevitably results in bringing ‘alien principles’ to the theological task.\textsuperscript{26} If it were simply a matter of those disciplines remaining somewhat ambivalent with regard to theology as a science, then there might not be cause for alarm. However, the crisis arises again because of the damage or mischief (\textit{den Schaden}) inflicted on the academy, as well as the church. In as much as the other fields of study fail to grasp the key issues of theological science, their efforts result in a distorted understanding of the church’s discourse about God; therefore, theology continues in its scientific endeavor as a necessary emergency measure which reminds the sciences of the tension in which they find themselves, as all their efforts to know reality simultaneously conceal it.\textsuperscript{27}


\textsuperscript{24} Cf. \textit{CD I/1}, p. 7.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{CD I/1}, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{CD I/1}, p. 6.

In summary, Barth envisions theology’s role within the academy in a somewhat analogous role to the church’s relationship with society. As the church’s task is to take up the prophetic functions of truth-telling, warning, reminding, and rebuking, so also theology often finds itself uncomfortably expressing what others are unable or unwilling to say. If the university remains content with attending to that which is merely natural and penultimate, Barth understands theology as charged with the task of continually ‘sounding the alarm’ through its proclamation of God’s self-disclosure despite the university’s unwillingness and inability to recognize it. In this proclamation, theology’s prophetic voice becomes the very apocalyptic in-breaking to which it testifies.\footnote{Cf. Barth, \textit{The Göttingen Dogmatics}, p. 15, as one of numerous places where he addresses the way in which proclamation becomes ‘God’s Word in the same glory’ as other modes of revelation.} It would be understandable to find in this approach an overly oppositional view of theology’s relation to the other sciences, but as Barth is prone to remind, science \textit{and} theology are \textit{Wissenschaften} which are defined by the act of searching as opposed to the state of ‘having found’ \textit{(ein Gefundenhaben)}.\footnote{Barth, ‘Religion Und Wissenschaft’, p. 430.}

\subsection*{I.2 Priest}

If Barth can be viewed as depicting theology in prophetic terms, then Van Huyssteen’s writing provides helpful resources for understanding the priestly role enjoined on theology. In what follows, Van Huyssteen will be shown to offer resources which: 1) highlight the contextual nature of all intellectual inquiry, and 2) correct reductionist views of rationality, and 3) recommend a postfoundational epistemology in which both theology and science are relativized such that neither is privileged in an interdisciplinary encounter. This consideration of Van Huyssteen’s ‘priestly’ contribution to the conversation differs from the previous section in that it was perhaps more apparent how each of the elements in our treatment of Barth fit a prophetic model. In Van Huyssteen’s case, the argument is cumulative, which is to say that the
first two points are preparatory or necessary preliminary steps on the way to the priestly mediation developed in the third. However, these preliminaries should not be understood as distinct from the priestly vocation, for minimal reflection on the description of priestly duties in, for example, Leviticus would seem to confirm that the various preparatory activities surrounding cultic worship are in fact included in their priestly responsibilities.

1.2.1 Scientific inquiry as contextual

Van Huyssteen builds on the work of various philosophers of science (e.g. Kuhn and Laudan) to argue that science, in spite of its claims to objectivity, is as historically and contextually conditioned an endeavor as anything else in which human beings engage. Therefore, he warns against abstracting theology and science out of the specific contexts in which they are pursued in an effort to determine their relationship. Rather, he observes that both theology and science are always done ‘in quite specific social, historical, and intellectual contexts.’ This recognition begins to redress the widely-held belief that the natural sciences operate on demonstrable universal truths while all other modes of truth discovery are bound by human contingency and subjectivity.

One of the ways he arrives at this conclusion is through the recognition that positivism has failed to account for the changes to scientific understanding which have taken place historically. These changes not only include the gradual accumulation of knowledge, but perhaps more challenging to the empirical confidence of the natural sciences are the major paradigm shifts which occur over time. One might respond that these changes are the result of the ‘scientific method’ at work, which Van Huyssteen would not deny; but the point is that science changes and that very change confirms that ‘all our inquiry and reflection, whether

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scientific or theological, is indeed highly contextual and already presupposes a particular theoretical, doctrinal, or personal stance and commitment. The contextually conditioned nature of scientific findings does not result in a debilitation of its intellectual pursuit, but rather it highlights the human character in discerning the nature of reality – even in its most scientifically ‘objective’ mode.

The change in scientific understanding over time is not the only indicator of science’s humanly conditioned character, but sociological analysis also yields a feminist critique of a patriarchal bias within the discipline. Building on the work of James Moore and Margaret Wertheim, Van Huyssteen observes that despite science’s efforts to insulate itself from feminist critique, science is dominated by a ‘white, middle-class, male’ presence which is so pervasive that, even when other genders or cultures are present, this dominant worldview continues to exercise a hegemonic hold on the field. This becomes especially clear, he suggests, in the cosmologies (i.e. quasi-theologies) that are espoused by some of science’s more notable representatives (e.g. Paul Davies, Frank Tipler, Stephen Hawking, and Steven Weinberg). Moore suggests that the dominance of this patriarchal bias is so prevalent in the natural sciences that one is capable of predicting how a person thinks about a range of issues merely on the basis of a primary commitment to this supposedly scientific worldview. Its patriarchal character is revealed through its fundamental conviction that it ‘can claim to know and understand everything’ by way of its superior rationality.

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34 Cf. Moore, ‘Cosmology and Theology’, p. 615.
What history and sociology suggest is further confirmed by contemporary theories in physics which challenge notions of an objectifiable world existing in stable and secure forms ready to be measured and analyzed. Quantum mechanics and theories of relativity suggest that the conditioned character of human beings places epistemological limits on what can be known of the world precisely because we participate in it. Likewise, when evolutionary theory is applied to epistemology itself, interesting insights emerge. The fact that human beings display ‘cognitive goals and ideals [e.g. moral sensibility, aesthetic appreciation of beauty, the propensity for religious belief] that cannot be explained or justified in terms of survival-promotion or reproductive advantage only’ indicates that human beings have the capacity to transcend what might otherwise be seen as biological and cultural determinates.

Taking these observations collectively calls into question the prevailing sentiment that the scientific community has access to a form of pure rationality and empiricism that is not subject to the influence of human subjectivity. The point of demonstrating science’s contextual limitations is not to undermine natural science as one mode of intellectual inquiry nor the fruit borne from it, but merely to subvert its overly confident claims to objectivity. As suggested above, this is the first step towards developing a mediatiorial view of theology’s relation to the sciences.

I.2.2 Re-configuring rationality

One might want to debate some of the details of Van Huyssteen’s contextual arguments while granting the overarching observation that scientific inquiry is to greater or lesser degrees humanly conditioned. This recognition, however, does not yet create the conditions for a transformative encounter between theology and the sciences. Instead, he grounds potential for meaningful dialogue in a reconsideration of what he understands to be reductionist views of

rationality. He summarizes the problematic understanding of rationality and the so-called conflict between science and religion in the following presumed axiomatic statements:

- scientific statements are hypothetical, fallible, and tentative, while statements of religious faith are dogmatic, ideological, and fideistic;
- scientific thought is always open to critical evaluation, justification, or falsification, while religious faith goes against the facts and often defies empirical evidence;
- scientific thought delights in critical dissent and constructive criticism, while faith more often than not depends on massive consensus and uncritical commitment;
- scientists therefore seem to base their beliefs on evidence and rational argument, while religious beliefs appear to be founded on “faith” only;
- scientific rationality is thus revealed as not only a very manicured and disciplined form of human reflection, but as also incommensurable with, and vastly superior to, religious faith and theological reflection.\(^{38}\)

These are the sorts of dichotomies that one might regularly encounter in discourses steeped in modernism's epistemic confidence concerning the nature of the so-called rational and irrational domains of science and theology, respectively. These widespread presuppositions inhibit interdisciplinary exchange by perpetuating the prejudices of a public that has an exaggerated confidence in science's explanatory capacity and by reinforcing the

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belief that theology displays a notable lack of interest in those scientific developments which have the potential to inform its discourse.\(^{39}\)

Building on the work of Nicholas Rescher and Larry Laudan, Van Huyssteen demonstrates the reductionism present in this polarization, and he identifies three misunderstandings in need of correction.\(^{40}\) First, viewing science and theology in terms of this sharp antithesis is an indication that both theology and science can exhibit characteristics of foundationalism. Theology’s seeking to secure incontrovertible ground through an inerrant scripture or self-authenticating revelation are met by science’s insistence on logic, sense data, and experimentation as the bedrock of knowledge.\(^{41}\) Second, this caricature of theology and science overlooks an important difference between theology and religion. To dismiss theology as simply another form of mysticism fails to recognize the critical dimension of theological reflection which might suggest that ‘theology, in this reflective mode, may turn out to share more with scientific reflection than with mystical experience.’\(^{42}\)

Third, and the heart of Van Huyssteen’s critique, reducing rationality to a monolithic expression of rule-based cognition misconstrues the complexity of how rationality functions – not only within theology but also within the sciences. In looking to Rescher’s analysis, one finds that rationality is not exclusively comprised of strictly cognitive dimensions, but that evaluative and pragmatic elements are present as well. These evaluative and pragmatic dimensions of


\(^{41}\) Cf. Van Huyssteen, ‘Postfoundationalism in Theology and Science’, p. 16.

rationality are not only operative in commonplace decision-making or the so-called subjective dimensions of faith and morality, but these seemingly less cognitive dimensions are employed in the natural sciences as well. Decisions regarding whether to accept or reject hypotheses, which theory options to utilize, the selection of discreet problems to investigate are all laden with value judgments which, although not entirely arbitrary, cannot eradicate the decidedly human dimension of all decision-making activity. In short, human subjectivity is necessarily integral in the scientific method. It is important to recognize that the presence of value-based judgments is not a denial of rationality, but this recognition calls into question abstract and idealized misunderstandings of rationality as a purely cognitive capacity. Instead, recognizing the subjective dimensions of rational reflection in all its forms acknowledges that there is no rationality which is not embodied rationality. This realization leads to a reduced emphasis on ‘rational beliefs’ in favor of highlighting the importance of ‘rational persons’ capable of demonstrating good judgement in addressing a wide-range of complicated questions, whether they are scientific, theological, or otherwise.\(^{43}\) The acknowledgment that it is persons who both use rationality and determine whether an idea or belief is rational, once again, underscores the social and contextual aspects of rationality. Part of the process of affirming a theory’s rationality is submitting it a scholarly community who is charged with evaluating its merits, and since that community necessarily exercises evaluative judgements, one is compelled to recognize that rationality as a human endeavor is a socially conditioned phenomenon in all its forms.\(^{44}\)

Recognizing the multi-dimensional character of rationality need not minimize the crucial importance of the analytic/cognitive dimension of rationality indispensable for the work of the natural sciences. Rather, it is to recognize that there are different ‘reasoning strategies’ which require different application of the same threefold matrix of rationalities. The existence of similar rational elements between theology and the sciences does not mean that they operate with identical reasoning strategies, but the use of these three dimensions (cognitive, evaluative, pragmatic) in every sphere of rational reflection implies that the


\(^{44}\) Cf. Van Huyssteen, ‘Postfoundationalism in Theology and Science’, p. 27.
‘scientific method’ does not provide a uniquely objective means of determining reality.\textsuperscript{45} The problems which science and theology pursue are certainly different, but the rationalities employed vary only in degree, and not in kind.\textsuperscript{46} This is a crucial recognition for any efforts directed towards meaningful dialogue between theology and the sciences which seeks to overcome the naïve polarity described above, for it carries the recognition that:

All our knowing is grounded in embodied, interpreted experience and is accountable to many layers of interpreted experience ... these problem-solving judgements apply to both theology and the sciences as we use the same kind of interpretive and evaluative procedures to, broadly, understand nature, humans, and the social historical, and religious aspects of our lives.\textsuperscript{47}

Acknowledgment of overlapping rational strategies is another important preliminary step in developing theology’s mediatorial role as it helps to create the necessary conditions for a generative dialogue.

\textbf{1.2.3 A Postfoundational Conversation}

The result of levelling the epistemic ground between theology and science simultaneously opens the possibility for a transformative encounter while also establishing limits on what one might expect from this encounter. Regarding the latter, Van Huyssteen’s efforts to redefine rationality in contextual and multidimensional terms mitigates against positing an identity between ‘rationality’ and ‘truth.’ To the protestation of theologian and scientist alike, possessing a form of ‘rationality’ is no guarantee of possessing or discovering truth. In place of a relationship of identity, Van Huysteen suggests that a ‘weak tie’ exists between the two.\textsuperscript{48} This

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\item \textsuperscript{45} Cf. Van Huyssteen, ‘Postfoundationalism in Theology’, p. 223.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Cf. Van Huyssteen, ‘Postfoundationalism in Theology’, p. 225.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Van Huyssteen, ‘Postfoundationalism in Theology’, p. 213.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Van Huyssteen, ‘Postfoundationalism in Theology and Science’, p. 33.
\end{itemize}
‘weak tie’ distinguishes between what he is proposing and more extreme forms of relativism by acknowledging the impossibility of taking full possession of truth while also maintaining its existence. Instead, the truth that is sought in the various scientific fields, which arguably includes theology, is a goal which the disciplines are incapable of definitively possessing.\(^{*}^{49}\)

Where this differs from the prophetic mode is in Van Huyssteen’s recognition that this \textit{focus imaginarius} is something which theology and other sciences are better served pursuing together. Despite the provisionality of its cross-disciplinary outcomes, theology’s willingness to enter into a dialogue affirms that priestly efforts are not primarily directed at critique or correction, but rather has the goal of communion and transformation. Put otherwise, a post-foundational epistemology which is fully aware of the contextual and multi-dimensional character of rational inquiry opens a discursive space in which different voices ‘need not always be in contradiction, or in danger of assimilating one another, but are in fact dynamically interactive with one another.\(^{*}^{50}\) The strength of the ‘priestly’ position is its enabling of theologians and scientists alike to enter into a dialogue which maintains the integrity of their disciplines’ ‘rational strategies’ and intellectual resources, while also being emboldened to proceed beyond the somewhat arbitrary boundaries of one’s own field of expertise.

Even though compelling reasons exist for entering into a cross-disciplinary dialogue, there are also inherent drawbacks and limitations. For the theologian in particular, when entering into discourses which operate on the presumption that all religions draw from a generic religious experience or metaphysics, one is cautioned that the possibility of a truly generative dialogue evaporates the more one discards those things which are distinctive about their particular traditions.\(^{*}^{51}\) Thus, Van Huyssteen concludes, interdisciplinary dialogue inevitably arrives at its limits, wherein the conversation is exhausted and potentially irreconcilable differences are acknowledged. Nonetheless, this interdisciplinary dialogue is not


\(^{50}\) Van Huyssteen, ‘Postfoundationalism in Theology’, p. 214.

necessarily undertaken in vain, for theologians (and presumably, scientists) are able to return to their own discipline’s discourses ‘carrying with them the rich interdisciplinary results … to impact a re-imaging of specific theological and doctrinal traditions.’ It is precisely in connection to this imagery of movement, communion and transformation that the ‘priestly’ metaphor comes into its own. A mediation occurs when theology and science move from safe disciplinary enclaves towards a place of transformative encounter where a mutuality exists even as distinctions are preserved, only then to return to their respective fields in order to bear witness to the discoveries made through just such an encounter.

Among the three positions being considered, one finds in Van Huyssteen’s writing on this subject a more philosophically inflected discourse in distinction from a more theologically self-conscious one. In at least one regard, the philosophical tenor supports my contention that a ‘mediatorial’ position can be discerned in Van Huyssteen’s writing. In as much as his efforts are directed towards meeting science ‘on its own ground’, then there is a kind of apostolic logic operative which seeks to use language and concepts accessible to critical thinkers from any discipline. However, the pitfall to which the priestly theologian might remain alert, as already observed, is that stripping one’s speech of its religious and Christian particularity leaves theology potentially exposed to a type of Canaanite colonization.

1.3 King

Before turning to the royal character of theology as exemplified in Webster’s writing on the topic, it may be helpful to identify in advance the shortcomings of adopting this terminology. First, ‘king’ language (or for that matter theology’s more traditional epithet – ‘Queen of the Sciences’) simply does not resonate with our modern and, broadly speaking, democratic sensibilities. The idea that theology might enjoy an epistemic superiority over the other disciplines appears antiquated at best and offensively domineering at worst. Furthermore, as has been intimated above, if any discipline currently deserves the regnant title

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52 Van Huyssteen, “Postfoundationalism in Theology,” 220.
today, it most assuredly is one of the many sciences or the natural sciences as whole. However, in the following consideration of theology’s royal office, it will be apparent that naïve understandings of theology’s dominance are mitigated by the recognition that it is not theology which reigns, per se, but God; and it is neither theology’s power nor dominance which are its distinctive features, but 1) unity, 2) order, and 3) dignity.

I.3.1 Unity

One recurring theme throughout Webster’s writing on theology and the disciplines (variously termed: science, humanities, arts, university) is the affirmation that knowledge is unified. This unity of knowledge is not a property inherent to knowledge itself but is derived from the recognition that ‘the reigning order of things established by God’s creation manifests unity of the cosmos’, and as such ‘all things come from God and have a relation to one another and to him’.53 Whereas postmodernism might be willing to make space for theology in the university based on a perceived need for a plurality of perspectives to describe differentiated spheres of (or discourses on) reality, a royal understanding of theology affirms that there is one reality, regardless of its being variously understood. This calls into question attempts to situate theology alongside other disciplines based on the recognition that efforts to do so often imply that each domain of inquiry address separate realities – one sacred and the other secular.54 When a vision of reality in which ‘every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights’ (James 1.17) is forfeited, the consequence is that both theology and the university it is meant to serve fall into disarray. Instead, as Webster advocates, a theologically derived unity of reality holds the promise for theology to provide ‘a comprehensive account of


the nature and ends of intellectual activity in toto, and so of humane studies. If, in accord with Bonaventure, one affirms that creaturely intellect itself is counted among the many gifts issuing from the ‘Father of Lights’, then if fulfills its proper use as it gives itself to know this singular created, redeemed, and sustained reality. In other words, if the imagery of James is to be taken seriously, the disciplines are capable of bringing illumination on the basis that they originate from the same ‘fount of source’. Objections on the basis of a discipline’s fragmented perspective, and the incapacities of created intellect, fail to recognize the ways in which the sciences are capable of anticipating a unified reality despite their limitations.

An important corollary follows the affirmation of a unified created reality which has its beginning and end in God; namely, the very processes of intellection themselves are part of this singular created unity and therefore participate in a movement from and to its divine source. The suggestion that God is the principle agent in the movements of the intellect runs counter to modernist understandings of the self which are prone to look no further than naturalistic explanations to understand cognitive activity. The seemingly inevitable conclusion which results from this preoccupation with the phenomenal is that the processes of intellection are exclusively under the command of the self-determining human subject. Theology, in its royal witness, seeks to controvert one of Western society’s widely held assumptions—‘freedom from determination by situation’—by acknowledging that the intellect is creaturely gift. Even

58 Cf. Webster, ‘God, Theology, Universities’, p. 250.
59 Cf. Webster, ‘Regina Artium’, p. 188.
though this counter-intuitive theological claim on the metaphysics of rationality call for reconsideration of deeply ingrained (although mostly implicit, and therefore all the more resistant to interrogation) habits of mind, theology’s royal perspective offers an optimistic outlook on one’s making use of the intellect to reflect on the various modalities of created existence. In as much as the various objects of study are ‘irradiated by the same divine wisdom in which theology instructs us’, worthwhile discoveries are gained as the intellect is moved by and towards its divine source.61

Webster recognizes a problematic optimism in this vision of the intellect as part of God’s unified action to bring all things to perfection in him, in that it fails to properly acknowledge sin’s effects on these rational faculties. Even if all things will eventually be brought to their perfected telos, not all intellectual activity is equally directed by or oriented towards this end.62 A more robustly Augustinian notion of human sinfulness allows for the recognition that fallen creatures consistently use their intellects towards misdirected ends, and therefore the task of the theologian is to exercise discernment in determining the scientific insights which can be helpfully appropriated and those which might be set aside.63 In the end, Webster’s desire to affirm the unity of reality results in an intensification of theology’s distinctiveness by suggesting that theology transcends any efforts to situate it as one discipline among others:

There is no conflict of the faculties between the arts and theology, because theology is not a ‘faculty’ but a culture, a mode of thought, prayer and holiness which permeates all acts of intelligence. Further, the reduction [of arts to theology] is a refusal of the secularity of the arts, for there is no secular realm, no entity or act which has its being and motion in itself and is knowable apart from God.64

61 Webster, ‘Regina Artium’, p. 173; cf. p. 180, ‘the work of the mind is the act of running back to God as doctor, grantor and fons.’


64 Webster, ‘Regina Artium’, p. 181.
I.3.2 Order

The theme of order serves as a counterpart to the previous affirmation of reality’s unity and it is a recurrent them in Webster’s writing. Later in his career, Webster increasingly exhibited a preoccupation with the Thomistic insight that theology has ‘God and all things in relation to God’ as its proper content and organizing principle. This characteristic concern forms the conclusion of Webster’s inaugural essay at Oxford and is announced as the point of departure in later essays. For example, his understanding of theology and the university springs from the ‘knowledge that the founding and encompassing reality for creaturely acts and forms of life is the triune God in his outer works.’

This acute interest in rightly-ordered theology does not merely cache out in formal terms either, but it is perhaps most strongly apparent in the way it exerts pressure on the material content of theological explication. In its application to cognition, an ordered theology suggests that prior to engaging in a general description of cognitive principles, one begins with the recognition that those engaged in theological reflection necessarily must come to terms with theology’s peculiar claim that its cognitive principle is ‘both extrinsic to itself and indemonstrable.’ This insistence on the proper ordering of theological reflection rests on a fundamental recognition of the Creator and creature distinction as properly basic, which means that any anthropological claims, including a proper understanding of the intellect and its varied uses in the university, are conditioned by the recognition that human persons are

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66 Webster, ‘God, Theology, Universities’, p. 241; cf. p. 243 and Webster, ‘Regina Artium’, p. 171, ‘theology is contemplation of the revealed wisdom of God, the liberal arts are … in the service of a Christian culture at whose centre lay the exegesis of Scripture.’

only appropriately understood in their ordered relation to their divine source.\textsuperscript{68} In particular, this insistence on attending to metaphysical first principles and theology’s proper object commends an alternative to modernism’s prioritization of the subject and postmodernity’s various deconstructions.\textsuperscript{69}

These fundamental observations concerning a rightly-ordered theological vision function as a powerful diagnostic of the ills of modern intellectual life as conducted in the university and, as importantly, within theology. Regarding the university, Webster observes the speciousness of the typically modern idea that operations of the intellect can somehow ‘be isolated from any contingent, secondary characteristics which happen to be true of particular enquirers in particular fields.’\textsuperscript{70} This observation complements Van Huyssteen’s critique of the pervasive belief that rationality is unaffected from the contexts in which it functions. The pretensions of a ‘non-perspectival’ or ‘de-particularized’ view of rationality which have powerfully shaped the ethos of the modern university have left it bereft of resources to press beyond the surface of naturalism to the metaphysical ‘underlying principles’ which provide grounds for a coherent explication of reality. Theology’s attention to this ordered structure holds the possibility of provoking the various disciplines to reflect more deeply on that which is signified by their disparate phenomena: the existence and character of ‘a unifying first cause.’\textsuperscript{71}

This disorder is not solely, or even primarily, restricted to the university, but Webster observes that theology itself has fallen into disarray. Whether it is replacement of the doctrine of God with epistemological concerns as primary, apologetic enthusiasm for proving the existence of a generic god, the resurrection shifting from being an object of belief to a ground

\textsuperscript{68} This is not an understanding of created intellect that sets creaturely action at odds with divine action, but it is instead the more nuanced recognition that what takes place on ‘the surface does not exhaust the reality of any creaturely act’ (Webster, ‘Regina Artium’, p. 181).

\textsuperscript{69} Cf. Webster, ‘Theological Theology’, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{70} Webster, ‘Theological Theology’, p. 14.

\textsuperscript{71} Webster, ‘God, Theology, Universities’, pp. 248–49.
of belief, or the various ways in which theology’s sub-disciplines have capitulated to the forces of de-particularization in order to garner prestige in the present academic climate, they are all symptomatic of the disorder that results from theology’s lack of attention (or nerve) to explicate to ‘the inner structure and dynamic of Christian doctrine.’ As such, a vision of theology’s royal vocation engenders a concern for restoring a theologically informed vision of reality in which all things find a divine coherence.

1.3.3 Dignity

Theology’s royal metaphor finds further expression in Webster’s characteristic concern that theology’s recovery involves a recognition of a peculiar dignity which extends beyond a scrupulous attention to theology’s order. This dignity finds expression in Webster’s writing on theology’s relation to the university as a concern for demonstrating theology’s capability and distinctiveness. Theology’s capability is rooted in its ample dogmatic and exegetical resources which are ‘capable of providing a sort of ‘first philosophy’ of the life of the mind.’ This consideration of theology’s capability instills a confidence in its own resources to justify its place in the university by recognizing that its intellectual tradition is well-established, and therefore is not dependent on the various other disciplines’ affirmation of its rationality. As such, theology need not capitulate to a diminished vocation by allowing the prejudices of natural religion to reshape theology’s identity as just another discipline among others.

A recognition of theology’s rich intellectual resources and capabilities further affords theology an immense amount of freedom to pursue its own interests in its own way. On the

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72 On the first three issues, see Webster, ‘Theological Theology’, pp. 18–20; on the last see Webster, ‘God, Theology, Universities’, p. 249.

73 Cf. Webster, ‘Regina Artium’, p. 191.

74 Webster, ‘Regina Artium’, p. 182.

75 Cf. Webster, ‘God, Theology, Universities’, p. 250.

76 Cf. Webster, ‘Regina Artium’, p. 172.
basis of theology’s distinctive freedom, efforts towards discovering commensurate areas of interdisciplinary agreement are frequently misguided and serve as a distraction for theology’s pursuit of its own vocation.\textsuperscript{77} Crucially, it is not dialogue itself which Webster eschews, but a dialogue that is blandly determined by modernity’s de-regionalizing modes of intellectual inquiry. In an effort to curtail this totalizing emphasis on universality, theology’s practitioners are encouraged to maintain its own particularity in the hope that it will generate ‘a set of orderly, energetic and curious conversations about differing visions of human life and thought.’\textsuperscript{78} Attending to theology’s distinctiveness in this way insures that theologians will have something to bestow which could not have been said otherwise.\textsuperscript{79} Additionally, fostering confidence in theology’s distinctive contribution should result in a refreshing lack of anxiety and hostility as theology engages broader intellectual discourses.\textsuperscript{80} In contrast, the lack of confidence exemplified in various interdisciplinary engagements only reinforces the perceived superiority of the other, more ‘scientific’, modes of knowing and encourages theology’s neglect of its own resources. If theology is to recover a sense of dignity that is not dependent on the university’s approval of its modes of rationality and discourse, it will do so out of the recognition that ‘whatever justification and worth theology has is in the last analysis conferred by God.’\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{77} Cf. Webster, ‘Regina Artium’, p. 191 n. 38; however, his justifiable censure of interdisciplinary efforts does not mean that the endeavor is never appropriate, and the critique seems to fall somewhat oddly given his more positive appraisal of the ‘lesser lights’ of various intellectual pursuits that all stand in relation to the infinitely greater source.

\textsuperscript{78} Webster, ‘Theological Theology’, pp. 27–28.


\textsuperscript{80} Cf. Webster, ‘Regina Artium’, p. 191.

\textsuperscript{81} Webster, ‘God, Theology, Universities’, p. 251.
These reflections on theology’s royal capability and dignity could suggest a vision of theology impervious to critique or only legitimately pursued in isolation from the other disciplines; neither is true. Theology stands to benefit from an association with the university, even if that association is not required for its flourishing. The range of possible benefits to theology which might result from its participation in the academy include an encouragement away from ‘self-absorption, formulaic repetition, laziness or loss of intellectual appetite’.\(^\text{82}\) As such, the university provides the theological undertaking with a context for and provocation towards a scrupulous rethinking of its own self-understanding. In this context, what is called for is neither a categorical imperative to belong to, nor withdrawal from, the academy but discernment regarding whether and how those interdisciplinary relationships are negotiated.\(^\text{83}\) Theology’s confidence and seeming indifference to the opinions of other disciplines could lead one to think that the regal character of theology comes with a certain measure of high-handedness, so it is vital to understand that it is not theology, per se, which demands for itself authority and respect. If, in some sense, theology is the ‘queen of the sciences’ then she is not an overbearing one, but rather a humble one. For, like all the rational inquiries into created reality, and as the other ‘offices’ also recognize, there is nothing superior about theology in and of itself. Theology, like the other sciences, only offers a partial understanding of the shape of reality; nevertheless, ‘what theology has been given to know, it knows, and what it knows it seeks to commend.’\(^\text{84}\)

**II A Munus Triplex?**

The bulk of this essay has demonstrated the ways in which Barth, Van Huyssteen, and Webster supply intellectual resources for developing prophetic, priestly, and royal perspectives in theology’s interdisciplinary interactions on the nature of reality. The *prophetic* character of

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\(^{82}\) Webster, ‘God, Theology, Universities’, p. 251.

\(^{83}\) Cf. Webster, ‘God, Theology, Universities’, p. 245.

\(^{84}\) Webster, ‘Regina Artium’, p. 189.
theology was displayed by observing how Barth draws attention to theology’s ambiguous place in the university, its readiness to address questions of ultimacy and the resultant existential crises. Van Huyssteen’s thought provided opportunity to reflect on the ways in which theology might adopt a priestly mode as it exposes and reconfigures deficient understandings of rationality in order to lay a foundation for a mediating encounter that has potential to prove mutually beneficial for both fields of inquiry. Finally, Webster’s insights served as provocation to consider theology’s royal character in which the themes of unity, order, and dignity might guide theology in its interdisciplinary engagements. However, to suggest that these figures can be drawn upon in these ways does not explain why one might be inclined to do so. Therefore, the present section attempts to address the reasons for drawing an analogous relationship between offices traditionally associated with Christ’s redemptive work and theology’s role in the academy, and then to consider potential objections over the appropriateness of drawing this Christological analogy.

There are at least two reasons why a munus triplex approach to theology’s interdisciplinarity is preferable to current models. First, it provides a conceptual framework with enough flexibility to negotiate the complex exchange between the disciplines and, second, it offers a more theologically attuned conceptuality than recent proposals have tended to articulate. In order to recognize the importance of factoring these two features into a one’s interdisciplinary model, two recent attempts to address this relation bring the above issues into focus. In the late-twentieth century, Ian Barbour offered an influential four-fold taxonomy to clarify the varying ways this interdisciplinary relation is negotiated: conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration. The labels of each approach speak for themselves, and the strength of this taxonomy is also its weakness, namely its simplicity. This is not to suggest that his treatment of the subject is simplistic, but only to observe that his taxonomy (and indeed all

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taxonomies) have a tendency to be deployed in reductionist ways that are ahistorical and static, and as such it fails to do justice to the ways in which the relationship between the two fields of knowledge vary depending on time and place. As the consideration of Van Huyssteen suggested, this sort of approach relies on an abstraction of religion and science from the particular contexts in which they are pursued. Recognizing this potential weakness, Mikael Stenmark seeks to offer a multi-dimensional model of relation by elaborating five different possibilities: the independence view, the contact view, the monist view, the complete scientific expansionist view, and the complete religious expansionist view. These categories are slightly less transparent than Barbour’s taxonomy, but his intent is to overcome the critique leveled against Barbour by recognizing that ‘science and religion are social practices which change over time’ and that one’s taxonomy ought to be flexible enough to account for those changes.

In agreement with Stenmark’s insight regarding the need for a multi-dimensional approach to interdisciplinary conversation, a munus triplex holds promise for an appropriately flexible model grounded in a familiar theological discourse. When practitioners of theology interact with other disciplines, there is not a singular approach which one uniformly applies in every situation. This remains true whether one adopts Barbour’s four-fold taxonomy, Stenmark’s five categories, or even a three-fold office. What the three-fold office offers that the others do not is a way of conceptualizing how a singular, but rich, body of intellectual discourses (i.e. theology) could concurrently enact different roles depending on the varying disciplines, the different contexts in which they are practiced, and the specific questions being

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87 Cf. Mikael Stenmark, How to Relate Science and Religion: A Multidimensional Model (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 250–69. To be fair, he sees himself elaborating a three-fold model and that the last two are extremes which do not actually occur in practice.

addressed. This makes the *munus triplex* a particularly apt analogy in that Christ’s offices are not exercised independently of the other offices, but Christ ‘bears all three offices at the same time and consistently exercises all three at once.’\(^9\) Rather than providing a monolithic view of how theology relates to other sciences, the ‘offices’ approach demonstrates a measure of flexibility in addressing *specific* ideas from various disciplines as it considers the degree of commensurability or, as often, incommensurability of scientific and theological claims.\(^9\) Even though it requires discernment to know when and how critique, exchange, and integration might be an appropriate response in the midst of an interdisciplinary encounter, the ‘offices’ approach encourages a vision of intellectual exchange that affirms the ways in which theological truths can be applied variously depending on the particularity of the circumstances in which the theologian finds herself.\(^9\)

While Stenmark’s multidimensional model is an advance over Barbour’s more static taxonomy, the decision to discuss religion, broadly conceived, in relation to science requires utilization of generic categories (e.g. independence, contact, etc…) to describe interdisciplinary interactions. As such, it lacks a Christian theological foundation from which to articulate its architecture and themes. The *munus triplex* approach seeks to address this by employing familiar religious images—prophet, priest, and king—in a recognizably Christian framework. In adopting a distinctly christological idiom for describing theology among the sciences, one affirms that theology’s disposition in interdisciplinary settings is compelled to reflect the

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90 By way of exaggerated example, the evidence marshalled for a young earth creationism requires a different kind of engagement than the presuppositions of metaphysical naturalism.

91 It is perhaps important to recognize in this context that there is no singular theology which is readily assumed by all in interdisciplinary exchange; however, the point has been to observe that there is not a singular approach which is required for theology’s engagement with various scientific communities.
character of the one who makes its own domain of intellectual inquiry distinct from more general concepts of religion (transcendence, religious experience, etc…). Put otherwise, the degree to which Christian theology has the revelation of God in Christ as the object of its reflection, it is not without warrant to expect that the shape and purpose of that reflection would be christomorphic.

Attempting to ground a theological exchange with the sciences in a doctrine that sought to do justice to the work of Christ will undoubtedly be cause for a measure of anxiety. Concerns over too easily transferring Christ’s offices onto theology could be taken to encroach on the uniqueness of Christ’s person and ministry. The objection can be put more pointedly: one ventures a category mistake in attempting to turn who Christ is as prophet, priest, and king into a predication of what theology is. Christ is a person and theology is a particular rational undertaking. Nevertheless, three brief observations support what may otherwise appear to be questionable efforts towards analogy.

First, the thought that one might seek a broader application of Christ’s offices was entertained by Calvin himself. In the course of his exposition, he suggests that Christ’s prophetic vocation was ‘not only for himself that he might carry out the office of teaching, but for his whole body’ so that they might be empowered to speak the truth.92 In a similar fashion, he observes that Christ’s uniqueness in priestly reconciliation does not preclude his receiving ‘us as his companions in this great office’.93 With regard to the Christ’s royal office, he affirms that the church stands ‘unconquered through the strength of their king, and his spiritual riches abound in them’.94 Calvin’s recognition that the church’s vocation was bound to Christ’s unique work is not to suggest that there is a one-to-one identity, but rather to simply affirm that the church participates in Christ’s prophetic, priestly, and royal work. If theology, in any


93 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.15.3.

94 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.15.2.
sense, is an extension of the church’s ministry, then theology likewise has a share in its redemptive work.

Second, Christoph Schwöbel’s observations concerning theology’s ‘self-relativization’ also help to qualify theology’s role by explicating the relation between theology and its object.\(^{95}\) This self-relativization is a function of theology’s consistent recognition of Christ’s supremacy and uniqueness, so that the claims theology makes are not for itself but the one it recognizes as ultimate and attempts to explicate as such. Theology is saved from an overconfidence in its own ability to enact any of the offices, because it ‘points to the constitution of faith by God as the ground of faith outside and beyond ourselves.’\(^{96}\) This self-relativization safeguards the important distinction between Christ’s fulfillment of the offices and theology as a creaturely activity conducted in reference to Christ. Thus, theology is reminded that whereas Christ executes his offices perfectly, theology’s own prophetic, priestly, and royal activity is necessarily provisional.\(^{97}\) When theology understands its task as an intellectual endeavor which is relative


\(^{97}\) It is important to recognize that Schwöbel understands ‘self-relativization’ as the relativization of the self in response to the reality of an unconditioned God, not an autonomous human act of self-relativization (cf. Christoph Schwöbel, *Gott im Gespräch: theologische Studien zur Gegenwartsdeutung* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011], pp. 127–29, e.g. ‘Toleranz wird auf diese Weise nicht in der Gegenseitigkeit des Tolerierens unter Menschen begründet, sondern in der Einseitigkeit der Identitätsbegründung in der transzendenten
to ‘God as the ultimate source of truth’, theology is prevented from ‘absolutising [its] own belief system.’ Therefore, theology is most ‘Christian’ when it recognizes that Christ is the unparalleled prophet, priest, and king, and thus theology is not.

On the other hand, and thirdly, theology’s relative character not only safeguards against infelicitous attempts to claim more for itself then is warranted, but its relation to Christ’s work is also preserved by that same relativity. To recognize that theology is *relative* to the supremacy of Christ is not to suggest that theology is incapable of functioning in a similar prophetic, priestly, and kingly fashion, but rather to observe that theology’s task is shaped by its *relation* to Christ as its head. In as much as theology is an attempt to bear witness to divine realities in human words, Barth’s observation regarding the witnessing function of theological language is apt: ‘A real witness is not identical to that which it witnesses, but it sets it before us.’ Therefore, in as much as theology remains true to its task in bearing witness to Christ, theology appropriately takes a christological shape, such that it can be envisioned as that mode of intellectual exchange among the sciences which has a unique task to fulfill. Theology need not, indeed can not, fulfill these offices with the perfection ascribed to Christ’s fulfillment of them, but through recognition of theology’s relative character both its distinction from and relation to Christ are maintained without encroaching on the uniqueness of Christ and his offices.

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Wirklichkeit Gottes des Schöpfers’, p. 129). In this context, prayer is the human act which holds potential for theology’s self-relativization: ‘Im Gebet wird der Zusammenhang von transzendenter Konstitution menschlicher Identität und Selbstrelativierung in der Konkretheit der eigenen Lebenserfahrung eingeholt und zur Sprache gebracht’, p. 135.


100 *CD* I/2, p. 459.
Conclusion

This essay attempted to demonstrate that Barth, Van Huysseeten, and Webster offer rich reflections on theology’s interaction with non-theological accounts of reality, and that they can be understood to offer distinct visions of the role theology fulfills in those interactions. Theology as prophet finds itself in an ambiguous relation to the academy by virtue of its insistence of addressing questions of ultimacy and the ‘crisis’ these questions provoke. Theology’s priestly character is seen in its willingness to enter into a meditating role in which redefining rationality is a preparatory step leading to a potentially mutually enlightening exchange. Theology enacts its royal functions by issuing a reminder that reality is unified, and accrues its particular dignity as a witness to these truths. It was further suggested that these offices can be drawn together towards a development of a munus triplic approach to the question of theology’s relation to science. Thinking of theology’s interdisciplinarity in these terms provides a model which not only allows for a measure of nuance in these cross-disciplinary exchanges, but it also finds grounding in a christological doctrine through an analogous relation in which distinction and similarity are preserved. In closing, thinking of theology’s task as derived from its christological point of reference not only informs how theology functions in its outward movement, but it also suggests that it shares similar redemptive ends.101

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101 What is implied in Calvin’s placement of the doctrine in Book II of the Institutes (‘Knowledge of God the Redeemer’), Bavinck makes explicit (Reformed Dogmatics 3, p. 365).