Introduction: The Future of Theology and the Theology of the Future

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Theology’s future

Readers who are familiar with the recent history of theology (and who know that there is nothing new under the sun) will recognize the title of this introduction as an echo of Harvey Cox’s 1967 dictum: ‘The only future that theology has . . . is to become the theology of the future.’ 1 Amid the heady atmosphere of the late 1960s, Harvey Cox’s confident pronouncement had the aura of an axiom – perhaps the only axiom that theology required. The mood of the times demanded theologies that made a clean break with the past, taking full advantage of ‘the present Götterdämmerung of the divinities of Christendom’ to make an entirely fresh start, interring the corpse of the ‘dead God’ of metaphysical theism and awaiting the emergence of the new God who would replace him. 2

Cox’s reference to ‘the theology of the future’ was in part a gesture in the direction of the eschatologically oriented theologies of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann, which had just begun to make an impact in the English-speaking world. 3 But it was also (and more basically) an expression of the perennial modernizing agenda of North American liberalism. The kind of theology that Cox and his contemporaries prescribed was a theology that surfed the waves of modernization and secularization, seeking to bring Christian faith into line with ‘the mode of consciousness which mankind, if not as a whole at

2. ‘The Death of God’, p. 252.
3. 1967 was the year in which Moltmann’s Theology of Hope was first published in English translation. Pannenberg’s Jesus – God and Man and his co-edited collection, Revelation as History, followed the year after, but the writings of both had already begun to be widely quoted and discussed in the immediately preceding years. Cf. William P. Frost, A Decade of Hope Theology in North America, TS 39 (1978), pp. 139–53.
least in respect of our own civilization constituting man’s cultural vanguard, has reached as a result of its historical and evolutionary development.4

Half a century later, and with the gift of hindsight, it is not difficult to spot some of the points at which the ‘new theology’ of the 1960s turned out to be ephemeral, immature and presumptuous. We are less likely, for example, to speak of the post-Christendom West as ‘man’s cultural vanguard’; we are (one hopes) less inclined to turn our backs on the wisdom of the pre-modern interpreters and theologians, and we are slowly beginning to come to terms with the implications of the eastward and southward shift in the centre of gravity of world Christianity. The ‘postmodern turn’ has sharpened our suspicions about the grand narrative of modernity, further disabusing us of any naïve assumption that the future disclosed in the gospel of Christ can be unproblematically equated with the future that we see emerging from the processes of (Western) historical and evolutionary development.

But the question about theology’s future has not gone away. The discipline of systematic theology is still confronted by a chorus of questions about its legitimacy and usefulness. Within the secular academy and in the public square, theology is either politely ignored or shrilly derided as an arcane and superstitious pseudo-discipline. Even within the church it is commonly (and perhaps increasingly) marginalized in favour of unreflective piety and pragmatism. In the face of these questions and criticisms, there are still good reasons to assert with Harvey Cox that ‘the fate of theology will be determined by its capacity to regain its prophetic role. It must resist the temptation of becoming an esoteric specialty and resume its role as critic and helper of the faithful community as that community grapples with the vexing issues of our day’.5 A theology that is faithful to the gospel and useful to the church (and useful beyond the church, in Christians’ wider conversations within the academy and the public square) needs to be both phronetic and prophetic.6 That is to say, it needs to offer a practical wisdom (a phronesis, to borrow Aristotle’s language) that sheds light on how individuals and communities ought to act in the present and make preparations for the anticipated future. And it needs to offer a prophetic wisdom – a wisdom

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that is radically distinct from the rationality that the New Testament labels as ‘earthly’ (Jas 3.15) or ‘of this age’ (1 Cor. 2.6), articulating in its place a way of understanding the world that is informed and determined by ‘what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived’ (1 Cor. 2.9). In at least these two crucial senses, a viable Christian theology must always be a ‘theology of the future’, and the question about theology’s own future is inextricably connected to its willingness to adopt that posture.

The Genesis of the book

The origins of this book were in the 2011 New College Lectures series, on the topic of ‘theology and the future’, and the resultant publication of a themed issue of *Case* magazine. The New College Lectures have a history of stimulating public dialogue and debate about issues that confront Christians and the church as they engage with the world. The topic for the 25th lecture series in 2011 was chosen initially in response to the felt need of the Trustees to provide a platform for some younger Australian theologians. But we were also mindful of the view that we are living in times where increasing questions are being asked about the legitimacy and usefulness of theology in the public square. While it seemed appropriate to privilege the voices of younger speakers, we also felt that we should address the role that theology itself might have in the future, a future of which they and their audience would be a part. In essence, we asked our younger theologians what they saw as the challenge, hope and future for theology.

At a time when religious belief is commonly seen as an irrational throwback, at worst dangerously oppressive and at best quaintly irrelevant, can a case be made for Christian theology’s rationality and relevance? What is to be its relationship to the modern university, the professions and the public policy debates of communities and states? Our harshest critics see theology as having no future. Religion is painted as a force that divides people, entrenches old hegemonies and leads to social division and strife, and theology is viewed suspiciously as a pseudo-discipline devoted to pondering the impenetrable mysteries of religion’s legitimating myths. The lectures were set against such claims and offered the counter-claim that theology has an indispensable contribution to make to our

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7 *Case* is a quarterly publication produced by the Centre for Apologetic Scholarship and Education hosted by New College at the University of New South Wales. *Case* No. 28, September 2011 (available online at www.case.edu.au/) was devoted to theme ‘Theology and the Future’ and included the papers from all three lectures plus two invited papers on related topics related to the theme.
understanding of reality, the world and its future. The combined claim they asserted was that there can be no more endeavour more critical to the way in which we imagine and help to shape the future than the theological task of understanding God and all things in relationship to him.

From the lectures to the book

In previous years the New College Lectures have frequently been subsequently published as a book. Notable examples include Stanley Hauerwas’s *After Christendom* and John Polkinghorne’s *Beyond Science.* In the case of the 2011 lecture series, the format we chose lent itself to a larger project, and we decided to build around the three lectures presented in the series a collection of related contributions, adding up to a single, large-scale, multi-author volume focusing on the future of theology. Alongside the three original presenters of the 2011 lectures, all of whom were relatively young theologians working in Australia, we invited a range of other contributors, including several other young Australian or Australian-born theologians, and a number of already established and well-known international scholars.

In choosing the contributors, we aimed for a diversity of voices, working within a wide variety of social locations and academic disciplines, but united by the common evangelical conviction that theology’s fundamental source and norm is the message of the gospel, as it is made known in the Scriptures. We were particularly keen to see that the list of contributors included a healthy mixture of specialist systematic theologians and interdisciplinary thinkers whose work built bridges of thought between systematic theology and disciplines including biblical studies, hermeneutics, philosophy, history, science, political theory, ecology, aesthetics, literary studies, drama and sociology. We asked our writers to explore questions that they saw as significant within a framework of two very broad questions.

1. What future is there for theology as a discipline of thought and speech, within the church, the academy and the world? and
2. How might the content and concerns of Christian theology help us to make a wise and hopeful contribution to the conversations of our time about the future of humanity and the world?

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Overview

The book is divided into two sections that reflect these two questions. The chapters in Part One (on “The future of theology”) are focused principally on the former question and the chapters in Part Two (on “Theology and the future”) are focused principally on the latter. Inevitably, however, the overlaps and interconnections between the two questions mean that there is much in the first half of the book that addresses the concerns of the second half, and vice versa.

Part One: The future of theology

Part One commences with chapters by Michael Allen and Stephen Long on God as theology’s source and principal subject. Michael Allen finds hope and a future for theology not in the ingenuity of theologians but in the goodness of the triune God. The textual instrument which God has set apart for this self-revealing work is the Holy Scripture, in which Christ speaks and by which the Holy Spirit illumines the understanding of his people; if it is to flourish, therefore, theology ought to take the form of ‘biblical reasoning’, meditating on what God has given rather than constructing its own edifice. If that is the case, Allen argues, the renewal of theology takes place not by revision or reinvention but by retrieval – a fundamentally receptive posture that submits to spiritual authorities and scriptural rules, with a humble and grateful awareness of its catholic context within the church.

Stephen Long’s chapter focuses on the question of God’s own future, assessing and responding to the various calls that have been made in recent decades for revisions to Christian theology’s traditional teachings on the simplicity, immutability, impassibility and eternity of God. Without dismissing the concerns that prompt the modern questions, Long insists nonetheless that there is great wisdom in the traditional language that theology has used to speak of God, permitting us neither to say too much, nor to say too little in what we assert about God’s being and nature. Theology, Long argues, can continue to speak in that language and make those assertions without denying the dramatic character of God’s saving interaction with the created world (and indeed of God’s own inner life), or retreating into an abstract world of barren and irrelevant speculations.

The chapters that follow in the remainder of Part One focus on the location of theology (within global Christianity, the church and the academy) and on its method. K. K. Yeo reflects on the impacts of globalization and the shifting centre of world Christianity, in the light of the biblical promises of a day when
'the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' and the praises of God will be sung by ‘a great multitude . . . from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages’. His chapter calls for a theology that is both local and catholic, interpreting the Scriptures in round-table cross-cultural encounters, so as to assist the global church in understanding its identity and fulfilling its calling.

The following chapter, by Miyon Chung, focuses on the particular challenges and opportunities of the Asian context. After a brief survey of the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary Asian contextual theologies, Chung argues for an approach that rejects the implicit premise that biblical faith is an alien, Western belief system that must be ‘contextualized’ for Asia; on the contrary, she argues, the Bible speaks to a world that Asians readily recognize, and Asian cultures (e.g. in their holistic world view and their predisposition to accept the spiritual and supernatural dimensions of reality) are fertile soil for the Christian gospel. The most promising future for Asian theology is to be found in an evangelical hermeneutic that finds its path to cultural relevancy in the Bible itself, read not as an expression of an ancient and alien faith in need of modernization but as an urgently relevant book for today.\(^9\)

The chapters by David Starling and Stanley Hauerwas address the situation of the church in the post-Christendom West and its implications for the theological task. Starling’s chapter is a response to the charge (made by Hauerwas, among others) that the very idea of a systematic theology is a Christendom construct that has outlived its time. Arguing that the pre-Christendom context of 1 Corinthians provides an illuminating analogy to the situation of the church in post-Christendom Australia, Starling finds within the letter a trajectory towards theological systematization that offers strong support for the continuing legitimacy of systematic theology as a post-Christendom endeavour and some salutary warnings about how such theological system-building needs to be undertaken, if it is to be authentically an act of Christian faith, hope and love.

Hauerwas, in his chapter, offers an apologia for his own way of thinking theologically, as a contribution to the conversation about how theology should be done after Christendom. Responding to the argument in Starling’s chapter, Hauerwas concurs that the ecclesial presuppositions and corresponding narratives that shaped Paul’s letter to the Corinthians provide the impetus and

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\(^9\) In the original plan for the volume, Miyon Chung’s chapter on ‘Theology and the Future of Asia’ was to have been followed by one on ‘Theology and the Future of Africa’. Unfortunately, due to ill-health, the contributor of that chapter was unable to complete it.
material for the theological systematization that emerged in the centuries that followed. He insists, however, that this is still no warrant for the ‘systematic theology’ of the modern era. Theology done as ‘letters to the church’ retains a concreteness that resists false universalizing tendencies; it jumps boldly into the middle of matters instead of indulging demands for prolegomena and systematic methodology, or the fantasy that it is possible to think and speak with a rationality that transcends situation and tradition. Theology properly understood, Hauerwas argues, is an exercise of concrete, polemical, practical reason, located within the polis of the church and informed by its particular narrative in the way in which it describes and addresses the world.

Turning from the church to the academy, John McDowell looks at the past and the possible future of theological education: how it became detached from secular higher education, leaving behind a system increasingly subjected to the commodifying, individualizing and instrumentalizing effects of market forces (forces to which theological education itself was not immune), and how it might renew its presence within a pluralist, secular academy, offering an alternative humanizing vision. A theology capable of articulating such a vision would be grounded deeply and securely in the particularist convictions of Christian confession, but would ask its questions and embark on its reflections in a manner that posed searching, critical questions for consideration within a secular educational space in a religiously plural society.

The last two chapters in Part One ponder questions concerning the method that theology is to follow in asking its questions and framing its assertions. Paul Helm contributes to the conversation as a philosopher, challenging the tendency of much contemporary theology to retreat into the conversational games of its own ‘charmed circle’, conducted according to conventions that exclude or defer the asking of questions about the referential success and belief-worthiness of its assertions. If theology is to be reinvigorated in our time, Helm argues, it needs to recover its confidence that ‘grace builds on nature’, taking seriously the objective character of theology’s subject-matter and the proper, instrumental use of reason and the senses in formulating its truth-claims.

The ‘prophetic proposal’ offered by John McClean is not a prediction (speculating about how theology will develop) but a vision of theology itself as a form of Christian prophecy. Taking the book of Revelation as a guide, McClean sketches an outline of a theology that participates prophetically in the drama of the self-revelation of the triune God, sharing in the worship, testimony and sufferings of the church and summoning the church to imagine and anticipate the coming new creation.
Part Two: Theology and the Future

Part Two opens with Michael Jensen's chapter on ‘Theology and the Future of Humanity’. Engaging with Zadie Smith's 2001 novel *White Teeth*, Jensen considers the competing metanarratives used to describe the future of humanity: the epic, the tragic and Smith's own ‘comic-romantic’ vision. Arguing that none of these satisfyingly account for ‘actual human experience . . . without remainder’, Jensen turns to an alternative presented in Paul's letter to the Galatians. In Paul's apocalyptic vision, the future of humanity has already invaded the present. At the cross, God founds a new humanity – a community bound in faith and formed because of the sacrificial love of God.

Trevor Hart's chapter explores and evaluates various notions of human creativity within the intellectual climates of modernity and postmodernity by situating them within the theological framework afforded by God's own unique role and prerogatives as Creator. The chapter responds critically both to the hubris arising from the initial linguistic trespass of the Renaissance humanists in appropriating the verb ‘creo’ and its cognates to apply to human initiatives and achievements, and to the postmodern pessimism which underestimates the capacities of human makers and God's call to them to participate actively and responsibly in the dynamics of his own eschatologically orientated and christologically focused divine project. The future of creativity, Hart argues, demands to be earthed in a religious narrative akin to those suggested, for instance, by J. R. R. Tolkien's notion of artistic ‘subcreation’ and by the Jewish Kabbalistic doctrine of *Tikkun Olam*. The proper context for these, though, is a Trinitarian and incarnational account of God's dealings with the world and its history.

The following chapter, by Alison Searle, focuses on the role played by theology in shaping the Christian imagination (referring not only to the imagination that is exercised in endeavours of artistic creativity, but more broadly to the way in which all individuals’ performances of their public and private selves are informed by the future that they apprehend imaginatively). Taking as a case study the attempts of the seventeenth-century Quaker, James Nayler, to ‘perform Christ’ in his entry into Bristol in 1656, Searle argues that theology has a crucial role to play in serving the efforts of believers to ‘put on Christ’, inverting normative cultural understandings of beauty, decorum and truth and anticipating the coming Kingdom of God.

If the first three chapters in Part Two interact (one way or another) with the creative and imaginative arts, the fourth represents a turn towards the sciences. In
it, Kirsten Birkett ponders the current debate among scientists and philosophers of science about ‘emergence’ – the idea that organization and order can emerge spontaneously within organisms and systems at suitable levels of complexity – and its implications for the next phase of the conversation between theology and science. After surveying and assessing the various proposals that have been made regarding the implications of emergence for how we might understand God (and God's relationship with the created world), Birkett applauds the anti-reductionist tendency of emergence thinking, but expresses scepticism about the claims that it necessitates a redefinition of God or renders the very idea of God redundant. Interesting as the science and philosophy of the emergence conversation have been, Birkett suggests that the most interesting aspect of all is the sociological one, including the way in which the reception of emergence thinking undermines the claims of epistemic purity frequently made by the prophets of scientific atheism. Ultimately, she argues, the debate has little to tell us theologically, except as a case study in ‘the age-old human impulse to make God in our own image’.

Byron Smith's chapter sits at the cross-roads between theology, science and ethics, focusing on the ecological crises that confront the present generation of humanity, and are likely to loom increasingly large in generations to come. Theology and theological ethics, Smith argues, need to wrestle further with this, not simply by developing a more robust doctrine of creation or creation care, but addressing the civilizational crisis into which we are heading. Theological reflection on the gospel, within the context of the present ecological crisis, calls for an expansion of neighbourliness, extending the horizon of anticipation, prudence and compassion, and a stance towards the future that combines humble receptivity with passionate concern and responsible agency.

The final chapter of the book, by David Smith, brings the project to a fitting conclusion with an exploration of the role of theology in providing vision and wisdom for the task of imagining and building an alternative urban world. The growth of cities across the world, especially in the Global South, is widely recognized as a key feature of our times, and one that is unlikely to be reversed. At the same time, this phenomenon is accompanied by a series of converging crises which, taken together, pose enormous challenges for humankind, for the natural world, and indeed, for our fragile planet itself. While the city may rightly be seen as the supreme expression of human creativity and inventiveness, its darker side is evident in the era of globalization in ever-expanding slums, in the growing privatization and militarization of urban spaces, and in the existential crisis experienced by urban elites in cities bereft of a sense of meaning. In this
context, contemporary urbanists recognize the critical role of the imagination in the creation of an alternative vision of the urban future. The challenge for theology is to re-read the Bible with urban eyes, and to allow the eschatological vision of the New Jerusalem to shape the Christian imagination in the urban world of today. This theocentric vision of the city provides a radical alternative to current urban planning and design, poses searching questions for urban churches, and opens spaces for genuine dialogue concerning human well-being in the century before us.