The State of the Secular University:  
A Critical Review of Recent Theological Proposals  

Jacob L. Goodson  
Southwestern College

Introduction

“So how do you deal with all of that secularism at the College of William & Mary?” This was a question asked of me at a Lutheran congregational dinner party. The host posed the question to me, which meant a deep obligation to answer it. It came after a long pause in the conversation, and all of the attention in the room turned toward my ‘judgment’ on my colleagues and employer. As academics tend to do, I offered an answer with more disclaimers than clarity.

At the College of William & Mary, undergraduate students who are confessing and practicing Christians struggle with the “secularism” of the Sociology Department. I taught one student, in particular, who wants to work with Christian social justice ministries and organizations; she remains committed to the discipline of sociology, but she finds the sociology faculty at the College of William & Mary difficult because of their refusal to ask questions concerning the (secular) foundations of their own discipline. While she attempts to constructively integrate her Christian convictions with the academic study of sociology, her sociology professors think that this endeavor is legitimate if and only if sociology acts as the theoretical basis and a critical tool against her Christian convictions and what she learns in the discipline of religious studies.

For departments of sociology to ignore or neglect their “Christian” students risks missing out on a whole enterprise in which sociological concepts and principles are actively applied: Christian non-profit organizations. How many jobs, realistically, can sociology majors go on to inhabit that are purely secular positions in terms of the relationships that they will build with the people whom they help and serve? Even if sociology majors go on to work for secular non-profit organizations, the individuals that they serve will have a plurality of religious backgrounds. To downplay the integration of religion and sociology, even of Christian moral reasoning and sociological reasoning, seems too isolationist (in the “ivory tower” sense) and unrealistic (in terms of who actually seeks help from non-profit organizations) to meet the demands and expectations of undergraduate education. In-depth knowledge of religious traditions will contribute to the information and strategies learned within the discipline of sociology; it seems like a sign of cowardice and narrow-minded insecurity to discourage an undergraduate from making such connections. I return to this problem later in this essay.

In this essay, I argue that the theological proposals concerning the state of secularism within the modern university vary, ranging from hubris to humility, hopelessness to hopefulness. Significantly, the theological proposals that promote theological hopelessness and hubris also come with more clarity about the relationship between academic disciplines. In contrast, the theological proposals promoting hopefulness and humility lack clarity in terms of actual dialogical practices.

Beginning with John Milbank’s account of the relationship between sociology and theology, I then turn toward three more recent theological proposals concerning the state of the modern secular university: (1) David Ford’s Hegelian description of how disciplines function within secularity and secularism, (2) Stanley Hauerwas’s servant-model for theologians in the modern university, and (3) Mike Higton’s hopeful proposal for the role of theology within the
modern secular university. In the conclusion, I make explicit where each proposal falls along the lines of clarity and flexibility, hubris vs. humility, and hopelessness vs. hopefulness.

**Heresy and Hubris in Milbank’s Theology and Social Theory**

John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* diagnoses the motivations and reasons behind the “secularism” of the modern university that creates anxiety and resentment among Christian laypersons and Christian scholars. Milbank’s book remains the most in-depth investigation explaining how and why “secular reason” monopolizes the academy today – especially in regards to the social sciences. Milbank articulates theology’s role within the modern university: theology is the queen of the sciences, not through an act of self-assertion, but through acts of memory and retrieval.\(^1\) The modern university is constructed around taking sides on theological matters; however, it displays amnesia when it comes to the recognition of these theological positions.

According to Milbank, the make-up of the modern university rests upon different arguments within the late medieval/early modern period of philosophy and theology. The modern university chose sides in these debates and has not looked back since. Examples of these debates range from the definition of objectivity to the relationship between reason, desire, and the will. In *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank illustrates how this is true especially within the modern disciplines of economics, political science, and sociology. While Milbank does not investigate the natural sciences, connections can be made through an application of his theory to the logical positivism that dominated the natural science throughout the 20\(^{th}\) century.

Milbank’s book started the movement we now call “Radical Orthodoxy.”\(^2\) This book, ironically, has a fairy tale beginning but no fairy tale ending: “Once there was no secular” could easily read, “Once [upon a time] there was no secular.”\(^3\) This book set the stage for so much of contemporary theology, especially philosophical and political theology, as well as theological ethics. Additionally, it stormed into modern sociology departments with sword drawn and shield up. It serves to remind philosophical theologians that we have a stake in modern society.\(^4\)

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2. In “The Grandeur of Reason and the Perversity of Rationalism: Radical Orthodoxy’s First Decade,” Milbank writes, “The case of Radical Orthodoxy is that… it is always necessary to go back to Christian ‘roots’, because otherwise the whole thing will eventually collapse – towards individualism, a neo-pagan enslavement, and a post-Christian utilitarian control through ‘false’ care of merely material bodies – without the quite specific Christian metaphysical underpinning.” Milbank continues, “In this sense a ‘radical’ orthodoxy means a militant orthodoxy in the sense of a proper integrity.” Radical Orthodoxy argues “that in the end secular dominance will undermine all the goods that it has inherited from Christendom, including those goods (like female emancipation) which clearly and admittedly have been able to develop more freely (if distortedly) outside clerical and church-institutional oversight. Therefore, we believe that secular order must be overcome and a new mode of ‘Christendom’ invented” (Milbank, “The Grandeur of Reason and the Perversity of Rationalism: Radical Orthodoxy’s First Decade,” in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, [New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2009], 393).


4. I write as a confessing and practicing Lutheran and as a Professor of Philosophy trained in philosophical theology, the philosophy of religion, and philosophical and religious ethics. The “we” here designates anyone in the academy who thinks that theology is not an out-dated scholarly enterprise. My PhD is in Philosophical Theology from the University of Virginia; I served as Visiting Assistant Professor of Religious Ethics at the College of William & Mary. Now, I am the Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Southwestern College, which is a Methodist-affiliated small liberal
In this work, Milbank also takes on modern political and social theories. He argues that “secular reason,” or secularism, does not name an independent space or time from the Church but, rather, is made possible by the Church through late medieval Christian heresies: secularism is formed and extended through time as the repetition of heresy. The question that haunts us is, which heresies? Milbank’s answer is the heresies of nominalism and voluntarism.

Voluntarism names the argument that God’s will takes priority over God’s intellect, and God’s freedom names his ability to do whatever God chooses completely independent of God’s nature. For example, within the doctrine of divine voluntarism, God could will someone to hate God. According to Milbank, this Christian heresy enables modern political theories, like Thomas Hobbes’s theory of the violent state of nature, to claim the will of God for political actions that are traditionally contrary to God’s nature.

Nominalism names the argument that objects in the world do not find their intelligibility in some universal – like a chair sharing in its chair-ness – but, rather, are simply named as that object. Traditionally, objects in the world gain their intelligibility through their participation in some real general or universal. According to nominalist theory, however, objects are intelligible only on the basis of their individual status. For example, in nominalist theory, a chair is a chair only because it has been identified or named as such and not because it shares in any kind of chair-ness. According to Milbank, this Christian heresy enables the sociology of modern individualism—in which all people are understood like individual objects within the world.

As a result, “secularism,” for Milbank, is defined by these two Christian heresies: nominalism allows for a kind of radical individualism that enables a person to be who he or she wants to be with no external authority or criterion governing that person’s identity, and voluntarism encourages a new kind of politics where God’s freedom continually sets – and potentially contradicts – God’s nature. This secularism launches the terms and ways of reasoning for the modern university, especially within the disciplines of political and social theory. Political science remains dogmatic about the priority of the will over reason and desire, while the emphasis on social constructivism puts nominalism on repeat in arguments assumed and forwarded in the discipline of sociology.\(^5\)

What is Milbank’s way forward? Although he comes down hard on modern political and social theories, and on modern theologies that assume these Christian heresies as well, he does offer a vision for hope. His vision is found in considering how the church can be construed as a social theory. The church, according to Milbank, embodies and offers a politics and a sociology that serve and work as alternatives to the violence found within both nominalism and voluntarism.

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5 During my time at the College of William & Mary, I served on an Honor’s Thesis committee examining John F. Kirn’s “Visions of the Good in International Relations: International Justice and the Struggle for Justice,” (Williamsburg, VA: College of William & Mary, 2012). Kirn agrees that the priority of the will has become dogmatic within political theory, and he challenges the priority of the will over reason and virtue, specifically within the discipline of international relations. He adopts Charles Taylor’s notion of “the good” as a more coherent and reliable foundation for international relations and political theory.

6 The undergraduate student studying sociology at the College of William & Mary confirmed Milbank’s judgment in our time of study together.
The church serves as an alternative to the violence of voluntarism, because the life of the church is ordered by and through the priority of God’s intellect over God’s will where God’s freedom flows from God’s good nature. This theological reasoning can be found in the church because the church continues, through time, the sacrificial love of Christ—a sacrificial and suffering love that would not be possible, according to Milbank, if God’s will took priority over God’s intellect. Why? If voluntarism were the right doctrine about God, then God the Father would have willed God the Son off the cross. Therefore, against voluntarism, God’s nature is one that completely and freely gives all of God’s self—even unto death—for God’s people.

The church works as an alternative to the violence of nominalism, because the life of the church would be completely unintelligible if the rampant individualism that grows out of nominalism were true. The life of the church is not comprised of individual persons that decide for themselves, on an individual basis, what determines each and everyone’s identity. Instead, identity in the church is determined through our participation in personhood as created by God and articulated by the doctrine of the imago dei. However, according to Milbank, it is not any kind of general personhood that determines who we are, but, rather, it is the personhood of God found in Jesus Christ that determines the identity of the church.

Against nominalism, Milbank argues that the church’s intelligibility is found only in her participation in Christ. With these corrections concerning nominalism and voluntarism—corrections found within the life and practices of the church—Christian theology sets the agenda for the other academic disciplines: theology properly understands (a) how reason orders the will, (b) the objects of the natural world, and (c) the universal category of personhood.

Theology and Social Theory was published in 1990, with a second edition published in 2006. Since the publication of the second edition, theologians have proposed other ways forward for thinking about the modern secular university. In what follows, I examine alternative theological models for the secular university in the wake of Milbank’s work. The primary difference between Milbank’s proposal and the three that follow concerns the difference between hubris and humility: Milbank’s proposal requires theologians in secular contexts to cultivate a kind of hubris in terms of knowledge and power, whereas the next three theological proposals argue for different versions of humility on the part of theologians in secular contexts.

Hopefulness and Humility in Ford’s The Future of Christian Theology

David Ford’s previous work emphasizes how the uniqueness of theological wisdom contributes to the modern university as a whole, to particular academic disciplines, and to...

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7 On the use of the word “violence” in this context, see Milbank’s emphasis on “the ontology of violence” in chapter 10.
8 For an interesting critique of Milbank’s priority of “reasoning” over the practices of the church, see Brad Elliott Stone’s “Making Religious Practices Intelligible: A Prophetic Pragmatic Interpretation of Radical Orthodoxy,” Contemporary Pragmatism 1.2 (2004): 137-153.
9 Milbank famously writes that the “pathos of modern theology is its false humility. For theology, this must be a fatal disease.” (1). Milbank makes the mistake of assuming that all humility is a “false humility” within modern theology and neither allows nor encourages theologians to cultivate and display healthy and helpful forms of humility in relation to secularism.
11 See Ford, Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World, (New York, NY: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007). Recently, there have been two helpful pieces written about Ford’s understanding of academic disciplines:
engagements between religious traditions. This account differs from Milbank’s in the sense that Ford’s focus concerns how theology attends to its object, God, through displaying a love of wisdom in relation to thinking about God. Ford’s turn toward wisdom does not commit itself to a defense of particular doctrines, as Milbank does, but to a dispositional methodology based on the virtue of prudence. According to Ford, the love theologians show toward their object of study models how other academic disciplines ought to display a love of wisdom as well. On Ford’s account, cultivating wisdom is the goal for the modern university.

In The Future of Christian Theology, Ford then turns toward G. W. F. Hegel’s aesthetic categories—the epic, lyrical, and dramatic—in order to address the question of how theology functions and moves about in the modern secular university. The category of epic emphasizes the objective aspects within aesthetics, and the features of an “epic” event or object involve monological control and the subordination of characters/people to a plot/painting. Objects and events described or presented as “epic” achieve clarity, completeness, and a singularity of meaning. To present or describe objects and events as “epic” is to seek to avoid ambiguity, indeterminacy, irony, plurality of meanings, and senses of vagueness. The category of the lyrical emphasizes the subjective aspects within aesthetics, including inwardsness, self-expression, and the priority of the present moment. Ambiguity, indeterminacy, irony, plurality of meanings, and

Rowan Williams, “Theology among the Humanities” (178-191) and Mike Higton, “For Its Own Sake, for God’s Sake: Wisdom and Delight in the University” (289-301), in The Vocation of Theology Today, ed. Tom Greggs, Rachel Muers, & Simeon Zahl, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013).
13 Mike Higton writes about Ford’s notion of wisdom in a very powerful way: “In conversation, Ford has made it clear that he is committed both to the idea that wisdom about higher education is developed and refined as one seeks to make sense of, and make a difference in, a specific university context, and to the idea that the wisdom so gained is not restricted to that one context but is a contribution to the process of making sense and making difference in other specific contexts” (Mike Higton, A Theology of Higher Education, [New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012], 132).
16 An “epic” presents itself, in Ford’s words, “in a monologue, as objectively as possible, about people, events, and ideas….Individuals are subordinated to the plot, which moves toward a necessary conclusion [or state of perfection]. The epic mindset likes clarity, completeness, and objectivity, systems, overviews, and comprehensive structures. It is impatient of ambiguity, indirectness, irony, multi-layered meanings, and multiple perspectives, and of characters, ideas, or events that do not seem to fit the [conceptions of] the movement toward…final resolution.”
17 The category of “lyrical” displays, in Ford’s words, “a concern for the subjective…, inwardsness, self-expression, and the present moment. God [becomes] ‘thou/you’, addressed by an ‘I’, and the relationship can be intense, with ups and downs messiness, and loose ends [that cannot be accounted for by academic disciplines]…. An ‘epic’ account may get the facts right but fail to capture the subjective truth. Significant past events cry out to be entered into imaginatively and with feeling, and the diverse testimonies to them may not come together smoothly in an epic monologue. The more one delves into the particularities of individual perspectives, conscious and subconscious motivations, rational and irrational responses, diverse worldviews, conditioning factors, hopes, fears, suspicions, doubts and desires, the less it seems that human reality can be done justice through an epic mindset.”
senses of vagueness are all encouraged by the lyrical aesthetic category; this category downplays the importance of objectivity, purposefulness, and singularity of meaning. Within aesthetics, Hegel designates the words “drama” or “dramatic” to name those events and objects that (a) embrace the subjective and the objective, (b) maintain both plot and purpose, (c) refuse suppressing diversity, freedom, and individuality, and (d) solidify complexity concerning desires, intentions, motivations, passions, and perspectives.

The category of drama includes both epic detachment and lyrical intensity, and it presents coherence without a reduction to the singularity of meaning. At their best, dramatic events and objects provide the sense that the creative mind inventing the art/performance neither has absolute control nor is simply offering mere representations.  

Ford applies these three categories to how theologians present the discipline of theology within the modern, secular university. A reasonable inference to make involves demonstrating how these categories apply to the attitudes and expectations of theologians in the secular context of the modern university. Academic theology has tendencies toward the category of “epic,” because it worries too much about trying to achieve objectivity and the singularity of meaning (divinity, reason, tradition). The category of lyrical describes the response to anxieties about objectivity (humanity, passion, freedom). 19 The Hegelian philosophical solution involves pushing both sides toward a balance of passion and reason, freedom and tradition, human and divine. In this sense, Ford’s employment of Hegel’s categories works in similar ways to George Lindbeck’s three categories for theological reasoning: the subjectivism found in Lindbeck’s “experiential-expressivism” model matches with Ford’s employment of “lyrical”; the over-ambitious account of objectivity found in Lindbeck’s “cognitive-propositionalism” model matches with Ford’s employment of “epic”; and Lindbeck’s own recommendation of the “cultural-linguistic” model matches with Ford’s employment of the “dramatic” because both seek to balance subjective practices with objective arguments within theology. 20

As a response against secularism, theologians tend to run toward the category of “epic” for how they make judgments and the kinds of judgments that they make. I believe Ford’s understanding of “epic” would include John Milbank’s Radical Orthodoxy project. 21 Secularism calls into question the legitimacy of theological claims. On the one hand, the category of “epic” provides standards of objectivity and singularity that offer a way to respond to the dethroning of theology within the modern academy. Theology is perceived by other disciplines as too subjective, and those theologians who defend “confessional theology” play into this rationale for the dethroning of theology within the modern academy. On the other hand, other theologians cede to the claims of objectivity that theology does and should make. These theologians turn toward the “lyrical” aspects of theology, which make theology look like a merely creative enterprise that

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18 Ford writes: “At its best, drama is able to embrace the objective and subjective, to maintain a sense of plot and purpose without suppressing individuality, diversity, and the complexity of levels, perspectives, motivations, and ideas. It can have epic detachment and lyric intensity, and enable a sense of coherence without assuming one overview. Because its primary concern is with characters and events in interaction, it can resist absorption either into the lyric interiority of one’s subjective consciousness or into an epic overview that assumes a standpoint far above contingency and untidiness of life....Good drama gives a sense that the dramatist is neither in authoritarian control (and just describing what has been predetermined in advance) not simply chronicling a set of diverse subjectivities” (24-27).

19 On the connections between anxiety, freedom, and passion, see Ford’s The Future of Christian Theology, 25-27, 42-49.


21 In The Future of Christian Theology, Ford neither assesses nor engages Milbank’s theological reasoning.
remains completely subjective. In order to prevent this tendency among theologians, Ford recommends a more disciplined and serious practice of “apprenticeship” within theological training, especially at the doctoral level, where prayer and worship are combined with pedagogy and study.

According to Ford, the proper response to secularism requires approaching theology in a “dramatic” way: to locate a balance between passion and reason, freedom and tradition, human and divine. Theology should not act in an “epic” way, attempting to “out-narrate” (Milbank’s phrase) every other discipline. In contrast, theology has the responsibility to disrupt other disciplines from presenting themselves as “epic” with claims to the final say on beauty, goodness, and truth. Theology should not present itself as merely “lyrical” because that posture will continue theology’s exclusion from academic objectivity. If we make an inference based upon Ford’s writing career, then we should say theology has a responsibility to confront other disciplines that present themselves as merely “lyrical,” because that over-subjective tendency blocks the possibility for cultivating a love of wisdom when it comes to the objects of study found within particular disciplines.

We can conclude the following from Ford’s The Future of Christian Theology. Theology ought to present itself as a “drama” that engages with other disciplines, acting within the “dramatic” framework of balancing passion and reason, freedom and tradition. The difference that theology makes is that it also contains the responsibility of balancing human and divine. Theology has a responsibility to confront and disrupt any discipline that presents itself in “epic” terms. Theology ought to resist the temptation toward being merely “lyrical,” and it ought to remind other disciplines – presenting themselves as “lyrical” – to better attend to their objects of study. Ford’s argument is bi-conditional: for theology to achieve these inter-disciplinary goals and responsibilities, it must accomplish its own work in terms of the “dramatic” by balancing passion and reason, freedom and tradition, divine and human. Achieving this balance means that theologians must work with some degree of humility, because they cannot and should not make absolute claims that involve working within an “epic” framework. Additionally, taking responsibility for making other disciplines present themselves in a balanced way admits to some degree of hopefulness that inter-disciplinary conversations can take place in healthy and helpful ways. Ford’s proposal also displays the hopefulness that theologians will be heard and taken seriously within the context of the modern secular university.

Theology’s “Suffering Presence” within the Modern Secular University

In this section, I address some of Stanley Hauerwas’s arguments found in The State of the University.22 Like John Milbank’s argument, Hauerwas defends the notion that theology is the “queen of the sciences.” Unlike Milbank, however, Hauerwas thinks the Christian understanding of being “queen” requires theologians to be “servants” within the modern academy.23 If theology is the queen of the sciences, theologians need to learn to serve other academic disciplines. Through

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23 For Hauerwas’s struggle with how much he agrees/disagrees with Milbank’s position, see Hauerwas’s State of the University, 12-31.
acts of service, theology will find its place in the modern university – not through a process of legitimation (à la Jürgen Habermas) but as a servant-leader.

The best way to read Stanley Hauerwas’s The State of the University is through his book on biomedical ethics entitled Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church. In Suffering Presence, Hauerwas argues that the primary task of the church, in relation to the secular practice of medicine, is to become a “suffering presence” for healthcare professionals. Hauerwas reasons that healthcare professionals remain a “suffering presence” for the sick and the suffering, but who serves as a presence for those in healthcare? While the church should remind medicine of their necessary limitations (they cannot and should not promise immortality, for instance), the church’s primary role is to suffer the presence of those in healthcare.

In the State of the University, we find a similar argument for how the discipline of theology works within the modern secular university. While the discipline of theology reminds the academy of their necessary limitations – for instance, theology mostly prevents other disciplines from committing dangerous and severe acts of self-deception – theology’s primary role concerns serving all other disciplines by becoming a “suffering presence” within the complexities and difficulties of the modern secular university. The church ought to support universities, not overtake them.

Hauerwas agrees with Milbank that theology is the queen of the sciences, but Hauerwas understands this role in terms of humility and service. He clarifies the practices required for theologians within the modern secular university: “[O]ur theological task is to help the various disciplines of the university explore their limits, possibilities, and connections to other subjects…. The task of theology is quite rightly to force the questions to be asked.” Hauerwas moves beyond “secular reason” without needing to “out-narrate” secularism or overtake the modern secular university, as Milbank requires. The difference concerns Hauerwas’s pacifism vs. Milbank’s triumphalism and how these differences play out in the context of the university.

Following Gavin D’Costa’s argument about the necessity of prayer for academic theology, Hauerwas turns toward the practice of prayer as one of the responsibilities of theologians within the modern secular university. Hauerwas states his concern: “the danger presented by the secular intellectual disciplines in the modern university lies in their power to produce and reproduce the knowledges that make the way things are seem inevitable.” What is the solution to this problem? Hauerwas writes:

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25 See Hauerwas, Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).
27 In Hauerwas’s words: “[T]heology is only a ‘queen’ of the sciences if humility determines her work” (31).
28 Hauerwas, The State of the University, 29. Hauerwas continues on page 30, “[T]heologians often exhibit a gregarious intellectual agenda that should commend their presence in the university. That theologians read more widely than many of our colleagues in other disciplines is because we are in the happy position, as the bottom feeders in the university, of having to know what others are thinking though they do not have to know what we are thinking.”
29 See Gavin D’Costa, Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy, and Nation, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2005), 112-144.
30 Hauerwas, The State of the University, 170.
Prayer…presupposes a time that cannot help but challenge secular time. Prayers take place in liturgical time and thereby challenges the presumption that there exists no other time but the time of historical succession. To pray means there is another time known through liturgical repetition that is made possible and necessary by the reality of the Kingdom of God. Accordingly, liturgical time is the necessary condition for the redescription of the world to challenge the presumption of secular disciplines that are aimed to make us believe the way things are is the way things have to be.31

Does Hauerwas’s turn toward prayer mean that theology is a superior discipline? No, not necessarily. The recovery of prayer within the discipline of theology requires the virtue of humility and should not become self-righteous.32 Hauerwas clarifies by saying that “the recovery of prayer for theology is not a pious gesture, but rather his attempt to name the condition necessary for theology to be recognized as knowledge.”33 How does this relate to a theological view of other disciplines? Does it mean that theology has “no time” for other academic disciplines? Again, the answer is no: “[A] theology shaped by prayer has no reason to deny the importance of the university disciplines that comprise its curriculum, but a theology shaped by prayer can engage non-theological disciplines to illuminate their possibilities and limitations.”34 What are these possibilities? Hauerwas articulates the “possibilities” involved by reflecting on the reciprocity of this relationship: “[T]heology has much to learn from secular disciplines including religious studies and the sciences.”35 What are the limitations? The limitations are found in Hauerwas’s turn from prayer to his reflections on “the poor” in the final chapter of *The State of the University*, which he titles “To Love God, the Poor, and Learning: Lessons Learned from Saint Gregory of Nazianzus.”36

Some college undergraduates want to serve the poor, but they do not have the virtues necessary for knowing what to do and where to start. The limitations of the university concern how “the university is not able to produce people…to see and describe the poor as beautiful.”37 Sociology, within the academy, tends to focus on “how to get rid of the poor.”38 Hauerwas writes that Christian theology enables us “to see the beauty of the poor because schooled by Christ [we have] no reason to deny or wish they did not exist.”39 The church can support the university in this way: by teaching the university how to properly be present with the poor. The church knows that “the poor will always be with us,” which means that the church can and should model the virtues required for being with the poor. This is how theology illuminates the “possibilities” for students within sociology departments in secular universities.40

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33 Hauerwas, *The State of the University*, 183-184
35 Hauerwas, *The State of the University*, 185.
38 Hauerwas, *The State of the University*, 198.
Hopefulness and Humility in Higton’s *A Theology of Higher Education*

From Mike Higton’s perspective, Hauerwas’s reflections on higher education come with a degree of resentment. Although I did not highlight this resentment in the previous section, I will do so now in order to draw a helpful contrast between Higton’s arguments and Hauerwas’s on Higton’s own terms.

Higton attempts to offer a more hopeful vision for the university than previous theologians provide. Higton contrasts his argument from Hauerwas’s claim that no one in the modern university has the ability to address and confront the questions of what the university is for and who it serves. Higton highlights the difference his argument makes in answering these questions, claiming, “One of the surprises that attentive Christian learners should be open to is…that there are still many opportunities within the university, even in [its current] state,… to pursue what [those] formed by Christian discipleship…can identify as the common good.” Also, in a footnote towards the end of the book, Higton writes, “I worry that a focus on crisis undercuts that ability to cultivate the kind of patient hope that experiments in providence demands.” Higton continually differentiates his book from Hauerwas’s *The State of the University*:

Hauerwas…regards the moral formation provided by universities today as in significant part a mis-formation, perpetrated on behalf of a morally mis-formed community: the liberal state. One of the characteristics of the liberal state…is its constitutional inability to recognize that it promotes a particular, contestable moral settlement. The universities’ consequent failure as institutions is in the first place their failure to recognize the moral nature of the reasoning process in which they are involved.

Are Hauerwas’s reflections the final answer on whether the good can be found in the modern secular university? Higton thinks not:

Yes, it is possible for me as a Christian to see what happens in the secular university as good – or as approximating to the good, or as pregnant with the good. And, yes, it is possible for me as a Christian to call such a university to fuller pursuit of that good, and to have some realistic hope as I do so that my voice might be audible and intelligible.

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41 Higton’s criticisms of Hauerwas’s *The State of the University* basically take Jeffrey Stout’s criticisms of Hauerwas’s writing career – that Hauerwas’s “new traditionalism” requires resentment on the part of Christian laypersons and theologians (see Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002]) – and apply them to the particular publication of Hauerwas’s *The State of the University*.

42 Hauerwas writes, “Those [who] run and those [who] teach in the modern university simply have no idea what or how they might provide an answer to the question of what the university is for or who it is to serve. As a result we are content to comfort ourselves by repeating familiar slogans about the importance of being an educated person who can think critically. Which…means that those who have [attended] university…will have greater earning power” (Hauerwas, *The State of the University*, 76).


The difference between Hauerwas’s and Higton’s reflections on higher education concerns the descriptions that follow from the uncertainties found within the current state of the university: Hauerwas thinks that these uncertainties ought to be described as “failures,” whereas Higton thinks that these uncertainties ought to be described in terms of “approximating to the good” or “pregnant with the good.” For Higton, this approximation and pregnancy mean that there is a definite role for Christian scholars – as Christians – within the modern secular university.

In his opening paragraph, Higton explains the purpose of his book:

This is a book about universities, and specifically about secular universities: universities that owe no explicit present allegiance to any Christian church or other religious group, and that do not knowingly encourage theological contributions to their policy discussions. It is, nevertheless, a theological book, and…develops a Christian theological account of higher education. It asks what I, as a Christian theologian, can recognize and celebrate as actually and potentially good universities; it asks what I and those who share my theological commitments might do to help universities approximate to their proper good more fully; and it asks what openness there can and should be in such universities to theological voices like mine. My answers to all these question circle around three core themes: higher education as training in intellectual virtue; the inherent sociality of university learning, reason, and knowledge; and the proper orientation of higher education towards the common good – the public good.  

Higton frames his book around these “three core themes” in the sense that the chapters in the second half of the book are “An Anglican Theology of Learning,” “The Virtuous University,” “The Sociable University,” “The Good University,” and “The Negotiable University.” Since we have established the hopefulness found within Higton’s A Theology of Higher Education, the next question is this: what is the role of humility in Higton’s understanding of the modern secular university? Higton claims that some aspects of the medieval university continue to provide a foundation for understanding the nature and purpose of the modern, secular university. The aspects of the medieval university that remain applicable today concern how “learning” and “virtue” belong together at least in two ways: “In the first place…, one could learn the good ordering of the materials at one’s disposal only if, in humility and trust, one took the risk of being called to penitence and transformed understanding by them.”  

Higton’s argument is a bi-conditional statement where “humility and trust” are necessary, not contingent, features for learning “the good ordering of the materials at one’s disposal.” Some professors might assume that most students will learn “the good ordering of the materials at one’s disposal” based upon

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47 Higton, A Theology of Higher Education, 1.
53 Higton writes, “It is on this ground – the ground of virtue and sociality oriented towards the good ordering of life before God – that I will be erecting my own theological account of university reason in the remainder of this book” (Higton, A Theology of Higher Education, 41).
54 Higton, A Theology of Higher Education, 41.
their intellectual capacities and not their dispositions of “humility and trust,” but Higton argues that the dispositions of “humility and trust” are requirements for the proper and right “ordering of the materials at one’s disposal” within every academic discipline.

The second way that “learning” and “virtue” belong together is as follows: “In the second place, one could learn the good ordering of one’s materials only by participation in a certain kind of communal good.”

Around what is the communal good centered? It involves “a community of peaceable but serious disputation.” The connection between this and humility is located in Higton’s emphasis on community and communal goods. On the surface, it sounds as if Higton calls only students to humility and trust; because of his emphasis on community and communal goods, however, everyone within the university must cultivate and display humility and trust for the purpose of “the good ordering of the materials at one’s disposal.” He further defends this particular connection in a section called “Apprenticeship” located in the chapter “The Virtuous University.”

Humility remains a necessary virtue, on the part of professors, toward the objects of study (“the materials”) within their own disciplines. Furthermore, humility and trust are required when professors reach across disciplines and render judgments on how others have ordered their materials. The reason for humility and trust is two-fold: they are simply the right dispositions to maintain for and within the academic context, and they model for students the necessary connection between “learning” and “virtue.”

In his conclusion, Higton writes:

The understanding of the life of the university that I have proposed is one in which such articulation is seen not as a form of violent self-assertion, but as a way of opening oneself to interaction, to questioning, to challenge, and to change; it is seen as a form of vulnerability rather than violence, one that calls forth attention, and makes real argument possible – including argument with those who understand the nature of argument, its virtues, excellences, exemplars, and disciplines, somewhat differently.

This conclusion helps readers understand how the aspects of humility and trust, which have their foundation in the medieval university, are transferrable to the modern secular university: humility and trust, as two of the “virtues” identified by Higton, allow for the possibility of “real argument” because such a “real argument” entails “a way of opening oneself to interaction, to questioning, to challenge, and to change.” Humility becomes the initial step of this opening of oneself, and trust sustains the opening of oneself within one’s teaching and a course of study for students.

Conclusion

John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* begins with a fairy tale and ends with the claim that theology ought to determine what political and social theory ought

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60 My deepest agreement with Higton concerns how the practice of Scriptural Reasoning provides the best model that we have available now for nurturing high quality argumentation, meaningful agreements, substantive disagreements, and tending to a common object of study (Scripture) together; see Higton, *A Theology of Higher Education*, 241-249.
to be doing. Milbank recommends neither humility nor vulnerability on the part of theologians within the modern secular university. Milbank’s vision leaves his readers with a sense of hope, but only in Milbank’s own Radical Orthodoxy project – not in the modern secular university as we find it in the 20th and 21st centuries. In the end, we have neither a realistic hope nor a recommendation for humility as a concrete virtue.

By employing the Hegelian categories of the dramatic, epic, and lyrical, David Ford’s *The Future of Christian Theology* provides readers with a framework for making their own judgments about hopefulness and humility. If an academic discipline presents itself in epic terms, then that discipline needs to cultivate and display more humility within the modern secular university. Ford allows theologians to identify the other academic disciplines that present themselves in terms of epic. If academic disciplines – especially theology – can present themselves in terms of the dramatic, then there ought to be a serious amount of hopefulness in the modern secular university. On Ford’s account, the overly subjective aspects of the lyrical lead us to less hopefulness because there is no way to engage with one another intelligibly. Ford does not demand humility or make a case for hopefulness. Instead, Ford encourages readers to evaluate how different academic disciplines present themselves and then make judgments based upon those perceptions. Hopefulness and humility may come about through the process of assessment, but Ford does not claim to know ahead of time whether humility is needed or whether the prospects are hopeful. Ford certainly writes in a hopeful way, but he is careful not to lead his readers down a pre-determined path. Rather, he seeks to offer a helpful framework for readers to make the judgments in their own scholarly contexts.

Ford’s adoption of the Hegelian categories to classify academic disciplines certainly is the most flexible of all of these theological proposals. Ford calls for Christian theologians first to examine themselves; upon this examination, Christian theologians ought to present their scholarly discipline in dramatic terms, balancing the objective with the subjective, free-thinking with tradition, human and divine. Secondly, and only secondly, can and should Christian theologians render judgments on how other academic disciplines present themselves within the confines of the modern secular university. Therefore, Ford’s framework should be of use in contexts where extremes seem to rule the day—where, for instance, a Department of Sociology presents itself as ‘purely objective’ (epic) while a Department of Religious Studies presents itself as studying the private subjectivities of citizens with no objective referent (lyrical).

Stanley Hauerwas’s *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God* makes a case for why theologians ought to show humility within the context of the modern secular university. However, Hauerwas’s reflections on the current state of the modern secular university leave readers with despair and resentment. Theology is “the queen of the sciences,” but this queen develops and maintains a style of servant leadership – which requires an intense amount of humility and, in this case, requires theologians to read and study outside of their discipline more than other faculty must do. While we are given a strong recommendation for humility on the part of theologians, we are not left with the sense that this humility correlates with a sense of hope about our work in the modern secular university.

Hauerwas’s model of servant-leadership, with a minimal amount of hopefulness, also seems flexible but perhaps more demanding for Christian theologians to achieve and maintain. Hauerwas’s proposal mandates theologians to humbly serve their colleagues and students, read and study broadly in other academic disciplines, yet expect no substantial changes among those who “run and those [who] teach in the modern university” because they “simply have no idea what or how they might provide an answer to the question of what the university is for or who it is to
serve.” This means that, within the modern secular university, theologians ought to out-work their colleagues from other academic disciplines and expect neither affirmation nor transformation. Therefore, Hauerwas’s model should be of use in contexts where the modern secular university is so determined by secularism that the only option available to theologians seems to be an extreme Christ-like service of carrying the burdens of the scholarly crosses and experiencing a daily metaphorical death because of the lack of encouragement and results that comes from one’s scholarly work.

In *A Theology of Higher Education*, Mike Higton makes a purposeful call for humility (and trust) and, moreover, goes out of his way to encourage readers to be hopeful about the modern secular university. He identifies humility as one of the aspects of the medieval university that remains beneficial and relevant within the modern secular university, and he makes a case for both faculty and students to cultivate and display the virtue of humility because of the necessary connection between learning and virtue. In conversation with Hauerwas’s *The State of the University*, Higton informs readers that there is significant reason for hope within the modern secular university because there are approximations of the good located throughout the overall messiness of university life. Hopefulness and humility seem to correlate in Higton’s account of university life: the more humility developed and shown by faculty and students, the closer the proximity comes to the good.

Higton’s proposal, which strongly emphasizes hopefulness and humility, comes with neither clarity nor flexibility. Higton expects Christian theologians to act ‘medieval’ in a ‘modern’ context: to argue in disputation-style hoping that others join the dialogical practice but continuing to argue with charity and humility no matter if others do, to constantly display humility and trust while cultivating humility and trust in their students, and to continually identify the approximations of the good within the context of the modern secular university. It remains uncertain what this looks like in actual practice – hence lacking clarity – but, ironically, it also lacks the flexibility that usually comes with a lack of clarity. Therefore, Higton’s proposal should be of use in contexts where it remains difficult to identify absolute binaries (good vs. bad, religious vs. secular, objective vs. subjective) and requires Christian theologians to continue their ‘medieval act’ based upon a spirit of hopefulness and the virtues of humility and trust.

Of all of these theological proposals for how to negotiate the current state of modern secular universities, from a Christian theological perspective, Milbank’s remains the clearest in terms of the daily demands of university life and the dialogical practices involved. For Milbank, theologians ought to critically evaluate how other academic disciplines do their work, especially in terms of their foundations. Theologians need to ensure that other academic disciplines do not maintain Christian heresies as their foundations. The foundations of contemporary political and social theory are nominalism and voluntarism, and theologians have a responsibility to their students and to university life to actively correct these foundational mistakes.

Hauerwas’s *The State of the University* achieves a bit of clarity in terms of how theologians ought to display humility and serve the daily demands of university life by maintaining an

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61 Hauerwas, *The State of the University*, 76.
awareness of what other disciplines claim in regards to issues such as poverty and war. Theologians, and students of theology who are practicing Christians, ought to remind professors in sociology that they are called to serve the poor. The course of study in sociology departments ought to prepare them for this calling. If professors in sociology fail to do this, then theologians should remind their colleagues in sociology that Christian undergraduates ought to be trained to serve all people, including those living in poverty, because “the poor will always be with us.”

Ford’s and Higton’s reflections on higher education come with less clarity. I pointed this out above in relation to Ford’s achievement within The Future of Christian Theology. Ford provides a framework – implementing the Hegelian aesthetic categories of dramatic, epic, and lyrical – for making sound judgments on one’s own work within theology, as well as in other disciplines within the modern secular university. In this sense, Ford intends to avoid clear direction and seems more concerned with providing a helpful and solid framework, which in itself serves an important purpose. Higton’s A Theology of Higher Education does not attain a level of clarity in terms of the daily demands of university life and the dialogical practices involved. On his own standards, however, this is not a problem. The lack of clarity and directive is, itself, a performance of the kind of humility that Higton identifies as a requirement for approaching the demands of university life.

By way of a personal observation, Higton’s proposal is the closest to describing my own way of being and provides the reason why I could not clearly answer the question, “So how do you deal with all of that secularism at the College of William & Mary?” when it was posed to me by the host of the Lutheran dinner party. I found it impossible to identify absolute binaries during my time there and decided, with the encouragement of my department chair (a scholar of Thomas Aquinas’s work!), to ‘act medieval’ when teaching Christian and Jewish ethics. This meant, pedagogically, balancing arguments with counter-arguments and attending carefully to the foundational object of study required for comprehending Jewish and Christian styles of moral reasoning (usually passages of Scripture but also papal encyclicals, the Talmud, and theological treatises). I even assigned constructing scholastic Disputationes in all of my 200 and 300 level courses (and still do in my PHIL 227: Logic course at Southwestern College).

I also found that I was responsible for instilling humility and trust in my students at the College of William & Mary—which simply meant taking arguments seriously, especially the ones that repel American minds in the 21st century context. My most serious and successful students at the College of William & Mary were the ones who “put on,” these two virtues in their own studies and practiced an intense amount of humility and trust toward biblical narratives, medieval arguments not heard much anymore, and moral arguments that run counter to what they or their parents believed to be true; these students identified as “conservative Evangelical,” “liberal Protestant,” “Orthodox Jewish,” “secular atheist,” and “traditionalist Catholic,” which means that their religious/non-religious formation did not over-determine their conclusions for and within

63 On the connections between Hauerwas’s views on pacifism and warfare and the nature and purpose of Christian (not secular) higher education, see Jason Byassee’s “City on a Hill...Still?” in the Journal of Scriptural Reasoning, vol. 14, no. 1, (June 2015). The present essay complements Byassee’s essay, because he examines what role Christian colleges and universities play within the secular world – and suggests that my own United Methodist affiliated Southwestern College remains exemplary because we train “disciples,” neither “Democrats” nor “Republicans” – whereas I investigate within this essay what role Christian theologians might play within the modern secular university.

64 I borrow this phrase from St. Paul’s theory of virtue.
their academic studies. Rather, the virtues of humility and trust established how they navigated complex and difficult arguments found within Christian and Jewish ethics. This gives me reason to be hopeful about the work accomplished in Religious Studies and Theology departments in modern secular universities.65

65 I am grateful to Todd Ream for funding the research for this essay. Allison Grady and Quinn McDowell helped with some of the research for this essay. Geoff Boyle, Todd Ream, and Daniel Reffner provided helpful editorial comments and corrections. Ashley Tate made the essay much more accessible in terms of grammar and style. Mistakes remain my responsibility.
Works Cited


The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning, Volume 14, Number 2 (December 2015)

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