

# The Place of Theology in the Contemporary University

## Research and Resources\*

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### University politics and research

In today's European university certain fields of research, such as natural sciences, medicine, technical sciences as well as economics seem to dominate university life in terms of research policy. They are at the center of defining a rationale for research activities. Accordingly, research is based on cooperative projects<sup>1</sup> – the larger the

better – funded by external money. Results of research are mostly presented in English, published in *peer review* journals and communicated in *power point* presentations, whereas the development of a full lecture has become a waste of time. The success rate of research activities is measured according to certain parameters, like external funding, bibliometrical indices and scientific penetrating power (according to the measuring of quotations and/or patenting).

In 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe scholars like *Wilhelm Dilthey* (1910) employed the distinction between "Geistes- und Naturwissenschaften"<sup>2</sup> and hence

\* This paper is based on a lecture given on the 6<sup>th</sup> December 2012 at the Menighetsfakultet in Oslo, Norway, on the occasion of the meeting of Norwegian PhD students in theology. I would like to thank my colleague *Prof. Gösta Hallonsten* for inviting me to publish this presentation in *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift*. – My observations are based on my current experiences as professor and research program director at Aarhus University, and various tasks and discussions in several committees. However, the ideas presented here do not reflect Danish university politics in particular. As a professor in a field of theology that is widely organized by international research activities (Biblical Studies), I rather try to reflect our common academic situation and needs – certainly from a Central European point of departure. Cf., e.g.: „Wissenschaft in Europa“, in: *Forschung & Lehre: Alles was die Wissenschaft bewegt* 11/12, 19. Jg. (ed.: Präsidium des Deutschen Hochschulverbandes), Bonn 2012, 880ff.

<sup>1</sup> However, some of these patterns defining research rationales today were already designed by the Human-

ities themselves, especially Theology and Classics, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, cf.: S. Rebenich, "Das System Althoff": Wissenschaft und Politik im Deutschen Kaiserreich, in: *Forschung & Lehre: Alles was die Wissenschaft bewegt* 11/12, 19. Jg. (ed.: Präsidium des Deutschen Hochschulverbandes), Bonn 2012, 906-908, 906: „Die moderne arbeitsteilige ‚Großforschung‘ nahm ihren Ausgang in den Unternehmen, die den Quellenbestand der Alten Welt erschließen wollten und hier auch international verbindliche methodische und organisatorische Standards setzten“.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. W. Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (1910). Hg. v. M. Riedel, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981; idem, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften: Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Ge-*

between ‘Verstehen’ and ‘Erklären’ in order to prioritize the former against the latter, and academic life was organized accordingly. In contradistinction to that, contemporary universities are basically oriented towards the paradigm of research as it is defined outside the Humanities. One might suppose this to be the revenge of the natural sciences of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. I do not think this to be the case, however, as colleagues outside the Humanities perfectly well know and accept the research of Humanities scholars. It rather seems to be a *political discourse*: Classifications like “de tørre fag” (‘dry disciplines’) indeed support the idea that Humanities, Theology included, are rather tolerated nowadays at universities and most of all connected to teaching obligations<sup>3</sup>, than seen as a substantial part of what should be done at modern *research* institutions. Still, this is an elementary pattern of thinking behind university management, even though certain huge grants on European and national level are specifically dedicated to research within the Humanities<sup>4</sup>.

Not to be misunderstood here: The problem is not that it is the natural sciences (“Naturwissenschaften”) in the broader sense that are expected to contribute most or even to solve the global challenges facing our generation (health, ecology, food, engineering). However, it *is* a problem that basic models of parameterization which are used here are simply transferred and applied to the Humanities and Theology, without ever questioning their validity. The assumption is that our research activities could be brought in line as if we were working on genetics or solar energy. It is widely ignored then, that the rationale behind our research activities is quite different: Researchers in Humanities and Theology start up and tend to work as individuals,<sup>5</sup> and they do not

need extended budgets. They work, think and publish in various languages (and this is pretty much needed in order to continue local traditions and cultures). The most successful medium is still the monograph. Researchers in Humanities and Theology tend to use power point as a supporting technique<sup>6</sup> without abstaining from elaborated lectures, because their research is based on a logically convincing *argument* rather than on the presentation of a quantity of results referring to a series of *experiments*. The success rate of research in Humanities and Theology is hard to measure and cannot be defined by funding rates only, since the results of research frequently become relevant only one or two generations later.

At the same time, we could easily question the research conditions and success rate parameters as outlined in natural sciences with regard to their persuasiveness, and rather suggest different ones as, for instance, proportionality: It could thus easily be considered as a success rate criterion that in various fields of Humanities and Theology the rate of consumption of human as well as material resources is low compared to the efficiency of research. Even a relatively small budget could fund a conference and a publication coming out of it, which might have a huge impact on future research. The most valuable resources to make projects successful hereby in fact are the researcher’s life-time and creativeness. These resources, however, are partly inaccessible from outside. At the most, they are vulnerable to university policy. A wise university politics, however, would protect and support the individual researcher’s opportunities in finding and developing access to these resources. It would also take into account the specific needs of diverse “Fächerkulturen”.

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schichte, Erster 5 Band (Ges. Schriften Bd. 1), Stuttgart/Göttingen<sup>6</sup> 1962.

<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I am focusing on research activities only and not discussing the role of Humanities with regard to teaching policy.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. „Pro Geisteswissenschaften“, „Sapere aude“, etc.

<sup>5</sup> This, indeed, implies various dilemmas and chances, s.: E.-M. Becker, Die Person des Exegeten: Überlegungen zu einem vernachlässigten Thema, in: O. Wischmeyer (Hg.), Herkunft und Zukunft der

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neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft, Tübingen/Basel: Francke Verlag, 2003 (NET 6), 207-243.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. H. Lobin, Fluch und Segen: Wissenschaftliche Präsentationen müssen Rede und Visualisierung integrieren, in: Forschung & Lehre: Alles was die Wissenschaft bewegt 12/12, 19. Jg. (ed.: Präsidium des Deutschen Hochschulverbandes), Bonn 2012, 1010-1011 (with further references to literature).

## Subjects and heuristics of research in Theology

It seems to me problematic that university politics eagerly follows an exclusive rationale of research according to the needs of natural sciences instead of showing awareness of the plurality of research methods and aims existing in contemporary university life. How can such a politics actually be up-to-date in a socio-political sense? While modern societies are diverse and complex, there should not be *one* paradigm of research only. If so, universities would sooner or later mutate into monocultures. Nevertheless, contemporary discourses in university politics oblige us to reconsider and articulate our understanding of the field of Theology, our expertise and goal of research, and this in cooperation with and in contradistinction to the Humanities. Further, the rationale for properly integrating this field of theological research in state universities – at least in European countries with a strong Protestant heritage – should be given.

The point of departure of research in the Humanities and Theology is the *individual* researcher. His/her scientific know-how and creativeness as well as moral paradigm is decisive for the progress of research. The conditions of research here to a large extent mirror what is also true for the entire society. A society is last but not least a plurality of individuals whose competitive as well as cooperative efforts reinforce community life. Thus, motivation theories need to focus first and foremost on the individual in order to gain success even for the group. As long as we are not living under conditions of despotism or slavery, it is the *individual* person who decides whether to be engaged physically and mentally in any kind of activity around him/her. The human approach to the perception of social organization therefore, is to accept the plurality and non-conformity of individuals living here. Thus, it is *de facto* the self-responsible and -reliable researcher, who knows about his/her liability for the collective. And it is him/her who stands as *pars pro toto*, i.e. he/she makes up the actual paradigm for how social life as such is working. Against this background group-oriented research, as practiced to a large degree in natural sciences, tends to ignore the

individual and his/her role in university-life (s. discussions on author-rights when publishing results of research).

In taking care of the *individual in persona* who makes up the general basis of research in Humanities and Theology, the gap is finally bridged between university and societal life. The university enters the societal, and the societal finds access to the field and infrastructure of academic research. It is the individual who mediates in every-day-life between university and society. The administrative respect for the plurality and pluriformity of individual researchers implies the abandonment of power strategies. In its place, researchers should be allowed to take responsibility for their own projects, a responsibility that only temporarily should be delegated to university administration<sup>7</sup>. 'Ethics of political administration' seems to become an increasingly important issue here.

But what is considered to be 'research', especially in Theology?<sup>8</sup> And how does it appear in cooperation with and in difference to Humanities? Let us begin by looking at the various *subjects of research* in Theology evident from a summary of the diverse fields and methods associated with our discipline – and these methods basically derive from all disciplines in the Humanities: (a) *History*: Theology is dealing with an adequate reconstruction and construction of the past as being the pre-history of ourselves, our cultures, our mentalities, and also of our social networks, such as families. In a cultural sense,

<sup>7</sup> This is, at least, what research program directors learn in management courses.

<sup>8</sup> It is hardly satisfying to see how Hans Weder in his recent article on "Theologie als Wissenschaft" (in: ThLZ 137 [2012] 1295-1308) misses to reflect on that topic in regard to his experiences as a rector of the University of Zurich (2000-2008). On the other hand, discussions on: "Strid om faget teologis videnskabelighed" (cf., e.g.: Kristeligt Dagblad: URL = <<http://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/artikel/458016:Kirke---tro--Strid-om-faget-teologis-videnskabelighed>>) are very much characterized by prejudices, polemics and political agendas instead of reflecting the 'scientific nature' of theology regarding its subject area, academic context and methodology viz. heuristics (s. below). In other words: Such a discourse should have the right balance of theologizing, methodologizing and politicizing.

reception-history plays an increasing role here. (b) *Philology and linguistics*: In Theology as in the Humanities generally, various philological projects are linked to the discovery and/or editorial work with historical sources (literary, monumental) which are partly unknown (e.g., fragments of apocryphal texts; Dead Sea Scrolls), and partly need to be re-edited (Nestle-Aland, 28<sup>th</sup> ed.). At the same process, the character and constitution of language (ancient and modern) is investigated. (c) *Social sciences*: Especially in modern church history or in Practical Theology the analysis of social reality, structures, and problems is prominent in order to strengthen social action within and beyond ecclesial institutions<sup>9</sup>.

(d) *Philosophy and ethics*: A huge task of Theology in dialogue with philosophy and ethics consists in the communication of Christian traditions and existential quests under contemporary intellectual conditions. (e) *Religious studies*: Theology in a historical as well as in a contemporary dimension has a descriptive task of contextualizing and characterizing socio-religious entities and their interaction. (f) *Literary sciences*: Specifically, in an ongoing dialogue with literary sciences where diverse models and theories of interpretation are discussed, Theology is aware of the upcoming cultural turns (linguistic turn, narrative turn, iconic turn)<sup>10</sup>. (g) In cooperation with *natural sciences and/or medicine* Theology discusses concepts of cosmic projections (e.g. physics) or contributes to the analysis of anthropological determinants, as in neurosciences the screening of brain activity regarding emotionality, interaction and language. As it becomes evident in traumatology, various phenomena need to be seen as a combination of somatic, psychic, historical, cultural and religious factors. Thus, they can only be analyzed and treated within the context of interdisciplinary research.

*Summa summarum*, research in the field of Theology mirrors various methods and quests pursued within the Humanities. Its special focus,

<sup>9</sup> Cf., e.g., the rationale behind the upcoming European research program: „Horizon 2020“.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Hamburg: Rowohlt<sup>2</sup>, 2007.

however, is on the history, the constitution and the contemporary meaning of Christianity as the basic religion of the Western world with a global extension. *Research in Theology has a documentary, an analytical and an interpretive dimension*: It serves the documentation of the history of Christianity in its cultural and religious perspective, the analysis of former, current or upcoming living-conditions for the religious individual and community, and the interpretation of texts and cultural artifacts, reflecting the handing on and reading of Christian traditions during the centuries up to now. ‘Scientific investigation’ in Theology can clearly be called *research* in that it follows certain crucial methods fundamental within the Humanities. Conventionally, formulated by *Ernst Troeltsch* (1898), those methods have been defined as the principles of correlation, analogy and critique<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, the goals of ‘scientific investigation’ in *Theology* should attend carefully to their underlying *heuristics*. As a matter of fact, all fields of research in the Humanities as well as in natural sciences share the idea of the quest for innovation. This is a common rationale of academic research in the modern era since *Giambattista Vico* (1668-1744)<sup>12</sup>.

But how can research in Theology – in cooperation with and in contradistinction to the Humanities – at all contribute to the quest for the ‘innovative’? It seems as if academic work in Theology is confined to a re-interpretative aim, in that various texts and traditions as well as textual readings and hermeneutics are the subject of a re-interpretative representation. So, where is the ‘innovative’ then? If it would be exclusively concerned with the representation and continuation of interpretations and research traditions,

<sup>11</sup> Cf. E. Troeltsch, *Ueber historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie* (1898), in: *Ges. Schriften* Bd. 2: *Zur religiösen Lage, Religionsphilosophie und Ethik*, Tübingen 1913, 729-753; F. W. Graf, *Art. Korrelation*, in: *Lexikon der Bibelhermeneutik: Begriffe – Methoden – Theorien – Konzepte* (ed. O. Wischmeyer et al.), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009/2013 (paperback), 346.

<sup>12</sup> E.-M. Becker, *Art. Heuristik*, in: *Lexikon der Bibelhermeneutik: Begriffe – Methoden – Theorien – Konzepte* (ed. O. Wischmeyer et al.), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009/2013 (paperback), 255-256.

theology as a field of academic research would have no edge. However, it *should* look for the innovative (the *novum*) in order to meet the requirements and criteria of scientific investigation. But, once again: how? We have earlier defined the research tasks in theology as being documentary, analytical and interpretive. All of these dimensions can be connected to the quest for the innovative. In the *documentary dimension*, the reconstruction and construction of the Christian past and the presentation of the sources to the past should offer supplementary information. It is not enough to retell the story of the past once again. Rather one should reconsider what can be said *today* in the light of knowing how it was told *earlier* (research history) and what supplementary sources or methods we can make use of today. The 'quest for the *novum*' here equals the forward projection of our eagerness in reconstructing the past.

In the *analytical dimension*, theology should contribute to an innovative view on the current situation and challenges of society, as well as among religious institutions and groupings, primarily the Christian churches. In an *interpretive dimension*, theology should probe whether and how the basic contents of the Christian *kerygma* and teaching could help us to face current existential, cultural, political and societal needs and challenges. Theology pretty much has an 'actual dimension' and field of action, since it builds a bridge between the university and one of the largest groups of organized societal life: the church(es). Hereby, Christian academic theology acts as a 'mediator' or sparring partner between past and present. It participates in a double intellectually transformative process, in that it makes use of Christian tradition in societal life, and at the same time reflects societal quests and their impact on Christian tradition and community-life. From here we can see that the heuristics of theology is oriented towards common scientific rules since it searches for the innovative in its various dimensions. Thus, theology can easily maintain and express its 'scientific status' among other fields of the Humanities and/or cultural studies as well as the natural sciences. On the other hand, academic theology mirrors the intellectual needs of a huge organization representing contemporary society: the church.

## The individual researcher in and beyond institutional settings

So far, we have looked at theology as an academic field with regard to its heuristics and the political conditions under which research is done at contemporary European universities. But what implications for the individual researcher – who is the main figure in the Humanities – can be drawn from those observations? How can individual theologians successfully organize their research under these conditions<sup>13</sup>, from PhD-level to senior scholars? What should be the focus of our research in theology?

First, we should be conscious of the comprehensive and cohesive power and task of theology as an academic field of research. Theology builds a bridge within and beyond Humanities. Theology represents a small subject area and/or faculty within a larger subject area/faculty. This is both a dilemma and an opportunity, since our subject area is extended and thus offers many connecting points to other fields of research in and beyond Humanities. In its focus on the rise, history and meaning of Christianity and Christian belief, it is a specialized, but at the same time phenomenologically guided area of research. Against this background we should need to be aware of the *proprium* of our subject. What is it that can be done *exclusively* in theology? In what does our specific scientific competence and expertise as well as our 'unique selling point' consist, especially in difference to other faculties or fields of research? I will try to point out three directions, which again reflect what has been said earlier on the documentary, the analytical and the interpretive dimension of heuristics in Theology.

(1) Investigating and documenting the cultural history of Christianity is an enduring and prominent task in reflecting on Europe's identity. This could partly be seen as an intellectual presuppo-

<sup>13</sup> In this context we should also take notice of the fact that an increasing amount of students and PhD-students suffer from psychic stress and depression, cf.: B. Derntl et al., Die Seele studiert mit: Psychische Erkrankungen bei Studierenden, in: Forschung & Lehre: Alles was die Wissenschaft bewegt 11/12, 19. Jg. (ed.: Präsidium des Deutschen Hochschulverbandes), Bonn 2012, 910-911.

sition for education, which might contribute to retaining and achieving economic vitality in European societies<sup>14</sup>. (2) The concept of “Theology” has developed during nearly 2000 years of cultural history in European societies. It basically implies a critical (self-)evaluation by a certain religion, i.e. Christianity, in order to reflect critically on religion (mythos, ethos, rites) and the interpretation of its basic traditions (Bible, creeds), using every tool of textual analysis. As a consequence, ecclesial life is confronted with the intellectual challenges of its surrounding societies, and the societal life stays in contact with its roots and origin, as well as with an outstanding culture of interpretation (‘Deutungsangebote’) of human life and existence (e.g., ethics, anthropology) as well as cultural criticism. In order to make religious traditions an open field for intellectual debate, the concept of Christian Theology could be seen as paradigmatic for the academic and societal dealing with Islam also. Here lies an important strategic and political task of theology. In the context of an open and critical dialogue with Islam, academic theology might thus come to play an even more important role in future university life.<sup>15</sup>

(3) Christian theology has an explicative component also. In contemporary Europe, where individuals as well as groups of people and societies as a whole feel and express the threat of regression, instability and rapidity of change, messages of hope, trust and belief could contribute in establishing a social and existential setting reflecting crucial values of political, ethical and religious discourse. This should be done on a reliable and transparent intellectual level that is not determined by dubious trading, selling or thinking strategies (as e.g. Scientology or the broad market of the Esoteric). Generally speaking, we could label this the quest for “applied

Christianity”<sup>16</sup>. Perspectives on the global dimensions of Christianity and Christian theology thereby offer various opportunities of worldwide academic interaction and cooperation, as well as socio-political and cultural attempts of understanding. This is even more needed in a post-colonial world<sup>17</sup>.

Coming to my final question here: How can we succeed individually in taking responsibility for research in the Humanities and Theology such as pointed out so far? What would be my individual role as a researcher, regardless of my place in the academic career? Let me give you a brief sketch of what I think could be on such a ‘to-do-list’: (1) We should share and discuss every information on politics and economics instead of being isolated in our fields of studies and research. (2) We need to develop our competence in communicating results, both on an argumentative and on a linguistic level, in and beyond our academic fields. This would also include writing, reading and speaking skills, since the general competence in using languages (classical and modern) and texts is decreasing rapidly in Western societies (cf. sms- and e-mail-culture). Assuming that writing, reading and speaking is the basic point of departure for sharing thoughts and feelings and constituting societal life (cf. *John R. Searle*)<sup>18</sup>, we should spend more energy in developing our know-how in communication, languages and textual interpre-

<sup>14</sup> Cf. The various contributions on: „Bildung als Ware“, in: *Forschung & Lehre: Alles was die Wissenschaft bewegt* 10/12, 19. Jg. (ed.: Präsidium des Deutschen Hochschulverbandes), Bonn 2012, 792ff.

<sup>15</sup> In regard to the celebration of the Reformation jubilee in 2017, we might remember that it was *Luther’s theological* insight in 1517 that changed political and societal life.

<sup>16</sup> Heinrich Detering has recently shown how Thomas Mann during his exile in USA explicitly discussed corresponding questions – here, however, based on his experiences with Nazi-Germany and specifically related to the “Unitarian Church” in America: T. Mann, *Pulpit Editorial* (1951), in: H. Detering, *Thomas Manns amerikanische Religion: Theologie, Politik und Literatur im kalifornischen Exil*, Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2012, 295: “... what is needed is applied religion, applied Christianity, or, if you prefer, a new religiously tainted humanism...”

<sup>17</sup> Cf. e.g., some reflections on this, in: H. Leander, Mark and Matthew After Edward Said, in: Mark and Matthew II, *Comparative Readings: Reception History, Cultural Hermeneutics, and Theology*, ed. by E.-M. Becker/A. Runesson, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013, 289-309.

<sup>18</sup> See latest: J. R. Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

tation. This is a common task for all researchers working in the Humanities and Theology.

As theologians in particular, we should be interested in a certain ethics of research also: (3) We should dedicate ourselves to shaping and developing a university culture and a research milieu in which Christian and/or Humanistic ethics is practised. This includes patterns of behavior, such as friendliness, honor and deference, open-mindedness, frankness, collegiality and the willingness of being tolerant and practicing forgiveness. It would soon become evident that most of these patterns correspond to what is seen in management courses as stimulating social factors for establishing a productive research milieu.<sup>19</sup> Christian ethics certainly is a rich and deep reservoir of cultural knowledge that could be a source of inspiration for reflecting and modelling contemporary life together.

(4) We should continue to develop our interaction in research with various fields in and beyond the Humanities. This should be done on a concrete project-related level as well as in a reflective sense: I think that each researcher needs to reflect explicitly on the impact of his/her project for other fields of studies and research. Since social cohesion is an increasingly im-

portant target to work on, as researcher we should promote noetic or intellectual communion in order to understand each other better and on a more continuous basis. Contributing to intellectual understanding is already crucial when applying for a PhD-grant, it is even a *conditio sine qua non* for being successful in an election process nowadays. (5) In its concrete connection to church(es) and ecclesial life, theology stays in close touch with societal and existential needs. The quest for individual and collective identity and social cohesion are great challenges theology has to work with.

(6) Finally, in all fields of Humanities as well as in theology, we need to explore the extent to which these subject areas in particular will remain dependent on the individual researchers. This, of course, means a huge challenge for the *individual*. Our particular field of studies will only be as good as its researchers are. We need to know and to develop our individual responsibility and should not try to hide behind institutional settings or administrative plans. On the contrary, our situation calls for strong personalities, representing our fields of research in an open-minded, communicative, cooperative, subject-oriented and innovative way.

<sup>19</sup> Cf., e.g. (materials referred to in courses led by: [www.udviklingskonsulenterne.dk](http://www.udviklingskonsulenterne.dk)): T. Amabile/S. Kramer, *The Progress Principle – using small wins to ignite joy, engagement and creativity at work*. Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2011; S. Visholm, *Ledelse i den postmoderne organisation – fra roller i struktur til personer i relationer*, in: T. Heinskou/S. Visholm (Eds.), *Psykodynamisk organisationspsykologi – på mere arbejde under overfladen*, København: Hans Reitzels Forlag, 2011, 216-245.