

Gwen Dupré, Emily King, Mac Loftin, Joanna Mikolajczyk Winterø
and Thomas Sojer

Doing Theology as Making Future(s)

The Practices and Poetics of “Rethinking Theology”

ABSTRACT

“Rethinking Theology” is an international think tank founded by a group of five early-career theologians in 2021. In this essay, they consider the future(s) of theology in an age when the future feels radically foreclosed, both by the decline in institutional support for theology and by the broader apocalyptic threats of climate change and accelerating global conflict. Meditating on five ways of doing theology—looking, listening, writing, thinking, and speaking—the five members of “Rethinking Theology” explore what it might look like for theology to confront its own end. Ultimately, the group itself demonstrates an example of how theology might be done after the death of theology—beyond institutional walls, in spaces of conversation and friendship.

Theologie(n) zur Gestaltung von Zukunft. Praxis und Poetik von „Rethinking Theology“

„Rethinking Theology“ ist ein internationaler Think-Tank, der 2021 von fünf Theolog:innen im frühen Stadium ihrer Laufbahn gegründet wurde. In diesem Essay setzt sich „Rethinking Theology“ mit Zukunft(en) der Theologie auseinander, in einer Zeit, in der sich die Zukunft sowohl durch den sich verringernden institutionellen Rückhalt für die Theologie als auch durch die allgemeinen apokalyptischen Bedrohungen des Klimawandels und der zunehmenden globalen Konflikte radikal verschlossen anfühlt. Im Nachdenken über fünf Wege des Theologietreibens – sehend, hörend, schreibend, denkend und sprechend – wird erkundet, wie eine Theologie in der Konfrontation mit ihrem eigenen Ende aussehen könnte. Abschließend zeigt sich die Gruppe selbst als

ein Beispiel dafür, wie Theologie nach dem Tod der Theologie betrieben werden könnte, jenseits institutioneller Mauern, in Räumen des Gesprächs und der Freundschaft.

| BIOGRAPHIES

Gwen Dupré is a doctoral researcher in Theology at the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Oxford.

E-mail: gwendolen.dupre(at)regents.ox.ac.uk

Emily King is the Elsa Marty Fellow at University of Chicago Divinity School.

E-mail: emilyking(at)uchicago.edu

Mac Loftin is a doctoral researcher in Theology at Harvard University.

E-mail: stephen_loftin(at)mail.harvard.edu

Joanna Mikolajczyk Winterø is a doctoral researcher in Theology at the Faculty of Theology, University of Copenhagen.

E-mail: jowi(at)teol.ku.dk

Thomas Sojer is a doctoral researcher in Theology at the University of Erfurt.

E-mail: thomas.sojer(at)uni-erfurt.de

| KEY WORDS

devotion beyond; rethinking; sensing; diversity; friendship

1 Rethinking Theology

We are five early-career theologians from different continents, Christian denominations, and schools of thought. Being a diverse group, we represent various cultures, traditions, interests, and academic approaches. We seek to discover what can be lost and what can be gained when we put all of our chips on the table (cf. Bataille 1994, 86). In this essay, we have broken down, even decomposed, theology into *Five Ways*¹ of engaging with the world—looking, listening, writing, thinking and speaking—as we try to rethink both our futures and the future of theology. William Germano says that “every worthwhile thing you read by anyone anywhere is merely the last revision in a series of revisions,” (Germano 2021, 6) and we would add that every text is also merely a moment in a conversation that continues beyond it.

As much a methodological intervention as a theoretical one

Thus the form of our essay is as much a methodological intervention as a theoretical one, representing a “cross section” of academic writing while conforming to the structure of the traditional academic article (headlines, sections, footnotes, argumentative progressions). It invites the reader to see writing *in progress* and not as a finished product. To put it in the most radical and polemical way, our essay seeks to combat what we see as a twin methodological and conceptual error in theology: the hidden but operative fantasy of the sovereign author mirroring the fantasy of divine sovereignty. We argue that theology is always a conversation, as this discursive text evidences, and we therefore believe that embracing this discursive method as an integral approach to the practice of theology can be a step towards undoing the fantasy of tradition, that is to say the fantasy of theoretical sovereignty.²

What follows are the voices of our five members, each of whom uses one of these *Five Ways*. Each contribution is not meant as a definitive statement, instead these pieces aim to resonate with each other, as the threads of conversation resonate between friends. We start with Mac Loftin and ‘looking,’ this section shows that a theology that looks at its own end opens up to a silent listening. Gwen Dupré contemplates the idea of a fictional theologian who might listen to ‘the end of the world,’ working as a theologian in a similar way to an artist in residence. She explores how a theologian ‘in residence’ might listen to their environment as a strategy for being in the

¹ Here, we hint at the classical *Quinque viae* of Neo-Thomist theology that aims at proving their own perspective of the world. In contrast, we are inspired by Nietzsche: “There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival ‘knowing’; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about a matter, *the more* eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter, that much more complete will our ‘concept’ of this matter, our ‘objectivity’ be” (Nietzsche 1998, 85).

² Here we follow Judith Butler: “The purpose here is not to celebrate a certain notion of incoherence, but only to point out that our ‘incoherence’ establishes the way in which we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us” (Butler 2005, 64).

present moment beyond a transactional or formulaic arrangement; existing in their role beyond an exchange economy. From ‘listening,’ we turn to ‘writing,’ where Emily King’s contribution considers what it means to write amid the backdrop of collapse—amid an ambiance of utter futility. In her section, she asks, “What masterpieces become possible at the end of the world?” In response to this question, Tom Sojer suggests that to even consider mastery requires another look at thinking itself, pointing towards a migration away from tradition and towards possible futures. But how may we reach this future, without speaking over each other or, worse, smothering others’ voices entirely? To this, Joanna Mikolajczyk Winterø closes with an examination of how we speak and what is at stake when we enter into a dialogue. The radical alterity of the Other is theology’s point of departure, which we must preserve and respect in our encounters and is the sole rule to which we should conform.

Future denotes a movement.

Future (*Zukunft/l’avenir*) denotes a movement towards an unforeseen encounter of someone or something with someone or something. *Futuring* theology in the *End* of Theology therefore cannot be centered on a speculative point in time that is yet to come, fulfilling certain expectations. It is about performing new ways of relating to each other in the here and now, and acknowledging shared liabilities.

2 Looking

Tucked away in the side of La Madeleine church in Paris is a reliquary containing a small, brown bone. I was in the city this summer and stopped by a few times to sit near the relic. My knowledge of anatomy is poor, I don’t know what kind of bone it is, clearly part of an arm or a leg, I don’t know which. But the church guide says it belonged to Mary Magdalene. The grieving saint, the one who came to the tomb to tend to Jesus’ body when everything had come to ruin and all was lost. The saint of devotion beyond reward.

I tend to think that the dead are dead, so I harbor no belief that she knew I was there or knew my thoughts. Her bone, if it even is hers, is just that, an old bone in an old box. Mary Magdalene is not in La Madeleine. The presence of her relic doesn’t undo her absence but rather makes that absence

present, the same way a memento of a lost love doesn't return the beloved but gathers the loss, gives it weight and a place.

These were my thoughts as I sat by her relic, a bit melancholic maybe, but they felt right. She is, after all, the disciple who loved Jesus as he was lost. The one who came to the tomb looking for her dead friend and, finding it empty, was driven to an endless search. Don't look here, look elsewhere—maybe he's in Galilee, or at dinner with his friends; maybe this gardener is him, or this stranger on the road, or this man sitting on the beach. For her, loss was not devastation; it was a spur to seek the Absent One in unfamiliar faces and strange voices. "Where have you laid him?"

Grace might be found not in bringing something to others, but in being transformed by them.

Christianity, for all its ossuaries and *memento mori*, often has a hard time accepting loss. It has an even harder time imagining—like Mary turning toward the gardener—that grace might be found not in bringing something to others, but in being transformed by them. The disciples only returned from their scattering when they heard rumors of resurrection, and they went out into the world only when they were given a message to proclaim. Their faith was conditioned by reward. But Mary went to the tomb when all it held was a dead friend. She left with only the angel's words: "He is not here."

Mary Magdalene's grieving, searching love has been on my mind a lot these days. Today we are inundated with messages that everything we hold dear will soon be gone. Climate scientists warn of the apocalyptic threat of climate change. We're on track to blow past the Paris Accords' 1.5° C goal and set in motion catastrophic tipping points. Either our civilization will be undone by the disaster we are triggering, or we avoid the worst by voluntarily undoing our civilization as we know it. A death either way (cf. Scranton 2015).

The horror of apocalypse breeds denial, which breeds darker fantasies. The far right distracts from scientific prognosis with murky prophecies of the death of "Christian civilization." Across Europe swirl grim auguries of a coming "Islamization." Even the ostensible center, personified in Emmanuel Macron, warns of civilizational replacement—last year, Macron's cabinet was full of whispers of *islamo-gauchisme* and he limited the number of foreign imams entering France in the name of "assimilation." The United States has its own virulent fear of civilizational death, with half of

all Americans—and 7 in 10 Republicans—believing in “the Great Replacement,” a baroque conspiracy theory alleging a plot to replace the white race with nonwhite immigrants (cf. Malm/The Zetkin Collective 2021).

Whether our civilization dies an agonizing death in a boiling world, or dies a necessary death in the transformation towards a post-fossil way of life, it is surely dying. And this death is being denied in violent fantasies that everything would be able to continue just as it is, forever, were it not for *them*, those hungry mouths and grasping hands at the door, with their strange faces and their strange languages and their strange gods, led by their traitorous puppet masters lurking in the shadows.

As a theologian, I’m led to wonder if theology bears some of the blame for this all-consuming death-denial, if Christianity’s inability to look at its own death has led us down this path. But there are some theologians who have faced the transience of theology.

One such theologian, Michel de Certeau, sees Christianity as first and foremost a religion of the empty tomb. “Christianity is founded upon the loss of a body,” he writes, and this founding loss inaugurates the faith as “an impossible mourning,” an unending search for the one who is always *not here but elsewhere*. Since the empty tomb, “the believers have continued to wonder, ‘Where art thou?’ And from century to century they ask history as it passes: ‘Where have you put him?’” (Certeau 1995, 81–82).

Seen from the empty tomb, what gathers the Christian community together is what we do not have—Jesus.

Seen from the empty tomb, what gathers the Christian community together is not *something* (election, righteousness, eternal life) we *have* and can benevolently share with others or jealously guard for ourselves. What gathers us is what we *do not have*—Jesus— and for which we must ceaselessly search, ask, yearn. The most unfamiliar other and the strangest stranger are not threats to be managed or charity cases to be assimilated. They are, instead, possible bearers of the grace we seek. And grace, for Certeau, is “the grace of being altered by what comes”—not eternity, but effacement (Certeau 2003, 285).

This leads Certeau to his most provocative conclusion, and the most urgent for our era of real and invented apocalypses.

“Today there passes beyond [the Church] what once passed through it. Thus it is led to mark the nature of sense through its own death as

site ... *Having passed by that way, it leaves, as at Bethel, the trace of stones erected as stelae and consecrated with oil—with our gratitude—before departing without return*” (Certeau 2003, 284).

Theology—like self, nation, race, civilization, or any other imagined anchor—is, in Certeau’s words, “called to lose itself in history” (Certeau 2003, 285). But the transience of all things is not, as racial paranoia and climate denial claim, a loss that can be forestalled by circling the wagons around the given. This loss is grace. The empty tomb is a “non-site,” not a place to hunker down in and build walls around but a place from which to depart, into the risk of an unknowable future (Certeau 2003, 293). If theology is complicit in the West’s suicidal and murderous death-denial, perhaps it can light the way leading down a different path. But we must have the courage to look into the empty tomb, to look towards our own inevitable passing, if we are ever to have the strength to bear our end.

3 Listening

The silence of the empty tomb calls us to listen. When Mary Magdalene discovers the empty tomb, she turns to the gardener, asking him where Jesus is. Mary recognizes the gardener as Jesus when he addresses her by name and the mood of the atmosphere feels palpable.

The thoughts collectively presented in this article speak to our present-day circumstances in which a brooding and apocalyptic undercurrent echoes like the sound of the ocean in a shell which we listen to, seeking to discern the spiritual tonalities within it— an atmospheric sensation aptly captured by Mac in the way he describes Mary Magdalene as the ‘saint of devotion beyond reward’. It is in this register that a theological sensibility can be noticeably woven throughout our everyday existence, where ‘listening’ could describe a kind of receptivity to the spiritual that extends outside the framework of theology departments.

The increasingly apocalyptic rhythm of everyday life is now something almost universally acknowledged. The doom-orientated perspective has reached a point where even the media alludes to it with no sense of irony, instead referring to it as something that is seen, heard, tasted, and felt. In relation to these foreboding conditions, what role does the theologian play? What responsibilities do they hold?

Like Mary Magdalene, perhaps it is the theologian's role to listen to apocalyptic winds without a direct or orientated action other than to preserve a spirit of devotion. But how might the theologian facilitate and do the work of this listening?

Thinking about this, I wondered what it would look like to displace the theologian. I imagined a fictional theologian working on an oil rig, at the seat of environmental degradation which would continue to take place around them beyond their direct control. Out in the deepest Atlantic, I imagined them there not to fulfil a role in any activist or evangelical sense, for example, they would not be there as a pious eco-theologian spiritually exorcising the transgressions of a world committed to fossil fuels, and neither would this theologian be a straightforward chaplain.

While a chaplain exists to maintain, to an extent, a transactional role, where the laity can seek spiritual comfort, training or guidance with them, the oil rig theologian would not have such a strict commitment. Nor do I imagine them like the activist and religious thinker Simone Weil during her factory years, joining in with the laboring, becoming a worker, although they might, just as they might offer comfort to a 'roughneck' worker who misses home. Nevertheless, their role would simply be to be a theologian, doing the work of theology through an open orientation toward their environment.

A posture of receptive yet active passivity

The format of the "theologian in residence" borrows from the established tradition of "the artist in residence". The artist in residence is freed from their institutional commitments and they might collaborate with other artists and community members, or they might keep to themselves. If seen akin to an artist, the theologian, outside of their specialized institutional setting, can practice their discipline in even a very paired down way, through an act as simple as listening to sound, to voice, to silence.

In this mode the theologian on the oil rig might find themselves one day being a chaplain figure, literally listening to their colleagues' problems (the theologian would not be elevated above the other workers), but on other days they might simply listen to the sound of metal and the coldness of the sea. In an overarching sense, I imagine this listening to take the shape of Simone Weil's "attention," a posture of receptive yet active passivity.

An example of a successful artist residency program that I draw from in imagining this theologian is the *Artist Placement Group* (APG) which emerged in London in the 1960's. The Tate website's synopsis of APG explains that:

"The organisation actively sought to reposition the role of the artist within a wider social context, including government and commerce, while at the same time playing an important part in the history of conceptual art during the 1960's and 1970's." (Tate learning resources 2004)

The slogan of the project was "context is half the work," meaning that it was not only the material output that constituted the work of these artists. The initiative was originally conceived by Barbara Steveni, who organized the group not as an established collective of artists but as "a loose network of artists who would be proposed for placements" (cf. APG archive 2022). With an open brief, the placement settings included Scottish Television (1971), the Department of Health and Social Security (1976), Ocean Fleets Ltd. (1974/75), and The British Steel Corporation, among others.

Artist George Leventis, who took up residence on an Ocean Fleets' ship, was expected to give art classes to alleviate the boredom of the crew during long sailings. A sort of functional expectation was set, which perhaps makes sense given the artists setting within an environment of traditional labor. Yet the artist defies function, and instead Leventis merely documented his experience, taking personal notes and drawings, and eventually, back on land, created an abstract installation he called "Pieces of Sea Fall Through the Stars" (1978).

Responding to echoes and sounds

I think back to my theologian who listens to the lonely Atlantic oil rig and wonder if the oil rig workers would be as confused by the theologian as the ship workers were by Leventis. Yet even the title Leventis gave his installation becomes a beautiful devotion in and of itself to his experience, and appears to make sense of it, even though it exists outside of his expected participation with his environment. It becomes a poetic dispatch from life aboard the ship. The oil rig theologian might output a similarly enigmatic and spiritual dispatch as a response to the echoes and sounds they would listen to at the edge of the world.

My example of a theologian in residence seeks to touch upon a practice of listening as attention, as receptivity to a particular setting, to the hearing

of its noises and its atmosphere. This can be seen as illustrating a theological approach to the particular that informs a mode of doing theology in an active yet non-invasive manner, one that is self-aware of its own methodology, even if this methodology is experimental, gentle, and without a rigid expectation of set outcomes.

4 Writing

In the shadow of the apocalypse, perhaps no other action is more nonsensical than to write. The activity of writing seems to rely upon the assurances provided by a reader. Writing depends on the future, on the infinite extension of time that promises that the message left in a bottle will be recovered and read, its meaning savored someday. However, whether one thinks of apocalypse in an ecological, Christian, or literary sense, the union of the text and reader is not guaranteed. From an ecological perspective, not only would the literary thoughts and dreams of the current generation be destroyed, but the whole cultural deposit of humanity.

As the last human perishes, so too die the works of Homer, Aristotle, and Plato a final death even as they sit, possibly even intact, on abandoned shelves. From a Christian perspective, human history moves towards a finite end—the eschaton, the return of Christ at a day and hour of which “knoweth no man.” As for a literary perspective, one need only reference literary greats such as Emily Dickinson and Franz Kafka, whose works would have been consigned to oblivion, were it not for the chance intervention of unnominated literary executors. Neither Dickinson nor Kafka wrote with the guarantee that their works would find readers. Indeed, they were content not only to write, but to perfect what they wrote—without the assurance of recognition.

Creation in the face of impending destruction?

“Apocalypse” evokes fright, dread—an attitude of aversion—to speak in general terms. The term connotes the sight of fire falling from the skies and of life as we know it coming to an irreversible, even irredeemable end. In the age of the Anthropocene, these images are all but familiar—even if the image of fire and brimstone can be more easily replaced by wildfire and shelling. Starved of its theological significance and provenance, “apocalypse” can be read as meaningless, devastating, irrevocable ecological col-

lapse in biological terms: the extinction of the human race. What action can be possible not in its wake in—since the apocalypse is always on its way—but in its inevitable, dreadful occurrence? Does not the prospect of an end—indeed, “The End”—make all attempts of creation futile in the face of impending destruction? How else to respond to an irrevocable end but with the posture of nihilism?

Foreclosure and possibility, disaster and inspiration

Keeping in mind that the term ἀποκάλυψις literally means “unveiling,” and has synonyms that have far less threatening connotations, such as “revelation” and “disclosure,” the notion of apocalypse as it relates to writing becomes more conceivable. How can the terms apocalypse and revelation—which are, at heart, selfsame—connote both foreclosure and possibility, disaster and inspiration? Can it be that the moment of apocalypse, the moment of revelation, is the moment that makes all other moments possible—literally the moment of truth?

Driven from their home when the Nazis invaded Paris, an assimilated French-Jewish family fled to Marseilles hoping to catch one of the last ships heading for the United States. In tow was a reluctant young woman—Simone Weil—carrying a portfolio heavy with a dozen thick manuscripts under her arm. While she accompanied her family to America, neither she nor her notebooks were ultimately destined to leave the site of the gaping historical wound. In 1942, at a train station, Weil entrusted that dense portfolio of notebooks to her friend Gustave Thibon. In a letter to him, Weil wrote of the “crushing weight” of the thought that she was unable to serve the truth as she saw it, “when in an inconceivable excess of mercy it seems to me that it deigns to allow me to behold it” (Weil 2002, xiv). In spite of Weil’s self-effacement—the modesty of a saint—her notebooks are an endlessly fascinating object of their time. “The texts are bare and simple like the inner experience which they express,” Thibon mused, “What is most striking in these thoughts is the comprehensiveness of their possible applications; their simplicity simplifies everything they touch” (Weil 2002, xix). The radical form of Weil’s notebook entries, utterly composed in their discomposure, bespeak the destruction of her world in the cataclysms of war. But, as Thibon states, they are tinged with a purity, a logic, that some readers experience as supernatural.

What does it mean to write at the end of one's life—at the end of one's world? For Simone Weil (1909–1943), whose short life was bookended by two world wars and who did not live to see the liberation of France, writing was a spiritual discipline. In the formative years of Weil's education, she was under the instruction of Émile-Auguste Chartier, commonly known as Alain, who stressed the importance of writing. Weil's biographer Simone Pétrement, who was also Weil's classmate at the time, explains Alain's pedagogy: "To learn how to write well was to learn how to think well" (Pétrement 1976, 35). Here Alain did not only refer to writing as an intellectual exercise, but he also demanded of his students an immaculate script—a request that put Weil, whose hand was crippled from an early childhood illness, to the test. The young Simone changed her handwriting by dint of force:

"Instead of a rather sloppy, almost careless, scrawled handwriting she developed a square, perpendicular, constructed, designed, and completely willed handwriting, which as time went on became progressively less rigid and more supple, and finally, attained the pure, beautiful script of her last years" (Pétrement, 1976, 39).

Although Weil was unable to collate her thoughts in a magnum opus of her own crafting due to the strictures of her time, the notebooks meet us in the present day with a strange prescience. Born out of catastrophe, "an inventory" (Weil 2002, 153) of her civilization, they find us uncannily in our own situation of decay, demise, and the overarching premonition that we are apprenticing ourselves to the study of a world that may before long cease to exist.

Living into the radically unknown

Reframing the apocalypticism of her moment, Weil writes in her notebooks: "You could not be born at a better period than the present, when we have lost everything" (Weil 2002, 177). Facing apocalypse with a stoic's *amor fati*, Weil could see how apocalypse, like a form of purifying atheism, can provide the criterion—the test—for action beyond reward. It makes us ask what an action, a Christianity, a text beyond reward would look like. In composing her notebooks in the context of civilizational collapse, she has provided a strident model of what it means to not give up, what it means to write at the end—even as she perished in a death of despair.

To ask again: What does it mean to write at the end of one's life? At the end of one's world? As we live into the lateness of this hour, the revelation of our particular moment is that we are and have always been writing at the end of our lives, at the end of our worlds. The early Christians lived in anticipation of the apocalypse — and while we today can akin the prospect of fire falling from the skies all the more readily with the frightening capacity of modern weaponry, I want to say that even without considering the threats that face us today, be they nuclear or environmental, we are always living into the radically unknown. And when we feel compelled to make a record of it, it is always with the posture of faith, a posture of communication, even—and especially—when futility marks each stroke. The flipside of apocalypse is revelation—in writing theology in an age when the prospect of the end of life as we know it looms menacingly over our keyboards the same way skulls sat and stared thoughtfully at the desks of monks and saints, we write against the guarantee that what we write will be fulfilled by a future reader. Theology must learn to write with renewed abandon. Like someone who engages in the most paradoxical of acts—like Socrates, who took up the lyre while awaiting his execution—we wonder: What masterpieces become possible at the end of the world?

5 Thinking

Against the backdrop of mastery, one could describe the 'art of theology' as an agenda of cataloging, producing, and archiving and collecting masterpieces about masterpieces. Such a perspective on theology's archival enterprise may not be as strange as it seems at first glance. For example, if one considers past and contemporary syllabi of Divinity schools, across denominations, national borders, and languages, one will find innumerate written catalogs filled with popular names and important titles every student in theology crosses paths with: biblical scriptures, the Church Fathers, and big books of each age. There are also the unwritten 'syllabi,' the theological 'who's who' of each student generation, campus trends, and the social bubble, all of which also contextualize the work of theology. Both of these catalogs illustrate a canon of texts and ideas that summon the perceived 'best' interpretations of another canon of texts that, correspondingly, have summoned the considerably best interpretations of another canon of texts ... etcetera, etcetera. Names and titles might change over time, however, the practice of cataloging does not.

The rise of theological thought, historically and in terms of its ageless self-preservation, springs from such practices of canonizing, authorizing, and standardizing the chosen texts as immortal classics. Doing theology against this backdrop—the autopoietic metabolism procreating normative text corpora in archives—seems so natural that I often forget how the big terms overshadowing these techniques of immortalization like *revelation*, *inspiration*, and *rationality* also claim an implicit practice of mastery.

Has already been thought through all there is to think through?

And yet, one who is not familiar with theology and its pursuit of mastery might ask, what are these masters of theology exactly mastering? Have they already thought through all there is to think through? If this is true, is the task of our generation to enter theology's archive under their apprenticeship and all-seeing eyes? Centuries of the process of crediting a text, an author, a concept, sets a standard that is often presented as mastery without question. But perhaps our generation should rethink this apparent mastery. A 'standardized' way of doing things should not hinder our access to enigmatic mastery lurking.

Doesn't actual mastery require yet another look at thinking? And, by the same token, doesn't thinking require yet another look at mastery? I mean this in the sense that master artistry often has not resolved but, on the contrary, has ignited new ideas—even absconding the source of inspiration in order to go in a new direction.

So, returning to the problem of the catalog which feigns mastery, such a perspective on theology's archiving enterprise for its immortal future reminds me of the following passage from Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder* (2007):

"‘Speculation?’ I repeated. ‘What’s that?’ [...] When people buy shares, they don’t value them by what they actually represent in terms of goods or services: they value them by what they might be worth, in an imaginary future. [...] ‘What if everyone stops imagining futures for all of them at the same time?’ I asked him. ‘That throws the switch on the whole system, and the market crashes’" (McCarthy 2007, 123–124).

Sometimes I have the impression that theology's archival catalog, full of masterpieces, also operates like speculations on the stock exchange. The

value of theology's masterpieces is not measured by what the masters and their great works are *currently* good for, but by what they would be worth in the event of a particular future. "*What if everyone stops imagining futures for all of them at the same time?*" I am asking about our canon of texts. What are they good for, here and now? Do they help us *think*?

For example, Heidegger distinguishes between simply making up one's mind—repeating, reframing, imitating—and actual *thinking* (cf. Heidegger 1997). The latter does not imply cognitive power or anything akin to an IQ score, but it is the very way of becoming open for things to show themselves as they are. Heidegger submits how one actually does *not* think but has to *learn* to think ever anew, notably by unceasingly acknowledging that one is not yet thinking at all. To put it differently, we can say, to think is precisely to stop imagining futures.

Thinking as a way of becoming open for things to show themselves as they are

What could this mean for us and for doing theology? Sometimes, I am dreaming of *another* normativity. I am dreaming about a normativity that is not bound to the speculation of how truth now is based on a point Z in the future, or a point X in the past. Why is the truth of something here and now dependent on the speculative case that it must still be true, has always been true, or will be even truer, at a particular point in the future?

For example, I am asking myself, how often do we fall prey to the assumption that theology does not have a geography? By geography, I do not mean to allude to territory. I do not speak about American, Danish, Austrian, or British theology (whatever these might be), as these framings are utterly temporal in my eyes. Although they refer to geographical units, they first and foremost declare perseverance and property in time. Territorial and property logic is not sensible for spaces, rather it freezes spaces in periods of time to construe possession. Accordingly, I see the archival and cataloging strategies of theology tied to an implicit territorial logic.

Theology always happens somewhere. And it also happens elsewhere. What does this mean? I want to suggest thinking as a form of migration across spaces and times.

Thinking, ineluctably, is intimate, yet, it is also alienating. Thinking walks into deserts and reshapes oases into new cities. It oscillates between finding and bonding. I am thinking about a theology that is unremittingly migrating, like Mary Magdalene after experiencing the empty tomb and the

call for departure. I am thinking about a theology with no roots in ancestral tombs, yet never without home(s).

If we consider thinking as a practice of migration, we can also become sensitive to attuning to different notions of time, and thus of archives, catalogs, mastery, and theology itself.

Rethinking theology calls for arriving elsewhere, in the exile of shared multi-alien temporalities.

Everyone who has experienced migration may quickly realize that while we share the same moment, not everyone lives within the same 'now'. Yet, it is exactly the shared plurality of temporalities that can transform spaces of cohabitation into a home for everyone in the common place. If thinking is migration, as a metaphor but also as a real embodied practice, rethinking theology calls for leaving behind agendas of autopoietic nostalgia and arriving elsewhere, that is in the sympoietic exile of shared multi-alien temporalities. While territory uses construed demarcations in space to install temporal supremacy, the geography of thinking invites the many 'nows' at work in the migrating bodies to find home through encounter, a form of encounter that opens up common ground. "*What if everyone stops imagining futures for all of them at the same time?*" —Maybe, then all of us *are* home, still elsewhere, yet together, which is something I like to call *thinking* in our practice of doing theology.

6 Speaking

The future seems so very uncertain. Not uncertain as in whether it will take place, as it surely will. The infiniteness of time that lays grounds for our existence will continue its inexorable trajectory with or without us. But what kind of future(s) are we stepping into at this moment right now as we *speak*? Speculating on these possibilities or impossibilities ahead of us, what is then the future of theology, the discipline that embraces reflections and discussions about the unknown, the radically Other?

Does speaking about theology ground its future at all? Or is speaking of theology always and already merely an echo of the canonical past, conserving certain doctrines and dogmas, and (or at best) speculative assumptions of the hereafter based on the two previous? I do not have the answer, but I *think* the crucial reflection lies in what kind of speaking we practice in order

to keep any potential theological future(s) open. I *think* that the grounds of theology are not in faraway horizons, nor are they restricted to certain events or institutions where theology is self-evident and thriving without much challenge. I *think* that they are in the genuine, interpersonal relations that unfold everywhere in daily life.

The grounds of theology are not in faraway horizons.

In the beginning was the Word. That word and words succeeding since are still audible in our roots, our foundation. In the biblical narrative, God spoke the universe into being, and we speak our words and language—ultimately ourselves—into that being. These expressions are not always vocal and audible—gestures, mimics, even a presence in silence is also a word. We are always already speaking word(s) that have already been said and have laid a ground for us whether that is existentially, theologically, or politically. We are not *tabulae rasae* in the world nor in the conversations we engage in. Acknowledging this and never ceasing to search for and challenge our blind spots not only lets us listen more attentively to the Other but also prompts us to ask questions—first and foremost questioning ourselves.

A disruption of what we name the world around us and how we communicate has emerged and entails a rupture of certainty, habituality and normativity in our expression, a sort of logoclasism of how we engage in (theological) dialogue. This rightful disturbance of authority, our institutions and normativity urge us to question ourselves: *D'où parlons-nous?* This urgent hermeneutical question of where we are speaking from allows us to explore and reflect upon ourselves as points of departure before interacting with the world and the Other. This self-reflection may hinder the ego-, ethno-, Euro-, Christian- or whatever-centric position we are so comfortably lulled into.

God, upon revealing himself in the biblical narrative, exclaimed “I am who I am.” I want to play with and apply this confession of *I am who I am* to the human condition as well, as we also are who we are. Scrutinizing who one is and where one is coming from gives a sense of integrity, a home, a point of departure for the self, where one has to acknowledge shortcomings and challenges. This self-interrogation of *I am who I am* is crucial in meeting the Other and responding to her. *I am who I am*, the totality of my being both good and bad, joys, anguish and perplexion; my complete incompleteness, is what I bring to the table in a conversation. I put myself

at stake, at risk of being disorientated, changed, somehow transformed, before I can withdraw and dwell back into the home of *I am*. This is very much like the Lévinasian notion of the *interior* and *exterior*.³ The interior is the sphere where I am at home, here I sojourn, detach from the obligations outside and get a hold of myself, maybe even rest. In the exterior sphere, I am under the heterogenous law of the absolute Other — I tend to the Other, not compromising myself, but putting the Other first. In the exterior sphere, I thus expand the capacity of the *I am*. I am transcending myself, awakened by and tending to a call, able to return to my home enriched and transformed.

*I am here: to listen with openness and generosity,
present for the radically Other.*

I answer the call of the absolute Other, just like some of the protagonists in the biblical narratives, with a *here I am*. This expression emphasizes my locus not as a geographical but as an existential identification, that despite whatever shortcomings I might have, I am *here*: to listen with openness and generosity, present for the radically Other. I am here despite there being no assurance of recognition.

Our challenge as theologians lies in working with what is embedded in the old language in a way that resonates with our contemporary fellows, who are not necessarily fellow theologians. Hoping that there is a future for theology entails daring to engage in conversations with not (only) the neighbor but with the farthest Other. This point of departure, reflection on the what and who *I am*, together with the *I am here*, is exactly what is at stake when we do theology. Response, prompted by the call of the Other, precedes the certainty of dogma. We must venture out, listening for the call that demands our response.

Theology offers so much yet to be explored, so many different paths. It is a bridge over the formless depth of human life. Here we can play with, exercise—and as paradoxically as it sounds—endeavor that which we know has no end and no finite goal. Presuppositions of the outcome of dialogue must be abandoned, the one speaking mustn't enact a total onslaught on the Other, imposing one's own attitude, opinion and perspectives as the "telos" of the argument. Because if there is no defined end—and no defined future(s)—that means there is no right and wrong. We are not here to validate anything but to open everything up to dialogue. The horizon is broad and undefined, ready to be explored and inhabited by new narratives.

³ Our theological approach here (and always) is rounded by Lévinas' *Totality and Infinity* and his ethics of the face of the absolute Other.

Does this very open and broad way of speaking theology make it susceptible to being dissolved? Stripped bare of its old pillars, will it fall apart? I don't think so. Even if God, the main character of our discipline is dead as Nietzsche proclaims, theology still lives on. But it is interesting to take that claim seriously because as Nietzsche points out in *The Gay Science* (no. 125), God is dead, because we have killed him by doing bad theology and by conforming to totality—especially in our speaking.

7 Conclusion

We know that this essay isn't exactly what one would expect to find in an academic journal. But our task was to consider the future of theology, and theology's future is as uncertain as the world's. Still, some things are certain. The ways theology has been done within the university setting until recently are undone.

Dead is the 'Great Man' of theology.

Dead is the 'Great Man' of theology, the singular genius who sits in his study piling volume upon volume of his Systematics (how his clothes got washed, his meals cooked, his coffee grown and harvested and prepared just the way he liked remains a mystery—he never told us). Not quite dead, but certainly close, is his theology department. Tenure lines expire and are not renewed, fellowships end and foundations find other ways to spend their money, departments are shuttered and folded together to offer a handful of "Humanities" courses, small colleges give way to online modules and large universities squirm under the watchful eyes of governments suspicious of "cultural Marxism" or "cancel culture" or "wokeism." Churches, too, are looking sickly, at least in the West. So if theology's future isn't in the study, or the faculty lounge, or the parsonage, where is it? Nietzsche said that after God's death his shadow would linger on the walls of caves for thousands of years (cf. Nietzsche 1974, 167). After theology's death, where will its shadow abide?

We believe that the future of theology is friendship theology: chance encounters, conversations, disagreements—the unexpected places where, really, we should have expected to find it all along. That's how we came together: five strangers attend a virtual conference, hear something in each other's words that strikes a chord in their own thinking, share a few emails,

chat on video, type stray thoughts in a chaotic shared document, form and deepen a friendship.

We have tried to take this mess—we believe theology is born in the mess—and squeeze it into a wholly alien form, the form of the journal article. This essay is meant to stand astride theology's future and its present, to jam the chaos of theology after the death of theology back into the form that it took for a time, like a snake wriggling awkwardly back into its shed skin.

**We believe theology is born in a mess, and
it will happen in spaces of care and concern.**

As such, this is no polished theological treatise, no definitive reading of a canonical text or answer to a longstanding question. Nor is it a repudiation of those forms—we love to read and write those kinds of texts. But this is not that.

It's theology as a time capsule—buried in the ground, to be dug up or to be forgotten, a consecration without reward. It's a portrait of a friendship, of comings and goings, a blurry snapshot of a thing in motion.

To pile on another metaphor: we hope it can also stand as a kind of mirror. Whoever you are, you have your own friendships, your own chance encounters, your own conversations—whether passing, awkward, deep, painful, or lighthearted.

As each of us has written in our own way, we are living in a time of ending. The world being born will be harsher, necessities will be stretched thinner, conflicts will burn hotter. It will be important, as it has always been important, to care for each other. If theology is going to happen after the death of theology, it will happen in those spaces of care and concern, those conversations in which people look, listen, write, think, and speak with each other.

These are the future of theology. In some sense it's no future at all: the departments are shutting down, the churches are closing, and the accelerating crises of the next decades could make academic theology seem a luxury. But in another sense, it's a rich future; more than that, it's a return to what theology always was and has been: conversation. Or as Delores Williams (2013) translates the Greek theology: God-talk.

Literatur

APG archive (2022), Introduction, en.contextishalfthework.net [24.10.2022].

Bataille, Georges (1994), *On Nietzsche*. Translated by Bruce Boone, New York: Paragon House.

Butler, Judith (2005), *Giving an Account of Oneself*, New York: Fordham University Press.

Certeau, Michel de (1995), *The Mystic Fable, Volume I: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Translated by Michael B. Smith, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Certeau, Michel de (2003), *La faiblesse de croire*. Edited by Luce Giard, Paris: Seuil.

Heidegger, Martin (1997), *Was heißt Denken?*, Tübingen: Niemeyer.

Germano, William (2021), *On Revision. The Only Writing That Counts*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Lévinas, Emmanuel (1971), *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff.

Malm, Andreas / The Zetkin Collective (2021), *White Skin, Black Fuel. On the Danger of Fossil Fascism*, New York: Verso.

McCarthy, Tom (2007), *Remainder*, New York: Vintage.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm (1974), *The Gay Science. With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Translated by Walter Arnold Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm (1998), *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated and edited by Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen, Indianapolis: Hackett.

Pétrément, Simone (1976), *Simone Weil. A Life*, New York: Pantheon Books.

Scranton, Roy (2015), *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene. Reflections on the End of a Civilization*, San Francisco: City Lights Books.

Tate learning resources (2004), APG Introduction, www.tate.org.uk/artistplacement-group/ [24.10.2022].

Weil, Simone (2002), *Gravity and Grace*, London: Routledge.

Williams, Delores S. (2013), *Sisters in the Wilderness. The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.