Conceptual design, sin, and the affordances of doctrine[1]

Hanna Reichel; hanna.reichel@ptsem.edu

Princeton Theological Seminary (64 Mercer Street, Princeton, NJ 08542

Systematic Theology harnesses the best modern reason has to offer for a coherent and rational presentation of Christian faith. Constructive Theologies point to the contextual nature of all theology, and criticizes systematicity's unexamined bias and complicity in structural injustice and oppression. Moving beyond epistemic incommensurability and mutual imputations, this article presents one Systematic Theologian's attempt to understand such criticism as pointing to the insurmountable implication of theology in epistemological sin. Drawing on the architectural metaphor in construction and system-building, it proposes a new understanding of theological work as conceptual design, responsibly ordering and structuring given materials for a purpose. It thus has to account for the actual use, material effects, and fit with environmental requirements of its doctrinal design. Aspiring to a more realistic "adaequatio ad rem" thus necessitates an expansion of theology's critical standards to encompass not only cognitive and logical criteria, but also the practical effects and uses of doctrine in an ethic of affordances. Finally, "queer use" effectively expresses how both the lives of real human beings and the reality of God will never fit into conceptual logics nor be exhausted by whatever current use we attribute to them.

What is hopeful about a system: that which is excluded by it.

—Elias Canetti

Contested Systematicity

Attending to the "bad rap" of the system, systematically

The "system" has gained a bad rap. No longer, it would seem, are order and regularity intuitively equated with goodness, or procedural and methodological uniformity with rationality. Indeed, talk about systems–having gained widespread currency from formalized scientific models to sociology and cultural studies–often invokes questions of how institutions or technological assemblages exert control through discipline. Such talk of systems typically gestures toward depersonalized and often inscrutable operations of power on the individual or on groups of people, e.g. in the form of "systemic oppression"

[1] I am greatly indebted to Wes Willison for introducing design theory into my theological imagination, and for inspiring explorations on the topic. I am grateful to Benedikt Friedrich, Thomas Renkert, Gary Burl McClanahan and Samuel Davidson for constructive discussions of previous drafts of this article, and to the latter additionally for editing assistance.

and "systemic violence." Main associations are with impersonal abstractness, rigidity, and potentially oppressive quality.

To be sure, such usage is not the only one to be found, and it also does not necessarily have to be understood as an indictment of Systematic Theology. However, it does signal that the cultural assumptions around systems and systematicity have shifted significantly from straightforwardly implying well-ordered states of being.

As someone who was trained in Systematic Theology, who teaches Systematic Theology at a prestigious institution, and who might on an occasion such as this be invited to publish thoughts on "the task and nature of Systematic Theology," I often find myself in an almost apologetic situation of having to explain and justify commitments to such a self-understanding. Valiant reasons may be cited in order to defend Systematic Theology against such accusations or instead to abandon the project of Systematic Theology altogether. This article instead presents the modest attempt of a Systematic Theologian to take the contention that systematicity has an oppressive tendency as seriously as possible, to theologize that contention itself, and to work toward a *constructive* way of taking such difficulty into account *systematically,* i.e., methodologically. Such an attempt, of course, might seem somewhat ironic, or even self-defeating if viewed from the outside, or once more self-justifying by internal rationales–all of which would be quite typical of systematicity. And yet.

Problematizing systematicity

Systematic Theologians wonder, why is "'order' so often perceived as a front for abuse, and 'system' as an assumed repression?"[2] For starters, the course of history over the past century or so, offers us enough material to doubt the identification of rational ordering with progress, truth, and human flourishing. Especially since the mid-20th century, scholarship from a variety of fields has substantiated the link of systematicity with violence and injustice in its rational, objective, and dispassionate ordering.

In particular, the supplementation of philosophical inquiry and historical investigation with empirical and theorizing work from social sciences and cultural studies has directed more and more attention to the social and societal, political and economic, sexual and bodily realities in and around systems. Often broadly referenced as "critical theory" (not exclusively in direct genealogical or conceptual dependence on the Frankfurt School), such critiques take into account the functioning of power, increasingly conceptualizing that notion by way of its structural effects–rather than as individual possession–and reflect especially on its inextricable role in epistemology and scientific method. This attention to

---

[2] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'on the Trinity'* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press., 2013), p. 42.

material effects and epistemic conditionings has added complexities and ambivalence to what we understand systems to be and to do.

Systematic Theologians increasingly find themselves faced with similar projects in or adjacent to their own field: Post-Holocaust Theology and Ecotheologies, Feminist and Womanist Theologies, Black and Latin American Liberation Theologies, Postcolonial and Decolonial Theologies, and Queer and Crip Theologies have been particularly active in critical analysis of theological systems with regard to their material effects and epistemology.

As multifaceted and diverse as these approaches may be, they will often be subsumed by Systematic Theologians under labels such as "Contextual Theologies"–in light of their commitment to specific communities and their experiences; as "Political Theologies"–by virtue of their explicit transformative agendas; or as "Liberation" or "Liberative Theologies"–in reference to their commitment to work for justice of oppressed groups and communities. Such "lumping together" deserves critical scrutiny of its own: It itself effectively relegates those so labeled to a shared periphery vis-a-vis the then unmarked, neutral, objective, and normalized-normative theology of the mainstream center. Nonetheless, I will also use a shorthand to describe a critical virtue shared by the above approaches: "Constructive Theology" will stand for endeavors that

- explicitly take into account the contextual and actively constructive nature of theological work, including their own;
- explicitly reflect on the power dynamics involved in such work, including their own.

For all perceived or stylized disparity or even antagonism that can often be found, Systematic and Constructive approaches are not disjunctive or mutually exclusive, and even their bimodal labeling is obviously problematic in generating or at least reifying to some degree their perceived disjunction. I myself would be the first among those who would want to be read as a Systematic Theologian *and* as striving to fulfill the definition of Constructive Theology just laid out. But taking into consideration the undeniable *existence* of discursive divisions within academic self-perceptions, and of boundary management in the contemporary panorama, that are often stylized along the lines of "Systematic" vs. "Contextual," "Liberationist," and "Constructive" Theologies, I employ these labels strategically for heuristic and diagnostic purposes, as "types." To remind the reader of this artificial rather than descriptive use, I write "Systematic Theology" and "Constructive Theology" with capital first letters. Without meaning to disregard the profound and serious contentions that Constructive Theologians are raising against Systematic Theology's method and approach, this article presents an attempt to work off a particular congeniality of these two only artificially differentiated "types."

Obviously Constructive Theologies do significant *constructive work* in their own right that is also insufficiently received by Systematic Theology. But for the purpose of this paper, I want to point merely to the serious contentions against Systematic Theology's systematicity that they articulate. Without, in the scope of this paper, being able to develop them from the material, I propose that we might discern three distinct, yet overlapping

charges–against the unexamined contextual commitments, systemic complicity, and bad effects of Systematic Theology.

Firstly, Constructive Theologies challenge Systematic Theology's self-understanding as methodically rational, objective, neutral, and universal. They might do so by providing empirical evidence of bias, or by theoretically plausibilizing alternative rationales, or by revealing the contingency and/or bias of underlying assumptions in Systematic Theology's method and framework.

Secondly, Constructive Theologies point out how such unexamined contextuality has allowed to go unnoticed the ways in which Systematic Theology's claims have been instrumental in establishing the dominance of particular groups over others, and complicit in structural violence and oppression.

Thirdly, Constructive Theologies point to harmful real-life implications and effects of such systemic complicity for those groups who are typically not represented in its authorship, resulting in what could be called a "lack of fit" of Systematic Theology for their distinct experiences, and how such lack of fit results in the marginalization of, discrimination against, or even outright rejection of these agents and their experiences as theologically valid (thereby once more enabling and further concealing the unexamined contextuality).

The key to what I call Constructive Theology here, then, has to do with the way the analysis crosses over the assumed divide between cognitive and material issues. They show us that cognitive systematization is not neutral toward the world it purports to describe. Its conceptual order has both contextual conditions and material effects, which in turn produce epistemological constraints. Cognitive systematization is therefore not "innocent," and certainly not "harmless."

This insight does not mean that order is *per se* bad and systems *per se* are oppressive–what it means is that there is always an element of active force exerted by them which needs to be accounted for in the analysis. Constructive Theology therefore does not necessarily decry any kind of ordering, but it does push for expanding the analysis to take into account the contextual conditioning, power dynamics, and real-life effects of cognitive systems, instead of merely assessing their coherence and explanatory potency.

Beyond epistemic incommensurability

Where such Constructive critiques have registered within Systematic Theology, they have often elicited various kinds of irritated, dismissive, paternalizing, and domesticating responses. More often than not, Systematic Theology seems unable to see in Constructive Theology anything more than a deficient mode of Systematic Theology, subsequently disqualifying it by Systematic Theology's standards, as not intellectually rigorous enough, as not presenting a plausible and defensible account of orthodox Christian faith, as not measuring up to standards of biblical interpretation and creedal adherence, etc–thus effectively neutralizing its critique systemically.

It is worth noting that Constructive Theology, too, will see Systematic Theology as not critical enough: as failing to subject its own methodology and practice to rigorous self-

critical examination. Both will typically charge each other with being ideological, citing explicit articulation of a political agenda on the one side and uninterrogated assumptions and unavowed bias on the other. In short, a stalemate ensues as each measures the other according to a different epistemic standard of *what counts* as critical and rigorous scholarship, in which each side is performing well by its own standards, finding the other lacking, and therefore feeling procedurally justified in its dismissal of the other. This stalemate is not something that could be resolved by way of dialogue on the individual material points–it is due to a fundamental incommensurability between two different epistemic paradigms.

The Argentinian social theorist and liberation theologian, Ivan Petrella muses,

> Modern theology had the skeptic, the person who denies belief in God, as its main interlocutor, and giving reasons for religious belief as its main goal, while liberation theology has the non-person, the person whose humanity is denied by the prevailing social order, as its interlocutor, and liberation as its goal. This shift in standpoint from the concerns of a rich minority to those of a poor majority is liberation theology's epistemological break from modern religious thought. The epistemological break leads to a kind of conversion within the discipline of theology in which the world is now looked at differently.[3]

Petrella's assessment suggests that it might be worth thinking about Systematic Theology as not self-contained, self-sufficient, and self-evident, but as responding to a particular historical challenge and as pursuing particular goals as well. Upon further historical investigation, Systematic Theology's self-understanding can be shown to be quite a late, and quite a particular, development of Western, predominantly European Protestant theology trying to keep step with the rationalism that emerged in Enlightenment philosophy. In its critique not only of authorities and dogmas, but particularly also of the epistemological viability of faith claims, secular reason was increasingly seen as a challenge to the Christian faith, a challenge which the development of rational, coherent, systematic accounts of theological contents rose to meet. Rendering Christian teaching as "a conceptual articulation of Christian claims about God and everything else in relation to God, characterized by comprehensiveness and coherence,"[4] Systematic Theology responded to European Enlightenment's rationalism and coherentism as the emergent arbiter of what is

---

[3] Ivan Petrella, "Theology and Liberation: Juan Luis Segundo and Three Takes on Secular Inventiveness", in *Another Possible World*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid, Ivan Petrella, and Luiz Carlos Susin, Reclaiming Liberation Theology (London: SCM Press, 2007), pp., 162–77, at 174–75.

[4] John Webster, "Introduction: Systematic Theology", in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain R. Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 1–15, at 2.

to count as "scientific" and therefore as justified truth claims.[5] Systematic structure and method served to justify the Christian faith as rational *and therefore* viable.

We might read Constructive Theology, in turn, as responding to the epistemic paradigm of late modernity's critical turns. Ever after Kant's critique of pure reason, such turns increasingly problematized the conditions of possibility of knowledge pertaining to the *subject* of knowledge rather than merely its objects. Historical and psychoanalytical, philosophical and sociological, feminist and decolonial scholarship has intensified doubts about the aspirational universality, objectivity, neutrality, and innocence of Enlightenment's celebrated reason. Especially the diverse criticisms often cited as "critical theory" with their analysis of historical and contextual contingency and implicit power dynamics can be seen as constituting an epistemic paradigm shift: the most rigorous investigation was no longer seen as the one which operates according to strict standards of logical coherence, but the one which takes into account how the construction of knowledge (including its critical meta-analysis) is informed by contextual, historical, cultural, political, embodied circumstances.

Both types, in their own ways, are responsive to the epistemic requirements their respective contexts afford, while obviously not being completely determined by them. Speaking in different idioms and wrestling with different sets of concerns as they are, we might, then, read Systematic and Constructive Theology as epistemologically incommensurable. Alternatively, however, we might also choose to read both Systematic Theology and Constructive Theology as fundamentally concerned with a similar, and truly theological task: the old task of laying out what ought to be said about the relations between God, the world, and the human being within it, while methodically accounting for the fundamental limitations of human abilities to do so, if according to different methodological paradigms.

In this task, Systematic Theology could welcome the Constructive Theologian as indeed *constructively* pushing for a "better,"[6] i.e., more rigorous, more self-critical, and maybe even more systematic, way of doing theology in light of new awakenings of critical consciousness. And if Systematic Theologians do not allow ourselves to be blinded by our misplaced trust in our particular method, we might even recognize that these new awakenings in fact resonate with fundamentally *theological* insights about the twofold

---

[5] Cf. the excellent exposition–both historically and systematically–by Nicholas Rescher, *Cognitive Systematization: A Systems-Theoretic Approach to a Coherent Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979).

[6] "Better" will, unfortunately, have to remain a placeholder throughout this article. Minimally, it stands for reconciling to the best of our ability epistemological and theological insights, avoiding errors that are perceived as problematic, and conceiving a methodological framework that does justice to the subject of theology. Theological criteria of what is to count as "better" would have to be developed in greater length from the theological commitments in question themselves.

epistemic problem that makes theology even more problematic than other pursuits of knowledge in general.

Systemic sin

The two problems of theology

Theology has always had two fundamental problems: God, and the human being. These are problems *of* theology of course in the sense that these two typically frame the scope of the content or subject matter for theology to systematize. But more to the point, these are also problems *for* theology because both of them pose insurmountable epistemological obstacles. Divine ineffability on the one side and human finitude and sin on the other indicate that any realistic description of the task of theology has to come to terms with the fact that its primary object of knowledge is unknowable, and the primary subject of its enterprise is less than ideally positioned epistemologically, to say the least.

That God is a problem for theology, and an epistemological problem at that, has long been recognized by the theological tradition. The ineffability of God is not only a methodological condition, but also a deeply theological insight in its own right, a claim about who and what God is, and therefore not "just" a prolegomenon but a material content of theology. Rather than diminishing theological production, it may thus even be seen as having advanced theology's material development. The doctrine of God as a whole, and, to different degrees, the doctrines of revelation and incarnation in particular are also material outcomes of theology's experience in grappling with divine ineffability, coalescing into doctrine by way of analysis of the precise shape of the epistemological problem thus posed.

That the human being is a problem for theology, and an epistemological problem, is something we are still continuing to realize in increasing degrees. The insight into the problematicity of the human being is of course also a profoundly theological insight in itself. It, too, is therefore not only a prolegomenon of theology, but also part of its material content, especially in theological anthropology, as well as more broadly in the doctrines of creation, fall, and redemption, but most centrally: in hamartiology. These doctrines are therefore partially also the material outcome of theology's experience in grappling with its own human limitations in trying to do theology, coalescing into doctrine by way of analysis of the precise shape of the epistemological problem thus posed.

I propose that we can read historical criticism, criticism of religion, and different varieties of critical theory as deepening the problematization of theological epistemology on the side of the human subject, increasing the acute sense that humanity is fundamentally complicit in problematic knowledge production and constitutively unable to step out of such complicity. In fact, these criticisms have challenged epistemology more generally than merely for theology, since they problematize the epistemological subject rather than the object of theology and therefore also apply quite directly to other fields of inquiry. If in previous generations there seemed to be an epistemological disadvantage of theology, which it sought to remedy by way of fervent systematicity, we might even find ourselves,

much to everyone's surprise, in deeper solidarity once more with all human endeavors at understanding by virtue of these sweeping critiques.

The sin of theology

The theological tradition has always asserted that sin affects human beings in their totality, not exempting any faculty, corrupting the soul just as much as the flesh, the intellect just as much as the will or desire. Of course, most methodological reflection will openly concede the limited nature of theological insight and method and reflect on it. I.e., it will take into account the human finitude limiting the project of theology. But it is surprising how little reflection has been devoted to how the not only limited, but *fallen* condition of the intellect would implicate the work of the theologian, and what consequences to draw to account for such a condition.

A prominent figure who can be read as taking theology to task in this regard is the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. He levels a scathing criticism against the system-building work of theologians, calling even the best of all theology "a dubious and equivocal phenomenon," susceptible to "misunderstanding, deception, falsification and corruption."[7] Even and *especially* where theology gets it right, Barth claims, and is thus convinced of its possession of the truth, it turns the truth of God into an idol, a false God. Systematicity and the illusion of mastery and control it affords over the subject matter become one of Barth's main targets in this regard: "[The theologian] sets up a theoretical and practical system of truth. […] He is so active in the cause of truth that compared with him Jesus Christ the true Witness seems to be only a waif and bungler who must surely be glad that He has found a patron and advocate to support Him so skillfully and powerfully."[8] By way of systematization, Barth claims, theologians effectively put their own intellect above the reality of God. They thereby also conveniently domesticate and "nostrify" God's truth, putting it into a form that renders it bearable and comprehensible, manageable and executable. Barth goes so far as to call the "lie" that arrogating to oneself the possession of truth constitutes, the "the specifically Christian form of sin."[9]

It is important to note that what is described here as the sin of theology has nothing to do with getting it *wrong*, misapprehending or otherwise missing truth. Factual error as well as disagreement over what should count as truth, widespread but undramatic as they are, are simply implications of human finitude. Sin is a different category. Barth illustrates his treatment of sin as falsehood using Job's three friends and insists: What they *say* about God is not incorrect, in fact, it is the best any Systematic Theologian could do rationally. Yet what the friends *do* by the way they *wield* that truth over Job means that their very correct theology becomes in effect "the continuation, development and even the fulfillment of the

---

[7] Karl Barth, *The Church Dogmatics* IV,3 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), p. 376.

[8] Ibid., 436.

[9] Ibid., 374.

satanic assault"[10] with which Job is stricken! Precisely *by* maintaining that they speak God's truth to Job, and by insisting on possessing the theologically correct account of truth, the friends turn all such truth into falsehood because the way in which they use that truth does not correspond to its–arguably theologically correct–content. With the correctness of their theology, they also immunize themselves against the real, concrete, and existential demand in front of them, Job's wrestling with God.

Taking sin into account, systematically

Now, theological insight into divine ineffability as well as human finitude and sin have always translated into some version or other of self-critical relativizing of theology's truth claims. Classical theology has very successfully developed mechanisms to take into account the epistemological challenges posed by divine ineffability and human finitude in the doing of theology. For example, the *biblical canon* can be seen as an ingenious theological innovation to methodologically do justice to the precise shape of divine ineffability. Making sure never to overcome divine ineffability, it found God's word hidden in, with, and under these human words, perceived as themselves identical, if always only indirectly identical with divine revelation, both externally given and self-relativizing precisely by way of their own concrete materiality, intrinsic plurality, and lack of systematicity.

Similarly, the invention of *dogma,* i.e., theology based on examination and interpretation of creedal formulas within the ecumenical church, can be seen as a methodological device to deal with human finitude of understanding. While not overcoming human finitude, the external standard of dogma complements and enriches individual insight at least by situating the theologian in the broader conversation and negotiation of the ecumenical church in all its diachronous and synchronous splendor, alleviating theologians of the responsibility to account for their material, instead allowing them to treat it as an item of faith itself.

But maybe the advent of historical criticism, psychoanalysis, sociology of religion, and critical theory in all its breadth are confronting theology like never before with the Anselmian objection "nondum ponderasti quantum ponderis peccatum" (you have not yet considered how great the weight of sin is)! Systematic Theology, thus Constructive Theology's claim, has not yet sufficiently reckoned with *its own* sinful condition epistemologically and methodologically–or, to put it even more pointedly: Systematic Theology is neither sufficiently systematic *nor* sufficiently theological.

By unmasking pervasive unrecognized bias, complicity in power struggles, and self-delusion, Constructive Theology's critiques are allowing theology to realize how much it has still failed to take into account its inherent epistemological obstacles methodologically, and how much more self-critical it needs to become. Cognitive systematicity as a methodology of choice, in particular, becomes problematic not only due to the finitude of its scope–dealing with concepts and their cognitive contents, it fails to bring into view

---

[10] Ibid., 453.

material realities–but more pervasively due to the sinfulness of the human intellect, twisting reason and engendering structurally harmful effects for self, other, and world.

Again, understanding systematicity to be sinful is not the same as saying that "systems are bad." The theological category of sin is not moralistic, nor is it reducible to the intentions and values of the actors involved. Sin as an anthropological condition implies an existential and ontological ambivalence: that we will always find the bad in, with, and under the good, that human works are always twisted and have a tendency to further twist our relationship to our fellow human beings, the world, ourselves, and God. Even with the best of intentions and applying the best of human faculties, neither we nor the cognitive systems we produce will ever be "pure" or "innocent." Additionally, sin has epistemological significance in that it veils itself–which means that where we find ourselves most acutely under its dominion we are typically unable to gain insight into this fatal condition by ourselves.

The conclusion to be drawn from such recognition is *not* that it is hopeless to do theology at all, but that such hope does not come from ourselves. Only when confronted by the Other, only when confronted with the real possibility of a different world, do we gain insight into our sin as sin, and only *then* does the situation change.

From the perspectives of both history of science and theology, awakenings of consciousness push for conversion: a turning point, resulting in the undeniability and inescapability of radical transformation. There can be no falling back behind the critical insight once reached. Drawing on Petrella's earlier analysis, we might come to realize that in order for Systematic Theology to be saved from its self-induced "sanctioned ignorance,"[11] an epistemic conversion needs to take place in which Systematic Theology understands itself as being confronted with its own sinful condition by Constructive critique. Such critique can primarily be understood in terms of falsehood, while the other two faces of sin that Barth describes also become visible: hubris and sloth.

The hubris in our falsehood is confronted where it becomes visible that the procedural standards we have established cannot be equated with divine laws, nor the words we have produced with the incarnate word of God. We cannot exempt our own theological praxis and scholarly paradigms from standards of new critical insights. Systematic Theology needs to reckon with the way its systematicity feeds into its own hubris and temptation to elevate itself into the position of God as synoptic viewer and arbiter of truth. Taking its own hubris into account, Systematic Theology needs to recognize in the voice of the marginalized other the voice of the "true witness," calling out theologian's conceit and arrogance and inviting us to repent and convert to a newly found epistemic solidarity.

The sloth in our falsehood is confronted where it becomes visible that the self-immunizing responses harbor a resistance against taking up the disconcerting and demanding freedom offered us, a lagging behind the insight of grace, instead complacently perpetuating our misery. Taking its own sloth into account, Systematic Theology needs to recognize that its

---

[11] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA.; London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 2.

investment in well-ordered systems fulfills important stabilizing functions but also shields itself against the freedom and liberation promised by the word of God. Taking its own sloth into account, Systematic Theology needs to recognize that its calling is to witness to God's freedom and live up to it by furthering human liberation from our self-imposed immaturity.

Systematic Theology is already a critical and self-critical endeavor that points to divine ineffability and the finitude of human understanding: Why not take seriously that theological insights into human fallenness and sin would also and especially pertain to its own work, making it potentially complicit in communicative structures that systematically undermine trust, destroy the ability to love and be loved, and deprive of hope?[12] Constructive epistemic paradigms flesh out concretely the conditions under which human knowledge construction (including theology) operates, criticizing objective rationality from insights into historical contingency and the embodied conditions of knowledge construction, its contextual dependence and communal testimonial negotiation, as well as, crucially, the play of power in all of these. They do not invalidate human rationality and abstract reasoning, but show it its place, its possibilities as well as its limitations, within a broader horizon of factors that play into the construction of knowledge. For theological reasons, then, Systematic Theology would need to further develop its own instrumentarium of methodological and procedural self-criticism in order to take the theological insight into sin into account more systematically.

As a framework for doing so, I propose to turn to the semantic field Systematic and Constructive Theology share–namely, that of architecture and design. Reconceiving theology's work as *conceptual design* is a way to do justice *methodologically* to the distinct faith claims it upholds: divine ineffability and human sinfulness. Not only what theology *says* but also what theology *does*, then, has to reflect adequately theology's insights about God, the world, and the human being. I propose to think about the effects of theology in terms of the affordances of doctrine.. Critical and constructive feedback-loops that take into account the practical use and epistemic functioning of theology then become part and parcel of our systematically constructive work. The ensuing natural conjunction of dogmatic work as conceptual design with an ethics of its doctrinal affordances could also give new meaning to the old understanding of Systematic Theology as comprising both dogmatics and ethics in a mutually transinformative[13] manner.

---

[12] Cf. again Sigrid Brandt, "Sünde: Ein Definitionsversuch", in *Sünde*, ed. Sigrid Brandt, Marjorie Suchocki, Michael Welker, and Klaus Berger (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997), p. 13–34.

[13] The concept of transinformation is from Thomas Renkert's emerging *Diakonia–A Theology* project (Thomas Renkert, "Diakonia: Open Lab Reports", PubPub. https://diakonia.pubpub.org/openlabreports, n.d. provides work-in-progress insight).

Systematic Construction: Design matters

Theology as Conceptual Design

Theology's fully developed systematic form stands curiously at odds with the fact that *what Christian theology is about* has never been objective or systematic. What doctrines of revelation and grace, creation and election, incarnation and resurrection all reference is rather more particular than universal, concrete rather than abstract, contingent rather than necessary, rationally inexplicable rather than consonant with insights from science at large. Furthermore, doing theology has typically been a function of faith seeking understanding, i.e., marked by an insider, participatory perspective rather than objective, detached observation. These traits were serious liabilities vis-a-vis the aspired *scientia perfecta* of Eurocentric universal rationality: They were seen as putting faith in contradiction to reason, and Systematic Theology has been struggling hard over centuries to prove otherwise.

With the rise of social theory and critical epistemologies, in their critiques of abstract reason and attention to power dynamics, Systematic Theology's primary interlocutor and source of recognition staggers. Theology will only continue to stagger with it as long as it understands itself as absolutely dependent on this interlocutor. Otherwise, theology might just have been given a historic opportunity to reorient itself. Constructive Theology's critiques can help to disidentify theology from the paradigm of Eurocentric rationality. And no longer does such disentangling have to be equated with giving up any and all standards of intellectual accountability and quality control. We are free to recognize that fundamental theological commitments are in fact much more congenial with the critical standards developed by this new epistemic paradigm than they were with the old one.

In the shift of interlocutors and ensuing awakening of critical consciousness, Systematic Theology and Constructive Theology might find themselves already inhabiting a shared semantic space. Their root metaphors of construction and system-building are those of architectural design. Rather than being fundamentally at odds with each other, systems are obviously constructive projects, and their de- and reconstruction is an endeavor that requires systematicity to do it responsibly. Of course, the adjectives are typically understood as metaphors. After all, design is traditionally oriented toward the realization of physical forms, while Systematic and Constructive Theology work on intellectual or cognitive formations. But already Thomas Aquinas insinuated that the term "architect," referring to someone who knows how things should be ordered and arranged, would be more appropriately applied to a philosopher than to a builder.[14] Nicholas Rescher's analysis of cognitive systematization points to the "amphibious" tendency of crossing between cognitive and material realms, allowing us to expand the metaphorical use of architectural semantics to the intellectual application as well. Rescher himself proposes that cognitive systems are "a 'design for knowing,' and system building is preeminently a

---

[14] Quoted in Rescher, *Cognitive Systematization,* p. 21 n. 28.

problem of rational design."[15] With the increasing development of informational and computational systems design, the boundaries between metaphoric and literal use have become even more porous. But pivotally, Constructive Theologies have time and again demonstrated how the disjunction of intellectual/spiritual and material/physical worlds is itself part of the self-concealment of how systems work. Cognitive systematization, then, does not only form ideas; it shapes and is shaped by the spaces we inhabit, the way we build relationships, and how we order movement and exchange.

With the rise of informatics on the one hand and constructivism on the other, even theology's old guiding discipline of philosophy is beginning to think less in terms of observation and propositional representation of reality, and more in terms of *conceptual design*. The Italian philosopher of information and digital ethics, Luciano Floridi has been pioneering such a proposal.[16] Philosophy, after all, has to grapple almost as much as theology with the impossibility of demonstrating its truth claims by way of correspondence to external realities. Floridi recognizes that, "Philosophical questions are ultimate but not absolute questions, which are not answerable empirically or mathematically, but are open to informed and rational disagreement. The best way to address them is by developing philosophy as conceptual design, and this requires its own logic."[17]

By conceptual design, Floridi envisions a kind of "semantic information modeling" which is "consistent with creative forms of reasoning, with the identification and exploitation of constraints and affordances, and hence the satisfaction of requirements."[18] In terms of such requirements, Floridi does not dismiss or replace earlier cognitive standards, but complements them and shifts the emphasis in terms of the work they do. Floridi proposes to add a third logic to Kantian transcendental logics and Hegelian dialectical logics, which are concerned with a system's (past) conditions of possibility and (present) conditions of in/stability, respectively. This third logic is the "design logic of future conditions of feasibility of a system."[19] Such a new philosophical self-understanding is thus by no means naive or anti-rational, or even necessarily anti-systematic. Rather, it recognizes that systematicity is in itself insufficient. At the end of the day, Floridi notes, "the essence of

---

[15] Ibid., p. 14.

[16] See esp.: Luciano Floridi, "The Logic of Design as a Conceptual Logic of Information", *Minds and Machines* 27.3 (2017): 495–519, https://doi.org/\url{10.1007/s11023-017-9438-1; Floridi, "What a Maker's Knowledge Could Be," *Synthese* 195.1 (2018): 465–81, https://doi.org/\url{10.1007/s11229-016-1232-8; Floridi, *The Logic of Information: A Theory of Philosophy as Conceptual Design*, 1st edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[17] Floridi, *The Logic of Information*, p. 205.

[18] Ibid., 195.

[19] Ibid., 204.

philosophy is not logic, but design. Logic is only a second-best compromise, in the absence of design."[20]

In contradistinction to the *mimetic* understanding of knowledge that dominated Western epistemologies, conceptual design draws on the *poietic* quality of "maker's knowledge."[21] Floridi returns to the neglected half of the Platonic distinction. While later generations saw the practically grounded, artisanal, and creative "maker's knowledge" as epistemologically inferior to the detached, "objective," theoretic knowledge of the observer, originally, "maker's knowledge" had only been dismissed because–while epistemologically superior!–it may ultimately only be ascribed to the one true maker: God. As human beings, our "making" can at best be the imitation and redesign of given materials. In an age where human beings are redesigning their natural and cultural environments as never before, Floridi returns to the insight that "manufacturing means the same as learning–i.e., acquiring, producing, and passing on information"[22]–and that at the same time, the conceptual shaping of knowledge itself is a constructive enterprise.

Just like theology, design theory is highly conscious of the fact that it does not itself create, but with Plato's valuation of poietic knowledge it understands that material engagement affords a different kind of knowledge than mere observation. Design is not constructive in the sense of the relativist caricature that things could be randomly made up. Design does not make things up. It works with given materials according to requirements that orient and constrain its task. Its constructive potential is in actively shaping them in the best possible way for their intended purpose.

A theologian, too, is a "maker" in Plato's sense: not the one true creator, but the one who through engagement of material realities comes to understand them better and more truly. In the Christian tradition, knowledge of God has typically had such a practical meaning as well, afforded by prayer and study, community engagement and spiritual experiences. Might we be so bold as to suggest that by conceptually redesigning theological concepts in relation to their actual use, theological praxis as conceptual poiesis might deepen our understanding of God and, aspirationally, facilitate a use of theology that will be a truer witness to its content?

Not for nothing have great theological works in history been likened to *cathedrals*. The architectural image combines references to Systematic Theology's impressive logic, stunning aesthetics, and practical religious purpose. Systems develop knowledge architectonically, with principles that have as much regard for beauty as they have for truth, and as much regard for function as they have for form. Not only is there an architectonic and aesthetic imagery at work in Systematic Theology, it is also quite

---

[20] Ibid., 205.

[21] Floridi, "What a Maker's Knowledge Could Be".

[22] Vilém Flusser, *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design* (London: Reaktion, 1999), p. 50.

obviously oriented by and to the religious life of a faith community; it is, as Barth emphasized, "a function of the church."[23] The mathematical precision and design acumen that go into the building of a cathedral serve a purpose: reflecting in the perfection of the structure the glory of God, and, even so, practically orienting Christian life, directing believers to worship.

Like design theory, Systematic Theology already understands itself as ordering and structuring given materials according to a purpose. But beyond that, design theory additionally thinks about this ordering in terms of its material effects, working consciously toward desired outcomes and attending to unintended consequences as feedback prompts redesign. Like design theory, Systematic Theology already works on putting ideas in right relationship to each other. But beyond that, design theory additionally makes the way users interact with the conceptual objects an intrinsic part of its responsibility and accountability.

Drawing on the resonances with design theory, I propose to actively interpret theology's task as the systematic and constructive work of conceptual design and include in its standards not only internal architectural structuring of concepts and cognitive criteria of cohesion and coherence, but also the practical effects and uses of doctrine, its affordances and their ethics.

Design creates patterns that allow for, invite, or discourage use, that make objects accessible or inaccessible, helpful or harmful for particular uses and particular users. It is the purposeful process of fitting a form to an environment, in partial control and partial dependence on both ends.[24] Good design, then, is form that is well-fitted to its environment *and* to its purpose, while drawing out constructively and creatively the potentials of its material.

If design is, as we said, a poietic process, then that means that design is not creation, design is always redesign. Design works with and on given materials, and attunement to their qualities and characteristics is an important element of craftpersonship. Good design knows that material is not inert matter that can be shaped and molded according to will. Materials have a character of their own, and good design (including theological one) will be attentive to the specific quality of its materials, their substance, their history, their previous use, their structure, their possibilities and their breaking points, attentive to what intentions and purposes they lend themselves to.

Just like design, theology does not start in empty air, but with given material and objectives. All theology is the reworking of theology found. Among its given material we find the community of believers and, with it, traditions: religious experiences of people past and present in their cultural expressions, including creeds and confessional statements,

---

[23] Karl Barth, *The Church Dogmatics* I,1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), p. 1.

[24] Cf. Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

liturgical and diaconic practice, as well as Holy scripture, and hopefully, somewhere in, with, and under it all: witnesses to historic, collective and individual encounters with God and their historical resonances. Theology will be accountable for its use of such materials in its conceptual design. In theology as well, a good designer demonstrates their craftpersonship by working *with* their material rather than against it.

Theologians will aspire to have our designs not merely reflect our own intentions, experiences, and interests. This is true of design in general as well, where a designer will typically not be able to invent uses randomly or artificially. Instead, good designers will be attentive to the dynamics of the particular environment they are forming the materials *for,* and pick up on its requirements. Design requires careful observation of what has happened before in given environments to understand what will happen as a consequence of even minute design changes.

Precisely in order to achieve its purpose, design will have to be user-centered and make usability its prime goal.[25] As design seeks to intervene in and change its environment according to specific intentions and requirements, it will be putting effort into establishing a natural fit between the intended use and the established form. Objects have to be fitted so that users are naturally and easily able to use them, rather than having to accommodate and compromise (or even just having to think too hard!) in order to be able to access their use. The demand of fit, however, does not indicate in any way that design is randomly "determined" by contextual demands. Quite the contrary, design is always an active response to such contextual environment, materially altering the environment in order to reorient behavior. The most "natural" fit can only be achieved through an elaborate feedback loop, trial and error processes, and most importantly, a communication between designer and user in which misfits between form and context are excised. In this procedural sense as well, design is always re-design.

Even as design is systematic, coherent, and corresponds to external realities, it effects an interesting shift regarding the criteria of assessment. With regard, for example, to the architectural design that is a house, the question of whether the house is "true" would seem almost nonsensical (except if it might be inquiring about its factual existence?). At best, we might respond: "True to what?" The fact that houses can be designed differently should not detract from the fact that there are real criteria according to which the quality of their design can be assessed.

Of course coherence will remain a basic requirement in architecture, for both pragmatic and aesthetic reasons. Design is fundamentally systematic in this way: If there is not enough coherence between the different parts, then the whole structure collapses. But coherence becomes a very minimal requirement, not by any means sufficient to make a house a *good* house. A range of aesthetic, pragmatic, and ethical criteria would be employed, to establish a broader understanding of *adaequatio ad rem* than an aspired

---

[25] Cf. Donald A. Norman and Stephen W. Draper, *User Centered System Design: New Perspectives on Human-Computer Interaction* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986).

correspondence to an ideal or real object. Questions of its projected purpose and its actual use come into play. What is the house *for*? How will it, how should it structure the lives of the people who live in it? How will it inform their routines, their emotions, their interactions? How will it connect them or keep them apart? Will it instill in them more productivity or allow them to rest? To what kinds of bodies does it provide access, and whom and what does it keep out? Thus, while it may be impossible or nonsensical to establish the truth of a house, or to build the one perfect house, it is arguably much more possible to establish the *falsehood* of a house. We might ask: Where does the architectural design not *do its job* properly? How does the actual use of the house convict the lofty idea of falsehood? And where does the built environment perpetuate or engender dynamics that are ethically questionable?

Even in Rescher's treatment of cognitive systems at the highest level of abstraction, he had pointed out that their assessment could not be separated from their use, and that assessment criteria regarding the "intellectual consistency" of cognitive systematization needed to be complemented by feedback loops regarding their "pragmatic efficacy." While both critical criteria are indispensable, he maintained, it is the latter that should be the "final arbiter of adequacy."[26] We might say that in conceptual design, a system is justifiable most centrally by its use–and less by the intentions of its designers or the very clever thought-out principles according to which they planned it. It is the use to which it is put–whether foreseen or unforeseen by the designers–that will establish what meaning the system has, what truth it reflects, what insights it corresponds to–in short, its *adaequatio ad rem*.

Developing a theological ethics of architectural design, Wes Willison muses, "if the designed environment is so powerful in setting up horizons of availability and interface, might it also work as a prison, trapping us in particular epistemes or regimes of power that fundamentally point us *away* from the flourishing of the Kingdom of God?"[27] While Willison is concerned with the ambitious project of actual physical design informed by theological insights and purposes, his question does resonate with our attempt to understand theology as conceptual design. Arguably, this is the theological contention we see Constructive Theology raising: It draws out the ways in which the conceptual design of Systematic Theology points people effectively *away* from the theological truths it purports to reflect.

If theology forms a symbolic and intellectual habitat for people to live their lives in, we ought to think of its design in terms of the kinds of practice, action, and posture which it makes possible, probable, and natural. Theological frameworks are spaces and dwelling places which we inhabit, and theological concepts are objects with which we live and which we use and wield in specific ways. Their *meaning* is not only in their referential value, but

---

[26] Rescher, *Cognitive Systematization*, pp. 102–3.

[27] Wes Willison, "Patterns of the Kingdom: Theology, Design, and Architecture", Master's Thesis (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2019), p. 24.

also in their use.[28] Just as in architectural design, it becomes apparent that systematic coherence is not sufficient as a standard for "good design." Rescher points out that even the intellectual pursuit of systematicity raises the question, "*quis custodiet* [*custodes*, i.e. who watches the watchmen]? When systematization is the quality-control standard of our claims to our knowledge, how are our systematizing methods themselves to be monitored?"[29] Intellectual adequacy can be devised and monitored internally, but the pragmatic validation in particular demands external, repetitive feedback loops in close communication with the *users* of theology, structured in processes of trial and error.[30] This is where the concept of affordances becomes central.

The affordances of doctrine

An affordance, according to Don Norman who popularized the concept, is "a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used."[31] Design choices are never neutral; they always *do* something or other. They facilitate certain kinds of use more than others, make some course of actions more plausible than others, enable some bodies more than others. Affordances are the perceived action possibilities of an object, features of the design that suggest to the potential user how the object can be interacted with and to what ends it can be used.

In this function, Norman teaches us, affordances are typically invisible–as long as they work. The power of affordances in fact is that they make the use of an object seem natural and self-evident. We do not need to consciously engage the object, we do not need to know the intentions of the designer, and we do not need to understand the philosophy or aesthetic theory behind it to use it. Affordances make up the implicit pedagogy of the designed object, and they constitute the value and meaning of the object, produced by way of its design.

James Gibson points out that the theory of affordances thus marks "a radical departure from existing theories of value and meaning." Firstly, it demonstrates that objects are always already perceived as being "value-rich" rather than "value-free." Secondly, "[a]ny

---

[28] Such a conception of meaning has more generally been proposed in the philosophy of language by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who argues that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language," thereby pragmatically bridging questions of truth and use (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), p. 43).

[29] Rescher, *Cognitive Systematization*, p. 91.

[30] Ibid., 106.

[31] Donald A. Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things* (London: MIT, 1998), p. 11.

substance, any surface, any layout has some affordance for benefit or injury to someone."[32] The theory of affordances indicates that the way an object is used and what meaning it acquires in the world is not accidental or secondary to its design, but is what constitutes that design. The reference to benefit or injury is crucial: Design thus becomes not only concerned with pedagogy, but with ethics.

At the same time, affordances also clarify that the use of things is not something the designer can conclusively determine in advance. Affordances do not constitute self-contained qualities of the object thus designed. They pertain to the relationship between the designed object and the person who interacts with it. Affordances are thus projected by the designer, but also discovered along the way by those who use the object (or fail trying). This is when they typically become visible: when they *do not work* or do not work *for us*. Norman developed the concept of affordances in the context of his famous study of doors ("Norman doors"). Centrally, he pointed out that when different people regularly make the same "mistakes" in the same environment of objects, perhaps we should think of them in terms of design failure and hold the designer rather than the user accountable. I.e., a good designer will take into account how people "tick," and design a door in such a way that people are subtly prompted to automatically use it as intended, e.g., cued by a bar to push or by a handle to pull.

The perception-based nature of affordances means that the experience of the user will become more central for the assessment of a design than the intentions of the designer. If the designer intends for this house to allow for community, but people find that the layout of the rooms space them in a way that they cannot meaningfully interact with each other, then it is not the designer's job to provide elaborate manuals to tell people how they can use the thus designed space to interact, after all. Instead, the designer needs to go back and redesign the house. While designers cannot possibly anticipate all the different forces of the environment that will act upon their designed form, good designers will spend much time in observation, dedicating themselves to critical and creative reflection about the subtle clues their design sends or fails to send, and they will be ready to go back again and revise, until their design lends itself to the envisioned use, or stands corrected to better use.

Further, the relational character of affordances not only speak to incongruities between intended and factual use, but also between intended and factual user. Design is a process of communication, and as in every act of communication, it is directed to someone. A person can be addressed by a design, and the design will tell the world something about the intended user. It will be enabling people with certain characteristics to use it while denying access to and disabling others.[33] This insight further clarifies our view of what happens when designs do not work: "Misfits" are not the bodies who fail to conform to the designed environment, "misfits" are produced by the design when it "does not sustain the shape and

---

[32] James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Dallas; London: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), p. 140.

[33] Cf. Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

function of the body that enters it."[34] Not needing to understand an affordance is a privilege. However, people for whom a design does not work typically have greater insight into how an object *factually* works than those to whom it seems natural: "Those who are not quite at home–in a body, a discipline, a world–have much to teach us about how things are built."[35]

Sarah Ahmed has coined the term "queer use" for the fact that "things can be used in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended."[36] Queer use can simply *happen* and indicate a failure of design, or it can mark an active resistance to its intended uses. As a refusal to use a design according to the intentions of the designer, it can be strategically employed "to make use audible, to listen to use, to bring to the front what ordinarily recedes into the background"[37]–the implicit assumptions of the design, its incongruity, its harmful effects. As theological designers, we would do well to listen to those who tell us about the uses our designs afford and fail to afford, rather than chiding or dismissing them for their lack of understanding and attunement to our logics and directing them back to the manual.

Queer use and theological *adaequatio ad rem*

Theology *de facto* already functions as conceptual design, but consciously and deliberately adopting such a framework for our self-understanding would allow us to take seriously a variety of requirements that it brings into view–requirements which go beyond cognitive systematization and its justification of faith vis-a-vis reason, requirements whose consideration would arguably enhance the quality of theological work, by intellectual as much as by ethical and by scholarly as much as by theological standards.

Centrally, a theology that understands itself as conceptual design needs to systematically take up the constructive questions about material effects and implicit structural dynamics. It will be insufficient if we only take into consideration if and how what we say about God and the world is consistent in and of itself, in continuity with scripture and strands of the tradition we care about, as well as largely compatible with insights from other sciences: We also have to take into consideration what affordances the so designed pieces of theology offer.

---

[34] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "The Story of My Work: How I Became Disabled", *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34 (2014); cf. also Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept", *Hypatia* 26.3 (2011): 591–609, https://doi.org/\url{10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01206.x}.

[35] Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham / London: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 19.

[36] Ibid., 199.

[37] Ibid., 198.

The *adaequatio intellectus ad rem* sought here is not the technical correspondence of bygone theories of truth, but it does aim at conceptual concordance with material realities and real-life effects in what we might name theologically as a *testimonial correspondence*: Does what our theology *does* correspond to what our theology *says*, and does their correspondence in turn reflect that *of which* it speaks? What does our theology *do* in the lives of people, what uses does it afford, whom does it enable to do what, what kinds of interactions does it engender, how does it shape our relationships to self, other, world, and God, how does it direct our actions and behaviors, and so on. All of these queries will themselves be governed by the theological question: Whether and how these uses and material effects reflect and correspond to the theological commitments we claim to hold. The witness does not need to become identical with what it witnesses to–in fact, it needs to remain recognizable in its non-identity–but the witness has to point to and adequately reflect the nature of that to which it witnesses.

Such an understanding of theological work would demand that we develop robustly *theological* accounts of, and criteria for, the "use" of theology. If we think about theological concepts as designed objects, we might ask: What is the practical purpose of theology, and how would we assess its effectiveness? What effects in the lives of people and communities should it engender? What is it that our doctrinal designs are meant to communicate? What actions and behaviors, perceptions and habits should they afford? What are good uses of theology, and can we develop methodological standards and procedures to discern between theologically non-adequate and theologically adequate uses? And lest some would be tempted to dismiss such questions as "merely" ethical or pastoral, as Systematic Theologians are sometimes rumored to do, let me put them in even more unmistakably theological terms: What do the uses afforded by theology say about who God is, about the reality of the human being *coram deo*, and about what right relationship between God, world, other, and self would look like? What practical effects and uses of theology would best *reflect* and *witness to* who we claim God to be?

Such an understanding ties back to a theological insight about knowledge of God, as well: That knowledge of God can never be reduced to knowledge *about* God. It does not merely exhibit an intellectual or noetic quality, but it in itself is a practice and a relationship that has transformative effects for the subject of such knowledge, which will affect all areas of their life. We have too long translated such an insight into the neatly compartmentalized disciplines of dogmatics, understood as concerned with the noetic content or meaning of the faith, and ethics, understood as concerned with its corresponding life forms. Criteria for a Christian life have to comprise the practice of theology.

Once we take these questions seriously as requirements of theological design and seek to address them as part of its task, we would realize that in order to design *well* by any standards, we will be dependent on the insight of those who have to live in the house we build. We would need to attend to those who tell us that our structures are *inhospitable* at best and *uninhabitable* at worst because our windows do not allow for the circulation of air, our doors will not let the Spirit enter, and the staircase is not wheelchair-accessible. Or, to put it in terms of theological virtues: We would need to attend to those who tell us that our theology structurally causes despair rather than hope, undermines the building of trust and

community, and twists relationships into destructive and harmful rather than loving dynamics.

We would realize in particular how much we are in need of the critical feedback of alleged "outsiders" and "misfits"–those whom we did not take into account in our doctrinal design and whose bodies and lives we fail by it, who find no use in it, and who are all but disenabled by it. As in architecture, the interactions of those who have not read the manual with our theological conceptual design would become a critical litmus test of what it is that our designs are *actually* doing and whether those effects reflect adequately what the design theorizes itself to mean. If, for example, Black women repeatedly run into the doctrine of atonement and find their own suffering theologically perpetuated and intensified rather than done away with, even as Systematic Theologians insist that the doctrine ought to give them comfort and hope, then, maybe the doctrinal design for all its good intentions does not afford them such hope. If elaborate instructions and mental gymnastics are required to understand how we speak of God as male without implying that the male is God, but women time and again find that these formulas are forcing them into submission to masculinity, then, maybe the doctrinal design does not afford them the esteem it claims to have for them. If God's love is wielded as a device to lash out against gay and trans people until it *effectively* drives them into suicide, then, maybe the doctrinal design does not, in fact, communicate such love.

The *de facto* uses to which theology is being put in the world and the effects it engenders could no longer be dismissed as "user error" or allow the theologian to feel intellectually or morally superior, but would come back to haunt us as failures of theological design.

Rather than blaming, dismissing, or killing the messenger, we would have to take responsibility for our design failures. The designer, not the user, would primarily be held accountable for the "misuse," especially where it is recurrent and patterned around structural oversights. We could see the "queer use" of doctrine sometimes performed by Constructive Theologies, i.e. uses not intended by the designer, as a practice test, an assessment of its efficacy, and potentially, a prompt toward a process of revision and redesign, in order to remedy emergent misfits between the conceptual objects we design, their purpose, and the uses they afford. Rather than being perceived as a misunderstanding or even irritation, the queer use Constructive Theologies might make of doctrinal designs would help Systematic Theology to *do its job better*, discern with greater clarity what it is factually witnessing to and what it might want to witness to instead, thus prompting it to better understanding and to becoming a truer witness.

It is important to note, however, that queer use does more than feed back into the work of the system, stabilizing it in the constructive use of its criticism. For starters, it can pry open conceptual systems to better accommodate the needs of previously unintended users, or even to deliberately make room for different kinds of uses rather than narrowly prescribing one: "Buildings can be built with queer uses in mind, which is to say, with a commitment to a principle that not all uses could or even should be foreseen."[38] The

[38] Ibid., 200.

theologian might finally come to suspect that maybe a (physical or doctrinal) cathedral is not the only and maybe not even the most *adequate* structure to reflect who God is; and that a more flexible and temporal, functional and versatile structure–more like a nomadic shelter–might provide a resting place more befitting the wandering people of a wandering God.

Further, queer use does not only point to lack in fit, it can also open up discussion about the theological validity of the purposes that oriented the design. It exposes the irredeemable but also to some extent self-defeating powers at work in any systematic construction, pointing to its cracks in order to allow some light and fresh air to get in. Queer use points to the lasting, and irredeemably sinful nature of the human construction, and in eschatologically-grounded resistance marks the refusal of "getting used to it"–i.e., to the fact that the way systems work is by systematic exclusion. It is the defiant insistence against all experience that "it is possible for those deemed strangers or foreigners to take up residence in spaces that have been assumed as belonging to others, as being for others to use."[39]

In this sense, "queer use is just a start"[40] and continues to point beyond itself, and beyond the systems and structures it temporarily inhabits and makes use of, to realities which cannot be encompassed by any system, structure, or design. This discrepancy in and of itself marks a theological stance that should not be "resolved" prematurely. A theological theory of conceptual design would, then, also help us overcome the urge to reduce the "queer use" we see Constructive Theologies making of doctrinal designs to those interventions' *usefulness* for our systemic purposes, i.e., to their structural functions for the consolidation and efficiency of our conceptual systems and their top-down design. We might instead recognize in "queer uses" acts of creative redesign of their own, and sources of genuine theological insight rather than mere irritations. We would then do well not to "quench the Spirit" (1 Thess 5:19), who notoriously transcends and transforms, breaking open and using for unforeseen purposes, human schemes and designs. After all, the reality of real human beings and the reality of God will never fit into neat categories nor be exhausted by whatever current use we are able to attribute to them. Queer use sounds the reminder that God will always remain a misfit in any system, and that this stubborn and vexing reality, at the end of the day, is what grounds our freedom and our hope.

---

[39] Ibid., 228.

[40] Ibid., 198.