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Developing a Theologically Self-Reflexive Critique with Comparative Theologians and the Sociological Analysis of Pierre Bourdieu

Colby Dickinson

Abstract. — In this article I attempt to locate productive foundations for a critical theological methodology through engaging with both the inherently critical nature of comparative theology alongside the sociological, self-reflexive analysis of Pierre Bourdieu. I turn, first, to comparative theology because it is a field with a heightened sensibility for how self-reflexive critique functions within a theological context, as it assumes that both sides in any conversation maintain the possibility of re-examining their own premises and foundations. I turn, second, to the work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu because it is his analysis of symbolic power that provides an examination of self-reflexive structures of understanding that might further assist theologians, comparative or not, to take up a critical theology from within the established traditions that constitute the field of theology proper. My argument is that theology has been beholden for far too long, centuries in fact, to non self-reflexive structures of inquiry. From our current vantage point, only a self-reflexive, critical theology can properly endeavor to be a theological investigation, as this is the only way to understand the outplaying of the confessional content of the theological tradition.

Prelude

From the commentaries of Saint John of Ávila on the Psalms, we hear this spiritual advice: “This is the order to follow with regard to the psalm’s command to see: first, look at yourself; then at God; and then at your neighbor.”¹ Sin, of course, and as Saint John notes, clouds any attempt at gaining ‘self-knowledge’, and can only be overcome by addressing not just one’s past sins, but those committed every day.²

1. John of Ávila, *Audi, filia – Listen, O Daughter*, trans. Joan Frances Gormley (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 175.

2. *Ibid.*, 186.

A responsibility to the present is born within this line of sight. Examining the self, however, as Saint John also sees, can often lead to “great sadness, distrust, and faint heartedness.”³ The cost of self-reflexive knowledge is measured by the loss of a certain security, in happiness, in trust and in ‘strong heartedness’. But there is no other way to progress in the spiritual life; of this truth many saints are certain. Within the life called Christian, a turn to Christ becomes a necessary movement of abiding in faith, and the first step can be found in the penance undertaken for one’s sins.⁴

What Saint John of Ávila points the believer toward is no less a paradigm for the spiritual life than it is for the theological understanding. As Carl Raschke has described the context in which we are living theologically, we need a critical, or what I am calling a self-reflexive, theology more than ever in our current global order.⁵ Yet such a perspective is often noticeably lacking, leading theologians to make numerous alliances with political ideologies that not only threaten the basis of any ecclesial community, but also inhibit Christians from engaging with, as Saint John described it, the necessary first step in one’s spiritual maturation: recognizing the sin that lies, either active or latent, within one’s self-knowledge.

We have often heard it said that Jesus was highly critical of the powers that be, of those structures and institutions in which he was raised and in which he both lived his life and established his ministry. As such, it is perhaps not much of a stretch to suggest that he promoted what many would consider to be a healthily self-critical understanding of his religious identity. I do not mean to suggest that Jesus himself was somehow flawed or sinful and so needed to be critiqued for an errant perspective of himself; rather, I suggest that he seems to have deliberately placed an emphasis on cleaning up his *own* (i.e. his Father’s) house (as a form of self-identification) and to have adapted his actions accordingly based on a critical reflection of those within his own religious tradition. Theologically, the very centrality of the practice (the *sacrament* even) of confessing one’s own sin, but also as they are somehow situated structurally within the history of Christianity, would seem to indicate that the inherent role of self-critique within Christianity is a central principle in living one’s life of faith. It is illustrated too by those

3. John of Ávila, *Audi, filia*, 199.

4. *Ibid.*, 210.

5. Carl A. Raschke, *Critical Theology: Introducing an Agenda for an Age of Global Crisis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

provocative readings of scripture that allow us to see how even Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, for example, probed the depths of God's own being, demonstrating some level of self-awareness as a form of self-reflexive critique. At the very least, there is certainly a profound and complex relation to the self that Christianity calls for in asking people to die to themselves (e.g. Romans 6:6) that promotes a robust cause for self-examination, as Kierkegaard once put it.⁶

The point of departure for any genuine confession of one's complicity in sinful structures becomes more difficult to establish, however, when we stop to consider what it means to be self-reflexively aware in explicitly theological terms. That is, how exactly do we form and maintain what could be called a self-reflexive (critical) theology? Unfortunately, the history of theology tells us that it is no easier to perform such a critique in theological terms than it is for any other discipline, though the seeds for self-examination should perhaps be that much easier to access given the stories and practices within both scripture and tradition that call theologians to take account of their words and actions so that they might be set upon the right path.

In what follows I attempt to locate productive foundations for a critical theological methodology through engaging with both the inherently critical nature of comparative theology alongside the sociological, self-reflexive analysis of Pierre Bourdieu. My argument is essentially that theology has been beholden for far too long, centuries in fact, to non self-reflexive structures of inquiry – paths that allowed the theologian to abstract themselves from the arguments they were making. Because of this, and from our current vantage point, only a self-reflexive theology can properly be a *theological* investigation, as this is the only way to understand the outplaying of the confessional content of the theological tradition, as noted in the prelude above. Put simply, theology needs to become more attentive to exactly how it is to manifest a particular form of self-critique in the modern period beyond merely capitulating to a particular form of abstracted rationality. Indeed, as I hope to show, our access to something like grace might just depend on this movement toward greater self-awareness. In pursuit of a self-critical theology, and in league with numerous contextual theologies, though here proceeding solely from comparative theological and sociological points of view, I believe theologians must not shy away from those social, political and philosophical analyses that could better inform the field of theology

6. Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

and its practices in order to more accurately observe and critique its all too frequently uncontested methods and models.⁷

As will soon unfold, I turn first to comparative theology in this context because it is a field with a heightened sensibility for how self-reflexive critique functions within a theological context, as it assumes that both sides in any conversation maintain the possibility of re-examining their own premises and foundations. I turn, second, to the work of Pierre Bourdieu because it is his sociological analysis of symbolic power that provides an examination of self-reflexive structures of understanding that might further assist theologians, comparative or not, to take up a critical theology from within the established traditions that constitute the field of theology proper.

Comparative Theology as Self-reflexive Theological Praxis

Because my approach to the formation of a self-reflexive model for theological inquiry is inherently comparative (in this instance explicitly involving political, social, philosophical and cultural methods of critique), I want to begin my assessment of the ‘rubble’ of theology – a term I borrow from Peter Admirand who utilizes the term in his survey of the fragmented field of theology today⁸ – by turning to comparative theology. Though in many ways it is not the central focus of the present study, but rather a strong partner with what I am here undertaking, comparative theology, or a theological field that begins with the assumption that dialogue with what appears as ‘other’ has the power to alter one’s own foundations and beliefs, is instrumental for any critical theological undertaking. Since I want to inspect the ways in which theology can divest itself of power and privilege in order to flow more seamlessly into other academic fields, subfields and disciplines in general, I begin with a motion toward comparative theology because it is, among all theological fields, particularly and methodologically attentive to the porousness of theological inquiry in ways that previous theologies have not been. I find recent comparative approaches particularly helpful as

7. See Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology: Origins and Problems of Biblical Criticism in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1990).

8. Peter Admirand, *Amidst Mass Atrocity and the Rubble of Theology: Searching for a Viable Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012). This fragmented field of theology for Admirand stems, in part, from the many sources of contemporary theology (e.g. contextual, systematic, pastoral, biblical, liturgical, ethical and so forth).

they have the ability to incorporate political and social analysis as part of their elaboration of ever more creative methods and models for the articulation of theological insight.⁹ In this particular context, I want to make use of the work of the comparative theologian Hugh Nicholson before linking his work to a more robust depiction of the ‘rubble’ of theology that is left to us today and that lies underneath any truly critical theology – ‘rubble’ that might just, in the end, prove to be the only building blocks worth assembling into something we might find to be usable.

In short, comparative theology has offered theological inquiry on the whole an opportunity to delve into its own (revealed) foundations by not only entering into dialogue with other religious traditions, but by turning any insight gained through inter-religious dialogue back upon its own claims and beliefs, presenting the theologian engaged in such conversation with more than simply hermeneutical nuance. They are rather presented with the opportunity for self-transformation through the confession of their faith and their religious failings at the same time. To admit this possibility of transformation is at the same time, as I will discuss later more fully, to admit the inherently political elements embedded within already established theological doctrines and traditions. By starting from this premise, comparative theology allows its practitioners to put themselves ‘at risk’, so to speak, in order that personal and communal self-understanding might be a dynamic and transformative experience, not simply an academic conclusion.

What I find especially intriguing in Nicholson’s assemblage of the political and the theological in the service of comparative theology comes in the form of his tackling the issue of self-reflexiveness through an emphasis placed on the task of ‘denaturalizing’ as a contestation of currently existing political portraits of nature.¹⁰ By taking a different approach to the political uses of the belabored concept of the ‘natural’

9. See, for example, Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). I am particularly struck, as well, by the way in which interreligious dialogue can help fruitfully develop a more ‘vulnerable theology’, as it is termed by Marianne Moyaert in her *In Response to the Religious Other: Ricoeur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounters* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2014).

10. Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For similar thematics in his work, see his recent article “Social Identity Processes in the Development of Maximally Counterintuitive Theological Concepts: Consubstantiality and No-Self,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, 3 (2014): 736-770. See also Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 50-51.

in religion, he is able to carefully and critically subvert the ways in which identity itself is protected against all difference through its establishment as being itself 'natural'. He recognizes in this approach to 'nature' that this is the starting point one must begin with if one is to take seriously the already constructed boundaries and borders which are legitimated as 'natural' by those defined by them and who often, in turn, defend their existence.

Following closely the works of both Kathryn Tanner and Daniel Boyarin in particular, Nicholson presents a way for "faithfulness to the Word of God" to move "against the formation of sharp cultural boundaries,"¹¹ exposing not just the problematic divisions between religious identities and traditions, but also the highly problematic existence of disciplinary borders. Such insights progress, in fact, from the essence of Christian proclamation which sought to eradicate the existence of exclusivism. Going back to the ever problematic division between Jews and Christians, for example, he finds that: "[...] the doctrine of Jesus Christ as the Word of God is deeply implicated in the history of Jewish-Christian apologetics and thus inseparable from the issue of Christian boundary formation."¹² To think beyond the desire for such boundary formations means by implication having to go back to the *originary* impulse for identity itself and the way it is often 'grounded' in a point of 'origin' for a religious tradition.

Just what exactly constitutes *systematic* theology and what *inter-religious* dialogue becomes in this context somewhat of a moot point, as comparative theology engages both most readily. Perhaps the breakdown between these divisions is, in this sense, for the best, as this breakdown promotes a vulnerability that might actually enable theology to dialogue with other disciplines and other religions in ways it has never quite yet done. What is remarkably clear however, is that the turn that Nicholson takes, citing Tanner's work – and this is what I would like to highlight as an incisive movement into the inherently self-reflexive nature of theological inquiry – is one made toward the "differences *within* cultures as opposed to the differences *among* cultures."¹³ In short, and to borrow the language of Giorgio Agamben, who uses this phrase in the context of Pauline thought,¹⁴ we are presented with a 'division of division itself',

11. Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 89.

12. *Ibid.*, 90.

13. *Ibid.*, 95. This idea is borrowed from Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997).

14. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

a self-critical mechanism that divides from within the cultural divisions already present in our world. That is, the comparative approach that theology needs to learn to adapt, by this reading of things, is one that looks outward only from the difference *within* itself, not necessarily the difference external to it. Theology needs perhaps in this case *to die to itself before it can find new life*, as the Gospels and Paul's letters had phrased it, and no matter what such a thing may entail in the end for the future and practice of theology (especially in a comparative sense). Not only does such a move bring the contingent nature of these boundaries to light, it also allows us to critique theology's historically hegemonic engagements.¹⁵

For his part, Nicholson is able to immediately turn such an insight around, back on itself in fact, in order to stress the political elements at work *within* Christian constructions of the self before engaging in the essential tasks of comparative study. As he phrases it, "Conversely, a demonstration of the contingency and mutability of cultural boundaries attenuates the essentializing characterizations of self and other that interfere with the recognition of the multiplicity of voices within each cultural formation."¹⁶ In other words, Christians have been guilty more or less throughout history of silencing the 'multiplicity of voices' within their *own* tradition in order to promote a particular, hegemonic narrative of Christianity, likely in a particular 'orthodox' version. It is not a far leap in light of such an analysis to advocate for an anti-essentialist methodology of 'cross-cultural comparison' for today's globalized world that focuses upon the 'political' elements centrally located, but also masked within, theological practice in order to more justly consider any religious identity that presents itself before us.¹⁷ We are witnesses in this procedure to methods of cross-cultural comparison as they become forms of critical self-reflexive understanding.¹⁸ The main point in all of this analysis is not that we necessarily begin with an external or internal critique

15. "The recognition of the internal diversity of a cultural formation like Christianity reveals the largely contingent and arbitrary nature of the cultural boundaries delimiting it from its surroundings. For [...] the differentials upon which such boundaries are founded invariably reflect hegemonic relations within each of the delimited formations." Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 95.

16. *Ibid.*, 95.

17. See *ibid.*, 13.

18. "The comparative juxtaposition of cultural-religious formations sets up resonances between the two whereby prominent features of the one bring to light parallel features of the other that may have been suppressed by various hegemonic discourses, whether those of indigenous orthodoxies or those of Western scholarship. In this way cross-cultural comparison can bring to light parallels that cut across established cultural boundaries, thus revealing the latter's arbitrariness and contingency." *Ibid.*, 95.

of our identity, but that an internal critique must be the end goal, one that demonstrates the difficult fracturing of identity that already lay within us.

To profit from this re-alignment of comparative inquiry that ends up re-focusing on the internal shifts in identity, we must also recognize that such an endeavor is not made in order to abandon the embeddedness of a given tradition's theological foundations and its own efforts toward forming an apologetics, but to try to yet locate, in Nicholson's words, a "deconstructive moment of the dialectic of identity," again, *within* traditional religious structures and cultures.¹⁹ This is Nicholson's subtle shift from attempting to 'depoliticize' Christian identity to 'denaturalizing' it, which is a demonstrably political tactic in another direction.²⁰

I am reminded at this point in my sketch of a comparative approach of the controversial terrain of political theology, one that begins with a critique of self-identity, so that we might see not only the failures of natural theology, but mainly of the highly problematic use of the category of the 'natural' and the way in which it is almost inevitably accompanied by a defensive posturing that has no place within theological reasoning.²¹ We see such a position brilliantly on display in the work of H. Richard Niebuhr, for example.²² I hear a similar voice of caution in those who would share in the impulse not to fear the secularization of our world (though not necessarily to embrace it either), but simply to realize that identities are far more complex than we often represent them, encompassing so many facets as to literally be unrepresentable in their totality.²³ I am encouraged on this score as well to see political theology and inter-religious dialogue not solely as mediators of an impasse within theological methods, but as central ways of 'doing theology' in the first place, a shift in perspective that I believe has been going on for some time now, but is still long overdue in being seen as a significantly central method of a more universal theological insight.

What I am discussing here specifically, and as I will relate to the work of Pierre Bourdieu in a moment, concerns how the integration of

19. Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 104.

20. *Ibid.*, 12.

21. See the way in which denaturalization is dealt with in Dawne Moon, *God, Sex and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 231.

22. On removing the defensiveness from theological discourse, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

23. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

various fields and subfields of theological inquiry might lead not to a fortification of each religion's boundaries, but to an openness toward each becoming vulnerable to the other, even at the risk of being swallowed up whole. Such a form of ontological poverty, as I would call it, could even be read as imploring each 'division' (e.g. ethical, systematic, pastoral, sacramental, historical, biblical, etc.) to cede ground to the other, and, moreover, to welcome the other (with their own unique 'methods' and focal points) into our midst. This would be not only an exemplary manifestation of hospitality, but also of bearing a form of love that lets the other – to incorporate Levinas's language – take it hostage, that lets itself be overcome.

Towards a 'Pathetic' Theology as Self-reflexive Theology

What Nicholson is gesturing toward, I would argue, is a domain somewhat familiar to theological inquiry over the past half-century or more. It is a topography that goes under a variety of labels, but which we more or less discern at work in Abraham Joshua Heschel's 'pathetic' theology,²⁴ John Caputo's 'weak' theology,²⁵ Dan Barber's recent attempts to depict theology as permanently 'in diaspora'²⁶ or Jürgen Moltmann's reading of Christianity as a form of 'permanent iconoclasm'.²⁷ I think it is also present in various shades within Dietrich Bonhoeffer's efforts to formulate a 'religionless Christianity'.²⁸ It is to the resonance that I sense within these political theological efforts that I wish to turn, as the dialogue that ensues will hopefully open up a path we might walk more fully along toward the ultimate poverty of theology.

In the wake of the Second World War and the Shoah, certain philosophical and theological trends began to take account of the radical alterity of the other in ways that had not been done before. Figures with intimate knowledge of the war and its effect upon the peoples of Europe began to stake new territory in exploring just how 'otherness' itself – the

24. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper, 1962).

25. John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

26. Daniel Colucciello Barber, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion, and Secularity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

27. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 87.

28. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

foreigner, the refugee, the stranger, the marginalized figure – must lie at the heart of our self-identifications, even, and perhaps especially, when they undo our identities from within. Such undertakings were done of course while recognizing the inherent risk that we might repeat the same mistakes if we were again to fail to notice how we are never able to construct an undeconstructible identity (*the impossible dream of the sovereign self*). A new view on comparative studies, it could be argued, began to take hold of us as the dialectic between self and other became much more real than had been embodied beforehand. Previously exclusive historical and national narratives were forced to confront their very concrete ‘other’. In this light, Theodor Adorno’s refashioning of dialectics into a ‘negative’ mode, which had a significant impact upon Moltmann’s theology and a number of emergent contextual theologies, would, to my mind, stand as one such exemplary moment.²⁹

Following this line of thought, Peter Admirand’s *Amidst Mass Atrocity and the Rubble of Theology: Searching for a Viable Theology* may have directly set out to reinvigorate the relevance of theodicy for theological reflection. However, his book ends up providing, in my opinion, an equal or greater service that we should here call to the fore of the discussion: recognizing the rubble of theology points the way toward a humbler theology, one attuned to the inherent fragmentation of both our thoughts and our world, and one therefore focused on the suffering of others that permeates every human existence. I believe that as such theology participates with both Nicholson and Adorno in trying to fashion a somewhat negative dialectic in the face of the disintegration of traditional borders and boundaries. When Admirand speaks of the ‘rubble of theology’ as such, he implies the performance of theology in the midst of ‘violence and injustice’, and as it finds a renewed sense of hope for the discipline within the theological ‘explanations and systems that have ultimately failed to address or admit their loss’.³⁰ This is a realization that will cause him at points throughout the work to glance at the gaps or holes within his own Catholic theological background, embracing rather than shunning such ‘failures’ as potential sites for dialogue with those many ‘others’ who speak from ‘outside’ its perceived boundaries.

Beyond Admirand’s take on theology today, another significant voice, and one just as relevant to theological discourse, lies in the work

29. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Continuum, 1973). See too the study of this narrative at the origins of contemporary political theology as it unfolds in David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

30. Admirand, *Amidst Mass Atrocity and the Rubble of Theology*, xv-xvi.

of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. There is a certain 'excess' to our humanity, as Levinas once demonstrated, that unsettles us and prompts us to try to reduce the 'Other' before us in ways that undermine the 'Other's' very humanity. The Levinasian task, however, is to access a revitalized notion of transcendence, but only as gained through the immanent Other(ness) before us, a sort of 'transcendence-in-immanence' that characterizes his work throughout.³¹ In his work, though this simply reiterates a point I find present underneath Nicholson's work as well, care and responsibility toward the Other become inherently political acts insofar as they directly call into question humanity's reliance upon warfare and the dehumanization of those who differ from the collective, and warring, 'us'.

In this context, Nigel Zimmermann has pursued a discussion of the nature of hospitality in Levinas' work in relation to Christian theology, as well as how 'evil' arises from a denial of our responsibility for the Other, that I find to be particularly helpful in this regard.³² According to Zimmermann's reading, letting the Other present itself (him or herself) to us is a strictly phenomenological exercise, and one that gives shape to Levinas' philosophy, though it is also clear that, despite such an appearance, the Other is never fully known by us, and in fact remains permanently unknown in its radical otherness, calling us to act ethically in defense of its alterity. As such, the problem which humanity faces lies not in trying to identify the Other – this is a distraction and even an abstraction that need not be performed, which is also a point that only bolsters Nicholson's claims on the importance of comparative theology – but in ethically responding to the Other, a situation that brings into being a certain permanently 'de-centered subjectivity'.³³ What Zimmermann concludes is that Levinas disturbs theology, not as one who uncovers decaying foundations and unreliable pillars, but as one who discovers the poor man in the dark and wakes him up with warm clothes and food. The provocation of Levinas is such that the poverty of one's own position is unmasked, not for the sake of public humiliation, but for moving past facades and healing the fragile body one finds there.³⁴

What I hear in this theological reading of Levinas is, again, the need to move through the 'rubble' of theology, not to strive for a seemingly

31. See, e.g., Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

32. Nigel Zimmermann, *Levinas and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013).

33. *Ibid.*, 24.

34. *Ibid.*, 81.

unblemished, systematic or comprehensive defense of an abstract transcendence that never existed as such in the first place, but to continue emptying it out, to 'impoverish' theology even further. Our task as theologians, as Jean Vanier reminds us, is one of 'littleness' and not of legitimating a sovereign politics that masquerades as a theological or religious observation on the 'nature of things'.³⁵ Levinas, for his part, brings forth a meditation on the 'littleness' of the faith of Israel in its desire to stick to its own particular traditions and revelations, something of the 'necessary humility' that Israel might accept in the face of God and those Others standing before them.³⁶ What he finds is that "The election of the Jew, and the whole people of Israel, is a calling out of the self towards the Other"³⁷ – a suggestion that opens up his entire philosophy toward theology at the same time as it withdraws and challenges theology from a certain distance. Providing a nice bridge between Levinas' philosophical and Jewish writings, Zimmermann points out how "[...] it is for Levinas a central Jewish tenet that an authentic community of faith is guided not by dogmatic content, let alone a *theology*, but by the self-sacrificial relationship of persons."³⁸ To think theology as a continuous process of going beyond theology, perhaps as a kenotic theology that pours itself out into other disciplines and other fields, is actually central to doing theology – a practice that concretely appears as a form of weakness and, to some no doubt, of the loss of identity.

In truth, however, what is to be discovered there is only another form of identity altogether, a true strength in what appears to be a weakness, a point Saint Paul knew all too well. Zimmermann concludes with the affirmation that God, according to Levinas, can be recovered after the Shoah, but only in terms of human inter-subjectivity (hence, comparatively), not through the reassertion of an ontotheological claim concerning God's being. As such, "Theology is not itself a glory, but a task in which the Other is glorified"³⁹ – a proposition that theologians still need to think through a good deal before they will be able to proceed to the next phases of theological insight. In each of these analyses, the task of theology is thoroughly comparative, or, in other words, *relational* and *transformational*, and so will always be at once political, social, philosophical, cultural and economic.

35. Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist, 1989).

36. Zimmermann, *Levinas and Theology*, 109.

37. *Ibid.*, 125.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 161.

But how are we to access these roots of theological self-critique directly? Will such roots be entirely theological in origin, or will they have come to us from other disciplines? Or, as I have already been suggesting, will there be little need to discern exactly where they come from so long as they are capable of addressing the presence of a permanent otherness within the theological? Are they perhaps as likely to derive from the dialogues of comparative theological approaches brought about external to a given religious tradition as they are from within it?

Pierre Bourdieu and a Self-reflexive Theology

If Nicholson and Zimmermann call our attention to the inherently comparative or inter-subjective nature of theological inquiry, the work of Pierre Bourdieu adds to the conversation a sense of how the individual is able to comprehend their identity in relation to communal identity and thereby to develop a self-reflexive form of understanding that theology might find useful. In Bourdieu's analysis of masculine domination, as but one example of where this takes place, and in his various attempts to 'objectify objectivity' or to strive for objectivity but realize too that we will never be able to achieve it, we might find a suitable correlation to what Judith Butler has been advocating as giving a critical account of oneself. This is to suggest the promotion of a certain sense of self-reflexivity in establishing one's personal identity.⁴⁰ Taking his unending

40. On the concept of self-reflexivity, see also Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Bourdieu's specific contribution to forming a theological conception of self-reflexivity is explored in D. F. Pilario, *Back to the Rough Grounds of Praxis: Exploring Theological Method with Pierre Bourdieu* (Leuven: Leuven University Press and Peeters, 2005) and in T. Howland Sanks, "Homo Theologus: Toward a reflexive theology (with the help of Pierre Bourdieu)," *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 515-530. For a general religious engagement with Bourdieu's work, see Terry Rey, "Marketing the Goods of Salvation: Bourdieu on Religion," *Religion* 34 (2004): 331-343. It should likewise be noted that the continuity between Butler's position on hom(m)osociality leading to self-critique and Bourdieu's notion of self-reflexivity is, in a general sense, consistent, and provides a unique opportunity to transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries in the hopes of providing further justification for the theories presented by both authors. Cf. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1999). Butler's own analysis of Bourdieu's work, despite her criticisms of his depiction of performativity, seems to indicate that such a correlation is indeed possible. See her article on Bourdieu entitled "Performativity's Social Magic," in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 113-128. At the same time, Bourdieu's analysis of gender relations is not without its complications and share of critics. See, among others, Lisa Adkins, "Reflexivity: Freedom or Habit of Gender?," *Theory, Culture and Society* 20, 6 (2003): 21-42; Howie Chodos and Bruce Curtis, "Pierre Bourdieu's *Masculine*

attempts to establish reflexive identities within the many social contexts in which he studied them, we can see how Bourdieu's account of self-reflexivity is not simply borne individually, but is that which is, as he points out, collectively assessed; it is the step from an 'I' to a 'We' that is essential to forming identity as such.⁴¹ For Bourdieu, the roots of one's self-identification are to be traced to one's position in a collective 'we', engulfing the 'I' and yet respecting its uniqueness so that an 'objective' view of the self might emerge. Fulfilling the role which one's community has traditionally played, the 'collective', as he terms it, adapts the practices of everyday life as a critical instance of regulating self-identity. As he puts it, "Reflexivity takes on its full efficacy only when it is embodied in collectives which have so much incorporated it that they practise it as a reflex."⁴² Such a reflex is intended to be a step toward liberating each person of the unconscious bias linked to their social position(s), and from which issues the point of view that has become 'the illusion of absoluteness' from which only a collective can restore any 'objectivity'.⁴³

To borrow a term normally associated with Butler's work, we might say that the 'performance' of one's identity is only critically engaged

Domination: A Critique, *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 39, 4 (2002): 397-412; Jo-Anne Dillabough, "Class, Culture and the 'Predicaments of Masculine Domination': Encountering Pierre Bourdieu," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25, 4 (2004): 489-506; Bridget Fowler, "Reading Pierre Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination*: Notes Towards an Intersectional Analysis of Gender, Culture and Class," *Cultural Studies* 17, 3/4 (2003): 468-494; Johan Heilbron, "Reflexivity and Its Consequences," *European Journal of Social Theory* 2, 3 (1999): 298-306; Leslie McCall, "Does Gender Fit? Bourdieu, Feminism, and Conceptions of Social Order," *Theory and Society* 21, 6 (1992): 837-867; Lois McNay, "Gender, Habitus and the Field: Pierre Bourdieu and the Limits of Reflexivity," *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, 1 (1999): 95-117; Gad Yair, "Vive la (Sexual) Révolution: The Political Roots of Bourdieu's Analysis of Gender," *The Sociological Review* 56, 3 (2008): 388-407. See also the critical essays gathered in *Feminism After Bourdieu*, ed. Lisa Adkins and Beverley Skeggs (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

41. From a sociological standpoint, within which Bourdieu locates himself, a "[...] reflexive analysis must consider successively position in the social space, position in the field and position in the scholastic universe. How, without surrendering to narcissistic self-indulgence, can one apply this programme to oneself and perform the sociology of oneself, one's self-socioanalysis, given that such an analysis can only be a starting point and that the sociology of the object that I am, the objectivation of my point of view, is a necessarily collective task?" Pierre Bourdieu, "Sketch for a Self-analysis," in *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 94. See also, in general, Tony Schirato and Jen Webb, "Bourdieu's Notion of Reflexive Knowledge," *Social Semiotics* 12, 3 (2002): 255-268.

42. Bourdieu, "Sketch for a Self-analysis," 114.

43. *Ibid.*, 116.

from a collective of which one is a part.⁴⁴ The problems exposed by this performative issue of one's subjectivity is, however, only part of a larger representational schema of power that Bourdieu is quick to deconstruct in his work as a whole, even, and perhaps more importantly for self-reflective purposes, as it invests itself in his own disciplinary (sociological) boundaries.⁴⁵ This self-reflective gesture allows Bourdieu to maintain that a struggle inherently lies at the center of social analysis itself, one between those who unveil how their beliefs distort their perspective and those who have a vested interest in keeping those interests purposely veiled. This is to say too that the

[...] relationship between [economic] distributions and [symbolic] representations is both the product and the stake of a permanent struggle between those who, because of the position they occupy within the distributions, have an interest in subverting them by modifying the classifications in which they are expressed and legitimated, and those who have an interest in perpetuating misrecognition, an alienated cognition that looks at the world through categories the world imposes, and apprehends the social world as a natural world.⁴⁶

In what can only seem like a direct homage to Butler's fundamental insights concerning the parody and performance of gender, as well as Nicholson's task of 'de-naturalizing' as a form of 'de-politicizing', what appears as 'natural' to one social classification system may be a construct wholly unnatural to the other it is placed upon, with the (designed) intentions remaining unknown to those receiving such an imposition. This is done, according to Bourdieu, for various reasons, most notably to express the interests of the dominant who are able to maintain (hegemonic) control by obfuscating and masking the uses of power and authority. Taking critical action to counteract the imposition of a falsely legitimated dominance, Bourdieu highlights however how social science specifically must re-categorize its systematic analysis of social structures by maintaining a firm solidarity with the more subversive elements of its study. This is potentially the case, he will argue, because the "specific efficacy of subversive action consists in the power to bring to consciousness, and so to modify, the categories of thought which help to orient

44. Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 171ff.

45. See Bourdieu's remarkable performance of the self-reflexivity possible within a university setting in Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), as well as his study of the men from his home region of France in his *The Bachelors' Ball: The Crisis of Peasant Society in Béarn*, trans. Richard Nice (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

46. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 140-141.

individual and collective practices and, in particular, the categories through which distributions are perceived and appreciated."⁴⁷

In describing what might appear to many as an almost revolutionary attempt to subvert the dominant 'objective' order – yet one that, as Hannah Arendt also observed, will not simply fade away with time, but is rather inherent to humanity⁴⁸ – he critiques this view strongly by asserting that such criticism falls short of objectivity,

[...] by failing to write into its theory of social classes the primary truth against which it was constructed, in particular the veil of symbolic relations without which, in many cases, class relations would not be able to function in their 'objective' truth as relations of exploitation. In other words, objectivism forgets that misrecognition of the reality of class relations is an integral part of the reality of those relations.⁴⁹

This misrecognition is what allows for a constitution of the daily activity of most social networks. The logic of practice, Bourdieu asserts, is precisely a logic of the everyday (e.g. from cooking and walking to marriage and representations of time or gender) that believes in its own legitimacy to the point that it can no longer recognize why it began believing this logic in the first place.⁵⁰ The person immersed in the social symbolic space cannot in essence see outside or 'beyond' the structures that make everyday life possible, and it is on this condition of forgetfulness that a repetition of the everyday subsists. This *habitus* – as the schema of the everyday is here termed – produces a worldview that is dissociated from its theoretical edifice. The everyday functions without a conscious knowledge present as necessary to cause its operation. This is nonetheless how a person constructs their world, a construct that eludes theoretical description, but nonetheless is total.⁵¹

Those who live on the level of the everyday, immersed in the *habitus* and not on the level of feigned 'objectivity' therefore, in Bourdieu's words,

[...] can make nothing of universes that have not performed such a dissociation and so have, as it were, an economy [of distribution and representation] in itself and not for itself. Thus, any partial or total objectification of the archaic economy that does not include a theory

47. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 141.

48. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

49. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 136.

50. This same extended argument is put forward more concisely in Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

51. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 76.

of the subjective relation of *misrecognition* which agents adapted to this economy maintain with its 'objective' (that is, objectivist) truth, succumbs to the most subtle and most irreproachable form of ethnocentrism.⁵²

The economy that functions within a given worldview appears as the only option, giving it an apparently inherent 'archaic' quality. This false form of 'objectivity' that develops through economic relations becomes the very backdrop of a particular worldview that refuses to acknowledge its own deliberate *misrecognitions* and yet passes as the 'natural' *habitus* in which a community is invested. This situation again (re)affirms the fact, for Bourdieu, that one's *habitus* is believed *in* rather than objectively viewed; it is as entirely personal as it is constituent of one's identity and therefore is liable to construct itself on the various 'blind spots' that it ignores. Bourdieu makes clear that belief is 'an inherent part of belonging' to a social field, one where the decision to enter it is less relevant than how that field works upon the subject: "That is why one cannot enter this magic circle by an instantaneous decision of the will, but only by birth or by a slow process of co-option and initiation which is equivalent to a second birth."⁵³

To avoid this 'ethnocentric' perspective (and I would here add that the labels patriarchal, racist or heteronormative are likewise applicable since these are formed much on the same basis), a critical form of self-reflexivity needs to be generated from *within* the bounds of each particular *habitus*, and not necessarily from *without*, something Bourdieu makes evident. Yet the difficulty of gaining a self-reflexive awareness within these social networks, including theology (which is here my particular focus *ad intra*), is thus particularly acute insofar as what is culturally arbitrary often comes across in these contexts as 'natural'.⁵⁴ These networks are what maintain the particular 'nature' of the people who constitute its community and who come to 'believe' in the integrity of its boundaries.

The demonstration of a contrast between believing in the social and cultural boundaries of a community in general and believing in the community which is the Church specifically, I would only add, is therefore doubly problematic. At the heart of the matter, there is often no way practically pronounceable in which to articulate differences in the

52. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 113.

53. *Ibid.*, 68.

54. See Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 2.

structures of believing, and thereby to differentiate, for example, between belief in the Church as the body of Christ and belief in the Church as social construct of security and identity. Making this distinction, however, as well as getting people within the Church to assume the vital willingness to change their perspectives on such structures, is necessary for transformations to occur on the path toward justice and the greater expression of the truths that define a communal body of believers.⁵⁵

The plane of self-reflexivity is in general fraught with the tensions of desire, of not wanting to alter that which in fact forms our personal sense of self, as Michel de Certeau pointed out some time ago.⁵⁶ This reality also, no doubt, speaks directly to why a rejection of comments critical to one's *habitus* often seems to be the norm. This reality is the site, Bourdieu reminds us, where theology in particular has historically developed an 'imaginary anthropology', "obtained by denial of all the negations really performed by the 'economy'" of symbols and cultural and political representations.⁵⁷ In Bourdieu's estimation, theologians in particular would do well to register caution when dictating principles that conflict with actual functioning economies within the world. This is not, however, and as Bourdieu again reminds us, a justification of the status quo, but a manner by which to unveil those imagined theological anthropologies that might actually be sustaining an ideological, hegemonic and ethnocentric discourse at their core.

At the very least, these reflections should prompt us to reconsider what ideological discourses lie embedded within the core of Church teachings or theological discourses, as well as the centrality given to doctrinal formulations which, in this sense, perhaps serve rather as obstacles to formulating a more accurate Christian conception of the body of doctrine. For this very reason, Bourdieu's articulation of a proper critique of dominance should be revisited properly in relation to ecclesiastical structures. His warnings concerning dominance – first, that it must appear as natural as possible, though working vaguely through the modes of a feigned objectification; second, that it is daily, personal and pervasive, going into the deepest levels of society in order to perpetuate itself as by its nature dominance must; and third, that if the specific manifest

55. The idea of critiquing the Church as an institution is certainly not a new idea in the history of theology, from Augustine's *City of God* to Avery Dulles' model of the Church as institution. See Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image, 1991).

56. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

57. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 134.

institutions of dominance are not themselves illustrated, we are in danger of merely reinforcing their agendas – must not be placed aside and forgotten. Rather, they should be articulated and expressed even more directly, and, we might add, with an ear toward more clearly expressing the heart of what it means to deal with confessional religious truths.⁵⁸

Authority and Power

From Bourdieu's perspective, authority itself rests on an arbitrary grounding, a foundation that will not be able to receive any external legitimization and so must mask its 'nature'.⁵⁹ For this reason, a drama unfolds between those who seek to conceal and those who seek to reveal this 'secret' nature of authority. What Bourdieu wishes to do is not only to engage in a deconstruction of the mechanisms of power and authority, but also to lessen the violence that such a concealment could be said to produce. This is what will characterize the background against which he will seek to portray the tensions (of dominance and subordination) between gendered representations, an example he took up on occasion. Traditionally, those in positions of dominance, themselves immersed in power, have had a vested interest in concealing the grounds of their own (sovereign) authority, a situation which often results in a certain circularity of argumentation. Accordingly, the concealment of authority's arbitrariness becomes the main ruse of dominance provided through the lack of justification given for power and its pronouncements.

This is encapsulated when Bourdieu alternately characterizes masculine speech – as only one prominent instance of this tactic, but a major one at that – as retaining dominance through its being an isolated set of verdicts, or pronouncements of order (blessings and curses). Feminine speech, on the other hand, becomes that which subverts masculine dominance though a comprehensive logic illustrating both a "questioning of necessity and an affirmation of contingency."⁶⁰ The latter, therefore, likewise allows, tolerates or even thrives on a certain ambiguity, while the former tends toward a universalized, monolithic or polarized speech. Theological discourse has certainly yet to catch up to Bourdieu's

58. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 129-133. For a more detailed systematic look at how male domination plays a central role in societal constructs appearing as natural, see Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination*.

59. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 94.

60. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 70-71.

analysis, especially when it is engaged in analyzing theological or dogmatic positions that often *appear* through what could only at times seem to align itself with the latter set of characteristics.

What further complicates matters a great deal, though, is not that universalized statements should cease to be given – indeed they are in some sense necessary for identity formation, its rites and rituals of institution⁶¹ – but rather that it would be a failure of theology not to distinguish speech acts of domination from its other discourses. We might be justified, for example, in asking if male theologians in particular can distinguish in their writings an act of masculine dominance, either in verbal or physical form, from an act supposed to convey or interpret God's word, both internally and externally. The difficulty in separating motives, both individual and ecclesial, is quite large here, especially in pastoral terms insofar as priests (as men) in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, for example, convey God's image in Christ. But it is essential to distinguish these different registers in order to avoid performing a continuous systemic violence upon both women and men.⁶²

The foundations for the use of such a force lie upon what Bourdieu characterizes as a 'mystical' foundation for authority, the site from which law itself is said to spring – a point affirmed by Jacques Derrida as well.⁶³ This brings us to inspecting the necessity of the force behind authority, a force which can be either more or less violent. Bourdieu defines the foundation for this authority as that which does not have an inherent justification; it only appears as the force itself which legitimates a

61. See Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 245.

62. Perhaps we can sense the difficulty of removing the embeddedness of patriarchal norms, the tactics of masculine domination which Bourdieu speaks of, through an historical, and strongly ecclesiological, example. John Paul II's apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, in contrast to its normal method of reference, citation and explanation to justify its claims, simply states how it is 'commonly thought' that women are more attentive to others than men, using the phrase alone to justify its validity. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 15 August 1988, §18. Accessed online at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html. This phrase, and there are many others one could potentially cite from contemporary Catholic Church teaching in particular to illustrate the point, touches the border of the danger that Bourdieu refers to as the masculine practice of 'dispensing with justification', an act that can only be performed as such by those in positions of power who seek to legitimate their authority through force alone. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 9. This act, according to Bourdieu, is most often rendered as claims of 'common sense' which convert opinion into what is intended to appear as 'natural' within a certain context. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 131. This is the manner in which someone can be said to 'become' what they already are, recalling Simone de Beauvoir's dictum that "one is not born, but becomes a woman." Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Bantham, 1952), 249.

63. See Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 49.

particular, though thoroughly contingent, order. What is to distinguish this 'mystical' foundation in its mythological, religious or nationalistic guises remains however less clear, and it is not an issue that is easily addressed, though there is a great need to do so. There is little doubt, however, that the 'force of law' which these symbolic utterances convey necessarily resists the ambiguity of law's foundations in order to promote identity through a stable social ordering, the symbolic ritual interests which found the social boundaries of cultural intelligibility.⁶⁴ Indeed, the order which certain theological or ecclesial statements reinforce through their promotion of specific norms often appear as fundamental to resisting the structures of 'sin' and 'chaos' which would otherwise abound (or at least the fear of such things abounds).

Many questions are also opened up by a general realization of the arbitrariness of signifying claims as opposed to (ontological) truth claims, and perhaps theology's failure in this regard has been simply to follow suit in not making this distinction clearer, for it is precisely this distinction between them that is essential for understanding difference as constitutive of identity itself. This distinction plays a pivotal role, for example, in discerning the levels of responsibility apparent in the usage of a signifying power, such as when we ask: what justice could possibly be done in redrawing the line(s) between identities elsewhere than the prevailing current norms? Who benefits from these juridical (re)drawings, perhaps in many ways analogous to the political practice of gerrymandering? Who is thereby included or excluded? What types of arguments for increased representation will be acceptable (or heard) and for what reasons will this be so? In short, who stands to lose power and who to gain it by signifying things differently? I would only add at this juncture that we might note as well the significance potentially open to hybrid identities and those contexts where instances of multiple-belonging arise, mainly, from comparative theological studies and which are yet central to our discussion of what constitutes the subject matter of theology proper.⁶⁵

64. See Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 118ff. See also the affinity which Bourdieu's use of the phrase 'force of law' shares with Jacques Derrida's usage in his essay "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, trans. Mary Quaintance (London: Routledge, 2002).

65. On hybrid identities, see, among others, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); on multiple belonging, see, in particular, Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2011). For a contestation of gendered binary categorizations, which I feel is highly relevant in this context, see, e.g., Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004).

The lack of justification for an utterance which conveys the 'force of law' can be seen as a necessity for social order, yet it is not one which is removed from all critique; indeed, its relation to 'Truth' may remain at times completely unstated, though needing perhaps to be the thing stated most clearly of all. In all of this, the essential question remains: to what degree does a contingently established order seek to promote justice (thereby lessening the violence it perpetuates) and not simply to legitimate its own dominance (thereby increasing the violence it performs)? Bourdieu's efforts to develop a 'non-violent' communication, attempting to 'reduce as much as possible the symbolic violence exerted', provides no easy outlet that would negate all responsibility for the violences that are committed in order to establish cultural legibility.⁶⁶ In the end, there is no simple (absolute) polarization possible in order to conduct a litmus test for violence, only a sliding scale which implicates *all* inasmuch as each discourse expresses new avenues for potential liberation as well. What we are left with then, as I noted in the beginning, is an embodied tension from which we cannot simply be removed.

Entertaining Religious Self-reflexivity

Following from this analysis of just how the symbolic language of dominance exerts its force, we see too how, for Bourdieu, an abstraction is a generalization, a thought-construct that is less fact than vaguely founded claim. To perform an act of abstraction is in some sense to perform a certain violence, to perform a reduction of the robust elements which comprise a more naturally complex scenario. At the same time, however, he recognizes that "[t]here is no politics of pure particularity."⁶⁷ Universal statements are the eventual outcome of a particular position, a necessary abstraction of sorts, which coalesce upon the horizon of what constitutes the 'political' in the first place. Their use, however, though inevitable, should be guarded and used with caution, for at their worst, abstractions become, in another sense, tools of the purely ideological.

In fact, the ideological use of abstraction results from what Bourdieu characterizes as a universalized position which seeks to remove itself from its particular context, thus refusing to 'objectify' its own objectivity. The

66. Pierre Bourdieu, et al., *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson et al. (Oxford: Polity, 1999), 609.

67. Ernesto Laclau, "Constructing Universality," in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 305.

violence which results is the violence of asserting a universal statement as the only form of one's particularity, thereby effacing the traces of the particular which would be seen as a contamination of a 'purer' universal rationale.⁶⁸ Situated within the confines of these remarks, we might then, as a task still in need of much explanation beyond simply inquiring as to the particularities of a certain abstracted theological position which professes to understand or define the norms of other contextual positions, elaborate upon what defines the embodied position from which specific theological writings or positions emerge. That is, what allows a theologian to proceed in their work as if their own autobiographical context did not matter?

We might take, for example, the Pope John Paul II's letter on the 'dignity' of women, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, that does not first take into account the positions of the men who wrote it. In the absence of such a letter on men and their role(s) in society from a theological perspective, though there have been critical voices which call for such a letter to be written,⁶⁹ for example, we are left to assume that the letter on collaboration between genders in a Catholic context promotes a universalized speech which yet must fail in some sense to account for its own (sexual) particularity, thus running the risk of condoning or instigating an unacknowledged but felt violence.⁷⁰ From another angle, we might also

68. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 62.

69. See Camilla J. Kari, *Public Witness: The Pastoral Letters of the American Catholic Bishops* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 127.

70. My analysis here almost reaches a definitive (though almost ironic) moment as the letter in question, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the one which does exist on the collaboration of genders, propounds and disseminates what could only be described as a series of abstractions, though ones that are not altogether unaware (in some sense at least) of their being abstractions. And therein lies the difficulty of discerning their meaning, or even if there is a deeper irony present in their articulation. The potential for irony is in fact great as the 'force' of these statements does seem to be invested primarily in generating and confirming the socially dominant (perceived) boundaries of gender identity through a series of abstractions. For example, it is said that women have a unique 'capacity for the other', they 'preserve the deep intuition of goodness in their lives of those actions which elicit life', they are marked by a 'capacity to give life' (i.e. motherhood), they 'acquire maturity very quickly', they hold a 'sense and a respect for what is concrete', they 'possess a singular capacity to persevere in adversity, to keep life going even in extreme situations, to hold tenaciously to the future, and finally to remember with tears the value of every human life', and they are 'opposed to abstractions which are so fatal for the existence of individuals and society'. A certain reductionism, no doubt, takes place here, and it is one yet intended to safeguard a woman's freedom though perhaps with the (un)intentional consequence of limiting it in other ways. So then, we have, in some sense, a series of abstractions issued in order to avoid the 'fatal abstractions' which do harm to the existence of both individuals and society, a series which draws a distinction between the different forms of abstraction possible, some of which the Church apparently does find itself willing to create, at least if we are to take this letter at face value. It is not, however,

inquire as to how a universalized statement *could be* issued without yet denying its particular grounding, and, furthermore, how that foundation sustains such a universalized position.

The violence done in pursuing such a false form of 'objectivity' is potentially double: not only are there those who become marginalized within a dominant paradigm, but there are even those within a dominant position itself who must marginalize, or repress, parts of themselves in order to become more 'objective', or more 'universal'. This reality is something which Bourdieu himself has linked to the role of priests through the act of 'becoming holy', a process that threatens to detach a man from his own social sense of 'being a man' in a given context (and along with whatever such a thing entails).⁷¹ The problem, again, is not simply that a form of universality is presented in the form of an abstraction, but that a form of universality is presented as the site of its own particularity, as if no other historical-empirical context grounded its articulation. This is what Bourdieu calls the 'eternalization' of a particular position seeking to deny its particularity.⁷²

Perhaps we should be seeking, rather as Bourdieu suggests, a project which attempts to 'objectify objectivity' itself – that is, to recognize how the tensions we are caught in will never really go away.⁷³ This would be to engage in an always asymptotic progression toward truth and justice, respecting the limitations which humanity has before it and unmasking the failures of attempting to be truly 'objective' and therefore at a remove from one's own humanity, which would be to perform a perverse act of violence to one's self. Like the evolution of a language which can become less racist or sexist over time, the individual can learn to eradicate such violences by allowing the repressed elements of what appears as entirely subjective to appear and to be integrated with the always already constructed narratives which comprise an individual's worldview.⁷⁴

entirely clear what type of abstraction is being propounded here, or whether a difference in types of abstraction is truly being asserted (as this document itself argues needs to be done) or whether the letter has accidentally slipped into a deeply ironic and contradictory position. On this point at least the temptations to obfuscate are high and the needed clarity still much sought after.

71. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 212-213 and 248.

72. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 82 and *Pascalian Meditations*, 48.

73. See also Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*.

74. There is an intentional overlap here with the work of Luce Irigaray on the role of language in evoking culturally established sexist positions. See Luce Irigaray, *To Speak Is Never Neutral*, trans. Gail Schwab (London: Continuum, 2002).

In the end, this 'double bind' of power exerts a certain circular logic, one that pronounces unity at the same time as it produces deeper divisions, that is, as it forms an attempt to liberate while simultaneously imposing other restrictions. What this means is that power, as noted above, in its 'mystical' foundations, engages in a certain circularity in order to legitimate and regulate its usage – it has no foundation to stand upon except the one it creates (and thus 'naturalizes' itself through this very act).⁷⁵ As Bourdieu notes, this is the 'perfect circularity' expressed in the cycles of honor between men, an indication of its arbitrary nature through the various lines of its succession.⁷⁶ This is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the usage of symbolic language within certain theologies and within the Church, a terrain, as Bourdieu notes, which especially demonstrates the capacities for violence which a particular discourse could be said to utilize, even if, I might add, done under the rubric of 'apostolic succession' or working within a canonized set of authors.

Bourdieu does occasionally hint that the maintenance of religious dogma, despite its at times arbitrary nature, is a necessity for providing social order as it aids the construction of the *habitus* that regulates our everyday realities. For this reason, he states that awareness alone of an arbitrary norm will not produce an effective change in social relations. Any perceived awareness must be accompanied by a corresponding change in the *habitus*, the practices of the body which function according to a knowledge of their own – this is the only way in which to break its circular justification of its own authority.⁷⁷ And this is to be done over and against the fact that symbolic power is constantly engaged in acts which serve either to secure or to betray the foundations for trust and belief; symbolic power indeed *defines* the conditions upon which we can be said to believe in the first place.⁷⁸ There is thus a belief in the teachings that constitute its universality or catholicity, but also a belief in the body that constitutes its everyday reality, the masses of persons who inform its particularity. Again, such is its circular nature.

75. See, among others, the critique offered in Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 42.

76. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 49.

77. See Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 9. In this regard, there are several helpful parallels present in Richard Terdiman, *Body and Story: The Ethics and Practice of Theoretical Conflict* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

78. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 28 and 170.

What this also means, however, is that to break the circularity of established power relations, one must perform a self-reflexive act, either on the everyday level of the *habitus* or on the theoretical level of abstraction. This distinction introduces an important qualification within an understanding of the Church as the body of Christ. That is, in order for the Church to (re)shape its own body, it must be attentive to this bifurcated reality, and so thereby distinguish between belief in a social body and belief in the body of Christ, and in no way simply renounce the necessity of social and political representations. This is something that can in reality be done without the need for a full-scale R/reformation. In other words,

Theology [...] can be understood [...] as a field of struggle for power to control the capital at stake, that is, the Christian symbol system. Conflicts in the field are not “merely theological,” but also involve struggles for power. Somebody’s interest is being served or undermined [...]. There is no disinterested theology. To pretend otherwise is to disguise and thereby legitimate those interests.⁷⁹

T. Howland Sanks’ comments on Bourdieu’s applicability to the field of theological discourse are deeply resonant with the overall aims of this study, for not only does Bourdieu assist in seeing the need for a self-reflexive theological discourse, but he also utilizes his critique in order to point toward notions of a ‘pure love’ as formed in the home, between persons intimately connected, those who are democratically overcoming structural forms of domination, and coming to the center stage perhaps in deference to the often non-rational means of overcoming political obstacles.⁸⁰ Like Charles Taylor’s exploration of ‘networks of agape’ in his *A Secular Age*, what Bourdieu points toward with his notion of ‘pure love’ is an almost utopian hope that non-subordinated relations might exist in contexts where self-reflexive critique abounds, no matter whether this is locatable in one’s home, family, the Church, another institution or society on the whole. There is no ‘purer’ expression possible for either theologians or ecclesial efforts to assist in locating the site of ‘pure love’ it has claimed, and must continue to claim, to lead people toward no matter where it is to be found. The Church, from its own foundations, must search only to locate such a love within itself.

79. Sanks, “*Homo Theologicus*,” 529-530.

80. Cf. Deborah Reed-Doanahay, *Locating Bourdieu* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 118.

Conclusion

What I suggest concerning this quest to establish the self-reflexive foundations of theological practice is that theologians must learn to be attentive to the often, but not always, exclusive nature of naming, labeling, drawing boundaries and forming identities. They must learn to embrace the inherent (comparative) relationality of doing theology, which also means that they can re-draw or re-negotiate these relations so as not to be as exclusionary as they, or the Church, had previously been. To return to our beginning, perhaps theology needs to take the comparative approach to theology much more seriously than it has ever done, not only to become increasingly aware of its limitations, but to realize that theologians always speak from particular, embodied contexts. Only by doing this will theology be able to deal with the reality of pluralism, dual belonging, the political formation of everyday theologies and a host of other complex realities in ways that more 'disciplinary' efforts are not able to. Theologians must learn, then, to be flexible in ways professional, guild theologians are often not.⁸¹ The theological resources for transformation in this regard are everywhere present. This may take place on the level of the seen or the unseen, the thought or the unthought. Or it can be a learning to 'see' beyond both levels, a seeing beyond, a thinking beyond. First, as in the end, theology must see itself as much as it sees beyond itself.

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81. The contrast of guild theology and the theological can be found in Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011).