

# From the tower to the pews: A call for academic theology to re-engage with the local context



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This article assesses the shortcomings and the disconnectedness of the current academic theological education in South Africa. It offers a brief history to provide a guiding principle for academic theology. It then proceeds to show the current disconnect and challenges between academic theology and the church, with its primary focus on academic theology. Drawing on original research and reflection on these responses, commodification, euro-centricity and rankings are seen as three traps of modern academics. These three areas have distorted the true content of theological reflection. This article thus clearly highlights the current problem and motivates the need for academic theology and the local church to reconnect with each other. With this article focussing on academic institutions, it calls for the academy to change not in nature but in content, and to draw its content for the local context.

**Keywords:** academic theology; local church; history of theology; theological discontent; theological renewal; correlation; original research.

## Introduction

A lawyer once told a great trade secret; law is in fact incredibly simple, it has just been shrouded in complexities so that lawyers can have jobs. Specialised terms, years of studying and exclusive knowledge are all introduced to keep the average person out and the lawyers employed. But underneath it, all are really very simple concepts that have been greatly complicated. This prompts the question: What about theology? Theology, as the study of God or contemplation of the divine, is a simple activity that all with a belief in God(s) partake in. It, at its very core, is the simple act of the believers reflecting on the significance and implications of their beliefs. Yet, has theology too suffered a similar fate to law? Has theological reflection on higher levels become so exclusive that it is keeping those with only a simple understanding out? This article intends to demonstrate how the 'study of God', an enterprise every Christian believer partakes in, has been institutionalised and specialised making the 'theologian' an exclusive title, detached from the everyday reality, experienced by most South African believers. In doing so, this article does not call for the removal of theology from an academic environment but for practitioners to strive to correlate their work with the everyday happenings of South African believers.

In order to propose that the current state of theology is in need of change, two points will have to be established. Firstly, that theology is not purely a specialised discipline for only a few, and it is not intended to have an exclusive nature. While more advanced studies are a worthy and indeed vitally necessary enterprise, theology, at its core, is something every believer partakes in at a certain level. The specialised theologian is needed as a guide to the wider community, not one who acts alone on abstract ideas. To establish these claims, this article will provide a brief overview of historical figures who personified this understanding of theology. Then, secondly, the exclusive nature of theological practices in South Africa will also have to be established. Here, the exclusive nature of the theologian is shown to be brought on by theological education's focus on rankings, Eurocentric ideas and financial motivation, which lead to it becoming an ivory tower of academic education. Finally, this article will end by explaining why the exclusivist nature is such a problem, and sound a call for academic theology to once again correlate with the needs of everyday believers.

## History

The study of academic theology, as it is understood today, really started in the 12th century with the rise of the modern university (see Olesko 2003). From the 12th century, faculties of theology at state universities would come into existence, and degrees in theology were bestowed on their graduates. Prior to this, although, dedicated theological reflections took place and while no

**Note:** HTS 75th Anniversary Maake Masango Dedication.

degrees were conferred, these early practices could still be classed as 'academic'. Initially, theology, as a term, was linked to Greek philosophy. The term was a compound of *Theos* [God] and *Logos* [reason], and referred roughly to 'an account of, or discourses about, gods or God' (Wright 1988:680).<sup>1</sup> In the earliest days of Christianity, theology was practised informally as believers worshipped, prayed and attempted to live out the daily reality of their faith (Bevans 2009:208). Here, theology was an informal act, an act without a distinct title that was performed by every believer. This informal reflection would always remain, but, from the third Century onwards, these reflections started to take on a more formal nature, and the theologian, one whose occupation revolved around the study of theology, came into being.

## Origen

Origen (c. 184–253) provides a clear example of one of the first theologians; one who practised theology in a more formal and dedicated manner. Origen spent the majority of his life engaging in philosophy and teaching others. In his work, he always strived to employ logic and rational thinking, which earned him recognition as one of the first true theologians (Bevans 2009:215; Kannengiesser 1989:116). As a theologian, he strived to take his philosophical reflection to the wider Christian community. At first, Origen instructed new converts to the faith. In this way, he equipped all believers with basic theological skills and an understanding of Christian doctrine. Then, as time progressed, Origen began to teach more mature believers (Gonzalez 1989:25). Here, it can be seen how theology was not an isolated or exclusive enterprise.

Nor was it something everyday Christians only partook in subconsciously. Origen, in his work, showed a great correlation between a theologian's task and the need for this to be rooted in the local Christian community. His philosophical and theological reflections followed certain 'academic' principles, yet were also employed to aid the local community. Origen, as an 'academic' theologian, occupied a leadership position aimed at helping the rest of the believing community practise more robust theology. He demonstrated that theology can be undertaken by all believers.

## Augustine

Moving on a few decades, we come to the example of Augustine. Augustine of Hippo has been classed as one of the all-time greats and a founding figure in Western theology. As such, he forms a central character, which one must investigate to unearth the nature of theology.

A highly intellectual individual with a great desire to study,<sup>2</sup> Augustine's theological endeavours were anything

but privatised. The very content of Augustine's theological reflections arose through the daily reality of leading the church. The challenges of Donatism brought about ecclesiological reflections, while debates with Pelagius brought on works more of a soteriology nature (see Bevans 2009:227). What Augustine reflected on in his study was brought to him by the daily happenings of the church and taken back into the church in service of it. As he writes:

Whatever abilities I may have for such study, I devote entirely to the instruction of the people whom God has entrusted to me; and I am wholly precluded by my ecclesiastical occupations from having leisure for any further prosecution of my studies than is necessary for my duty in public teaching.<sup>3</sup>

Academic study was not an activity of leisure, undertaken for its own reward.

Rather, it was pursued to aid the Christian Church, the body of Christ, in its daily reality. Augustine saw his role as a theologian akin to that of a pastor. Theology was part of the pastor's and indeed all believers' search for God's wisdom. As Strachan (2015:74) says, 'Theology for the Bishop of Hippo creates habits of thought and action that in turn produce a life of godly wisdom. There is no wisdom, then, without theology'.

As Augustine was to lead and guide the rest of the believing community in their own search for wisdom, theological training was essential. Theology, as such, was something all partook in, while the theologian was the one who instructed, interpreted and guided this reflection. Often this leadership took theological reflection in new directions and introduced new ideas, but the leadership of the Church, not academic curiosity, was steering the direction theology took.

## Anselm of Canterbury

Again, moving on a few decades, we come to Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm is most well-known for his maxim describing theology as 'faith-seeking understanding'; a definition which is used even today. As such, it is worth inspecting this definition in more detail to unearth the nature of theology behind it.

In the first chapter of his *Proslogion*, Anselm writes at length to explain the maxim:

I do not try, O Lord, to penetrate your great heights because my understanding is in no way comparable to the task; yet I desire to understand some degree of your truth which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I might believe, but I believe so that I might understand. For this also I believe, that unless I have believed I will not understand (chapter 1).<sup>4</sup>

Anselm is showing that theology is not simply an academic enterprise but intrinsic with and dependent upon faith;

1.The term 'theology' is not religion specific. However, in this article the focus is specifically on Christian theology.

2.Initially, Augustine was uninterested in the Christian faith as he thought it to lack the instinctual vigour he craved, viewing Scripture 'unworthy' compared to philosophical writings (conf. 3.5.9).

3.Letter 73, Chapter 2, paragraph 5. The translation used here is taken from Nicene and PostNicene Fathers [Schaff 1887] [accessed online on:01/01/2018].

4.Translation here is taken from 'Anselm' in *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy* (Hogg 2010: 313).

theology cannot be practised separately from belief, and belief cannot flourish without theology. Here, then, a clear correlation is shown between faith and theology. One cannot exist without the other, and, as such, theology is always more than an exercise in logic. This correlation can be used to argue that the theologian should not peruse theological knowledge for its own sake but as part of their function in the body of Christ.

Faith, while personal, is not a privatised endeavour, and thus, theology should also not be privatised. Anselm, with his maxim faith-seeking understanding, quoted above, shows theology to be a central tool in building faith and thus vital to avoid speculative or privatised matters. In short, academic theology and the everyday experience of faithful believers were unavoidably correlated.

## Calvin

Moving to a final historic example, Calvin's works in Geneva provide a further example of a theologian avoiding an exclusivist study of theology to work as a guide for the local community. Martin Luther or Ulrich Zwingli could have ably provided a demonstration of theology as a public endeavour for the good of the believing community. Yet Calvin, through the establishment of *La Congrégation* (The Congregation), the publication of various volumes of the *Institutes* and his writings on the office of the 'Doctor of the Church', provides the richest and the clearest example.

*La Congrégation* was a discussion of the scripture in which any interested party could attend and the local pastors and doctors had to attend (see Manetsch 2016:83–84). The purpose of the meeting was to help both the laity and the clergy to come to a deeper understanding of the scripture and, in doing so, build their theological repertoire (see De Boer 2006:398–408). *La Congrégation* served as a form of theological education accessible to anyone interested. This education was not privatised or cut off from the local congregation but was wide open to it. While led by a professional, anyone was welcome to participate.

In the continuous writings of his *Institutes*, Calvin shows more of his academic flare. While the 1539 edition could be classed more as popular writing, later editions were definitely in the 'academic' realm (De Greef 2004:43; Hesselink 2004:76; Zachman 2006:58). This academic work, which drew on multiple sources to firmly establish what Calvin saw as the true intended form of the church, also aimed at clarity of speech and presentation (see McGrath 1990:148–149). Thus, while more academic, it was not privatised but open to being read by anyone with a learned interest. Calvin's *Institutes* did not require years of specialist training to be understood but simply a desire to grow one's theological knowledge.

Finally, in the ecclesiastical ordinances, Calvin lays out the role of the Doctor of the Church (the theologian).

Although brief, the section prescribes the *Doctor* with 'the instruction of the faithful in true doctrine, in order that the

purity of the Gospel be not corrupted either by ignorance or by evil opinions' (Calvin 1954:62). As Calvin (1960) would write in the 1559 edition of his *Institutes* 1.14.4, 'The theologian's task is not to divert the ear with chatter, but to strengthen consciences by teachings things, sure and profitable'. Here the theologian is seen to be a leader among the community whose duty is to help grow the believing communities' understanding of the doctrine and the scripture. They are to work as a guide to upbuild theological knowledge in all. In no way should their task be a speculative or exclusivist endeavour.

In this brief history, it has been clearly demonstrated how academic theology and the theologian do not function in isolation or as an exclusive discipline. Time and again, the theologian has been demonstrated as a leader to the believing community at large. This has meant that an academic education has been vital for them to fulfil this role, yet their education did not form an end in itself. Nor did their education remove them from the local community. The theological enterprise was always rooted in the needs of the local church and always aimed to feedback into its daily happenings. Theology was accessible and while theologians held a high position, they did not function in isolation and made sure their work was accessible to the general community.

## Current disconnect

However, the above correlation between academic theology and the local church was not to remain. With the rise of the Enlightenment age and stepping into the Modern age, a rift developed between science and religion; a rift which is very much felt even today. The break in this correlation has been recorded by authors, such as Farley (1983), Hiestand and Wilsons (2015), Strachan (2015) and Pillay and Womack (2018). To oversimplify a very complex situation, theology in the academy began to follow a rational line, downplaying the supernatural. Believing communities focussed on the experience of the supernatural away from rational interpretations of the doctrine. Thus, while the above picture of theology has not completely demised, its nature has greatly changed from a scientific study with and in aid of the community to a scientific study abstracted from the community.

In South Africa, exclusive tendencies within academic theology are discernible. Venter (2016:13) commented on how the vast amount of literature being published on the topic within South Africa showed either a great commitment to or a great dissatisfaction with theological education. Naidoo has published multiple articles (2010, 2012b, 2012c, 2016, 2017) and edited two books (2012a, 2015), focussing on the current shortcomings of theological education and its need to become rooted in the African context. Balcomb (2012, 2013) too has published articles questioning as to who theological education in South Africa is currently catering to. Other scholars have highlighted the voicelessness of theological education (Amanze 2012; Kritzingner 2012) and its

irrelevance to the South African situation (Buffel 2010; Maluleke 2006).

The authors of this research undertook a study to investigate the gap between academic theology and the church (Womack 2017). From this work, it was established that there is a strong dissatisfaction with the current state of theological education. Particularly, within clerical circles, individuals felt that their education had not adequately prepared them for the ministry. From 12 interviews conducted, 10 of the clergy felt academic theology should have relevance to the local church.<sup>5</sup> Yet, of these same 12, only three felt that their academic training had adequately prepared them for ministry. As such, a clear shortcoming in the accessibility and applicability of academic theology is clear to see. As one respondent remarked, their education had given them wonderful tools, but not all these tools work outside of the academy.

Among the interviews conducted amidst academic circles, an awareness of the exclusive nature of theology was discernible. This was especially clear to see when questions on publications were asked. Respondents were aware that 'scholarly journals don't read well for people who are not in the field'<sup>6</sup>, and, as such, only had a specialist audience. Some of the respondents described how they took personal time to 'translate' their academic work for an ecclesial context. Yet, in every case, this was a labour of love for which their institution did not provide space for them to undertake. As one respondent explained:

[T]hey [the academic institute] do not place any value in my involvement in the church and neither do they have any interest as it is not a requirement of staff in theology department to participate in their local churches.<sup>7</sup>

Another respondent explained how they would not want to further their involvement in the church, as they simply did not have the time owing to the requirements of academic life.<sup>8</sup> As a subject within the confines of the university, theology has become an exclusive affair. As one respondent phrased it when asked if they thought everyday South Africans would read their work: 'No I doubt whether these topics would have helped a congregant or pastor, unless they were interested in academic reading'.<sup>9</sup> Academic theology has become an object in itself; it would appear as if its purpose is no longer to primarily aid the church but to explore academic curiosity.

Drawing from this research, several key factors are behind the maintenance of this exclusive nature of theology and academic theological education. A focus on university rankings, Eurocentric theology and a theology dominated by

5. Authors in possession of original manuscripts.

6. U8 a similar view was also expressed by U10.

7. U1, a similar view was also expressed by U2, U3, U6 and U10. However, one respondent did highlight how church involvement was seen as community service and an essential part of their job (U7). Yet, this can be contrasted to other respondents who felt the academy did lip service to community service and left no time for genuine involvement (U8, U13).

8. U5.

9. U2.

financial concerns has led to a theology produced simply for its own self, isolated from the needs of the wider community. This has created a spiralling circle in which academic theology has become trapped within the ivory towers of the university drawing itself ever further away from the needs of the local community.

## Rankings

Rankings and league tables have become the holy grail of most universities within South Africa. Bragging about world rankings and upward table movement has become common practice.<sup>10</sup> Thus, theology performed within a university tends towards the same agenda. It is no secret that one's social location affects their being and theology is no different in this regard. 'The concrete situation of theology helps to shape the questions that are raised and the priorities that are set' (Migliore 1991:14). Within the university environment, then, one of the priorities theology has set is to achieve high rankings. A recent article published by Buitendag (2016:6-7) presents several graphs and statistics to demonstrate the high rankings of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria. For Buitendag (2016:9), 'academic excellence is not negotiable' and forms the main focus of theological education. This article leaves no doubt that rankings are viewed as vitally important and something which academic theology should aim for.

However, it also highlights how local appropriation of this knowledge is left to the individual churches<sup>11</sup> (cf. Buitendag 2016:9). It is left to the church to provide the necessary in-house or local training to become an effective minister and produce robust local theology. Yet, as Naidoo (2017:6) has pointed out, 'Theological education must involve training and equipping pastoral leaders to do theology by involvement at the grassroots level and developing responsiveness to that level'. If one looks to the example of medicine, Doctors are not only given academic training but also practical training as part of their degrees. Those pursuing a medical career are not only taught in the academic, abstract, but also in a real-life setting; this should also be the case for theological education (Wood 2008:290). The church, as well as the university, should form a key centre of learning away from a purely academic enterprise to integrate life experiences. As much as rankings are desired within the university context, it should be engaged in contextual research that impacts and transforms society. As Molobi and Saayman stated (2006:325), 'too much theological reflection still starts and ends in the classroom'. As Ford stated (Ford 2017b:6), 'there is no international university league table for measuring all that, but in the end it is what matters most of all'.

10. A quick search of universities websites reveals information about their current ranking as well as news articles related to upward movements in ranking. See [http://www.up.ac.za/en/news/post\\_2496316-university-of-pretoria-significantly-improves-its-world-ranking](http://www.up.ac.za/en/news/post_2496316-university-of-pretoria-significantly-improves-its-world-ranking); <http://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/News-&Media/Articles/Unisa-features-on-Shanghai-Ranking-for-the-first-time>; <https://www.wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/general-news/2017/2017-08/wits-among-top-300-in-the-world.html>; <http://www.uct.ac.za/main/research/rankings>.

11. The official focus of the faculty is academics, church and society. While church and social matters are covered in place, the greater part of local engagement is left more to the various centres attached to the faculty. Lecturers' primary responsibility is the publication and dissemination of academic knowledge.

Whilst international ranking may be necessary for theology at a university, it should not develop an exclusivist theology isolated from local needs.

### Eurocentric

Another significant contributor to theological education's captivity to the ivory towers of academia is its Eurocentric focus. Within South Africa, a Western-orientated approach to theological education remains, which has seriously weakened the effectiveness of theological reflection in South Africa (Venter 2012:147). One such example is how the Western approach has downplayed spiritual realities (Balcomb 2013; Pobebe 2013). Maluleke (2006) has explained these issues at length using a fictional story by Mbiti to explain how theology in South Africa is largely irrelevant. He concluded that theological education should be training the graduate to cope with the African reality but all too often 'much theological and religious education on the continent continues to be essentially foreign to the African context and often designed to alien Africans from Africa' (Maluleke 2006:71). In a more recent article, Duncan (2016:7) has commented how a 'vener of Africanisation' has been installed, while academic theology continues to function in isolation from the wider South African situation. As such, theological education has been taken out of the everyday concrete situation of the local believers and placed within a Westernised bubble of ideas, making it inaccessible and excluding to the average African believer. Academic theology has tended to focus on international competition and influence over local impact. Some commentators have stated that the #FeesMustFall campaigns stemmed out of discontent for the Eurocentric nature of African universities (see Dismelo 2015; The Daily Vox 2017). In response to these protests, all course contents at faculties of theology have gone under review. Yet, if this review will be yet another veneer or epistemic change is something that will be revealed in time.

### Commodification

Another major contributor to the exclusivist nature of academic theology is its commodification. The value of a subject is no longer held in its societal worth, but in its financial value; in it being an item capable and desirable for trade (Hadebe 2017:2). 'Universities are portrayed as businesses offering knowledge packaged and branded in the form of teaching programs for sale to interested clients' (Naidoo 2017:2).

The focus is on creating profit, not on creating a locally viable outcome which could aid the believing community (Beyers 2016:4). In this regard, education is turned into a commodity available to those who can afford it, and shaped by the interest of the buyer. 'Universities are portrayed as businesses offering knowledge packaged and branded in the form of teaching programs for sale to interested clients' (Naidoo 2017:2). The first excluding effect of this commodification is that the poor (those without sufficient financial means) can no longer access theological education. 'Commodification

denies many students access to higher education and opportunities to improve their lives' (Hadebe 2017:2). Without adequate financial resources, a higher education in theology is denied. The second isolating effect is that the specific interest of the benefactor and the marketability of a product, not the general challenges of a certain locality, are the key determining factors in knowledge production. Academics and researchers are not encouraged to research their own themes and interests. Rather, they are expected to research that which is a buzz in the moment and contribute articles to pre-determined faculty themes.

What the above analysis has shown is the detrimental impact academic theology's participation in the public universities has had. Academic theology is failing to transcend its immediate context. It has become caught up in the challenges of the public university, tending to overlook or inadequately deal with the problems of the local church. As such, the discipline is locking itself up more and more in the ivory tower of academia, which in turn is producing more and more exclusive theology. Van Wyk (2017:255–261) has linked this style of theology to the Hunger Games trilogy. It is a theology 'fighting' for glory in the academic arena, seriously weakening the authentic contribution institutions could make outside of that arena (Van Wyk 2017:276). From the field research highlighted above, it was shown how many scholars are aware of the need for theology to transcend this approach, yet finding the institutional environment of academia leaves no space but to keep on playing the academic game they know so well. Theology has been caught up in the rat-race of economic gain production and survival, which has overshadowed the needs and interests of local communities, preventing them from being taken seriously.

### The problem

The problem with this exclusive nature of theology is that it is quite clearly contrary to the nature of theology presented in the opening of the article. The current situation presents a picture in which the local church has been pushed out of the frame, left to function by itself without the direct support of academic theology.<sup>12</sup> Some may argue that the lack of church influence in academic circles should be classed as positive, as the church only provides a distraction. Churches, too, have distanced themselves from academic theology for reasons, such as its irrelevance, being too academic, too liberal or too conservative. Yet, this view would seem to highlight further the exclusive nature of academic theology. The key problem with this exclusive theology is quite simple that it is not serving God's creation, making it a false theology.

'Knowledge production is not an end in itself but must result in transformation of the society from which it arises'

12. It could be argued that some churches actively took themselves out of the frame not wanting to engage with academic theology and purposefully distanced themselves. This, in some cases, is true. Yet, this should not form an excuse as there are still many denominations that seek to train ministers at academic institutions. As such, the academy has a responsibility to these denominations. In this case, the prevailing opinion is that academic theology is answering to the academy first and the local church second, resulting in a curriculum and approach, which can distance or side-line the local church.

(Hadebe 2017:6). The end of theology is not the academy but to serve God's kingdom. Theology is not an exercise in free thought or speech but 'holy speech' bound to the gospel and the church, with its main task being the edification of the church and the transformation of the world (see Webster 2003:2-3).

While the nature of theology is broadening to serve more than just those preparing for the ministry, this does not change its core nature; to be a critical reflection on God(s), which supports the believing community. As such, the needs and challenges of the local church should influence the content, proceedings and outcomes of academic theology. 'Theology serves the church, not the other way around; she's a hand-maiden, not a god' (Hiestand & Wilson 2015:122). This view of theology was clearly shown in the historic section.

However, theology embedded in a university setting can fall short of reaching the church and the world. This is not to say that the church does not have a role to play in this situation. Local churches must be active partners in this relationship. Yet, the focus of this article is on the public university. Let it not be forgotten how important academic theology should be in the life of the church, as was outlined above. As shall be shown further below, the university plays a crucial role in theological education, and this needs to be renewed.

## Why stay within the university

The above writings showed academic theology in South Africa to be apparently walking a path of isolation within the confines of academia. The public university has become the natural social setting for academic theology, and, as such, academic theology has appropriated the criteria of this setting. Thus, perhaps an obvious solution to this exclusive nature of academic theology would be to call for its withdrawal from a public university. However, the matter is not that simple. This approach would ignore potential benefits of the university, further driving a rift between science and religion, and assuming that seminaries do not suffer from issues of relevance.

## The benefits of a public university

A public university is at the forefront of knowledge. This simple observation should make anyone think twice before calling for the removal of theology from academic circles. As the above history showed, specialists in theology are necessary and a specialised training for these individuals is most beneficial. If a minister or theological leader does not have adequate training, this does not prevent them from producing theological statement. Rather, it simply means they produce inadequate, or worse, spurious theology (cf. Hiestand & Wilson 2015:57). If one takes the theological leadership of the church seriously, then this should result in these leaders being trained at the highest level, at the forefront of knowledge. In short, academic theology is needed for robust ecclesiological and theological practices.

Furthermore, the critical space which a public university provides allows development within theological thought to take place. Theology should absorb a certain degree of 'secular reasoning' so that it can practice a healthy form of self-criticism and thereby strengthen both its own internal self-understanding and its comparative relationship to other secular disciplines. (Macdonald 2010:1006)

The university provides a critical space in which ideas can be challenged. Sometimes, this criticism can be taken too far, but without it, the church would stagnate and fail to appropriate itself anew in each age. Faith and religion must be exposed to scrutiny, and the public university is a worthy setting for this scrutiny (see Phiri & Nadar 2011).

Another benefit of the public university is the multi-faith environment it presents. No longer can Christianity, or Christian theology, continue as if it were the only faith in South Africa. To do so would result in a limited reflection, understanding and engagement of and with realities in the world (Pillay 2017:5). Dialogue with other religions needs to take place. This would be to the benefit of the Christian faith in broadening its horizons as well as in avoiding fundamentalist religious conflict. In the view of Pillay, 'closing down the study of religion and faith at universities will cause an increase in religious fundamentalism and promote life-denying instead of life-enhancing practices in religion' (Pillay 2017:7).

Moving on from a multi-faith environment, the public university also provides an environment in which multiple disciplines can interact. The rift between science and theology is a thing of the past (Macdonald 2010):

[*The secular perspective*] quickly can become self-defeating: the more we transcend our own subjectivity in our collective intellectual pursuit, the more we loosen our grip on important aspects of the 'human', which in turn means that, despite our initial hopes, the more we seek to converge on the vantage point, the more 'we' as humans fade from view. (p. 1003)

In other words, to study life without faith is not really to study life at all. Those who try to maintain a rift between science and religion (Ford 2017a):

[H]ave not faced the fact that over 80% of the world's people are directly involved in some religion, or that, because of higher birth rates among the religious, this is likely to have increased by 2050. (p. 2)

'Practically speaking, the university cannot fulfil its task to teach "universal knowledge" without the church's assistance' (Hauerwas 2007:29). Theology and science now can and need to move from a time of competition to cooperation, and the public university provides the crucible in which this can happen.

Away from the argument around the benefits of the university is the realisation that withdrawing from this environment may not produce a better situation. Hiestand, an author from a seminary background, has written many works critiquing

the current break in the connection between theology and the local church (see Hiestand 2008; Hiestand & Wilson 2015). His work has been inspirational in drawing awareness for theology at a public university to also address this issue. Yet, the background of his work should not be forgotten. Removing theology from a public university to a seminary context does not guarantee it will correlate with local needs overcoming the challenges mentioned above.

## Working towards a solution

'The academic setting and the ecclesial setting represent two unique social locations. Each context has its own legitimate, yet distinct, questions' (Hiestand 2008:361). As the historic section and contemporary analysis have shown, both the church and the academy have legitimacy in themselves; this has become clear to see throughout. Yet, what also becomes clear is that while legitimately a distinct phenomenon, this is not legitimisation for theology to function in an exclusive way. The challenge then is for theology to maintain its legitimacy as an academic discipline while also correlating with local needs. Its nature should remain, but its content needs to change. In other words, theology needs to maintain an academic rigour but also be accessible to the wider community. As the historic section showed, all four examples held a strong academic rigour but also worked in such a way so as to make their ideas accessible to the wider community. This accessibility came through both the writing style and the study content. As such, theological reflections were inspired by the local context. To allow the ecclesial situation to govern the content of theological reflection, although, does not mean scientific rigour has to be done away with, especially when considering the benefit academic theology holds. Rather, academic theology is to reorganise the content and orientation of the course to answer primarily to the needs for local theological wisdom, and not internally developed ends (Farley 1983:155–154 *Theologia*). The ecclesia and academy have to correlate once more. Exclusive practices in theology have begun to define the discipline yet, this should not be so. Each theologian thus has a responsibility to make sure their work is not only framed in academic (exclusive) terms but is also brought before the local congregation in service of their own theological journey.

## Conclusion

This article started by providing a brief historical overview of four key 'academic' theologians to discern how they functioned as theologians. This history was then used as a basis to critique the current situation in South Africa. In the current situation, it was seen how academic theology has isolated itself from everyday believers, creating a specialised and exclusive discipline contrary to its intended nature. However, it was also argued that academic theology should remain in recognition of the benefits brought within a public university. As such, this article concluded by highlighting the need for academic theology to remain in the university, but to correlate its investigations (content) with the needs of everyday life and to work in a manner that is able to access

the average believer. This article in no uncertain terms has highlighted the problem. It can no longer be ignored; the state of academic theology needs to change. The theory to this is simple – public universities need to regain their contextuality and relevance while also maintaining their critical and reflective nature. There are benefits of the public university, but the traps of commodification, rankings and acontextuality need to be dealt with seriously and effectively. These three pollutants have had a major impact, which needs to be overcome for the good of academic theology and for the good of the wider community. History shows the future potential, but public institutions need to take seriously the current challenges if a positive future is to become a reality. In spite of the fact that theology faculties are working on these, much more has to be done to get down from the ivory tower and get back into the pews.

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