

Exploring the landscape of historical theology through the Lens of Geomorphology

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Abstract

The widening spectrum of scientific and theological reflection has encompassed much of the natural sciences as was evidenced in the August 2013 volume of *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* that celebrated the work of Professor Cornel du Toit. But subjects like geomorphology are far removed from reflections on the human person and thus not a traditional point of departure for theological engagement. Nevertheless some key concepts in geomorphology such as the ideas of interconnectedness, holism and scale perspectives have been tentatively explored by the author to locate human thought and actions towards and within the environment as an extension of the ethic to “love your neighbour”. Within this initial attempt of exploration were the seeds for a much greater and deeper exploration of geomorphic logic to theology, applying geomorphological concepts in the pursuit of theology and in the context of this article, to historical theology. The aim is to find traction between the two very different fields of geomorphology and theology.

Introduction

The August 2013 volume of *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* celebrated the work of Professor Cornel du Toit. He has been a pioneer in the field of science and religion, promoting the South African Science and Religion Forum and within that, the Divine Action Project.¹ The Divine Action Project was a joint initiative of the Vatican Observatory and the Centre for Theology and Natural Sciences in Berkeley in response to an address by Pope John Paul II calling for a review of the Science-Theology debate.² Over the next two decades conferences dealt with different aspects of Divine Action –

¹ Wessel Bentley and Christina Landman, “Editorial”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, August 2013, Volume XXXIX, xi.

² Detlev Tönsing, “Cornel du Toit’s Science and Religion Contribution in the Lens of the Divine Action Project: The advantage of limited aims and epistemological diversity”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, August 2013, Volume XXXIX, 8.

Quantum cosmology and the laws of nature (1992), *Chaos and complexity* (1994), *Evolutionary and molecular biology* (1996), *Neuroscience and the person* (1998) and *Quantum mechanics* (2000) – bringing together prominent researchers in the fields of science and theology.³ During this same time Du Toit organised conferences as part of the SASRF that covered similar themes but were clearly rooted in the African context, including a wide range of perspectives and emphasising the concept of the human person.⁴ In the first conference Cornel offered a theological response to 20th century cosmology.⁵ But with an ever widening spectrum of reflection in the natural sciences, Du Toit argued that the big challenge of this century is to view the various accounts of what life is in a holistic context.⁶

This widening spectrum of scientific and theological reflection has encompassed three of the four main branches of the natural sciences, namely, biology, chemistry and physics. The fourth branch, that of earth sciences, is the poorer cousin possibly because subjects such as geomorphology seem far removed from intimate reflections on the human person and so struggle to find any theological resonance. Yet it is the belief of the author that we stand to benefit by continuing the trajectory of ever-broadening perspectives to bring theology into conversation with the earth sciences, especially in relation to geomorphology. Not least, because the earth sciences challenge an anthropocentric view of life and the world that we live in.

To this end, a tentative first step was taken by the author in a paper given at the *Theological Society of South Africa* conference in 2013 to extend some key concepts in geomorphology, the ideas of inter-connectedness, holism and scale perspectives, to locate human thought and actions towards and within the environment as an extension of the ethic to "love your neighbour". Within this were the seeds for a much greater and deeper exploration of geomorphic logic to theology, applying geomorphological concepts in the pursuit of theology and in particular, in the context of this article, to historical theology. The aim is to find some traction between these two very different fields of inquiry.

³ Detlev Tönsing, "Cornel du Toit's Science and Religion Contribution", 8.

⁴ Detlev Tönsing, "Cornel du Toit's Science and Religion Contribution...", 14.

⁵ Peter Barrett, "The South Africa Science and Religion Forum: a memoir", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, August 2013, Volume XXXIX, 1.

⁶ Danie Veldsman, "The bio-century challenge: life in a holistic context. In conversation with Cornel du Toit", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, August 2013, Volume XXXIX, 27.

Dynamic systems, equilibriums, thresholds and historical theology

Geomorphology is a discipline rooted in a very long historical timescale, one that views human history as something very recent.⁷ Processes that shape landscapes like sub-aerial and sub-aqueous weathering, transport and deposition are the domain of geomorphology. One way of understanding the evolution of landscapes is through the lens of systems. The development of systems concepts in geomorphology has followed similar developments in physics, chemistry, biology, and ecology but at the same time has come to represent a radically different way of thinking in relation to geomorphic systems.⁸

Geomorphology has contributed to systems thinking in science, but this has been a reciprocal relationship in that developments in physics, chemistry, biology and ecology have influenced systems thinking in geomorphology.⁹ According to Huggett, classical mechanics and classical thermodynamics promoted the idea of equilibrium, open systems thermodynamics encouraged the idea of steady state and dynamic equilibrium and non-equilibrium thinking generated the linked ideas of complexity and chaos.¹⁰ Systems can be in various states of equilibrium or disequilibrium. A disturbance may be of an order that a system returns to the same state. Alternatively, a threshold may be exceeded which creates a tipping point and results in a radically altered landscape. Erosion gulleys and landslides are just a few examples we are familiar with in South Africa. A hillslope system may be destabilised by a major road cutting and lead to the collapse of a slope. However, where non-linear dynamics are at play a relatively insignificant perturbation such as a grass fire may have a similar disproportionate effect on the landscape.¹¹ How does this relate to theology?

The dynamism of the theological landscape

The ideas of dynamism, equilibrium, disequilibrium and thresholds are not alien to the theological landscape. Historical theology promotes the understanding that theology is something dynamic. Historical theology is a branch of theology which aims to explore the historical situations within which ideas developed or were specifically formulated.¹² The universality of God's

⁷ There is some cross-over in the sub-discipline of applied geomorphology, which is particularly concerned with practical applications to the human context and timescale.

⁸ Richard Huggett, "A history of the systems approach in geomorphology", *Géomorphologie: relief, processus, environnement*, 2/2007 | 2007, 145.

⁹ Huggett, "A history of the systems approach in geomorphology", 153.

¹⁰ Huggett, "A history of the systems approach in geomorphology", 147.

¹¹ Jonathan D. Phillips, "Sources of nonlinearity and complexity in geomorphic systems", *Progress in Physical Geography* 27,1 (2003), 5.

¹² Alister E. McGrath, *Christian theology: an introduction* (Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 144.

saving action is embedded in the experiences of people in particular cultural systems which are shaped, according to McGrath, "by the insights and limitations of persons who were themselves seeking to live the gospel in a particular context".¹³ Local circumstances have a major impact on theological formulations. The problem, argues McGrath, is that we too easily overlook the insight that theology has a history.¹⁴ It is the study of history that links us to the circumstances surrounding the development of theology in any one age.

Historical theology is not therefore simply a Christian rendering of history. To McGrath it is something more; it is subversive in nature, seeking to "indicate how easily theologians are led astray by the self-images of the age".¹⁵ Historical theology also enables us to identify landmarks (to use geomorphological language) in the development of Christian thinking that remain pertinent today (such as the Nicene Creed).¹⁶ To Geoffrey Bromiley an ideal or perfect historical theology lies beyond the limits of human possibility because even the ideas of the ideal differ so broadly that what might approximate the ideal for some, falls hopelessly short for others.¹⁷ He comments that "historical theology is not just a history of Christian theology but is itself theology".¹⁸ Historical theology reminds us that theology is a dynamic process to the core, which seems at times linear in nature, yet at other times, undergoes significant upheavals when a threshold is crossed.

Both the aim of historical theology and the various methodologies used inherently impose selectivity. Bromiley recognises that the choices lie at two levels: which theologians are to be introduced, and which of their works are to be used for the purpose? He also acknowledges the subjective nature of this selectivity:

In neither sphere can any definitive criteria be found by which to make the selection... Hence the final choice has an arbitrary element in which circumstances and preferences play a major part.¹⁹

But what is the particular value of doing historical theology? Bromiley and McGrath outline several benefits:

- It shows how the church is dynamic and has moved across the centuries and continents with an ongoing continuity in spite of every discontinuity.²⁰

¹³ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 144.

¹⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical theology: an introduction to the history of Christian thought* (Blackwell Publishers, 2010), 10.

¹⁵ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 145.

¹⁶ McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 13.

¹⁷ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical theology: an introduction* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1978), xxi.

¹⁸ Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, xxv.

¹⁹ Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, xxiii.

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- It offers examples of the way in which, and the reasons why, the conformity of the church's word to God's Word has been achieved or compromised in the different centuries and settings.²¹
- It brings a valuable accumulation of enduring insights as well as relevant warnings to today's church.²²
- It demonstrates that certain ideas came into being under very definite circumstance; and that mistakes have been made.²³

McGrath is adamant that historical theology is not restricted to the past and therefore argues:

Too often, modern trends in theology are little more than knee-jerk reactions to short-term cultural trends. The study of history makes us alert both to the mistakes of the past, and to the alarming way in which they are repeated in the present.²⁴

Bromiley is more tentative about what can be achieved. He cautions against a theological arrogance in our approach to the Christian narrative of history so that

the criticism will be constructive, not condemnatory... and both criticism and approval will be undertaken with humility, for is not the historical theologian himself a participant whose work comes under the same test?²⁵

It is important that the historical theologian works to a specific end acknowledging that she or he is a participant in theology, forging the proclamation of God's Word in authentic contemporary terms.²⁶ He concludes that historical theology, like all theology, needs to serve the ministry and the mission of the church.²⁷

Having a sense of the dynamism of theology and embracing a longer view of history, while keeping in mind the mission of the church, is essential. Paul Tillich commented that people in the twentieth century had little sense

²⁰ Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, xxvi.

²¹ Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, xxvi.

²² Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, xxvi.

²³ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 145.

²⁴ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 145.

²⁵ Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, xxvii.

²⁶ Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, xxviii.

²⁷ Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, xxviii.

of history; they were not aware of the sources of tradition from which they came.²⁸ Consequently a great part of Tillich's career in teaching theology was devoted to "tracing the history of an idea through its main stages of development, observing even subtle shifts in the nuances of meaning at the main turning points".²⁹ Stages of development, shifts, turning points – this is the language of systems and an approach to knowledge in geomorphology.

Ignorance about the development of ideas

Another key figure, Rowan Williams, the former Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, also argues that the ignorance of the theological development of ideas in time handicaps the church and its witness:

A Church that shares the widespread and fashionable illiteracy of this culture about how religious faith worked in other ages is grossly weakened in its witness. That witness has to do with a promise of universal community that is grounded not in assumptions about universal right and reason but in a narrative displaying how communication is made possible between strangers by a common relatedness to God's presence and act in history – in an historical person.³⁰

Williams sees history as a set of stories we tell in order to understand better who we are and the world we are now in.³¹ Constructing a history helps us define our own identity.³² Williams notes, "We begin with a sense of identity that is in some way fragile or questionable, and we embark on the enterprise of history to make it clearer and more secure."³³ He likens our relationship to history as to a foreign country and to historical characters as to strangers:

Good history makes us think again about the definition of things we thought we understood pretty well, because it engages not just with what is familiar but with what is strange. It recognises that "the past is a foreign country" as well as being our past.³⁴

²⁸ Carl E. Braaten, (Ed) *Paul Tillich: a history of Christian thought* (Simon & Schuster Publishers, 1968), xiv.

²⁹ Braaten, *Paul Tillich*, xvi.

³⁰ Rowan Williams, *Why study the past?* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 113.

³¹ Williams, *Why study the past?* 1.

³² Williams, *Why study the past?* 1.

³³ Williams, *Why study the past?* 23.

³⁴ Williams, *Why study the past?* 1.

Furthermore, Williams suggests that good historical writing is one that makes the familiar become unfamiliar in order to make it clearer;³⁵ in other words our identity now is “bound up with a whole range of things that are not easy for me or us, not obvious or native to the world we think we inhabit, yet which have to be recognised in their solid reality as both different from us and part of us.”³⁶ For good or ill, we are more indebted to our theological past than we will ever truly realise. Williams recognises this:

Who I am as a Christian is something which, in theological terms, I could only answer fully on the impossible supposition that I could see and grasp how all other Christian lives had shaped mine, and more specifically, shaped it towards the likeness of Christ ... I do not know, theologically speaking, where my debts begin and end.³⁷

He cautions that the characters that historical theologians engage with, and to whom all Christians are indebted to various degrees, “are not modern people in fancy dress; they have to be listened to as they are, and not judged or dismissed – or claimed or enrolled as supporters – too rapidly”.³⁸ He also cautions against seeking a definitive History and argues rather, that “We don’t have a single ‘grid’ for history; we construct it when we want to resolve certain problems about who we are now.”³⁹

Continuity, discontinuity and irrevocable changes

There is therefore a fine equilibrium to be kept between seeking continuity – linking of the present with the past in a manner that is familiar – and discontinuity – seeing the strangeness of the past in regard to the present – in history. Yet it is an important equilibrium in the theological system. Williams argues that “the risk of not acknowledging the strangeness of the past is as great as that of treating it as purely and simply a foreign country.”⁴⁰ In other words, there are two extremes to be avoided: seeking flawless continuity of our faith tradition with the past; and thinking who we are now and what we believe as being completely discontinuous with all that has gone before.

³⁵ Williams, *Why study the past?* 20.

³⁶ Williams, *Why study the past?* 24.

³⁷ Williams, *Why study the past?* 27.

³⁸ Williams, *Why study the past?* 11.

³⁹ Williams, *Why study the past?* 5.

⁴⁰ Williams, *Why study the past?* 11.

In the perspective of geomorphology, both extremes, while tempting, are impossibilities and a perturbation within this system can have irreversible consequences. If theology and historical thought is viewed as a dynamic system, then when a threshold is exceeded a significant shift occurs that does not permit a return to a previous state. In some instances a cascade effect can be triggered where one change leads to a number of other distinct and significant changes until the system settles down again. In a non-linear system a simple, small action, such as the nailing of 95 theses by Martin Luther to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, would gather momentum and set in motion something that would change the theological landscape irreversibly. Another such example would be the development and formulation over successive councils of the early church of what is commonly known as the "Nicene Creed". The creed has become a touchstone over time for mainstream Christian orthodoxy in the Western tradition, yet also represents a tipping point in the relationship between the Western and Eastern church over the *Filioque*. An even earlier example that serves to illustrate this same principle is the parting of ways between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the early church.

Crossing a threshold – the example of early Jewish-Gentile relations

Early on in the development of theological thinking in the church a threshold was exceeded in relation to Jewish-Gentile relations. Politically and socially Judaism was a recognised religion, Christianity was not. Judaism had a defined position in society and enjoyed a certain amount of security.⁴¹ Religiously, the Jew had the security of hundreds of years of unbroken tradition.⁴² Oskar Skarsaune notes the fragility of the Christian position once it became largely Gentile:

The Christians were newcomers with no pre-history, and they were painfully aware of it. The rabbis handed on a tradition of scriptural exegesis which could claim the authority of generations of excellent teachers, reaching all the way back to Moses on Mount Sinai ... And there was a basic consistency in their approach to the Bible: they not only recognised the Torah as divine, they also observed it.⁴³

⁴¹ Oskar Skarsaune, *In the shadow of the Temple* (Inter Varsity Press, 2002), 265.

⁴² Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple*, 265.

⁴³ Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple*, 266.

Thus it was impossible for a religious movement coming out of Judaism to expound Christianity without reference to and comparison with Judaism.⁴⁴ This required an encounter with Judaism on doctrinal grounds as well as from the standpoint of history and contemporary relations, whereas Judaism could be expounded without theological reference to or comparison with, Christianity.⁴⁵

The early Christian-Jewish believers shared the same identity as their fellow Jews, but believed there was a fulfilment of Messianic promises in the person of Jesus. Consequently, an emphasis on the unique history, values, and beliefs of the "in group" became necessary in order to help separate the new, essentially Jewish movement from the surrounding community; but it later, also encouraged a defensive or polemical attitude toward the "others".⁴⁶

This new Jewish-Christian grouping viewed Jesus as bringing the earlier history to a climax, yet in a manner that demanded a significant reinterpretation of that same history. Rowan Williams, in his book *Why study the past? The quest for the Historical Church*, argues that the New Testament should be seen as a great attempt to write history as a consequence of revolution; maintaining one story, despite enormous breaks and redirections.⁴⁷ The New Testament is more than a narrative of what happened in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; it represents a set of memories that covers events of a great disruptive force.⁴⁸

He highlights that there is not a single grid for history, rather differing narratives that define a subject and persist through time, providing continuity.⁴⁹ There is also an element of discontinuity that is essential to history, which means that history and revolution are always born together. In relation to religious groups, Judith Banki remarks:

Each group will tend to see the larger patterns of history in the light of how they have affected the destiny of the group. Obviously, Roman Catholics and Anglicans have different views of Henry VIII, just as Protestants and Catholics do of Luther.⁵⁰

Drawing on the French philosopher, Michel de Certeau, Williams argues that a revolution, a major rupture in a corporate experience such as the life, death

⁴⁴ Banki, J.H., "What and how Jews teach about Evangelicals and Christianity", in Rudin, A.J. & Wilson, M.R. (eds.) (1987) *A time to speak*, 94.

⁴⁵ Banki, "What and how Jews teach about Evangelicals and Christianity", 94.

⁴⁶ Banki, "What and how Jews teach about Evangelicals and Christianity", 92.

⁴⁷ Williams, *Why study the past?* 8.

⁴⁸ Williams, *Why study the past?* 7.

⁴⁹ Williams, *Why study the past?* 5.

⁵⁰ Banki, "What and how Jews teach about Evangelicals and Christianity", 93.

and resurrection of Jesus, provoked people to review and re-interpret their past.⁵¹

It was this tension between continuity and discontinuity of ideas that deeply worried the earliest Christians. Jewish and Gentile Christians were aware that a familiar world had been broken apart and reassembled, rather tenuously at first and held together through paradox and skilful redefinition.⁵² Heresy became anything that threatened to break the developing unity of ideas. Williams elaborates:

Time and again, what they identified as heresy turns out to be, in one form or another, a system that reintroduces into a world rather precariously put together after great ruptures some kind of deep division – between Old and New Testaments, between Christ and God, between the divine and human natures of the Saviour.⁵³

Despite this, early Christianity was characterised by considerable diversity.⁵⁴ Churches varied in their theology and praxis.

Diversity in the early church

In regard to theology, apologetics began to come to the fore in the second century through writers such as Justin Martyr (c.100 – 165). A more formalised and recorded theological debate began in earnest once the church ceased to be persecuted.⁵⁵ Likewise, with praxis, the church had no one divine pattern of organisation, leadership or worship because the early church was a dynamic phenomenon.⁵⁶ Early Christianity embraced diversity as long as there was essential unity with respect to the person of Christ.⁵⁷ The reality of this diversity among the New Testament churches was so real that it exposes the naivety of any desire to “get back to the New Testament church” since one must ultimately ask, “To which church should we return?”⁵⁸

According to James Dunn, we find existing and competing in the early church Jewish Christianity, Hellenistic Christianity, Apocalyptic Christianity and early Catholicism.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, within this diversity there were developments that were considered unacceptably diverse. For Jewish Chris-

⁵¹ Williams, *Why study the past?* 6.

⁵² Williams, *Why study the past?* 8.

⁵³ Williams, *Why study the past?* 8.

⁵⁴ Patzia, *The emergence of the Church* (Inter Varsity Press, 2001), 144.

⁵⁵ McGrath, *Christian theology*, 8.

⁵⁶ Patzia, *The emergence of the Church*, 144.

⁵⁷ Idea of Dunn, referred to by Patzia, *The emergence of the Church*, 144.

⁵⁸ Patzia, *The emergence of the Church*, 144.

⁵⁹ Patzia, *The emergence of the Church*, 144.

tianity it was Ebionitism; for Apocalyptic Christianity, Montanism; for Hellenistic Christianity, Gnosticism and for early Catholicism, rigid ecclesiastical institutionalism.⁶⁰

Ebionitism was an early Christological heresy, which treated Jesus as a purely human figure, but recognised that he was endowed with charismatic gifts which distinguished him from other humans.⁶¹ Montanism was a prophetic movement originating in Phrygia around CE.170. A Christian named Montanus began uttering new prophecies, which he and his followers sought recognition for from the church. Montanus and his followers claimed that their movement was the beginning of a new age demonstrated by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.⁶² The consequence of this was to diminish the significance of the events of the New Testament and the belief that the death and resurrection of Jesus had in fact ushered in the new age; the church therefore rejected Montanism as heresy.⁶³

Gnosticism was a diverse and complex movement, not dissimilar to the modern New Age movement; it was viewed as a major challenge by many early Christian writers.⁶⁴ Salvation through hidden knowledge or *gnōsis* was stressed. Cosmological dualism was an essential feature: Gnostics argued that there was a radical dualism between the “physical” and the “spiritual”, with matter being inherently evil.⁶⁵ From an historical-theological point of view it is interesting to note that Gnosticism has been a permanent shadow of the church and, as Robert Vosloo has noted, “seems to loom large at the moment”.⁶⁶

A parting of ways and a threshold crossed

By the end of the first Century there had been a parting of ways between Christianity and Judaism and a split between Jewish and Gentile Christianity.⁶⁷ This division between Christianity and Judaism brought with it the depreciation and eventual extinction of the Jewish Christianity in the mainstream church – to which the New Testament writings make plain, the worldwide church owes its very existence.⁶⁸ The reasons for this parting are many

⁶⁰ Patzia, *The emergence of the Church*, 144

⁶¹ McGrath, *Christian theology*, 356.

⁶² Justo L. González, *The story of Christianity* (Harper San Francisco, Vol. 1, 1984), 76.

⁶³ González, *The story of Christianity*, Vol. 1, 76.

⁶⁴ McGrath, *Christian theology*, 15.

⁶⁵ McGrath, *Christian theology*, 188.

⁶⁶ Robert Vosloo, Beyond spirituality, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, (No.127, 2007), 84.

⁶⁷ Patzia, *The emergence of the Church*, 145.

⁶⁸ Moltmann, J (1993) *God in creation: a new theology of creation and the Spirit of God* (Fortress Press, 1993), 295.

and complex, some of which have already been discussed with the issue of continuity and discontinuity. Yet there were other contributing factors that moved the church to cross this threshold, resulting in a significant and largely irreversible shift in the system.

The Jewish persecution of Jewish Christians was a factor in the split: all who deviated from Pharisaic norms were no longer welcome within the community.⁶⁹ Jewish Christians also refused to fight in the two Jewish revolts against Rome (CE 66–73 and 132–135) and thus compromised their allegiance to the Jewish community and state.⁷⁰ Coupled with this was the dramatic event of the fall of Jerusalem, which denoted the end of Jewish political independence and a particular religious way of life and further coloured the emerging church's theological interpretation of history.⁷¹ With the destruction of the temple a reformulated Rabbinic Judaism grew to dominate, which eventually came to consider all Jewish Christians *personae non gratae* in relation to the synagogue.⁷² But by then the church had become overwhelmingly Gentile, and so reasoned that there was no more need for the support of the Jewish root. It is the judgement of the Jewish philosopher, Abraham Heschel, that "the children did not arise and call the mother blessed; instead, they called the mother blind".⁷³

Judaism and Jewish Christianity were consigned to the scrapheap of church history, behind Christianity's advancement. Marvin Wilson remarks that "the tearing away from Jewish roots resulted in the Church defining itself largely in non-Jewish terminology".⁷⁴ The abrogation of the Jewish faith of Jesus became conviction within the first few hundred years of the birth of the Christian Gentile church. As Christianity distanced itself and dis-identified itself from Judaism it also developed an anti-Semitic tradition and doctrine that in later centuries would have tragic consequences.⁷⁵ A threshold had been crossed.

Nevertheless the parting of ways between Judaism and Christianity did not happen overnight. Jewish scholar, David Rokeah asserts that the last friendly literary venture to win over the Jews was Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, written in about the mid-second century.⁷⁶ At this same time there was a hardening among official Jewish attitude towards Christianity,

⁶⁹ Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 88.

⁷⁰ Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, 88.

⁷¹ Williams, *Why study the past?* 7.

⁷² Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, 88.

⁷³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The insecurity of freedom* (Schocken Books, 1972), 169.

⁷⁴ Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, 89.

⁷⁵ M. Perry & F.M. Schweitzer, *Jewish-Christian encounters over the centuries* (Peter Lang, 1994), iv.

⁷⁶ D. Rokeah in Graham Keith, *Hated without a cause? A survey of anti-Semitism* (Paternoster Press, 1997), 92.

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evidenced by the Sages instructing Jews not to discuss their faith with Christians.⁷⁷ Keith argues that before the second century the church could still have staked a claim to represent true Judaism in a pluralistic religion. Later, a shift occurred and an anti-Jewish attitude formed an integral part of the testimony and self-identity of the Christian church, which the church has never really left behind.⁷⁸

Perturbations, points of no-return and simplified reality

This example serves to illustrate two important aspects to historical theology as a dynamic system of knowledge. First, there is no going back or undoing of what may be perceived as past mistakes. This is contrary to the view of McGrath who has a view of those who undertake historical theology as being guardians of the Christian faith: "Too often, modern trends in theology are little more than knee-jerk reactions to short-term cultural trends. The study of history makes us alert both to the mistakes of the past, and to the alarming way in which they are repeated in the present."⁷⁹ He maintains that theological developments are not irreversible and that the mistakes of the past may be corrected.⁸⁰ But once there is a perturbation in the system and a threshold has been crossed, more often than not, a new reality emerges that precludes any return to what was before. An example from geomorphology: a hillslope where the angle of repose has been exceeded, coupled with a rise in the level of the phreatic surface, can result in a landslide. Once the landslide has happened it has happened, the hillslope system adjusts, and there is no return to the previous form.

There is no returning theologically or in practice to being the New Testament, Apostolic church that many independent or Pentecostal churches say they *are* or aspire to be. There is no possibility of returning to the church in its pristine youth, before it erred in matters of faith, as envisaged by the Reformers and the Church of England in splitting from Rome.⁸¹ There is no repeating of past mistakes since past mistakes are in the past and the potential for new mistakes, albeit of a similar nature, present themselves in this century in vastly different social, cultural and ecclesial contexts.

Second, reality must be simplified in order to be understood. Systems in order to be engaged with, and communicated about, must be simplified in some manner. In theology, as in geomorphology, every context is different with a variety of variables coming into play, some universal, some specific,

⁷⁷ Keith, *Hated without a cause?* 92.

⁷⁸ Keith, *Hated without a cause?* 93.

⁷⁹ McGrath, *Historical theology*, 16.

⁸⁰ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 145.

⁸¹ William M. Jacob, *The making of the Anglican Church Worldwide* (SPCK, 1997), 9.

some macro, and some micro. A model or theory of complex reality must by necessity be constructed. In geomorphology this may be the evolution of geomorphic systems theory. The focus of the complexity written into any given model will be constructed with an end in mind, a research goal, something that will be described as accurately as possible. In theology this may be the advancement of evangelical or liberal perspectives or feminist or womanist or liberation theologies. More recently it has extended to doing eco-theology. Essentially, at the core of each theological knowledge stream, is the belief that a particular reality has not been adequately engaged with and needs to be represented. This theological process has happened down through the ages with the major doctrinal debates and developments as well as on the key historical figures being recorded as the history of the church.

However, the recorded history of the Church is not necessarily the real history of the church. There are the other stories of the hidden, invisible, unwritten histories of the faithful ordinary people of God in every generation; his-story and her-story that will never be told. Thus Rowan Williams writes:

The true Church has no real history, since it is always that community of persons (not wholly coterminous with its membership of the visible institution, in which there will always be those not fully obedient to God) in whose lives the kingdom has come.⁸²

This paradox between the visible and invisible church throughout time, between the strangeness and foreignness of history and the sense of continuity or discontinuity with our present forms of Christianity create many challenges in the study of historical theology. William Placher notes the ambiguity of the story of Christianity in the following quote. Although rather long it is worth including in full because it clearly illustrates the theme of the many and various complex historical contexts in Christianity:

Christian ideals inspired many of the efforts to end slavery, but slave owners quoted the Bible too. Both sides of every war fought by Christians have evoked religious principles. A Christian-inspired conviction that the world had a rational order often inspired scientific advance, but defenders of outdated scientific theories have also appealed to theological premises. In late antiquity, when many philosophers treated anything physical as evil, Christians affirmed the goodness of the physical world as part of God's creation, but Christianity has

⁸² Williams, *Why study the past?* 16.

led some to deny the value of this world. The very first Christians gave women positions of authority and influence unusual in their society, but in other times Christianity has been cited as a justification for assigning women a subordinate place. Christian theology tolerated and too often encourages a long history of anti-Semitism, and no responsible history of Christian theology written in the twentieth century can ignore the haunting shadow of the Holocaust.⁸³

Yet this only serves to illustrate the importance of studying the historical contexts and development of theological ideas. Consequently, the aim of historical theology necessarily shapes the methodologies. Placher adds a caution that the various church traditions, church historians and historical theologians have had to clarify their logic and integrity and have consequently tended to accentuate the *positive* interpretations and story of the church.⁸⁴ To some extent in an age of historical scepticism or even cynicism (with a hermeneutic of suspicion) alternate historical narratives on the church are being presented.

With the development of oral historical methodology the voices of ordinary people or in the words of Williams, the invisible church, the little people, are being captured and given a place in the historical matrix. With this, their role in doing or even shaping theology is also being given space. With social networking and blogging many previously unheard voices are now being given a platform from which to be heard. This is a recent threshold that has been crossed, which with the benefit of hind-sight, will be seen to have a significant effect on the way theological ideas evolve and are communicated.⁸⁵

Conclusion

A closing thought on geomorphology and theology. The aim of this article was to find traction between geomorphology and theology. In the Divine Action project three levels of traction were distinguished: traction as consonance, traction as consistency and a third level, not aspired to by participants of the Divine Action Project, where theological theories are derived from the sciences.⁸⁶ Geomorphology does not lend itself to the traditional theological

⁸³ William C. Placher, *A history of Christian theology* (Westminster Press, 1983), 13

⁸⁴ Placher, *A history of Christian theology*, 13.

⁸⁵ This is a topic for another article.

⁸⁶ Traction as Consonance seeks to establish a general resonance between theological language and the results of natural science. Traction as Consistency envisages that theological assertions be formulated in a way that is specific enough to enable conflict to arise with

interaction on the topics of human consciousness or the human person associated with the Divine Action Project or South African Science and Religion Forum. But it does, however, provide a useful means of engaging with a theological meta-perspective, the bigger picture of how theological systems develop, which is also the domain of historical theology.

The traction between geomorphology and historical theology is around systems, perturbations and thresholds, providing a valuable reminder that theology is part of a dynamic process given to upheavals at times. In this sense, the article has been a tentative engagement with the third level of traction, not deriving entirely new theories from science, but certainly affirming existing dynamics with theology through the lens of geomorphology.

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