EDITED BY JOHN ALLAN KNIGHT AND IAN S. MARKHAM

THE CRAFT OF INNOVATIVE THEOLOGY

ARGUMENT AND PROCESS

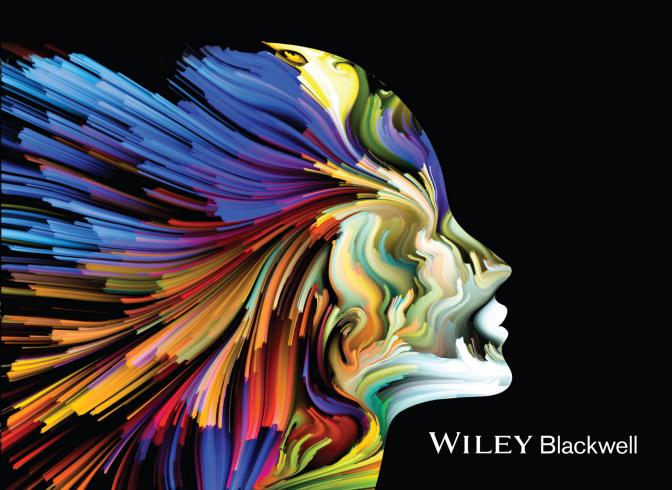**The Craft of Innovative Theology**

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WILEY Blackwell

For Melody and Lesley – our companions on the journey of life

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The Acknowledgments

From the Editors

We are grateful to Catriona King, the commissioning editor from Wiley Blackwell, who saw the potential in this idea. It has been delightful to work with Catriona. The subsequent readers' reports transformed the project and added depth and texture. Thanks to Conant Fund of the Episcopal Church, we had sufficient funds to cover the costs of – what became – a virtual conference and our talented and capable research assistant.

Jean Cotting was our research assistant for this project. She is organized, efficient, and extremely capable. Along with working with all the contributors (and becoming the master of the gentle reminder), she organized the discussion sessions, shared the results of the sessions with contributors, and put together the entire glossary. All of this was done during the great pandemic of 2020; and all of this was done with humor and graciousness. Thank you Jean. Then in the concluding stages of the project, Sam Burke stepped forward and assisted the editors by finalizing the manuscript and helping with the copyediting and the proof stage. Thank you Sam. We are grateful to Taryn Habberley, who did a marvelous job with the index.

Finally, we are grateful to all those who added this assignment to their busy lives. We are proud and delighted by the quality of the essays. This was not a regular writing assignment; each contributor needed to shape their essay for the book. They all did it so well. Thank you.

From John Knight

First, of course, I'd like to thank Ian Markham, my co-editor. It has been a delight to work with Ian, who brought all kinds of gifts to the project that I simply don't have. I could not have asked for a better co-editor.

I am also grateful to Marty Shaffer, Dean of Liberal Arts, and Thom Wermuth, Vice President of Academic Affairs, at Marist for supporting my research over the years. I'm also grateful to Andrei Buckareff, my colleague at Marist, whose friendship I value greatly and whose knowledge and expertise has kept me from many philosophical mistakes over the years.

Finally, of course, I'm grateful to my family: Ella, Johnny, and Melody. Their patience with me is completely undeserved. I'm especially thankful for the wise advice and counsel, companionship, friendship, incisive but kind critique, and unfailing love from my wife, Melody. My life has been fortunate and blessed in many ways, but their presence is the best part of it.

From Ian Markham

The idea of a "research methods textbook" that takes people to a place where they can write complex research articles was birthed in endless conversations at The Grape and Bean pub with John Knight. It has been a privilege to work with John. He saw possibilities in the project that I did not see. I am grateful for John's expertise and sense of fun that he brought to this project as co-editor.

I am blessed with a board of trustees that understands that the writing of books is part of my duties as dean and president of Virginia Theological Seminary. In particular my board chair, Dr. David Charlton, is not just one of the wisest voices of counsel that I have ever known but also has been completely supportive of my writing and teaching. I am deeply grateful for his leadership of the board.

My senior staff – Melody Knowles, Jacqui Ballou, Katie Glover, and Linda Dienno – provide me with much needed space to write. Cassandra Gravina is a remarkable executive assistant. I appreciate them all so much.

Please allow me to acknowledge my debt our US family. To Elaine and Ian, we love you. I am grateful every day for the joy that Luke, my son, brings to the lives of his parents. Lesley and I find life all the richer because of his presence. The editors have decided to dedicate this book to our wives. For Lesley, one is never sure what exactly is around the corner of life, but I am so pleased that I am making the journey with you.

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Introduction

Most professors are better at imparting content than they are at imparting research skills. Professors are good at explaining the complexities of Aquinas or the details of Kant's categorical imperative. But they are less good at helping a student learn how to *think* about a new way to interpret this thinker or *defend* an unfashionable position. Beyond the basics, such as thinking critically and avoiding plagiarism, many professors usually don't teach a student how to move the discipline on to a new set of questions or a new approach or a potential solution to an old problem. For the Masters' student trying to write a thesis or a student starting on a Ph.D. dissertation, we have an old-fashioned system of "trial and error" – you try, the professor tells you that it is wrong, and you try again. There is a need for a book that explains *how* to write in such a way that you advance a discipline; there is a need for a book that explains *why* this article is great and that it should be a model of great research writing.

This book sets out to solve this problem. We do so in two ways. First, toward the end of this introduction we set out what we take to be the basics of writing publishable research essays. Second, we offer sixteen model "research" articles. Surrounding each article is an apparatus that explains precisely why this is a model research article. We make explicit what is often implicit. We explain about the importance of the signpost, the accurate representation of positions you do not hold, the way in which objections are anticipated, why this footnote is important, and how a good piece of writing ultimately drags the reader to feel that this argument might be right even if his or her instinct is to find the argument mistaken.

Therefore, the first purpose of this book is to teach the art of writing good, creative, research-orientated theology. Our target readers are all those trying to write a Masters' thesis or beginning work on their doctorate. But the book is also intended to provide the basis of an "innovative theology" course. This is a course that takes a group of students through a set of issues, loosely clustered around the key themes in systematic theology, that are models of good theological writing with theses that are provocative. A professor can select certain chapters or simply work through each chapter and in so doing teach both content and the art of research writing.

We did try to make sure that the book touches a range of different approaches to the writing of innovative theology. So Pamela Jones, primarily, employs a historical approach to the theme of race in the Southern Baptist Conference. Keith Ward attends closely to the biblical text in his discussion of eschatology. Andrei Buckareff brings the rigors of analytical philosophy to the issue of hell. In addition, we were interested in writing that crosses disciplines. As a result, the engagement of science is prominent with articles on anthropology (Celia Deane-Drummond), biological evolution (Christopher Southgate), and artificial intelligence or AI (Ian Markham). We wanted

articles that connected with the dilemmas of living. Trevor Bechtel explores the issues around the eating of animals, while Kathryn Blanchard takes COVID-19 as a case study in business ethics. We wanted some essays that exhibited an interfaith sensitivity. Therefore, Tinu Ruparell writes about religious pluralism and Cass Fisher reflects on the whole concept of Jewish theology. We wanted some texts that are very accessible – Thomas Oord eases the reader into a controversial thesis in a very gentle and readable way – and we wanted other articles to illustrate what participation in a highly technical discussion, where the scholar is completely on top of the literature and the current conversation – Leigh Vicens and John Knight met this goal perfectly. We wanted different writing styles, from those who love stories and illustrations – Martyn Percy and Trevor Bechtel – to those who appeal primarily to precise logical distinctions – Andrei Buckareff. For the teacher and the reader working through this book, the result is that you are introduced to a vast spectrum of approaches. But they all share the virtue of being great examples of provocative, innovative research writing.

Approaching the Book

There are two ways that this book can be used. First, a professor can start at the beginning and treat the book as a textbook for "creative theology." Second, a professor can move around the book focusing on those chapters that are easier for a beginner to access first and moving on to those chapters that are more advanced. This works for a "research methods" course. Now there are many "research methods" books on the market, but none do the work of providing research method techniques for the student who is going to start writing at the level of a Ph.D. or a research Master's Degree. This text teaches research writing at the highest academic level. If used for a research methods course, then the result is that the student at the end of the course will have a real sense of the different types of research levels and different types of research writing.

Research Levels

We deliberately wanted a book that embraced a full spectrum of research writing, from the very accessible to the very difficult. To give the reader a sense of the level, each chapter has a ranking. Level 1 means that the article is accessible and teaches basic research skills. Level 2 means that the article has certain concepts that will require explanation, but a good student can grasp the issues. Level 3 means that the article assumes some knowledge of the field and, without such literacy, the argument will be difficult to grasp. One assumption we are making here is that reading articles that are technically beyond the reader actually helps the reader to grow. With the help of the glossary (all words in bold in the text are explained in the glossary at the end of the book) and with the sheer discipline of reading to the end, the reader will learn how to read at such a technical level. Level 4 means that there is a level of technical understanding and background knowledge that is essential for understanding the article. In the end, research articles are an act of participation in a pre-existing conversation. To have credibility, one must know the existing participants in the conversation. The essays included in this book exhibit this kind of credibility and exemplify the ultimate goal of great innovative academic writing.

We have four articles at each ranking. At the first research level, Ian Markham offers an essay in Christology that argues that Jesus (the first-century Jewish male) could have been Eternal Word made flesh in a different human form; he takes as his case study a person with Down's Syndrome and argues that the Eternal Wisdom could have been made manifest in such a life. Also at this level, there is Pamela Jones offering a historical survey of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and its journey to overcome the stigma of racism; she suggests that shifting attitudes in the SBC are partly linked to declining membership. Ian Markham has a second article at this level, in which he explores AI. He argues that it is possible that the church might have to face the emergence of "self-conscious" AI entities that then should be granted human rights. And finally Thomas Oord's chapter "Rentless Love and the Afterlife" argues that God would not compel a person to be either in heaven or hell. God's character is unchangeable and that character does not compel.

At the second level, the book starts with Tinu Ruparell exploring the implications for theology of religious pluralism. He makes the case that all theology must take interreligious conversations seriously. Trevor Bechtel takes a serious look at the eating of animals; he argues that factory farming is deeply wrong and that no animal should be eaten that has not had a good life. Kathryn Blanchard looks at the debate in the US over COVID-19 – health or business. She argues for a vision of business that takes seriously the full range of stakeholders. The last chapter at this level is written by Keith Ward; his essay argues that Christians should treat the language about the return of Christ in the same way as the creation narrative. To harmonize with the scientific narrative, we need to recognize that the language is not descriptive of the return of the resurrected Christ to Earth, but instead an affirmation that ultimately God's providential plans for creation will be realized.

At the third level, we have two chapters on science and religion. Celia Deane-Drummond reflects on what it means to be distinctively human. She advocates for getting away from "Image of God" language and instead drawing on Christology. Christopher Southgate argues that although evolution is true, it does create real problems for theology. His suggested solution is a compound theodicy. Andrei Buckareff looks at hell, suggesting that persons in hell will not necessarily be "unhappy" and that there is always an option to escape. Finally, in this third level, Martyn Percy invites the reader to see how all faith is conditioned in different ways by the culture in which it grows.

At the fourth level, we have Leigh Vicens who provides a nuanced account of the concept of responsibility. Given that no human can avoid sinning, in what sense should we be held responsible? Demonstrating mastery of the literature, she sees blame as a moral protest concept; it is not so much the person that is blamed but the actions that we do. The other level four essays are all in Part VI. John Knight teases out some linguistic assumptions underpinning liberal theology. Cass Fisher looks at the way in which Jewish studies should be developing the arguments for "theological reference" (namely you can properly refer to God) rather than continuing to deny the legitimacy of theological reflection. And finally, John Knight in the last essay in the book, takes a particular argument – the slingshot argument of Marshall – and shows that it does not invalidate correspondence theories of truth.

One goal here is to create the "self-conscious" reader who can see and appreciate good academic writing. At the end of this book, you will understand the achievement of these different essays. In so doing, when you read other articles and books you will be able to place and recognize the achievement of those texts. But before moving on to the chapters we've just mentioned, let's turn to the basic elements of publishable academic writing.

For the Student: Basics of Writing for Publication

In this section we'll do three things. We'll first talk about the importance of asking a good question (which in your writing you'll attempt to answer). Next, we'll introduce the basic parts of any good essay. Finally, we'll say a few words about the process of producing a publishable essay.[1]

Every Good Piece of Writing is an Answer to a Question

When reading any source, whether it's an ancient text or a scholarly book or article, it's important to figure out just what question the author is asking. That is the first step in any good interpretation. But focusing on the question is important not only for reading well but also for writing well. When you're setting out to write an essay, make sure you have a good question. But what makes a question a good one? To our minds, a good question has several characteristics. First, it should be authentic – that is, it should be original to your essay. That doesn't mean that no one has ever asked it before. Rather, it should be a question that either has not been answered or has not been answered to your satisfaction. In your hands it is a question that can yield an original contribution to scholarship in theology. And making an original contribution will be the most important consideration in determining whether your essay is publishable.

Second, a good question is one that is answerable. There are two parts to this characteristic. First, there must be evidence or arguments capable of supporting a reasonable answer. Take, for example, the following question: "What did prehistoric people think were the most persuasive forms of argument?" Since the people in question are prehistoric, there won't be any evidence to support an answer. Second, it must be capable of an answer within the space constraints of the journal – normally around twenty pages or so. "How have the relations between church and state changed in Europe between the middle ages and the present?" It's questionable whether a book would have sufficient room for an adequate answer to that question; certainly an article is too short.

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[1] As you begin to write your dissertation, keep in mind that you will eventually want to publish it as a book. The following works are very helpful in this task: William Germano, *From Dissertation to Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); idem, *Getting It Published: A Guide for Scholars and Anyone Else Serious about Serious Books* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Beth Luey, ed., *Revising Your Dissertation: Advice from Leading Editors* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004); and Susan Rabiner and Alfred Fortunato, *Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction—and Get It Published* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002). While revising our dissertations for publication, however, we found it extremely useful to submit some portions (usually not a whole chapter) to journals for publication. We found the feedback from the anonymous reviewers to be extremely helpful. Thus, we have focused most of our comments on writing article-length essays. In our comments here, we are indebted to Victoria Reyes, "How to write an effective journal article and get it published (essay)," *Inside Higher Ed*, https://www.insidehighered. com/advice/2017/05/09/how-write-effective-journal-article-and-get-it-published-essay; "How to get published in an academic journal: top tips from editors," *The Guardian*, Jan. 3, 2015, https://www. theguardian.com/education/2015/jan/03/how-to-get-published-in-an-academic-journal-top-tips-from-editors; and Faye Halpern, Thomas A. Lewis, Anne Monius, Robert Orsi, and Christopher White, *A Guide to Writing in Religious Studies*, https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/religious_studies.pdf.

Third, a good question is one that is consequential. If the answer to the question – your thesis – is shown to be true, there will be consequences for the field. Perhaps it will open up new ways of thinking about some particular question; perhaps some conventional view will have to be changed. These consequences tie into the question of motivation. What is motivating you to write this essay? Very often it will be to provide a counterargument to some view you think mistaken. It might be to lay the groundwork for a new direction in addressing some theological issue. Essentially, a good question can provide a follow-up answer to "So what? So what if you're right?" If you've formulated a good question, you'll be able to answer the "So what?" question by articulating the consequences of your answer. And these consequences should be spelled out in your conclusion.

Every Good Piece of Writing Has a Beginning, a Middle, and an End

A Beginning: The Introduction

We find it helpful to write the introduction first, to make explicit how we want to proceed. But most often it will need to be rewritten after the essay is substantially completed, as arguments regularly change a bit during writing. But in the final draft of your introduction, make sure the argument is clear. How do you know if it's clear? Suppose you're on the subway and strike up a conversation with the person seated next to you. If that person asks you to explain the argument in your paper before she gets off at the next stop, could you explain it without resorting to technical vocabulary? That clear, concise explanation should be included in your abstract and your introduction.

The introduction should serve four functions. First, it should contextualize your essay. A good introduction will describe previous work on the subject and show that there is a problem or a lacuna in the literature that needs to be addressed. Second, the introduction should show exactly how your essay addresses the problem. This is where you will state the precise question you will be answering and the thesis for which the essay will argue. Third, it's very helpful if the introduction provides a brief roadmap of your argument that states in a concise and orderly way the explanation you gave to the hypothetical person on the subway. Editors are busy people; don't make their job harder than it needs to be. When an author makes their job easier by making clear, right in the introduction, what the essay will argue, the whole process goes more smoothly and quickly. Fourth, make sure to mention the broader implications of your essay for contributing to some ongoing conversation. You can spell this out in more detail in the conclusion, but it should be mentioned in the introduction.

B Middle: The Argument

The middle section is where you make your argument. In general, we find it helpful if each step in your argument has its own section. The sections may or may not have a title (i.e. the sections may just be numbered); the journal you pick may have guidelines for this.

Not all arguments rely on textual evidence (a purely logical or *a priori* argument won't), but even those that don't will likely involve some text that you are disputing. If your argument involves textual evidence, you'll need to do more than simply quote the texts. You will need to interpret them. This will require several steps. First, either simply quote the text or re-state in a summary fashion what the author is saying. Next, if there are ambiguities, state the various meanings that the text might have, then specify which meaning is most supportive of your argument. Then show how, in the context of the entire text, this meaning is the best one. You can do this by noting a contradiction or an adverse logical ramification to the alternate meanings. Finally, explain exactly how the text in question supports your argument.

On the other hand, if you are criticizing a text, state the various meanings that the text might have, then specify which meaning is most resistant to your critique. Then you have two alternatives. First, you can show that this is the only meaning that can withstand your critique. Second, you can show that even this most resistant meaning cannot withstand your critique.

You will also need to consider and refute counterarguments. If there are counterarguments in the literature, you need to find them and argue against them. And if there are other possible counterarguments that have not yet been raised, you'll need to articulate them and refute them as well.

C End: The Conclusion

Your conclusion should include three elements. First, summarize concisely the findings of your essay, including the thesis. Second, without trivializing your essay, specify the limitations of your argument. Claiming to have done more than you actually have will reduce your credibility. Third, explain your original contribution. How has your essay done something that other publications have not? Finally, propose possibilities for future work, describing how such possibilities have been made possible by the work your essay has accomplished.

Process

Now that we've mentioned some of the basic elements of a publishable essay, let's talk about the process of writing it.

Read, Read, Read!

The first thing to do, of course is research and read. Read a lot. Make notes on the reading. Make sure your research is current and complete. As you're reading, think about the way you will explain to the reader how your essay relates to work that has already been published. It's not necessary to mention every previous publication on your topic, but situating your essay in the context of previous work in the field is necessary to demonstrating your specific contribution. In addition, as you're reading and doing research, think about how to formulate the question your essay will answer. As you're considering various formulations, remember the elements of a good question as we discussed earlier. It is not uncommon to begin with an overly broad question and, as you read more, narrow the question down until finally it is narrow enough to be answerable within the space of an article-length essay.

Decide on a Journal

First, submit your essay to only ONE journal at a time. Often, authors write the essay first and then decide on a journal. The process will probably be faster and easier, however, if you decide on the journal first. The problem of writing the article first and then deciding on the journal latter is that the guidelines of each journal varies significantly. Hours can be wasted as you change the citation system and delete pages of text that exceed their word limit.

Know the audience and the most common topics of the journal. The best way to do this, in addition to reading the description on their web site, is to read several articles from the journal to get a sense of the kinds of discussions they publish. If your preferred journal is published in the UK and has primarily British readers, you should not assume, for example, that they all know the American system (and similarly for British writers publishing in the US). You can ask your advisor to recommend a couple of journals. Look at the journal's web site for submission

guidelines (citation style, word limit, etc.), and follow them carefully as you're writing. This will not only save you time but will also avoid irritating the editors right out of the box.

In addition, note that journals have a specific identity. *Religious Studies*, for example, focuses on philosophy of religion; submitting an essay to that journal discussing the relationship between Canaanite and Israelite religion would be pointless. *Theology Today*, while it publishes scholarly articles, also publishes essays pitched to a broader readership than practicing scholars. So it's helpful to decide on the audience to which you wish to speak and pick your journal accordingly. This may seem obvious, but we hear from editors that it is surprising how many essays are submitted to journals whose focus has almost nothing to do with the essay.

Finally, think about how quickly you want your work to be published. Some journals are more prestigious than others and have a higher rate of rejection. In addition, some journals are known for their lengthy wait before publication. We have had articles accepted as is, but it took two years after acceptance until the articles appeared in print. Some journals with lengthy wait times will publish your essay online while it is waiting; listing the "doi" number on your cv will show prospective employers that your work is publishable.

Formulate a Good Question

Remember the elements of a good question we discussed earlier. Your essay will be an answer to the question you have formulated. Confine your paper to answering that question. The strongest papers answer one question convincingly, provide plenty of evidence and arguments to support the answer, and position the argument within the overall conversation in the field. This will often mean that you cannot publish a whole dissertation chapter in a journal article. Instead, you may need to take one argument or sub-argument from the chapter and resituate it into a contemporary conversation in the literature.

Outline

The structure of your paper is as important as the content. Structure your outline so that it's as easy as possible for a reader to follow your argument from beginning to end. Every good essay follows a strong narrative arc, and this should be displayed in your outline. This narrative arc can be a logical or historical progression, and it will constitute the structure of your argument. We like to have an outline in mind before we start writing. Others like to start writing and get inspiration and ideas before they start writing. However you begin, a good essay will follow a well-structured outline.

Write

Make sure to explain clearly how your work is an original contribution. Even if your essay is an interpretation of an aspect of another scholar's work, or a reinterpretation of a theological concept, you must still have something original to say in order for the piece to be publishable. This contextualization is crucial and is a common reason for rejection of articles after peer review. Don't be bashful when you write. Make sure your paper demonstrates a strong authorial voice that is neither unduly modest nor overconfident. Above all, seek clarity. Writing that is clear and easy to read is also easier to understand and more persuasive. Keep in mind that clarity does not equate to superficiality, and clear writing does not necessarily involve overgeneralizations. Generally speaking, language that is more specific is clearer and less conducive to misunderstanding.

Always keep your audience in mind as you're writing. Write your essay in such a way that it answers questions that they are asking and is appropriate for their level of expertise. Scholars and other experts in the field can be expected to be familiar with technical language, while lay readers may need technical concepts explained.

The structure of your paragraphs should follow the roadmap in your introduction. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence that states the overall point of the paragraph. And at the beginning and end of each section (remember that each section is a step in the overall argument) you should include a "signpost" that references the roadmap in the introduction and indicates where the overall paper is going. If the argument is especially complex, your signposts can include summary reminders of the points in the argument that you have already established can be helpful. Topic sentences and signposts keep your reader oriented to the overall direction of the paper and how far along in the argument they are.

Revise

Once you have finished a draft and completed your first revision, ask a colleague to read it. This may become less necessary after you have become more experienced in publishing articles. Still, even experienced writers sometimes find it helpful to have a colleague read their essays. As the author, you know and have been living with your argument for some time. It's therefore difficult for most authors to know how clear the essay's argument is to someone reading it for the first time. It's common in graduate school, however, to form dissertation groups of three or four students who read and discuss each other's work before submitting it. This is especially helpful if you're writing in a language other than your first language. Even if you don't have a colleague read it, it's a good idea to let it sit for a couple of days and then do a significant revision.

Proofread

It's very important, after your essay is finished, to proofread it carefully for typographical and grammatical errors, misspellings, etc. (including errors introduced by autocorrect!). Don't rely on spellcheck! You may want to have a friend proofread your piece – after having gone over it repeatedly, it can be very difficult to see small errors. Some schools still offer proofreading services, though these are becoming rarer.

Submit!

When you're submitting your work, many journals ask for a cover letter. Don't repeat the abstract in the cover letter or go through your argument in any detail. Instead, focus on the bigger picture, explaining what you think is most significant about your essay and why it is a good fit for the journal. This is a chance to emphasize your original contribution, but keep it brief.

Revise and Resubmit!

After submitting an essay to a journal, unless the editor rejects it for being outside the scope of the journal, you will likely receive comments from reviewers (two, or possibly three) with their suggested changes. At this point, it is amazing how many writers who receive revise and resubmit letters never actually resubmit the essay. After receiving the reviewers' comments, it's probably a good idea to read them and then wait a couple of days before responding. More than once we

have received reviews with comments we initially thought quite wrong, only to find ourselves agreeing with them after a few days. When resubmitting your essay after receiving reviews, you should submit a cover letter detailing the changes suggested by the reviewers and describing any changes you have made to the essay in response. Respond directly and professionally to every reviewer comment. You don't necessarily have to comply with every suggestion; but if you disagree with a comment and disregard the suggestion, you should provide your justification for doing so.

Celebrate!

You may experience some hesitation before submitting the essay. This is understandable, for once it's submitted you lose some degree of control over it. It's a difficult thing to submit a manuscript for publication. Even if it's rejected from your first-choice journal, submitting it is still an accomplishment and your work during the submission process will make it more likely that your second-choice journal will accept it. So reward yourself in some way!

In Conclusion

Learning to write at the highest level of the academy is hard. But we are committed to the view that stating complex and technical arguments with stylistic clarity can be learned through examples. We chose models of writing that reinforce certain basic principles – a good piece of academic writing has a signpost, it is fair to the opponents, it illustrates a grasp of the literature, and it always goes back to the primary sources.

We are hopeful that this book will assist those who aspire to write research articles. We hope the ultimate result is a growth in the academy, in the church, and in the world of thoughtful exponents of creative theology.

John Allan Knight and Ian S. Markham

Part I

God and the Incarnation

1

Knowing God through Religious Pluralism

Tinu Ruparell

RESEARCH LEVEL 2

Editors' Introduction

Good academic writing is clear and elegant. This opening essay meets both of those conditions. It is a provocative thesis: All serious theology must be shaped by religious pluralism. He believes that this has always been the case; and now it must continue to be "consciously" so in the future. He suggests five characteristics of such theology, which he sets out as the heart of the essay. He then concludes by responding to some of the objections that the reader might have to his argument.

Theology is always hybrid (see Box 1.1).

Box 1.1
Tinu Ruparell puts his thesis front and center. All theology draws on a range of traditions and sources. He then unpacks this assertion by insisting that all serious theological systems must take religious pluralism seriously. This is a shocking assertion. It means that all those who primarily work as theologians within a tradition are, in the view of Ruparell, not doing serious theology. The opening of this essay is controversial and provocative. The reader is invited to engage with the argument.

I propose this statement as axiomatic for any theology which takes religious **pluralism** seriously, and of course *all* theology must take religious pluralism seriously. Indeed I contend that no theological system can be taken seriously if it does not countenance the facts of religious plurality at its very foundation. To fail to do so is to be blind to the conditions of human thinking about the religious. The religious traditions we encounter, study, may participate in, critique, and/or promote have all originated, developed, and continue to exist within a context of religious plurality. This, I submit, is an empirical fact needing little further argument.[1] Moreover, all

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[1] Due to space I cannot here justify this claim fully, though even a cursory reading of most of the world religions' founding texts shows regular references to a religiously plural context. Ancient theologians are also well aware of their pluralistic context. For instance Clement attributes to Xenophanes the view that the Thracians "gods are red haired and blue eyed, the Ethiopians' black as apes" in the process of his argument that the "heathens made Gods like themselves, whence springs all superstition" *Stromata* VII, chapter 4.

theology, like all theorization, is inherently comparative.[2] In order to understand and create theology the scholar partakes in comparative and generalizing activity, which requires **emic** and **etic reference**. Religious pluralism is thus an intra-religious concern as much as it is an interreligious one. No tradition, and therefore no theology, can thus be considered without conscious reference to the Other since all traditions were originated and continue to develop with explicit or implicit reference to other traditions which form their contexts. The importance of religious pluralism for our understanding of the theology, as well as for the production of novel, creative theology, cannot be understated. In what follows I will argue that the practice of theology must be recast to be explicitly pluralistic in a way that has not hitherto been the case. Theology must be more obviously interreligious and hybrid because theology is *already* interreligious and hybrid, but currently does not recognize itself as such (see Box 1.2).[3]

Box 1.2

Footnote 3 is a lovely note. The author is anticipating an obvious objection: If all theology is – as a matter of current reality – hybrid, then why is this program so radical and provocative? He uses the footnote to answer this objection. He is writing alert to potential criticisms to his arguments.

In redescribing theology through religious pluralism, I argue, it becomes more powerful, more relevant, and more useful. More powerful in its increased capacity to accurately describe the human condition; more relevant as it breaks out of its chains as a chauvinist practice of merely priestly interest; and more useful as it regains a role in broader economic, social, political, and cultural spheres.

Before I proceed to describe some elements of a pluralistically remade theology, an issue of terminology needs to be clarified (see Box 1.3).

Box 1.3

Ruparell is a careful scholar. He knows that there is considerable discussion over the language. So he clarifies precisely what he means by the terms "religious pluralism" and "a theology of religious pluralism." He does not want the reader thinking of a different meaning of these terms that then leads to a misunderstanding of his argument.

Religious pluralism refers simply to the existence of many different religious traditions in any given context (let us avoid for now the question of the definition of religion or religious tradition.) A *theology of religious pluralism*, however, has most often signified a particular view or theory concerning the status of multiple, different religious traditions – their beliefs, truth claims, and practices, etc. – in terms of one tradition held to be normative. So, for instance,

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[2] I take this as a central thesis of J.Z. Smith's famous characterization of religion in his *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

[3] I realize the irony of proposing a somewhat radical program to transform theology into something I point out it already exhibits. My argument is not that theology must become pluralistic in a way it never was, but rather that it should fully and thoroughly recover the vigor and creative potential of the pluralism out of which it was born.

theological projects with which many will be familiar, using well-worn distinctions such as religious **inclusivism**, **exclusivism**, and pluralism, describe views from within a given (mostly Christian) tradition considering the truth claims and the **soteriological** status of other (mostly non-Christian) traditions. In what follows I do not intend to propose a theological redescription in this vein – though certain kinds of theologies of religious pluralism may follow from what I argue. What I wish to do, in keeping with the general aim of this collection, is to propose how one should do creative, novel, interesting, and useful theology in the light of religious pluralism, viz. allowing the facts of religious plurality more forcefully and creatively to impinge directly on theology. Eschewing a "view from nowhere," I wish to highlight what any attempt at doing theology should look like if it is shaped and guided by the facts of religious plurality from the outset. I shall use the terms *pluralistic theology* to refer to this project. While I will focus on Christian, or broadly Semitic, traditions, there is no reason why the claims and arguments should be limited to Christian theology. Indeed, creative theologizing concerning any religious tradition should be thoroughly pluralistic in the senses I shall elaborate. A throughgoing pluralistic theology thus construes its religious tradition to be merely one among others, even if it shows special concern for its "home" tradition. The nuances of the tension inherent in this definition should become clearer as we proceed.

What does it mean, then, to speak about God – that is, do theology, and specifically creative theology – in the face of our religious Others? I suggest that it will or should display, minimally, the following characteristics (see Box 1.4):

Box 1.4

He helpfully lists the characteristics of a theology that takes religious pluralism seriously. The following five characteristics are his own listing. Although he is drawing on approaches found throughout the literature, his own listing of these five characteristics is his contribution to the debate.

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1. Theology must be radically humble (principle of **fallibilism**).
2. Theology must be radically flexible (principle of indeterminacy).
3. Theology must be radically open (principle of contingency).
4. Theology must be radically poetic (principle of attraction).
5. Theology must be radically risky (principle of irony).

These are in no way meant to be an exhaustive set of characteristics, nor should we imagine that they will be present in equal measure, however, I argue that these are at least necessary features of knowing and speaking about God in the context of religious plurality. We will see, moreover, that these principles are interwoven, one often implying or melding into the others. Let us take them in turn before drawing some concluding insights and responding to some potential concerns.

Radical Fallibilism: The Principle of Humility

Pluralistic theology must be conducted according to the fundamental idea that on matters both large and small, *we may be significantly wrong in the end*. One must therefore engage in creative theology with a spirit of humility. There are both internal and external reasons for this **epistemic** fallibilism (see Box 1.5).

Box 1.5

One feature of this essay is to draw a contrast with other approaches to theology. So this pluralistic theology will operate with a spirit of humility. It is not a conceited theology – one that is sure that it is right and everyone else is wrong. This is an important part of Ruparell's argument.

Firstly, within Christian scriptures and theological tradition, there are many proscriptions against the idea that human beings can adequately grasp the true nature of the divine. The Hebrew Bible and New Testament clearly state that God is beyond all reckoning,[4] and that to believe and act as if one knows God's being, nature, and acts is liable to leave one mistaken in the end, as evidenced by the parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25: 31–46)In this parable, those who presumably followed religious law but failed to act according to its deeper meaning were judged to be wicked. Surely one lesson to take from this parable is that one shouldn't be quite so certain that one's religious beliefs and practices are correct, or that one has fulfilled all of God's requirements. And in the Hebrew Bible perhaps no greater scriptural evidence for fallibilism can be had than the epiphany of Job. While notoriously difficult to square with traditional teaching about God's nature as well as the **theodical** questions which give rise to the narrative, God's blustery appearance in the whirlwind very clearly puts human knowledge in its place: limited, mistaken, overweening. However else one might interpret the book, Job clearly emphasizes human ignorance and fallibility.

Theologically, the doctrine of **transcendence**, when fully realized, makes it impossible to know God, truly, in any positive sense; that is, we cannot literally attribute any predicates to God, only negations – as in the *via negativa* of Aquinas or Augustine's depiction of God as *wholly other* (see Box 1.6).[5]

Box 1.6

It is worth pausing and looking closely at footnote 5. In the text, the author is explaining that God's transcendence means that we cannot know precisely what God is like. The author is aware that this is the realm of **apophatic** theology. To discuss this at any length in the text would be a major distraction. Instead, the author uses the note to invite the reader to read an essay on apophatic theology. In this way, he reassures the reader that he is aware of this strand in the literature; and he helpfully directs the reader to a text that can provide a helpful discussion of this approach to theology, namely, Andrew Louth, "Holiness and the Vision of God in the Eastern Fathers," in *Holiness: Past and Present*, ed. Stephen C. Barton(London: T&T Clark, 2003), 217–239.

The transcendence of God puts hard limits on what human beings can know about the divine, highlighting the humility with which we must hold theological statements. Of course the doctrine of transcendence, and indeed the scriptures on which they are based, are also balanced by statements that positively ascribe actions and characteristics to God. Aquinas's theory of analogy makes certain forms of positive religious language possible and sensible, but of course

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[4] See for instance Isaiah 55:8–9; Acts 17:24; 1 Kings 8:27; Job 38–42.

[5] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.2.a.2; Augustine of Hippo *Confessions* 7.10.16. For a discussion of the roots of apophatic theology, see Andrew Louth, "Holiness and the Vision of God in the Eastern Fathers", in *Holiness: Past and Present*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 217–239.

analogical language cannot be said to refer to God directly. We must rely on figurative language to speak, as it were, above our heads,[6] while maintaining strict adherence to Divine Otherness lest our words refer to something other than God.[7] To be clear, transcendence logically forbids the possibility of literal, positive predication, so the characteristics of God described in scripture and tradition must be suspended in analogical tension. In the light of this tense suspension, the most consistent perspective is that when humans hold a particular view about the divine it must be held lightly, as with an open palm. This is a performance of our humility: we cannot presume to truly *know* God, yet we are able to *understand* our relationship to the divine only when we continually recognize the tentative, fallibilistic nature of our ideas.

Most religious traditions accept that language cannot literally refer to God, only analogically or figuratively. Just as the idea of transcendence necessitates a theology which requires epistemic fallibilism as an axiom, analogical predication opens up possibilities of understanding that facilitate and even encourage a religiously plural, creative theology. The flexibility and **polysemy** inherent in analogical/metaphorical[8] language allows for a wide variety of images, metaphors, and symbols to be used in religious language, not all of which necessarily derive from a single tradition. This opens up the possibility of using figures of speech (along with their semantic horizons) deriving from "foreign" language games, resulting in hybrid or creole predication. This is indeed the case for Christian tradition itself, as the first few centuries of its theological development show a synthesis of Jewish and Greco-Roman concepts, language, images, narratives, and symbols: the marriage of Jerusalem and Athens. So if, following George Lindbeck,[9] we understand the relationship of theology to religious belief, practice, and tradition on the model of the relationship of grammar to its natural language, then a thoroughly pluralistic theology can be forged through explicit and implicit synthesis of ideas, images, and concepts derived from a variety of religious forms of life. What begins with a humble recognition of fallible and limited human abilities to know the divine leads to a freedom to borrow from a variety of languages and conceptual schemes in order to express what *can* usefully be said. A humble, creative, pluralistic theology must therefore leave space for such hybridity.

Radical Flexibility: The Principle of Indeterminism

I expect some may be rather queasy about the skeptical trajectory of the principle of fallibilism just described. If we must resist the drive toward certain knowledge and conviction, maintaining, rather, that when all is said and done we might be significantly wrong about central beliefs and practices of a tradition, then in what sense could we hold religious beliefs and practices to be true? Surely, contends the critic, even a theology thoroughly inflected by the facts of religious plurality must have some criteria of justifiable belief? Pushed too far, does not the principle of fallibilism lead to Pyrrhonian skepticism?

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[6] See Janet Martine Soskice's *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

[7] Augustine, *Sermons* 117.3.5.

[8] I suggest that analogy is a species of metaphorical predication however cannot develop this view fully here. It is worth distinguishing, at this point, polysemy with hybridity: the prior belonging to a term's reception and the latter its semantic content.

[9] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox press, 1984), 33–34.