

The Importance of Dialogue for Pastoral Theological Development: Some reflections on van Holten and Walton’s theological method and its dangers.

Abstract

We are grateful for the editors of the journal for providing the opportunity to respond to van Holten and Walton’s thoughts and concerns and hopefully offer something constructive for future conversations. As Chris Swift points out in the editorial to this edition of the journal, discussions like these, if they are carried out in a spirit of intellectual humility, and a desire for dialogue and mutual learning, are important for chaplaincy, and indeed for theology more broadly. In the following response Swinton will be joined by the theological ethicist Professor Brian Brock. Professors Brock and Swinton have worked together for many years on issues around theology disability. It therefore seems fitting that they should collaborate within this conversation which attempts to offer a challenge to some important issues within this field of enquiry. Introducing a perspective from theological ethics should enrich the discussion and hopefully make it more interesting for readers. We are also grateful to van Holten and Walton for continuing this discussion, and whilst we disagree with them on central issues, we appreciate the conversation.

Dialogue, argument or debate?

Van Holten and Walton begin in the spirit of Swift’s editorial comment by introducing their work as a “a dialogue between different ways of doing theology: practical versus philosophical (or systematic)¹.” We wholly agree that dialogue is crucial for conversations like this. Both approaches to theology have important contributions to the area of disability theology, and indeed there are some fine philosophers and systematic theologians engaging in this important area of theological reflection². However, their paper is clearly *not* intended as an invitation to dialogue. This is clear in the way that they frame the conversation as practical theology *versus* philosophical theology, a distinction which fails to grasp the most relevant theoretical claims we will make in the response that follows. Schirch and Campt point out that:

Dialogue is a unique communication process because it focuses participants’ attention on listening for understanding. Dialogue works best when participants listen for what might be correct, true, and insightful about what others have stated³.

The essential dimension to dialogue is respectful listening, learning and sharing experiences, as opposed to pitting two sides against one another. Whilst van Holten and Walton make a claim for dialogue, the fact that they fail to engage with the majority of the arguments that Swinton made in his rejoinder and simply return to their original position, restating it in a slightly different way, indicates that the terms of engagement within this conversation are not dialogue but argument and critique without any obvious desire for positive proposals for either theology or practice:

In debate, participants listen to others to find what is wrong, incomplete, or otherwise flawed in their opponent’s statements. The intention is to identify those flaws, expose

¹ Van Holten and Walton(2021) ‘Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice: A Response to Swinton’s Rejoinder,’ p.

² Timpe, Kevin., ‘Christian Philosophy and Disability Advocacy.’ In Simmons., Aaron J. (2018) London: OUP. Yong., Amos. (2007) *Theology and Down Syndrome*. Texas: Baylor Press

³ Schirch, Lisa; Campt, David. *The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects* (Little Books of Justice & Peacebuilding) (pp. 7-8). Good Books.

them, and poke holes in the opponent's overall position. Many consider dialogue to be the opposite of debate⁴.

This is disappointing, as there is clearly a need for constructive critical dialogue in and around the kinds of issues that are at stake here. There is nothing wrong with debate. The problem is that it rarely ends up with creative constructive conclusions, which is precisely the problem here. It is therefore important to begin by being clear about the nature of the conversation that van Holten and Walton's two papers set up if we are to grasp the importance of distinguishing between dialogical and argumentative engagement. Debate works well between academics around concepts and ideas. Dialogue on the other hand opens up space for the whole people of God to participate in a collaborative theological enterprise. This key point is one that we will return to as we move on. We would prefer dialogue but have been pressed backward into a debate, in the face of which we will nevertheless attempt to pose some positive proposals for how it might mature into a genuine dialogue.

Theological method

In their rejoinder to Swinton's rejoinder, van Holten and Walton shift their conversation by focusing attention on the issue of theological method, that is, the particular procedures we use to carry out the task of theological reflection and construction. They express some discomfort with the way that Swinton uses Scripture by placing it against particular situations and using that as a way of illuminating the situation and enabling people to see things within the Scriptures that they may not have been able to see without such illumination. The idea of illumination is developed by Augustine and Aquinas⁵ and, as van Holten and Walton correctly observe, relates to the work of the Holy Spirit. It is also a "method" that is used frequently by Jesus and St Paul as they try to explore and explain the contemporary relevance of Scripture to the church and world of their times. In other words, it is a well-established approach, what Brock describes as the "flashlight method" In seeming to push against this way of using Scripture to illuminate practice, they equate Swinton's previous use of the metaphor of Scripture acting as a lens to help us to see certain things more clearly. This is not the case. A lens magnifies particular details so that we can see things clearly. It is a cognitive device that helps us to reconceptualise situations. Illumination, on the other hand, is a work of the Holy Spirit. It requires prayer, contemplation and a level of intellectual humility that enables us to realise that all that we know does not simply come from our own abilities to think. If one shines a spotlight, one is *searching*, and cannot know what will be found. Such things have no place in van Holten and Walton's theological method, which is one reason why the issue of mystery and the significance of the genre of the particular text under discussion is simply discounted as irrelevant. Theology in a more meditative mode requires not only intellectual awareness, but also, and *at the same time*, practical engagement with what God is doing in the world. Within van Holten and Walton's analysis, all this is screened out in their rejection of the distinctive contours of Swinton's approach as they attempt to persuade him to take up a new type and method of theology in a more conceptual register. What they never do is the most critical thing: To explain *why* this should be done. If theological language illumines lives and opens up existential impasses, why should we insist on tearing it apart to reformulate in quite different

⁴ Schirch, Lisa; Campt, David. *The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects* (Little Books of Justice & Peacebuilding) (p. 7). Good Books. Kindle Edition. Cf. Brian Brock, "Prayer and the Teaching of Christian Ethics: Socratic Dialogue with God?" *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 33.1, 2019, 1-15.

⁵ Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John (1-40)*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Edmund Hill, vol. III/12 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (New York: New City Press, 2009). Scripture shines "the ray of divine revelation", as Thomas Aquinas has put it, which makes the knowledge of God available to human beings. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*: 1.9 ad 2 (1485).

configurations oriented around conceptual coherence? The importance of conceptual clarity for theological understanding is taken as axiomatic and simply asserted. They treat conceptual clarity as an independent good in itself, an independent value, inviolable and not up for analysis. In this they of course are in good company, with a whole host of (modern) philosophers and philosophical theologians—none of whom has talked usefully into the issues that Swinton is clearly talking sense about, as they admit. The difficulty with thinking about conceptual clarity as a good in and of itself is important and we will return to in the conclusion to this paper.

Can theological views be drawn up severally?

The main problem in terms of method seems to be that van Holten and Walton do not think that, at the methodological level, there can be any plurality at all in theological thinking⁶. We disagree. It is worth grappling with the reality that those who try to talk sense about the messy realities of life seem to need more images and metaphors and even genres of writing — like the Bible— than the authors can countenance. Essentially Swinton is looking for the right metaphor or image from the tradition and scripture to reveal ways to go on in lived existence. This is fundamentally different work than the clarification of concepts, integrative rather than atomizing. And in this Swinton is a fellow traveller with philosophers engaged with cognitive science:

If we consciously make the enormous effort to separate out metaphorical from nonmetaphorical thought, we probably can do some very minimal and unsophisticated nonmetaphorical reasoning. But almost no one ever does this, and such reasoning would never capture the full inferential capacity of complex metaphorical thought.⁷

It is not true that conceptual clarity is an end in itself. This seems to be, in the end, the fundamental point van Holten and Walton wish us to concede.

What is theology and how do we do it?

When we begin to reflect on van Holten and Walton’s understanding of what theology is, the reasons for the tensions we have just outlined become clear. They inform us that they are not interested in contributing to the practical theological reflection on disability and dementia *per se* and use this as a reason for not engaging with empirical content, even though throughout their response they, once again, persistently attempt to engage with the empirical, even to the extent of using a case study from *empirical* theology, only to reject its theological implications and constructive utility.

The crucial question, then, is what they mean by *doing theology*? They claim that they are not interested in the pastoral practices that Swinton develops, indeed they welcome them, in spite of the fact that as Swinton pointed out in his rejoinder, and as most practical theologians acknowledge as a given⁸, they are developed directly from Swinton’s theological framework. Instead, they inform readers that they are interested in “Swinton’s *theology*.” In italicising the term ‘theology,’ they draw attention to the striking fact that they view theology as something that is to be understood quite apart from practice. To clarify an idea demands it be separated

⁶ Van Holten and Walton(2021) ‘Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice: A Response to Swinton’s Rejoinder,’ p.

⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 59.

⁸ Miller-McLemore, Bonnie J. (2012) *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. Miller-McLemore, Bonnie J. (2012) *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*. West Sussex, UK: Blackwell.

⁹ Van Holten and Walton ‘Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

from practice. We would see this as tantamount to making theology a human endeavour that claims autonomy from the work of God in the world or the people of God who are striving to make sense of God, self and world. In their view, theology is something that is done with the mind. They seem unhappy with Swinton's use of the term "theology of." In their opinion the term "theology of" can only relate to a comprehensive, systematic view¹⁰. They give no reason or rationale for this other than the inference of the primacy of conceptual clarity for which, as we have noted, they also offer no reason or rationale. They seem unaware of the wider theological literature, which is replete with theologies of blackness, disability, trauma, women, work and so forth, few if any of which would claim (or desire) to offer comprehensive theologies of their subjects. This complaint seems to be a caricature of Swinton's position designed to emphasise the importance of one way of doing theology.

But let us think for a moment about the way in which they have located themselves within the philosophy of religion. They do not claim to be representative of all philosophers of religion any more than Swinton claims to be representative of all practical theologians. What they present is their perspective on the issues. Central to their understanding of theological method is the suggestion that theology is something that goes on within human minds alone. As part of their justification for this position they use a fragment of a verse from Matthew's gospel as a biblical basis for their understanding of the philosophy of religion: "love the Lord with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). In order to use this verse, in this way they have to decontextualise it, ignoring "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul." Two points are important here. Firstly, this is the only place in their argument where they have used scripture as part of the description of their theological method and in order to use it they have to remove the troublesome issue that knowing God and loving God involves bodily engagement as well as intellectual knowledge. Secondly, whilst a few paragraphs earlier van Holten and Walton raise concerns about Swinton placing pieces of Scripture against pastoral situations to enable illumination and fresh understanding, now we find them doing exactly the same thing in relation to providing a biblical basis for their approach. Had they been engaging in dialogue, they might perhaps have spotted this anomaly and seen it as a place for agreement and constructive development.

Furthermore, the authors suggest that irrespective of how faithful and Biblical we strive to be, practical and philosophical theology are bound to articulate their perspectives from and via human concepts¹¹. We have no real difficulty with this suggestion as an aspect of the conversation. But there are two important problems with this statement in the undeveloped form that it is presented here. Firstly, and most obviously, a basic hermeneutic principle is that language finds its meaning not in extrapolated ideas, but within particular contexts and according to the ways that language is used. There is an obvious need for creative dialogue between philosophical and practical theology if the hermeneutical task is to be authentic.

The second problem may be less obvious. If by 'articulate' here van Holten and Walton mean only language, for those of us who have language there is some truth in this. But what about those of us who do not have language or who cannot understand the kind of language that van Holten and Walton assume to be the norm for theological construction? Are people with these kinds of experience to be excluded from the theological task? One of the things Swinton tries to do in all of his writings is to show how taking into consideration the experiences of marginalised people (culturally, socially and theologically marginalised), often disrupts standard systematic theories that have been put together by elite academics who feel no obligation to pay attention to the role of the people of God in theological construction. For this reason, we would suggest that this conversation is not simply about theological method –

¹⁰ Van Holten and Walton 'Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

¹¹ Van Holten and Walton 'Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

a technical term that belongs to the academy – but is actually about who is and who is not allowed to participate in the process of theological construction. In proclaiming the role of philosophical theology as trying to “prevent misunderstandings and lack of coherence in our exposition of faith¹²,” they indicate that theology comprises a fixed system that is patrolled by intellectuals as they seek to ensure the authenticity of particular conceptual frameworks. The static and insular nature of this enterprise is obvious.

Responsibility

The lack of awareness of the issues around disability are further emphasised when van Holten and Walton return to defend the philosophical theologians that they recommended Swinton should read in order that he can further understand their position and develop his own thinking on time. In the rejoinder Swinton noted that the philosophers of time that van Holten and Walton recommended were not particularly helpful, as the conclusions of their work ignores messy topics such as disability. In this paper the authors respond in a rather surprising way. Rather than acknowledging the tension and entering into constructive dialogue, they inform Swinton that “this can hardly be held against them¹³!” They then go on to state that Augustine, whom Swinton drew on in his discussion on time and disability, also had no interest in disability. This is not the case. Augustine actually *does* have a lot to say about disability as Brock’s work on Augustine and disability very clearly shows¹⁴ Augustine has his own conceptual difficulties, but the fact that he focuses on disability indicates that it *is* quite possible to include diverse experiences in the process of theological and philosophical development.¹⁵ We therefore think that it *can* be “held against them,” insofar as theologians and philosophers who claim to discern the things of God have a moral responsibility to think with the whole of the human condition in mind. Does the experience of disability or dementia really make absolutely no difference to their positioning? If not, how do they know that as they have never considered it? It *does* matter that philosophical theologians have almost to a person not written about messy topics. The methods that people focus on do not enable them to escape the analytical cast of their discourse, in which different disabilities can only appear as conceptually interesting counterfactual cases. The great father of modern philosophical theology, Hegel, very explicitly did this,¹⁶ but as Licia Carlson illustrates in devastating detail, so does almost every other modern philosopher.¹⁷ When you turn people into dislocated concepts you will miss important experiences that may impact upon the neatness of your concepts. Van Holten and Walton let these philosophers off the hook far too easily.

Perhaps van Holten and Walton might respond, “well, that would mean we have to take into consideration *all* of the diversity of human experiences, which is impossible!” Our response would be that it is only impossible if you want to work on your own, without creative dialogue with other positions and people, assuming that your own approach to theology is the only one and that other perspectives must conform to your approach. It appears that van Holten and Walton want to take on the responsibility of mapping out the boundaries of orthodoxy¹⁸ without taking responsibility for the people of God who live out that orthodoxy and perhaps

¹² Van Holten and Walton ‘Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

¹³ Van Holten and Walton ‘Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

¹⁴ Brock, Brian and Swinton, John (2011) *The Disability Theology Reader*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. Chapter 2.

¹⁵ Brian Brock, “Augustine’s Hierarchies of Human Wholeness and their Healing,” in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, Brian Brock and John Swinton, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 65-100.

¹⁶ Martin Wendte, “To Develop Relational Autonomy: On Hegel’s View of People with Disabilities,” in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, Brian Brock and John Swinton, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 251-285.

¹⁷ Licia Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Van Holten and Walton ‘Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

even challenge its veracity day by day. In their definition of the philosophy of religion the authors make some interesting claims in relation to revelation. We will return to these at the end of this paper as, strangely enough, revelation may be a place where real dialogue between the positions presented here might begin.

Summary

To summarise what has been claimed thus far, in regard to van Holten and Walton's theological method, we have an understanding of theology and what it means to construct theology that excludes from its formal method, practice, experience, prayer, contemplation, the Holy Spirit, and the significance of the heart and soul dimensions of love for God (as per the truncation of the Matthew passage), and from its content the living theologian within the body of Christ. Instead, it locates itself within the mind of the philosopher or the community of philosophers, whose task it is to ensure that theological systems are coherent. There is no need to consider the full breadth of the lived human experience of human beings, although as is clear from the argument of their paper, philosophers are allowed to project ideas into experiences and to claim that some ideas not only do not fit coherently into the system, but can in fact be dangerous, in this case for people with dementia. All of this is claimed without any place for consulting anyone other than intellectuals, and without taking into consideration anything other than ideas. It is not difficult to see why they might misunderstand how what they see as the drastic errors in Swinton's approach have yielded claims about lived faith with which they claim to be in full agreement.

To be clear, we are only going by what has been written in this paper. We do not mean in any sense to indicate that the authors do not personally engage in spiritual practices or pastoral engagement. They make it clear in their paper that they are involved in pastoral practice. On a personal note, Swinton remains grateful to Martin Walton for the kindness that he showed him and his wife during a trip to Groningen a few years ago. The issue is not that practices and experience means nothing to them. It simply makes no discernible difference to their theological method.

Time and Timelessness

Having laid out some of the issues surrounding theological method and the parameters of who should be allowed to participate in theological construction, we must now return to the issue of time and timelessness. The authors talk about the analogy that Swinton uses to indicate the ways in which God is present with and within the experience of time for people with dementia, indicating that whilst people may be disoriented in time, God is with them in all of their experiences of time. For God there is no past, present and future in the way we experience time. So, when someone experiences the present as the past and the past as the present they are not just "hopelessly confused" (invoking pity and distance); rather we can reframe their situation via the analogy of God being present in past, future and present (invoking understanding and awareness that this moment is meaningful). Van Holten and Walton recognise this as an analogy¹⁹, but then, for whatever reason, choose to turn the analogy into a metaphor: "For a timeless God past and present do not "intermingle" or "move between one another" as they do for people with advanced dementia; they are *one instant*. (God, in other words, is not suffering from dementia.)²⁰" A metaphor says something *is* something else. An analogy says something is *like* something else. The point of an analogy is to make some sort of explanatory point. By making this change in the meaning of the text van Holten and Walton are able to make the point that for God past and present do not intermingle in the same way as they do for people

¹⁹ Van Holten and Walton 'Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

²⁰ Van Holten and Walton(2021) 'Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice: A Response to Swinton's Rejoinder, ' p.

with dementia. Unfortunately, by changing Swinton's analogy into a metaphor they completely misrepresent Swinton's point. In so doing they miss the point. This mistake exposes the import of further important observations.

The intermingling of time

There are various models and understandings of time in the bible. In Matthew 22:18-27, Jesus has an exchange with the Sadducees who deny the possibility of resurrection. At the end of that interchange Jesus says: "But concerning the dead rising, have you not read about the burning bush in the Book of Moses, how God told him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!" Here we see quite clearly that the past and the present do not appear to be the way we normally expect them to be. This sense of the wholeness of time helps us to hold on to the wholeness of people who may be disoriented in that time. God, it seems, can be envisaged as being in the past, the present and the future at precisely the same time. The analogy simply reminds us that people with dementia are not dislocated from the same God given time that binds all of us together.

The sacrament of the present moment

In response to van Holten and Walton's concerns that Swinton's theological construction doesn't make a difference to people with dementia or their carers and supporters²¹, (a claim which as we will see seems somewhat contradictory), a deeper reflection on the implications of the above-mentioned analogy indicates *why* this may not be accurate. The authors state throughout this exchange that they are happy with Swinton's pastoral responses. Swinton pointed out in his rejoinder and we argue here that you can't separate the two. Take for example the idea of the sacrament of the present moment²². This is a spiritual tradition within which the contemplative recognises that God is in every moment²³. That God is within them in the present, has always been with them and continues to be with them in the present. Swinton's analogy considered in the contemplative meditative mode that he clearly indicates, helps people to realise that God is in the moment. God has an awareness of the past, the present and the future and that although it may sound confusing that people seem to be moving between times, in fact they do so with a God who inhabits all of these times. This seems to us important. It is very difficult to see what kind of psychospiritual harm this might cause.

God doesn't have dementia?

We would also like to point out that the off the cuff comment made by van Holten and Walton that God doesn't have dementia is too simplistic. The systematic theologian Peter Kevern has done important work in conceptualising God in relation to the lived experience of dementia. His is an excellent example of the kind of hospitable dialogue between practical and systematic theology that we think is required within this area. In his paper 'Sharing the mind of Christ: preliminary thoughts on dementia and the cross,' Kevern explores the idea that in order to develop a full theological response to dementia we should consider what it means to say "Christ 'demented' on the cross" He asks that:

we consider the possibility that Christ 'demented' on the cross, in the sense of losing self-awareness and awareness of his own motivation; that as a result, in the midst of dementia,

²¹ Van Holten and Walton 'Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

²² Swinton, John (2012) *Dementia: Living in the memories of God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. P. 235 ff.

²³ de Caussade, Jean Pierre.(1989) *The Sacrament Of The Present Moment*. New York: Harper Collins.

God is present; and that this means that grace and the redemption of the cosmos is at work in and through those who are dementing²⁴

Reflecting on the statement from Gregory of Nazianus: “What is not assumed is not redeemed²⁵” he points out how the tradition has emphasised the importance of Christ’s participation in every sort of human limitation a lack of beauty, autonomy, power, but rarely self-awareness. He points out that:

The trajectory of Christology seems to reinforce the prejudice that self-awareness is the seat of the soul, and so the site of human redemption: when everything else is stripped from Christ, this one thing is left him. This amounts to a lacuna in our understanding of incarnation and redemption. If Jesus abandons all sovereign power, takes on all human frailty (which is necessarily entailed in our rejection of docetism), then we must not preserve for him a refuge in the innermost depths of his soul, a place of calm self-awareness untouched by the drama of the cross. And conversely, if we are to find a place for the dementing in the economy of salvation, we must attempt to identify a sense in which Christ shares in their dementia, and in which it is itself brought to the Cross²⁶.

Kevern develops this interesting Christological perspective on the issue of redemption and kenosis not by working with concepts at a high level but by seriously engaging with the experience of dementia in a way that problematizes apparently “obvious” statement. Kevern also offers an interesting perspective on the solidarity model that van Holten and Walton draw out in their case study: “We might say that his self-awareness died just a little before his body stopped breathing, and for that period he was brought into solidarity with the demented, the comatose and the mentally disabled²⁷.”

We are not simply affirming Kevern’s position. There are clearly always things that Christ did not take unto himself. However, we value Kevern’s position as it shows one way in which a creative dialogue can in fact be developed between systematic theology and human experience in ways that are challenging, disruptive, surprising and empathy building. It also teaches us that apparently “obvious” statements about where God is and what God does or does not experience, requires interaction with a wide range of theological sources and lived experience if their implications are to come to the fore. Simply to presume that God could not be said to be demented is to display a worrying tendency to think of God in terms of the philosophers, in a manner that renders Jesus something less than a creature or, alternately, something somehow less than “real” God.

A dynamic view of time

Van Holten and Walton call for a dynamic view of time, something which Swinton is fully in favour of and cached out at some length in his rejoinder. Unfortunately, the authors choose not to dialogue with Swinton’s development. Instead, they continue to criticize him by offering a quotation from Grace Jantzen which more or less echoes what Swinton said in his clarification and development. But there is a problem here. Jantzen says that: “A God who could not respond to us and indeed could not be in any way affected by us would be far removed from the God of Jesus of Nazareth²⁸.” It’s difficult to see how this criticism can be adduced from Swinton’s

²⁴ Kevern,, Peter (2009) ‘Sharing the mind of Christ: preliminary thoughts on dementia and the Cross. *New Blackfriars*. 91(1034):408 – 422. P. 414.

²⁵ Gregory of Nazianus, reply to Apollinaris, Ep. 101, 32.

²⁶ Kevern. ‘Sharing the mind of Christ, p. 415.

²⁷ Kevern. ‘Sharing the mind of Christ, p. 416.

²⁸ Van Holten and Walton ‘Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

work. Swinton previously denied this point, and also that it follows from claiming that God is eternal. So, what exactly is the complaint here, other than presenting a caricature of Swinton's position? A few sentences later they make the accusation that Swinton drifts into Neo-Platonism. This is not the case. Swinton with this move is best understood as an inheritor of the theological vocabulary of Stanley Hauerwas, who has substantive reasons for claiming that it is important to maintain that God is not a concept.²⁹ What the authors seem to be doing is *ascribing* a concept to Swinton and then pointing out that it is incoherent. They don't seem to grasp that by translating Swinton into another register of thought, they are falsifying what he has said, and in so doing will be producing the very inconsistencies they are trying to accuse him of.

The dangers to pastoral care

The authors insist that the moral urgency of their methodological proposal turns on the model of God's timelessness held by Swinton somehow generating dangers in the context of pastoral care. It is dangerous because it is static: "What we have in mind here are the static associations that accompany this image of God³⁰." It is very important to point out that nowhere in Swinton's corpus does he propose or defend stasis. In his rejoinder Swinton acknowledged and responded to the fair criticisms around his use of Augustine. However, time and timelessness are not two opposites. For human beings, time begins in Genesis and time ends in Revelation, but God neither begins nor ends. So, it is in this sense that God's time is different from human time, but that difference does not lead to stasis. Likewise, the perspective on time that Swinton presents in the rejoinder has no static implications. All of his main metaphors are dynamic. The accusation of stasis in Swinton's theology seems to be an importation. It brings in a concept to make a point that has not emerged from or been part of the conversation thus far. Had they developed this suggestion of stasis through dialoguing with Swinton's rejoinder the point might have been more obvious and nuanced. It is not clear why they have done this other than to, once again, lever apart the practical/empirical from the theological dimensions of dementia, this time by interpolating a concept that Swinton does not deploy, to sustain their claim that his theological mistakes are dangerous for practice.

They move on to suggest that if God does not know past, present and future as we know it then God cannot be sympathetic³¹. We disagree, not only because Swinton has never said this (the image of the three mile an hour God is clearly an image of the incarnation which in turn indicates God's involvement with time as we know it), but because the argument itself is problematic. Whatever we say the Father's unchangingness means, what we know is that for the Son to become human means that God has to be ready and willing to raise him from non-existence. So even logically the trinity is needed to make sense of the Christian story, and in the trinity, we need both change and unchangingness. That is the basic affirmation of every Christian, and we are very comfortable in holding it. We are much less comfortable with the philosophical account that van Holten and Walton seem to be pushing which seems to be something like a process theology view of God. We respect those who hold open theology and process theology, we just do not share that view.

The problem of the empirical: The appeal to practice.

In his rejoinder Swinton asked how it was that van Holten and Walton could constantly appeal to practice in attempting to make theological points, whilst at the same time making no attempt whatsoever to engage with it or to dialogue with those to whom they seek to apply their

²⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and Brian Brock, *Beginnings: Interrogating Hauerwas*, Kevin Hargaden ed. London: Continuum, 2016), 12-15.

³⁰ Van Holten and Walton 'Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

³¹ Van Holten and Walton 'Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

theology. In this paper van Holten and Walton suggest that this is an ambiguous question. In response they ask three questions in relation to why they cannot engage with experience: *who do you ask? What exactly do you ask? How do you value the answers given?* They also express a concern that one might end up with a plurality of theologies. On the latter point, in his rejoinder, Swinton pointed out that he had written part of his book on time and disability in collaboration with someone who lives with a significant brain injury. There he indicated why plurality may not be an undesirable outcome. We will not repeat that argument here other than to point out that there *are* a plurality of theologies within the academy and within the church. The history of theology makes it abundantly clear that not even separating theology from practice guarantees the achievement of a unity of theological positions. But let us respond to the questions.

Who do you ask? What would you ask?

Within the context that we are discussing here, the answer to that question is straightforward. You take seriously the experiences and thoughts of people living with dementia and their carers and, in conversation with Scripture and tradition allow that knowledge and the questions that emerge from it to help you understand and develop theology. Put slightly differently, we would allow the different questions that emerge from people's "non-academic" experiences to participate in the theological conversation. There are some wonderful examples of this in the literature. The work of Christine Bryden³² who lives with dementia and who in her work constantly reflects theologically on the implications of her dementia for the way in which she constructs her theology is a helpful answer to the question "who do you ask.?" Likewise, the recent qualitative work of Tricia Williams³³ on faith and people with dementia, shows clearly that Christians living with dementia are able to engage in theological conversation and bring new and important questions, issues and dimensions to standard ways of framing issues and developing theology. Interestingly, both of these theologians have some important reflections on time which bear relevance to this conversation. It is therefore not difficult to work out who to ask and what to ask them if one is prepared to acknowledge that the construction of theology is not the work of academics alone and that some dimensions of theology are emergent and dialectical rather than simply being imposed from above.

In discussing the empirical, van Holten and Walton draw on a study by the empirical theologian Johanas van der Ven. Van der Van was an important innovator in the development of empirical theology³⁴. The study is not about time, but they conclude that the study shows that "the image of timeless and immutable God is regarded less adequate by believers in situations of pain and suffering³⁵." This statement is misleading. Granted, such a conclusion can be drawn from this study as far as such a belief works for that cohort of the Dutch Roman Catholics investigated in the study, but to state that this in some way represents *all* believers in situations of pain and suffering as the authors claim, is to misunderstand the methods and intentions of such social scientific studies. The findings certainly contributes to the theological

³² Bryden., Christine (2012) *Who Will I Be When I Die?* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Bryden., Christine (2015) *Nothing About Us without Us: 2- years of dementia advocacy.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

³³ Williams., Tricia (2021) *What Happens to Faith When Christians Get Dementia?: The Faith Experience and Practice of Evangelical Christians Living with Mild to Moderate Dementia.* Pickwick Publications.

³⁴ Van der Ven, Johannes A. (1993) *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach.* Translated by Barbara Schultz. Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House. Van der Ven, Johannes A. (1988) 'Practical Theology: from Applied to Empirical Theology.' *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 1, no. 1 (1988): pp. 7-27.

³⁵ Van Holten and Walton 'Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

conversation, but they do not define it. The question of whether one could use van der Venn's findings to ascribe a preference to what van Holten and Walton call "the solidarity model," is yes. It can certainly contribute to the theological conversation if it is brought into dialogue with other perspectives. Anecdotally, Swinton remembers having a conversation with van der Venn at a British and Irish Association for Practical Theology conference in Cardiff in 2003. Swinton asked him whether the work of empirical theology could contribute to theological construction. Van der Venn's reply was that it could, as long as it was done in conversation with a sympathetic systematic theologian. Once again the importance of dialogue is the key.

Van Holten and Walton make a plea that some issues should be settled at a different level³⁶. It may be true that something does not have to be practical for it to be conceptually accurate. We would not argue with that. The problem throughout this exchange however, is that they have constantly attempted to take these ideas that come from a different level and use them to analyse practice without allowing the other level of practice to challenge or develop them. In other words, they have moved out of the "other level" and into a different level, but still want their arguments to do the same work that they think they do at the "different level." When you are dealing with ideas, there is no problem with conceptual critique that is not tested in practice. But when one tries, as the authors do time and time again, to push these ideas down into practice, their veracity can and should be challenged by the criterion of the level of practice. If not, you end up with a platonic ideal being placed upon the experience of real people who may well have a contribution to make to understanding the concept or idea. The danger of "ivory tower thinking" is very real.

Agreeing with conclusions but rejecting premises

One final issue requires to be addressed. In both papers van Holten and Walton "wholeheartedly endorse³⁷" Swinton's conclusions with regard to the inviolability of personhood for people with dementia, and that to live in God's time makes a difference in how we view and treat people with disabilities. They like his outcomes, but are unhappy with the way Swinton gets there and his theological intentions. We are not sure how this caches out. If they think that Swinton's conclusions are totally right, but his premises are totally wrong, it might be worth them considering that they are trying to fit Swinton's thinking into a procrustean bed that he is simply not going to fit into and indeed does not need to as his pastoral project seems to be working well with the concepts, he seems to think sufficient for that work. It's very difficult to see how Swinton could be so conceptually wrong, but so totally right in terms of practice. This can only be done if you separate theology from practice and analyse each with a different set of lenses. When you do this you will come up with something like the position that van Holten and Walton hold. What kind of speech act is it for them to ask Swinton to abandon his approach and to join theirs, when there is absolutely no attempt in either of the papers to examine whether their own thinking, ideas and concepts make any difference to practice? Likewise, how can they claim that Swinton's position poses a danger to the psychospiritual needs of people with dementia, and at precisely the same time say that they support the pastoral practices that emerge from his theology? Is this position not a logical impossibility? The one thing that they could do to convince us of their over all position is the one thing that they have not done: that is to present a worked case of how what they consider to be their more clear position illumines anything in life.

Conclusion and Constructive proposal: Truth is ordered towards the good

³⁶ Van Holten and Walton 'Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

³⁷ Van Holten and Walton 'Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

In their paper van Holten and Walton state that “philosophical theology is a way to express what is given to us in faith and revelation in a clear and coherent way”. The obvious problem here is that whilst they may have a desire to deal with misunderstandings and a lack of coherence in faith, revelation does not come in neat packages. It is one thing to say that they desire to clarify concepts, it is quite another thing to say that they desire to conceptualise revelation³⁸. Revelation is always surprising, unusual, and communicated through a Spirit that often intercedes through wordless groans (Romans 8:26). Packaging the Spirit in the way that is suggested here does not seem to us the best way to deal with the issue of Revelation. However, it is on this point of revelation that we might actually find the beginnings of some grounds for genuine dialogue in the way we outlined it at the beginning of this paper.

Revelation is intended to reveal that which is good. Both the conceptual and the practical anticipate and are aimed towards truth and goodness. There is therefore a necessary coherence between truth and goodness. Truth and goodness are not hypotheses, nor are they ideas, even though we use ideas to try to name them. There is no final proof of truth and goodness other than life. The text of ideas and the text of life are both required in order that the good can prevail. The question of truth arises theologically in both of those registers and it is not asked and answered adequately unless it is asked and answered simultaneously in both those registers. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy are necessary for truth and goodness to prevail. Paul Lehman puts it thus:

That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness; . . . And that no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd, than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man's opinions are. On the contrary, they are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth, or to embrace it³⁹.

Pursuing truth in dialogue with another register is not optional. All parties in this current conversation have a desire for truth and goodness. Likewise, all parties have a desire to do the best that we can in our pastoral practices. For Swinton this means holding together theology and practice. For van Holten and Walton this means separating the two. The dialogical way forward is that both philosophical theology and practical theology call each other to account for doing full justice to the one thing that we are all agreed on: to ensure that truth and goodness prevails and that that goodness manifests itself in the ways in which human beings interact with one another, particularly in times of difficulty. Van Holten and Walton think that the search for truth and goodness is a particular kind of conceptualisation that is carried out apart from practice. We would not argue about the importance of conceptual clarity. Our claim is that this is only a part of what is required to do justice to issues around truth goodness and indeed holiness.

There is certainly potentially common ground in the quest for truth and goodness. There may well be room for dialogue in a conversation like this if all parties actually want to dialogue. Consider this an invitation to begin—again.

³⁸ Van Holten and Walton ‘Timelessness, Dementia and the Appeal to Practice. p.

³⁹ Lehmann, Paul L. “Truth Is in Order to Goodness Reflections on the Church and the University.” *Theology Today* 6, no. 3 (October 1949): 348–60. P. 348.