

Doctrine after Christendom

2013–2014

Symposium Notes

Symposium 1

In our first symposium, we began with the idea that researchers in Christian doctrine are, or should be, in a strong position in relation to the ‘impact’ agenda – because the relation of doctrine to the churches provides a ready-made ‘pathway to impact’. Doctrine matters in the life of the churches (including in relation to the roles the churches play in wider public life), and therefore research that clarifies, develops or critiques doctrinal formulations might matter.

The picture underpinning this confidence is something like this. The practice of the churches is bound up in complex ways with habits of doctrinal thought and speech. Sometimes, debates arise about the origin, interpretation and application of that discourse. Researchers with doctrinal expertise might then have impact when they *articulate* the churches’ discourse – clarifying its content and structure; when they launch *critiques* of aspects of that language; when they *make judgments* about its implications for practice; or when they make *proposals for its development*.

This picture needs to be qualified however. First, it is qualified by the prevalence of a negative narrative about the relation of the churches to the public good – suggesting that research that seeks clarification or development of a discourse internal to the churches is unlikely to have a *positive* public impact. In other words, the whole idea of public research impact via this route might be viewed with scepticism or antagonism.

Second, this picture is qualified by the ambiguous status of doctrinal discourse even in the life of the churches. We discussed the ways in which doctrinal discourse has ceased to have significant purchase in various church contexts – and in which university teaching and research have sometimes become the

primary home of doctrinal discourse. There are, of course, exceptions – we discussed the importance of doctrinal debates in panevangelicalism, for instance.

Third, the picture is qualified by the complex nature of university teaching and research on doctrine. It is not clear how much study of doctrine in a university context is, or seeks to be, constructive work (e.g., work that clarifies, develops or critiques doctrinal discourse taken as a living discourse) undertaken in engagement with real church communities. There are, of course, other legitimate aims of intellectual work in this area – as when it is seen as part of a wider historical project, for instance – but doctrinal research can also easily become something pursued for its own sake, as a fascinating intellectual game with no connections beyond itself.

Fourth, even where doctrinal discourse clearly matters, there are proper questions about the position within the churches' polities of academic experts, and about the recognisability of their claims, especially when it comes to critiques, judgments, and proposals. We cannot ask about impact without asking about the church *polity* within which the doctrinal researcher sits, about the *relationships* that bind them into that polity, about the (sometimes problematic) forms of *power* that they might be wielding in that polity, and about the *attentiveness* to their ecclesial situation that properly impactful work will require.

We talked at some length about the relationship between the doctrinal researcher's task of *articulation* and the tasks of critique, judgment, and development. Constructive or critical proposals are only possible if the doctrinal tradition is construed as a landscape of varying depth – such that there are deeper and less deep commitments. To be 'impactful', to be audible in the churches and capable of shaping their life, doctrinal proposals need to be argued for as a form of *deeper faithfulness* – otherwise there is a zero-sum game between faithful adherence to the tradition in all its parts and the dissolution of faithfulness.

Symposium 2

Our second symposium concentrated in more detail on the roles of doctrinal research in the life of the churches.

We began with another qualification to the picture explored above. Doctrinal research can be understood in ways that are less tied to specific ecclesial communities. It can be seen as a form of exploration that draws on the language of the church to help articulate the religious ideas and experiences of people more generally, and that revises that language in the process.

Some of our discussion pursued the questions of polity and attentiveness raised in the first symposium. The transmission and revision of doctrinal discourse is a complex social process in which doctrinal researchers are involved, but which they do not own. The whole metaphor of 'impact' could obscure the collaborative nature of the work involved: it is not the researcher's thought that then has an effect on the community, rather the researcher thinks in and with the community, as the community reflectively shapes its life.

Constructive doctrinal research works (or should work) through theological conversation with faith practitioners – and there is always already a theology included in the practices of groups, whether well articulated or implicit. In order to clarify our language about this, we discussed the four voices of theology identified by the Action Research in Church and Society group: (1) Normative theology (creeds, scripture, councils etc.); (2) Formal theology (theology of theologians); (3) Espoused theology (theology of a particular group, e.g. a mission statement); and (4) Operant theology (theology embedded within the practices of a group). We noted that we sometimes focus on espoused theology to the exclusion of operant theology, as if attending to practice simply means surveying the stated theological opinions of people in the church. In relation to normative theology, we also need to consider how groups in practice (in their operant theologies) point to and acknowledge sources of authority. If a theologian pursuing formal theology wants to address a theological argument to

such a community, that need not mean simply agreeing with their espoused theology, nor simply describing their operant theology, but framing arguments that build on the sources of authority acknowledged by this community in a way that this community can recognise and own.

We spent some time teasing out the very different politics and processes that might surround such a process in differing ecclesial contexts (focusing especially on Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Reformed, and panevangelical examples). In each context there are different models of role that might be played by the work of the academic researcher. Those differences are inseparable from questions about *authority* in the different contexts – who has the authority to define doctrine, in what ways, and on what bases, and how is that authority recognised? In other words, discussion of the nature of impact of doctrinal research requires discussion of different ecclesiologies.

We talked about multiple instances where academics were involved in doctrinal discourses in the life of the church. For example: the discussion and production of ecumenical reports; the deliberations of official Faith and Order committees and doctrine commissions; the workings of the Roman Catholic magisterium; formal doctrine teaching to trainee ministers; preaching to congregations; discussion groups in parishes; wider patterns of formal catechesis; the non-academic speaking and writing activities of individual theologians; and so on.

We noted that during the conversation we had been looking back to older ecclesial settlements where doctrinal discourses were perhaps more central in the life of the churches. One of the steps along a pathway to impact for doctrinal research might therefore be teaching that demonstrates the ongoing salience of doctrinal discourse: how it speaks about, and enables reflection on, all sorts of current aspects of the life of the church. That suggests, however, that in parallel to the attempt to show the wider academic community the ways in which their research can have impact, doctrinal researchers should be engaged in the attempt to show ecclesial communities that their research can make a difference.

Symposium 3

The third symposium focused on potential impacts of doctrinal research on wider culture, or on the churches specifically insofar as they relate to wider culture.

Doctrines are passed on in specific artefacts (including texts), practices and institutions – in church institutions, practices and artefacts, for sure, but also in the institutions, artefacts and practices of wider culture, at least as a penumbra to their ecclesial transmission. One route open to doctrinal research is therefore interaction with artefacts that can be construed as part of that transmission.

We began with a case study of theological engagement with paintings from a major art gallery. This engagement involved a partnership between doctrinal theologians and gallery staff, and was aimed at a wide public audience. Such engagement could be understood simply as a way to explore the religious contexts from which various works of art emerged, historically. However, the language of doctrine is (amongst other things) a living language for addressing questions about the purpose of human life in the world, so to make explicit the connection of these artefacts to doctrine can also allow them to become resources for asking and answering these big questions. A doctrinal engagement with these artefacts can be an exploration of what it means to live in the world with other human beings in more imaginative and more hopeful ways.

There can be a wide audience for such engagement beyond the churches, but addressing that audience often requires some reserve on the part of the theologian, not to wade in too quickly with explicitly theological language. Nevertheless, the goal is thick theological redescription – a *transformative* redescription. In the context of audiences who are already, in messy and complex ways, making sense of their lives and world in part by engagement with these artefacts, a theological engagement with the artefacts can become a fruitful part of the conversation.

We moved on to a very different case study, based on a context in which the wider cultural transmission of doctrine – the presence of artefacts, institutions, and practices that had been shaped by a doctrinal history (alongside other histories) – was profoundly negative. It seems clear that Christian doctrinal patterns and elements were part of the ideologies that had made the Rwandan genocide possible – as well as part of the ideologies that supported resistance to the violence. To investigate the relevant patterns of doctrine and practice might be one way of making sense of what had taken place, as a contribution to the work of peace-making and the prevention of violence. It would be all too easy, however, to respond to such an analysis by assuming that *indoctrination* is the problem – such that the solution is simply a refusal of doctrine. What we are actually talking about, however, is a complex interplay of forms of doctrine, of good and bad ecclesial formations, and so on. Doctrine does not sit on only one side of the equation.

We moved on to discuss more generally the processes by which doctrine is transmitted in a culture, and the processes by which a researcher can engage with that transmission. We looked at some case studies highlighting the ways in which people improvise upon the traditions they receive: the reception of doctrine is always complex, multi-faceted, active and creative bricolage. We explored some models for interaction between doctrinal theologians and wider audiences that were not based on transmission or trickle-down, but on the formation of non-hierarchical relationships, engagement in communities of discussion and improvisation. In any case, formal theology itself is produced and received in an ongoing creative conversation, and the boundaries between that and the ongoing complex conversations of espoused and operant theology are more blurred and messy than might be commonly appreciated

Engagement in this kind of conversation requires formation in various virtues that might not be identical to the virtues formed by more traditional modes of academic work: authenticity, vulnerability, openness, informality, and teamwork.

Symposium 4

The fourth symposium focused on the impact of doctrinal research in the area of public policy, but also ended up exploring a theme that had become increasingly important in the project: the shift from thinking about research impact to thinking of researcher impact.

We looked at a pair of organisations – a development NGO and a think-tank – that sometimes drew on doctrinal researchers, and we talked to theologians who were sometimes approached for such consultancy work. As well as looking for specific expertise, these organisations were looking for a specific kind of person: someone knowledgeable; someone fair (who would not just be driving their own bandwagon), but not someone who would refuse ever to commit to an answer; someone comprehensible; someone good at translating into non-theological language (and at learning the languages of those to whom they were speaking); someone who would be attentive to what is going on in the situation they have been asked to address. They look, in effect, for someone with a certain set of virtues (not necessarily possessed by every academic).

The deeper the trust between the researcher and those to whom they were talking, the deeper the impact was likely to be. Thinking is after all a social process, and is mediated by economies of trust: I trust others to have thought things through for me; I trust those they trust. Building trust is in part a matter of demonstrating trustworthiness in argument – being able to display the moves involved in reaching a conclusion, and to show that the premises and appeals are ones that the listeners can acknowledge. A crucial skill needed is therefore that of learning the argumentative culture into which one is speaking – even if one's response is not to fit in smoothly with a given argumentative culture, but to say, 'It's more complicated than that.'

The kind of help that is being sought also differs from occasion to occasion. Sometimes the organisations we considered wanted answers to specific questions; sometimes they wanted to be helped to think differently. Sometimes

they asked for the first while in fact needing the second (being shown how to ask better questions, rather than being given fixed answers). Sometimes they simply wanted help to articulate and justify what they were already thinking – they wanted confidence that their positions are supportable, that they have not stepped beyond the bounds of what is theologically possible. (This is the positive side of the worry that theological arguments are only cherry-picked: adopted piecemeal, to the extent that they support pre-existing conclusions.) The prevalence and importance of this kind of impact suggests that identifying impact exclusively in terms of *change* and *development* is problematic.

It was clear that explicit expertise in some specific area was often not what was required. Several of the theologians present explained that, because they were embedded in specific relationships of trust, they were often consulted on topics on which they did not have explicit expertise, but nevertheless discovered as the conversation went on that they had things to say that drew on their training as doctrinal theologians. They were also enabled to develop their own thinking in unexpected ways as a result of these conversations. This is very much *not* a model of theology first, then application – or research first, then impact.

We talked about some of the general characteristics of doctrinal theology that might shape the kinds of impact it can have. One impact that doctrinal theologians can have is to make a certain kind of connection. Theologians might be useful precisely because they are trained to look for certain kinds of connection – a skill that can be brought to bear on a whole variety of particulars. That includes the capacity to make connections between the tradition of Christian belief and contemporary practice: the question, ‘What does this mean *now*?’ is inherent to doctrinal work. This capacity to make connections is often more important than the specific area of a theologian’s expertise; it characterises the kind of person who is able to respond to calls beyond her specific area of expertise. If this is the case, however, then the writing of the big book on a given topic is not the source of the researcher’s impact. Rather, the work that also leads to such outputs helps to create the conditions of possibility for the doctrinal researcher responding to a wide range of calls.

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Further information about the project is available at:

www.durham.ac.uk/theology.religion/common.awards/projects/doctrine/christendom