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SEEING, THINKING, AND LIVING: ADOLF SCHLATTER ON THEOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY¹

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What is the role of theology at the university today? How can theology remain relevant for the university, the church and society? In our current post-modern climate of increasing relativisation and secularisation, theologians run the risk of becoming an endangered species if they hesitate to provide substantial answers to these urgent questions. In a letter to the *Independent*, Richard Dawkins recently compared theology to ‘the study of leprechauns’.² He doubts that “theology” is a subject at all’ and demands that a ‘positive case now needs to be made that it has any real content at all, and that it has any place in today’s universities’.³ I am convinced that Swiss theologian Adolf Schlatter, though a voice from the past, offers a vital contribution towards confronting these claims even today. Adolf Schlatter, even today, assists us in making a case for theology’s rightful place in the university. In inviting us to adopt a holistic-salvific perspective, Schlatter is certain that only in this way will theologians be able to legitimise their membership of the academy. I wish initially to introduce briefly Adolf Schlatter before we turn to his holistic-salvific perspective in relation to theology in the university.

WHO WAS ADOLF SCHLATTER?

Swiss theologian Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938)⁴ stands out as one of the most prolific and influential scholars of the late nineteenth and early

¹ The present contribution is the modified version of a paper originally presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Francisco, CA, November 16, 2011.

² Dawkins, ‘Letters: Theology has no place in a university’, *The Independent*, October 1, 2007, <<http://richarddawkins.net/articles/1698-letters-theology-has-no-place-in-a-university>> (accessed November 18, 2011).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Robert Yarbrough has translated Werner Neuer’s short biography, *Adolf Schlatter: A Biography of Germany’s Premier Biblical Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995). Neuer’s extensive Schlatter biography is, unfor-

twentieth century.⁵ As theology professor, focusing both on New Testament and dogmatics, Schlatter lectured for one hundred consecutive semesters in Bern (1881–88), Greifswald (1888–93), Berlin (1893–98), and Tübingen (1898–1930), and thereby influenced several generations of pastors and theologians (among them, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Erich Seeberg, Paul Althaus, Paul Tillich, Ernst Käsemann, and Otto Michel). Schlatter lived in turbulent times, both historically and theologically. Growing up in rural Switzerland, Schlatter experienced the character of Wilhelmine Prussia; he lived through the First World War in which he lost a son; he then became a citizen in the Weimar Republic, and subsequently witnessed the rise of National Socialism until he passed away on the verge of the Second World War. Theologically, he was raised and rooted in Protestant Reformed orthodoxy; he was influenced by German philosophical Idealism, had to answer liberal claims around the *fin de siècle*, and was finally in dialogue with 1920s dialectical theology, in particular with his former student Karl Barth.

Adolf Schlatter pursues a comprehensive theological approach. In doing so, he seeks to overcome any tendency to segmentation and isolation in theological departments.⁶ Theology, Schlatter underlines, has to be concerned with the whole of reality.

The territory that the theological task has to stride across ranges over the whole revelatory work of God. That endows it with a direction to the whole [*Richtung auf das Ganze*]... In the idea of God [*Gottesgedanke*] is included the sentence that all being stands in relation to God and that it somehow visualises his power and his will.⁷

tunately, still untranslated, *Adolf Schlatter: Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1996).

⁵ Nonetheless, the name 'Adolf Schlatter' does not reverberate in the halls of the theological ivory tower. Andreas J. Köstenberger remarks that 'until this day, Schlatter's incisive theological work has remained something of a well-kept secret among the English-speaking theologians'. 'Translator's Preface', in Adolf Schlatter, *The History of the Christ: The Foundation of New Testament Theology*, transl. by Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), pp. 9-15 (quote from pp. 11-12).

⁶ See 'Adolf Schlatter: Selbstdarstellung', in *Die Religionswissenschaft in Selbstdarstellungen*, ed. by Erich Stange (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1925), pp. 145-71 (quote from pp. 157-8; cited as 'Selbstdarstellungen' in the following) and *Das christliche Dogma*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1923), p. 44; cf. p. 370 (cited hereafter as *Dogma*).

⁷ *Dogma*, p. 13.

On this foundational assertion Schlatter builds his comprehensive, three-fold theological agenda. True theology with a universal scope, says Schlatter, consists of exegetical seeing, dogmatic thinking and ethical living. This forms his theological triad of 'seeing-act' (*Sehakt*), 'thinking-act' (*Denkakt*), and 'life-act' (*Lebensakt*). These three acts are organically inter-related, in particular, as they share a common vanishing point in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thus, Schlatter develops a Christ-centred approach to theology, in which he moves from exegetical observation in the seeing-act to dogmatic elaboration in the thinking-act and existential assimilation in the life-act. In what follows we shall, *first*, examine Schlatter's interpretation of the theologian's vocation on basis of this threefold distinction and then, *second*, test whether this conception may be relevant for today's debate on the role of theology within the university context.

1. THE THEOLOGIAN AS SEEING EXEGETE

Through his father and through influential teachers, such as Johann T. Beck, Schlatter was encouraged from an early age to forge a 'connection with nature'.⁸ A close, empirical perception of reality became then an integral element of his theology. Schlatter asserts:

I, for my part, consider the formula 'perception' as appropriate for my method and my goal; it characterises what I have in mind... I would... not reject the label 'empirical theology'.⁹

All 'knowledge', notes Schlatter, 'begins with empiricism'.¹⁰ 'Observation' is 'the root of all knowledge',¹¹ for 'the eye awakens the thinking'.¹² Schlatter is convinced that theologians do not need any special epistemology in order to 'do' theology. We 'need neither a theory of seeing, in order to see',

⁸ Similarly to Schlatter's father, Beck, the 'friend of analogies' as Schlatter called him, emphasized creation as the locus of God's revelation. See Schlatter's essay, *J. T. Beck's theologische Arbeit*, Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie (in what follows, BFChTh) 8,4 (1904), p. 30.

⁹ *Briefe über das Christliche Dogma*, BFChTh 5,5 (1912), p. 85, p. 11 (emphasis original, in what follows, *Briefe*).

¹⁰ 'Geschichte der speculativen Theologie', p. 1 (unpublished; Schlatter Archive, Landeskirchliches Archiv Stuttgart, Germany, No. 183/II).

¹¹ *Die christliche Ethik*, 3rd edn (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1929), p. 252.

¹² 'Selbstdarstellungen', p. 164. On his empirical-realist framework see also his *Metaphysik*, ed. Werner Neuer, *ZThK*, Beiheft 7 (1987) and Walldorf, *Realistische Philosophie: Der philosophische Entwurf Adolf Schlatters* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), pp. 51-146.

he opines, 'nor a theory of epistemology, in order to know'.¹³ 'Every true theologian is first and foremost an observer'.¹⁴ It is exactly this empirical-realist act of seeing which renders theology a science (*Wissenschaft*), on a par with other academic specialities.¹⁵ For '[s]cience', Schlatter famously writes, 'is first seeing, secondly seeing, thirdly seeing and again and again seeing'.¹⁶ Basically all forms of science use the same empirical method of observation. This applies to both the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and to theology. 'The first and foremost task of the dogmatician is, as in every scientific profession, observation, which shows him on the basis of reality the processes that bring us into relation with God and mediate the divine works through which God reveals himself to us'.¹⁷

Schlatter took the scientific-empirical nature of theology very seriously. When, at celebrations on his seventy-fifth birthday, a colleague described him as 'religious genius, [but] scientific nil', (*religiöses Genie, eine wissenschaftliche Null*), Schlatter retorted, 'There is no religious genius in this room, that does not exist!—A scientific nil, well, we will have to see about that'.¹⁸ This process of observing God's work in nature, in history, in the human consciousness, in the Scriptures, and of course,

¹³ *Dogma*, p. 42. Schlatter writes, 'There is no deduction that can work with any other material than the one that is observed; even the most audacious apriorician [*Aprioriker*] has never skimmed through his material and the most assiduous spurner of seeing has never produced a thought other than by means of seeing'. *Jesu Gottheit und das Kreuz*, 2nd edn (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1913), p. 37.

¹⁴ *Die philosophische Arbeit seit Descartes: Ihr ethischer und religiöser Ertrag*, 4th edn (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1959), p. 12.

¹⁵ In this context, it might be helpful to clarify some central terminology. The German term *Wissenschaft* differs from the English term 'science'. Etymologically, the continental term denotes the creation and composition of knowledge in a broad sense. 'Science' (going back to Latin *scientia*, meaning 'knowledge') is most commonly understood in a narrow sense, referring mainly to natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*). However, in this study, 'science' is meant in the broad sense of *Wissenschaft*, as Schlatter understood it, i.e., as also including the so-called *Geisteswissenschaften*, the humanities. Wilfried Härle notes that '*Wissenschaft's* function is to expand knowledge in a revisable manner'. *Dogmatik*, 2nd edn (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), p. 4. Understood in this sense, Schlatter argues that theology can indeed count itself among the sciences.

¹⁶ 'Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie', *BFChTh* 9,5 (1905), p. 240.

¹⁷ *Dogma*, p. 12.

¹⁸ Kittel, 'Adolf Schlatter: Gedenkrede', in *Adolf Schlatter: Gedächtnisheft der Deutschen Theologie* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1938), pp. 6-17 (quotation from p. 8).

in the person and work of Jesus Christ,¹⁹ Schlatter calls the 'seeing-act' [*Sehakt*].²⁰ The application of this principle to hermeneutics means that the theologian's agenda must be to expose what the text itself says, in order to find out what 'actually happened'.²¹ 'The first task of New Testament theology', writes Schlatter, 'consists in perceiving the given facts of the case [*Tatbestände*]'.²² Theology, he argues, has therefore to begin with attentiveness, with—as his student Dietrich Bonhoeffer later put it—"silence before the Word".²³ For Schlatter, the seeing-act is essentially a historical task.²⁴ 'The historical task of the Bible', Schlatter reminds us, 'can be by no means anything other than an intense hearing for what the bible contains and what it renders visible; anything contrary to that is not "science"'.²⁵ The theologian thus works as an observing historian,

¹⁹ In his works, Schlatter deals extensively with God's revelation in creation (see for example his *Metaphysik* or the anthropological treatment in his *Dogma*).

²⁰ *Dogma*, p. 23; *Rückblick auf meine [seine] Lebensarbeit*, ed. by Theodor Schlatter, 2nd edn (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1977), p. 208; *Erlebtes: Erzählt von D. Adolf Schlatter*, 5th edn (Berlin: Furche-Verlag, 1929), p. 102; *Philosophische Arbeit*, p. 12; cf. Walldorf, *Realistische Philosophie*, pp. 51-73.

²¹ *History of the Christ*, p. 17.

²² 'The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics', in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, ed. and transl. by Robert Morgan (London: SCM Press, 1973), pp. 115-66 (see pp. 136 and 139).

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, transl. by John Bowden (London: Collins, 1966), p. 27.

²⁴ 'Because we receive God's revelation through history and become what we are through it, there can be no knowledge about it which is independent of historical observation'. 'Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics', p. 153; see also *Erlebtes*, p. 59; 'Selbstdarstellungen', p. 162.

²⁵ 'Der Glaube an die Bibel', in *Heilige Anliegen der Kirche: Vier Reden* (Calw & Stuttgart: Verlag der Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1896), pp. 34-46 (see p. 42). See also 'Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics', pp. 149-50. When Schlatter emphasises the 'hearing' or the rendering 'visible' of the bible's content, he is, beside historical studies, concerned with linguistics, with the relationship between language and cognition ('Selbstdarstellungen', p. 164). 'History means linguistics', says Schlatter. 'Erfolg und Mißerfolg im theologischen Studium. Eine Rede an die evangelisch-theologische Fachschaft in Tübingen', in *Zur Theologie des Neuen Testaments und zur Dogmatik. Kleine Schriften*, ed. Ulrich Luck (München: Christian Kaiser, 1969), pp. 256-72 (p. 261). For a detailed discussion of Schlatter's emphasis on language see Joachim Ringleben's essay, 'Exegese und Dogmatik bei Adolf Schlatter', in *Arbeit am Gottesbegriff, Vol. 2, Klassiker der Neuzeit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 350-385.

examining 'what was once true for others [the New Testament people]'.²⁶ Schlatter maintains that hermeneutics must be rooted in the historical givens and is therefore essentially dependent on historical and linguistic research.²⁷ Pursuing this empirical-historical agenda, Schlatter ventures into elaborate studies of the historical setting of the New Testament, and forged significant advances in first century Judaism and linguistic studies.²⁸

For Schlatter then, faith and science are not opposed to each other, it is not 'either or', but 'both and'. Most importantly, the seeing-act has its essential focal point in Jesus Christ. Seeing the history of the Christ, his words and works, is the ultimate purpose of the empirical process, as the appearance of Jesus Christ constitutes the goal of history.²⁹ 'In my view', writes Schlatter, 'there is no higher calling for the human eye than perception which apprehends what Jesus desires and claims'.³⁰ The seeing-act is organically related to the thinking-act.³¹ In other words, the receptive act of observation cannot do without the productive act of interpretation. Looking to the past in historical research and looking to the present in theological interpretation are for Schlatter two sides of the same coin.³²

²⁶ 'Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics', 118; 'Die Bedeutung der Methode für die theologische Arbeit', *Theologischer Literaturbericht* 31,1 (1908), p. 7; 'I consider New Testament theology to be a historical task', notes Schlatter. *History of the Christ*, p. 17.

²⁷ 'Selbstdarstellungen', pp. 164-5. See also 'Die Entstehung der Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie und ihr Zusammenhang mit meiner theologischen Arbeit zum Beginn ihres fünfundzwanzigsten Bandes', *BFChTh* 25,1 (1920), p. 76 (in what follows, 'Entstehung der Beiträge').

²⁸ See 'Selbstdarstellungen', p. 162.

²⁹ As Peter Stuhlmacher correctly observes. 'Adolf Schlatter (1852-1938)', p. 233.

³⁰ Schlatter in his 'Foreword' to *Das Wort Jesu* (in *History of the Christ*, p. 17).

³¹ See 'Entstehung der Beiträge', p. 58; 'Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics', p. 126; *Rückblick*, p. 102. He underlines that *Rezeption* demands and necessitates *Produktion* (*Briefe*, p. 19)—'first reception, then production' (*Briefe*, p. 23). Unfortunately, Schlatter does not clearly define his *Denkakt*. In some passages, Schlatter refers to the thinking-act as a cognitive judgment (*Urteil*; see 'Atheistische Methoden', p. 235; 'Entstehung der Beiträge', pp. 31, 53), while in others, he summarises under the *Denkakt* both observation and judgment (*Dogma*, pp. 89-93; 'Bedeutung der Methode', pp. 5-6). This obviously indicates the close relation between *Sehakt* and *Denkakt* according to Schlatter.

³² According to Schlatter, the empirical-historical act necessitates and informs the dogmatic thinking-act ('Bedeutung der Methode', pp. 7-8), for, as he put it, '[b]efore our own production stands the receiving [*das Empfangen*], the process we call seeing' ('Selbstdarstellungen', p. 153). 'Every true theologian',

2. THE THEOLOGIAN AS THINKING DOGMATICIAN

Moving, secondly, to the thinking-act, Schlatter is convinced:

The religious question is never settled by simply handing on what Scripture says. The question is always: what does Scripture mean *for us*? This 'us', with all it involves, takes us into the realm of dogmatics.³³

The implications of historical research in the seeing-act are thus organised and processed in the dogmatic task, where the dogmatician delivers a judgment.³⁴ The dogmatic task requires the 'whole dogmatician', with his own personality and his life-story, as a person who is embedded in the wider historical context.³⁵ 'The manner', Schlatter claims, 'in which he [the dogmatician] participates with his observation and experience in the experience of Christendom, shapes his dogmatic judgment'.³⁶ Hence, the theologian needs to be aware of his own particular presuppositions, his personality and his individual history, in order to secure the truth (yes, Schlatter believes that there is an absolute truth out there that can, to a certain degree, be discovered!). The Swiss critical-empirical realist is eager to note that this almost paradoxical subjective objectivity is not a stumbling block in the way of proper science. Subjectivity does not, argues Schlatter, undermine the scientific nature of theology. On the contrary: Schlatter counters objections that this importing of faith into the theological task might obstruct his goal of scientific work (*scientifische Arbeit*, as he puts it).³⁷ He points out that faith is actually instrumental for accurate access to theology, as only in the mode of faith, as it were, does one achieve an elementary congruence between the God-made observed object (e.g. the Scriptures) and the God-made observing subject, the theologian.³⁸

During Schlatter's time, and maybe this tradition is still in vogue today, it was common to distinguish clearly faith and science. If theology wanted

says Schlatter, 'is an observer, not a designer; he reasons on basis of the given [*des Gegebenen*], not "a priori".' (*Philosophische Arbeit*, p. 27; emphasis original).

³³ 'Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics', p. 133 (emphasis original). See also 'Bedeutung der Methode', pp. 7-8 and *Briefe*, pp. 50, 57.

³⁴ See *Dogma*, pp. 373-4; *Briefe*, p. 33.

³⁵ 'Atheistische Methoden', pp. 234-5; *Dogma*, pp. 5-6.

³⁶ *Dogma*, p. 5.

³⁷ Letter to Hermann Cremer 29/12/1894, in Stupperich, ed., *Wort und Wahrnehmung: Briefe Adolf Schlatters an Hermann Cremer und Friedrich von Bodelschwingh* (Bethel: Verlag der Anstalt Bethel, 1963), p. 18.

³⁸ See 'Selbstdarstellungen', p. 15 and *Der Glaube im Neuen Testament*, 2nd edn (Calw/Stuttgart: Verlag der Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1896), pp. 9-10.

to be taken seriously, it had to ignore faith in the pursuit of proper science. In 1905, Paul Jäger published an essay entitled 'On Atheistic Thinking in recent Theology'.³⁹ In this article, Jäger demands that scientific theology must pursue 'the atheistic method'.⁴⁰ That is, for the sake of pure, authentic scientific observation, the theologian, as every other scientist, must perform his research under the presupposition that God does not exist. The intention behind Jäger's approach is to explain reality through empirically observable reality alone, excluding the allegedly unscientific transcendental idea of God in the process. Only in this way, Jäger argues, will theology be taken seriously by its fellow (natural) sciences. Only after completing the scientific process may the theologian assume again the role of the religious individual and re-embrace the notion of transcendence. Schlatter, at that point professor of New Testament in Tübingen, discards the intrusion of any 'Atheistic Methods in Theology'—this was the title of his published refutation of Jäger's arguments.

In his reply, Schlatter turns the tables and points out that the positivist atheistic approach in theology is fundamentally misguided. The allegedly neutral, secular approach is in fact not objective at all, but rather a subjective, idiosyncratic presupposition that leads to inexact science. Schlatter stresses that theologians, like all scientists, approach their subjects as people of faith with special personal commitment and particular presuppositions.⁴¹ For the theologian, this means that faith must not be, as Jäger demands, excluded as unscientific from the scientific process but is *de facto* central to his profession and thus must be taken seriously.⁴² Only as a coherent individual, with his life-act intact, can the theologian, like the natural scientist, work properly and accurately. The dogmatic task can therefore only be adequately performed when the theologian is at the same time an individual of faith. Schlatter calls this mode of dogmatic thinking 'faith-based thinking'.⁴³ With this we are touching upon the existential life-act, to which we now turn.

³⁹ 'Das "atheistische Denken" in der neueren Theologie. Zur Verständigung', *Christliche Welt* 25 (June 1905), 577-82.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 578.

⁴¹ This is echoed by Stanley Grenz who notes: 'Scientists are theologians, then, in that personal stance affects, even directs, their research . . . Like theologians, scientists engage in their discipline as persons of faith. They bring a certain type of personal commitment—that is, faith—to their work'. 'Why do Theologians need to be Scientists?', *Zygon* 35,2 (2000), 348.

⁴² Cf. Thomas F. Torrance, *Christian Frame of Mind* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989), p. 75.

⁴³ 'Die Unterwerfung unter die Gotteswirklichkeit', *Die Furche* (Oct-Nov 1911), pp. 11, 47-8.

3. THE THEOLOGIAN AS ETHICIST: EXISTENTIAL ANSCHLUß AN CHRISTUS

The exegetical seeing-act and the dogmatic thinking-act organically usher in the existential life-act (*Lebensakt*) where the individual assimilates the observed and processed material.⁴⁴ Schlatter thereby takes Schleiermacher's and Kierkegaard's existential emphasis on the subjective and devotional element in theology seriously, while, obviously, developing his own existential approach. Adolf Schlatter speaks of an existentially relevant 'connection with Jesus' (*Anschluß an Jesus*) by faith⁴⁵ which has concrete ethical bearings for the theologian's personal conduct of life.⁴⁶ 'Theology', contends Schlatter, 'that declines to create an ethic, does not fully carry out its duty'.⁴⁷ 'For the *Dogma* is given to us so that we would have an ethics'.⁴⁸ The energetic Swiss theologian thus calls for a 'completion of the Reformation'⁴⁹ as he observes a significant neglect of ethics in post-Reformation Protestantism.⁵⁰ 'To me', writes Schlatter, 'observation was then valid as the process that gave us the dogmatic knowledge and that created the duty [*Pflicht*]'.⁵¹ Thus, seeing-act, thinking-act and life-act

⁴⁴ Schlatter student Paul Althaus was receptive to his teacher's concept of the life-act. Althaus notes, 'There is, for us, no theoretical, objective concept that allows us to cognitively associate the Divinity and Humanity in Jesus Christ, but only an existential, subjective way: "I believe in Jesus Christ"'. This, argues Althaus, echoing Schlatter, is not a concept, but an act, 'one cannot think it, but only live it'. *Die christliche Wahrheit: Lehrbuch der Dogmatik*, 7th edn (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1966), p. 460.

⁴⁵ This is *Anschluß an Jesus* is central to Schlatter's thinking, appearing in virtually all his publications.

⁴⁶ Schlatter speaks of the 'Vollzug des Lebensakts'. *Dogma*, p. 107; *Ethik*, p. 275; 'Gotteswirklichkeit', p. 11.

⁴⁷ *Briefe*, p. 45. Schlatter argues that '[t]he New Testament knows of no concern with the divine which does not produce ethics'. 'Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics', p. 165. This ethical agenda was not simply a theoretical construct for Schlatter but had a concrete impact on his personal *Lebensakt*. Schlatter was, for instance, closely connected with Christian relief organization 'Bethel', which was founded by his close friend Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, offering care for socially disadvantaged people. Bodelschwingh's son, Friedrich Jr., praised Schlatter's vital support for the 'Betheler Anstalten' in his moving speech at Schlatter's funeral. See Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, pp. 819-20.

⁴⁸ 'Entstehung der Beiträge', p. 78.

⁴⁹ 'Selbstdarstellungen', p. 150.

⁵⁰ *Becks theologische Arbeit*, p. 34, pp. 41-42; *Rückblick*, p. 67, p. 107.

⁵¹ 'Entstehung der Beiträge', p. 44. Schlatter underlines that the 'thinking-act cannot be completed without a movement of our will' (*Briefe*, p. 20), p. 45; see

belong together just as New (and Old) Testament theology, dogmatics and ethics form an inseparable unit⁵²—in particular, as the three acts converge in their mutual Christological focus. Schlatter asks:

Where did I find the reason for my faith? Like Luther not in the church, but in Christ alone, not within me and my work, but in Jesus' grace alone. What gave me the authority in the pulpit... and the lectern... ? The word, only the word, not the arts, not science, not the law, but Jesus' word. Was I not seriously the servant of things, seriously determined to *see*, to *think*, to *will* and to *do* what the situation showed and required?⁵³

The New Testament question of the history of the Christ, the dogmatic question of Christology, and the existential, ethical question of what human beings become (and are called to do) through their connection with him are one. Every theologian is, in this sense then, an exegete, a dogmatician as well as an ethicist, who has a personal point of contact (*Anknüpfungspunkt*), as Schlatter's contemporary Emil Brunner would have said, with Jesus Christ. For Schlatter, therefore, the theological task is not complete when one merely 'sees Christ' in history and 'thinks him' in dogmatics. Rather, the theologian's goal, as that of any individual, is to experience fundamental experiential change driven by a significant ethical impetus through the encounter with Jesus Christ.⁵⁴ Only in this holistic, Christocentric way can both the theologian as a person, and his scientific work become relevant. Any ethics must 'display', says Schlatter, 'the glory of divine grace in that it makes us an instrument of God with a free movement of our knowledge and love at the place that is assigned to us'.⁵⁵ This includes Christian theologians. Theologians are 'instruments of God', displaying the 'glory of divine grace' at the university, at college, at conferences, in seminars and lectures.

In an influential speech, delivered in 1901 at the University of Tübingen, Schlatter asks the question, 'What is the religious duty of the universities today?' He answers: The religious duty of *all* the sciences at the university consists in their common purpose of ascertaining the truth (*Wahrheitsfindung*). That is, all scientists explore God's truth as it is

also 'Entstehung der Beiträge', p. 55 and *Rückblick*, p. 102.

⁵² See 'Entstehung der Beiträge', p. 8.

⁵³ *Rückblick*, pp. 201-2 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁴ This existential trajectory might have influenced his student Rudolf Bultmann in the formulation of his existential exegesis. See Bultmann, 'Das Problem der Hermeneutik', in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, II (Tübingen: J.B.C. Mohr, 1961), pp. 211-235 (see p. 217).

⁵⁵ *Erlebtes*, pp. 117-18; see also *Ethik*, p. 87.

revealed in creation, in history, in the Scriptures, and, of course, in Jesus Christ. In doing so, the sciences naturally perform a worship service (*Gottesdienst*) to the glory of God. Schlatter put it like this,

The religious dignity of our vocation [*Beruf*] depends on the canon of truth... Correctly exercising obedience [to this canon], keeping this commitment unharmed, this is what constitutes the worship service [*Gottesdienst*] that is innate to the labour at the university.⁵⁶

All in all, the theologian stays true to his vocation when he, with scientific accuracy, as a seeing exegete, faith-based thinking dogmatician and ethical Christian, discovers and displays God's truth, above all the grand truth of the gospel that salvation is to be found in no other name than Jesus Christ's, thereby performing at the same time an act of worship to the glory of God.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we ask: In what ways may Adolf Schlatter's holistic-salvific approach be relevant in today's debate about theology's role in the university? To begin with, one must admit that Schlatter obviously lived in his own unique historical context that created its own particular challenges for theology's place in the university. Nevertheless, when we look at our situation now, over a hundred years later, it seems that the general positivist mind-set of nineteenth century Prussian Culture Protestantism is not too remote from today's charges proposed by the new Atheism movement. Contrary to contemporaneous thinking, Adolf Schlatter underlined that theology is indeed a proper science, not concerned with the 'study of leprechauns', but involved with hard empirical facts. Schlatter reminds us that we are, as theologians, empirically working scientists, strenuously devoting our efforts to see, to see, and to see again.

Pursuing this goal of seeing God's truth as it is revealed in reality, theology honestly and persistently points to the common task of all sciences, namely, the exploration of God's truth in all reality to the glory of God alone. This constitutes theology's inherently integrative role in the academy, and, as Stanley Grenz observes, 'several prominent theologians have returned to... the idea that theology brings the sciences together into a unified whole'.⁵⁷ In order to do so, Schlatter's holistic salvific perspective offers essential guidance. If *the* integrative role at the university falls

⁵⁶ 'Was ist heute die religiöse Aufgabe der Universitäten?', BfChTh 5,4 (1901), p. 77.

⁵⁷ Grenz, 'Why do Theologians need to be Scientists?', p. 342.

to theology, and if theology intends to remain relevant for the church and for the society today, then theologians need to grasp the content of their vocation, and embrace it in a holistic way. Theologians, according to Schlatter, must be exegetes, dogmaticians, and ethicists who are not only members of the academe, but also members of the church, disciples of Jesus Christ who enjoy an existential connection with their Saviour.

This issue of a personal *Anschluß an Jesus* might be less pressing for those of us who are working in a confessional institution. However, if I consider my own background, studying at a theological faculty within a British secular university, things look rather different. Clearly, the position of theology at the university is weakened when ecclesiastical ties are severed. In a recent editorial to the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, Dr Paul T. Nimmo, Lecturer in theology at Edinburgh's New College, expresses the difficulty he experiences as a confessing Christian teaching at a secular university. He laments the

[t]ension between practicing what is a deeply confessional discipline and having to teach it in a non-confessional manner. At times, this is an opportunity for creative, if veiled, apologetics; at other times, it is a matter of rather deep frustration.⁵⁸

Despite chronic frustration, we are called to make a case for the *raison d'être* of our profession. In order to survive in the university context, Schlatter's voice from the past must not only be heard, but must be rearticulated today with singular conviction and clarity.

⁵⁸ Nimmo, 'Editorial', in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13,3 (2011), 249.