

Reeves's Against Methodology in Science and Religion

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LEGITIMACY AND THE FIELD OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

by Peter N. Jordan

Abstract. Prompted by the concerns about legitimacy that Josh Reeves expresses in his book *Against Methodology in Science and Religion: Recent Debates on Rationality and Theology*, this article considers how the field of science and religion, and the disciplines and scholars that comprise it, should think about the pursuit of legitimacy today. It begins by examining four features of any conferral of legitimacy on an object. It then looks more closely at distance and its effects on judgments of legitimacy. It first notes how longer distances can enable a wide range of factors other than the internal features or inherent merits of the object to influence judgments of its legitimacy. It then explores the factors that persons who have significant expertise in or experience with the object may consider when judging its legitimacy. It closes by posing three questions that anyone designing a strategy to increase the perceived legitimacy of an object might ask.

Keywords: legitimacy; methodology; theology

How should the field of science and religion, and the disciplines and scholars that comprise it, think about the pursuit of legitimacy today? This question is prompted by two sentences that bookend Josh Reeves's marvelous study *Against Methodology in Science and Religion: Recent Debates on Rationality and Theology*. The first: "one of the key aims of science and religion scholars has been to show how religious or theological inquiry might be rational, thus showing why the subject deserves a

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place in university curriculums” (Reeves 2019, 8). The second: “If the methodological work by scholars of science and religion are based on faulty assumptions about the nature of science, then does the field itself lack the intellectual legitimacy that scholars have been seeking?” (Reeves 2019, 122). They, along with similar statements and questions elsewhere in the book, reflect the concerns about legitimacy which Reeves rightly identifies as exercising (at least some) members of the field. They also helpfully point readers to the larger sociological dynamics behind the theological, philosophical, and historical arguments that he considers.

In the following, I take up the topic of legitimacy with the purpose of fleshing out this central yet relatively undeveloped aspect of Reeves’ analysis. I begin by examining four ingredients of any conferral of legitimacy on an object: the object itself; the party whose bestowal of legitimacy on the object is sought; the distance between the object and the bestower of legitimacy; and manifestations of legitimacy’s bestowal. I then look more closely at distance, and examine how judgments about the legitimacy of an object may change as distance from it varies. First, I consider the vagaries that larger distances can introduce, noting how perceptions of legitimacy from afar can be influenced—sometimes quite significantly—by a range of factors external to the object itself. I then look at the kinds of factors that those persons much closer to an object, and who have significant expertise in or experience with it, may consider when judging its legitimacy. I do this by considering real and imagined responses by theologians to Reeves’ subjects’ efforts at “making theology ‘scientific’” (Reeves 2019, 1), and discerning from these some of the factors involved in their judgments. In light of the many elements involved in legitimacy’s bestowal and pursuit, I conclude by suggesting how the field of science and religion, and the discipline of theology in relation to it in particular, might think about legitimacy and its pursuit today.

LEGITIMACY’S INGREDIENTS

Legitimacy refers to the acceptability or validity of an object in the eyes of a particular person or persons. Understanding what is going on in any conferral of legitimacy requires paying attention to at least four key elements of the process: the object itself, for which legitimacy either is or is not granted; the party who grants, judges, or perceives the legitimacy of the object; the distance between the perceiver and the object; and visible manifestations of the conferral of legitimacy. These last take the form of symbols or tokens, and are produced in recognition of the object’s status as legitimate.

As the quotations above indicate, Reeves is interested both in the field of science and religion, and in one of its longstanding constituent disciplines. Given this broad focus, in what follows I refer to these and the many other

related objects whose legitimacy may be of concern simultaneously as the *activity* of science and religion. By this term, I mean the suite of things that typically fall under the umbrella term “science and religion”: the nouns that constitute science and religion (e.g., the field itself; the scholars who identify with it; the disciplines from which those scholars come; the field’s subject matter; the body of knowledge the field’s scholars generate), and the relevant verbs that these nouns either perform, or have performed on them (e.g., study of the field’s subject matter; generation of the field’s body of knowledge; dissemination of the field’s newest knowledge through journal articles and conferences).

In many situations, it is helpful to distinguish roughly between two kinds of grantors or perceivers of legitimacy: insiders and outsiders. In the activity of science and religion, insiders are those nouns who undertake its verbs—that is, those who perform the activity’s main tasks. For insiders, the distance between themselves and the activity is zero. Outsiders, by contrast, are those for whom there exists a nonzero distance between themselves and the activity. For some outsiders that distance may be quite small. (Think here of theologians who work on subject matter other than that of the field of science and religion: they will have first-hand knowledge of one of the activity’s tasks, but they focus on different subject matter.) For others, that distance will be greater. (Think here, for example, of interested members of the public.)

For outsiders to an activity, the direction of traffic is normally one way: the person(s) looking at the activity either grants, or refrains from granting, legitimacy to it. Insiders, by contrast, typically are both seekers after others’ perceptions of legitimacy (either for themselves, or for the activity in which they are participating), and grantors of legitimacy to the activity and its tasks.¹ Each of the scholars who study science-and-religion’s subject matter and who contribute to its body of knowledge, for example, provide legitimacy to the field of science and religion as a whole, to the field’s subject matter, to its subject-specific journals and conferences, and to other aspects of it, simply by virtue of their choice to do what they do in relation to each of these (respectively, by participating in it; by knowing it and contributing to it; by reading them and publishing in them). At the same time, they seek recognition as legitimate contributors to the field’s body of knowledge, as legitimate members of the academic discipline(s) with which they identify, and as legitimate potential recipients of financial support from those funding bodies who support the pursuit of the activity (among others). It is similar for other aspects of the activity, such as the university. Scholars seek the legitimacy that comes from being able to identify themselves as members of a university, and the activity of science and religion has similarly sought the legitimacy that comes from aspects of it taking place within a university setting. Universities also rely on the legitimacy of the disciplines that it incorporates and the

scholars that it employs and supports in order for them to be perceived as legitimate.

Over the years, the activity of science and religion has led to the production of a wide range of symbols or markers of legitimacy. At an institutional level, for example, the legitimacy of the field has been marked by the establishment of centers and institutes devoted to one or more aspects of the field, by the creation of undergraduate and graduate degree programs which focus on the field's knowledge, methods, and subject matter and which are taught by its scholars, and by the endowment of university chairs devoted to its study. Funding bodies have judged the field and its scholars sufficiently legitimate to have provided grant and other forms of funding to support its scholars and its activities. Individual contributing disciplines to the field have judged research on the field's subject matter to have reached that discipline's standards, a fact reflected by those disciplines willingly publishing science and religion research in their flagship disciplinary journals. And the field has seen learned societies established, journals devoted to its subject matter and the development of its own field-specific methods created, and conferences on a hugely diverse range of its topics held. Most, if not all, of these tokens represent judgments of insiders and those very close to the activity.

LEGITIMACY FROM AFAR

If the preceding sketch of legitimacy's ingredients is broadly correct, then knowing the distance a person whose judgment of legitimacy is desired is from the object will be important for those developing strategies aimed at promoting a positive perception of the object in that person. One might, for example, hope for positive perceptions among experts and those generally quite close to an activity. Alternatively, one may want to shift more distant public or societal perceptions of legitimacy of an object. In either case, knowing how far the person(s) whose judgment is of interest is from the object will matter because those at different distances often rely on very different considerations when reaching their judgments, and may be influenced by very different factors as a result.

An example from the history of science and religion itself can help to shed light on some of the factors involved in more distant perceptions of legitimacy. As is well known in the field, one of the most common societal or public perceptions that have been the target of scholarly work is the "myth" of perennial science-religion conflict. One way in which some members of the field have tried to fight this myth is by replacing the deficient histories of the relations between science and religion that the myth relies on with more subtle, and truer, histories of what actually took place in the past. One aspect of the past that highlights just how simplistic and untenable stories of inevitable conflict really are relates to

the means by which science came to assume its present high standing in society. Modernity's high-status, religion-free science, historians have argued, is the product of conscious strategies in the nineteenth century to pull apart the study of nature from its religious context. But the two were previously so intertwined (and in the eyes of many at the time, happily so) because selected early modern figures began to regard the (lower-status) study of nature as potentially useful to (higher-status) religion, and began to put it to work for theological ends:

A good part of the distinctive success at the level of legitimation and consolidation of the scientific enterprise in the early modern West derives not from any separation of religion and natural philosophy, but rather from the fact that natural philosophy could be accommodated to projects in natural theology: what made natural philosophy attractive to so many in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the prospects it offered for the renewal of natural theology. Far from science breaking free of religion in the early modern era, its consolidation depended crucially on religion being in the driving seat: Christianity took over natural philosophy in the seventeenth century, setting its agenda and projecting it forward in a way quite different from that of any other scientific culture. (Gaukroger 2005, 9)

Far from displacing religion over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, science relied heavily upon religion in order to move itself from the margins of intellectual life. What we witness during this time, particularly in the English context, is the development of a much closer and more intimate relationship between science and religion than that seen during the Middle Ages. . . . [A] significant factor in the development which sees science attain social legitimacy, and a key reason for its rise to the prominent place that it now occupies, was a process that established its religious usefulness and its capacity to fulfil crucial religious functions. Part of the story, then, of the role of religion in the rise of modern science is a story about how science gained intellectual credibility and social prestige because it was able to harness the considerable legitimizing power of religion. (Harrison 2008, 257)

Science's most avid defenders regularly narrate the rise of science as the inevitable result of its inherent epistemic and methodological superiority over everything else, and use versions of that story to criticize religion and delegitimize it (Harrison and Roberts 2019). But if Gaukroger and Harrison are right, the true historical picture is rather different. Skepticism about the merits of experimental science eventually was replaced by current perceptions of its "unparalleled prestige" (Harrison 2008, 256) not because science teaches us the truth about nature (a story that readers of Reeves's book will find many historical and philosophical reasons to doubt). Rather, it did so at least in part because religious persons found science—or more accurately, science's historical precursors like natural philosophy—to be theologically useful.

On this view, then, factors other than the internal features of science and its inherent epistemic merits were directly implicated in science's rise to prominence. Distant (what Harrison refers to as "social") perceptions of the legitimacy of science historically have been the product not merely of science's internal features and merits, but also of factors external to it. Maintenance of the perception of science's legitimacy now relies at least in part on mythical historical narratives about science and religion's purportedly conflict-ridden past. Together, these examples demonstrate how factors external to any object may play a role in shaping distant perceptions of it.

Despite the best efforts of historians of science and religion, the idea of perennial warfare between science and religion in the public imagination has proved to be so difficult to dislodge that it's been named "the idea that wouldn't die" (Hardin et al. 2018). As they have discovered, sometimes factors external to an object have such a hold on the imagination that they make changing perceptions of the legitimacy of the object almost impossible. In the case of historical narratives, that hold may be due to the simplicity and affective power of conflict myths, qualities that narratives involving complexity and nuance cannot match. Whatever the case may be, stories and other external factors can so readily influence more distant perceptions of legitimacy because there is no first-hand familiarity or experience with the object to generate resistance to them. Distant outsiders instead rely on others' judgments about the legitimacy of an activity, and even adopt others' judgments as their own, rather than reaching their own reasoned conclusions or judgments about its legitimacy directly.

LEGITIMACY UP CLOSE

While Reeves does at times (especially in his more historically oriented sections of the book) evince concern about these more distant judgments about legitimacy, his main focus appears to be the perceptions of those considerably closer to the activity of science and religion. As he recognizes, the judgments of those with first-hand knowledge of an object, or expertise in it, are likely to involve consideration of the specific features and merits of the object much more than for those of persons more distant from it. Consequently, their perceptions might be expected to be significantly less influenced by, or subject to, factors external to the object like those just described. Where Reeves could have been a little more explicit, however, is in identifying the typical bases on which insiders and nearby outsiders make judgments about the legitimacy of objects with which they are familiar. His readers would then be better positioned to determine whether making theology scientific is a good way to pursue legitimacy for theology in the eyes of those near to it. They would also be better able to judge whether failing to make it so might have the detrimental effects

on perceptions of legitimacy of the activity of science and religion that he worries about.

How might we identify the kinds of factors likely to matter most to those nearby an object? For the activity of science and religion and the discipline of theology in particular, one way to do so is by looking at how theologians have concretely responded to past efforts that resemble those undertaken by Reeves's subjects, or by imagining how they might respond to such efforts based on their stated views about closely related topics. From the following six real and imagined responses, we can discern various factors that those close by appear to deem most relevant when making judgments about the legitimacy of these objects.

- (1) In his study of the nature of theology, Andrew Louth asserts that he isn't persuaded that making theology scientific is a good idea. Louth believes that the epistemic priority that the sciences have arrogated to themselves is unwarranted, and that "in reality science as a human pursuit of truth is much less privileged than the claims of the Enlightenment might lead us to suppose" (Louth 2007 [1983], xiii). He, like Reeves' subjects, acknowledges the legitimacy that would come from making theology scientific—"given the enormous respect in which the sciences are held nowadays, would it not be of considerable apologetic value if theology could be regarded as genuinely 'scientific'?"—yet he proceeds to give numerous reasons why theologians should resist actually making it so.² If they are going to look over their shoulder at other academic disciplines to model themselves after, he says, theologians should look to the humanities rather than to the sciences. By refusing science's claim to being a privileged way of knowing, one can better recognize and appreciate the different "pattern[s] of knowing" that the sciences and the humanities represent, without the latter becoming distorted by the "lure of the scientific method" (Louth 2007 [1983], 60, 66).³
- (2) Other theologians may question the desire to make theology scientific because of the plurality of methods that already exist within theological circles. In his study of theological method, Paul Allen has observed that there has been historically, and there remains today, a wide range of theological methods rather than a single method (Allen 2012). Hans Frei's identification of different types of theology in modernity corroborate this (Frei 1992). Even if representatives of every existing method or type were to agree that making theology scientific is an important pursuit, the results of doing so would likely be as diverse as the theologies before they were made scientific already were. That diversity would make assessments of whether the goal of making theology scientific had in fact been achieved impractical, if not impossible, in anything but individual cases.

- (3) Other theologians might raise concerns about putting methodology above all else in theological work. As one theologian who trained in universities where methodological concerns loomed large has noted, methodology can so dominate the conversation that it forecloses other pursuits. Writing of her experience in the Yale University religious studies department in the 1980s, Kathryn Tanner reports that “the main worries of theologians and philosophers of religion were methodological in nature: Could religious thought and language be intellectually justified? Did religious thought and language, for example, meet general standards of meaning, intelligibility and truth?” (Tanner 2010, 40). Tellingly, these concerns were so prominent that two of her teachers at Yale, Frei and George Lindbeck, “often half-jokingly quipped that one day they would eventually *do* theology, rather than spend all their time talking about how to go about it.” In that context, the rediscovery of the substance of theology awaited future theologians:

The hopes of my teachers for their own work came to fruition with the next generation of theologians, of which I count myself a member. Typical of this new generation of theologians—whatever their methodological commitments—is a willingness to make constructive claims of a substantive sort through the critical reworking of Christian ideas and symbols to address the challenges of today’s world, a willingness to venture a new Christian account of the world and our place in it with special attention to the most pressing problems and issues of contemporary life. . . . Frei, my old friend and mentor, at once so cautious and generous in outlook, would no doubt be astonished—grateful but perhaps a little envious too, pleasantly surprised but also taken aback by the unselfconscious boldness of this new turn in theological inquiry.⁴ (Tanner 2010, 40)

- (4) Yet other theologians may think that giving so much attention to the university, the institution in which being like science apparently matters so much, is unwarranted. Although being part of it doubtless confers many benefits, in Reinhard Hütter’s view the modern university, especially in its research-intensive varieties, is a pale reflection of its true self. As little more than “sophisticated problem-solving institution[s],” most universities today are “accidental agglomeration[s] of advanced research competencies, gathered in one facility for the sake of managerial and logistical convenience” (Hütter n.d., 2, 4). Rather than encouraging (as liberal education supposedly does) the pursuit of universal knowledge through “reflection upon one’s knowledge in relation to other fields and to the whole,” universities instead “deliver goods . . . seen as commodities that can be purchased in order to satisfy individual desires” (Hütter n.d., 6, 3). The “polytechnic utiliversity” is thus a counterfeit version of the true item (Hütter n.d., 5).

If Hütter is right, one could be forgiven for wondering why theology should bother making an effort to remain in those universities where it already resides, or to join those where it currently does not.⁵

- (5) Other theologians are likely to be concerned about the kind of theology that could be undertaken within the university today. Even if theology is admitted back into the university in order to restore its intellectual coherence (less likely), or even if its ongoing presence is tolerated in some but not all universities (more likely, albeit probably for reasons of historical inertia more than anything else), it is not clear to what extent it genuinely would benefit from being there. As Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun have observed, theology within the modern research university has largely turned into the scientific study of religion, and theologians there increasingly see themselves as “primarily engaged in a knowledge-producing enterprise, in an endeavor to incrementally increase the human grasp of the world” (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 46). The knowledge that this version of theology produces is knowledge of the historical religion Christianity, rather than of “God and everything else in relation to God” as was true for figures like Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and others (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 47). If Volf and Croasmun are right, then to the extent that theological education takes its cue from the university, the possibility of experiencing what David Kelsey refers to as an “Athens” type of theological education—“a movement from source to personal appropriation of the source, from revealed wisdom to the appropriation of revealed wisdom in a way that is identity forming and personally transforming”—will be slim (Kelsey 1993, 19–20).⁶ Were theology to gain (either through successfully becoming scientific or through some other legitimation efforts) the longed-for recognition from the university that it purportedly seeks, it may become but a shadow of its former self.
- (6) Finally, some theologians appear to have already learned the lesson (from Peter Harrison and elsewhere) that science doesn’t possess a transhistorical essence or method(s), and have decided as a consequence not to abandon making theology scientific altogether, but instead to pursue what Reeves refers to as a more “localist” approach. A good example of those who have done so are those who participate in the constellation of activities known as science-engaged theology, one description of which is “a vision of science as an authentic theology source—alongside scripture, tradition, and reason” (St. Andrews, n.d.). Despite the shortcomings that Reeves identifies in the specific attempts to make theology scientific that he surveys, the existence of science-engaged theology indicates that there are many theologians today who think that engaging science in some way is still an

important task for theology to undertake. The past failures that Reeves highlights in his book may provoke these theologians either to try harder or to try differently, rather than to stop altogether.

What can we learn from the various expert positions just surveyed? From them, we can discern a number of different kinds of considerations that insiders and nearby outsiders to one of the disciplines that constitute the activity of science and religion are likely to bring to their judgments about that discipline's legitimacy. These scholars are very aware of the range of different methods and approaches that one might adopt within the object of concern, and feel themselves able to judge the relative strengths and weaknesses of each. Their awareness of the history of the object and its tasks allows them to recognize new versions of old endeavors, and to discern potentially more and less promising ways of dealing with pressing problems. They are sensitive to the wider context within which the object and its tasks are situated, and how changes in that broader environment may contribute to the object's flourishing or floundering. And because they have taken the time to obtain an intimate familiarity with the object, they are (unlike those at greater distances who have at best second-hand knowledge of the activity) able independently to assess the merits of claims that others make about it, and therefore are likely to be relatively less susceptible to prevailing societal narratives, myths, and assumptions about it. They may disagree with others close by about how the object should look in the future, but those variations generally occur within the context of a shared commitment to, and sympathy for, the object.

Given the factors that experts bring to bear when forming their perceptions of legitimacy, it seems highly unlikely that all of those nearest to the activity of science and religion will think that the failure to make theology scientific undermines the legitimacy either of the activity, or of the discipline of theology in particular. Some may find their perceptions of one or both changing somewhat in response to those efforts, but dramatic shifts of the kind that Reeves appears most worried about seem rather unlikely.

Indeed, the preceding analysis of the many facets of legitimacy of the activity of science and religion suggests a fairly significant level of robustness in close-up perceptions of its legitimacy. While the legitimacy of the field as a whole will of course depend on the legitimacy of each of the disciplines that historically have constituted and contributed to it, the legitimacy of this very diverse field will not depend wholly on the legitimacy of any one of those disciplines that constitute it. Regrettably though flawed methodological reflection by a handful of scholars within one of the many disciplines that comprise this growing field may be, very likely it will not, on its own, cause the field as a whole to lose the already considerable legitimacy that it has attained.

LOOKING AHEAD

How, then, should the field of science and religion, and the disciplines and scholars that comprise it, think about the pursuit of legitimacy today?

If the discussion so far has generally been on the right track, then increasing the legitimacy of any aspect of the activity of science and religion will require strategies that take into account many of the factors both explicitly identified and implied above. Anyone actively pursuing legitimacy for an object can ensure that they will consider some of the most important ones along the way simply by asking themselves the following three questions as they develop their strategy: (a) From whom is the perception of legitimacy that they care about being sought? (b) What distance is the person(s) whose judgment is being sought from the object? (c) Does the proposed strategy adequately take account of the identity of the perceiver and their distance from the object?

As we have seen, different persons and institutions bring different considerations to their judgments of legitimacy, which means that no one-size-fits-all approach to the pursuit of legitimacy will work. Most scholars care greatly about being perceived as legitimate by other scholars, and so the efforts for which they will most likely be rewarded in this regard will be those aimed at other insiders and those outsiders who are very close by. While those pursuits must ensure that any knowledge they generate satisfies the expected standards of their discipline, those who also seek legitimacy in the eyes of potential funding agencies today may find themselves needing to consider other factors—potential for impact, communications plans, etc.—in order to be regarded as a legitimate potential funding recipient. Although different insiders and up-close outsiders may require different considerations from each other, their judgments about legitimacy generally will arise from judgments relating to features internal or inherent to the activity, and to the merits of specific actions in relation to it.

Those hoping to gain legitimacy for an object from those far away from it may, by contrast, need to adopt quite different strategies. Scholars may gain scholarly legitimacy from writing books about an object that other insiders and nearby outsiders judge to be of sufficiently high standard, but those distant from them, and from their object of interest, are unlikely to read those books or even know of their existence. Because books about an object which are aimed at academic audiences will alter wider societal perceptions of that object only by very indirect routes, dislodging pre-existing views of that object and cultivating new attitudes—views and attitudes likely to be much more easily influenced by factors external to the object itself—will require other approaches, ones that are better matched to the specific perceivers of interest and their distance from the object. The mode of delivery of a message, and the audience at which the message is aimed, are just as important as the message itself.

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NOTES

1. In some situations, an outsider may want to pursue legitimacy for an object, as when (e.g.) a funding body that supports an activity wants to draw attention to that activity, even though it does not directly participate in that activity.

2. It is worth noting here that Louth does not repudiate all theological engagement with science: “[E]ven if we decide that theology has nothing to gain from an analogy with the exact sciences, this does not mean that the sciences have no relevance at all for theology” (Louth 2007 [1983], 58).

3. For a recent and insightful comparison between the sciences and the humanities, see Foley, 2018. For another example of a theologian critical of those who have succumbed to the temptation to “show that their belief is rational in the same kind of way that scientific beliefs are,” see Moore, 2006.

4. Of course, reflecting on its methodologies and practices is important for any discipline, theology included. Allen is thus surely right to observe that among those critical of an overemphasis on method in theological work, “theological method will always re-emerge as an issue, even if the aims of past efforts seemed overly ambitious” (Allen 2012, 226). For those for whom method is central, the challenge would nevertheless be to keep it from becoming theology’s sole concern.

5. Perhaps surprisingly, Hütter insists that it should try because only theology can save the university from its present terminal decline. Echoing John Henry Newman, Hütter argues that

the only thing that can save the university from the reductive and, in the end, detrimental distortions of philosophical naturalism . . . is the discipline that allows for the widest possible scope of truth. Only with theology as the capstone of the arch of university disciplines will the arch achieve the widest possible scope, will the university remain open to a maximum of interrelated and complementary sciences, will a university education remain in all areas of knowledge essentially philosophical, and will universal knowledge as an end in and of itself be intelligible and desirable. (Hütter n.d., 21)

The kind of theology that Hütter, following Newman, has in mind here is theology as a science. But by this—that is, by the “Science of God”—he means (quoting Newman) “the truths we know about God put into a system” (Hütter n.d., 8). Even though theology of this, or any other kind, is likely to receive a chilly reception in the contemporary university, it should persist in its efforts to join its ranks, or to remain there, for only theology “guarantees a genuinely liberal education” (Hütter n.d., 21).

6. Kelsey is interested specifically in the theology one finds in theological or divinity schools, rather than in the theology one encounters within liberal arts education programs and schools such as those that Hütter has in mind. The distance between the two may not be all that great, however, especially when one compares the former with explicitly Christian liberal arts institutions.

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