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David Fergusson is Professor of Divinity in the Faculty of Divinity, University of Edinburgh. He reflects on the changing face of theological teaching from one of Britain's oldest and most prestigious centres of theological education.

The presence of theology as a subject of study in UK universities still owes something to the history of our institutions since the middle ages. As the “queen of the sciences,” theology was once regarded as the crowning discipline in universities like Edinburgh, which were founded *inter alia* as centres of education for priests and ministers. This ethos continues to be apparent, at least residually, in the presence of some canon professorships in England open only to academics who are also clergy of the Church of England. In Scotland, the national Presbyterian Church does not have its own seminary and continues to maintain a partnership with the divinity faculties of St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh universities.

By comparison with the past, however, the present may appear to reflect loss, decline, and fragmentation. There are few theologians willing to assert before colleagues in other disciplines that theirs is “the queen of the sciences.” The fading significance of our national churches, together with the lack of public interest, particularly amongst the young, signals a marginalisation of confessional theology. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has even remarked that theology is at its lowest ebb since about the tenth century. In Scotland, fewer than 10 percent of all divinity undergraduates are ordinands for the church. Most systematic theologians, moreover, now find themselves as part of academic departments that include a wide range of subject areas and approaches.

Yet not all the indicators of change should be presented negatively. With the enhanced academic profile of Bible colleges, the advent of distance learning programmes, and the appearance of theology degrees in some of the new universities in Britain, there are actually more students taking theology courses than ever before. The growth in higher education has been matched generally by an expansion in theology and religious studies. One particularly notable change has been in the gender balance of students. Once dominated by male students, many with a vocation to ministry, most departments in Britain now have a large majority of female students.

This has also coincided with a renewed confidence amongst practitioners of theology. The nervous and defensive strategies employed in the mid-twentieth century to counter logical

positivism have been abandoned in favour of greater inter-disciplinary collaboration and a return to the study of Christian doctrine. This has been facilitated by the realisation that secular patterns of thought face formidable difficulties, and also by a new curiosity about theology amongst exponents of other disciplines such as philosophy, the health sciences and physics.

All this has influenced the teaching of systematic theology in its British setting. The demand for courses remains, but participants increasingly come from varied disciplinary backgrounds. Joint honours degrees involving theology are more common than in the past, and many students pursuing a BA degree will take the occasional course in theology. The audience the contemporary teacher of the discipline now faces presents a challenge very different to that of twenty years ago. A rudimentary knowledge of the Bible can no longer be assumed, far less an awareness of some of the key episodes and figures in Christian history. A passionate interest in the filioque controversy, the Pelagian dispute, reformation controversies about the sacraments, and competing views of the work of Christ cannot be guaranteed. Strenuous work in analytic philosophy of religion may also be less appealing for today's student constituency.

All this, however, does not betoken a lack of ability or concern with theological matters. When related to spiritual practice, ethics, pastoral care, art, literature, science, and the other world religions, Christian theology continues to excite student attention. This may be perceived as providing part of the opportunity for modern systematic theology to reconnect with spirituality, aesthetics, and other academic disciplines. The typical syllabus today is more interactive, comparative, and cross-disciplinary in its scope. Within this environment, the Templeton Foundation, for example, has been successful in its pump-priming of courses in theology and science across the country, while several centres also reveal a burgeoning interest in the relationship of theology to the arts.

In his recent work on models of theological education, David Kelsey distinguishes the two dominant paradigms inherited from classical Greece and modern Berlin that have informed recent approaches.¹ The former viewed the study of theology in the context of personal formation. It was a type of paideia in which the participant was shaped by the object of study. This model was appropriated by the church in its catechetical schools. Here, theology was transformative. The study of texts and traditions could not be undertaken except by reference to their contribution to the spiritual, moral, and intellectual welfare of the person. In an effort to defend the academic integrity of theology in the post-Enlightenment period, the model of theology as directed toward professional training replaced that of paideia. It took its place alongside other modern disciplines and was characterised by the same scholarly rigour, objectivity, research excellence, and disinterested pursuit of the truth. Engaged in professional formation, moreover, theology could command a place in the modern academy alongside medicine, law, and education.

As a rough generalisation, one might describe the modern study of theology as offering a blend of these contrasting approaches, albeit a blend that is sometimes the source of unease and lack of clarity. An emphasis upon the practical dimensions of theological study — ethics, pastoral care, spirituality, and missiology — is combined with traditional emphases upon philosophical, historical, and linguistic skills for the pursuit of theological study. Almost all British theologians continue to relate to the churches and to regard their work as making a constructive contribution to their community of faith. Most would eschew any disjunction between “insider” and “outsider” approaches. Both narrow confessionalism and dispassionate neutrality are highly problematic if adjudged to be the only acceptable form of engagement with the subject matter. At the very least, today’s student will be encouraged to develop a greater sensitivity to, and understanding and tolerance of, theological positions.

To suggest a uniform paradigm, however, would distort the sheer variety of approaches, methods, and foci of theological study currently available. In part, these are determined by different institutional settings and the diverse manner in which departments, schools, and faculties are configured. “Theology and Religious Studies” is now the standard designator for departments, the unit of research assessment, and the teaching quality review panel. The recent “benchmarking” statement eschews any essentialist definition of theology as it is taught today. Instead, it describes the wide range of approaches, methods, and loci of study in theology and religious studies, recognising none as normative but all as valid.²

In a recent survey of British theology, David Ford has commented upon the wisdom model that is widely practised throughout the country. He contrasts this with German and American models. Following Rowan Williams, he perceives the marks of this style of theology as celebratory (evoking a fullness of vision), communicative (persuading and commending), and critical (drawing upon philosophical and other methodological tools).³ These three marks entail a commitment less to systematising than to ongoing conversation and constructive theological input in contemporary discourse. Less apparent is the desire to produce a complete “system” of Christian thought in relation to Scripture and other fields of knowledge. Attempts on the European continent and in the US to produce systematic theologies have found, perhaps regrettably, few counterparts on the British scene. This may owe something to the more diffuse context in which the subject is now taught.

While this thesis cannot be pressed too far without imposing a false uniformity, it does indicate a highly influential approach within recent British theology. It can be portrayed as combining aspects of the two models of teaching theology described by Kelsey, while also retrieving the traditional responsibilities of systematic theology, particularly attention to the history of doctrinal theology, philosophical awareness, and apologetic engagement with contemporary culture.

Endnotes

¹ *Understanding God: What's Theological about a Theological School*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992.

² <http://www.qaa.ac.uk>

³ David Ford. "Theological Wisdom, British Style." *Christian Century*. April 5, 2000, p. 390.