

**Becker, Matthew L. (2024, first edition 2013) *Fundamental Theology: A Protestant Perspective*, Second Edition, London: T & T Clark. pp. 735, paperback**

In this second edition of his undergraduate theology textbook, Becker appears to have three goals: 1) to untangle the confusion over what distinguishes Theology and the Studies-in-Religion field as separate disciplines; 2) to frame these distinctions from a Protestant confessional perspective; and 3) to update these discussions drawing on scholarship produced in the decade since the first edition was published.

The introduction is fair and reasonable, surveying the many meanings of “religion” or “being religious” included throughout the text (10-11). Becker helpfully points out across the spectrum of belief “[the need to] recognizes an important relationship between theology and religious studies while seeking to maintain the distinctive approach and concerns of each” (473-4). The aim of studies-in-religion is not to redefine ‘theology’, but rather to simply study the phenomenon. However, Becker’s understanding of Protestant mission becomes the catalyst for its inherent contradictions of defending and criticising institutional outlooks or worldviews: “Such criticism is, of course, in service to the church and its mission; academic theology cannot avoid the reality of the church, but it is not necessarily the advocate of the church and its practical life.” (490) It is not a sufficient statement from Becker for a scholar in-and-of religion, nevertheless, it is the minimum commitment for academic study.

There are the prejudices and blind-spots of broad-stroke description and explanations towards the different interdisciplinary perspective that the Protestant and undergraduate perspective cannot penetrate. The shortcomings of Sigmund Freud and the psychology of religion (200-201), as well as Peter Berger and the sociology of religion (201), are exploited for weaknesses that suggest larger, and sociological, ‘paradigm dismissals’. The trouble is sociology has dismissed in such prejudice as unfounded ‘dismissal’ (18-23, 116-18). The issue is where the loyalties exist across different types of institutions: “The institutional context in which Christian theology is done affects its nature and form (118).” The sleight of hand is to *argue* that the *university* Christian theology is understood and believed in the churches ‘revelation’, *dialogically* allowing that the *theology* is *not exclusively* owned by the churches (119, 123). Yet *academic-professional* historians of “the Protestant religion” point out that ***the churches have not understood and believed in academic theology, particularly in the United States*** (Buch 1995: 1, 42).

The critical point is (129) the under-analysed and poor conclusion in the distinction binary between *heresy* (“false teaching”) and *orthodoxy* (“correct teaching”). It *misunderstands* the history discipline and historical method, and it has also been sleight-of-hand in Protestant thought to maintain the unhistorical distinction. Becker attempts to introduce what he thinks is *an evenness of ‘the opposing’* claim:

Christian theology is concerned to identify where the natural and social sciences and humanities might be blind to the accomplishments within human culture and religious traditions, specifically the tradition of Christianity, critically appropriated, when they attempt to ground all human value and wisdom solely within their own academic disciplines. (130)

Solely? Becker forgot his linkage between academic theology and interdisciplinary method (118). But the critical point is *there is not the evenness* that Becker imagines. Certainly, modern cultures, particularly the United States, appropriated Christian beliefs. In this argument is an *appropriating* in institutional thinking. While orthodoxy condemns the heretic, it ends up reforming itself in the same heretic beliefs. This is the unhistorical sleight of hand. For example, Erdozain’s (2016) work on Protestant history in European history from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

Becker is attempting an evenness that does not exist in practice; as in practical theology (508-15). The text is deflecting the issue by denying ‘the practice now’ is “what used to be”: polemic and apologetics, neither of which has disappeared in Christian churches (131). The critical point is the failure in the institutional thinking by scoping to “internal understandings of the Christian faith within **the Christian churches themselves.**” (131) It has nothing to do with Christian persons who think and practice “faith” *against* the institutional hermeneutics.

The key difference between the first edition to this second edition was a reorganisation of the previous material on skeptical traditions of beliefs. There is a move to legitimise theodicy and populist apologetics. The first edition (135-6) was limited in discussing the word and concept “agnostic”, whereas the second edition extensively criticised the belief (216-7). The target in the first edition was the New Atheist movement. In the second edition the attention is targeted on nuanced belief beyond Protestant orthodoxy. In this regard the Protestant choice is blunt for its thinking. For the Protestant perspective, Becker represents a too narrow a conception of orthodoxy; one as if orthodox belief has not be touched by historical shifts; which are rarely admitted or confessed in church life.

The text does not meet the standards in the *academic* history discipline today; descriptions of worldview and method are outdated. A shortcoming which is *understood* in the studies-in-religion discipline, in its *friendly* criticism of theology.

## Reference

Buch, Neville Douglas (1995). American influence on Protestantism in Queensland since 1945, School of History, Philosophy, Religion, and Classics, The University of Queensland, [Text Queensland](#).

Erdozain, Dominic (2016). *The Soul of Doubt: the religious roots of unbelief from Luther to Marx*. Oxford University Press