



THE DIVISION OF LABOUR BETWEEN
POPULIST ENCHANTMENT AND SCHOLARLY
MODERN THEOLOGY: TRUTHFULNESS,
FALSEHOOD, AND THE PATHWAY TO
COMMUNICATIVE COMPREHENSION
Helping Intellectual Historians

ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the structural division of labour between populist enchantment (lived, affective, and vernacular spirituality) and scholarly modern theology (critical-hermeneutical and university-based inquiry).

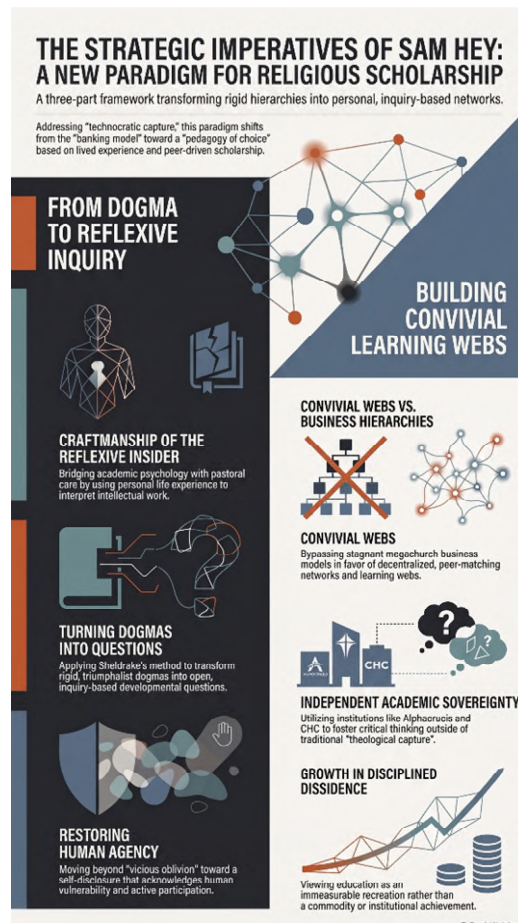
Neville Buch

Communication and Theology

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The Division of Labour Between Populist Enchantment and Scholarly Modern Theology: Truthfulness, Falsehood, and the Pathway to Communicative Comprehension

Dr Neville Buch¹



Abstract

This essay investigates the structural division of labour between populist enchantment (lived, affective, and vernacular spirituality) and scholarly modern theology (critical-hermeneutical and university-based inquiry). Rather than viewing these two domains as mutually exclusive or irreconcilable, this study demonstrates that both populist enchantment and scholarly theology possess distinct forms of truthfulness and falsehood. Populist enchantment offers an authentic, embodied stance toward everyday mystery, redemptive lift, and existential care, yet it remains highly vulnerable to anti-intellectual “potted thinking,” “folklore epistemology,” and political

¹ Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) has been fairly used in the production of this work. The tool used is Google NotebookLM (recently rebranded as Gemini Notebook). It is an AI-powered virtual research assistant and thinking partner designed to help a person interact deeply with their own documents. Unlike general chatbots, it is source-grounded, meaning it only generates answers based on the specific PDFs, documents, or links uploaded. The A.I. process in the production of this work has been limited to the attached (prompts) on each of the questions in turn. This ensures an accurate reading of each source. The author then rearranged and re-edited the answers the A.I. provided. The human author publishes this work. A.I. is never an author when used properly. This assistance is not qualitatively different from a human research assistant when that assistance is deemed to have no authorial status but is acknowledged.

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“theological capture” by authoritarian demagogues. Conversely, scholarly modern theology provides crucial demythologizing tools, historical-critical rigour, and intersubjective validity claims, but it frequently succumbs to “academicism,” technocratic reductionism, “credential inflation,” and an existential alienation from lived faith. To uncoil the deep-seated confusion between these stances, five strategic communication points are established: (1) Spiral Historiography and “crap detecting”; (2) Habermasian post-secular translation and the “dialogue of myths”; (3) the “craftsmanship of the reflexive insider”; (4) the reframing of miracles and enchantment beyond modern supernaturalism; and (5) Illichian convivial learning webs and Macklin's pedagogy of choice. Finally, the essay demonstrates that improving communication between the populist and scholarly spheres is an urgent existential imperative to overcome “denoetization” (the mechanical liquidation of human judgment), resist the “authoritarianism of the stupid,” restore “Human Authorship,” and foster “Planetary Wisdom.”

1. Introduction: The Structural Division of Labour in Contemporary Theology

In contemporary sociological and theological literature, the landscape of belief is frequently marred by “blunt categories” that pit an uncritical, emotional folk religion against an insular, secularized academic elite (Buch 2026a, p. 28; Oosstveen 2020, pp. 415–419). This dichotomy masks a deeper, functional division of labour between populist enchantment and scholarly modern theology (Gorski 2000, pp. 327–331; Buch 2026a, pp. 1–3).

Historically, human culture has required both an immediate, affective orientation toward the sacred—what Max Weber termed the experiential domain of “salvation and prophetic religion”—and a reflective, systematic discipline designed to organize, critique, and transmit sacred concepts across generations (Weber 1922, cited in Gorski 2000, p. 331; Becker 2024, pp. 354–358). Populist enchantment operates primarily in the domain of “lived religion,” addressing existential suffering, communal solidarity, and the desire for daily transcendence within the “limits of the ordinary” (Hay and Morisy 1985, pp. 333–334; Hall 1997, cited in Oosstveen 2020, p. 423; Buch 2026b, pp. 1–2). Scholarly modern theology, since its post-Enlightenment formalization by Friedrich Schleiermacher and Johannes von Hofmann, functions as a university discipline (*Wissenschaft*) that subjects historical sources, doctrinal developments, and ethical claims to rigorous, critical evaluation (Schleiermacher 1811, cited in Becker 2024, pp. 354–356; Hofmann 1879, cited in Becker 2024, pp. 358–359).

However, when these two poles cease to communicate, the division of labour collapses into ideological warfare (Buch 2025b, pp. 150–153; Newheiser 2026, pp. 1071–1073). Populist enchantment degenerates into anti-intellectual paranoia, while scholarly theology retreats into

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technocratic academicism (Hofstadter 1963, cited in Buch 2026a, p. 10; Stiegler 2017, p. 456). Resolving this crisis requires analysing the internal dialectic of truthfulness and falsehood within both stances and constructing robust communication pathways between them.

2. Populist Enchantment: Dialectic of Truthfulness and Falsehood



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2.1 The Truthfulness of Populist Enchantment

Populist enchantment possesses an enduring truthfulness rooted in its capacity to access genuine human affect, imagination, and existential meaning that formal academic systems often overlook (Hay and Morisy 1985, p. 334; Newheiser 2026, pp. 1072–1075).

1. **Embodied Affect and Everyday Wonder:** As empirical research in sociology and anthropology demonstrates, a majority of ordinary citizens report profound experiences of peace, awe, or transcendent presence that cannot be reduced to abstract cognitive formulas (Hay and Morisy 1985, pp. 333–334; Breeden 2023, pp. 90–93). Populist enchantment validates this “natural supernaturalism” or “religious naturalism,” treating existence itself as wondrous (Carlyle 1831, cited in Breeden 2023, pp. 91, 96).
2. **Lived Practice and the “Play/Faith Frame”:** Anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann shows that ordinary believers manifest deity in their lives through relational practices—such as conversational prayer or imaginative companionship—that transform abstract symbols into tangible, comforting realities (Luhrmann 2012, 2020, cited in Breeden 2023, pp. 102–103). This “lived religion” fulfills a crucial psychological and spiritual need, offering an immediate sense of care (*panser*) and hope amidst economic hardship and personal trauma (Dayton 1988, pp. 7–13; Newheiser 2019, pp. 1–7; Buch 2026a, p. 17).
3. **Redemptive Lift and Popular Reenchantment:** In working-class communities, global Pentecostalism, and marginal spiritual movements, populist enchantment provides “redemptive lift”—restoring personal dignity, moral agency, and communal solidarity to populations excluded by elite social structures (Dayton 1988, pp. 12–13; Yong 2010, p. 115; Possamai 2008, pp. 430–431). This represents a vital “reenchantment from below” through the spontaneous production of meaning and shared symbols (Possamai 2008, p. 431).

2.2 The Falsehood of Populist Enchantment

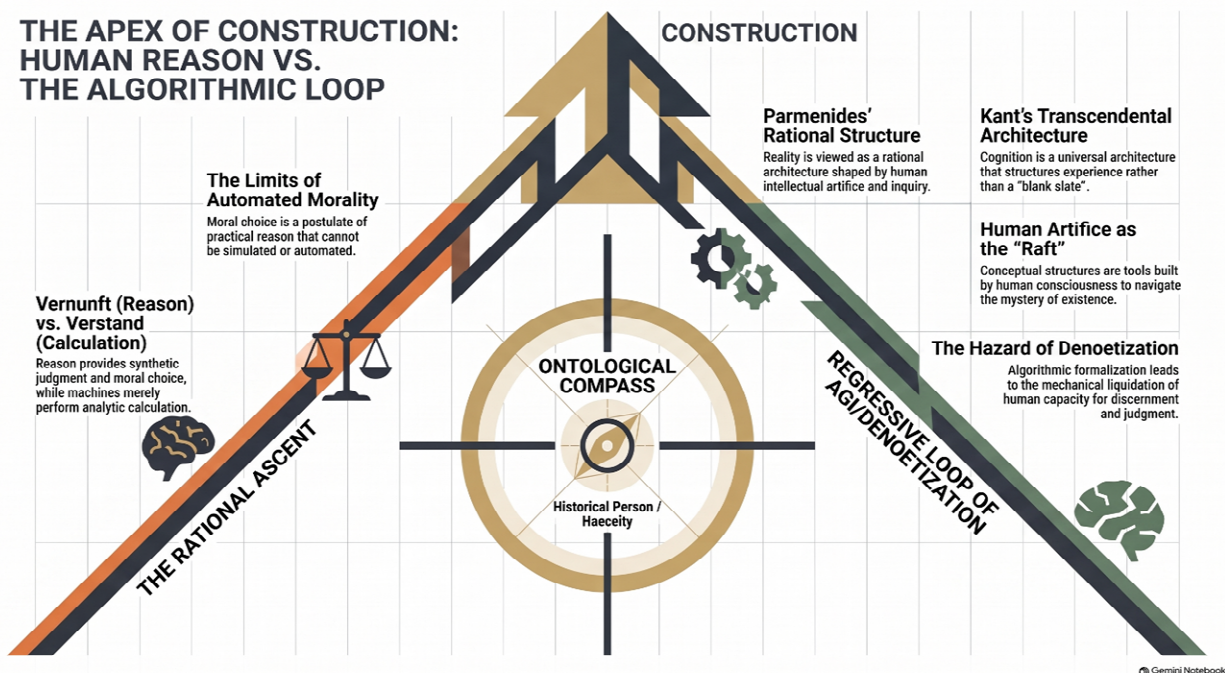
Despite its genuine affective power, populist enchantment harbors severe falsehoods when it rejects critical reason and historical reflection:

1. **Anti-Intellectualism and “Potted Thinking”:** As historian Richard Hofstadter famously diagnosed, popular religion in the West—particularly within the American Revivalist Tradition (ART)—is frequently infected by a “pervasive anti-intellectual prejudice” that values immediate, practical utility over rigorous inquiry (Hofstadter 1963, cited in Buch 2026a, pp. 9–10). This yields “potted thinking”—the uncritical acceptance of compressed,

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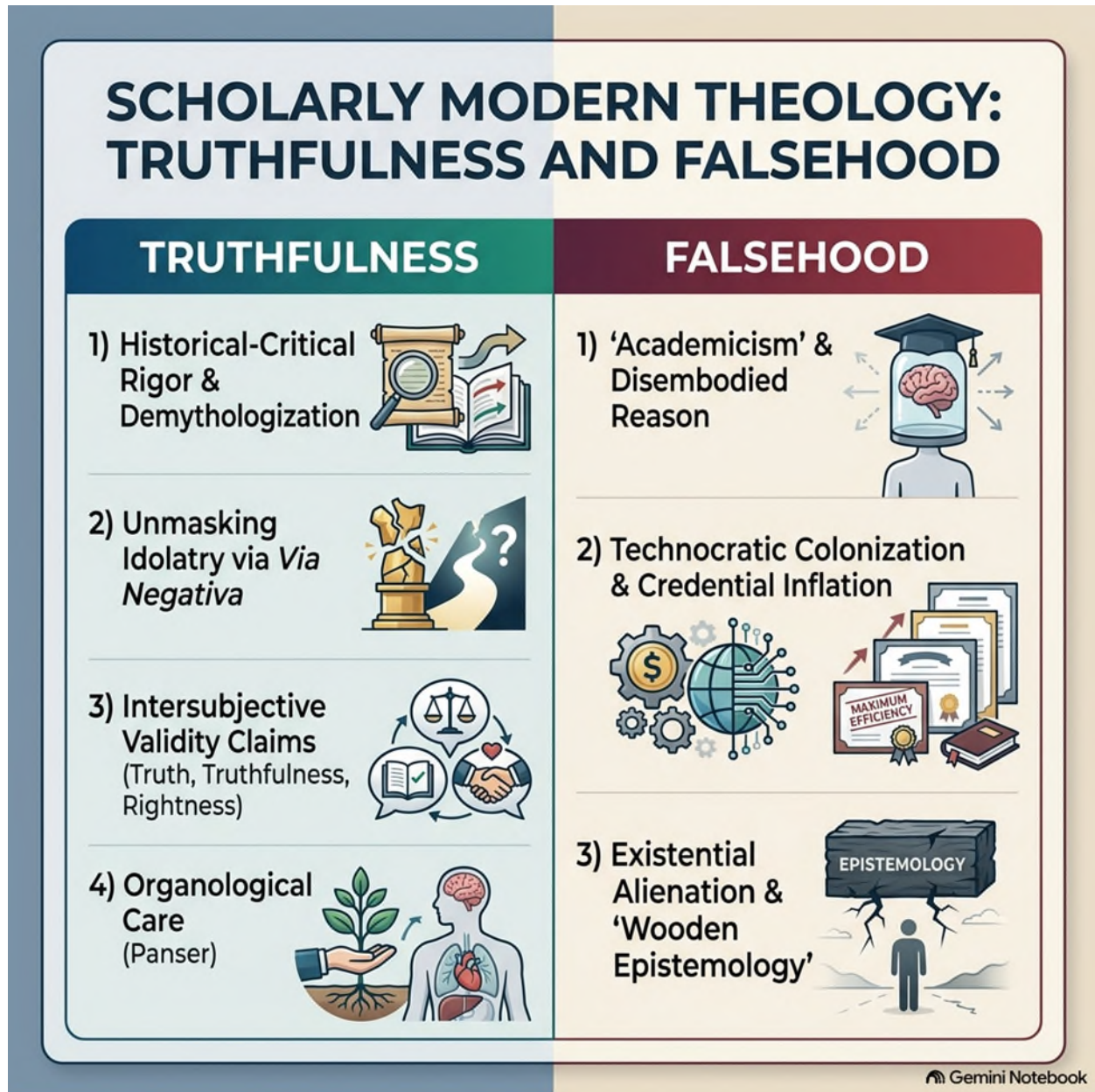
simplified slogans that bypass deep hermeneutics and foster “historical forgetfulness” (Buch 2026a, pp. 10, 19; Buch 2026c, p. 2).

2. **“Theological Capture” and Political Manipulation:** When populist enchantment lacks an intellectual immune system, it becomes extraordinarily vulnerable to “theological capture” (Buch 2021, p. 1; Buch 2026a, pp. 20–22, 32). Religious symbols are decoupled from their ethical traditions and reassembled as “memeable religiosity” or “theological masks” to serve narrow partisan agendas, corporate business models, and right-wing populism (Schmitz 2026, cited in Buch 2026c, pp. 1–2; Buch 2025b, pp. 151–153).
3. **Ahistorical Supernaturalism and Misguided Science:** Populist enchantment often conflates the miraculous with a quasi-scientific “supernatural invasion” of physical laws, treating God as a divine mechanism that intervenes to alter material outcomes (Eire 2023, cited in Newheiser 2026, pp. 1071–1074). As Peter Harrison demonstrates, this literalistic supernaturalism is actually a modern invention that distorts premodern Christian materiality and traps believers in an unsustainable conflict with empirical science (Harrison 2024, cited in Newheiser 2026, pp. 1075–1080).



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3. Scholarly Modern Theology: Dialectic of Truthfulness and Falsehood



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3.1 *The Truthfulness of Scholarly Modern Theology*

Scholarly modern theology fulfills an indispensable, truth-seeking function within the cultural division of labour:

1. **Historical-Critical Rigour and Demythologization:** University theology provides the tools of historical criticism, philology, and sociological analysis necessary to investigate scripture and tradition on their own terms (Becker 2024, pp. 80, 213, 354–356). By uncovering how doctrines evolved within specific historical contexts, scholarly theology dismantles ahistorical myths and fundamentalist inerrancy claims (Schweitzer 1906, cited in Becker 2024, p. 314; Buch 2025b, pp. 151–152).
2. **Unmasking Idolatry via the *Via Negativa* :** Drawing on ancient apophatic traditions and Enlightenment critique, modern theology systematically unmasks “theological masks,” religious propaganda, and political idolatry (Hudson 2005, p. 344; Newheiser 2019, pp. 6–12; Buch 2025b, pp. 152, 177). It demonstrates that all human language about the divine is non-absolute and metaphorical, guarding against the sacralization of state power or church authority (Macklin 1967, pp. 1–15; Otto 1999, cited in Becker 2024, p. 63).
3. **Intersubjective Validity Claims in the Public Square:** Through Jürgen Habermas's communicative framework, scholarly theology translates private religious symbols (*Vorstellungen*) into publicly testable validity claims—evaluating **truth** (factual accuracy), **truthfulness** (sincerity of intent), and **rightness** (moral appropriateness) in open, post-secular dialogue (Habermas 1984, pp. 86–91; Habermas 2006, pp. 251–260; Buch 2024b, p. 14; Stiegler and Habermas 2026).
4. **Organological Care (*Panser*):** In Bernard Stiegler's formulation, genuine noetic scholarship acts as a therapeutics or system of care (*panser*) that dis-automates mechanical routines, preserves *noodiversity* (diversity of knowledge), and projects improbably creative futures (*bifurcations*) (Stiegler 2018, cited in Turner 2023, p. 180; Turner 2023, pp. 184–187).

3.2 *The Falsehood of Scholarly Modern Theology*

However, scholarly modern theology becomes distorted when its academic structures disconnect from living human experience:

1. **“Academicism” and Disembodied Reason:** Academic theology frequently succumbs to “academicism”—a hyper-specialized, self-referential discourse that treats concepts as disembodied intellectual puzzles while remaining completely deaf to subjective uncertainty and existential suffering (Stiegler 2017, p. 456; Stiegler 2020, pp. 459–460).

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This creates a “hypertrophy of the understanding (*Verstand*)” that substitutes sterile logic for living reason (*Vernunft*) (Whitehead 1929, cited in Stiegler 2020, p. 460).

2. **Technocratic Colonization and Credential Inflation:** Modern university departments are increasingly colonized by neoliberal market metrics, “job-ready” training mandates, and administrative bureaucracy (Collins 2019, cited in Buch 2026a, p. 29; Buch 2024a, p. 6). As Edward Farley observed, this produces a narrow “clerical paradigm” or technocratic “credentialism” that devalues true learning in favour of measurable institutional outputs (Farley 1983, cited in Becker 2024, p. 366; Collins 2019, cited in Buch 2024a, p. 6).
 3. **Existential Alienation and “Wooden Epistemology”:** When scholars view religious life strictly through a reductionist, non-committal lens, they fall into what Neville Buch terms “wooden epistemology”—treating faith as a static object to be dissected rather than a lived horizon of meaning (Buch 2026a, p. 4). This elitist stance dismisses the genuine spiritual insights of ordinary believers as mere “superstition,” widening the rift between the academy and the public (Harrison 2024, cited in Newheiser 2026, pp. 1076–1080; Buch 2026a, pp. 4–5).
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4. Communication Points to Uncoil Populist-Scholarly Confusion

To bridge this divide and restore a healthy division of labour, five key communication mechanisms must be deployed:

PATHWAYS TO COMMUNICATIVE COMPREHENSION: Uncoiling Confusion Between Populist Enchantment and Scholarly Theology



1. Spiral Historiography & 'Crap Detecting'

Uncoiling consciousness from historical forgetfulness and theological masks. Scrutinizing narratives, debunking distortions, and tracing the genealogy of ideas through critical historical awareness. Moving beyond surface-level histories to understand underlying biases.



2. Habermasian Post-Secular Translation

Translating religious *Vorstellungen* into public, intersubjective validity claims. Bridging the gap between religious insights and secular discourse for shared understanding and reasoned deliberation.



3. Craftsmanship of the Reflexive Insider

Anchoring academic scholarship in personal biography and topological place. Integrating personal context and ethical reflection into scholarly work for deeper engagement and authentic inquiry. Valuing lived experience as a valid source of insight.



4. Reframing Enchantment Beyond Supernaturalism

Understanding miracles as affect, wonder, imagination, and moral formation. Moving past literal interpretations of the supernatural to appreciate the transformative power of awe, ethical inspiration, and imaginative engagement in human experience.



5. Convivial Learning Webs & Pedagogy of Choice

Replacing bureaucratic monopolies with lifelong educational access. Fostering voluntary, decentralized, and diverse learning communities. Empowering individuals to choose their educational paths and share resources freely.

Illich & Macklin

Gemini Notebook

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4.1 Spiral Historiography and “Crap Detecting”

Neville Buch’s Spiral Historiography provides a non-linear method of reflection that moves backward, forward, and sideways through time to correct “widely-believed falsehoods” and retrieve forgotten intellectual frameworks (Buch 2026a, pp. 41–42; Buch 2026b, pp. 1–2). A vital procedural component of this spiral is “crap detecting”—systematically filtering out “theological masks,” institutional propaganda, and populist demagoguery while preserving the raw, authentic materials of spiritual culture (Postman and Weingartner 1969, cited in Buch 2026a, p. 24; Buch 2026b, p. 2).

4.2 Post-Secular Translation and the “Dialogue of Myths”

Under Jürgen Habermas’s post-secular framework, communication is structured as a reciprocal “dialogue of myths” (Habermas 2006, pp. 251–260; Buch 2025b, p. 153; Stiegler and Habermas 2026). Scholars must not demand that religious populations abandon their imaginative symbols (*Vorstellungen*); instead, both secular intellectuals and religious believers engage in a cooperative translation process, testing claims against intersubjective standards of truth, sincerity, and moral rightness (Habermas 2006, pp. 258–260; Buch 2024b, p. 14).

4.3 The Craftsmanship of the Reflexive Insider

Drawing on C. Wright Mills’s concept of the “sociological imagination,” scholars must operate as “reflexive insiders” who use their own life experience and historical situatedness (*in rebus* / topological turn) to interpret the world (Mills 1959, cited in Buch 2026a, pp. 16–17; Buch 2026a, pp. 5, 17, 33). This prevents academics from treating believers as passive objects of study, grounding scholarly analysis in concrete community realities (Ringma 2023, cited in Buch 2025c, pp. 1–2; Buch 2026b, pp. 1–2).

4.4 Reframing Enchantment and Miracles Beyond Supernaturalism

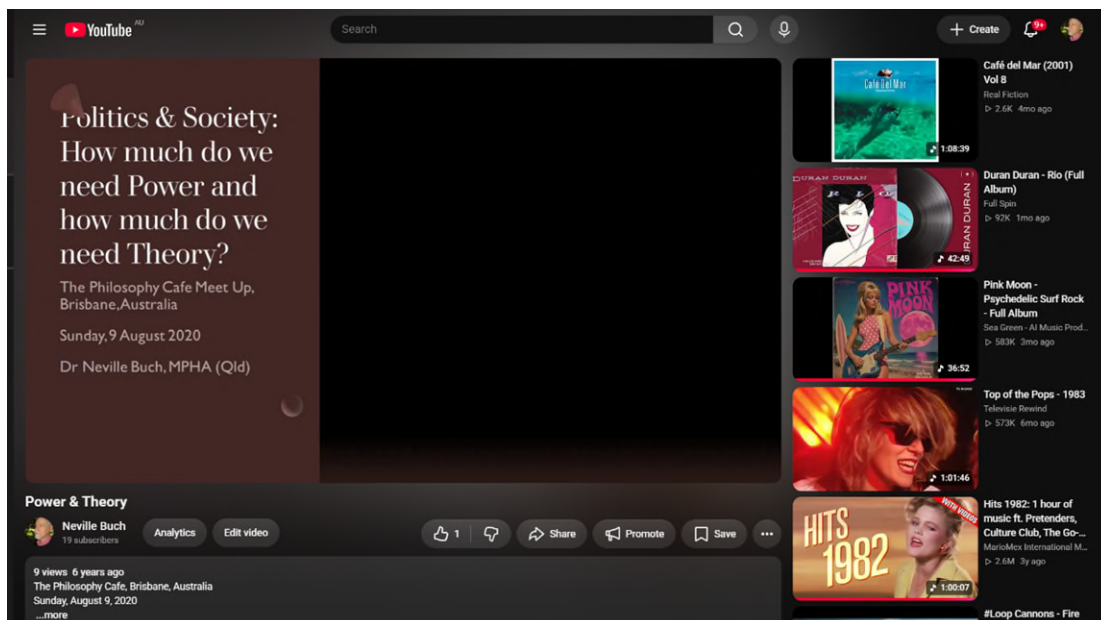
As David Newheiser and Peter Harrison argue, scholars and populist communities can find common ground by disentangling enchantment from early modern supernaturalism (Harrison 2024 and Newheiser 2026, cited in Newheiser 2026, pp. 1075–1082). By understanding the miraculous not as an impossible violation of physical laws, but as an experience of wonder, affect, imagination, and moral formation, theology clarifies a capacity for enchantment that is shared by religious and non-religious people alike (Newheiser 2026, pp. 1072, 1081–1082).

4.5 Convivial Learning Webs and the Pedagogy of Choice

To bypass both stagnant university bureaucracies and populist media echo chambers, educational infrastructure must be reorganized around Ivan Illich’s convivial learning webs and Michael Macklin’s lifelong educational entitlements (Illich 1973, pp. 50–60; Macklin 1976, pp. 20–35; Buch 2026a, pp. 34–35). Funding individuals directly through personal educational accounts restores the “initiative in education,” creating decentralized skill exchanges and peer-

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matching networks that foster self-directed, lifelong inquiry (Macklin 1976, cited in Buch 2026a, pp. 34–35).



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYoLt4dZI6M&t=5s>

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5. The Imperative of Improved Communication: Human Authorship and Planetary Wisdom
Improving communication between populist enchantment and scholarly modern theology is not a mere academic exercise; it is an urgent existential requirement for democratic society in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Buch 2026a, pp. 1, 44–46; The Iron Gates of Academe 2026).



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1. **Resisting Denoetization and the “Authoritarianism of the Stupid”:** In an age dominated by reticulated AI, automated social media algorithms, and computational capitalism, human consciousness faces widespread denoetization—the mechanical liquidation of the capacity to exercise noetic judgment (Stiegler 2014, cited in Turner 2023, p. 113; Buch 2026a, pp. 21–23, 28). When populist enchantment is left uneducated, it succumbs to digital propaganda and the “authoritarianism of the stupid” (Ellul 1973, pp. 206–211; Buch 2026a, p. 24). Reciprocally, when scholarly theology remains isolated, it offers no effective resistance to this technocratic slide.
2. **Restoring Human Authorship and Aristotelian Flourishing (*Eudaimonia*):** Effective communication enables the individual to undergo a “humanistic ascent” out of unreflective habit, becoming the proactive author of their own spiritual, intellectual, and social narrative (Buch 2026a, pp. 1, 15, 41; Ringma 2023, cited in Buch 2025c, p. 2). Faith and reason are reunited in service of Aristotelian flourishing (*eudaimonia*) and radical public orthopraxis (Cupitt 2008, cited in Buch 2025b, p. 176; Ringma 2023, cited in Buch 2025c, p. 2).
3. **Achieving Planetary Wisdom:** Ultimately, uncoiling the confusion between populist and scholarly stances allows society to achieve Planetary Wisdom—a synthetic, pluralistic understanding where diverse religious, secular, and scientific narratives interact constructively in a shared commitment to co-humanity and biospheric care (Stiegler 2018; Habermas 2006; Buch 2026a, pp. 45–46).

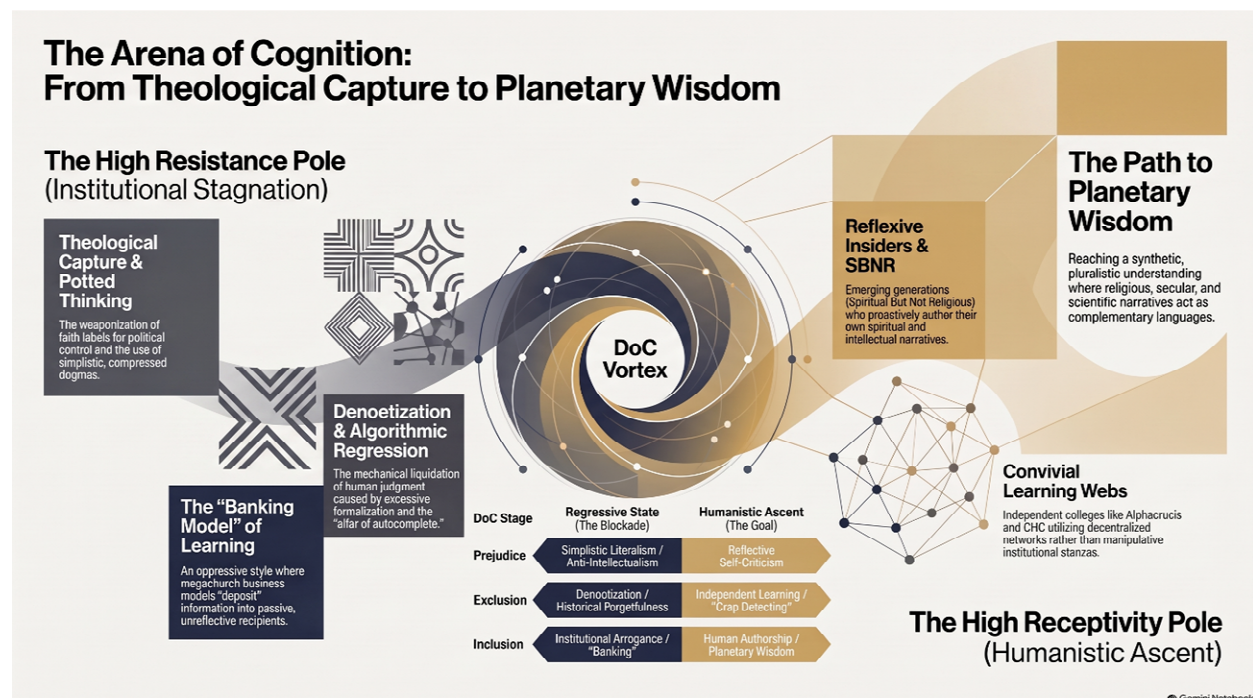


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6. Conclusion

The division of labour between populist enchantment and scholarly modern theology reflects the dual necessity of human life: the need for living, affective meaning in the ordinary world, and the need for critical, historical-hermeneutical discipline. When allowed to operate in isolation, populist enchantment decays into anti-intellectual superstition and political capture, while scholarly theology hardens into alienated academicism and technocratic management.

By deploying Spiral Historiography, Habermasian post-secular translation, the craftsmanship of the reflexive insider, a reframed understanding of enchantment, and convivial learning webs, these two domains can re-establish active, respectful communication. This synthesis unblocks the pathway into genuine education, dismantles the “altar of autocomplete,” restores Human Authorship, and guides humanity toward Planetary Wisdom.



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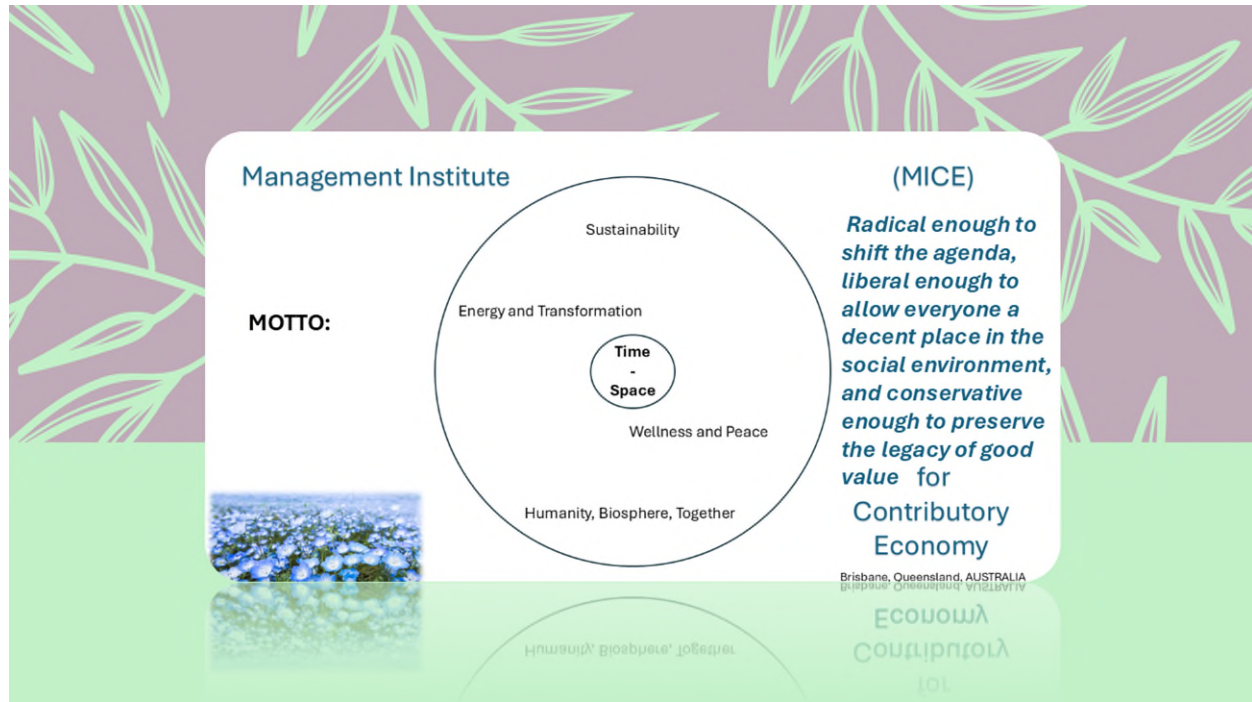
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