



A Suggestion for the Relevance of Systematic Theology in a Changing Context: Response to Commentators

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In this rejoinder, I engage with the criticism my book *Systematic Theology as a Rationally Justified Public Discourse about God* receives from Lois Malcolm and Dirk Evers. First, I answer two objections from Malcolm focusing on the comprehensiveness of my vision for theology and my understanding of “public.” As to the comprehensiveness, I defend my stricter understanding of realism based on the notion of theoretical frameworks; I defend my stricter notion of truth as coherence as the most fruitful understanding for academic theology. As to the public character, I reject Malcolm’s critique that my understanding of “public” is too narrow, since I deliberately limit the investigated context to research universities; thus, I have no problem accepting that there are other publics of theological interest at another point. Second, I answer five objections from Evers that are stated as clusters of critical questions: (1) I accept that I see the change in metaphysics as the context that calls for renewed theological answers, but (2), I reject that this is a problem. The institutional problems for theology are related to a changed metaphysical context in the Western world. (3), I defend the place of logic in metaphysics even though it is in a weakened form compared with classical logic. (4), I defend the need for a third-level academic theology that sustains everyday belief. (5), I accept that God is *semper maior* but reject that this makes theological theories of God superfluous.



Introduction

It makes me both proud and humble that two such esteemed colleagues as Dirk Evers and Lois Malcolm have found the time and energy to engage with my book, *Systematic Theology as a Rationally Justified Public Discourse about God* (Mørch 2023). In a publishing landscape of increasing velocity, I cannot take this for granted, and I can only hope that they have learned as much as I have from this exchange of ideas.

It seems to me that both commentators have grasped the main gist of my proposal, and they even have kind words to say of it. But as they focus mainly on their objections, I will also focus my attempted answers to contribute to a shared reflection of the discipline that is ours. I do not assume we will agree right away, but our discussion can clarify differences and point to new questions for us all. This is all in line with the book's approach that "it is up for discussion whether other criteria are better" than the ones I decided to work with (Mørch 2023, 27).

I will start my response with comments on Malcolm's objections and then proceed with comments on Evers's objections before I wrap up with some short concluding remarks.

Response to Lois Malcolm

In her thought-provoking response, Malcolm (2026) identifies two objections to my proposal. The first is whether my theoretical conceptions are comprehensive enough, and the second is whether my theory does justice to the public character of theology. She then suggests alternatives to my understanding of realism, truth, and publicness that thinkers like Charles Taylor, Paul Tillich, and David Tracy help her articulate as a better proposal for theology's public mandate today.

Let me briefly say that in my book, I outline the coherence theory of truth as philosophers like Nicholas Rescher (1973) and Lorenz Puntel (2008) have established it. The theory states that we have the most reasons to accept a theory over another if it is consistent (non-contradictory), has the highest number of connections between its theoretical elements (cohesiveness), and manages to integrate the highest number of relevant elements without compromising the first two criteria (comprehensiveness). As such, Malcolm's first objection accepts that comprehensiveness is a relevant category for assessing theories, and her suggestion is that she has a better (i.e., more comprehensive) alternative than mine inside this framework.

With this said, let me investigate her objections to my proposal. First, she is hesitant about my idea of "public" and finds it "too narrow." In my book, my idea of "public" is synonymous with the criteria for research that I call "critical intersubjectivity." This notion covers the view that "methods, data, presuppositions, and results cannot be dependent on (but inevitably informed by) the researcher but must be testable and reproducible by others if they follow the clearly stated theoretical framework and the methods"

(Mørch 2023, 284). According to Malcolm, this approach is challenged by a too narrow understanding of realism that I state as a presupposition for my work (Mørch 2023, 22). Malcolm places me in a tradition of realism that Taylor and Herbert Dreyfus call the “mediational view” of realism, that is, “a picture of reality that presupposes that the ideas or schemes we use to represent it are separate from our immediate contact with it” (cf. Dreyfus and Taylor 2015). So far, I agree. To me, realism says that the external world exists mind-independently and that our best scientific theories are approximately true descriptions of how the world functions—everything else would be a miracle given their enormous accuracy in description and prediction (Putnam 1979). But since we only have access to this world through our mind, we can never be completely sure that our understanding of it is correct (which requires fallibilism). Puntel would say that our understanding of anything is mediated through language, even what it means “to be” or “to exist.” In this case, there is something that is there before language, but humans cannot say more than that. That is why coherence theory is the only way to proceed for Puntel. Our best approach to assessing theories of the external world is to compare the theories through relevant criteria, and I have suggested—inspired by Puntel—that a non-foundational coherence theory of truth is helpful in this endeavor.

Malcolm’s alternative—with Taylor and Dreyfus—is to understand realism as an approach that accepts our experience of the world as a “multi-media” encounter that is always already “culturally and linguistically mediated” (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, 44). But, as I argue in the book, this is not a better alternative. The coherence theory I propose accepts that we are culturally and linguistically mediated and that that is why our theoretical frameworks are “mildly relativistic” (Mørch 2023, 286; Puntel 2008, 241–45). But the point is that Taylor, Dreyfus, and Malcolm cannot tell us sufficiently how we can have critical intersubjectivity through their approach. We should indeed discuss how to constitute a proper encounter with the world, but interpretivism is not enough for systematic theology in my view. Or to put it another way: we are not able to understand anything outside our theoretical framework, but some frameworks are more coherent than others, and we have reasons to believe that the most coherent theory better explicates what reality is like. This is, in my view, a better approach than Dreyfus’s and Taylor’s.

Malcolm then points to Tillich’s proposal for discerning truth as more comprehensive than my understanding. I do not, however, accept that I “reject” Tillich’s therapeutic concerns, as she suggests. I agree that “truth” includes everything there is (what Puntel [2008, 32] calls “the unrestricted universe of discourse”), but in my book, I focus almost exclusively on theoretical truths and not aesthetic or pragmatic truths. Since I defined the notion of truth more theoretically than Tillich, and since I limited myself to this understanding of truth, I could not work more with the therapeutic approach (cf. Mørch 2023,

23). Maybe Malcolm is right when she points out that I am “sectarian” in Tillich’s approach so that I try to “divorce theological answers from the questions they address,” but if we try to discuss theological answers in a research context where we have to be able to explain our theoretical framework, I still fail to see how Tillich’s and Malcolm’s option is better. In that sense, we have to accept that our public epistemology is more limited than Malcolm suggests through Taylor, Dreyfus, and Tillich. We should confront “the full range of factors needed for discerning truth in each situation,” but in research, there are stricter criteria at work, since they must work intersubjectively across theoretical frameworks.

Malcolm’s criticism, then, is actually concerned with my stratified understanding of systematic theology. I would place her critical remarks on the second level of systematic theology, but she seems to discard this stratification altogether and collapses the three strata into one basket of theoretical elements. It seems to me that her reason for doing so is both her understanding of truth and her epistemology. Her understanding of truth is much wider than mine, and her epistemology says that “we do not have access to truth apart from the contingencies that define our lives.” My notion of truth is more limited but, I think, more precise and thus academically workable. And I do think that a fine-grained understanding of coherence theory helps us work systematically with theories that are not held captive by the contingencies of our lives. Not that our mundane lives are irrelevant or that pragmatic motivations and considerations are not important. I only suggest that these reflections are placed in another category and have their academic credence from level three.

Regarding the second objection, I struggle more to see how it is a real criticism. I admit in the book that Tracy’s “culture of pluralism” is much broader than just academic issues, but I limit the territory of my investigation to theological research in the research university as it is the scientific credibility I seek to address (Mørch 2023, 59). So, when Malcolm argues with Tracy that “publicness” should be understood much more broadly than I do, I fully agree, and I find her considerations stimulating. She works with Tracy’s three notions of public discourse, i.e., argumentative, conversational, and mystical discourse, to propose how to see the role of religion in public conversations. Given the context of my book—limited to a research context in universities—I restrict myself to her understanding of “argument.” It is not the case that I am not interested in the other two types of discourse, since I am myself deeply involved in the public conversation in my home country of Denmark. But in the academy, there are stricter criteria for the work we do, and I think Malcolm agrees, even though she does not clearly say so. Nevertheless, Tracy’s understanding of the argument is—in line with Taylor and Dreyfus—that we should not apply “the criteria from one discipline to another,” in Malcolm’s words. In a sense, this is correct. In my book, I support critical realism when it says that the method should be aligned with the investigated object (Potter and López 2005). But

my proposal is that despite the enormous methodological variations among the disciplines, there are some common criteria for scientific research that can be established, and systematic theology can meet these criteria in a satisfying way and thus be rationally justified in its public discourse about God. Tracy's stimulating and creative proposal for a Christian theology that engages the pluralistic public does not challenge this proposal in my view.

This said, I agree that the context for discussing the role of the university in the West has changed profoundly and rapidly since the publication of my book in 2023. And in a context where both the political left and political right seek to control the research, its communication and dissemination, and the scope of free speech for students and researchers, theologians should be deeply engaged in developing and sustaining "a more robust and comprehensive notion of public reason," as Malcolm writes. But I think this articulation should take place on a firm ground, and I still believe that the framework I propose in the book gives us a resource for thinking about and discussing how to bring academic theology into the public for the development of the common good.

Response to Dirk Evers

Dirk Evers's (2026) comments are both poignant and challenging. He presents five objections to my proposal, and in the following, I respond to them in order. But note that Evers does not present five questions but five clusters of questions, which actually require much more space for proper answers than can be provided here. I thus try to distill the core of the objections before I present my reflections.

First, in the introduction to my book, I present a sketch of the institutional development of academic theology in the West and point to resources that discuss why theology seems to be in a crisis. But Evers objects that I seem to contention that the problem is a change in metaphysics, and thus if we can save metaphysics, we can save "God-talk" and systematic theology. But does my proposal not depend on a development in the modern era, then? This is an interesting question, and I have not thought much about it before. I think I assumed that institutional issues are always contextual and that the development of Western universities is therefore the relevant context for a contemporary proposal for the scientific credibility of systematic theology. When university presidents say that if their universities were established today, theology would not be among the disciplines (Volf and Croasmun 2018), I understand their view as coming from an immanent and secularized framework (i.e., metaphysics) that theology should challenge.

Second, Evers says that the real issue is that "the current understanding of education and research, of vocational training and the social significance of science, has entered a crisis" rather than a question of metaphysics (point one). I agree that higher education is in a profound crisis across almost all Western countries, and the perspectives for the next decades are bleak. But I fail to

see how these broader institutional difficulties for the research university as such erase the suspiciousness of metaphysical theological claims that is very often still articulated in the literature on philosophy of science and among the scientists from other fields I talk to at conferences and alike places (I refer to quite a number of these in the book). Thus, I do not agree with Evers and Dietrich Bonhoeffer that Christianity has nothing at stake in the discussion of metaphysics. I think Christianity can actually gain “reputation through an improved form of ‘God’ as a working hypothesis” (Evers 2026). Evers and I might speak with different colleagues who have different questions for our field of theology, but at the Center for Science and Faith at the University of Copenhagen where I am an affiliated researcher, we have to argue all the time for a relevant metaphysics in order to get peers in dialogue. I am not partaking in a “conflict model” between science and religion, but many are, and I think it is a part of the project to show that the conflict model is unnecessary if we develop a better framework for scientific research where metaphysics is not just allowed but inevitable. At the end of the second objection, Evers then presents a cluster of questions that circles around the problem that my proposal is contingent on historical factors and not rational as such because a “rational foundation for rationality” cannot be given. As said, I agree that questions arise from historical circumstances, but I do not think this undermines an attempt to give a rational answer. The fruitfulness of coherence theory is that it gives us a method for how to assess and update theories on clear criteria, and this is my understanding of rationality: to systematically and critically assess theories of the world through methods and criteria that are intersubjectively transparent.

Third, Evers is suspicious that it is possible to articulate a sound metaphysics, since history shows a cacophony of internally inconsistent metaphysical theories. In my proposal, which builds on the work of Rescher and Puntel, logic plays an important part, and Evers is worried that I concede too much in my ambition to work logically with metaphysical theories. But I think Evers makes too much a point here. First, I take it as uncontroversial to say that theories should be consistent and that classical logic is a relevant tool for assessing consistency in theories. Second, with Rescher, I admit that context is more important than classic logic is aware of. I think Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (2010, 381–82) was right when he said that context is unavoidable for assessing the logical coherence of a theory. The two propositions “God does exist” and “God does not exist” cannot both be true. This is the law of the excluded middle. But there could be a temporal aspect that this criterion overlooks such that “God does exist” was true at some point but is not anymore. The law of the excluded middle must thus be accepted in a weakened form, where we say that “A” and “not-A” cannot be true about the same thing and at the same time. To this extent I concede to quite an amount of transcendental logic, but I do not think I do it unqualifiedly. What I take from Evers’s point is, of course, that logic

is not a given but is also a theoretical framework that should be argued for and discussed, but did Kant believe otherwise? The alternative seems more compromising to the possibility of articulating a public discourse about God that is understandable and truth conducive.

Fourth, like Malcolm, Evers is critical of my stratified understanding of systematic theology. Not because he finds “these distinctions helpful and a good way to analyze different aspects of the field of systematic theology” as such, but since scientific research is not accessible to everyone, does my proposal not imply that many believers are “incurably fideistic”? I argue at length for the view that only if “systematic theology 3” is credible and convincing as a scientific discipline can we take “systematic theology 1 and 2” to be as well, and only derivatively. We might disagree, but *prima facie*, I think Evers is more concerned with the credibility of everyday belief (as, e.g., reformed epistemology or Friedrich Schleiermacher) than I am in the book. My project is to articulate a “rationally justified public discourse about God” as it can be understood in a research university. I do believe that “the credibility of the notion of God directly depends on the success of metaphysics,” since I fail to see how it is possible to have a sound theology based on an “unsuccessful metaphysics.” What would that even look like? I emphasize that the attention Evers gives to everyday believers has my honest support, but I suggest that academic systematic theology works methodically from level three to level one instead of mixing the categories. It is also my own experience that many nonacademic believers intuitively work with something like the criteria for coherence even though they do not know the work or the concept. If this is true, then there might be a much closer connection between systematic theology 1 and 3 than Evers’s critique seems to imply.

Fifth and finally, Evers brings his argument together in his objection to my understanding of “God.” My approach is too rationalistic to him, since God cannot be mastered “through intellectual effort.” I do not hesitate to agree. God is *semper maior*, as Ignatius of Loyola famously said, but I add that what is “maior” must be clarified, and for that we need the theoretical work of metaphysics and epistemology. Not to control God, but in order to understand the possibilities and limitations of theological work. With Wolfhart Pannenberg (1991), I agree that God must be revealed in order for us to know anything about God. But the interesting point from Puntel (2011) is that we can come quite a long way in articulating a robust notion of God without naming the phenomenon. We should not confuse word with phenomenon here, and Puntel does not do so either. He simply states what can be configured on strict philosophical grounds and then leaves it for the theologians to name the phenomenon. This is not dubious but a consequence of the differentiation of the disciplines. When sociologist Hartmut Rosa’s (2019) much discussed theory of resonance stops before an articulation of what “calls” us on the vertical axis of resonance, it is an open invitation to

develop the content of the theory. When Puntel presents a metaphysics that starts with a “Being as such,” it is an invitation to develop the theory into a fuller notion of God. As such, “the ‘God’ of Western metaphysics” is not necessarily “a chimera,” but we need to know the framework that most fruitfully wrestles with the reality of God. Interactions with God as ultimate reality are obviously multifaceted, but I cannot see why Evers’s criticism would render my approach superfluous. It is one important element in our attempt to understand more of God, and it is the most proper scientific approach I can think of.

Concluding Remarks

My project is an attempt to accept the fact that since theology wants to be a part of the modern research universities, it must accept the criteria for playing the game. Not uncritically and not as a fixed game, but as long as the premises for doing science are the common criteria I outline in the book, it is up to theology to meet these. I think it is possible to do so, and I have presented how I understand the task.

In the book, I admit that it is a specific kind of theology that works with a specific set of criteria, and both “theology” and “science” can be differently understood (as Malcolm and Evers do). But I am still convinced that my understandings of both a stratified notion of systematic theology and a coherence theory of truth are suited for the rational inquiry of reality that is the aim of scientific research. I think, however, that the informed criticism from both opponents gives me enough to wrestle with in the years to come. I think Malcolm points to some important caveats in the limited scope of “publicness” in my proposal, and it is important to reflect upon how public theology more broadly can be done, even though I stick to my understandings of realism and truth. Evers rightfully points to a number of problems in my proposal, but they all relate to a rather different conceptualization of theology, as they spring from a much more pragmatic understanding of the nature of theology. I am still more inclined to think of theology as a discipline that works with metaphysical concepts in critical conversation with (especially) philosophy, but I accept the challenge to think more about the consequences of this approach. I cannot yet be as “relaxed” in my metaphysics as Evers suggests because philosophers like Puntel have shown it is possible—in fact even necessary—to develop a metaphysical framework for theology, and that such a metaphysical framework is needed for theology to be seen as rationally justified on common criteria. Thus, it is not just for strategic reasons that I hesitate to accept Malcolm’s and Evers’s alternative suggestions but also because I still believe that we can do proper theology on the third level of systematic theology.

All this said, I am grateful for all the relevant criticism Malcolm and Evers bring to the table, and I look forward to continuing the conversation on these important matters. Those who discuss learn!

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