

Research Article

Henco van der Westhuizen*

Constructive After Systematic? On Doing Theology in South Africa Today

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2024-0020>

received March 25, 2024; accepted July 12, 2024

Abstract: In this article, I inquire about the value and significance of the concept of Constructive Theology, more specifically, the value and significance of the concept constructive when it is related to the concept of theology. In the first part of the article, I inquire about the meaning of Constructive Theology. The story of Constructive Theology is a story of many stories. In this part, therefore, specific reference is made to one such story, as it has taken shape in and through the Workgroup on Constructive Theology since 1975, more specifically, the publications of the working group. In this section, a connection is also made between this constructive theological work and theology as it has taken shape in South Africa. Although the concept of Constructive Theology as such has not been adopted in South Africa, theology in South Africa shares the focus of Constructive Theology on theology as hermeneutics. In the second part of the article, a step back is taken. In light of the focus of Constructive Theology on hermeneutical theology, the question is asked about the relationship between theology and construction. Thus, I inquire about the meaning of constructed theology. I do this by looking at the Tabernacle-traditions in the Old Testament. Here, it is argued that the Tabernacle-traditions offer a perspective on theology as construction. In light of these insights into theology as constructed theology, in the subsequent third part, I inquire how theological constructing can be done in such a way that theology functions constructively and contributes constructively. To do this, I look at the interconnections between construction and creation – also in the Old Testament traditions. In conclusion, I argue for the importance of doing constructive after Systematic Theology in South Africa today.

Keywords: Systematic Theology, Constructive Theology, public theology, theological method, hermeneutics

1 Introduction

In his inaugural address (2000), Dirk J. Smit argues that Systematic Theology and Dogmatics – concepts that have played an important role in South Africa¹ – should not be understood as abstract theory:

[Theology] does not consist of a number of propositions, principles, or claims, that are eternally true, that can be found in textbooks, and that only need to be repeated again and again. There have only been a very few doctrinal decisions in the history of Christianity, and even they were not intended as propositions. ... All attempts to summarise the so-called essence of the faith in so-called fundamental articles, have always been extremely controversial. The Christian faith does not know any absolute truths. Doctrinal theology, sometimes called dogmatics, does not study dogmas. Systematic theology does not possess

¹ The concepts of Systematic Theology and, more particularly, Dogmatics (“Dogmatologie” in Afrikaans) are not, as Smit described the concepts.

* **Corresponding author: Henco van der Westhuizen**, Department of Historical and Constructive Theology, University of the Free State Faculty of Theology, Bloemfontein, South Africa, e-mail: hvdw@ufs.ac.za

any systems. Skill in [Theology] is something fundamentally more than merely knowing and repeating what others knew, thought and said before, irrespective of who they were.²

Smit follows Barth, for whom theological work, which does not merely want to know and repeat, is to start again, to begin anew from the beginning:

Theological work is distinguished from other kinds of work by the fact that anyone who desires to do this work cannot proceed by building with complete confidence on the foundation of questions that are already settled, results that are already achieved, or conclusions that are already arrived at. [Theologians] cannot continue to build today in any way on foundations that were laid yesterday by [themselves], and [they] cannot live today in any way on the interest from a capital amassed yesterday. [Theologians'] only possible procedure every day, in fact every hour, is to begin anew at the beginning. ... In theological science, continuation always means 'beginning once again at the beginning.'³

For both Smit and Barth, theological work is *Nachdenken*,⁴ reflection, contemplation, thinking, pondering, meditating, considering, and deliberating. Smit therefore employs the metaphor of language. For him, rather than an abstract theory, Systematic Theology and Dogmatics are grammatical rules for using the language of faith that should not be ignored if the language still wants to claim to be Christian.⁵ In terms of the metaphor, he therefore argues, theologians are like grammarians, interested in language and *the way it works*.⁶

Smit remains interested in the way language works. In his Annie Kinkead Warfield Lectures (2018), also his inaugural at Princeton Theological Seminary, he reflected on the ways in which we use the language of faith and how this is related to certain *ways of living*, arguing that doctrine matters. For him, the question is not how accurate our propositions are, but how the use of the language matters, on *how we speak and how it is heard*.⁷

He is therefore interested *inter alia* in Anthony Thiselton's *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (2007), who argues, according to Smit:

that doctrine is not about systems of a-contextual and a-historical propositions. Instead, doctrine forms part of human responses to questions arising from real life. ... They belong to life-contexts as self-involving speech-acts, dispositional accounts of belief, convictions that imply and involve commitments ... They are embedded in life-forms, function like the rules of games, form the grammar of communal stories and commemorations and practices. Doctrines serve those who speak their language in the project of wise living. ... Therefore, doctrines call for formation (quoting Gadamer), for training (quoting Wittgenstein), for education and transformation. ... Developing doctrine therefore involves the vocabulary of character formation, of judgment, training, habit, and human agency. We cannot think decently – and we cannot speak doctrine – if we do not want to hurt ourselves ... if we are not willing to pay the price of such thinking and speaking (quoting Wittgenstein again). *Doctrine, because it implies ways of living, thus also involves others, encounters, being told how others experience us and our doctrines and their consequences for our ways of living* (italics mine).⁸

In light of these insights – “from abstract theory to life-related hermeneutics,”⁹ I inquire in the article about the value and significance of the concept of Constructive Theology, more specifically, the value and significance of the concept *constructive* when it is related to the concepts of Systematic Theology and Dogmatics described above.

In the first part of the article, I inquire about the meaning of Constructive Theology. The story of Constructive Theology is a story of many stories.¹⁰ In this part, therefore, specific reference is made to one

² Translated from Smit, “In diens van die tale Kanaäns?,” 396. For a recent (2022) response to the inaugural lecture of 2002, refer to Baard.

³ Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 165.

⁴ Barth, “Denken heißt,” 5, 7; Barth, *Anselm*. Also Smit, “Quo Vadis,” 42–3.

⁵ Smit, “In diens van die tale Kanaäns?,” 393.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Smit's Warfield Lecture, “Framed by Politics?”

⁸ Smit's Warfield Lecture, “Framed by Politics?” Also Smit, “Review of The Hermeneutics of Doctrine, Anthony Thiselton.” Also see Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*; Thiselton, *New Horizons*; Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics*; Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*.

⁹ Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, xvi–xxii.

¹⁰ Dirk J. Smit often refers to Reformed theology in South Africa as a “story of many stories,” highlighting that there are many ways to tell the story of Reformed theology in South Africa. Refer to Smit, “Trends and Directions in Reformed Theology,” 313. This, one

such story, as it has taken shape in and through the Workgroup on Constructive Theology since 1975, more specifically, the publications of the working group. In this section, a connection is also made between this constructive theological work and theology as it has taken shape in South Africa. Although the concept of Constructive Theology as such has not been adopted in South Africa, theology in South Africa shares the focus of Constructive Theology on theology as hermeneutics.

In the second part of the article, a step back is taken. In light of the focus of Constructive Theology on hermeneutical theology, the question is asked about the relationship between theology and construction. Thus, I inquire about the meaning of constructed theology. I do this by looking at the Tabernacle-traditions in the Old Testament. Here, it is argued that the Tabernacle-traditions offer a perspective on theology as construction.

In light of these insights into theology as constructed theology, in the subsequent third part, I inquire how theological constructing can be done in such a way that theology functions constructively, and contributes constructively. To do this, I look at the interconnections between construction and creation – also in the Old Testament traditions.

In conclusion, I argue for the importance of doing constructive theology in South Africa today.

2 Constructive Theology?

There are different ways in which the question of what the significance of the concept of Constructive Theology is can be described.¹¹ Constructive Theology, of course, cannot be reduced to the concept of Constructive Theology itself. In this part, however, the focus will be on this particular concept and how that relates to theological work in South Africa.

In various publications, Jason A. Wyman has narrated this particular story of Constructive Theology. His dissertation on the history and method of a contemporary theological tradition, published as *Constructing Constructive Theology: An Introductory Sketch* (2017), as well as the more recent edited volume with Marion Grau, *What is Constructive Theology? Histories, Methodologies, and Perspectives* (2020), are insightful narrations of this story.

According to Wyman, the concept of Constructive Theology can be traced back to the publication of *Contentio Veritatis: Essays in Constructive Theology* (1902). The authors, H. Rashdale, W. R. Inge, H. L. Wild, C. F. Burney, W. C. Allen, and A. J. Carlyle, argued that “there is a widespread unsettlement and uneasiness. ... [P]eople suspect that much that was once commonly believed is no longer tenable, but they do not know how much, nor by what it is to be replaced. The writers of the present work are well aware that the needed reconstruction must take a much more solid and substantial form than a volume of Essays by different authors. The most that such a volume can do is to call attention to the need of such a reconstruction, to show that the need is felt, and to indicate some of the lines on which they believe it ought to take place.”¹² In a review of these essays, William Sanday argued that “‘Constructive Theology,’ as the name implies, is a process and not a finished work. ‘Essays in Constructive Theology’ is an appropriate title. What we have been discussing are essays or attempts, some of which really build.”¹³ Wyman further refers to the publication of *The Constructive Quarterly: A Journal of the Faith, Work, and Thought of Christendom*, established and edited by Silas McBee (1913–1922). According to McBee, “The destructive method has had its full opportunity and will continue to have it and ought to have it. But ... The plan is to bring together members of all Communions who will write constructively of Christianity.”¹⁴ Furthermore, Wyman refers to James Ten Broeke. Against a form of Systematic Theology critical of any form of construction he argues in *A Constructive Basis for Theology* (1914)

might argue, is also the case with Constructive theology. This is so as there are many theologies that do not, for example, describe their theologies as constructive. This doesn’t mean, however, that their theologies aren’t constructive.

¹¹ For a broad introduction to Constructive Theology, see Rieger, “Constructive Theology,” 483–6.

¹² Ten Broeke, *A Constructive Basis for Theology*.

¹³ McBee, “Introduction.” *The Constructive Quarterly: A Journal of the Faith, Work, and Thought of Christendom*, 1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

for “the need of such a theology is evident, for construction still yields to criticism, especially in the realm of systematic theology”¹⁵ and asks: “Negations and destructive criticism are comparatively easy, but what is being done towards a really new theological construction of a systematic character? Shall we simply continue to pull down the old house without being sure that we are able to build a better? Or shall we make not too radical changes and live in the old house still?”¹⁶

In *Constructing Constructive Theology*, Wyman furthermore highlights the work of Bernard Eugene Meland,¹⁷ Gordon Kaufman,¹⁸ Edward Farley,¹⁹ David Tracy,²⁰ and Sallie McFague,²¹ as they both precede and were part of the Workgroup in Constructive Theology. According to him, their work is the prolegomena of what for him constitutes Constructive Theology today.²²

Wyman particularly focusses on The Workgroup on Constructive Theology.²³ A way to narrate the story is by examining the work of this Workgroup (1975–),²⁴ more specifically, the textbooks published by the Workgroup since 1982, and then to inquire about specific characteristics of this particular narrative of Constructive Theology, and whether and how these characteristics were also found in South African theological works of the time.

Christian theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks, the first handbook, was published in 1982 and was edited by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King. A revised and enlarged edition was published in 1985 with accompanying *Readings in Christian Theology*. In her epilogue, and of importance for the argument of this article, Sallie McFague highlighted Constructive Theology’s emphasis on contextuality: “We have come to realize that there is no naked eye, no innocent eye, that all our ways of being in the world are our ways, and that the ways in which we construct our world are determined by our time and place.”²⁵

In addition to an updated edition of *Christian Theology* (1994), *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, edited by Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor, was published in 1994.²⁶ Also, published in 1994 was *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives*, edited by John W. De Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio. This was part of a series entitled *Theology and Praxis*. What the series wanted to do was in many ways in line with the trajectory of what the Workgroup wanted to do contextually, and it is noteworthy that *Christian Theology. An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks* (1985) is listed for further reading:

The authors represent a variety of Christian traditions and theological perspectives The volume is an ecumenical effort which seeks to interpret the meaning of Christianity in a broad and inclusive way all are written from the perspective of a committed faith which is seeking to express what that faith means today The intention was not to provide a set of essays

¹⁵ Ten Broeke, *A Constructive Basis for Theology*.

¹⁶ Wyman Jr., *Constructing Constructive Theology*, 248.

¹⁷ Ibid., 13–25.

¹⁸ Ibid., 37–40.

¹⁹ Ibid., 41–5.

²⁰ Ibid., 46–50.

²¹ Ibid., 51.

²² Wyman Jr., *History, Movement, Method*, 11.

²³ Wyman Jr., *Constructing Constructive Theology*, 35–82.

²⁴ Wyman Jr., “Interpreting the History,” 312–24.

²⁵ McFague, “An Epilogue,” 377. This was also important for De Gruchy: “One of the dangers of the notion of theology as a science is the implicit assumption that the theological systems which have evolved in Western European theology are universal, and therefore paradigmatic for all Christian theology. What needs to be recognized is that all theology is contextual, including Western European theology ... This way of doing theology is only one of several, and it is very much the product of the particular way in which scientific thought has developed in the West. We need to recognize its contextual character and therefore limitations in a world where a variety of theological paradigms or models arising out of different contexts and using different methodologies may have equal validity” (De Gruchy, “The Task of Theology,” 9).

²⁶ Whereas the previous volumes consisted of chapters by Robert H. King, Edward Farley, Peter C. Hodgson, Langdon Gilkey, George Stroup, Julian Hartt, David H. Kelsey, Robert R. Williams, Walter Lowe, Robert C. Williams, David B. Burrell, Carl E. Braaten, John B. Cobb, Jr., David Tracy and Stephen W. Sykes, with an epilogue by Sallie McFague – the authors exhibited real diversity in theological methods and even disciplines in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, with chapters by Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, David B. Burrell, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Kathryn Tanner, Dawn DeVries, Sallie McFague, Sharon D. Welch, Walter Lowe, Linda A. Mercadante, John T. Pawlikowski, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Peter Crafts Hodgson, Catherine Keller, and James H. Evans, Jr.

which reflect identical understandings of the Christian faith, but rather to portray something of the rich diversity of approach and understanding that is part and parcel of the Christian theological tradition.²⁷

Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes, edited by Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland (2005), clearly remains in this trajectory: “We’ ... belong to many Christian traditions, and we do not all share the same convictions about how theology needs to be done, or what its precise role may be in today’s world. But we are all ... committed to working in collaboration to uncover the continuing importance of the ancient traditions of Christianity for the very different world of today.”²⁸

In the most recent handbook by the Workgroup on Constructive Theology, *Awake to the Moment. An Introduction to Theology* (2016), the editors Laurel C. Schneider and Stephen G. Ray Jr. included a bibliography on Constructive Theology. A look at this bibliography, with theologians and their work that can be referred to as Liberation theology, Black Theology, Feminist Theology, Womanist Theology, Postcolonial theology, and Queer theology, clearly shows the *hermeneutic* diversity that is Constructive Theology today.²⁹

De Gruchy in *Doing Theology in Context* follows David Tracy for whom Constructive Theology has to do with the relation between theology and hermeneutics.³⁰ In the second edition of *Christian Theology* (1985), Tracy in a chapter on “Theological method,” argued that theology in a new paradigm *is and has to be hermeneutical* theology: “My strategy for the reflection itself is as follows: I shall claim that amidst the great differences of contemporary theologies certain methodological constants do appear. That claim can be made more specific by introducing the following definition of a shared theological method in the new paradigm: *theology is the attempt to establish mutually critical correlations between an interpretation of the Christian tradition and an interpretation of the contemporary situation.*”³¹

For Tracy therefore, at least in 1985, to do theology was to do hermeneutics. Engaging in theology does not entail imposing a singular theological model, Tracy argues. Constructive Theology as a theological paradigm highlights what has always been implicit in traditional theologies: the *interpretations* of both Christian traditions and contexts. According to him, embracing an explicit hermeneutical focus not only permits but also enables the engagement of the entire theological community in dialogue – discussing different and diverse interpretations within an integrated hermeneutical framework.³²

My interest in this article lies in this hermeneutic concern of Constructive Theology. In the second part of the article, I therefore take a step back and ask about the relationship between theology and construction, the meaning of constructed theology.

3 Constructed Theology?

The construction of the Tabernacle sheds light on the manner in which theology is constructed, I argue.

According to Fretheim, one-third of the book of Exodus is devoted to considerations about the Tabernacle.³³ These detailed descriptions are depicted twice: when God directs them how to build it, and when those directions are being carried out.³⁴

Fretheim argues that the detailed descriptions signal theological shifts:

The occasional appearance of God on the mountain or at the travelling tent will become the ongoing presence of God with Israel. The distance of the divine presence from the people will no longer be associated with the remote top of a mountain but

²⁷ De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio, “Introduction,” x.

²⁸ Jones and Lakeland, *Constructive Theology*, vi.

²⁹ Schneider and Ray Jr., *Awake to the Moment*, 205–8.

³⁰ De Gruchy, “The Task of Theology,” 10.

³¹ Tracy, “Theological Method,” 36.

³² *Ibid.*, 54–5.

³³ Exodus 25 to 31:18 and Exodus 35–40.

³⁴ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 263.

with a dwelling place in the centre of the camp. God comes down to be with the people at close, even intimate, range; they no longer need to ascend to God. The divine dwelling will no longer be a fixed place. God's dwelling place will be portable, on the move with the people of God. Overall, these chapters represent a climax not only in Israel's journey but in God's journey.³⁵

Fretheim takes together these theological shifts in the following way: "This is a God who does not stand above them, enjoying the precincts of the palace while the people plod through the desert sands, with never a secure, fixed place they can call home. This God takes up residence with the people, tabernacles with them. This God dwells, not at the edges of Israel's life, but right at the centre of things."³⁶

In his *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, also Walter Brueggemann highlights the theological importance of these traditions: "While the text is rather boring to read and has been much neglected in interpretation, we should not miss the powerful theological [construction] at work here."³⁷ According to Brueggemann, the literature was constructed during the exile. This tradition likely evolved into its current form during the exile, embodying a concept of presence within a context characterised by profound absence, he argues. The current formulation is perceived as a constructive theological endeavour aimed at ensuring presence despite absence.³⁸

In this sense, theological construction is directly linked to the construction of the Tabernacle, and the construction of the Tabernacle directly to what is constructed theologically. In *Exodus*, Fretheim asks about the significance of thirteen chapters having to do with the Tabernacle, what he refers to as a long stretch of non-story.³⁹ As a reason for the detailed descriptions and long stretch, he mentions that "the language [constructs] a sanctuary in the minds of those who have none."⁴⁰

The connection between language and construction, detailed theological language and theological construction allows for inquiries into the concrete implications of theological language and construction, that is, theological language that constructs.

The connection allows for these inquiries into implications, particularly in light of the construction of the calf.⁴¹ Considering the lack of detail in the construction of the calf, it is clear that details in construction – *the grammar of construction* – are of critical importance. In fact, argues Fretheim, "inattention to detail may well have been a major factor in the syncretism and idolatry that developed."⁴²

In *After Method*, also Hanna Reichel is interested in this endeavour. Reichel puts it in the following way:

If theology indeed builds [a building] of sorts – a symbolic and intellectual habitat in which people can dwell, which orients their lives and shapes their perspectives, movement, and relationships – and if theological concepts are indeed *objects* with which we live and which we use and wield in specific ways, then we ought to think of their design in terms of what practices, acts, movements, and postures they enable and facilitate, obstruct or impede, encourage or habitualize. Their meaning is not only in their referential value, but also in their use.⁴³

Although following the insights of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Reichel focuses on *assessing and critiquing* how terms are used rather than on describing their meanings through discourse.⁴⁴

In light of the relation between theology and construction in the Tabernacle-traditions, *language constructing a sanctuary*, in the third part, I inquire how theological constructing can be done in such a way that theology functions constructively, how constructing theology *enables and facilitates, obstructs or impedes, encourages or habitualises*.⁴⁵

³⁵ Ibid., 264.

³⁶ Ibid., 275.

³⁷ Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 85.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 263.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 264.

⁴¹ Ibid., 32.

⁴² Ibid., 264.

⁴³ Reichel, *After Method*, 217.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 217.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 217.

4 Constructing Theology?

The concrete implications of the construction of theological language or theological language that constructs become particularly evident in the relationship between the traditions of the Tabernacle and those of creation. Connections between the Tabernacle and creation, in terms of both language and themes, have been recognised for some time, argues Fretheim. The parallels are *designed* deliberately.⁴⁶ Of interest here is Fretheim's emphasis on the relationship between *form and function*.⁴⁷ God is present and active in both creation and Tabernacle, not simply in the verbal, but also in and through that which the verbal constructs, that which is constructed verbally, that which in its verbliness is construction or constructing.

The question here, therefore, concerns the constructions and constructing encapsulated within language – whether these constructions and acts of constructing are indicative of forms of or function as idolatry or of God's presence and activity. I argue that the creation traditions, in light of the Tabernacle traditions, enable us to assess and critique the constructions and constructing inherent in theological language. The creation traditions provide a perspective not only on the relationship between theological language and what it constructs, but also on theological language and the constructions inherently encapsulated within it.

Here, it is important to distinguish between creation and reality.

This distinction plays a particularly significant role in Michael Welker's Annie Kinkead Warfield Lectures, later published as *Schöpfung und Wirklichkeit* (1995) and *Creation and reality* (1999). He describes *creation and reality* as an initial step in assessing and critiquing the conventional images of the creator and its concurrent conceptualisation of reality.⁴⁸

He too discusses what I refer to as the relationship between theology and construction, theological language and the manner in which realities are constructed, theological language and the constructed and constructing realities encapsulated within it. Central to this article's argument is that the creation traditions illustrate the implications of theological language and construction, enabling assessment and critique through the aforementioned distinction between creation and reality.

Welker elucidates the distinction between creation and reality by exploring the significance of creation in Genesis.

Welker describes biblical creation as constructing activity, whereby different interrelated creatures – themselves creating and taking part in the creating activity – are brought into differentiated interrelations and forms of interdependence.⁴⁹

Creation thus is creation as *wohlgedeiheende Vegetation*.⁵⁰ The differentiated interrelations of interdependence *flourish or blossom* as relations that are reciprocally beneficial to each other are brought forth.

Welker conceptualises the creative activity of human beings *in terms of these relations*. For him, human beings, as it is with the creatures of the heavens and the earth, take part in the creative activity of God.⁵¹ Their creative activity is parallel to God's activity without, however, ceasing to be their activity.

This activity is the topic of his articles on the image of God and the meaning thereof for human beings in creation, where he relates the *imago Dei* to the *dominium terrae*.⁵² For Welker, the image of God refers to these differentiated humans' *mandate* of dominion, the *dominion* of the mandate characterised *by the law*. According to him, the law has to do with the interconnection of *Recht, Erbarmen, Gotteserkenntnis*⁵³ or, as he states in secular terms, *Recht, systematischer Schutz der Schwachen, Wahrheitssuche*.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 269. See Reichel, "Theology and Design," 1–18. <https://journalofsystematictheology.com/theology-and-design/>.

⁴⁷ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 270.

⁴⁸ Welker, *Creation and Reality*, 2.

⁴⁹ Welker, "What is 'Creation'," 56–71. See Van der Westhuizen, *Faith Active in Love*, 147–74.

⁵⁰ Welker, *Gottes Geist*, 163.

⁵¹ Welker, *Creation and Reality*, 13.

⁵² Welker, "Creation and the Image of God," 436–48.

⁵³ Welker, *Gottes Geist*, 109.

⁵⁴ Welker, "Gottes Gerechtigkeit," 417. See Van der Westhuizen, *Faith Active in Love*, 125–46.

In this way, the creation and law traditions in light of the Tabernacle-traditions enable us to assess and critique the constructions and constructing inherent, encapsulated, or rather *embodied* within theological language. *This becomes possible by constantly questioning whether our constructed and constructing theological language is constructive* – that is, whether it constructively contributes to the mentioned *wohlgedeihe*nde *Vegetation*. The flourishing characteristic of creation as a constructing activity, whereby different interrelated creatures are brought into differentiated interrelations and forms of interdependence are *constantly* assessed and critiqued in light of the law, particularly, the *Schutz der Schwachen*. The flourishing characteristic of creation depends on the blossoming of foreigners, strangers, widows, orphans, slaves, the poor, ostracised, vulnerable, powerless, opponents and enemies, and so on.

5 Conclusion

This brings me back to the title, constructive after the systematic question mark.

The title, on the one hand, asks if the constructive follows or should follow the systematic, if Constructive Theology, for example as public theology, should be *after* Systematic Theology in South African theology. It asks if Constructive Theology must be after Systematic Theology in this sense that it takes Systematic Theology further, *inter alia*, in terms of this article's argument, by asking as to the being constructed of Systematic Theology, the constructing of Systematic Theology, in such a way that it becomes constructive.

The title therefore asks, on the other hand, if Constructive Theology should be *after* Systematic Theology, if Constructive Theology should be critical of Systematic Theology and therefore after it.

From a South African theological perspective, Constructive Theology might be described as a form of Public Theology, which has been one of the most prominent ways of doing theology, at least after 1994.

John W. De Gruchy, in an article on theology in South Africa, argued for a move from political theologies to public theologies. The plural – from political to public theologies – is of import: “At the outset, we need to recognize that there is no universal ‘public theology,’ but only theologies that seek to engage the political realm within particular localities.”⁵⁵

Where Tracy in the mentioned chapter on theological method argued for theology in a new paradigm, Dirk J. Smit, at a conference on *Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology* (in Bamberg) and later also published in *Grundtexte Öffentlicher Theologie* (2015), as well as in “Does it Matter?” published in the *Companion to Public Theology* (2017), asked whether Public Theology can be regarded as a new paradigm, a new way of doing theology, a new methodology, *the* way theology is to be done here and now.

If this is what is meant by public theology – that public theology is *a* new way of doing theology, *a* new methodology, *the* new way theology is to be done – if public theology strives towards commonalities that characterise the way theology is to be done here and now, then he would not want to argue for public theology as a new paradigm. For Smit, public theology should precisely *not* strive towards what different public theologies have in common *globally*.

He therefore deliberately wants to ask about the *particulars* of different local public theologies. He wants to think neither from the global to the local, nor from the local to the global. In fact, what makes public theology a viable way to do theology in South Africa, he argues, is precisely that it wants to think *from the particular to the particular*.⁵⁶

Smit is interested in paradigms as an example of how things could be done in a particular, specific here and now. According to him, it is only really possible to learn from paradigms when one moves from one particular paradigm to another. “They are concrete and instructive examples of something that can precisely *not* be captured in general rules, whether before or after. We learn from them precisely because we see them

⁵⁵ De Gruchy, “From Political to Public Theologies,” 45.

⁵⁶ Smit, “The Paradigm of Public Theology,” 22.

in their singularity.”⁵⁷ For him, there are “only historical moments of public theology, instructive and inspiring precisely in their uniqueness.”⁵⁸

In the mentioned *Doing Theology In Context* (1994), the authors therefore wanted to move from theology as an abstract theory to the doing of theology in *specific contexts*.⁵⁹ For them, it was important to ask themselves how theology relates *to praxis*.⁶⁰

In his article, James R. Cochrane particularly asked about the *form* that theological construction should take in South Africa, in how it should function.⁶¹ At the core of developing a contextual theology lies the concept of local theology, he argued. Theologians, therefore, have the task of listening to “the voices of the ordinary, untrained people on the margins of society.”⁶² For Cochrane, a Constructive Theology would have to also be local theology, *empirical* theology, and it requires an empirical element.⁶³

As a secondary task of Systematic Theology, he then asks that the implications of local or empirical theology inform Systematic Theology, in terms of this article, *that the constructive is after the systematic*:

The next step is into the realm of foundational theology, where the implications of the theology produced in context are developed to correct, alter and, if necessary, discard fundamental, doctrinal claims about who God is, who Jesus Christ is, what the church is, what the nature and destiny of human life are, and so on. ... If anything worthwhile at this level is to be achieved, it will be shown by the extent to which those who have produced the theology upon which it depends recognize their own life and experience, are confirmed by it, and are challenged by it.⁶⁴

De Gruchy, in the mentioned article on theology in South Africa, also highlighted the importance of theology being “tried and tested in specific localities, critically informing each other and being recast in ways appropriate to specific contexts.”⁶⁵

The fact that theology has to be *tried and tested in specific localities* highlights the relation between theology and construction, the being constructed of theology, and the importance of always asking anew whether theological constructions – the continuous constructing of theology – are characterised by concepts of creation where theology is linked to relationships characterised by the law and, thus, constructive.

It also highlights the fact of the evasiveness or elusiveness that is the doing of theology. To return to Barth:

Let it be noted that theology should neither repeat, re-enact, nor anticipate the history in which God is what [God] is. Theology cannot make out of this history a work of its own to be set in motion by itself. Theology must, of course, give an account of this history by presenting and discussing human perceptions, concepts, and formulations of human language. But it does this appropriately only when it *follows* the living God in those unfolding historical events in which [God] is God. Therefore, in its perception, meditation, and discussion, theology must have the character of a living *procession*. Theology would forfeit its object, it would belie and negate itself, if it wished to view, to understand, and to describe any one moment of the divine procession in isolation from others. Instead, theology must describe the dynamic interrelationships which make this procession comparable to a bird in flight, in contrast to a caged bird.⁶⁶

Author contribution: The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results, and manuscript preparation.

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Smit, “Does it Matter?,” 68.

⁵⁹ De Gruchy, “The Task of Theology,” 2.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁶¹ Cochrane, “Theology and Faith,” 35–7.

⁶² Ibid., 35.

⁶³ Ibid., 37.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ De Gruchy, “From Political to Public Theologies,” 45.

⁶⁶ Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 9–10.

References

- Baard, Rachel Sophia. "Public Theology and the Linguistic Turn." *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 8 (2022), 1–17.
- Barth, Karl. *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum. Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme*. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960.
- Barth, Karl. "Denken heißt: Nachdenken." *Zürcher Woche* 15, no. 5 (1963), 7.
- Barth, Karl. *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.
- Chopp, Rebecca S. and Mark Lewis Taylor, eds. *Reconstructing Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.
- Cochrane, James R. "Theology and Faith: Tradition, Criticism, and Popular Religion." In *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives*, edited by John W. De Gruchy and Charles Villa Vicencio, 26–41. New York, 1994.
- De Gruchy, John W. and Charles Villa-Vicencio. "Introduction." In *Doing Theology in the Context: South African Perspectives*, edited by John W. De Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, ix–xi. New York: Orbis, 1994.
- De Gruchy, John W. "The Nature, Necessity and Task of Theology." In *Doing Theology in the Context: South African Perspectives*, edited by John W. De Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, 2–14. New York: Orbis, 1994.
- De Gruchy, John W. "From Political to Public Theologies: The Role of Theology in Public Life in South Africa." In *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, edited by W. F. Storrar and A. R. Morton, 45–63. London: T & T Clark, 2004.
- Fretheim, Terence E. *Exodus: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991.
- Grau, Marion. "Methodological Themes and Patterns in Constructive Theologies." In *What is Constructive Theology? Histories, Methodologies, and Perspectives*, 53–74. London and New York: T&T Clark, 2020.
- Hodgson, Peter C. and Robert H. King, eds. *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982.
- Hodgson, Peter C. and Robert H. King, eds. *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks. Revised and Enlarged Edition*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985a.
- Hodgson, Peter C. and Robert H. King, eds. *Readings in Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985b.
- Hodgson, Peter C. and Robert H. King, eds. *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks. Newly Updated Edition*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1994.
- Jones, Serene and Paul Lakeland, eds. *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.
- King, Robert H. "The Task of Systematic Theology." In *Christian theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*, edited by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, 1–28. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982.
- McFague, Sallie. "An Epilogue: The Christian Paradigm." In *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks. Revised and Enlarged Edition*, edited by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, 377–90. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985.
- McBee, Silas. "Introduction." *The Constructive Quarterly: A Journal of the Faith, Work, and Thought of Christendom* 1 (1913), 1.
- Rashdall, H. and W. R. Inge, eds. *Contentio Veritatis: Essays in Constructive Theology*. London: John Murray, 1902.
- Reichel, Hanna. "Theology and Design." *Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (2023), 1–18, <https://journalofsystematictheology.com/theology-and-design/>.
- Reichel, Hanna. *After Method: Queer Grace, Conceptual Design, and the Possibility of Theology*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023.
- Rieger, Joerg. "Constructive Theology." In *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*, edited by Anne L. C. Runehov and Lluís Oviedo, 483–6. Dordrecht: Springer, 2013.
- Sanday, William. "Review of Contentio Veritatis: Essays in Constructive Theology, by Six Oxford Tutors." *Journal of Theological Studies* 4/13 (1902), 2.
- Schneider, Laurel C. and Stephen G. Ray Jr., eds. *Awake to the Moment. An Introduction to Theology*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.
- Smit, Dirk J. "Review of The Hermeneutics of Doctrine, Anthony Thiselton." *Review of Biblical Literature*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008.
- Smit, Dirk J. "In diens van die tale Kanaäns? Oor sistematiese teologie vandag." In *Opstelle oor Geloof en Openbare Lewe Versamelde Opstelle 2*, edited by Nico Koopman, 387–428. Sun Media: Stellenbosch, 2008.
- Smit, Dirk J. "Quo Vadis' Sistematiese Teologie?" *Scriptura* 100 (2009), 42–53.
- Smit, Dirk J. "Trends and Directions in Reformed Theology." *The Expository Times* 122 (2011), 313–26.
- Smit, Dirk J. "The Paradigm of Public Theology – Origins and Development." In *Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology*, edited by H. Bedford-Strohm, F. Höhne, and T. Reitmeier, 11–23. Zürich, Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2013.
- Smit, Dirk J. "Does it Matter? On Whether There is Method in the Madness." In *A Companion to Public Theology*, edited by S. Kim and K. Day, 67–92. Leiden, Brill, 2017.
- Smit, Dirk J. "'Making the Good Confession before Pontius Pilate' – Framed by Politics?," 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4l49pUBUFxU&list=PLjSFe-2r4QfsBpt0aY_tnFPsNLCKuiNuE&index=6.
- Ten Broeke, James. *A Constructive Basis for Theology*. London: Macmillan, 1914.

- Thiselton, Anthony C. *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1992.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: The Collected Works and New Essays of Anthony Thiselton*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009.
- Tracy, David. "Theological Method." In *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks, Revised and Enlarged Edition*, edited by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, 35–60. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985.
- Van der Westhuizen, Henco. *Faith Active in Love. On the Theology of Michael Welker*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021.
- Van Oorschot, Fredericke and Florian Höhne, eds. *Grundtexte Öffentlicher Theologie*. Leipzig: Evangelischer Verlagsanstalt GmbH, 2015.
- Welker, Michael. "What is 'Creation'? Rereading Genesis 1 and 2." *Theology Today* 48 (1991), 56–71.
- Welker, Michael. *Gottes Geist. Theologie des Heiligen Geistes*. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1992.
- Welker, Michael. *Schöpfung und Wirklichkeit*. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1995.
- Welker, Michael. "Creation and the Image of God: Their Understanding in Christian Tradition and the Biblical Grounds." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34 (1997), 436–48.
- Welker, Michael. *Creation and Reality: Theological and Biblical Perspectives*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1999.
- Welker, Michael. "Gottes Gerechtigkeit." *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 56/4 (2014), 409–21.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. 4th ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1953.
- Wyman Jr., Jason A. "Interpreting the History of the Workgroup on Constructive Theology." *Theology Today* 73/4 (2017), 312–24.
- Wyman Jr., Jason A. *Constructing Constructive Theology: An Introductory Sketch*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017.
- Wyman Jr., Jason A. "History, Movement, Method." In *What is Constructive Theology? Histories, Methodologies, and Perspectives*, edited by Jason A. Wyman Jr. and Marion Grau, 9–30. London/New York: T&T Clark, 2020.
- Wyman Jr., Jason A. and Marion Grau, eds. *What is Constructive Theology? Histories, Methodologies, and Perspectives*. London/New York: T&T Clark, 2020.