

HOMO THEOLOGICUS: TOWARD A REFLEXIVE THEOLOGY (WITH THE HELP OF PIERRE BOURDIEU)

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The current conflictual situation of theology can be understood from a sociological perspective using the work of Pierre Bourdieu on the relationships of power in a given field. The article intends to help theologians be more reflexive about their task of interpreting the Christian symbol system.

IN RECENT YEARS INDIVIDUAL THEOLOGIANS have become increasingly self-conscious about the various social, cultural, and historical factors that condition or affect their theological production. Reflexivity in the social sciences refers to examining social practices (in this case, theology) and modifying them in the light of the incoming information about them.¹ Theologians' own experience as perhaps white, male, and clerical with an academic position in an economically developed country, Europe or the United States, contrasts sharply with the experience of a black or Latina female from a developing country in Africa, Latin America, or Asia, working in a more pastoral setting. They know that these various factors affect what questions or issues they address, what resources they can draw upon, and what literary forms or genres their work will take. Theologians are also aware that they are responsible to at least the three publics of the academy, the church, and society at large, as David Tracy pointed out some years ago.²

But theologians have not been as self-conscious, self-critical, or reflexive

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¹ See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 1990) 28. For an overview of the use of the term "reflexivity" in the social sciences, see Michael Lynch, "Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 17.3 (2000) 26–54.

² David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) chap. 1.

as a social group. In this article I look at theologians not as individuals but at theology as a “field” of study, including all the various theological disciplines, biblical, historical, systematic, and pastoral or practical theology. I have put “field” in quotation marks to indicate that I am using it in the technical sense developed by French anthropologist/sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, which he uses to highlight the conflictual character of social life. I first describe the conflictual situation of contemporary theology in its various manifestations and then appropriate some of Bourdieu’s insights, and, finally, suggest how they may illuminate, although not resolve, the conflicts currently experienced in the field of theology.

CURRENT SITUATION: THEOLOGY AS A FIELD OF STRUGGLE

Anyone familiar with Roman Catholic theology over the last 40 years knows well that theology is a field of struggle and conflict—witness the first session of the Second Vatican Council itself when the council fathers rejected the preparatory documents *De revelatione* and *De ecclesia*. The long-dominant neo-Scholastic theology and philosophy were unseated in favor of a more biblical, more patristic, and more historically conscious theology. This shift was the fruit of the *ressourcement* movement, of the progress in the historical/critical approach to Scripture, and of the liturgical and eumenical movements prior to the council. Council historian Giuseppe Alberigo characterized the shift as a transition, “imperfect and indeed incomplete,” from an essentially deductive method to an inductive method.³ It has also frequently been described as the transition from a classicist or ahistorical mode to a historically conscious mode of thinking and theologizing.⁴

That theology is a field of conflict was also manifested in the decades following the council in the disputes surrounding Latin American liberation theology. Although there were many points of conflict, the main issue was about the starting point, a social and cultural analysis of the situation in Latin America and, more specifically, over the use of Marxist analysis.⁵ Engaging social science to analyze a situation was not the usual starting

³ Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, 5 vols., ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003) 4:624; this reference appears in chap. 8, interestingly titled “Major Results, Shadows of Uncertainty.”

⁴ Among others, see John W. O’Malley, “Developments, Reforms, and Two Great Reformations: Towards a Historical Assessment of Vatican II,” in *Tradition and Transition: Historical Perspectives on Vatican II* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1989) 82–125.

⁵ See “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation,’” August 6, 1984, in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly, S.J. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/

point of traditional Scholastic theology, which was accustomed to begin with the dogmatic tradition bolstered by scriptural proof-texting. The experience, the praxis, of the Christian community was not seen as necessary or helpful in doing theology. But for the liberation theologians solidarity with the poor and marginalized was a prerequisite. This appeal to praxis was perceived as divisive and threatening to theology, or even as not theology at all, as it was as practiced in Europe and the United States. Latin American theologians had to justify their use of the social sciences, and this method of doing theology continues to be a source of conflict.⁶ Closely allied and similar to the conflict over starting points and the use of the social sciences in Latin American liberation theology has been the struggle over beginning theology “from below” or “from above.”⁷ Salvadoran theologian Jon Sobrino argued in several volumes that Christology must begin with the historical Jesus, his life, suffering and death, rather than from the already glorified, resurrected, Jesus of the Chalcedonian formulations.⁸ In a context where suffering and oppression are the experience of the vast majority of Christians, this would seem obvious. But more traditional theologians judged that this was denigrating the orthodox formulations of the early church. In the United States, Roger Haight approached Christology “from below” in his *Jesus Symbol of God*, and was criticized by other theologians for this and certain other issues.⁹ More recently, Haight has argued for an ecclesiology “from below,” by which he means a method that is “concrete, existential, and historical” as contrasted with a method that is “abstract, idealist, and a-historical.”¹⁰ Some reviewers disagree with or

congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html (accessed May 13, 2007).

⁶ See, e.g., Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Theology and the Social Sciences,” in *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 53–84; and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Notification on the Works of Father Jon Sobrino, S.J., November 26, 2006, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20061126_notification-sobrino_en.html (accessed Jun 11, 2007).

⁷ See Karl Rahner, “The Two Basic Types of Christology,” *Theological Investigations* 13 (New York: Seabury, 1975) 213–23.

⁸ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978); *Jesus in Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987); *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) and *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001).

⁹ For a summary of these critiques and Haight’s response see, Roger Haight, “Epilogue: Jesus Symbol of God: Criticism and Response,” in *The Future of Christology* (New York: Continuum, 2005) 196–214.

¹⁰ Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History*, vol. 1, *Historical Ecclesiology* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 4–5, 18–48.

continue to misunderstand this approach.¹¹ A further example of how Roman Catholic theology continues to be a field of conflict or struggle is the ongoing debate over the interpretation of Vatican II illustrated by some recent articles in *Theological Studies*.¹² John O'Malley's article describes the elaborate introduction to a new book by Archbishop Agostino Marchetto on the history of Vatican II that seeks to act as "a counterpoint, indeed the polar opposite of the interpretation of Vatican II that until now has monopolized the historiography of the council"¹³—referring primarily to the magisterial five-volume history of the council edited by Giuseppe Alberigo and the "Bologna school," which portrays the council as an "event, a new beginning, and a 'new Pentecost' for the Church. Marchetto stresses the continuity of the council with the whole Catholic tradition and contends (as had Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) that there is no "before" and "after" the council; this historical reconstruction purports to tell the "true story" of what happened (or did not happen) at the council.¹⁴ For O'Malley, however, Marchetto attempts to rewrite (revise) the history of Vatican II to make it conform to the theological a priori of some theologians today. These theologians do not like the direction Vatican II gave the Church; hence they contend that the council did not say what it clearly intended to say, and they denigrate its historical significance. They are trying to reverse the outcome of the debates and battles the minority lost at the council and return to the *status quo ante*. Whatever the long-term outcome, the argument over the interpretation of the council exemplifies the continuing conflict and struggle that characterizes the field of Roman Catholic theology.

This brief description of various conflicts serves to remind us of what I take to be an obvious fact: Roman Catholic theology is a field of struggle and conflict. It is not a harmonious or homogeneous arena in which all speak with one voice. It is not the monolith that the long dominance of neo-Scholasticism made it seem to be. Yet theologians on both sides of these various conflicts adhere to the same Scripture, claim loyalty to the same apostolic traditions and creedal, conciliar heritage, and acknowledge the teaching authority in the Church. So what is going on? How does one

¹¹ See, e.g., reviews by Luke Timothy Johnson, *Commonweal*, 132.2 (January 28, 2005) 34–36; Robert Imbelli, *America* 192.4 (February 7, 2005) 35–37.

¹² John W. O'Malley, S.J., "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 3–33; Stephen Schloesser, S.J., "Against Forgetting: Memory, History, Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 275–319; and Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., "Response to Karl Becker, S.J., on the Meaning of *Subsistit in*," *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 395–409.

¹³ O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" 4.

¹⁴ Agostino Marchetto, *Il concilio ecumenico Vaticano II: Contropunto per la sua storia* (Vatican City: Editrice Vaticana, 2005).

explain or understand the conflictual nature of the field of Roman Catholic theology? As with most facts of history, there is not just one cause or explanation. Some commentators point to the diverse philosophical and theological lineages—Platonic or Aristotelian, Augustinian or Thomistic—as the root of such a conflictual situation. Others point to the diverse social, cultural, economic, and historical contexts of the various theologians. All theology is contextual theology; no theology can escape its cultural matrix. I want to suggest another perspective, one that can help us understand, learn to live with, and even profit by the conflictual character of theology—the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu.

“FIELD” AND “CAPITAL” IN BOURDIEU

Pierre Bourdieu’s death in 2002 was front-page news in *Le Monde*. There the French prime minister described him as “a master of contemporary sociology and a great figure in the intellectual life of our country.”¹⁵ Bourdieu was professor of sociology at the Collège de France since 1981, the author of numerous books and articles, and founder and editor of *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*. His 1988 book, *Homo Academicus*, a study of French intellectual life, inspired this article.¹⁶ It suggested to me the value of looking not only at individual theologians, but at theology as a field of struggle. I will not attempt to present his entire sociological theory but, at the risk of oversimplification, merely describe two of his major analytical concepts, “field” and “capital.”¹⁷

Field

The concepts of “field” and “capital” are closely interrelated—they can only be understood together. “Field” is a spatial metaphor analogous to the

¹⁵ *Le Monde*, January 25, 2002, p. 1. See also Anne Friederike Müller, “Sociology as a Combat Sport: Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002)—Admired and Reviled in France,” *Sociology Today* 18.2 (2002) 5–9.

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo academicus* (Paris: Minuit 1984); Engl. trans., *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 1988). For a more complete biography of Bourdieu and introduction to his work, see David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997) chap. 2.

¹⁷ I am passing over Bourdieu’s other major concept, that of “habitus,” which is the disposition or practical sense of how to move in a given social world or context. In Bourdieu’s own formulation, “habitus” is “the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations . . . a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice [Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University, 1977] 72, 95, 214).

playing field of a sport. Thus, in a field, Bourdieu says, we have stakes that are the product of competition between players; the players are taken in by the game, oppose one another, agree that the game is worth playing, and follow rules, some of which are not explicit or codified. We have “trump cards” whose relative value changes with each game depending on the various species of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) that are valued in the game.¹⁸ On this analogy, Bourdieu defines a field in more technical terms as: “a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.).”¹⁹ Or, as David Swartz says, “Fields denote arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate and monopolize these different kinds of capital. Fields may be thought of as structured spaces that are organized around specific types of capital or combinations of capital.”²⁰ Bourdieu speaks of the “intellectual field,” the “scientific field,” the “artistic field,” and applies field analysis to higher education, religion, and literature, among others. In highly differentiated societies such as those in “developed” countries, fields are relatively autonomous microcosms, but they overlap. We operate in more than one field at any given time and each field is related to the larger field of social power. Bourdieu himself exemplifies one who acted in the overlapping fields of academe and politics. In any given field, there are players or actors who struggle to produce, distribute, appropriate, or control some form of capital. The actors are related to one another by their position in the field, not just by personal or subjective relationships—for example, in baseball the pitcher is related to the catcher, to the first baseman, to the right fielder, etc., no matter the identity of the person playing each position. The relationships are hierarchical, that is, some have more power to affect the outcome than others—the pitcher in baseball or the quarterback in football. “Field analysis,” Swartz notes, “calls attention to the social conditions of struggle that shape cultural production. Even the seemingly most neutral or ivory-tower cultural practices are, according to

¹⁸ See Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992) 98.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 97.

²⁰ David Swartz, *Culture and Power* 117.

Bourdieu, embedded in systems of social as well as intellectual distinctions.”²¹ So, a field is an arena of competition for power or capital.

Capital

One of Bourdieu’s significant contributions to social theory, and of particular interest for my argument, is his notion of “capital.” He distances himself from Marx, Swartz observes, by extending the idea of capital from the merely economic “to all forms of power, whether they be material, cultural, social, or symbolic. Individuals and groups draw upon a variety of cultural, social, and symbolic resources in order to maintain and enhance their position in the social order. Bourdieu conceptualizes such resources as capital when they function as a ‘social relation of *power*,’ that is, when they become objects of struggle as valued resources.”²² “Capital” includes, therefore, what for Marx was the symbolic or ideal superstructure. Bradford Verter comments that for Bourdieu “the material and the ideal are both facets of a larger economy of power. The notion of capital, then, encapsulates assets other than money and property. Education, social networks, artistic abilities, and cultural knowledge are all obtained at the expense of labor, and these forms of symbolic capital are all subject to the same laws of accumulation, inheritance, and exchange that govern material forms of capital.”²³

Bourdieu speaks of four generic types of capital: “economic capital (money and property), cultural capital (cultural goods and services, including educational credentials), social capital (acquaintances and networks), and symbolic capital (legitimation).”²⁴ These forms of capital can be exchanged under some conditions. For example, a family can invest its economic capital in higher education for its children, who then acquire cultural capital that in turn can be parlayed into social capital (e.g., Ivy League social connections). Or, in another direction, someone with little or no economic capital, can get a Yale degree and a Rhodes scholarship (cultural capital) that can be parlayed into social capital and then into political capital (as president of the United States) and then converted into economic capital via lucrative book contracts and speaking engagements.

Cultural Capital

For my purposes, cultural (also termed “informational”) and symbolic capital are of primary interest. Cultural goods differ from material goods in

²¹ Ibid. 119.

²² Ibid. 73–74.

²³ Bradford Verter, “Spiritual Capital: Theorizing Religion with Bourdieu against Bourdieu,” *Sociological Theory* 21 (2003) 152.

²⁴ Swartz, *Culture and Power* 74.

that “one can appropriate or ‘consume’ them only by apprehending their meaning. This holds for music, works of art, and scientific formulas, as well as works of popular culture. Thus cultural capital exists in an *embodied* state.”²⁵ That is to say, some person or other has appropriated it personally. But cultural capital also exists in an *objectified* form, such as books, works of art, etc., existing independently of their producers or consumers. And, finally, Bourdieu speaks of cultural capital existing in an “institutionalized” form, by which he means the educational credential system. “Bourdieu places great importance upon the growth of the higher education system and the role it has come to play in the allocation of status in advanced societies.”²⁶ Unequal access to higher education is a major contributor to social inequality in modern societies. (Below I discuss the implications of this inequity for theological education and the Church.) Important as cultural capital is for Bourdieu, it is always subordinated to economic capital.

Before discussing Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital, I need to say a word about how he understands all symbol systems. He argues that symbol systems perform three interrelated functions: cognition, communication, and social differentiation.²⁷ They are “cognitive” insofar as symbol systems are a means of ordering and understanding the social world, language being the most basic symbol system. They are instruments of communication because they are “‘codes’ that channel deep structural meanings shared by all members of a culture.” Finally, and most importantly for Bourdieu, symbol systems serve as instruments of domination. As Swartz puts it: “Dominant symbol systems provide integration for dominant groups, distinctions and hierarchies for ranking groups, and legitimation of social ranking by encouraging the dominated to accept the existing hierarchies of social distinction. They therefore fulfill a political function.”²⁸ It is this last function that Bourdieu stresses in the notion of symbolic capital.

Symbolic Capital

Symbolic capital, the stock-in-trade of theologians, would seem to be a species of cultural capital, but Bourdieu distinguishes it as a separate genre of capital because of how it functions in social relations. “Symbolic capital

²⁵ Ibid. 76.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ I am following Swartz, *Culture and Power* 83, but Bourdieu’s own concise formulation can be found in “Symbolic Power,” in *Identity and Structure: Issues in the Sociology of Education*, ed. Denis Gleeson (Driffield: Nafferton, 1977) 112–19. See also Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 2000) 172–79.

²⁸ Swartz, *Culture and Power* 83.

is ‘denied capital’; it disguises the underlying interest relations as disinterested pursuits.”²⁹ Symbolic capital is the form of capital that legitimates other forms and disguises them as “disinterested,” or, in Bourdieu’s term, “misrecognizes” them. “Misrecognition” is an important concept for Bourdieu. Like the idea of false consciousness in the Marxist tradition, it denotes “denial” of the economic and political interests present in a set of practices. Symbolic practices, Bourdieu argues, deflect attention from the interested character of practices and thereby contribute to their enactment as disinterested pursuits. Thus they legitimate economic, social, or cultural capital and justify their existence, possession, and use as disinterested rather than as the forms of power they actually are. So, for example, individuals who accumulated vast amounts of economic capital in the 19th and early 20th centuries by whatever means—the “robber barons” like Rockefeller, Carnegie, or Mellon—legitimated their ill-gotten gains by building universities (Rockefeller and the University of Chicago—sometimes called the University of Standard Oil), or public libraries and art galleries for the public good, thereby acquiring symbolic capital. Philanthropy is a way of giving legitimacy to massive material wealth. In our day, Bill Gates and Warren Buffet disguise their own economic interests by setting up foundations to cure diseases, promote childrens’ health and education, again acquiring symbolic capital in the process. Or, again, the enormous profits of huge corporations such as Exxon/Mobil are used to sponsor programs on PBS, which allows these companies to portray themselves as generous public servants. Swartz describes this process by saying that “activities and resources gain in symbolic power, or legitimacy, to the extent that they become separated from underlying material interests and hence go misrecognized as representing distinterested form of activities and resources.”³⁰ The same process obtains with political and military capital: the raw use of such power has to be legitimated by symbolic capital in the form of a UN resolution. The bold invasion of one sovereign state by another is disguised as the “liberation of a people from a brutal dictator,” or, more acceptably today, as “humanitarian intervention.” For Bourdieu, symbolic capital is necessary for the effective exercise of political or economic power. In contrast to the Marxist emphasis on economic and political power, he believes, the symbolic dimension of power has become more important in modern societies. He contends that symbolic power is the major force in perpetuating inequality in the current social context. Symbolic capital is produced by the labor of specialized symbolic producers, that is, intellectuals who transform interested social relations of exploita-

²⁹ Ibid. 90.

³⁰ Ibid.

tion into legitimate social relations. As Swartz rightly asserts, Bourdieu “considers symbolic labor to be as important as economic labor in the reproduction of social life.”³¹ In the economic sphere, large corporations spend millions of dollars on symbolic workers in marketing, advertising, and public relations to conceal excessive profits gained at the expense of the average person (think of Enron and the exploitation of “Grandma Millie”). In the case of political power, the symbolic work of political consultants and their focus groups provides legitimacy for candidates and the interests of their political and economic backers—the “selling of the candidate.” Swartz says that Bourdieu “assigns a key role to cultural producers (e.g., artists, writers, teachers, and journalists) in legitimating the social order by producing symbolic capital through symbolic labor. . . . Cultural producers mediate the relationship between culture and class, between infrastructure and superstructure.”³² (Theologians could be added to that list of cultural producers.)

Cultural and symbolic capital, then, are the accumulated labor of symbolic workers and function like other forms of capital, economic or social, and are, at times, interconvertible with them. Those who labor in any given field compete for some valued resource whose possession gives them power. For Bourdieu, there are no disinterested social practices, even though the interest may not be conscious, and even if it becomes more effective when disguised or misrecognized (legitimated by symbolic capital). Bourdieu’s sociological jaundiced eye leads to a more reflexive awareness of actions of any social group. In the next section I discuss how these concepts can help theologians as a social group—a field—become more reflexive about what is going on.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF THEOLOGY

I do not propose Bourdieu’s social theory as a solution to conflicts in theology, but merely as a “sensitizing device” from a sociological perspective. And that perspective should not be applied reductively, as if it were the only one. A sociological perspective is complementary to other understandings appealed to by theologians—for example, the perspectives of faith, history, and, of course, theology. These perspectives are all valid and not exclusive or reductive. The sociological perspective, however, is frequently overlooked or ignored by theologians, who are more inclined to explanations rooted in the history of ideas. The sociological perspective can make one more reflexively aware of what is going on when one does theology.

³¹ *Ibid.* 93.

³² *Ibid.* 93–94.

Before considering theology as a field, however, I must say a bit about Bourdieu's understanding of the religious field of which theology is a relatively autonomous subfield. Influenced by Marx and Weber, Bourdieu considers the religious field as a "system of religious beliefs and practices as the more or less transfigured expression of the strategies of different categories of specialists competing for monopoly over the administration of the goods of salvation and of the different classes interested in their services."³³ Or, in Swartz's formulation, a religious field is a situation in which "a group of religious specialists is able to monopolize the administration of religious goods and services. Religious capital is a power resource, since it implies a form of 'objective dispossession' by the constitution of a 'laity' who by definition are those without, yet in need of the valued resources controlled by specialists."³⁴ For Bourdieu, religion provides symbolic legitimation for the otherwise arbitrary structure of social and economic relations of a society. It adds symbolic reinforcement to the material conditions of existence by masking or disguising them as of ultimate or divine origin. Religion is "misrecognition" par excellence. The religious field is also a competition of specialists and laypersons as well as competition between opposing specialists within it. This competition provides the dynamic of the field, enabling the transformation of religious ideology.³⁵

Following Weber, Bourdieu argues that, in addition to the laity, the major players in the field are priests and prophets. The priests maintain the practices and ideology of the religious institutions (his prime analogue was the medieval Catholic Church), and the prophets challenge the status quo. Thus, there are rivalries for spiritual authority within the religious field, and they establish a relatively autonomous subfield of scholars, the theologians. Bourdieu calls these subfields "clerical schisms," wherein scholars seek intellectual distinction in the domain of doctrine and dogma.³⁶

To what extent, then, can we consider theology a field or subfield? First of all, for Bourdieu fields are not clearly demarcated; their boundaries are

³³ Pierre Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," in *Comparative Social Research* 13 (1991) 1–44, at 4; originally published as "Genèse et structure du champ religieux," *Revue française de sociologie* 12 (1971) 295–334. I am relying on this article in what follows.

³⁴ Swartz, *Culture and Power* 43.

³⁵ Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure" 17.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 26. Bourdieu's understanding of the religious field obviously needs to be qualified. Religion does not always legitimate the social and political order. It can also be delegitimizing as, for example, in the case of revolutions in Mexico under the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Moreover, not all theologians are priests; many are lay persons, and many theologians are also prophets (Pope John XXIII's role as prophet would be considered by many as more significant than his role as priest).

porous. The field is determined by the species of capital at stake. Bourdieu says, “In empirical work, it is one and the same thing to determine what the field is, where its limits lie, etc., and to determine what species of capital are active in it, within what limits, and so on.”³⁷ The capital (valued resource) at stake in the field of theology is the Christian symbol system—the explication, interpretation, manipulation, control, and mastery of those symbols by which Christians interpret the universe. The players or actors in the field are all those who struggle to preserve, interpret, and explicate that symbol system. Theologians are laborers in the symbol factory.

Theology is a “diffuse” discipline, in Stephen Toulmin’s terms,³⁸ and builds bridges to many other disciplines such as theology and science, theology and literature, theology and. . . . All those who practice the “craft” of theology are the players in the field of theology. To further complicate matters, there are subfields with more specific forms of cultural capital, for example, biblical studies with the cultural capital of biblical languages and archeology, church history with its specific capital of historiography, medical ethics with its knowledge of medical science, etc. Again, the boundaries among these subfields are porous.

Theology is recognized as a field by those outside it, as when someone says, “I am not a theologian, but. . . .” The field of theology is also unified by shared guilds such as the Catholic Theological Society of America, the Society of Biblical Literature, and by shared journals and bibliographies. Someone has said that a field (academic) is constituted by all those who have the same books on their shelves. Fields are also delimited by institutionalized barriers such as credential requirements for admission. Hence, most professional theologians have the cultural capital acquired in graduate school and required for admission to professional societies.

Although the capital at stake in theology is the Christian symbol system, there are other forms of cultural capital or expertise possessed by theologians, as indicated above. There is competition among theologians with different forms of cultural capital to have their forms prevail. Theology, then, can be understood as a field of struggle for power, *champ de pouvoir*, in Bourdieu’s sense.

In the case of the conflicts at the Second Vatican Council, those theologians whose cultural (informational) capital was primarily neo-Scholastic philosophy and theology dominated the preparatory commissions, and their cultural capital was reflected in the preparatory documents, whereas

³⁷ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* 98–99.

³⁸ See David Tracy’s discussion of Toulmin’s terms in *The Analogical Imagination* 17–18, citing Stephen Edelston Toulmin, *Human Understanding, Volume 1: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1972).

the cultural capital of the more progressive theologians was the biblical and patristic theology of the *ressourcement*. The conflict between Ottaviani/Tromp and Congar/Rahner, for example, was not personal; rather, the conflict was between different positions in the field. The struggles in the aula and in the commissions were for control of the central symbols of the Christian faith. The theologies accepted by the council thereby acquired symbolic capital; that is to say, they were legitimated and in turn legitimated new social practices in the Christian community. The symbol “people of God” in *Lumen gentium* no. 2 helped legitimate a more participatory understanding and practice of being church, exemplified in a “full and active participation” in the liturgy. The symbol of collegiality, so hotly contested, legitimated more participation of the bishops in the governance of the Church. Those who opposed collegiality understood this all too clearly and saw their own position in the field threatened. Bourdieu’s theory can also help explain the struggle in the case of liberation theology that arose in Latin America after the council. The liberation theologians used their cultural capital, the social sciences, in their social analysis of the Latin American situation, in particular the Marxist category of class conflict and the economic dependency theories prominent at the time. Other theologians in Europe and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), whose cultural capital was primarily philosophy (transcendental Thomism, for example), saw this importation of social analysis as merely warmed over Marxism that had no place in theology.³⁹ They also feared that a church of the poor or a “people’s church” would undermine the hierarchical structure of the institutional Church. When Leonardo Boff suggested that there really was a power struggle involved in competing theologies of the church and sacraments, the CDF’s response was fast and furious. “One ought not impoverish the reality of the sacraments and the word of God by reducing them to the ‘production and consumption’ pattern, thus reducing the communion of faith to a mere sociological phenomenon. The sacraments are not ‘symbolic material,’ their administration is not production, their reception is not consumption. The sacraments are gifts of God, no one ‘produces’ them, all receive the grace of God in them, which are the signs of eternal love. All that lies beyond any production, beyond every human doing and fabrication.”⁴⁰ The CDF was anxious to hide, disguise, or misrecognize, the human component in the religious practices, the sacraments. They are “gifts of God,” not symbols that the Christian community has construed as responses to God’s self-

³⁹ See CDF, “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation.’”

⁴⁰ CDF, “Notification Sent to Fr. Leonardo Boff regarding Errors in His Book, *Church: Charism and Power*,” March 11, 1985, in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* 429.

communication, as mediations of the divine to the human. By talking about “divine origin” or “divine will” as if there were no human agency involved, the theology of the CDF misrecognized the historical development of religious practices.

Something similar, I suspect, underlies the conflict over theology “from below” and theology “from above.” By beginning Christology with the historical Jesus, or ecclesiology with the historical origins of the church, theologians like Sobrino and Haight are employing their cultural capital of a historical reconstruction of human experience, whereas their critics want to begin with dogmatic conclusions in creedal and conciliar definitions, which are their form of cultural capital. Theology as a field of struggle and the various forms of capital involved can help illuminate this sometimes acrimonious debate between theology “from below” and theology “from above.”

The recent struggle over the interpretation of Vatican II is a continuation of the battles fought at the council itself. The unbalanced ecclesiology that was the result of the unfinished First Vatican Council, with its excessive focus on the hierarchy and the papacy in particular, was delegitimated by the recovery of the symbol of the people of God and the acceptance of episcopal collegiality, its openness to other Christian churches and to non-Christian religions. Those in the minority theological position that lost at the council are now trying to revise the history to say that nothing really happened, that nothing really changed and we should carry on as before, indeed, that there is no before and after.⁴¹ Yet, as the minority at the council clearly perceived, the issue that “lay continually below the surface of all the conciliar debates” was precisely the issue of the development of doctrine, or change.⁴² To try to portray the conciliar majority as seeking a complete break with the great tradition is nonsense. They were trying to recover and restore aspects of the tradition that had fallen out of the more recent practices of the Church. One of the most frequent words in *Sacrosantum concilium* was “restore.” And the teaching on episcopal collegiality was not seen as a novelty but in continuity with and a recovery of the ancient synodal or conciliar tradition.⁴³ The current attempt to portray the conciliar majority as seeking a complete break with tradition is not warranted. But there was change from the practices of the immediate

⁴¹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985) 35.

⁴² John Courtney Murray, S.J., introduction to the Decree on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis humanae*, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 673.

⁴³ See *Lumen gentium* 22.

past—"micro-ruptures," Ormond Rush calls them.⁴⁴ As in all history, there is both continuity and discontinuity. The battle between the ahistorical and the historically conscious approach to theology can be explained by the differing forms of cultural capital being invoked.

The various conflicts in the field of theology are compounded, however, because theologians are players on more than one field. They also operate in the academic and ecclesiastical fields of power. They may occupy positions of more or less power in these fields as, for example, holder of a chair at a prestigious university, or an ecclesiastical office, for example, archbishop of Cologne. The power dimensions of these fields also influence positions in the field of theology. The theology embraced by those holding powerful ecclesiastical positions can be and has been used to suppress other theological positions—as occurred when the theology of the Roman School was used to suppress the Modernists in the early part of the 20th century.

Further complicating the current situation is the postconciliar entrance of many lay persons into formal theological education. Contrary to Bourdieu's assimilation of theologians with priests, laity now have access to symbolic power and are increasingly making this expertise felt in the Church. Laity as well as priests can be both scholars and/or prophets. Ordained clergy no longer have a monopoly on theology as a form of cultural capital. Thus the historic inequality between clergy and laity has been reduced by the acquisition of educational credentials by the laity. There is more diversity among the players on the field of struggle.

Finally, there is more at stake in the struggles within the field of theology than there is for Bourdieu in his study of French intellectuals. Theologians are struggling to maintain, interpret, and preserve the Christian symbol system because they are trying to keep alive the dangerous and subversive memory of Jesus of Nazareth who became the Anointed One of God. Their more or less adequate attempts are ordered to the pursuit of Holy Mystery. This was not the concern of Pierre Bourdieu.

CONCLUSION

Theology, then, can be understood, with the help of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital, as a field of struggle for power to control the capital at stake, that is, the Christian symbol system. Conflicts in the field are not "merely theological," but also involve struggles for power. Somebody's interest is being served or undermined. This is true of theologians on both sides of the conflicts I have mentioned, conservative and progres-

⁴⁴ Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (New York: Paulist, 2004) 75.

sive. There is no disinterested theology. To pretend otherwise is to disguise and thereby legitimate those interests. Bourdieu's insight that the symbolic dimension of power is perhaps more important than the economic or political forms of power in perpetuating inequality, domination, and exploitation is extremely relevant for theology and the Church today. To be aware of this dimension is to be more self-critical, more reflexive; this is always the first step in authentic interpretation. Theologians are the interpreters of the Christian symbols, the workers in the symbol factory. There is much at stake: who will control the symbols? As we engage in this ongoing struggle, we need to be more reflexive and realistic about the practice of theology. Bourdieu's social theory can give us another perspective toward this goal.