Theological Research Work in a World of Precarious Work

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INTRODUCTION

The increasingly global phenomenon of precarious or fragile work was determined to be a critical research priority for the University of Divinity's (UD) Centre for Research on Religion and Social Policy's (RASP) study of work. In this article, I offer three propositions that may support and guide theological researchers who are interested to research in this field. The propositions are derived from my personal and professional research experience studying work-related harm for a UnitingCare agency. First, I submit that the Christian gospel provides a distinctive theological perspective on precarious work. Second, I propose that the foundation for researching precarious work is the researcher's embrace of their human experience of vulnerability in the increasingly precarious university work environment. This proposition derives from my personal experience as a researcher, and I endeavour to substantiate my professional judgment by disclosing that experience. My third proposition is that Christ's gospel calls theological researchers to be 'in the world' in solidarity with all those who struggle for a flourishing life in a precarious or fragile work environment. In this article I propose to work backwards through these three propositions.

PRECARIOUS THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH WORK IN THE IDOLATROUS WORLD OF MODERNITY

My first proposition is that the Christian gospel provides a distinctive theological perspective on precarious work. Theological research proceeds in the context of the predominant worldview characterised by 'modernity', which assumes that there is a public sphere of human activity governed by the fruits of the Enlightenment thinkers: rational thought (B. Harvey, *Another city: An ecclesiological primer for a post-Christian world*, 1999, 97), scientific truth and economic and technological progress (J. Middleton and B. Walsh, *Truth is stranger than it used to be*, 1995, 16-20). So, emotional experience and expression are imagined to be in opposition to rational thought; belief in divine providence (or God's governance) is imagined to be in opposition to scientific truth; and human growth is imagined to be in opposition to economic and technological progress. The Enlightenment thinkers successfully relegated emotional expression, belief in God and human growth to the private sphere of people's lives.

When the Enlightenment ideology quarantined God's governance from the public realm, it became idolatrous, replacing God's work at the centre of life by the work of human hands. In ancient Israel, the name of God was sacred. It could not be spoken. The silence surrounding God's name is integral to the reality of God testified to in Judeo-Christian Scriptures, because biblical faith believed that knowing the name of a person or thing gave one power over them. But the silence that hides the truth about the human roots of an ideology cloaks the ideology

with a divine-like status. The sin of idolatry is a collective 'forgetting' that the object of devotion was made with human hands. The ideology becomes a source of ultimate truth in society, a reality in which people have faith and worship (B. Goudzwaard, *Idols of our time*, 1984, 20-21). From biblical times we know that, when persons and societies put their faith in things they have made, they have created gods. Then, as they come to depend on their gods to save them and deliver them the good life, the gods take on the form of idols that begin to control their creators. When an ideology is given the status of a god, the invisibility of the connection between its beliefs and the social reality it describes becomes absolute.

Enlightenment thinkers gave rational thought, scientific truth and economic and technological progress religious significance and ultimate status to determine what it means to live a fully human life. The silence that such idolatry demands cloaks itself by suffocating people's experience of suffering and fostering confusion and doubt about the truth of their experience. This is the silence of oppression and fear that has invaded the sphere of human work, making the experience of work increasingly fragile and precarious. In a theological sense, work that is carried out under a regime of idolatry is fragile and precarious because it both robs workers of their life, as the psalmist declares below, and also comes under the governance of God's judgment, for example as discussed in relation to proposition two.

But scripture sees the matter differently: 'Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands' (Psalm 115:3-4). Human work that has given religious significance to rational thought, scientific truth and economic and technological progress finds itself cut off from any knowledge of God. The Psalmist then discloses the true nature of the idols that our work has created:

They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats. (Psalm 115:5-7)

Everything is not as it seems. Idolatry creates a world of illusions, lacking substance; and no matter what their appeal may be, idols are lifeless, that is, there is no life in them.

Finally, the Psalmist discloses the spiritual heart of modernity's idolatry: 'Those who make them (idols) are like them; so are all who trust in them' (Psalm 115:8). Work that is carried out under the sacred canopy of idolatry ensnares the whole community in its illusions and its debilitating lifelessness. Such work produces precarious lives because the Giver of life has been rendered captive to the violence of this idolatry. Both those who shape our society's idols and those who trust their life to these idols become like them - wooden, lifeless, plastic, inflexible and superficial.

The consequence of our idolatry is suffered widely as 'the alarming diminishment of the human fabric of our common life' (W. Brueggemann, *Ichabod Toward Home: the journey of God's glory*, 2002, 86).

I submit that precarious work is a direct consequence of the precarious state of God's governance in modernity. All the sociological, economic and psychological research into precarious work will not tell us anything different: human life has been diminished, and injustice and suffering have been embedded in the soul of corporations, workplaces and workers. For example, a colleague in sociology noted that the emphasis on commercial returns from university research meant that the humanities are increasingly marginalised. He added:

It's fair to say this economic framework dominates Australian universities and most of our performance outside of teaching is rewarded either directly or indirectly by it.

The diminishment of the human fabric of our common life brings a human cost and distorting effects on the vocations of academic staff, as reported by a survey on the impact of ERA (the government's Excellence for Research in Australia) on academic staff at Macquarie University. In summary, the report said:

The university's increased pressure on research forces academics to make choices about their research. This has contributed to stress and low levels of job satisfaction. The study also revealed that workload issues have caused a considerable imbalance between teaching and research, devaluing the importance of teaching, an important element of university life. (A. Sardesai, *An investigation of the impacts of Excellence in Research for Australia: a case study on accounting for research*, 2014, 231)

Biblical testimony summarises this experience of idolatry's consequences as 'exile', which is first and foremost being cut off from God, the source of life. As a consequence, life and work are no longer as God intends, and work becomes the site of human suffering, conflict and injustice. And perhaps the largest single new factor in the Australian university work environment in the past ten years has been the development of ERA. ERA has attracted widespread support as well as a significant level of criticism about the fetish of pursuing 'excellence' as the absolute priority for academic research. A team of UK, Canadian and Australian researchers completed an international review of the goal of excellence, declaring:

It encourages researchers to engage in counterproductive conscious and unconscious gamesmanship. And it impoverishes science and scholarship by encouraging concentration rather than distribution of effort. The net result is science and scholarship that is less reliable, less accurate, and less durable than research assessed according to other criteria. (S. Moore, C. Neylon et al., '"Excellence R Us": university research and the fetishisation of excellence', *Palgrave Communications* 3, 2017, 2)

I suggest that, as the impact of ERA increases, academic research work in UD colleges will experience a similar 'exile' or diminishment of the human fabric of their common life in their research work environment as other Australian and international universities.

ERA in theological perspective

ERA commenced in 2010 as Australia's national research evaluation framework for competitively allocating research funding to academics and researchers at Australian universities. Its mandate is to identify and promote excellence across the full spectrum of research activity in higher education (HE) institutions. ERA seeks to provide a comprehensive evaluation of research excellence in Australian universities. But now research excellence has been absolutised in the service of government funding and raised to the level of idolatry. The key indicators (metrics or measurements) for the 2018 evaluation framework are journal citation profiles, peer review of a sample of research outputs, other non-ARC sources of research funding and a new measure for research engagement and impact. Moore et. al.'s criticism of the use of these metrics does not to diminish the value of peer-review in the academic community, but, in concert with the theological proposition I have advanced, rejects the absolutising of this technique as *the* method to determine research funding.

Successive Federal governments have been keen to ensure that academic research maintains Australia's economic competitiveness (Sardesai, *An investigation*, 39), believing that the link of economic progress to the global knowledge economy is best done by promoting local research activity that is both excellent and relevant. This belief is also supported by academics who justify linking research with the national goal of material progress:

If Australia is to continue with its high standards of living, it must have a vibrant innovation system with a strong scientific research base. (P. Jensen and B. Webster, 'Let's spend more wisely on research in Australia', *The Conversation, 22/7/2014*)

There is an ideological nexus between government funding, academic research and teaching knowledge, but the theological problem that arises is that this nexus is then justified by an idolatrous belief in national economic progress (higher living standards) as the absolute goal of the desired research excellence.

The idolatries of excellence and national economic growth present theological researchers with a theological challenge about how to be in the ERA system but not be captive to its foundational idolatries. As Brueggemann testified above, and many participants in ERA have experienced (see below), the idolatrous character of the pursuit of excellence and national economic progress have contributed to the diminishment of the human fabric of our common life.

Measuring excellence: experiencing idolatry's bitter fruits

Perhaps the best documented public resistance to the effect of the idolatries created by absolutising excellence and national economic progress is in relation to the research focus on measurement within ERA. When ERA measurement of excellence first used an impact metric based on the number of articles published in prestigious (that is, internationally renowned) journals, the metric was criticised for:

- Marginalising humanities disciplines, such as economics (A. Doraisami and A. Millmow, 'Funding Australian economics research: Local benefits?', *The*

Economics and Labour Relations Review 27, No. 4, 2016, 27), the arts and social sciences (P. Genoni and G. Haddow, 'ERA and the Ranking of Australian Humanities Journals', *Australian Humanities Review* 46, 2009, 7-26).

- Discriminating against smaller industry sectors or communities, such as allied health disciplines (J. Heath, K. Grimmer-Somers, et al, 'Measuring the impact of allied health research', *Journal of Multidisciplinary Health Care* 4, 2011, 191-207).

- Ignoring whether the research had a public policy impact (E. Mendez, *What's in Good?* , 2012, 8).

- Introducing a hierarchy of quality for journals that is divisive and counter to the spirit of quality research (Mendez, *What's in Good?* , 8).

- Failing to consider the complex economic, social and health pathways from academic research and their impact on improved public outcomes, for example in Indigenous health research (S. Ramanathan, P. Reeves et al., 'Encouraging translation and assessing impact of the Centre for Research Excellence in Integrated Quality Improvement: rationale and protocol for a research impact assessment', *BMJ Open* 7, No. 12, 2017).

Two University of Melbourne academics summarise the challenges of the ERA evaluation process thus:

Researchers are under increasing pressure to publish their research in order to get tenure, promotion, and improve their institution's Excellence in Research ranking. The upside of this is obvious: researchers work harder in order to demonstrate their suitability to be part of the profession. The downside of this is also obvious: researchers tackle simpler, bite-sized research projects in order to get some papers published as quickly as possible. (Jensen and Webster, 'Let's spend more wisely')

But the ERA is not the only source of pressure in the academic research work environment. A colleague summarised the other dehumanising factors that are brought to bear on staff through HE's captivity to the idolatry that subjects university academic work to the national goal of economic growth. She noted:

- The increasing casualisation of the workforce.

- The new 'teacher only' or 'teacher fellowship' contracts that push research time to the margins and then make research a pre-requisite to further academic positions.

- Lip service to supporting part-time work but then structuring performance expectations to fit around the availability of full-time workers.

- The pressure of heavy workloads that are necessary to build and maintain industry or professional collaborations.

- The stress of teaching large numbers of international students underprepared for the English language requirements of their studies.

- The expectation to travel for teaching and research.

These comments are a timely warning for theological researchers not to become captive to the idolatry's narrowing of focus. The UD vision statement imagines a holistic identity and purpose for the university that also envisages maintaining a broad focus. The statement emphasises the centrality of being a learning community committed to 'critical engagement' that integrates 'learning, teaching, and research'.

Measuring excellence: idolatry without borders

In fact, the reminders that there are other sources of harm and injustice for academic staff in the current work environment pushes us to look deeper than merely the narrow focus of measurement metrics. For underpinning the deep reliance on these metrics is the increasingly contested debate about research 'excellence'.

A focus of government was to establish Australian research 'excellence' in an international context by evaluating research 'against international benchmarks based on its quality and impact' (J. Bishop, in A. Gunn and M. Mintrom, 'Measuring research impact in Australia', *Australian Universities Review* 60, No. 1, 2018, 11). This policy set Australian university research funding squarely in the context of international research evaluation criteria. Moore et al. ('Excellence R Us') recently published a stinging critique of an international trend in university research that they submit is in thrall to the fetishisation of excellence. They note the widespread use of the term by universities for widely diverse settings and activities 'from Montreal to Mumbai', but with little agreement on what 'excellence' means.

Mendez also quotes a number of scholars who agree that 'quality' and 'excellence' in research mean different things to different people, with few overlaps between the two terms (Mendez, 'What's in Good?', 2). She also draws attention to diverse types of research, such as basic, applied, revolutionary and inter-disciplinary research, with their differing views on methods, objectivity and truth posing different challenges for research evaluation.

Andras expresses the concern that paradigm-changing research risks being dismissed because it does not fit in with currently held assumptions in the research community about what is fit for publishing in high ranking journals (Mendez, 'What's in Good?', 5). There is a body of evidence to show how 'excellence' as an international assessment tool distorts research practice across national boundaries while failing to provide a reliable means of distinguishing among competing projects, institutions or people. For example:

- Citation metrics consistently undervalue novel research over timeframes used by conventional measures. Weiss adds that research often doesn't have a direct impact on policy or practice. Rather, 'ideas stemming from research slowly "creep" into policy and practice settings, changing assumptions and raising questions over a long period of time' (Mendez, 'What's in Good?', 14).

- Reported instances of both fraud and error (as measured through journals' retractions) are on the rise, particularly for higher prestige journals. The very focus on 'excellence' encourages researchers to submit fraudulent, erroneous and irreproducible papers, at the same time as it works to prevent the publication of replication studies that can identify such work. Kingsley has argued that these problems 'are caused by having a single value point in research – publication in a high impact journal' (D. Kingsley, 'The case for Open Research: reproducibility, retractions & retrospective hypotheses', *Unlocking*

research: University of Cambridge office of Scholarly Communication, unlockingresearch-blog.lib.cam.ac.uk, 14th July 2016).

- Commercial journals with high prestige based on a high Impact Factor have been shown to have a bias against replication studies, especially those that invalidate rather than confirm the original result. Good science may be a poor research and career development strategy.

- Improving a nation's research capacity by differentially rewarding 'excellence' can have the paradoxical effect of reducing this capacity, by underfunding the very forms of 'normal' work that make science function or that distract attention from national priorities and well-conducted research towards a focus on the performance measures of North America and Europe.

- An emphasis on excellence will create pressure to conform to unexamined biases and norms within the disciplinary culture. Challenging expectations as to what it means to be an excellent researcher is a very difficult way of demonstrating that you are the 'best' researcher. The research of women, other disadvantaged groups and non-traditional centres of scholarship may be 'under-estimated and unrecognised'.

In their conclusion, Moore et al. concede that they have not analysed the power politics behind their critique, or placed their concern for how the narrative of 'excellence' developed from the deep roots of its historical context. Both are regarded as critical for a fuller understanding of the possibilities for cultural change. Their concluding remark may suggest that, for theological colleges and researchers, it may be vital to strengthen and nurture both corporate and personal vocations:

> *The roots of the problem in fact lie in the internal narratives of the academy and the nature of "excellence" and "quality" as supposedly shared concepts that researchers have developed into shields of their autonomy. The solution to such problems lies not in arguing for more resources for distribution via existing channels as this will simply lead to further concentration and hyper-competition. Instead, we have argued, these internal narratives of the academy must be reformulated.* (Moore et al., 'Excellence R Us', 10)

The local narratives about the identity and purpose of theological colleges and their researchers in an international context may be of fundamental importance in situating how they may flourish within the universalising idolatry of excellence in university research environments, which is narrowing the purpose of research excellence to the absolute goal of economic growth.

BEING REFORMED: RESEARCH WITHIN THE HORIZON OF GOD'S JUDGMENT AND MERCY

How to stand in the world of the ERA but not be subsumed into its narrowing space for human flourishing leads me to my second proposition, which arose from my painful experience in a recent theological research project (J. Bottomley, *Cannot be told before it time*, 2009).

The proposition is for theological researchers researching precarious work to embrace their human experience of vulnerability in the increasingly precarious university work environment. The power of academic researchers and the politics of competitive government funding remain opaque in much of the literature reviewed for this article. However, I am able to testify to the critical importance of these concerns if a research enterprise is to be open to God's grace for healing a researcher's spiritual blindness and restoring our capacity for deep listening to the suffering, trauma and injustice of precarious work in a world captive to the idolatry of modernity.

The need for confessing my blindness struck me in a research project into Indigenous leadership in the Church. As the project design unravelled, I realised that my best endeavours revealed further dimensions of my blindness to our agency's own cultural assumptions. Paradoxically, the project was concerned with documenting the impact of colonisation on Indigenous leaders in the Church. I began to see that our agency, as inheritors of our nation's colonial history, was too often blinded to the reality of Indigenous people's experience. We were also too often blind to how our blindness can itself cause Indigenous people to feel unsafe about sharing their stories and experiences. This also became clearer as my conversation with our Indigenous project worker unfolded.

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies guidelines are very aware of the power issue in Indigenous research. They focus on enhancing the power and rights of Indigenous people, Indigenous communities and Indigenous knowledge systems, cultures, languages, histories and perspectives. But what is absent is the impact that this transfer of power, control and rights may have on white, male, 'Anglo', tertiary-educated middle-class researchers such as myself. The protocols for Indigenous research hide the ethical imperative on researchers from the dominant research culture to transform our identity from being grounded in the knowledge system of western (social) science and to accept that we do not have privileged access to Indigenous knowledge systems.

Yet this silence hides the need for non-Indigenous researchers to accept that our exclusion from Indigenous people's sacred business was a key to the core problem in our research project. The hidden nature of the non-Indigenous researcher's power is a central feature of western science's post-Enlightenment assumption that researchers are value-free in their study of 'facts'. My blindness about the power accorded me in the intellectual tradition in which I am rooted as a white, male, 'Anglo', tertiary-educated middle-class researcher became highly problematic. And this cultural silence about my inherited power opened my eyes to God's judgment on the idolatry of the western myth of economic progress.

I am convicted of my complicity in the ideology of modernity and its silencing of the injustices caused by our society's captivity to this idolatry. Yet within the horizon of God's judgment and mercy I have been joined in solidarity by the crucified Christ, and learned anew how to be in solidarity with victims of injustice (cf. Isaiah 50:4-9). For example, my recent theologically-framed study of widows seeking workers' compensation after their husband's work-related death identified how their suffering and injustices are the bitter fruit of a compensation system that has its roots in late 19th century assumptions about the

inferior status of women, the individualistic assumptions in medicine and the law that serve the political, social and economic status quo, and the priority of economic progress over human well-being. The silence around the plight of widows of work-related deaths has endured for over a century, and, in the absence of social science research into their plight, the biblical advocacy for widows provided a theological framework that gave voice to their suffering and their cry for justice. (J. Bottomley, *Our System Isn't Geared for Death*, 2015) Scripture brought to me an unexpected perspective of solidarity with these widows. Then the challenge to listen deeply to what is hidden by Enlightenment assumptions about social reality led me to review the social, economic and political history of workers' compensation and so to dismantle many of the barriers to hearing the full dimensions of their personal stories. And, in voicing their suffering of the injustice of their husbands' work-related deaths and the injustice of a system designed a century ago to de-politicise their grief and silence their lament, the study gave voice to a new social policy agenda for all those bereaved by a work-related death.

I trust that my testimony reminds non-Indigenous researchers of our need to understand the power we bear as those who inherit and embody a western research tradition. The personal is political. So as theological researchers we are called to a personal stance of deep listening to the pain of victims of injustice when our encounters with God's judgment strip us of our spiritual blindness and open our eyes to God's just ways. And this reality speaks to our need to understand that research into flourishing work in the Australian economy cannot justify the power structures of university research if it violates the daily lived experience of those who suffer injustice due to our theological colleges' participation in the idolatry of economic progress through ERA. We may need to be reformed researchers as we learn how to be in the world in solidarity with its pain, but not of the world as privileged researchers.

BEING A THEOLOGICAL RESEARCHER, DOING THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

My third proposition is that the distinctive theological perspective that the Christian gospel provides for academic researchers into precarious work is incarnational. Theological researchers are to be open to the pain of those to be researched while being open before God to one's own experience of work-related pain and suffering. I suggest that such openness requires the practice of a holistic spiritual discipline that is both personal and corporate. Theological colleges will need to cultivate a holistic way of being where professional knowledge and faith's wisdom are sustained in dynamic tension through pastoral supervision, spiritual direction and membership in a faith community that embodies relationships of peer support. Being a theological researcher means taking the pain and suffering of an unjust and violent world seriously, while deeply knowing and rejoicing in the grace of God in Christ's empowerment for doing theological research.

The fruitfulness of such openness to Word and world in the sphere of HE is embedded in a reflective piece by Bruce Wearne ('What is a university club?', thinkfaith. net/fisch/blog/what-university-club, 2018). Wearne is concerned about the impact on young students of the developing market-orientated narrative. In particular, he

asserts that the transformation to commercial universities selling degrees has reduced students to consumers of HE and has led to the consequent demise of university clubs. Wearne's resistance to this transformation comes in the form of asserting the university comprised of a triangle of relationships: academic-student, academic-academic and student-student. He thus redefines 'academic management as serving the work of the academy by holding the three relationships together in: "an ethic of mutual trust, developed from a love of learning for training in science"'.

Wearne's narrative embeds research (training in science) in a learning community based on an ethic of mutual trust. His humanising vision emerges from reflection on his personal experience as a Christian university student formed by the support he enjoyed in student Christian clubs, and later as an academic. His vision is highly congruent with the UD's vision, which also emphasises the centrality of empowering a learning community committed to addressing the issues of the contemporary world through 'critical engagement' with Christian theological traditions that integrate 'learning, teaching and research'.

CONCLUSION

The challenge in researching the precarious nature of work may be for theological researchers to understand that we stand on the same precarious ground as researchers at other universities and institutions. We are all in the same boat! So the first step in theologically researching precarious work must be a confessional turning away from the binaries of modernity embedded in ERA, followed by a second step towards the oneness of God. Researchers formed by such a confession and renewal of their worship of God may come to their work mindful of how their emotional lives have been quarantined. They will acknowledge their formation in a world that promises they could be 'saved' by their knowledge of objective facts. They will be mindful of their own lack of faithfulness to God's governance in their work, and acknowledge their formation in a world that promises them 'salvation' by their hard work and productivity. They will be mindful of when they sacrificed their own wellbeing as humans for whatever benefit they achieved from their work, and they will acknowledge their formation in an ideology that legitimated forgetting pain or injustice, including their own pain.

When they turn towards God, they then will engage in those personal and corporate spiritual disciplines that keep them centred on a gracious God for their life and work. Doing theological research in a precarious world may well spring from acceptance that the human foundation for this work is God's inalienable gift of righteousness for humankind.

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