

THEOLOGICAL GENEALOGIES OF MODERNITY: AN INTRODUCTION

DARREN SARISKY 

This special issue of *Modern Theology* gathers together full research essays that were first presented, in summary form, at the 2021 online conference Theological Genealogies of Modernity. For both the original event and now this collection, *theological genealogies of modernity* serves as a term of art referring to any complex, broad-sweep narrative account of the rise of a modern Western cultural order that highlights theology's role within that process. The conference organizers deliberately employed the term in a capacious sense out of a desire to find a rubric under which to include a range of narratives and disciplinary perspectives on them. Defined broadly, the terminology extends both to stories celebrating the Enlightenment for bringing about progress and also to narratives stressing the need constantly to recur to a pre-modern cultural synthesis from which people today should continue to receive instruction. Of course, this simplistic distinction deserves to be challenged, and several of the essays here contest this stark division of options. The overall aim of the inquiry into genealogies is to help theologians understand how these narratives work, regardless of which account is attractive to them, so that they may develop a well-informed position on how (and even whether) to employ them.

Suppose that we define theologians inclusively as those who speak about God. Theologians assume different stances on genealogies. Marcus Borg invokes a common story about modern progress by claiming that during the previous two centuries historical scholars have learned that the picture of Jesus emerging from the ecumenical councils of the church does not actually match up well with the life and ministry of Jesus himself, but instead is the work of the early Christian movement in the years following his death.¹ Advances in historical research supersede prior understandings, no matter how firmly ensconced ecclesial tradition has become. By contrast, John Milbank argues that Christians must take their cue from a medieval participatory ontology in order

Darren Sarisky
Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry, Australian Catholic University, 115 Victoria Parade, Fitzroy 3065, Victoria, Australia
Email: darren.sarisky@acu.edu.au

I would like to acknowledge the many incisive comments and suggestions for revision that Pui Him Ip, Austin Stevenson, and Derek Bruns made on the initial draft of this introduction. Their feedback greatly improved the text.

¹ Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 3.

properly to conceive the identity of Jesus.² Failing to see the relevance of this ontology entails starting with another set of fundamental commitments, ones that from the outset undermine offering a non-identical repetition of what the classical creeds say about who Jesus is. Borg and Milbank employ substantively different genealogies, but each one uses a single story that conforms, more or less, to a recognizable type—progress in the first case and declension in the second, at least in the eyes of its critics. Other theologians blend these options together. Georges Florovsky, for example, works with a complicated combination of narratives. On the one hand, he insists that all Christian theology should trace itself back to the fathers of the church, who articulated the deposit of faith. Contemporary constructive theological reflection requires strict fidelity to a synthesis of patristic thought; anything else counts as defection from this standard. On the other hand, Florovsky values modern historicism and other forms of thought that were not elements of the patristic synthesis. Only by a sleight of hand is he able to mingle together a declension narrative and his appreciation for the fruit of progress.³ It is also possible to find arguments for being wary of any whole genealogy and, instead, limiting oneself to gleaning insights from several of them. Joel Rasmussen reads Søren Kierkegaard as casting suspicion on any attempt to take the measure of ourselves, the whole of recent history, and our place within it, without ideology infecting these evaluations. The best strategy, in light of these problems, is to select insights from a plurality of approaches that perpetually vie with each other.

Whether theologians employ a single genealogy, whether they use multiple stories, or whether they are suspicious of any story on such a grand scale, they can hardly avoid taking *some* stance on genealogies of modernity. Therefore, theologians should think through the issues these accounts raise and how to deal with them. This work is worth undertaking because theologians need to make recourse to one or more genealogies in the process of sustaining their substantive claims. Those who incline toward a progress narrative press it into service to explain how entrenched traditions block the future trajectory of research and must be resisted for this reason. Those working with a decline narrative, or something like it, need a way to explain why their theological claims are not immediately believable to many in the world today, although they had greater subscription in a previous period. Those who combine stories feel pulled in both directions at once and attempt a synthesis of genealogies. And, finally, those wary of being drawn into the orbit of any large story still end up taking a position on topics they address, such as religion's role in the modern world. In one form or another, genealogical discourse is entangled in the theological task. It therefore profits theologians to consider how best to navigate such stories. That was a working hypothesis behind the Theological Genealogies of Modernity conference and remains a premise of this special issue.

There are several features of these accounts, however, that make them challenging to handle skillfully. Perhaps the most obvious difficulty is their massive scope. They are indeed grand narratives, spanning whole epochs and rendering interpretive judgments upon them. As Richard Cross fittingly comments in his blistering polemic against the way Radically Orthodox theologians read Duns Scotus, "A grand

² A pertinent primary source is John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), 145-68. For a construal of Radical Orthodoxy as operating with a declension narrative, see Douglas Hedley, review of *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, *Journal of Theological Studies* 51 (2000): 405-08.

³ Paul L. Gavriluyk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance, Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

narrative of this nature is dependent upon some—probably all—of the smaller stories that compose it. That some, and probably all, of these stories are truthful is necessary for the truthfulness of the analysis as a whole—for the truthfulness of the grand narrative.⁴ Is it even possible for those who employ such narratives to know enough about all that they contain for their knowledge to be genuinely secure? Cross argues that while Radical Orthodoxy takes Scotus to be proposing a metaphysic when he says that the concept of being is univocal to God and creatures, he intends merely to advance a semantic theory. It would be easy for a reader of Cross's critique to feel that if the leading lights of Radical Orthodoxy are off base about Duns Scotus, then perhaps not only have they rushed in where angels fear to tread, but it would be foolhardy for anyone to lean heavily on a genealogy. Maybe caution should be the rule instead. Being wary regarding grand narratives appears to constitute the only way to avoid exposing oneself to perpetual vulnerability. One of the constituent essays in this collection responds constructively to this challenge, as discussed below. But for now, the point is simply to note that this difficulty attends grand genealogical narratives. Large-scale narrative accounts are also challenging to handle insofar as they contain a variety of material. While many major on intellectual history and refer to a wide range of primary texts, others bring within their purview material culture and social factors as well. A final challenge to handling genealogies well is that they raise fundamental questions of epistemology. Do genealogies force the theologian to choose between either a problematizing approach to knowledge (Nietzsche) or a tradition-informed stance (Aristotle)? Or is it preferable to bring these two together somehow? In this collection, Joel Rasmussen explores these questions in dialogue with Kierkegaard's corpus.

Theologians face these challenges, yet standard academic arrangements throw an obstacle in the way of addressing them effectively. Due to the breadth of genealogies, it would be ideal to discuss them in an interdisciplinary setting. Theologians would profit from conversing with historians, philosophers, and literary scholars. But because academic fields are typically isolated from one another in ways that inhibit communication and cooperation between specialized areas, the sort of discussions that theological genealogies inherently deserve seldom take place. It was for this reason that the conference included practitioners with an array of expertise. As readers of their respective essays can see, both Brad Gregory and Peter Harrison bring specialist skills as historians from which theologians can glean much. Several of our contributors have knowledge of philosophy. While Thomas Pfau did not contribute an essay to this collection, his skills as a literary scholar were on display at the conference itself when he engaged in a discussion of Kierkegaard with Joel Rasmussen.⁵

A welcome trend in recent work on genealogies is that the discussion is diversifying. Many standard points of reference continue to receive discussion at present, but they now stand alongside more efforts to speak about and from the perspective of previously marginalized communities. The conversation about such accounts is rightly expanding to include new voices, some of which are challenging well-ensconced

⁴ Richard Cross, "'Where Angels Fear to Tread': Duns Scotus and Radical Orthodoxy," *Antonionum* 76 (2001): 7. As Cross also rightly notes, the veracity of the smaller narrative units is not sufficient to make the larger account that subsumes them true. It is also necessary for the claims interconnecting them to be true as well.

⁵ For Pfau's own genealogy of modernity, see his *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

genealogical practices in order to create opportunities to be heard. This is evident in the essay on “Genderealogy: Erasure and Repair” within this special issue. Its authors, Christine Helmer and Ruth Jackson Ravenscroft, argue that raising the profile of women within genealogies requires a deep reconception of human agency itself. Likewise, Ragnar M. Bergem ends his essay with an appreciative assessment of two major texts on the role of race and religion in the formation of modern Western culture. It is to the benefit of the present discussion that it is less dominated by figures from a single demographic.

Theological Genealogies: Assessment and Prescription

The Content of Genealogies

Five of the essays brought together here interpret and assess genealogies of modernity as they currently exist. Their authors provide some guidance for how these narratives might develop in response to their interrogation, but they mainly focus on understanding and evaluating examples from the current discussion. The value of these pieces derives from how they challenge assumptions that give certain narratives greater influence than those stories perhaps deserve, how they undermine caricatures that may misconstrue some genealogies, how they highlight the achievement and limits of genealogies, and how they wrestle in explicit ways with methodological questions that are seldom satisfyingly answered in other discussions.

In the modern West, the narrative enjoying the broadest cultural currency portrays history as bringing about progress, or an ever-increasing quality of life for human beings. Yet Brad Gregory points to what he sees as a significant problem with this story. The obstacle is the Anthropocene, the proposed epoch marking out the beginning of large-scale human impact on the Earth’s geology and ecosystems. Such impact includes climate change, but it indicates broader and deeply problematic alterations to the planet’s energy, water, and biochemical cycles. This difficulty pertains not only to problems that have already occurred, but even more to the trajectory that the planet is currently on. Based on observations that scientists can presently make, people’s impact upon the world may well challenge the habitability of some or even all of the planet. For this reason, the onset of the Anthropocene, usually dated to around the middle of the twentieth century, poses a challenge to any narrative about human progress: if human beings cannot continue to live on the planet they currently inhabit, that decisively undermines the claim that their quality of life only improves with time. The usual, allegedly benign, attempts to include more people within a consumer capitalist culture only exacerbate the issues. They do not offer a solution to the basic problem.

Western nations, in which Christianity has exerted a tremendous influence, have proven largely responsible for these difficulties—this despite Jesus’ stern and unambiguous condemnation of the greed and accumulation of wealth that ultimately drive many current threats. Nominally Christian nations have outrightly repudiated core teachings of Jesus, and this choice has brought looming planetary destruction as its consequence. Gregory holds up saintly individuals and ascetic communities as examples proving that it is indeed possible to follow Jesus’ teaching, at least on a small scale, despite the sorry display writ large that we otherwise see and with the consequences of which we must now live. Gregory’s picture is admittedly gloomy. Those who seek to resist his conclusion

about progress narratives would need to find a way to account for the considerable range of evidence he marshals without bursting the bounds of that common modern story. Could it be that the progress story might yet sustain itself if technological solutions were invented that could reverse the degrading effects that human beings are presently having on the planet? Only time will tell if anything like this comes to pass. While Gregory proffers the evidence of the current Anthropocene as sufficient to undermine the progress narrative, he stops short of embracing a macro-account of decline, insisting that declension accounts depend on rightly identifying a point from which decline began—a question with which he does not deal in this focused essay. In his larger work, *The Unintended Reformation*, Gregory disavows nostalgia for a past Golden Age, refusing to embrace a single historical period as the juncture from which subsequent history defected.⁶

Two other essays deal more fully with genealogies that are often understood in terms of decline. In “Neither Progress nor Regress: The Theological Substructure of T. F. Torrance’s Genealogy of Modern Theology,” Darren Sarisky contends that the category of decline does not genuinely apply to the genealogy of the Scottish Reformed theologian. A brisk reading of Torrance’s work might lead one to conclude that he views history as a declension from certain high points, such as the Nicene period or the Reformation. But such a conclusion overlooks his appreciation for many modern advances. And, more importantly, it fails to register what is most important for the structure of his genealogy, that is, Torrance’s own deepest doctrinal commitments. Aspects of Trinitarian and Christological doctrine, rather than the idealization of any time periods, lie at the heart of his genealogy, because they determine its structure. Among other effects, they reshape how Torrance understands time. Even though nearly two millennia separate today’s church from the events of Jesus’ earthly ministry, that does not entail that an unbridgeable gap opens up between him and today’s ecclesial community. Rather, time is warped in the sense that it is no longer exclusively linear. The one who was crucified and resurrected then is alive even now and becomes present to the church by the power of the Spirit. Because time is not simply linear, on his view, it is erroneous to understand his genealogy as portraying history as a decline from a particular point. What is more fundamental to the genealogy than chronologically bounded periods is epistemic reconciliation between the knowing subject and the God who is the object of theological inquiry. Because the practice of theology depends upon epistemic affinity, Torrance’s genealogy critiques developments in history that frustrate achieving epistemic reconciliation and lauds those that facilitate it. This focus helps Torrance prioritize which historical moments need evaluation, and it explains the angle from which he assesses any given claim. Furthermore, because God can establish epistemic affinity between humans and himself in any set of historical conditions, thereby retaining his freedom, knowledge of God does not depend ultimately on the existence of certain earthly circumstances. Torrance’s genealogy certainly offers some bold assessments and can at times display carelessness with details. But it manages to avoid indulging in the most sweeping historical generalizations that other genealogies include. Torrance’s work thereby contributes to the current debate by being more measured in this sense. Readers concerned about the tendency toward cavalierly evaluative periodization can turn to Torrance to find something different.

The notion of decline figures less centrally in John Milbank’s essay, “Genealogies of Truth,” but his piece might well nevertheless be construed as offering two important

⁶ See Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 365–87.

comments on this notion. The first is that whatever relevance “decline” possesses, there is also a need within Christian theology for genealogy to operate in a fundamentally different mode. Genealogy ought to function positively in the first instance. Positive genealogy builds upon the past, not simplistically, by merely repeating what others have already said, but by reflectively building upon exemplars from within a tradition in which one stands. The warrant for prizing history in positive genealogy comes from nothing less than the incarnation itself, where Jesus Christ is understood as inhabiting the life of the church by being identified as closely as possible with its liturgical practices. Positive genealogy funds doctrinal proposals by licensing theologians to think with their forebears, because Christ is embodied in the diachronic extension of the church’s life. Since it stands within a particular stream of thought and life, theology also needs, secondarily, negative genealogy, in order to challenge assumptions that may be well established but that nevertheless run counter to basic Christian commitments. Negative genealogy locates common assumptions and interrogates them, demonstrating their dubious status. More fully, the role of negative genealogy is “gloomily to pinpoint delusion by an evidential tracing of the origins of the prevailing *episteme* which turn out to be quite other than was supposed: ignoble and reactive rather than admirable and self-directed.”

This leads to the second comment that Milbank is, in effect, making in his essay. While positive genealogy is supposed to be substantively primary, it receives less attention than the negative genealogy of Radical Orthodoxy, which is often associated, especially by critics, with terms such as decline and nostalgia. Still, Milbank insists that what he is ultimately after, if it is a return to an outlook that had greater influence in the past, is precisely to “return, differently.” He wants to have learned from postmodernity, while fully intending to go beyond it by virtue of operating with strong theological convictions. The use of negative genealogy itself provides an example of him operating in this manner and verifies that he is working in good faith by putting this point of nuance on “decline.” Milbank’s essay displays a polyphonic unity and contains discussions of Nietzsche and Heidegger as illustrating some of the tendencies he has discussed.

In his “The Spirit of Modernity and Its Fate,” Ragnar Bergem makes a couple of main points that pertain to both progress narratives and so-called decline accounts. Bergem’s initial thesis is that many of the recent genealogies that have drawn attention from theologians have been inspired by postmodern theory, and especially Michel Foucault’s work, although theologians have also gone beyond him. Postliberal theology and Radical Orthodoxy have tried to suspend modernity by underlining its contingency and opening up the possibility of challenging it. When these genealogies are most successful, they have given readers a vantage point on modernity—a sense that it is not in its entirety our fate—and perhaps even a conviction that there could exist an alternative arrangement for life that has not been superseded by the arrival of a modern age. In this way, these theological discussions have eased the sense that Christians today have no choice but to fit themselves into a modern, and to that extent secularizing, mold. Yet insofar as these stories point us back to a “certain Middle Ages,”⁷ their ambition exceeds anything Foucault envisions as part of his genealogies. Foucault wants only to unsettle the present and to free up thinking

⁷ Catherine Pickstock, “Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance,” *Modern Theology* 21, no 4 (October 2005): 566.

about new possibilities. His genealogy excludes faithful adherence to a theological tradition, to which past monuments testify. Bergem does not dwell on whether theologians in the streams of postliberalism or Radical Orthodoxy would take his observation as a critique. Clearly, some of them have no intention of proceeding within the limits of Foucault alone. Nevertheless, he successfully highlights the specific aims that theological genealogies have by indicating where their agendas do not overlap with key sources that have shaped them.

While these accounts have emboldened some theologians to distance themselves from modern developments that would in the past have been accepted as givens, Bergem's second thesis is that, in some respects, modernity still exerts a powerful force within them. For instance, because many of the genealogies in question concentrate their discussion on specifically intellectual developments, emphasizing ideas to the exclusion of material culture, they have only a limited ability to overturn the structures that keep in place the ideas they discuss. One of the most influential genealogies from recent years recognizes that some accounts artificially separate out ideas from their cultural milieu and blame society-wide problems solely on intellectual causes, referring to this problematic tendency as creating an "Intellectual Deviation" story.⁸ Charles Taylor's observation reinforces Bergem's thesis. Furthermore, Bergem contends, contemporary theological genealogies cede territory to modernity by using periodization schemes that developed in modern discussions, that serve its agenda, and that may even filter out evidence that does not fit the historian's preferred narrative account. J. Kameron Carter's genealogy of race as a category is offered as exemplifying some of these tendencies by leaning heavily on schematic concepts, rather than sticking closely to the historical ground in arguing that race emerged via a transformation of supersessionism. By contrast, Willie Jennings's work on race attends to particulars in a more obvious way. Bergem's overall aim is not to call for the discontinuation of genealogical work; rather, he wants mainly to assess current thinking and, secondarily, to offer suggestions for improvements that might benefit current projects. He is at his most insightful when he demonstrates that genealogies that are frequently considered mutually exclusive options are not, and that, instead, one story may depend on elements of its supposed rival.

Readers often understand theological genealogies to be arguing an unashamedly normative case by starting from premises that not all share, and thus to be caught in irresolvable moral disagreements. Peter Harrison's contribution, "Normativity and the Critical Function of Genealogy: The Case of Modern Science," argues that several genealogies actually work in a subtler way. He demonstrates how representative accounts manage to venture conclusions that are normative in a robust sense, even though such genealogical arguments do not themselves begin with controverted assumptions. Genealogies can accomplish this by uncovering basic logical inconsistencies in the putatively neutral stance associated with secular modern enterprises and institutions. Because they unearth inconsistencies within historical developments, these accounts implicitly recommend a different point of view as the only coherent option. In this precise regard, these genealogies function as normative. This strategy is the essence of the critical function of genealogies.

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 773-76.

Harrison surveys, in a clear and erudite way, several genealogies that locate logical problems in the embodied version of modern ideas. For instance, Karl Löwith argues that Marxism cannot motivate people to achieve the dream of a classless society, reminiscent as it is of the kingdom of God, without some form of messianic intervention within history. But the theory offers itself as a secular one that is opposed to religion as such. Marxism thereby depends on what it supposedly repudiates, showing itself not to be fully coherent. This suggests that Marxism should receive a negative assessment of some sort, though Löwith does not need to commit himself to a strong evaluative perspective to make this judgment. The conclusion emerges simply from a close analysis of the logic of Marxism itself. Harrison explores several other examples as well. He canvasses debates about other major historical works to demonstrate that authors such as Brad Gregory are often taken to be making their own normative (philosophical or theological) claims when they are in fact arguing, for instance, only that the concept of human rights is not well founded unless it makes appeal to theological sources. Gregory need not commit himself to such sources to make that analytical point. The idea, once again, is to clarify how genealogical work can be normatively interesting and substantive without being agenda-driven in ways that historians appropriately consider problematic. Complementing Harrison's broader discussion of major recent works across a range of subject areas is a more detailed treatment of test-cases from modern science. The essay problematizes what is often taken as an obvious given, that modern institutions and practices genuinely are secular, by showing that they depend on theological resources in some way. Harrison's piece should encourage historians and theologians to attend closely to the precise form of argument operative within genealogies. He offers terms that can help readers understand the nature of the argument at work within accounts whose normativity derives from difficulties in the embodied form of ideas, rather than from any religious or philosophical arguments the historian seeks to mount on independent grounds.⁹

Writing (or Not Writing) Genealogies

Three additional essays within this special issue directly address whether and how genealogies ought to be written. Each of these essays is alert to problems associated with the genre, though they respond differently to the difficulties they identify. The first essay urges a renewed commitment to certain principles of composition with a view toward averting common challenges associated with narratives that involve history having taken a fateful wrong turn. The second essay calls for a radical revision to the unfortunately common pattern of ignoring women's contributions to history. And the final

⁹ In the final roundtable discussion at the virtual conference, John Milbank conceded that, at one level, the sort of separation Harrison had in mind is indeed possible to achieve, but Milbank proposed that such differentiation ultimately is not tenable at the level of "big history," that is, for narrative accounts on the largest imaginable scale. Furthermore, Milbank called for the treatment of "macronarratives" (such as those found in Edward Gibbon, Fernand Braudel, and Perry Anderson) and "theological genealogies of modernity" (such as those of Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Milbank himself) as "on a direct level playing field." See "Roundtable Discussion: Future Directions for Theological Genealogies of Modernity," *Theological Genealogies of Modernity*, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQDfNeykLXE> (from 38:30). For those who find themselves in some sympathy with Milbank's proposal, it is worth asking at what point the scale of a historical interpretation begins to raise normative or theological questions. In other words, when does history become "big history"? I appreciate Pui Him Ip drawing my attention to Milbank's point.

essay concludes that our human capacity for self-deception requires wariness about any particular grand narrative we might tell about human history and our place in it.

Silvianne Aspray astutely observes that genealogies which develop critical stances toward modernity, because dubious assumptions became accepted at some point in the culture's formation, tend to distance their adherents from the history they describe. The problems of the present day, to which this history has led, can appear to be someone else's responsibility if the reader of the genealogy identifies more strongly with the road not taken than with the one that has been. Such genealogies do not necessarily cultivate an attitude of despairing resignation, but something like this is a danger that attends these accounts. What is the best way to avoid the danger? Aspray's constructive proposal is that genealogies should be written to stress their author's involvement in the flow of history. Those composing genealogies should frankly acknowledge the specificity of their own vantage points and interests. They ought to be open about how the stories they construct shape forms of individual and communal identity, providing alternatives to the offerings of today. It is advisable for any genealogy that is critical of modernity to adopt this stance. But it is particularly fitting for theologians to construct involved genealogies, for declension narratives echo the Genesis fall narrative within later history. Genesis depicts evil as coming from within human beings and as encompassing everyone; therefore, no one can disavow responsibility for what is wrong with the world. There are, thus, general methodological and specifically theological reasons to favor involved genealogies.

In addition, genealogists should compose historical narratives that they submit as conjectural. Because genealogies are encompassing narrative accounts that offer readers orientation in the face of an otherwise overwhelming amount of historical data, their authors should clarify that their accounts have the status of an auxiliary. They are nothing more. Genealogies provide provisional orientation, and those who receive guidance from them should expect to achieve a more nuanced perspective by undertaking more specialized study of narrowly defined tracts of history. Looking at genealogical narratives in this way has two positive results. First, it reduces the tendency to dismiss dogmatically any conclusions that differ from one's own. Second, it recognizes the insight of Richard Cross's concern that large-scale stories are always precarious, remaining vulnerable to questions from specialist study. Cautious adherents of a genealogy rightly own up to the need always to learn more, even as they proceed according to the initial bearings they have received from the story that acquired their provisional allegiance. Aspray grounds her second injunction, like her first, in general historical practice as well as within Christian theology. The theological perspective underscores the finitude of human beings, who have a limited perspective, not a God's-eye view of history. In addition, its ultimate point of reference is the *eschaton*: hope for dwelling with God in the new creation should exceed any appreciation that a genealogist has for a past period of earthly history. Her constructive methodological reflections have value for any genealogy questioning overarching stories about progress; they apply especially well to the tradition of Radical Orthodoxy as it develops over time, with a new generation of leaders gaining influence and the strongly defined brand-name approach perhaps beginning to morph into a more diffuse manifestation of the original ethos.

Christine Helmer and Ruth Jackson Ravenscroft identify a major lacuna in genealogies—the omission of women as agents moving history forward—and

propose a thoughtful strategy to address this lack. They are rightly dissatisfied with calls for genealogies simply to provide more coverage to what women have done and thought. They document the relative stress on men, but if this were the root level of their concern, then it would suffice by way of repair just to recall more fully what women have contributed. Helmer and Jackson Ravenscroft are not satisfied with this, however, because the male bias in history goes much deeper: it is not only a matter of who is considered to have developed meaningful ideas or to have undertaken historically significant actions; it extends to the very meaning of thinking, acting, and being human. Therefore, what our authors call for is nothing less than a reconception of human life and action. Only this will block depictions of women as merely the second sex. In the first part of the essay, the authors chart patterns of genealogical writing and contest the binary opposition according to which men are active while women are passive and therefore seldom responsible for substantial historical change. As they write, generally women “do not figure as history’s agents. Even if they articulate an idea, their influence extends, so to speak in feminist parlance, as a wave that crashes onto the shore, only to disappear back into the ocean.” Helmer and Jackson Ravenscroft draw upon feminist and womanist thought as well as the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher to propose a paradigm shift in understanding humanity—not what it means to be a woman, but what it means to be a human being, understood without the mythology that often falsely privileges men. A close reading of Schleiermacher delivers an anthropology stressing social connectedness and situatedness in one’s physical and cultural environment. The point of lifting up Schleiermacher’s theological anthropology is not to eliminate any notion of singular identity and agency, but to underscore the insight that identity always takes shape, and agents always act, in larger contexts. This notion of human life should inspire a fundamental revision to genealogy, which our authors name *genderealogy*.

What would focus on communities of knowledge formation rather than male individuals look like? Implementing this research agenda is something that only a future generation of genealogists can do. But the way Helmer and Jackson Ravenscroft highlight the male orientation of genealogies, and the probing way they explore the challenges of moving beyond the status quo, deserve the attention of every reader of genealogies. It is a virtue of the current discussion of genealogies that it is beginning to acknowledge constituencies that have previously been marginalized. This is an asset also of Bergem’s essay, which closes by considering race.

Joel Rasmussen’s essay questions the value of grand narratives and proposes that it is best to allow several of them to exist in critical dialogue, without expecting any one story ever to gain ascendancy. Even theologians who adhere strongly to one story cannot dismiss Rasmussen’s critical query, because it derives from a close reading of Kierkegaard, who is a significant figure in the modern Christian theological tradition. Rasmussen’s essay begins with an assessment of Alasdair MacIntyre’s commentary on Kierkegaard and broadens to evaluate genealogical discourse as such. Rasmussen certainly shows himself to be a more attentive reader of Kierkegaard than is MacIntyre. The primary source that is most important here is Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, and, while no capsule summary can do it justice, something that emerges from this text is a conviction about the depth and scope of human sinfulness, the sense that in relation to God, everyone is always in the wrong. What does this entail for genealogies? The implication is that a certain tentativeness should attend placing

one's faith in any overall life-view, and one should remain in continual dialogue with other views, because any established framework for navigating life is liable, in some way, to betray the influence of sin. To quote Rasmussen: "Do they [genealogies] not all run the risk of narrating historical directionality, moral enquiry, epistemology, and theological tradition in a manner that is univocal, grasping, and self-assured ...?" It is beyond our capacity, as Rasmussen reads Kierkegaard's text, fully to face up to the truth about the world and ourselves, so we should not foreclose the possibility of altering claims we may entertain. *Either/Or's* exploration of a multiplicity of competing life-views is preferable to embracing a single unified story about modernity. It is certainly worth registering Rasmussen's thoughtful caution regarding genealogies.

Readers of Rasmussen's essay have two options if they wish to challenge his conclusion, as several of the contributors to this collection would want to do, though they also ought to learn from him. First, it is possible to deny that the precise sense of sin Rasmussen draws from Kierkegaard properly characterizes human life. This conception of fallenness does, of course, have a particular Protestant provenance. What would a genealogy of this version of sin reveal about its applicability in times and places beyond nineteenth-century (Lutheran) Denmark? That context displays some characteristic features of Christianity in modernity, to be sure, but it also has its own distinctiveness. Furthermore, within the Christian tradition, alternative conceptions of sinfulness do exist; there are competitors both from within the Protestant tradition and from Roman Catholic and Orthodox perspectives. Second, it is also possible to query the logical connection between this notion of sin and the repudiation of large-scale stories. As we have seen in this introductory survey, our special issue contains an essay by Aspray considering how to integrate epistemic humility into genealogical history. If that is possible, why is it that Kierkegaard's understanding of sin supposedly disallows any intact genealogy to be sufficiently persuasive for a reader to inhabit it?

Future Directions in Research

The essays gathered here have the potential greatly to stimulate further research regarding genealogies. What follows in this section is not an exhaustive description of where these essays may direct further thinking, but only a brief set of indicative questions about where future research might follow the promising lines of inquiry they suggest.

First, some of the essays here, together with a few of the comments from the conference's final roundtable, call for future work to prioritize the ethical implications of genealogies. What sort of effects does a given genealogy aim to produce, or what sort of lives are likely to follow for those who adopt certain stories? And how should these effects and lives be evaluated? Of course, discussion about the veracity of genealogical narratives should and will continue. No historical account can dodge queries about its own truthfulness. But if there is no single correct story, because the data to which any genealogy is answerable is more than any one narrative could possibly interpret, then it is worth assessing the stories we have from the angle of their ethical correlates.¹⁰ Can

¹⁰ See the remarks from Judith Wolfe at "Roundtable Discussion" (from 56:33). She was building on observations from Cyril O'Regan and Christine Helmer.

genealogies prompt the storyteller and her readers to take up responsibility and transform the present into a better future? Contributors such as Aspray and Bergem are interested in these questions. To their credit, both of these authors also attempt to articulate a thoroughly *theological* stance—one grounded in the principles of Christian doctrine—regarding how genealogies should shape lives. Future genealogists will do well to attend to their concerns and suggestions about the effects of genealogies and to articulate more systematically, and from a theological point of view, the intended use of genealogies.¹¹

To take one dimension of this issue and expand it, Aspray's essay could potentially create a pathway by which genealogical accounts with reservations about modernity could successfully address gender inclusion. Those who do not resonate with critiques of modernity sometimes promote a progressive idiom by claiming that their adversaries are inevitably conservative, for they venerate tradition; they further claim that critics of modernity possess precious few resources to combat the oppression that has become embedded in the present due to its continuity with a past order that failed to respect the rights of women. When certain critics of modernity exhibit a "nostalgia for the medieval feudal past,"¹² how can they possibly dissociate themselves from the gender hierarchy that helped to structure it? It is possible, though, to see Aspray's essay as pointing out how those who are sympathetic to the value of the path not followed might work for increased inclusion. Recall that the safeguard she proposes against throwing up one's hands in responses to problems is for genealogists to write involved accounts. Speaking in an explicitly involved authorial voice should include addressing existing injustices with respect to gender. Surely the sense of respect for tradition that is part of these narratives should not extend to blessing all aspects of the status quo. The concept of tradition associated with these accounts is more nuanced than that, and, as Aspray herself explicates genealogy, it crucially involves an eschatological hope that relativizes appreciation for any past heritage. Future work might reflect upon the avenue that Aspray has opened for others to travel.

Second, what would it mean to do theology while dispensing with theological genealogies of modernity, or at least not giving one's allegiance to any particular version, and instead allowing rival claims to jostle together? This is a question that Rasmussen's reading of Kierkegaard raises. Others might explore this issue more fully than he is able to within his limitations of space. His conscientious and searching engagement with Kierkegaard, and MacIntyre's reading of him, could become a point of departure for further constructive reflection. As the essay draws out what we might learn from Kierkegaard, Rasmussen quotes George Pattison at a crucial juncture. As Pattison sees it, Kierkegaard demonstrates how, for modern people who live after the democratic revolutions of the nineteenth century, Christianity does not function as the default position for everyone. Christian claims no longer compel the allegiance of all, though they hold appeal for some as a mode of private religiosity. On this reading, while Kierkegaard remains deeply rooted in his own Protestant tradition, he is also recognizably modern in significant respects. In his work, how do elements of different narratives come together? And what might this teach genealogists? What does it mean to allow multiple stories to exist in tension with one

¹¹ I acknowledge Pui Him Ip's significant contribution to this paragraph.

¹² Douglas Hedley, review of *Radical Orthodoxy*, 406.

another? How much of one story might one subscribe to while retaining openness to insights from others? How does the proposed dialogue assign relative weight to different voices and manage their interaction? There is a trajectory of thinking here that others might well extend profitably.

Acknowledgements

Pui Him Ip and Darren Sarisky gratefully acknowledge contributions to the Theological Genealogies of Modernity event on the part of several institutions and many scholars. These contributions made the event possible even as the world was struggling to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic. The University of Oxford's John Fell Fund generously pledged funding for the event. Oxford's Centre for Theology and Modern European Thought hosted our conference website, which was skillfully designed and regularly updated by Elizabeth Li. Australian Catholic University stepped in at a later stage to serve as a secondary sponsor of the event. Joel Rasmussen not only gave selflessly of his time to assist with the planning, but he also delivered an outstanding paper of his own. Judith Wolfe and Thomas Pfau deserve special recognition for serving as presentation respondents and providing such penetrating and detailed analyses of their subjects. Johannes Zachhuber joined our final roundtable and similarly merits specific acknowledgement for his insightful questions and comments at the conference's concluding event. Likewise, Jonathan Teubner and Cyril O'Regan delivered excellent conference presentations, though they have not published their work here. Austin Stevenson and Derek Bruns worked deftly behind the scenes with our Zoom platform, successfully ensuring that our sessions ran smoothly. They also did state-of-the-art marketing on social media ahead of the conference, getting the word out to a wide audience. Videos of the original presentations and responses, edited by Austin, remain on our Theological Genealogies of Modernity [YouTube channel](#); they offer a useful teaching resource for instructors seeking a briefer treatment of the issues than the full essays provide. Finally, we appreciate all of those who attended the conference: more than 600 attendees from over 50 countries participated. The interest the conference sparked and the quality of the discussion give compelling testimony to the importance of the topic itself. Open access publishing facilitated by Australian Catholic University, as part of the Wiley - Australian Catholic University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.