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Theologies of Failure

An Inadequate Introduction

Duncan B. Reyburn and Roberto Sirvent

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"I never failed once. It just happened to be a 2000-step process."

—Thomas Edison.

Failure, by its usual definition, refers to what falls short of a standard or does not conform to an ideal. Its mere presence announces a dichotomous relationship with its obvious opposite, *success*, and other synonyms of success: attainment, triumph, victory, and so on. In everyday usage, failure tends to resonate with pejoratives like *collapse, loss, negligence, omission, dysfunction, dissolution,* and *defeat*. Whatever we might conceive of as a failure depends a great deal, therefore, on the standard or ideal that we have in our sights.

It would be fair, for example, to distinguish between bad apples and good apples, since we have in mind an ideal—the form of the good apple—and thus a logical desire to balance the symbolic equation. However, misunderstanding the ideal or choosing the wrong ideal may lead us to make any number of false comparisons, and thus also to draw erroneous conclusions. G. K. Chesterton explains, via a metaphor, that we perceive falsely if we "think first of a Briareus with a hundred heads, and then call every man a cripple for having only one."[1] The point he makes is simple enough: if the ideal we measure something against is poorly selected, or if the analogical relationship between something in one category and something in another is misaligned, we will end up denigrating something unjustly; we will, at a fundamental level, misunderstand its very being.

The possibility that we might be setting up deceitful comparisons—comparing, as it were, apples with oranges—points out that the category of failure is not nearly as univocal as it may first appear. Failure can be said in many ways. Its meaning may turn out to be equivocal, for instance, in which case a precise value judgement about its quality or outcome would be difficult to make. And beyond the equivocal is the dialectical sense; and beyond that is the paradoxical or, to follow William Desmond, the metaxological. It may, in other words, include various meanings while also suggesting an inevitable surplus of meaning. Failure, in this paradoxical sense, points beyond itself, to more than itself, to what transcends failure completely—to the very context within which a dialectic between failure and success is established.

Failure may even have, in its paradoxical form, sacramental value. The broken body or text reveals a divine reality beneath and/or beyond the obviousness of our human assignments of meaning. This is demonstrated, for instance, in the paradoxical idea that what is regarded as a failure according to one standard or articulation may end up being a roaring success according to another. Failure is, if not entirely then at least to a significant degree, in the eye of the beholder.

The paradoxical voice of failure is wonderfully, if incompletely, captured in *James Acaster's Classic Scrapes*, a book with the tag line, "To err is human. To err enough to fill a book isn't." In that book, Acaster, a comedian by profession, recalls numerous life events that he refers to as "scrapes." Scrapes can be thought of as misfortunes that are nevertheless—and perhaps to the reader's relief—funny. After 300 pages of recounting a variety of personally experienced disasters, many of which had been owed to his own inability to properly consider his options and their possible consequences,[2] Acaster concludes:

> I once saw a poster in an office that read, "Your best teacher is your last mistake" and it filled me with pride. I may not have

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1. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Vol. 1*, 68.
2. Acaster, *James Acaster's Classic Scrapes*, 2.

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> gone to university but my god, have I been educated. My professors were a skydiving instructor, a French porcelain salesman, a nobhead named Alistair and a nine-year old boy with unlimited access to cabbages. They are the ones who set *my* exams. And yes I failed those exams but in failing them I actually passed them because that's the way you pass an exam about mistakes—you fail. And all the people who "pass" the exam are the ones who actually fail the exam in the end. But in doing so maybe they also end up passing them because they failed. I don't work on an exam board; maybe everyone passes because everyone fails. And isn't that what life is all about? We are all failures and as such we are roaring successes. Each and everyone of us.[3]

There is something in failure, as Acaster alludes, that points beyond itself; that transcends itself, and thus reframes and rearticulates failure as something beneficial rather than detrimental. Not all failures work like this, of course, but some failures do. As many of Acaster's so-called scrapes reveal, failure is paradoxical also in the sense that it is something we avoid even though the seeds of failure can be found in many of the things that we actively seek out.[4] This is to say that, while trying to avoid failure, we are always moving towards it. Sometimes, in fact, the avoidance of failure, the very tentativeness of our steps towards any given goal, may exacerbate failure. Every movement towards success is always potentially a movement towards failure. This is evident, too, in Viktor Frankl's notion of "paradoxical intention," which suggests the possibility that it is precisely in striving for a goal that we ensure that the goal will not be reached. The more we might try to be happy, for example, the less likely it will be that we acquire happiness. And the more we try to control the world, the more it will spin out of control. Sometimes, it is precisely because we reach out for success that we fail. And yet not trying at all may render failure in even more catastrophic terms.

One example of a confusion of failure and success is found in reference to the so-called "*Citizen Kane* of bad movies,"[5] Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* (2003). According to generally accepted standards of good filmmaking—coherence in narrative, crisp dialogue, originality of content, consistent character motivation, realism in portrayal, etc.—it is quite simply a filmic disaster. But this apparently terrible creative production

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[3] Ibid., 302.

[4] Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 2.

[5] Morrin, "The *Citizen Kane* of Bad Movies."

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is more talked about and widely enjoyed today than the film that won the Academy Award for Best Picture in the year that *The Room* was made and released.

The Room is acclaimed for various reasons, including its sheer entertainment value, its usefulness as a tool for educating new filmmakers, and its ability to unmask Hollywood vacuity. To this day, some speculate that everything in the film was put there deliberately by Wiseau to challenge the success standards of the American film industry. Since this is merely speculation, it cannot be taken entirely seriously, but it raises the oxymoronic possibility of a *successful* failure—a failure that succeeds precisely by virtue of being a failure. Others argue, of course, that even if everything in the film were to have been intentionally put there, there are more or less objective standards of excellence that must have escaped the notice of its creators. So even if it succeeds on one level, and succeeds by virtue of being a failure, it still fails completely in other respects. This reveals that failure and success can exist simultaneously, unified in a paradoxical coincidence of opposites.

In *The Disaster Artist* (2013), authors Greg Sestero (who acted in *The Room*) and Tom Bissel have a lot to say about failure, either directly or by implication. In their book we find these words: "*The Room* is a drama that is also a comedy that is also an existential cry for help that is finally a testament to human endurance. It has made me [Sestero] reconsider what defines artistic success or failure. If art is expression, can it fail? Is success simply a matter of what one does with failure?"[6]

This is simplistically put and philosophically naive. Art cannot be defined as mere expression. Cussing after stubbing one's toe accidentally is expression, but it certainly isn't art. Still, the example of *The Room* remains instructive and complements the idea at the heart of the present collection of essays, which is that often failure is the very thing that throws into question the dialectic of success and failure. In this sense, failure functions as rhetorical defamiliarization.[7] By throwing our familiar perspectives into question, it allows us to see things anew, as if for the first time. This is precisely the defamiliarization at work in much of the present book.

Of course, many have already written about failure, and considered it from various perspectives, often in keeping with failure's many voices.

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[6] Sestero and Bissel, *The Disaster Artist*, xxx.

[7] See Reyburn, *Seeing Things as They Are*, 172–83.

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Scott Sandage, for instance, has written extensively on failure in terms of its historicity in *Born Losers*. Sandage notes, for instance, that the now commonplace reference to failure as something that can be applied to human subjects is a very recent historical intrusion.[8] Failure had been, prior to the mid-eighteen hundreds, a term applied to business, rather than a metaphor applied to the denigration of people. Thus, economics became the measure of the self and Sandage points out that success has consequently become something of a trope in America's ideological landscape—often linked to issues of wealth and status.[9] Failure, as a designation of human worth, has thus often been a tool for existential formation. Whether one agrees with Sandage's assessment of capitalism or not, he nonetheless indicates something along the lines of St. Augustine's theologically informed insight concerning use and enjoyment in relation to people. Great evils are committed when people are regarded (as successes or failures) in terms of their use-value, rather than seeing people in terms of their intrinsic value.

Other writers have considered the category of failure in terms of its ability to challenge and disrupt accepted modes of interpreting the world. Jack Halberstam, in particular, opens up the possibility of regarding failure as a counter-hegemonic strategy.[10] And while his work is not in any formal sense theological, it opens up a number of theological possibilities. By embracing failure, for instance, we may discover more surprising ways of being in the world and of doing theology; or perhaps of recovering a childlike wonder that is unafraid of mistakes and therefore also disrespectful of strictly "grown up" seriousness when it comes to encounters with the Divine. Perhaps, as Halberstam considers, failure might offer a useful dose of chaos to that which is overly ordered.

But when it comes to genuinely exploring the theological implications of failure, we find something of a lacuna. *Theologies of Failure* aims to inadequately address this lacuna in theological discourse, namely the idea that *failure*, as a theological category with a variety of possible meanings and interpretations, is largely untapped. This is not to claim, of course, that theologians have not grappled with various forms of failure, but rather that failure has, for the most part, tended to be something of a peripheral concern. By highlighting failure itself—by isolating the

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[8] Sandage, *Born Losers*, 2.

[9] Ibid., 12.

[10] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure.*

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notion and by letting it be itself, albeit within the context of specific value structures, and without trying to completely undermine existing theological imperatives—the contributors in this book invite us to reflect on the meaning of failure in their own theological journeys. Some of the reflections allow for the whimsy evident in the examples provided above. Others are far more serious, dealing with failures that are truly weighty, and often difficult both in their existential resonances and in their theological formulations. To borrow the words of Raúl Coronado, we find in the essays that follow a provisional attempt to rethink theology's own potentially "overpowering categories of analysis" so that we might learn from a "history of false starts, of dreams that failed to cohere."[11] It should go without saying, however, that the perspectives in this book cannot fully account for the plurivocal possibilities of failure as a theological category. Nevertheless, they do manage, if only sometimes implicitly, to ask the reader to turn inward, perhaps even contemplatively and prayerfully, to consider the meaning of failure for her or his own life and thinking.

Our example for grappling with failure is found, most importantly, in the fact that many of the biblical authors seem to think failure worth dwelling upon. Second Corinthians 4, for instance, offers a theological musing on the existential perplexities of embodied entropy. There, we find a careful consideration of human afflictions, bafflement, persecution, and the like, not as causes of despair, but as signs that we are "[a]lways bearing the body of the dying Jesus, so that Jesus's life might be made manifest in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor 4:10, DBH).[12] Here we have, as suggested above, an example of a paradoxical failure that transcends the usual bounds of the dialectic of failure and success. That which fails is, in a sense, what overcomes the very distinction between what succeeds and what does not.

Similarly, in the same letter, Paul contemplates a mysterious "thorn in the flesh," which he regards not as something to be dismissed or gotten rid of but rather as having an androgogic function; it prevented him from being "excessively exalted" (2 Cor 12:7, DBH).[13] In a moment of revelation, Paul recognizes how true power is that which works beyond categories of both power and weakness, such that "power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9, DBH).

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[11] Coronado, *A World Not to Come*.

[12] See Hart, *The New Testament*.

[13] Ibid., 367.

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Such an acceptance of failure is mirrored in the message of Jesus, which can be understood, as Robert Farrar Capon intimates, as being in praise of the last, lost, least, little, and dead. In a particularly provocative passage, Capon writes that "[t]he work of Jesus in his incarnation, life, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension makes no worldly sense at all."[14] It is, in its own way, something that fails to communicate in terms that support the logic of the given dialectical world order. Thus, both theology *and* failure become strategies by which the ways of the world are refused. Capon continues: "The portrait the Gospels paint is that of a lifeguard who leaps into the surf, swims to the drowning girl and then, instead of doing a cross-chest carry, drowns with her, revives three days later, and walks off the beach with the assurances that everything, including the apparently still dead girl, is hunky-dory."[15]

Capon has a gift for pointing out something of the unpalatable darkness at the core of the illumination of the Gospels, which is failure. No Eden is possible without a serpent in it. As Capon's popular theological articulations highlight, Jesus doesn't simply overcome sin the way that a superhero might overcome the villain—by force or, in a gesture of supreme authority, by remaining completely immune to and above the villain's schemes. Rather, he "becomes sin" (2 Cor 5:21, DBH). He enters into and succumbs to death itself; he dies like a common criminal, thereby adopting something of the identity of a criminal (Phil 2:8). By all appearances, he lets corrupt ideologies succeed; he lets evil win. And yet this is not the real story. This is only the story as it *appears*. To continue Capon's image, Jesus doesn't save the drowning girl *from* death but saves her *in* and *through* death, both his and hers. Failure is not avoided but embraced as a component of the transcendence that outranks the very distinction between life and death. This embrace doesn't merely rush past the difficulties of existence as mere trifles but instead attentively acknowledges the trauma they produce and carefully considers what such traumas might mean, given their concreteness within existential reality.

However, of course, the point of the present book is that all of this is up for theological debate, and our brief exploration above of how failure is approached in Scripture, certain writers, and in the work of this one theologian cannot be assumed to be the universally adopted perspective in and on the message of the Gospels. And yet, we have highlighted all

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[14] Capon, *Kingdom, Judgement, Grace*, 39.

[15] Ibid.

of this because through it we find an insight into the profound realism in the Gospels, which, as in much of the biblical canon, make no attempt bypass the deficiencies and losses affecting the human experiment. However we might read the Gospels and interpret their meanings, along with the other Scriptures, we cannot avoid the centrality of failures of all kinds to their theological and narrative arc. Failure, as the above suggests, does not have only one meaning or one application, and for that reason it is vital that we make an attempt to consider failure from multiple perspectives, through various hermeneutic postures and procedures. Some of these, of course, tend towards the univocal, where failure remains failure in its common, everyday sense, while others will consider the equivocal, dialectical, and paradoxical voices of failure—separately or together—to reveal entirely new interpretive possibilities and even, perhaps, moral and existential directives.

The different paradigms of the contributors to this book allow fresh perspectives on familiar ideas. All in all, the authors of these essays have in their own way contributed to a larger idea. *Theologies of Failure* asks how failure can challenge a world obsessed with power, prestige, privilege, and various other articulations of success, whether vaguely or clearly understood. It asks us if we have perhaps on occasion misunderstood certain failures, or overlooked their theological importance. It explores the ways in which theologies can help navigate, overcome, transcend, endure, and even embrace failure, depending, of course, on the kind of failure in question. In keeping with their various theological and philosophical commitments, the contributors encourage us to adjust our customary modes of perceiving the world and our being in the world. In doing this, they demonstrate that failure is something that must always be reconsidered or perhaps, to use the theological language of Irenaeus, *recapitulated*. To recapitulate is to relive, to remember, and to re-member. It is to put together what has been experienced and perceived as disintegrated.

This book deals with a range of pertinent topics, grouped under a few theme headings. And it is important to keep in mind that, through the review and editorial process, our aim has been to ensure that the voice of each writer be maintained, rather than setting up the policing of different positions to conform to a single one. For this reason, the reader will find essays that she or he both agrees with and disagrees with. This diversity of views, we believe, is vital for the sake of generating healthy, critical, informative, and insightful discussion. Such a diversity of views implies that

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the conversation needs to continue. With failure in our sights, we become more aware of the limits of our own positions and perspectives, and thus become open to considering and weighing up the viewpoints of others.

Part 1: Failing Well begins with Heather C. Ohaneson's reflection on failure through the lens of improvisation theory and the key idea of "overaccepting." Ohaneson argues that improvisation is far from simple. It includes moments of challenge, resistance, combativeness, and care, among other things, and always calls for skill and discernment. In theological terms, it requires grace and to be graced, to keep the play going. Following this is Mariana Alessandri's essay on Glennon Doyle's popular theology of failure. Alessandri pays attention to the voices of Augustine, Aquinas, and Kierkegaard, and aims to articulate a way of loving as "showing up" that is uniquely and beautifully reconciled to failure. In this, Alessandri reconfigures success and failure around the issue of showing up, rather than around measurements like wealth or status, and thus proposes a "Marian theology of failure" that invites us to receive forgiveness and extend love.

Lincoln Harvey takes on the subject of competitive sport from a theological perspective and ventures the proposal that sport, as an unnecessary but meaningful activity, helps us to celebrate our nature as unnecessary but meaningful creatures who have been summoned into life by God out of nothing. Given this proposal, Harvey maps winning and losing onto the dynamic ontological profile of the human creature, with losing becoming a vital component of the celebratory event of our subjective reality. In the last essay in this section, Kara N. Slade takes a look at something that may at first appear neutral—Big History—but which is in fact laden with an insidious ideology that can easily infect any form of theological thinking, especially around contrived divisions between what fails and what succeeds. The temptation to co-opt the supposed neutrality of Big History for theological purposes is unmasked as a participant in a form of epistemological arrogance. Slade offers a very Kierkegaardian reflection on what it means to fail to achieve a moment of self-transcendent reflection through reason.

Part 2: Failing Better starts off with Duncan B. Reyburn's critical reflection, through the lens of mimetic theory and interdividual psychology, on the inner logic of forgiveness. In particular, he uncovers what makes a shift from negative reciprocity (*ressentiment*, vengeance, and the like) towards positive reciprocity (forgiveness, love, and so on) possible, given the relational economy of desire. He posits that forgiveness itself

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becomes possible only after we have failed and accepted that failure. The acceptance of failure is also at the heart of Michael S. Burdett's essay, which explores failure as a constructive issue with regard to the question of technology. Jacques Ellul's work features, along with that of Tillich, Heidegger, and others, as a way of exploring how efficiency itself fails, as well as how inefficiency can be thought of as a kind of success. Among other things, Burdett demonstrates that it takes a kind of failure to be able to participate in virtue, and to genuinely care for our fellow human beings. Following this is Matthew D. Kirkpatrick's examination of the paradoxical power of failure in the life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer can be considered, in some ways, more of a failure than a success, and Kirkpatrick aims to unpack some of the virtues of these failures, especially in terms of an identification with Christ himself.

Kate Ott explores the question of adolescent sexual ethics, which, in its most commonly articulated form, still tends to prioritize particular modes of self-mastery as the measure of success. In questioning the narrative of self-mastery, Ott places failure at the center of sexual ethics, and thus argues for the importance of a particular erotic attunement that promotes a healthier relationship with the self and with the body. Concluding this second section of the book is Roberto Sirvent's interview with political theologian William T. Cavanaugh, which begins by looking at advice that might be genuinely instructive at any commencement address, namely the advice to not give too much credence to exhortations to "change the world." As Cavanaugh explains, it is easy enough to presume a false empathy that dislocates the ethical impetus behind moral action. What is needed is a critical, although not cynical, posture that asks how political theology can become intimate with the more personal and circumstantial concerns of people. When Cavanaugh advises, "please *don't* go out and change the world," he exposes the hubris of so many well-meaning Westerners who presume a God's-eye view of the world—that they themselves have been given a unique, privileged, and even divine revelation about how people of other countries and cultures should conduct their affairs.

Part 3: Failure as Resistance begins with Dennis F. Kinlaw III's exploration of the work of David Foster Wallace, in which we find extended reveries on various kinds of failure, and through which we also discover that failure may present us with the possibility of genuine renewal. One

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of the editors of this book[16] tried and failed to read through Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, and Kinlaw argues that even such a failure may not have been entirely without merit. Rebekah Ekland's essay complicates the way that we might read the beatitudes, taking seriously the subversive, challenging, and often ambiguous meanings of the various kinds of failure that the beatitudes point to. Eklund's focus is a feminist reading of the beatitudes that allows us to see them in the context of community, rather than as confirmations of individualist ethics.

This is followed by Silas Morgan's apology for the uselessness of theology as a protest against a neoliberal ideology, which renders the world intelligible only in terms of competitive economic practices, use-value, and instrumental reason. In particular, Morgan brings critical theory and queer theory into dialogue with political theology, and in so doing argues for an artful, critical, queer theology of failure. In her essay, Elizabeth T. Vasko unpacks how accounts of self-love have not properly taken into account the practical effects and intergenerational impact of moral paralysis and self-hatred (the internalization of oppression). In particular, and in the context of sexual violence, and to highlight love's potential to dismantle cycles of violence, she outlines important considerations for ecclesial identity and Christian vocation. As Vasko argues, a genuinely compassionate love is one that embraces failure. The final essay of this third part of the book is Elizabeth Newman's, which provides a serious examination of the gnosticism—a failed theology—that underpins and undermines the modern academy. She offers, as a response to this failed and failing theology, the idea that genuine openness to the *logos* within our various academic cares and concerns requires the recognition of an ontology of communion that considers faithfulness as having priority over an "objectivity" that is ultimately neutral only in appearance.

With reference to feminist, ecological, and public theologies, Rosemary P. Carbine's essay commences *Part 4: Failure and Liberation*. Carbine considers reactionary religious and political responses to climate change from the US political right to Pope Francis's encyclical on the climate crisis, *Laudato Si'*. In this, Carbine argues that Pope Francis's attempt to address a widespread moral failure has some failings of its own, especially in terms of persuading conservative politicians. In the penultimate essay in the book, Min-Ah Cho examines shame, as that which suggests not only having failed but feeling like a failure. She asks if

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[16] It was Duncan.

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shame cannot, in some way, be transformed into something constructive and even life-giving. In particular, Cho looks at Edward Schillebeeckx's thinking around the Eucharist, which takes seriously the embodied tension between remembrance and anticipation without collapsing the paradox or ignoring failure. The ambiguity within this tension takes seriously the human experience, and the hope that our self-awareness and capacity for compassion might be increased.

Finally, concluding the fourth section and the book itself, is Mitzi J. Smith's reconsideration of Paul's famous discourse on love in 1 Corinthians 13 and its literary context through the lens of a womanist hermeneutics of suspicion. She considers the possibility that Paul's theology of love is a theology of failure in a very particular sense. It is, in Smith's estimation, a theology that fails, since, among other things, it does not sufficiently take into account the struggle against problematic hierarchies and oppressive ideologies. Smith offers some instructive solutions to Paul's ideological framework in keeping with a womanist ontology of wholeness.

Taken together, the chapters in this book consider failure as that which has been, perhaps unfairly, submerged under a variety of dominant narratives. And yet, as the contributors have pointed out in many and varied ways, failure is in fact not hidden at all. It is, instead, something profoundly ordinary—something that we all know intimately, albeit from our own unique perspectives. It is part of the factical texture of our everyday engagements and, therefore, something that ought to be carefully considered as we work out our various theologies in fear and trembling. To say the least, the implications of taking failure seriously are ontological, epistemological, and teleological. Failure has implications for ethics, psychology, and politics, and any number of other human endeavors. In other words, failure speaks not only to what happens, but to what life itself is. Also, in terms of the frame provided in this introductory chapter, failure asks us to rethink how we have perceived things, as well as how we might still perceive things. It is thus not merely a pronouncement of the end of anything, but a condition of possibility. Perhaps it is even one of the conditions for the possibility of theology itself.

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