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## How to tell Jerusalem from Athens: How a faith-methodology distinguishes theology from philosophy

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Tertullian's famous question 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' concerns the relationship between theology (Jerusalem) and philosophy (Athens). Regardless of answer, the question assumes some distinction between the two. Developments in modern philosophy, however, have complicated this assumption. Some philosophers of religion, for instance, have used their philosophical training to answer explicitly theological questions,<sup>1</sup> and the rise of 'analytic theology' is equally explicit about its desire to adopt philosophical tools for the theological task.<sup>2</sup>

A more pressing question, then, is not what Athens has to do with Jerusalem, but do the sprawling cities overlap such that they are no longer necessarily distinct?

One might wonder at the outset why this question matters – does it matter whether a particular work is called 'philosophy', 'theology', 'philosophy of religion', 'philosophical theology', or anything else? What is at stake, however, is whether the discipline of theology has anything unique to offer or whether it is rendered superfluous. The aim of this paper is to show how theology is distinct from philosophy of religion.



## **Words about God and loving wisdom: Defining theology and philosophy**

In order to distinguish the disciplines of theology and philosophy, initial definitions must be offered. History or etymology can be guides but are ultimately insufficient to provide helpful definitions.<sup>3</sup> If philosophy is the love (*philo*) of wisdom (*sophia*), then anyone who loves wisdom is a philosopher. Similarly, if theology is simply words (*logos*) about God (*Theos*), then most human beings are theologians. This might correctly describe the kind of activity germane to each, but as definitions of a discipline they are too broad. On the other hand, defining theology or philosophy only as academic disciplines would be too narrow. ‘Armchair philosophers’ or ‘armchair theologians’ are those with an interest in the respective discipline without any academic training.<sup>4</sup> Good definitions of philosophy and theology will be sufficiently broad enough to include practitioners inside and outside the academy but sufficiently narrow enough to be helpfully descriptive and not include all who ‘love wisdom’ or ‘speak about God’.

What is philosophy? Keith Yandell is right that there is no such thing as a ‘noncontroversial answer’ to this question.<sup>5</sup> He defines it as ‘the enterprise of constructing and assessing categorical systems.’<sup>6</sup> This suggests that philosophy, broadly understood, is best defined by its methodology, or how it operates, rather than its object of study as most other disciplines do (e.g. ‘biology’ is the study of living things). William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland call philosophy a ‘second-order discipline’ for this reason. A first-order discipline studies particular objects, but a second-order discipline studies other fields or disciplines.<sup>7</sup> Eleonore Stump argues that philosophy does seek something in particular (wisdom), but is distinct because what it seeks is not a concrete object but ‘an abstract universal.’<sup>8</sup>

Understood in this way, philosophy and theology are not identical since theology is, in some way, indexed to the study of God.<sup>9</sup> However, philosophy of religion is a sub-discipline of philosophy indexed to religious claims and practices. Yandell says it offers ‘philosophically accessible accounts of religious traditions and assessing those traditions’.<sup>10</sup> Charles Taliaferro defines it as ‘the philosophical examination of the themes and concepts involved in religious traditions’ including

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‘alternative concepts of God or ultimate reality’.<sup>11</sup> The challenge, then, will be distinguishing theology from philosophy of religion.

What is theology? Like philosophy, there is no such thing as noncontroversial answer to this. By ‘theology’, I mean distinctly Christian theology. Andrew Torrance argues that theology in the Christian tradition is marked by a ‘commitment to being “scientific.”’<sup>12</sup> This ‘refers to theology as an endeavor to understand a mind-independent object in a way that is true to the nature of that object.’<sup>13</sup> For him ‘the task of theology should be characterized as a commitment to understanding *God and all things in relation to God* (GATR<sub>G</sub>) in a way that is accountable to the true nature of GATR<sub>G</sub> [...] and takes into account God’s self-disclosure.’<sup>14</sup> Torrance ‘follows Aquinas’ in this understanding of theology as science. Of Aquinas’ view Gerald Loughlin says:

For Aquinas, sacred doctrine [i.e. theology] is ‘science’ (knowledge), the principles of which are [...] received in faith from a superior knowledge, ‘namely God’s very own which he shares with the blessed’ [...] given to us in the scriptural revelation through the tradition of the church<sup>15</sup>

In what follows, I adopt a scientific understanding of theology.<sup>16</sup>

There are at least four features which mark the task of theology. First, theology is the study of God, a mind-independent person. Stump contrasts philosophy, which seeks the abstract universal ‘wisdom’, with theology, which seeks a person ‘characterized by mind and will’ who ‘cannot be construed as an abstract universal.’<sup>17</sup> Second, theology depends on God’s self-disclosure.<sup>18</sup> It is ‘received in faith from a superior knowledge,’ the principles of which cannot be derived without revelation. It, adds Torrance, ‘is bound up with God’s historical self-disclosure in the spatiotemporal order.’<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Thomas McCall says theology is the attempt to articulate ‘what we may know of God as God has revealed himself to us.’<sup>20</sup> Third, the context of theology is Scripture and the church. The revelation on which theology depends is ‘given to us in the scriptural revelation through the tradition of the church.’ Although made possible by God, theology is a human task and occurs within this particular context. Fourth, theology is performed in faith. It must be ‘received in faith’. Torrance argues that ‘without the condition that is described as “faith”’ the theologian ‘has no recognition of GATR<sub>G</sub>.’<sup>21</sup>



## **A faith-methodology: Distinguishing between theology and philosophy of religion**

Using the definitions above, theology and philosophy of religion cannot be called identical. It is easy to distinguish philosophy of religion from theology. A systematic account of Buddhism, for instance, could be an example of philosophy of religion but not theology. However, distinguishing theology from philosophy of religion is more difficult. What is needed is some feature or characteristic that could be ascribed to theology but, necessarily, not to philosophy of religion. In this section I analyze three ways to distinguish theology from philosophy of religion before suggesting a fourth as a better way forward.

The first way to distinguish theology from philosophy is to argue that theology is a science and philosophy of religion is not. Torrance, for instance, argues that theology's object is 'mind-independent,' but philosophy of religion is 'mind-dependent' and reducible to 'human thoughts about GATR.'<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Rutledge, however, doubts whether this approach is sufficient since philosophy too can be defined as a science.<sup>23</sup> He says philosophy 'centrally involves some form of conceptual analysis' that includes concepts and propositions which, most philosophers agree, are mind-independent. Rutledge thinks Torrance's understanding of philosophy as necessarily mind-dependent demonstrates 'a fundamental misunderstanding of what philosophy is.' Since philosophy includes, for Rutledge, 'investigating mind-independent objects',<sup>24</sup> then it can count as a science in Torrance's definition.

A second way to distinguish theology from philosophy of religion is to argue that the referent in each is different. This can take at least two forms. First, one might argue that the conception of 'God' used in philosophy of religion is different than the conception of theology. Theology requires one 'not merely to say things about God (or God-and-everything) – it is to speak *truly* of God (so far as we can).'<sup>25</sup> This requires, adds Torrance, 'the revelatory activity of God' without which 'a person cannot know the triune God and, therefore, cannot know the one to whom theological words refer'.<sup>26</sup> In this form, the philosopher of religion might *attempt* to speak about God but fails to do. Second, one might argue that the referents are different kinds of things. Rutledge, for instance, recognizes that the concepts and propositions used in philosophy of religion are not the same

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thing as ‘God’ because they are not a person. Theology refers to a person while philosophy of religion does not. Stump takes a similar view:

[...] the difference between theology and philosophy lies most centrally in this difference in what they seek. It makes a great difference to one’s method of seeking and one’s view of the nature of depth-in-understanding whether what one is seeking is an abstract universal such as wisdom or something with a mind and a will.<sup>27</sup>

Philosophers of religion trade in concepts and ideas while theologians, first and foremost, study a person.

The third way to distinguish theology and philosophy of religion, similar to the second form of the second way, is based on their ‘epistemological orientation.’<sup>28</sup> Stump argues that theology helps ‘connect human persons to the person of God and to gain comprehension of him.’<sup>29</sup> Theology and philosophy, then, incorporate different ways of knowing; philosophy aims for knowledge *that* while theology aims for personal knowledge.<sup>30</sup> The basic orientation of each, says Stump, is distinct ‘in terms of the kind of epistemology each needs to pursue its aims’.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Rutledge says that personal knowledge is ‘exclusive and fundamental to the practice of theology.’<sup>32</sup>

These ways have much to commend, yet there remain intuitive problems.<sup>33</sup> The first way fails to offer a definition of science which excludes philosophy of religion. The second way says that the referent for each discipline is different, but it is difficult to see why this need be the case. The philosopher of religion, regardless of faith commitment, might refer to an all-powerful, perfectly loving person who created everything.<sup>34</sup> This, at least initially, appears to refer to the same person of Christian theology even if there remain significant differences. Moreover, why can the *Christian* philosopher of religion not, *qua* philosopher of religion, refer to the Triune God of Christianity in her work? The third way would require any work using concepts and propositions about the nature of God to be philosophy of religion and theology to be non-propositional. Theology, however, as a human task of speaking about God does use propositions and, without propositions, it would be difficult to consider it an academic discipline. These are not intended to be defeaters, but they are, to my mind, intuitive weaknesses of each way.

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The fourth way to distinguish theology from philosophy of religion avoids these weaknesses. Theology can distinguish itself not principally in what kind of task it is (a science), nor in its object of study (God), nor in its kind of knowing (personal), but instead in *how* it is performed. The fourth feature of scientific theology is particularly important: theology is performed in faith. This could be understood as merely engaging discipline while having faith, but I understand it as something more fundamental to the task. Theology, unlike other disciplines including philosophy of religion, adopts a *faith-methodology*. A methodology is the mode of operation for a discipline; it is the structure or system that one operates within. Faith, for the Christian theologian, is characterized by a trust or allegiance to the Father known in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. A faith-methodology, then, is a mode of operation whereby faith determines the practices and context of the discipline and is not merely incidental to it.

To clarify this further, we can see how a faith-methodology manifests itself in at least two ways. First, a faith-methodology manifests itself by inhabiting what John Webster calls ‘a Christian culture.’<sup>35</sup> For Webster, ‘a culture is a space or region made up of human activities. It is a set of intentional patterns of human action which have sufficient coherence, scope, and duration to constitute a way of life.’<sup>36</sup> By inhabiting a particular culture, theology remains, to some degree, a human task. In the third way of distinction, Stump and Rutledge are both correct to conclude that the task of theology is not reducible to propositional content. It is, as the study of a person, necessarily personal. Yet it continues to participate within a human culture and, therefore, continues to use human language (i.e. propositions) to describe God.<sup>37</sup> Theology adopting a faith-methodology remains, then, academically appropriate.

Theology, however, inhabits not just any culture but a distinctly Christian one. That is, a culture ‘which seeks somehow to inhabit the world which is brought into being by the staggering good news of Jesus Christ’.<sup>38</sup> It cannot, then, be primarily conceived of as an academic discipline but an activity which is ‘characterized by a certain regional specificity’ – that of the church of Jesus Christ.<sup>39</sup> Sarah Coakley, likewise, argues that theology is ‘a form of intellectual investigation’ but nonetheless a form ‘in which a *secular*, universalist rationality may find itself significantly challenged – whether criticized, expanded, transformed, or even at points rejected.’<sup>40</sup> Webster thus insists that the better question for the relationship of theology

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and academy is *not* ‘what does theology need to become in order to fit into the academy?’ but rather ‘what does the academy need to become in order to profit from Christian theology?’<sup>41</sup> Theology has an ecclesial vocation that is prior to, and more fundamental than, its academic vocation.

The second way a faith-methodology manifests itself is in the habits and practices germane to the method. Since the task of the theologian is primarily ecclesial, Webster argues that ‘being a Christian theologian involves the struggle to become a certain kind of person, one shaped by the culture of Christian faith’<sup>42</sup>; the theologian will be one continually disrupted.<sup>43</sup> Coakley adds that ‘the task of theology is always, if implicitly, a *recommendation for life*. The vision it sets before one invites ongoing – and sometimes disorienting – response and change, both personal and political, in relation to God.’<sup>44</sup> Unlike other disciplines, theology, insists Webster, ‘requires the cultivation not only of technical skills but also of habits of the soul.’<sup>45</sup> This means that certain practices, or habits, are not incidental to the task of theology, but fundamental to it. These practices include<sup>46</sup> but are not limited to:

- *Prayer*, in the sense that conversation with God in individual and communal prayer counts as reflection and engagement with God;<sup>47</sup>
- *Worship*, in the sense that the liturgy of the church can contribute to a cognitive apprehension of God;<sup>48</sup>
- *Humility*, in the sense that human language about God is subservient to the revelation of God;<sup>49</sup>
- *Submission to and engagement with Scripture and the church tradition*, in the sense that the theologian perceives her task as within this particular tradition that is governed by particular norms and criteria for truth.<sup>50</sup>

These practices, in the specific senses identified here, proceed from a faith-methodology. They are fundamental to theology because they are the way one comes to know God. Sarah Coakley points out that ‘if one is resolutely *not* engaged in the practices of prayer, contemplation, and worship, then there are certain sorts of philosophical insight that are unlikely, if not impossible, to become available to one.’<sup>51</sup> Without these practices theological practice is deficient if not impossible.

It is of course true that practitioners of other disciplines might, for instance, pray while practising their discipline, but this is not a faith-

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methodology. In a faith-methodology, prayer can actually be a way the discipline is practised. This does not mean, however, that all of these practices, in the senses identified above, are always necessary for any theological work.<sup>52</sup> The theologian may, for instance, produce a work of theology without showing how worship in the liturgy is contributing to that work, but she will recognize worship as appropriate, and even normative to some degree, in the task of theology. By adopting a faith-methodology, the theologian practises her discipline in a way the philosopher of religion cannot.

One objection<sup>53</sup> to the faith-methodology as the distinguishing mark of theology is that the Christian philosopher of religion might adopt a faith-methodology just like the theologian. Moreland and Craig, for instance, argue that ‘the task of the *Christian* philosopher of religion’ need not differ from the theologian ‘insofar as he philosophizes as a Christian’.<sup>54</sup> It is true that the Christian philosopher of religion, or practitioners of other disciplines for that matter, might have a deep personal faith in Jesus Christ and find that faith relevant to her work. Her methodology, however, determines the discipline in which she engages. A philosophical methodology performed by a person of faith is not the same as a faith-methodology. A philosopher can pray *while* practising philosophy, but the theologian prays *in order to* practise theology.<sup>55</sup> If a practitioner adopts a faith-methodology to speak about God, then the better conclusion would be that she ceases to do philosophy of religion and, instead, performs theology. There is little reason to think, after all, that an academic trained in one area (like philosophy) might do work in another area (like theology).



### **Conclusion**

Theology and philosophy, or philosophy of religion, have much in common. Both operate within the academy, and both use propositions to describe the nature of God. Moreover, the work of many modern philosophers and theologians have brought the disciplines closer together. Yet they remain distinct primarily in their methodology. Theology’s method is best characterized by a faith-methodology, a methodology which is determined by one’s faith in Jesus Christ. By adopting this methodology, theology proves distinct from all other academic disciplines, including philosophy of religion.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For instance, William Hasker's book on the Trinity: William Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Other apt examples include analytic philosophers Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, Nicholas Wolterstorff and Peter van Inwagen.

<sup>2</sup> See especially the introductions in: Thomas H. McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2015); Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> The meaning of each discipline has evolved over the years. Ancient philosophy, for instance, is closer to the modern understanding of religion, and 'philosophy' was probably the best available term for the Church Fathers to describe what they were doing. See: Johannes Zachhuber, "What Is Theology?" (Lecture, October 29, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, most pastors are 'armchair theologians', as those interested in theology and as the primary theological voice of their community – whether or not they have academic training.

<sup>5</sup> Keith E. Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1999), 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2003), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Eleonore Stump, "Athens and Jerusalem: The Relationship of Philosophy and Theology", *Journal of Analytic Theology* 1 (May 2013): 50.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that this is aimed at description and not necessarily prescription. Indeed, as Andrew Torrance points out, philosophy and theology might – perhaps even should – be identical in the eschaton. This paper, however, is aimed at modern praxis of the disciplines. Andrew Torrance, "The Possibility of a Scientific Approach to Analytic Theology", *Journal of Analytic Theology* 7 (June 2019): 192.

<sup>10</sup> Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Taliaferro, "Philosophy of Religion", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed October 23, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/philosophy-religion/>

<sup>12</sup> Torrance, "The Possibility of a Scientific Approach", 179. He says the scientific understanding of theology has a 'rich heritage [...] in the

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theological tradition'. Torrance is specifically engaging 'analytic theology', but I take what he says to be true of all theology.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Gerard Loughlin, "The Basis and Authority of Doctrine", in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57.

<sup>16</sup> Space does not allow me to defend this understanding against objections or other definitions of theology, but generally I see this as the understanding of the Christian theological tradition.

<sup>17</sup> Stump, "Athens and Jerusalem", 50.

<sup>18</sup> This does not necessarily reject so-called 'natural theology'. A theologian might affirm, for instance, that God has provided a kind of general self-revelation that is widely available.

<sup>19</sup> Torrance, "The Possibility of a Scientific Approach", 190.

<sup>20</sup> McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Torrance, "The Possibility of a Scientific Approach", 189.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Rutledge, "Separating the Theological Sheep from the Philosophical Goats", *Journal of Analytic Theology*, forthcoming.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology*, 170.

<sup>26</sup> Torrance, "The Possibility of a Scientific Approach", 193.

<sup>27</sup> Stump, "Athens and Jerusalem", 50. This is not to disparage; in fact, she uses this distinction to argue that each have important, but distinct, roles to play in knowing God.

<sup>28</sup> The phrase is my own, but derived from Stump's understanding.

<sup>29</sup> Stump, "Athens and Jerusalem", 57.

<sup>30</sup> For more on these different ways of knowing see: Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 56–77.

<sup>31</sup> Stump, "Athens and Jerusalem", 53.

<sup>32</sup> Rutledge, "Separating the Theological Sheep from the Philosophical Goats".

<sup>33</sup> This is not to suggest that these problems are unsolvable, only that they are problems.

<sup>34</sup> For an example, see: J. L. Schellenberg, "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy", in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*,

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ed. Adam Green and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>35</sup> John Webster, *The Culture of Theology*, ed. Ivor J. Davidson and Alden C. McCray (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2019).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>37</sup> The definition of Hans Frei walks this tension well: theology is ‘a praise of God by the use of the analytical capacities’. As quoted in: *ibid.*, 93.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 16.

<sup>41</sup> Webster, *The Culture of Theology*, 102.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>43</sup> Ivor J. Davidson, “Introduction,” in *ibid.*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Webster, *The Culture of Theology*, 134.

<sup>46</sup> See Torrance’s ‘five distinguishing features’ of theology for a similar account of methodology: Torrance, “The Possibility of a Scientific Approach”, 193f.

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, the prayerful *Proslogion* and *Monologion* of Anselm in *Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2007).

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance: Sarah Coakley, “Beyond ‘Belief’: Liturgy and the Cognitive Apprehension of God”, in *The Vocation of Theology Today: A Festschrift for David Ford*, ed. Tom Greggs, Rachel Muers, and Simeon Zahl (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2013).

<sup>49</sup> Andrew B. Torrance, “A Place for Paradox in Theology”, forthcoming. Also, Rowan Williams writes: “Language about God is kept honest in the degree to which it turns on itself in the name of God, and so surrenders to God” (*On Christian Theology*, 2000, p. 8).

<sup>50</sup> There might be different accounts of what this looks like, but all Christians traditions, to some degree, submit to tradition insofar as they are a *tradition*.

<sup>51</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 16.

<sup>52</sup> Some of the practices, however, might be necessary. For instance, humility (in the specific sense) would likely be a requirement for theology.

<sup>53</sup> Another objection that I do not consider here is that theology does not require a faith-methodology. I see this as a necessary feature of a scientific

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understanding of theology and, as I say above, I simply assume this definition.

<sup>54</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 464.

<sup>55</sup> This is not to suggest that prayer is merely instrumental to the theologian. Webster is helpful here: 'Prayer is not to be thought of functionally or instrumentally. It is not a means to an end; it is not some kind of contemplative clearing of the mind or spirit, a positioning of oneself more accurately before the intellectual task [...] Prayer is speech addressed to God in which we ask for help with an urgency and intensity which only makes sense if we really are in dire straits. Prayer [...] corresponds to our incapacity, to our unsuitability for what is required of us, and therefore to utter necessity of the merciful intervention of God.' (*The Culture of Theology*, 143)