

Theology, Metaphysics, and Science: Twenty-First Century Hermeneutical Allies, Strangers, or Enemies?

A Position Paper By

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In this particular case, the author was asked to answer the following question:

"Can the study of theology and/or metaphysics be classified currently or ever qualify in the future as a scientific endeavor? Why or why not? If yes, what criteria or methods would need to be in place and practiced to make them scientific? If no, what is it about 'science' that prevents theology and/or metaphysics from qualifying?"

Abstract: This article answers the question of whether the study of theology and metaphysics can be classified currently, or ever qualify in the future, as a scientific endeavor. Rather than choose a particular theology or metaphysics as the subject of inquiry, this essay argues that it is not only necessary to recognize the role of hermeneutics within different fields of study, but that it is also necessary to begin a human hermeneutic with human experience. Changes in our global context, whether social, economic, political, or environmental, are important drivers of hermeneutical evolution. We should expect no less change in the areas of theology, metaphysics, and science. The question of truth, whether subjective or objective, is a hermeneutical one.

Keywords: Theology, Metaphysics, Science, Epistemology, Hermeneutics

The Question: The Crux of the Matter

A PERENNIAL QUESTION FOR philosophers is: how does one know truth? The analogous question for theologians is: how does one know God? Over the millennia, these questions have been answered in myriad ways. The adequacy

of those intellectual schema has been tested and found variously sound or not. Accountability structures have been conserved, undermined, jettisoned, or superseded. The twenty-first century is no different. The hermeneutics by which humans apprehend meaning is certainly being tested. Changes in our global context (whether social, economic, political, or environmental) are important drivers of hermeneutical evolution. We should expect no less in the areas of theology, metaphysics, and science. We should also expect hermeneutical change to deeply impact pastoral care and evangelism efforts on the ground.

Can the study of theology and metaphysics be classified currently, or ever qualify in the future, as a scientific endeavor? Rather than choose a particular theology or metaphysics as the subject of inquiry in this essay, perhaps the advice of the Dalai Lama might be helpful, “Existence is indicated by my own experience.”¹ That is to say, rather than starting with particular theologies, metaphysics, or scientific approaches, it may be helpful to begin human hermeneutics with human experiences.² What is it that people reflect on theologically, metaphysically, and scientifically? They reflect on experiences.

The crux of the question as to whether theology or metaphysics can be classified as a scientific endeavor is indeed a hermeneutical one. The first clarification to be made is that this is a question about perception, cognition, and reflection on personal experience. Indeed, theology and metaphysics explore particular kinds of experiences. Whether analytic or synthetic, the act of thinking is not the same thing as the object of one’s thoughts. Though one may engage in reflection, the reflection itself is not a direct experience of the subject under study. Broadly paraphrasing the terminology of Rudolph Otto, experience of numinous phenomena is prior to the apprehension of its meaning.³

Arguably, and for better or worse, the scientific method, as well as its empirical hermeneutic, have dominated how human culture apprehends human

¹ Tenzin Gyatso, *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*, ed. Jeffrey Hopkins and Elizabeth Napper, trans. Jeffrey Hopkins (Boston: Snow Lion, 2012), 53.

² See, for instance, the work on theological method by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973) and the psychological work of Jean Piaget, *The Construction of Reality in the Child*, International Library of Psychology (1954; repr., Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2002).

³ Though highly criticized in later years, Otto’s work remains a defining work for focusing the attention of scholars on the experience of numinous phenomena as ubiquitously reported throughout human cultures. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (1917; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

experience since the Enlightenment. During this period, theology and metaphysics found a *modus operandi* (maybe even a détente) through the positive sciences by purposefully classifying religious experience as the proper realm of theology and metaphysics, whereas natural phenomena remained the realm of scientists. This is an historical novelty.⁴ In previous epochs and in other cultures, human knowledge was seen as much more of a unified field of integrated wisdom. Indeed, the rise of universities in medieval Western culture was driven in large part by the study of theology, once crowned by as the Queen of the Sciences (cf. Aquinas, *STh.* I q.1). Given the advances in theoretical physics and philosophical theology, this late, discrete, and arguably aberrant distance between theology, metaphysics, and science is now breaking down.⁵

The question of how God can be known to humans is an enduring one. Each religious culture grapples with it. For instance, let us take a limited example. In Christianity, two influential medieval voices contributed to the conversation of their times: Thomas Aquinas in the Latin West and Gregory Palamas in the Greek East. Building upon theological traditions they inherited, each answered the question in their own way. For Aquinas, the natural capacity of the human intellect was insufficient to apprehend the experience of God, either immediately or through the mediation of God's effects in nature. Yet, believers persist in claiming that they have genuine encounters with the divine. Aquinas' solution was to posit the operation of a power beyond the nature of the human subject and its intelligence: grace (*STh.* I q.12). Thus, the claim is that the human intellect is assisted from divine power in order to apprehend metaphysical experiences. In the Greek East, Gregory Palamas approached the issue through the experience of God's effects. He, too, did not think the human intellect is sufficient to apprehend the essence of God. Nevertheless, Palamas took human religious experience quite seriously. He posited that the effects of God were of two kinds: natural and divine (i.e. created effects and uncreated effects). Human experience of the first kind was susceptible to human powers of apprehension. Human experience of the second kind, however, was the only way to experience God directly. Just as one can only experience the sun through its light or heat, and its light and heat are direct emanations of itself, humans can experience the presence of God through direct, uncreated emanations that

⁴ Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 171, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226184517.001.0001>.

⁵ Elaine Howard Ecklund, Jerry Z. Park, and Katherine L. Sorrell, "Scientists Negotiate Boundaries Between Religion and Science," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50, no. 3 (2011): 552–69, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2011.01586.x>.

Palamas called “divine energies.”⁶ All of this was also seen as an operation of God’s grace. While the difference between these two approaches may seem highly nuanced, historically they account for very different metaphysics between Eastern and Western Christianity.

For our purposes in this essay, the relevance of these two examples is not in the truth claims they seem to make. Rather, it is in the project they purport to be about, which is the apprehension of religious experience. Both examples claim that humans can, under certain conditions, perceive and apprehend religious experience. It would be hard to argue that *no* human experience is open to analysis, synthesis, or reflection. Embedded by education and practice in the hardware of our cognitive systems, hermeneutics operate throughout the entire continuum of human experience (contingent upon the health and state of the human subject). So, in order to see if a scientific hermeneutic might serve theological or metaphysical experience and reflection, it would be useful to review just what is meant by theology, metaphysics, and science.

The Definitions: Theories and Practitioners

Taking in turn theology, metaphysics, and science, it may be instructive to consider first a generic definition of each and then applied insights from a community of experts. Thus, in each case considerations of general theory will move to a perception of that theory by practitioners in the field.

Theology

Broadly speaking, theology is the study of the nature of God, religious belief, or of systematically developed religious theory. Practitioners remind us that theological analysis distinguishes itself on three grounds.⁷ First, it may appeal to confessional criteria for its assertions. Second, practitioners may be required to assent to these criteria as a condition for reflection. Finally, regardless of the first two grounds, theology is specifically interested in metaphysical truth claims. This last may be the most important connection

⁶ Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, ed. John Meyendorff, trans. Nicholas Gendle The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 96, 104–6.

⁷ Schubert M. Ogden, “Theology and Religious Studies: Their Difference and the Difference It Makes,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46, no. 1 (1978): 3–17, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/xlvi.1.3>.

between theology and science, not because of the object of reflection (i.e. physical or metaphysical) but because the purpose of both is to give an account of truth. One need not accede to the position that the *sole* project of theology is to *establish* the truth claims of its object (e.g. the existence of God), even though some theologians may attempt to do so. Instead, theology is the *study* of those truth claims and, more importantly, the study of religious *experience*.

Even though most theology is done within a confessional context, properly speaking theological analysis is neither synonymous with confessional claims nor with one's experience of God. It is the analysis, not the experience, of the data. Certainly, theological reflection has been employed to support confessional communities, illuminate confessional claims, and in some instances, even inspire religious experience. However, one should not confuse the articulation of music theory with the rhapsody—or boredom—of listening to the music. Accordingly, religious experience/datum implicates the existence of the theologian who experiences, just as scientific or natural experience/datum implicates the existence of the scientist. The object of their reflections will be apprehended through the subject's hermeneutic. In this regard, the theologian is not so different from the scientist.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, identity, time, and space. As such, it not only seeks to provide an account of the ontology and identity of these objects of knowledge, it also reminds one of the ontology and identity of the subject who seeks that knowledge. In a discussion of scientific method, a serviceable appreciation of one's metaphysics would guard against naïve notions of both objectivity and subjectivity.

A useful twenty-first century metaphysic, as well as science, would keep the hermeneutical process grounded in experience, as the Dalai Lama has noted. Practitioners claim that this certainly would take metaphysics beyond purely classical/Aristotelian categories of changeless being and first causes.⁸ It would take it beyond transcendental, aprioristic approaches of early twentieth century phenomenologists on numinous experiences of the divine. Finally, it may even take it beyond the late twentieth century analytical approach to

⁸ Peter van Inwagen and Meghan Sullivan, "Metaphysics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2014), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/metaphysics/>.

metaphysics.⁹ It would seem that both metaphysics and science have arrived at a common space in giving priority to experience as a datum for analysis.

Science

At its most basic level, the Latin root of the term *science* simply means *knowledge*. A generic, contemporary definition of science identifies it as the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behavior of the natural world through observation and experiment. It may also be a systematically organized body of knowledge on a particular subject. Practitioners from the United Kingdom’s Science Council stipulate:

Science is the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence. Scientific methodology includes the following:

- Objective observation: Measurement and data (possibly although not necessarily using mathematics as a tool);
- Evidence;
- Experiment and/or observation as benchmarks for testing hypotheses;
- Induction: reasoning to establish general rules or conclusions drawn from facts or examples;
- Repetition;
- Critical analysis;
- Verification and testing: critical exposure to scrutiny, peer review and assessment.¹⁰

According to this description, mathematical models are not the only possible means of measurement. There must, in fact, be something to observe. For the purposes of this essay, the object in view for theology and metaphysics is religious experience. There is longstanding disagreement among scholars from various fields as to whether numinous experiences are based upon distinct phenomena or if they are merely epiphenomenal. Moreover, there is a great

⁹ See The Society for the Metaphysics of Science, accessed July 27, 2019, <https://www.sites.google.com/site/socmetsci/home>.

¹⁰ “Our Definition of Science,” The Science Council, accessed July 27, 2019, <https://sciencecouncil.org/about-science/our-definition-of-science/>; punctuation added to the bullet point list.

distance between a position that holds *some* numinous experiences to be either phenomenal or epiphenomenal and *all* of them to be so. Even mystics can be, and have been, critical in this regard. The literature of spiritual directors is often skeptical of ecstatic religious experiences and other mystical consolations. Critical analysis, testing, and peer review are certainly not the provenance of the so-called “hard sciences” alone. Many theologians, philosophers, and spiritual directors have engaged in the latter for centuries.

Objectivity has long been taken as the *sine qua non* of the scientific method. The reigning empirical epistemology in our culture takes it for granted. However, both the generic definition and the one given by practitioners, recognize that 1) science is an intellectual activity; and 2) it involves inductive reasoning to draw its conclusions. That is to say, the role of the perceiving subject is substantive in the observation, analysis, and apprehension of the studied object. Indeed, the human subjects who study are more than substantive; they are vital to the conclusions that are drawn. After all, the experience of the scientist implicates the existence of the scientist, and vice-versa. It would appear that the scientific method not only depends upon a philosophy of science, it also depends on a philosophy of metaphysics (whether the scientist admits that or not). That is because the structures of human cognition have both biological and hermeneutical contexts. The ontology of human subjects, and their comprehension of experienced objects, are as constitutive of science as they are of theology and metaphysics. Of course, there are different types of science, which each have their proper methodologies. The same can be said of theology, metaphysics, and each of their specializations.

The Position: Epistemology Matters

Given the theory and practice of researchers over the centuries, there are grounds for stipulating that theology and metaphysics *can be* classified and *can qualify* as scientific endeavors. In terms of practice, however, there is of course no guarantee that any particular scholarship will be of good quality. There are better or worse theological analyses, which is also true of metaphysical and scientific explorations. Poor scientific methodology does not yield quality theological or metaphysical reflection. Poor hermeneutical theory or methodology does not result in quality scientific induction. Given a nuanced, non-reductive hermeneutic, the twenty-first century may even usher in a new era of both a scientific theology and a theological science. This will not happen, however, if naïve or reductive hermeneutics prevail.

The first thing a scholar brings to the task of research and analysis is him or herself. For better or worse, both theoretically and practically, critical choices are made throughout the entire process by a human subject who is a whole person. One particular area, therefore, that affects objective observation, as well as inductive reasoning, is the epistemology operative within the analysis. Generally speaking, epistemology is one's theory of knowledge, especially with regard to the methods, validity, and scope of that knowledge. One's epistemology also provides distinctions between justified belief and mere opinion. Practitioners remind us that the conditions, sources, structures and limits of knowledge all affect the inductive reasoning of cognitive analysis and synthesis. Critically, all reasoning has an accountability structure that operates for better or worse to establish distinctions between truth claims and opinions.¹¹ The epistemology of the researcher lies between the object of study and the subject engaging in the act of study. There is no way around this, no matter if the object of study is religious experience or any other kind of experience. Furthermore, as noted above, the practice of hermeneutics evolves over time. When epistemologies can no longer establish clear distinctions between truth claims and opinions, foundational cognitive adjustments become vital to the project of knowledge. Theology, metaphysics, and science may indeed be at one of those hermeneutical inflection points today.¹²

The Methods: Realms of Application

If there are epistemic grounds for stipulating that theology and metaphysics *can be* classified, and *can qualify* as scientific endeavors, then there should be criteria and methods to support such research. The general methods of scientific research can suffice for a shorthand list. However, even within the realm of science, these methods are employed in ways proper to the kind of objects studied and the sort of knowledge desired. Furthermore, as was noted, mathematical tools are not the only ones available for measurement. Not only can one see this across disciplines such as biology, chemistry, physics, and geology, but also ones such as sociology, psychology, anthropology,

¹¹ Matthias Steup, "Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology/>.

¹² Case in point, see Darren M. Slade, "Patristic Exegesis: The Myth of the Alexandrian-Antiochene Schools of Interpretation," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 155–76, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no2.03>.

archaeology, history, philology, literary studies, semiotics, and many other fields of study. Religious experience would qualify for such methodologies. Indeed, these areas of study are all realms of application for scientific methodology, but even within each field there are different kinds of questions and different species of scientific reflection. The Science Council of the United Kingdom identifies no less than ten types of scientist.¹³ Analogously, one may reasonably posit just as many types of theologians.

First, there is the business scientist. This person supports the management and business of a group by providing data and knowledge for sound decision making. Their work can impact any or all levels of a group. Bishops, adjudicatory officers or bodies, and their assistants, researchers, accountants, and fund developers often function in this capacity for religious communities. Likewise, the communicator scientist combines scientific and technological knowledge with an ability to communicate. They may also know about various forms of media and the psychology behind those forms. Closely related to teachers, in faith communities these are the experts in proclaiming their religious message. Some communities know them as evangelists, or great preachers, and (especially these days) ministers of communication. It should be remembered that the exponential growth of Christianity in its first five centuries coincided with the adoption of the codex (rather than the scroll) as its major form of mass communication. This revolution in communications technology was embraced thoroughly by those who crafted and disseminated the New Testament. Clearly, a similar revolution and mass dissemination of the Bible took place with the advent of the printing press and the Western Reformations. It remains to be seen just how faith communities will adapt and benefit (or not) from today's social media revolution.

There are also developer scientists. They use the knowledge generated by others to develop or translate products, services, behavioral changes, or improvements in existing technology. In theology and metaphysics today, such folks may be on the cutting edge of the creation of new curricula, electronic applications, or software. Scholars engaged in translation and recovery of classical religious or philosophical texts also come to mind. Entrepreneur scientists make innovation happen. They have the knowledge of bureaucratic and technocratic systems and networks, as well as business acumen, to grow existing scientific institutions. In a religious context, these may be church planters, evangelists, fund development specialists, or theologians who are

¹³ For the following discussion, see "10 Types of Scientist," The Science Council, accessed July 27, 2019, <https://sciencecouncil.org/about-science/10-types-of-scientist/>.

focused upon stewardship, responsible investment, and the meaning of monetary (or other) resources for faith communities.

Explorer scientists are engaged in research and development. They want to understand or push the boundaries of current knowledge about context and content. They look at current trends and future scenarios. In the world of religion, these are the people customarily viewed as theologians. They may attempt to give an account of the encounter between current cultural experience and orthodoxy or tradition. Indeed, at one time systematic theology would have been considered the pinnacle of scholarly research. That is because theological and scientific standards of observation and induction were not seen as mutually exclusive but, rather, mutually beneficial. We still have evidence of such scholarship today.¹⁴ Certainly, the list of theological systematians is too long to cite, especially since the twentieth century produced so many.¹⁵ This is true in the realm of metaphysics, as well. Brain studies of mystical states are but one recurring example of such areas of research. Systematic theology and cognitive-neurological studies aside, theological reflection may also take place in non-theoretical, or even non-critical ways, such as in poetry, music, or other artistic media. Standards of observation can still apply even in the realm of aesthetics.¹⁶

Those who engage in observation, mapping and piecing together large amounts of data, are known as investigator scientists. They often work collaboratively and in multi-disciplinary contexts. Demographers who look at potential areas for growth and expansion can be employed by religious communities in order to understand the missionary landscape better.¹⁷ In some

¹⁴ See also, Kirk R. MacGregor, "Theology and Metaphysics as Scientific Endeavors," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 275–89, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no2.09>.

¹⁵ A survey of systematians from the last 100 years would indeed be quite long and beyond the scope of this position paper, but one might profitably look at the works of Teilhard de Chardin, Bernard Lonergan, Paul Ricoeur, and many others for examples.

¹⁶ The theologian Hans-Georg Gadamer reflected precisely on theological aesthetics in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

¹⁷ MapDash for Faith Communities, collaboratively developed by Datastory and the FaithX Project on Datastory's MapDash™ platform, as well as the Strategic Missional Planning process developed by FaithX are prime examples of this kind of scientific research. See Kenneth W. Howard, "Grounding Discernment in Data: Strategic Missional Planning Using GIS Technology and Market Segmentation Data," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 310–25, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no2.11> and Jeffrey Peters, "Using Science to Find the Faithful," WhereNext, April 9, 2019, www.esri.com/about/newsroom/publications/wherenext/science-finds-faithful/.

denominations, they work with evangelists to maximize their impact, but location is only one object of study. Another may be focused on the messaging of content and its effects on different ages and generations. Sociologists and anthropologists of religion, such as Emile Durkheim, E.B. Tylor, and Claude Levi-Strauss, come to mind, as well as religious studies scholars Rudolph Otto, Mercia Eliade, and Huston Smith. Certainly, philosophers of linguistics have a role to play here, following in the footsteps of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

The policy scientist uses scientific and technical knowledge along with an understanding of government and policy to shape, recommend, or monitor legislation and policy for the benefit of society. In the experience of religious communities, these are the scholars of ecclesiology, church history, and the history of religions. Arguably, liberation theology itself may be a further articulation of the political critique of religion initiated in the nineteenth century. Similarly, regulator scientists focus on the reliability and safety of systems and technologies. Their areas of expertise are found in monitoring the implementation and application of standards. Faith communities know these folks as ethicists, moral theologians, and canonists. Ethics and polity are major areas of concern for them. So-called “safe church” practices, as well as the moral standards acceded to by faith communities and believers, are all supported by such theological practitioners.

Additionally, teacher scientists are trained to share knowledge. They are the communicators of science. Their goal is to pass on knowledge to other persons. Some write and publish. Some are public speakers. Some teach in a classroom setting. Teaching is a core activity of all religious traditions. In faith communities, catechists, pastors, rabbis, imams, bishops, and professors are all involved in this theological office. Finally, technician scientists provide actual operational, scientific services to the public. Doctors, nurses, coroners, nutritionists, compliance officers, and many other types of scientific practitioners fall into this category. They provide the public with the benefits of science. In the world of religion, these are the specially trained practitioners, in most cases being the ordained clergy and other professionally trained lay ministers and pastoral counselors.

Conclusion

This is a truism: bad science does not make good theology. One day, we may again be able to say that bad theology, or bad metaphysics, does not make good science. In any event, it would seem that theology and metaphysics

can indeed be scientific endeavors so long as one does not have a naïve notion of scientific objectivity or a reductionist notion of theological induction. Theology and metaphysics fail as scientific endeavors only if one accepts that truth and meaning are beyond the realm of science, and that experience and observation are beyond the realm of theology and metaphysics.

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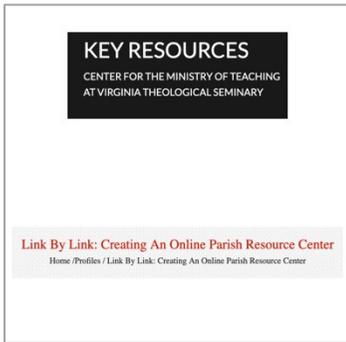
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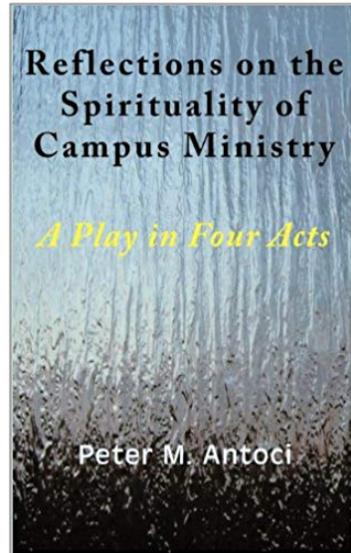
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