

THEOLOGICAL SHAMELESSNESS? A RESPONSE TO ARTHUR PEACOCKE AND DAVID A. PAILIN

by *Vitor Westhelle*

Abstract. This is a theological response to two programmatic essays, “Science and the Future of Theology: Critical Issues,” by Arthur Peacocke and “What Game is Being Played? The Need for Clarity about the Relationship between Scientific and Theological Understanding,” by David A. Pailin. It argues that the two authors, well informed by the recent developments in science, are reduplicating some methodological and epistemological trends common to nineteenth-century theology. The feasibility of their project should, therefore, be examined on whether they succeed in answering the questions posed to the liberal project that dominated theological and philosophical scholarship in the last century. They are found to be wanting in their inadequate response to three considerations: (1) the persistence of particular manifestations of religion and theology’s enduring refusal to accept thoroughly scientific “enlightened” criteria, (2) the epistemological implications of the eschatological character of the Christian message, and (3) the trinitarian paradigm for Christian theology and the life of faith.

Keywords: death of God; episteme; epistemological break; eschatology; nineteenth-century theology; Trinity; ultimacy.

In 1841, Bruno Bauer (1809–1882), then already a post-Christian theologian, wrote an article entitled “Theological Shamelessness” in which, with characteristic sarcasm, he described the aftermath of what appeared to be the devastating onslaught of the Enlightenment on positive religion and on the theological establishment. But with some dismay and frustration he wrote: “The age before the Enlightenment and the [French] Revolution are called the good times of faith, as if today faith had lost its power or even as if it did not longer exist. Completely wrong! Now the true age of faith

Vitor Westhelle is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, IL 60615-5199.

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has broken in and the religious consciousness has come to its fulfillment” (Bauer 1841, 465).

Arthur Peacocke and David A. Pailin certainly do not concede to religion and theology the triumph that Bauer scornfully decries, although they seem equally puzzled by the theological persistence in not fully accepting the canons of rationality the Enlightenment has crowned. But like Bauer, in the name of the legacy of the Enlightenment, they also denounce the shameless state of the theological enterprise in its two-centuries-old failure to match the intellectual rigor of the sciences. Less caustic than another contemporary of Bauer—David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874)—they stop just short of calling the theology they see a “science of idiots, of the ignorant consciousness” (Strauss 1840–41, 2:625). But very much like Strauss they would agree that theology’s “task in the present consists in demolishing a building that is no longer grounded on the foundations of the modern world” (1840–41, 2:624).

Is there something methodologically new that they are proposing and that has not been around in the major revisionist efforts sweeping the theological ground of the nineteenth century from Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) to Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889)? Is it more than a turn-of-the-millennium re-editing of the Enlightenment? After all, they both seem to share Gotthold Lessing’s (1729–1781) groundbreaking declaration of the untenableness of the historical “proofs” of Christianity: the miracle stories, the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, and the historical triumph and expansion of orthodox Christianity (Lessing 1957, 51–56).

The continuity with the claims of the Enlightenment and the nineteenth-century theological responses is, in my estimation, quite clear; the novelty the two essays present, a couple of centuries after the Enlightenment drastically remodeled the theological agenda, is less than astonishing, notwithstanding the fact that the paradigm—the natural and historical sciences—for how theology should be done has indeed amassed a field of data and configured scientific models that the nineteenth century was only starting to touch upon. (And they should be commended for the comprehensive engagement with these data.) But, then, novelty is not a criterion for credibility and truthfulness about the way things really are. The question is rather to know whether the essays we are considering meet the test of their own criteria and, in so doing, present us with Ariadne’s thread in the maze of catatonic theological reactions to the watershed of enlightened rationality so well represented in the nineteenth century’s theological and philosophical scholarship. My response does not pertain to and is not even competent to dispute the scientific content they work with. I shall focus rather on their methodological and epistemological presuppositions in defining what religion and the task of theology are about.

Both are programmatic essays (Pailin’s has more analytical depth, Peacocke’s more critical incisiveness) on what they perceive to be the

challenges theology must face if it is to attain credibility (Pailin) or verisimilitude (Peacocke) as a discipline or narrative about theistic beliefs and convictions.

Peacocke diagnoses contemporary theology's incapability of meeting the criteria of epistemological realism. For him, this realism is what has fortified the scientific edifice and granted to it a rational intelligibility that has protected it from the assaults of its obscurantist enemies (which often become strange bedfellows of theological irrationalism), the latest edition being those the author names vaguely as "postmoderns." Theology, Peacocke denounces, "as it is" has missed the mark of using the method of proceeding by "inference to the best explanation" (IBE, after Peter Lipton 1991) and has stubbornly relied on the authority of a book, a community, or an a priori truth, resulting in the perpetuation of circular arguments.

Pailin, while he is less belligerent in his criticism of theology than his English colleague and more subtle in drawing lessons that theology should learn from science (for a realist, he surprisingly admits that the Wittgensteinian game theology plays has definitely different rules than the ones that govern the language of the scientific community [Wittgenstein 1953]), remains equally adamant regarding the feasibility of theology according to the models it has pursued. Similar to but more elaborate than Peacocke in laying out the theological landscape, he also finds failing attempts at realism that resort to circular arguments. Faring equally badly in his estimation are nonrealist interpretations that try to accomplish a restoration of theology by eliminating features that have traditionally been essential to theological self-understanding or to religious sensibilities.

The epithets for the new theology they propose have been with us for quite some time: "genuinely liberal and even radical," according to Peacocke (p. 136); "liberal, modern (that is, enlightened) natural theology," according to Pailin (p. 160). The importance of these contributions for a theology for the next millennium actually exceeds what a term like "liberal" might evoke in the mind of any theologian familiar with the history of (continental) theology in the nineteenth century. Pailin, it seems, regards nineteenth-century liberalism as a valiant but mostly flawed attempt due to its often nonrealist escape into a safety zone (*Sturmfreiesgebiet*), away from the critical realist eye. Both authors are trained in the natural sciences and versed in the contemporary epistemological implications of scientific methods of investigation. Both also know the sciences to provide a credible and a shared majority opinion about the way the world is. They expect a future and credible theology to do with the theistic hypothesis what the sciences have done with the physical world: provide for a meaningful and intelligible explanation with respect to ultimate realities that coheres with what science has taught us about the world, stripping existing theology down to "newly conceived essentials" (Peacocke, p. 136) or adopting a new story that can be "rationally justified" (Pailin, p. 160).

The questions they raise and their caustic evaluation of most of the theology they see being done deserve the highest respect, as does nineteenth-century theology. Nonetheless, the critiques addressed to nineteenth-century theological efforts must be again addressed to Peacocke and Pailin: What is the peculiar character of a religious narrative, and, by implication, of theological reflection? Is it to speak of ultimate realities using the criteria of verisimilitude that the sciences employ? Is there a natural and universal religious core, or are religions intrinsically pluralistic and irreducible in their particular manifestation? Are there universal epiphanies, or do religions intrinsically rely on authoritative, though revisable and reinterpreted, claims of divine self-revelation? To use a classic liberal analogy, is a particular religion a universal kernel covered by a culturally bound but nonessential husk? Or would an onion be the most appropriate metaphor, suggesting that if peeled to the core nothing is left (in the husk is the proof)?

An example taken from Bertold Brecht's (1898–1956) play *Galileo* will help me to frame my argument. The play is obviously a grand elegy for the procedures and virtues of science and, as expected from Brecht, a virulent denunciation of established religion. In scene 4, Galileo is demonstrating his telescope to Prince Cosimo de' Medici, who is accompanied by courtesans and an assortment of university professors. Galileo insists that the experts look through his telescope to confirm the facts that his observation has gathered. Refusing to do it, the mathematician in the group questions Galileo's reliance on the telescope, thereby discarding "the teachings of two thousand years." The discussion is about what the telescope allows to be seen in comparison to the data that the church relied upon. Obviously, in the play the position of the church and its reliance on centuries of theological reasoning is ridiculed.

Another reading of the scene without making any apology for the church in that particular affair is, I suggest, possible. Brecht focused the discussion on the reliability of the lenses of Galileo's telescope. My own rereading of the play would focus not on whatever Galileo had been able to establish credibly with his observations but rather on the fact that whatever fell in Galileo's field of vision through the telescope, whatever rationality he was trying to construe, implied also a decision to leave out, beyond the frame of this field, other knowledges (or *epistemes*) lying beyond the horizons that the new science was establishing as normative, that is, normative for science. Ironically, Brecht tries to claim for science the same hegemony for which he criticizes the church's theology. But the point is well taken insofar as the play discloses the possibilities of another knowledge than the one the church, in Brecht's view, wanted to efface and, for a time, succeeded in suppressing. Galileo's anecdotal "yet it turns" (*eppur si muove*) ought to be read also, with license to irony, as a comment about systems of knowledge that rely in the immovable enlightenment of a metaphorical star.

One does not need to reject science in order to trust other knowledges that inform and give meaning to life. As Peacocke informs us, quantum theory does not change when we go south across the equator (p. 122). But even north of the equator there are those who would trust a physicist—or, for that matter, be one—and simultaneously find meaning in the story about the empty tomb and earnestly confess that Christ was born of the *virgin* Mary (I am here calling upon two examples of Christian claims that Peacocke would like to erase from the theological text and from religious confession). Irreconcilable as these claims may be within the field of vision of science, they do coexist, suggesting other fields of vision (something that Pailin, in principle, agrees with in his Wittgensteinian gesture, although at the end he imposes “scientific” criteria—“how we actually find the world to be”—as the ruling norm also for theological discourse). And, if recent sociological studies are to be trusted (Berger 1998), this coexistence of nonscientifically based rationalities does not seem at all to be withering even in the midst of tremendous advances registered by science and technology, not to mention more than two hundred years of “enlightened” criticism of religion and theology. What Brecht’s play is finally about is the power invested in a given knowledge (in this case, of the theology of the church) that marginalizes and silences others.

As far as religion and theology are concerned, the fact that their “object”—as it is admitted by the authors—is characterized by a sense of ultimacy raises the question whether this ultimacy does not have also its peculiar epistemological implications. If ultimacy has to do with an end, a limit, is it not plausible at least to say that this limit is the very limit of the world as we know it to be and, therefore, also of the rationality that has rendered it to the best possible explanation? In other words, are not religious and theological ways of knowing adventures into the boundary areas of the accepted inference to the best explanation that science provides us? The best explanation is neither the ultimate one nor an explanation of the ultimate. The ultimate implies an epistemological break, a rupture with a given way to pursue an explanation.

It does not seem to me coincidental that it was in the heydays of liberalism in theology that Johannes Weiss (1827–1914), Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), and others established the eschatological character of the New Testament message. Their claim was that the New Testament in general, and the words and deeds of Jesus in particular, could be correctly interpreted only if read from the perspective of a community that expected the imminent end of the world as we know it to be and the ushering in of a new world, a kingdom not of this world but of God. Such an expectation, it is argued, is the key to interpreting the theory and the practice of the first generation of Christians, who were responsible for the writings that would later become the canonical texts upon which Christianity relies. This “eschatological hypothesis” has dominated biblical and theological scholarship in the twentieth century.

Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), in reminiscences of his student years in Berlin (Bultmann 1958, 13), reminds us of the frustration that came upon the theological world with the persuasiveness of the eschatological hypothesis and mentions theologian Julius Kaftan's (1848–1926) remark that, if these studies were right, there could be no place for the notion of a kingdom of God within Christian theology. In his estimation, such an eschatological vision would render theology irrelevant for the world as we know it to be. But contrary to Kaftan's predictions, it was indeed eschatology, in its plethora of interpretations, that became one of the elements most emphasized in Christian theology during the twentieth century, a century that, even beyond the borders of theology proper, both knew the atomic bomb and provided a timetable of some billion years for the end of the world as we know it, the former suggesting an apocalyptic-like scenario and the latter offering a philosophic entry for the finitude of the universe. A plausible case for an explanation other than the one provided by the sciences (without denying it!) is to recognize that the limits of the world as we know it to be are also the limits of the explanations that account for its being as science finds it to be. There is a legitimate place for pluralism within the spectrum that ranges from relativism to absolutism.

A further point to be raised in connection with the texts of Pailin and Peacocke has to do with the theistic presupposition they assume as normative for a religious conscience or theological discourse. If stripping theology down to its "newly conceived essentials" means accepting theistic convictions for a presumed generic religiosity, how can it represent a particular religion, say Christianity (not to mention an antitheistic religion like Buddhism), which had for most of its history thought of itself not strictly in theistic but in trinitarian terms? Here again the authors can claim as their allies some important nineteenth-century predecessors, like Schleiermacher, who, not seeing much use for the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian theology, relegated it to some concluding remarks in his comprehensive *The Christian Faith* (Schleiermacher 1989, 738–51).

Indeed, trinitarian thought seems to be helplessly trapped in contradictions that post-Cartesian thinking cannot reason itself through (unless one is a Hegelian). But if contemporary German theologian Jürgen Moltmann (1993) is right, and I think he might just be, such trinitarian thinking is an attempt to explore a fundamental contradiction that lies at the very core of the Christian faith—the death of God—more than it is a speculation about the divine life and relations. Trinitarian thinking attempts to hold together a theistic belief in a God with an assortment of supernatural attributes and the divine partaking in the utter frailty of human finitude. Can the assertion that the one man who dies on a cross is "truly God" be removed from Christian conscience in the name of a generic theism? Can we overcome what Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) with a sense of bewilderment yet acute perception called "that stroke of

genius of Christianity” (1930, 2:123) and subject the death of God to an inference to the best explanation? Can we remove the folly, the unreasonableness (1 Corinthians 1:18) of such a conception and still retain the core of what Christianity is about?

In *The Garden of Epicurus*, Anatole France (1844–1924) has an illustrative story regarding the language of metaphysics that I think can also be applied to a theology that would be governed by the criteria posited by Pailin and Peacocke. The story is a discussion between two characters regarding a sentence found in a book on metaphysics: “The spirit possesses God in proportion as it participates in the absolute” (France 1923, 193). The discussion is about the abstract character of the language that metaphysicians develop in their attempt to overcome the mythical rootedness of the concepts they employ and thus create a Esperanto-like language to communicate across disciplines. One of the characters offers the following analogy:

I was thinking, thinking how Metaphysicians, when they make a language for themselves, are like knife-grinders, who, instead of knives and scissors, put medals and coins to the grindstone, to efface the lettering, date and type. When they have worked away till nothing is visible in their crown-pieces, neither King Edward, the Emperor William, nor the Republic, they say: “These pieces have nothing either English, German or French about them; we have freed them from all limits of time and space; they are not worth five shillings any more; they are of inestimable value, and their circulation is extended infinitely.” They are right in speaking thus. By this needy knife-grinder’s activity words are changed from a physical to a metaphysical acceptance. It is obvious that they lose in the process; what they gain by it is not so immediately apparent. (1923, 194–95)

The argument concludes when this character of the story shows his metaphysician friend that the most the latter has accomplished is to efface by a new conceptuality the concrete mythical and localized signification of that original statement, creating what he calls not something superior to the myth that he had valiantly tried to overcome in an enlightened spirit but “an anaemic mythology without body or blood” (p. 214).

After reflecting on the texts of Pailin and Peacocke one is left to wonder whether a theology “stripped down to newly conceived essentials” (Peacocke, p. 136) or to “a rationally justified response to what we understand to be how things actually are” (Pailin, p. 160) is not another proposal for an anemic myth. Peacocke (and Pailin implicitly also) certainly tries to take account of “the Jewish and Christian communal inheritance of claimed, classical revelatory experiences” (p. 131) as “data” for theology. But how much is left of the inscription on the coin when a radical revision of theology “as promulgated by church bodies and in most pulpits” (p. 132) is called for? Would he be proposing to grind only one side of the coin? In this case, what he loses is clear: both the actual value of a half-defaced coin *and* the metaphysical pretense of an infinite circulation—for even if no longer worth its pristine value it would still be bound to what would be

left of its inscription, namely, the classical “data.” What he gains might be even less than the metaphysician’s share in France’s tale.

If theology ought to be ashamed of anything—and this is the noble lesson we ought to retain both from Pailin and Peacocke and from the nineteenth century—it is that it sought frequently to rescue itself not on the basis of its own unique claims of thinking about and within the limits but in subservience to powers and knowledges that too often discipline its discourse, be they the political regime of the day, sectarian obscurantism, ecclesial polity, or even the scientific inference to the best explanation. Peacocke’s chiasmus imposed on the Anselmian formula to read that “understanding seeks faith” (Peacocke, p. 131) might be innocently intended, but its implication is that theology might be left incapable of saying another word or announcing a world *other* than the one science so persuasively and credibly informs us about. Thereby, religion and theology might well lose their essential identity altogether. If that should happen, there would be nothing really worth revitalizing, even, or above all, if we were to follow the guidelines that Peacocke and Pailin have proposed.

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