Theology, the University, Metaphysics, and Respectability

IN PRAISE OF FOLLY? THEOLOGY AND THE UNIVERSITY

by Gregory R. Peterson

Abstract. To suppose the possibility of dialogue between theology and science is to suppose that theology is an intellectually worthy partner to engage in dialogue with science. The status of theology as a discipline, however, remains contested, one sign of which is the absence of theology from the university. I argue that a healthy theology-science dialogue would benefit from the presence of theology as an academic discipline in the university. Theology and theologians would benefit from the much closer contact with university disciplines, including the sciences. The university and the sciences would benefit from the presence of theology, providing a department of ultimate concern, where big questions may be asked and ideologies critiqued. A university theology would need to meet standards of academic integrity.

Keywords: theological method; theology; ultimate concern; university

---

And these most subtle subtleties are rendered yet more subtle by the several methods of so many Schoolmen, that one might sooner wind himself out of a labyrinth than the entanglements of the realists, nominalists, Thomists, Albertists, Occamists, Scotists. Nor have I named all the several sects, but only some of the chief; in all which there is so much doctrine and so much difficulty that I may well conceive the apostles, had they been to deal with these new kind of divines, had needed to have prayed in aid of some other spirit. (Erasmus [1509] 1913, 117)

Gregory R. Peterson is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion at South Dakota State University and Program Coordinator of the Philosophy and Religion Department, Box 504 Scobey 336, SDSU, Brookings, SD 57007; e-mail greg.peterson@sdstate.edu.

[*Zygon*, vol. 43, no. 3 (September 2008)]
 ISSN 0591-2385

So remarked Desiderius Erasmus on the theologians of his age. Writing several years prior to Martin Luther's fateful posting of his ninety-five theses, Erasmus delighted Europe with his barbed observations of the culture of his day. He did so when theology and theologians were, arguably, at the height of their intellectual influence and power. Theology, understood as the queen of the sciences, occupied the preeminent place in the university. Far from being peripheral to the educational process, it was understood that the educational process led to theological contemplation. The sciences, then referred to as natural philosophy, could still be properly seen as a handmaiden to theology, a view first developed by Augustine on the eve of the Middle Ages.

Erasmus' criticisms of theology ring oddly familiar today, and not a little ironic. Erasmus, after all, was a scholar and theological thinker of no small repute, and alongside his *The Praise of Folly* ([1509] 1913) he is perhaps best known for his debate with Luther over the freedom of the will (Erasmus [1524] 1978). While the world today frets over various fundamentalisms and the clergy that lead them, the idea of academic theologians being powerful, let alone powerful in the university, will no doubt strike many as amusing, precisely because of their agreement with Erasmus' assessment. Theology, the argument goes, is just not a real discipline, at least not a real academic discipline, and as such does not belong in the university proper. At best it might find itself in the divinity school, where it is politely understood that the theologian's duty lies in training pastors, not furthering the quest for knowledge or deepening our understanding of how the world works.

Even more strange, the issue of the intellectual status of theology as a discipline and, consequently, its place in the university, is only rarely discussed, even among theologians. True, issues of the rationality of religious belief in general and belief in God in particular remain of central concern for academic philosophy of religion, but philosophy of religion is a field that employs relatively few philosophers and, strangely, few theologians. In seminaries and (some) church-related colleges, the issue does not arise; the intellectual integrity of theology is assumed, so the issue becomes not whether one should do theology but what kind of theologizing should take place. Meanwhile, the university proceeds largely as if theology did not exist, and if it did, it was long ago converted into a department of religious studies. Because there are no theologians on the faculty, the question of whether there should be never arises, so the university can go about its business.

My modest proposal is that this is an unhealthy situation, both for theology and for the university. Theology as a discipline belongs in the university, and theologians should engage their work in the context of the goals and aspirations of the university. Understanding the reasons for this has much to do with our understandings of the relation of theology to the sciences as well as the ongoing vitality of the theology-science dialogue.

Theology and Ultimate Questions

There is a traditional—and obvious—rationale often cited for the absence of theology in the university. The university, as commonly conceived, is devoted to the accumulation of knowledge and methods of discovery that are public in character and so, at least in principle, discoverable by anyone. Theology, as it is often understood, concerns itself solely with elaborating doctrines regarding God based on a source or sources of revelation that are taken simply as given. On this construal, theology is based not on public but on private knowledge claims. In Christianity, this knowledge is typically taken to be based on the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and creedal statements. In the case of Roman Catholicism, the scriptures are further supported by the authority of the pope and church tradition. Among Pentecostals and in some forms of Protestantism, religious experience also may serve as a source of knowledge. Such sources are taken to be private because they are seen as givens or are not accessible to what we normally understand as scientific verification. Christians may believe that the Bible is a revelation from God, but its status is often assumed rather than argued for, except perhaps for an appeal to the category of faith. By contrast, the university's approach to knowledge eschews appeals to revelation, to faith, to claims not based on observation and rational argumentation. Unable to meet the demands of public epistemic accountability, theologizing must occur outside the boundaries of the university.

Although I put the argument forward in a simplistic form, the general outline is familiar enough and finds expression by both advocates and opponents of theology. The category of revelation certainly has been of historic and continuing importance to theology as has been the distinction, laid out clearly by Thomas Aquinas, between truths known by reason and those apprehended by faith (*Summa Contra Gentiles* I.3). Although this by itself does not entail that theologizing should take place outside the university—Aquinas himself was a university professor—it is a short step to that conclusion, particularly if faith is construed narrowly as the holding of belief in contrast to reason. Such was the understanding of faith as employed by Steven Pinker (2006) and Lawrence Kraus (2007) in their essays opposing the inclusion of a course on faith and reason within the core curriculum of Harvard University.

Theologians tend to be more sophisticated in their understanding of faith, but the result is sometimes the same. One way this comes out is in the appeal to church and community. Theology, it is said, is not like other academic disciplines because it is done in the context of a worshipping community and cannot be divorced from it. Academic theology divorced from church and community is therefore not real theology. Stanley Hauerwas attributes the failings of Christian ethics as a discipline to Friedrich Schleiermacher's attempt to create a university-style theological curriculum, strong on objective, scientific analysis but correspondingly unable to

make any actual theological claims. Because the university by definition is dedicated to the Enlightenment project of universal, objective knowledge shorn of personal commitment, it is not a place where theologizing can take place (Hauerwas [1997] 2001).

Despite these claims, it is important to note that they assume a particular and narrow account of what theology is, one that neither is universally shared nor reflects the broad character of the discipline. If theology were just God-talk derived unthinkingly from scripture, which in turn was held up as a source of knowledge based on blind and unjustifiable belief, clearly theology does not belong in the university—and probably doesn't belong anywhere. But attention to the history of theology and the contemporary character of the discipline suggests a more complex picture, one that implies that theology may have a place in the university after all. God and revelation certainly have been of importance for theology as a discipline in the monotheistic traditions, but the claim that theology is only about God and revelation misses quite a bit of theological inquiry.

The idea that theology rests wholly on the category of revelation subscribed to on the basis of blind faith takes very little time to dismantle. Although Aquinas made a distinction between truths that can be derived from reason and those derived only by revelation, he quite famously argued that we can know some things about God independently of revelation, such as whether or not God exists. Modern analytic philosophy of religion has spilled no small quantity of ink on both the existence question and the more general question of the rational status and character of God-talk. In theology proper, a similar conversation may be found in the questions surrounding theological method, questions concerning rational justification, explication, and discovery of theological truths, and even whether one can intelligibly speak of theological truths.

A similar but less obvious point may be made with regard to God. In the monotheistic traditions, God and God-talk are obviously important. The term *theology* means, literally, talk about God. From a historical perspective, however, the meaning of the term *God* has admitted of some ambiguity. Although one may speak of God as a "being among beings," a superagent who creates and acts on the world in strong analogy to human agency, theology just as commonly speaks of God as a "wholly other," beyond comprehension or definition, or as synonymous with nature, as in pantheism. Famously, Paul Tillich (1952) spoke of God not as a being at all but as "the ground of being," arguing that genuine religion requires a breaking free of our ordinary conceptions of the divine in order to get to the "God beyond God."

This picture becomes more complex when we move beyond the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Hinduism speaks of God and gods, and so we may speak of Hindu theology; yet the role and status of these gods are variously understood, and in the Advaita Vedanta

tradition the concept of God is treated as something of a useful fiction. As a result, it is easy to speak of Advaita Vedanta as a philosophical school—the problem being that it is very clearly a religious philosophy that understands itself to be based on the scriptural tradition of the Vedas and Upanishads. A similar issue crops up for Buddhism, because the Buddha seemed to have believed in the Hindu gods but regarded them as irrelevant to the pursuit of nirvana. So Buddhism often is understood to be an atheistic religion, although it recognizes the buddhas as having godlike knowledge and, in the case of Mahayana Buddhism, understands the nature and actions of bodhisattvas in terms that sometimes are quite recognizable to theists. As a result, to speak of Buddhist thought as Buddhist philosophy misses the very religious context in which Buddhist inquiry takes place. *Buddhology* could be used, but this is also potentially misleading, as it can be taken to imply that Buddhism involves the worship of buddhas, which is technically incorrect. As a result, some Buddhists have embraced the term *theology* as the closest one in Western languages to capture what it is that Buddhists do when reflecting on their tradition (Jackson and Makransky 2000).

These are points I raised in a previous *Zygon* essay (Peterson 2001), and I rehearse them here because they are important for understanding what place theology may have in the university. In that essay I argued that a discipline is defined not so much by the answers it gives as by the questions it asks. If this is correct, what makes theology distinctive as a discipline is not so much that it talks about God but that it asks certain kinds of questions, kinds not found in the disciplines of physics, history, or psychology: questions of ultimacy, meaning, and purpose. Although these questions sometimes are addressed in other, neighboring disciplines, the more explicitly they do so the more they come to look like theology. This is very clear in the case of Western philosophy, with which the theology of the monotheistic traditions shares so much history. Much of contemporary philosophy explicitly eschews questions of ultimacy, meaning and purpose and consequently does not look very much like theology. This has not always been the case. Ancient philosophy, which took seriously the call to love wisdom, was concerned not simply with knowledge or logical puzzles but also with how to live in a way that connected with a deeper understanding of the cosmos. Both Stoicism and Neoplatonism are easily understood as religious philosophies, and both explicitly speak of God and categories of ultimacy.

The case can be made that a good many popular writings that seek to interpret the meaning and significance of the picture of the world coming out of modern science possess a strongly theological structure and sensibility, even if the authors do not recognize this. Ironically, Daniel Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995) is one of the clearer examples, beginning with basic philosophical presuppositions, then moving sequentially through

cosmology, biology, human evolution, and ethics, much as a text in Christian systematic theology moves from creation to the human condition to the promise of redemption and sanctification. Dennett is clearly antitheological in the narrower sense of not believing in God, but his work has the kind of structure that is distinctively theological in the broader sense that I am speaking of.

A similar point has been made recently by Nancey Murphy (2007). Employing Arthur Peacocke's hierarchy of the sciences, which seeks to link the sciences in a chain of complexity from physics to biology to psychology, Murphy endorses Peacocke's placing theology at the top of this hierarchy as the most inclusive form of reflection. She then observes that removing theology in the narrower sense of God-talk does not eliminate the "slot" at the top of hierarchy, for this kind of discourse and the questions it addresses is still required, and this is what prominent atheist interpreters of science such as Richard Dawkins and Dennett do. Although they very clearly do not believe in God, they are theologians in the broader understanding of theology that I am speaking of. Although "atheist theologian" certainly sounds odd, it is not quite the oxymoron it once was.

At the end of the day, it may be that some other term, less prone to misunderstanding, is preferred to designate the kind of discipline that I speak of. The central point still stands—that theology as I have described it is a unique and important discipline, addressing unique and important questions that are not fully and completely addressed elsewhere in the university.

Voices in the Wilderness

If this argument is correct, a clear reason that the university needs theology is precisely that theology is a legitimate field of inquiry, and the absence of theology in the university represents a failure of the university in its mission to explore all areas of knowledge. The university needs a department of ultimate concern, where there is freedom to ask the big questions of meaning and purpose and a serious effort to address them.

Such big questions are raised in other disciplines, but typically they are not answered within the confines of those disciplines. A clear case is that of physics, the study of which raises important questions about the nature of matter and therefore ontology, space and time, and the origin and fate of the cosmos. Versions of these questions are studied within the confines of physics, but, in the process, questions of ultimacy, interpretation, and commitment invariably arise. What are the implications, not simply physically but also existentially, of the evidence that the universe was birthed in a big bang more than thirteen billion years ago? What does our knowledge of the huge size of the universe imply, if anything, about our place in it? How committed should physicists be to the finality of any physical theory? Physi-

cists certainly ask these questions, but when they do, they do not ask them as physicists within the confines of the disciplines or find their answers in articles on physics in physics journals. They are questions confined to the late hours of the night, after the "real research" has been done. At that point, the physicists have stopped being physicists and start speaking as theologians.

Similar observations may be made about fields such as biology, psychology, and computer science. That theology is similarly wrapped up in the humanities should be clear. These connections point to a further role that theology may play. Concerned as it is with the whole of reality, a department of theology may serve as an important place where disciplinary barriers break down. Because theology is precisely concerned with the meaning of the whole, the study of theology involves the kind of cultural and (ideally) scientific literacy that typically is not available elsewhere.

There is a further rationale for the inclusion of theology, one distinctive from the claim that the university needs another discipline that contributes to its mission of knowledge and understanding of the world. Linked to its role of asking questions of ultimate concern, a department of theology can be a place where the prophetic voice is heard. That the university needs a prophetic voice is likely much more obvious now than in previous periods. Modern universities are no longer—if they ever were—ivory towers, committed to the pure pursuit of knowledge with the concerns of the world kept at arm's length. The modern university is a messy place, clearly identified as an engine of economic growth and prosperity. Governmental monies feed the university either directly through state financing and tuition support or indirectly through massive grants for scientific research. Universities are expected to provide returns on these investments. University research should spur the creation of new business enterprises or aid existing ones. Scientific research should provide benefits, whether for health and medicine (and therefore the medical professions), industry, or defense and national security. This entanglement with government and economy has led to greater entanglement with business, which increasingly has played a direct role in funding research and even the determination of the publication of the results. Behind these entanglements lie ideological commitments, not all of which are benign.

Speaking in a prophetic voice is integral to the theological task. Inquiry into questions of ultimate value is inherently destabilizing, for it questions and relativizes all existing commitments to an ultimate norm. Here there is clearly overlap with the ethicist in the philosophy department, who in the context of the university may be asked to weigh in on ethical guidance on particular issues. Philosophical ethics, however, especially in its applied form, is narrower in its interests and scope. The ethicist may be called upon to question the suitability of guidelines for experimentation on human subjects, or to evaluate norms for avoiding conflict of interest, or even

to critique inequalities of race, sex, and class as found in the university. Typically it is not taken to be within the ethicist's purview to denounce the ideologies that may control and misshape the identity of the university, let alone identify them. Referencing ideology might suggest the political scientist or the political philosopher, but political scientists tend to understand themselves as studying political systems, not advocating or opposing them. Political philosophers are better equipped for such a task, but arguably they would either have to presuppose the very question of ultimacy that may be at stake or have to act as theologians themselves, directly engaging themselves with theology, attempting to answer questions of ultimate commitment and value.

Universities, and the interests that control them, do not want to be critiqued, but that is of course the point. The modern university needs critique, including theological critique. This is not to say that universities should be done away with—far from it!—but a healthy university needs self-criticism, and placing theology and theologians in the university is one way to provide it. Nor is it to say that sources of valid critique cannot be found in other disciplines. Rather, I am suggesting that theology is a unique resource for such a critique, for it is precisely theology that asks the question of ultimate concern: What, in fact, *is* your god? For example, does the system of college athletics in the United States reveal a form of idolatry, one that corrupts the very nature and intent of the university?

There is a flip side. Just as the university needs theology, so too theology needs the university. To answer questions of meaning and ultimacy requires reflection on that which has been discovered. Optimally, this requires theologians to be in conversation with the university, and theologians who are not will quickly find themselves perceived as irrelevant to the tasks and questions of modern society. To an important extent, theologians are aware of this. Theological education at most institutions typically includes training in philosophy, hermeneutics, and history and, to a lesser degree, some introduction to norms and methods of the social sciences. But students of theology often learn the content of these disciplines secondhand, not from experts in these fields, so the rate of dissemination is slow. Exposure to the physical sciences is comparatively nonexistent. Theologians not working in the context of a university have few opportunities to interact with scientists. As a result, when it comes time for theologians to reflect on the sciences in a sophisticated manner, they are at a disadvantage.

In addition to these reasons aimed at the integrity both of the university and of theology as a discipline, I would add a more subtle reason for the inclusion of theology in the university: the social effect it might have. It is easy to criticize theology if there are no theologians around, and it is easy for theologians to (for instance) criticize the practice or content of science if there are no scientists present to provide some explanation or counterargument. Academics are trained to think of learning and discovery as some-

thing that occurs through the formal processes of publication and peer review, but a good portion of it occurs in hallways and in the after-hours of a campus lecture, a result of personal encounters, chance or otherwise. Theology can learn from the university and the university from theology only if the two are connected enough for such interactions to occur.

Can Theology Play Ball?

Despite these considerations, nagging questions likely will remain for many that involve the epistemic character of theology. These can take one of two forms. The first suggests that although there may be a legitimate field of theology, it does not belong in the university because it does not deal with the kind of knowledge that lies at the heart of the mission of the university. The second suggests that theology does not engage in the production of knowledge at all but simply produces irrelevant fictions that do not meet university standards of inquiry. As such, theology belongs not with physics, mathematics, and political science but with astrology, numerology, and alchemy.

The former argument has been cited already as a traditional rationale for excluding theology from the university. I believe that it should not be seen as persuasive. It claims that theology, relying as it does on faith and scripture, constitutes a private rather than public form of knowledge, where *public* implies (in principle) available and accessible to anyone. Thus, physics produces public knowledge, because its results can be verified by anyone who conducts the proper experiments and follows the proper procedures. No such procedure exists to determine whether any given scripture should be taken as authoritative, and because most of the content of theology relies on the interpretation of scriptural texts it cannot be taken to be public knowledge.

A few points can be made in response to this argument. First, theology as I have defined it does not necessarily appeal to scriptural texts, so arguments about scripture do not, a priori, say anything about the status of theology as a field, defined as it is by a unique set of questions. Buddhist and naturalistic theologies, for instance, do not make these appeals and so are immune to such an argument. Beyond this, it is not obvious that an appeal to or use of scripture is automatically irrational in character. Certainly, to assume the authority of a given scripture without justification or explanation smacks of the irrational, and this does suggest that theological programs making such appeals would not meet the standards of university inquiry. It is not so clear that the category of scripture always involves such irrational appeal, and part of the theological task of those traditions that employ scriptures is to give some account of why one should do so. The advent of modern scholarship has made many of the traditional arguments problematic. Premodern Christian theologians often appealed to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies or to the miracles recounted in the

New Testament in a way that is less than convincing now. But this is a far cry from claiming that no such argument can be given, and some contemporary theologians and philosophers of religion have attempted to do so (see Murphy 1994; Tracy 1989).

Additionally, such a criticism presumes that knowledge is traditionless and that appeal to any authority beyond immediate experience or deductive reasoning is automatically flawed. The postmodern turn has made us much more aware that the idea of traditionless knowledge is a fiction (Gadamer 1989; MacIntyre 1989; Kuhn 1962). Knowledge inquiry always takes place within the context of a particular tradition of inquiry that shapes the questions asked. As a result, each academic discipline can be understood as having a "canon" of authoritative texts relied on precisely because they have in the past proven to be reliable and fruitful. This is most obviously the case in other disciplines of the humanities and some areas of social science, where the works of foundational scholars such as John Locke, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx have, perhaps ironically, a near-scriptural status for those who work within the traditions these scholars started.

The above argument is only a sketch and would need to be fleshed out to justify the place and use of scripture. In the context of the primary argument—that theology holds a place in the university—the point is that appeals to scripture are not necessary to theology, and, if such appeals are made, it is not at all clear that they disbar theology from the circle of rational inquiry. As a result, the claim that theology is private, not public, knowledge does not seem very persuasive, not least because the public/private distinction is more porous than it first appears.

Addressing the claim that theology does not constitute public knowledge because it must necessarily take place within the context of community is slightly more complex. If the claim is that there is such a thing as public knowledge and that theology does not meet the requirements of such knowledge, the claim seems troubling, for it would suggest that theology is not knowledge at all but something else. Some theologians have suggested precisely this. Alex Nesteruk (2000), following a line of thinking in Greek Orthodox thought, suggests that theology be understood as doxology (praise), although he clearly does not seem to mean that there is consequently no content to theology at all.

The problem in at least some of these arguments is not so much the assumption that theology is connected to a community or communal experience but the assumption that knowledge as it is produced in other disciplines is not so connected. If there is no such thing as traditionless knowledge, the idea that theology is connected to a community seems less anomalous, even if it turns out that it lies at one end of the spectrum. Part of the claim here may be that certain kinds of knowledge and reflection require certain kinds of experiences and that the having of these experiences is necessary in order to engage in the appropriate kind of reflection.

Although the arguments referred to here have been made primarily by Christian theologians, the requirement of an experiential component is important for other traditions of inquiry. The veracity of Buddhist doctrine rests in part on the insight gained from or verified in meditational states. Proponents of strong accounts of the value of nature in the context of environmental ethics sometimes rely heavily on experiential accounts and insights that move them to their conclusions, and these experiences are taken to have as much or more force as strictly empirical or logical arguments (Leopold [1949] 1969 being a classic example). These arguments are not without problems, but if the communitarian element in theology is as important as some advocates indicate—and admittedly I am not convinced by some of the more extreme views—this seems at least a plausible route, and one that need not be incompatible with the mission of the university.

In the context of the United States there is at least one further nagging question, that of the relation of church and state in public universities. Because theology as ultimate concern is not tied to a specific church or religious institution, and might not even be considered specifically religious, it is not clear that the legal separation of church and state applies here. If there is such a thing as theological knowledge, it would be very strange for the state to rule that the pursuit of such knowledge is forbidden in state-funded universities. Indeed, there is no small irony in arguing that theological knowledge is the only kind forbidden in modern society. But issues of law and politics have their own histories and mode of operations, and it is impossible to say in advance that the courts would not rule narrowly and so exclude theology from state universities on the basis of the establishment clause in the Bill of Rights.

Theology's Epistemic Status

These concerns about private versus public knowledge will seem to some to be merely dancing around the second, and arguably more important, question about whether theology constitutes knowledge at all. Why shouldn't it be lumped together with astrology and numerology?

The most straightforward answer is that the questions theology addresses, questions of meaning and ultimate concern, are real and legitimate questions that need to be addressed, while astrology and numerology are based on premises that we know are false and that seem to have definite and negative answers. A fuller answer is considerably more complex, for to say that theology is the study of that which is of ultimate concern is not necessarily to exclude claims about the existence of God, Brahman, or nirvana, nor is it to say that the theological perspectives arising out of particular religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, Sikhism) are automatically excluded from consideration. It is to say that, if such study is to occur in the context of the university, certain standards of rational inquiry need to be met.

Here we come to the nub of the matter, because the argument over the presence of theology in the university comes down ultimately to an understanding of the norms of rationality and the question of who gets to decide what they are. For much of the twentieth century positivists held—or at least claimed to—the keys to rationality, and as a consequence not only was theology excluded, but any discipline unable to show itself to be scientific by positivistic standards was similarly threatened with expulsion. The postmodern reaction of the late twentieth century has altered the situation considerably, although in a way that has been tricky for theology, which seems to be primarily about the kind of metanarratives that at least some forms of postmodernism have attempted to dismantle (Lyotard 1984). The result is that postmodern approaches to knowledge may be seen as lowering the bar of rationality, and if this is case it is not necessarily a good thing for theology, because its entry to the university would be based not on its claim to knowledge but on the abolition of the requirement of such a claim.

The notion that postmodernism simply lowers the bar, however, is misleading, relying as it does on more extreme interpretations. Rather, the impact of postmodernism has been to change the kind of bar or bars used to evaluate rational discourse and so to suggest what now seems obvious, that the positivistic criteria for what counts as knowledge were inadequate. Although giving a recipe for the scientific method seems straightforward enough, the actual practice of scientific evaluation and theory formation typically is more complex and more diverse than such recipes suggest. Clearly, science involves falsification, but a particular falsification is sometimes profitably ignored; certainly science involves quantification, but it also includes qualitative judgment; and undoubtedly scientific theories portray the physical world accurately, except for when they probably do not. These *ceteris paribus* clauses do not necessarily damage the overall integrity of scientific disciplines, but they do reveal that scientific judgment and assessment of scientific theories is not so simple a matter. Add to this the fact that not all knowledge is scientific knowledge (my knowledge of the contents of my dream last night, for example, or uncannily accurate intuitions about playing the stock market) and the realization that our knowledge claims are inevitably historically and culturally contextualized, and we begin to see how theological rationality may be made more understandable to its critics.

Two related points may be added. The first is to recognize the ongoing and significant work in philosophy of religion and theology that seeks to address the issue of epistemic status and does so at a level of sophistication equivalent to that in many other disciplines. Even within the confines of the science-and-theology dialogue some quite good work has been done (for example, Barbour 1974; Murphy 1990; Van Huyssteen 1999). Second, if the kind of epistemic grounds typically employed to do good theology are not strong enough for the university, it is likely that a number of

disciplines already in the university, from areas of philosophy to anthropology and sociology to the more speculative branches of physical cosmology, also are in epistemic trouble. The bar can be set too low, but it also can be set too high.

Even within individual disciplines, there exists what may be called an epistemic polarity, a continuum of scholarship and standards that inform the discipline. On one end of the continuum stand the strongly scientific demands of the discipline, which require quantitative analysis, rigorous logic and/or testing procedures, and strict rules of interpretation and implementation. On the other end stands the poetic: the willingness, indeed the need, to draw on metaphor, simile, anecdote, and personal experience and the daring to consider the unique at the expense of the general. The practice of poetry is illuminating in this regard, for, although we tend to think of the writing of poems as a creative activity, it also provides insights that may not be perceived by other means. Poetry can be truth-bearing, and it is so precisely because of its poetic character, not in spite of it.

Realizing this is important, because such a continuum exists in the practice of theology today, and it need not, indeed should not, be squelched in the context of the university. Theology also has its more scientific side, methodologically as it approaches the norms of philosophy and ontologically as it approaches forms of religious naturalism, and those who theologize in this fashion value clarity, precision, and logical and empirical rigor in the same way as their like-minded colleagues in the natural and social sciences do. It also has its strongly poetic side, brought out in its sense of mystery, its recognition of the ineffability of that which is ultimate, and the richness of experience that cannot be captured in a scatter-plot graph. This mode of theologizing is also valuable—as valuable to the university and society as the more scientific/philosophical forms.

In addition, there is one element of theology that strongly distinguishes it from both science and poetry, and that is the element of commitment. Questions of meaning and purpose are not simply questions of facts but questions that affect the kind of life one leads. One may believe in black holes, but one does not commit to them, and nothing follows personally from the claim that black holes exist. In contrast, theological claims tend to be strongly connected to categories of commitment. Belief in God is almost inevitably intertwined with concerns about living a godly life, and believing Buddhist claims about suffering and the means to end suffering is intertwined with a life that pursues such an end, perhaps with confidence, perhaps with doubt. As a result, categories of faith and hope become relevant for the theologian in a way that does not occur in the sciences, for the question is not simply What is true? but What do I commit to? Although these questions are independent, they are complexly related, and part of the theologian's task is to explore the relation between the two questions and how best to answer them.

Conclusion

The issue of theology's presence in the university may seem far removed from matters of the field of science and theology, but reflection shows that the two issues are inevitably intertwined. For there to be a field of science and theology, there must be scientists and theologians who are able and willing to engage one another. If such dialogues are legitimate, the university is clearly the place for them to happen, and if theology remains outside the university, such dialogues will be that much more difficult. A more basic issue is that if theology-and-science is a legitimate area of intellectual discourse, this implies the legitimacy of the theological task, and it is not clear then why theology is not in the university.

Bringing theology back into the university currently may seem unachievable, even folly. But this need not remain the case, for theology may also be done by those who are not theologians, particularly by those who are in the cognate areas of their discipline where theological questions naturally arise. That, after all, is how academic disciplines are often born, by the coming together of those already present to form something new. Perhaps theology does not need to enter from the outside as much as it needs to be reborn from within. Although theologians may decry their own importance, what is needed is for that importance to be recognized by those outside the field. Doing so will require the university to position itself in its broader, more proper, horizon, concerned not merely with things that are useful and profitable but also with things that are ultimate.

References

Barbour, Ian. 1974. *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Dennett, Daniel. 1995. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life.* New York: Touchstone.

Erasmus, Desiderius. [1509] 1913. *The Praise of Folly.* Trans. John Wilson, ed. P. S. Allen. Oxford: Clarendon.

———. [1524] 1978. "On the Freedom of the Will." In *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, 35–100. Philadelphia: Westminster.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1989. *Truth and Method.* 2d ed., trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall. New York: Crossroad.

Hauerwas, Stanley. [1997] 2001. "How 'Christian Ethics' Came to Be." In *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright, 37–50. Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press.

Jackson, Roger, and John Makransky. 2000. *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*. New York: Routledge.

Kraus, Lawrence. 2007. "Reason, Unfettered by Faith." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 53 (19, January 12): B20.

Kuhn, Thomas. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Leopold, Aldo. [1949] 1969. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1989. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* South Bend, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press.

Murphy, Nancey. 1990. *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press.

———. 1994. "What Has Theology to Learn from Scientific Methodology?" In *Science and Theology: Questions at the Interface*, ed. Murray Rae, Hilary Regan, and John Stenhouse, 101–26. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans.

———. 2007. "Arthur Peacocke: Postmodern Prophet." In *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Philip Clayton, 130–39. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Nesteruk, Alexei. 2000. *Light from the East: Theology, Science, and the Eastern Orthodox Tradition.* Minneapolis: Fortress.

Peterson, Gregory. 2001. "Theology: Reduction or Autonomy?" *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 36:597–614.

Pinker, Steven. 2006. "Less Faith, More Reason." *The Harvard Crimson, Online Edition*. *http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=515314*.

Tillich, Paul. 1952. *The Courage to Be*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press.

Tracy, David. 1989. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. New York: Crossroad.

Van Huyssteen, J. Wentzel. 1999. *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans.