

A PROPOSAL FOR METATHEOLOGY

by Edward A. Maziarz

Philosophy of science is an interdisciplinary enterprise currently engaging the interests and efforts of many scientists as well as philosophers. The origins of its present formulation as a problem date back about a hundred years¹ when science had begun to acquire some of the characteristics that identify it even today. In those early days, philosophers of science concerned themselves primarily with the logic and with the language of the sciences. Every effort was made to eliminate precisely those considerations—ontological, epistemological, psychological, sociological, and historical—that now form part of the entire interdisciplinary consideration of science in general, and of particular sciences as well.

As a consequence, one cannot help but be astonished at the radical alteration in the problems and the minute proliferation in the questions raised as to the meaning of science now as contrasted with a hundred years ago. For one, the devotees of philosophy of science are not limited to professional philosophers. A philosopher of science may concern himself with the logic, or with the psychology of science; he may give his attention to the problem of distinguishing science from other branches of learning and from common sense; he may reflect upon the developmental character of the sciences and study, in great detail, the number and the variety of factors that favor or that retard scientific development. One can even find contemporary philosophers of science who consider it naïve or uninteresting to regard science alone as being objective, and others who would regard as amusing the proposal that science is a cultural product immune to a variety of mundane influences. There is, then, a caravanserie of perspectives on science—the logic of science, the sociology of science, and so forth—that the expression “philosophy of science” comprises today in contrast with its original narrow and rather rigid formulation.

The very fact that philosophy of science is so extensively an interdisciplinary and humanistic endeavor—rather than solely the

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philosophy of science—serves as the basis for labeling these reflections upon science by such terms as “metascience” or the “science of science.”² Though these latter expressions have been subjected to a minute refinement of meaning, “metascience” designates all those reflective endeavors that the scientist *qua* scientist (rather than *qua* philosopher, or humanist) exercises over both the foundations and over the summit-building activities of his own specialty. Metamathematics,³ of course, served as the paradigm for this type of research into the foundations, the methodology, and the periphery of mathematics, and thus paved the way for similar investigations that are sometimes entitled “metabiology” or “metasociology” and so forth. The expression, “metascience,” and its cognates, however, can be and has been employed in a second way to embrace those attempts aimed at establishing a new territory of learning that deals with knowledge about knowledge—or what we generally term “philosophy of science.” In this latter sense, “metascience” implies that a philosopher or a psychologist or an historian isolates one of the sciences and regards it as a bounded universe of meaning upon which he adopts a meaningful perspective, and concerning which he asks questions that are both interesting and significant.

In the light of the above considerations, when one turns his attention to the current status of reflections on theology, he encounters a similar proliferation of topics, issues, and scholarly endeavors being exercised by theologians, philosophers of religion, psychologists, and sociologists. However, if one then inquires whether theologians are involved in an enterprise recognizably similar to metascience in either of the above meanings, he is disappointed. Theologians do not exhibit that unity of effort and clarity of issue that concerns metascientists. One may even wonder what the primary targets of scholarly concern and direction among theologians are. It may be argued, of course, that “metatheology” lacks the hundred-year development that “metascience” enjoys. However, as a counterargument, one could assert that the major religious faiths have enjoyed a longer lifetime and exercised a greater amount of influence than have any of the sciences. Moreover, sound arguments could be adduced that would enable one to date the current problem of theology to the “philosophy of religion” as inaugurated by Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Schleiermacher.⁴

There are, of course, a large number of reasons that can be adduced to make the plight of contemporary theology more palatable and intelligible. Intra- and extramural debate about the nature of the theological enterprise itself is indeed a formidable ob-

stacle. The fact that many theologians limit their reflections to the confines of their own scriptures or established church rather than expanding them to embrace other scriptures and other faiths is another factor that helps account for the differences between meta-scientific and metatheological concerns. But the principal obstacle to the progress and to the success of theology, I believe, lies in the fear and/or failure of theologians to acknowledge how theology itself is grounded in the sociohistorical order. In effect, then, the theological enterprise has a grave need for a metatheology grounded on the supposition that theology is at least and, possibly, only a human artifact.⁵

This article will argue favorably, then, for the recognition of metatheology as a discipline comparable with the role enjoyed by metascience. It will emphasize the similarities that obtain between the scientific and the theological enterprises with the prospect of employing the former as a model for the latter. Two paradigmatic views of the sciences will be employed as arguments favoring the recognition of metatheology as a discipline comparable to metascience. The first regards the sciences as interembodied or intersubjective ways of being a man-in-the-world, and attaches itself closely to the phenomenological movement and to the sociology of knowledge. This tradition emphasizes the humanistic character of scientists, regarding them primarily as members of the community of men and only secondarily as members of the community of scientists. The second tradition is a derivative of late nineteenth-century philosophy of science. It stresses the logic and the language of the sciences as related, on the one hand, to ordinary language and, on the other hand, to the possibility of an ideal language. It is my conviction that these two traditions are more concordant than discordant, and that, taken in combination, they offer a view of the sciences that encompasses an Edmund Husserl analyzing language as well as a Ludwig Wittgenstein emphasizing forms of life.⁶

THEOLOGY AS A PHENOMENON OF HUMAN CULTURE

Turning to the first, the phenomenology-sociology tradition, one finds an alternate solution to the nineteenth-century attitude that regarded the sciences as being objectively certain, whereas philosophy and theology were inescapably subjective or simply emotive and opinionative. For this objective/subjective dichotomy, the social sciences have substituted an alternate pair that can be described in terms of the community of men and the individual, or of the person-

al sharing of each human being in the intersubjective realities constructed and maintained by human beings. In explaining the ontology of the sciences, this tradition distinguishes man as embodied in the reality of everyday life or the natural attitude—man *qua* man—from man *qua* scientist. The reality of everyday life or the natural attitude is the paramount reality, holding the scientist *qua* man captive to the time and space, and to the paradigms and issues, of his own culture. But the scientist is also bonded, precisely *qua* scientist, to the community of scientists; he shares their language, embodies their methodical behavior, and occupies himself with the questions and problems considered significant by the community of scientists.

I believe that this tradition argues successfully for the inability of the scientist or the theologian to escape from the realities of everyday life that all of us share as men, and from the communal realities shared by men *qua* scientists and *qua* theologians. In effect, then, the reality of everyday life serves both as the basis and as the springboard for the universes of meaning that are socially constructed and maintained by the community of scientists. If one adopts the basic proposals of the phenomenology-sociology tradition as explanatory of the sciences, then he can understand the life and the work of theologians as well. Both theologians and scientists can be regarded as addressing themselves to significant questions that arise for them as they face their own culture from the viewpoint of traditions, education, and experience that are communally shared. Finally, the cumulative effect of this approach to the sciences and to theology is to envision them as universes of meaning and as socially constructed realities embodied in the phenomenon of man, but transcending the worlds of everyday life through the pathways of imagination, reflection, and abstraction.⁷

THEOLOGY AS A THEORETICAL SCIENCE

One may, of course, adopt the first tradition of regarding the sciences and theology in a communal, cultural, and humanistic context. It is not difficult to grant that the theologian is a man in the community of men and a scientist among the scientists of his time. But can theology be considered scientific also in terms of the second tradition? In effect, can one employ the more rigorous notions associated with the hypothetico-deductive method of science to theology as espoused by the logic-language tradition? To do so, of course, would imply that the four components of this method—theory, calculus,

dictionary, and models—be as applicable to the theological sciences as they are to the natural and to the social sciences.⁸

In the first place, and addressing ourselves to an issue that theologians might find difficult to accept, theology⁹ as a science is not involved with existential but merely with theoretical or hypothetical propositions. That is to say, the theologian *qua* theologian is primarily a theorist operating on a level of reflection and abstraction from common experience that is kindred to, though distinct from, the level of the theoretical mathematician or physicist. When a theologian addresses himself to the meaning of salvation history, of justification, or of eschatology, he is operating on the level of *theory*—at which level he is functioning within a domain of meaning and reality that is not of itself directly relevant to religious facts, but needs to be made relevant through the complex movements of what are called correspondence rules and models.

As a scientific theorist, the theologian is interested in the broadest possible interpretation of the facts of religious experience. And, in this endeavor, he addresses himself to the variety of possibilities that he bears within himself as a learned man of his culture; he may consider marshaling his facts under such theories as a “theology of hope,” of theology as “hermeneutics,” and so forth. To do so effectively, however, he has been faced with an upper bound to his speculations that has served, at times, to becloud his attempts as well as to illuminate them: the upper bound of “God.” But unless the theologian is willing to admit that within theological science God himself is but a part of theological theory and not of existential encounter, he may fail in his attempts at being scientific.

For, at the level of theological theory, God is no longer a concrete subject of existential propositions, but as much a matter of speculation and theory as would be the nature of matter in quantum mechanics. The theologian who believes that in dealing with God, or with God’s attributes, he is etching out the “God who is” has only succeeded in confounding the pastoral concern or popularization of theology with the science of itself. In this regard, the theologian is similar to the mathematician. The latter explores the dimensions and mathematical reality of non-Euclidian geometry and then embraces a different perspective when he attempts (1) to embody his insights into mathematical language and (2) to offer a cultural and popularized expression of the geometrical world.

If, then, theology is a science basically similar to the notions of science acceptable in our culture, its primordial interest is theory.

Theology faces the same problems of interpretation or hermeneutics as do the other sciences. A theologian may need to acknowledge the obtuse problem of distinguishing theory from theological law and hypothesis, and even of facing the issue that theological theories and laws may not be isomorphic expressions of what is actually the case in the world of religious experience. Moreover, as in other sciences, theology may need to be concerned not only with theology as explanation but with theology as prediction and with the complexities suggested by the notion of "verifiability" and "falsifiability."¹⁰

At this point, we need to consider a strong objection that may arise. Theology, it will be said, needs at all costs to be faithful to its original data—the data of revelation (especially theology in a revelational faith). But is it not precisely this almost fanatical fidelity to facts that characterizes the contemporary sciences? And, to the extent that the practical order of human needs and the continuous theoretical development of the sciences open a larger and more detailed realm of facts to be explained, to the same extent one can admit the continual widening and proliferation of religious data. Similar to any scientist, the theologian needs to be faithful both to the original and to the interpreted religious traditions on the one hand, and relevant to the practical order of religious needs and expectations on the other. Perhaps the objection will be answered further if one admits to a parallelism between technology as the fruit of scientific theory and the notion of religious reform and pastoral concerns as the comparable "technologization" of theological science.

A second way in which theology is similar to contemporary science is in its employment of an abstract calculus or process of reasoning. As a theorist, the theologian employs those forms of logical movement that are valid for any scientific quest. Though he may believe that as a theologian he employs only a traditional or intensional logic,¹¹ he may find himself actually employing any or all of the techniques enjoined by contemporary, extensional logic.¹² And the proof for this proposal lies in a study of the linguistic expression of theological proposals. A study of the latter will indicate that theologians employ a variety of "logics" and that they operate under a set of presuppositions. In addition, theology is governed by axioms and postulates and the laws of association, as are other sciences. There is, accordingly, a logic of theology that is at one and the same time a logic similar to that employed in the other sciences, and a particular use of logical patterns determined by the theoretical needs of theological science itself.

A third characteristic of contemporary science is its employment

of a dictionary of reference or semantical rules and so forth.¹³ Even in this aspect one can find a close kinship of theological with contemporary science. As an illustration, one can consider the theological theory associated with interpreting Christ as the God-man. The latter may be represented by means of theological theory in terms of one person and two natures—with the consequent rules by means of which this theory is made to correspond with the “embodied Jesus”—how, as a matter of fact, do we explain the unity of Christ? We need to face the problem of whether or not there are two minds and two wills, and how to explain the interaction between the human faculties, and so forth. Or again, viewing theology as salvation history, one needs to know how to apply the theory to the actual directions which human history has taken and is yet to pursue.

A fourth manner in which theological science is similar to contemporary science is in its employment of models. Theology can, of course, consider God as provident and thus regard God himself as that theory of the world of which the world itself is the modeling. Or, one can shift the emphasis and consider one’s theological theory of the religious world as that to which and upon which God is viewed as model, exemplification, and prime analogue. In a similar vein, the words and deeds of Jesus can be regarded as embodying the “theory” of being a Christian and the life of a Christian as being some sort of “modeling” of that theory by means of rules of correspondence (ascetical practices).

CONCLUSIONS

By employing contemporary views on science as a hypothetico-deductive enterprise we have opened ourselves to a variety of questions which—in place of being called a philosophy or a logic of theology—we have named metatheology, or metareligion.¹⁴ The merit of this expression lies in disclosing theology as a contemporary, cultural artifact and, accordingly, as an object of wide interdisciplinary concern. A theologian would need to acknowledge that there is a wide variety of influences that come to bear on theological science embracing, on the one hand, the broad cultural milieu within which the theologian functions as a human being, and, on the other, the specific insights and problems that arise between theology and the other sciences as operating within their own dimensions of reality.

Metatheology, then, is both an interdisciplinary concern and a highly specialized aspect of theology that would embrace at least the following topics. In the first place, metatheology would deal with the question of whether or not, and in what senses theology can be

called a science. In applying itself to this question, a metatheologian would need to address himself well both to the history of religions and of theologies. He would need to be advised about how theologians operate within a given culture and particularly as to the likeness and differences that theology shares with other sciences in that particular culture. A second area of metatheological concern would address itself to the methodology, to the logic and language of theological discourse. Here, again, a cultural grounding of theology would be necessary. A metatheologian would need to consider how theological logic, methodology, and language are a derivative of, and yet distinct from, the religious logic and language within a given culture. A third area of metatheological concern would need to address itself to the issue of the ways in which theologies influence the culture itself. That is, granting that theological returns and pastoral concerns are the technological results of theological research, one would need to study the "return" of the theologian from his own dimensions of theological reality into the realm of cultural life. And, in the fourth place, metatheology deals with the complex problems of the relationships that may obtain between theology and the other branches of learning. How is theological discourse related to mathematics,¹⁵ to psychology, to the arts, and to philosophy? Or, stating these problems in a theoretical fashion, how does one distinguish the dimensions of theological reality from those of the arts and sciences, and how does one attempt to relate theology to these human sciences and unify them?

Perhaps, by way of conclusion, metatheology already exists as an area of speculation, under a variety of other names. There are studies on the logic of theology, on its history, its sociology and psychology, even though the more general term "religion" is commonly employed. Usually, however, the development of the study of "religion" exhibits the closeness of theological to the social sciences. Perhaps only when we recognize that mathematics and the natural sciences—along with the social sciences—are *human* sciences will it be possible to make both the study of "religion" and/or of "theology" a science of that name and one that will help to build a better religious future for mankind.

NOTES

1. For a short and clear exposition of how the current problematic of science arose, see Peter Alexander, "The Philosophy of Science: 1850-1910," in *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, ed. D. J. O'Connor (New York: Free Press, 1964), pp. 402-25.

2. For a recent work on this subject, see Gerard Radnitzky, *Contemporary Schools of Metascience*, 2 vols. (New York: Humanities Press, 1969); see also Sylvain Bromberger, "A Theory about the Theory of Theory and about the Theory of Theories," in *Philosophy of Science*, The Delaware Seminar, vol. 2, ed. Bernard Baumrin (New York: Interscience Publishers, 1963), pp. 79-105.

3. The prefix "meta-" was originally applied to mathematics by David Hilbert; he used the term metamathematics to designate a branch of mathematics which would take mathematical theories and their structural properties as objects of study (see David Hilbert, *The Foundations of Geometry*, trans. E. J. Townsend [La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1938], pp. 126-32 ["Conclusion"]).

4. This proposal is presented well in James Collins, *The Emergence of Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968).

5. An excellent statement of how scientists and theologians are "grounded" within the cultural order can be found in Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1967), passim.

6. The peculiar convergence of linguistic philosophy and phenomenology in "grounding" theologians and scientists within the social order is well explicated by Dallas M. High, *Language, Persons, and Belief: Studies in Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations and Religious Uses of Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), chap. 3 ("Language Games"), pp. 70-98.

7. It is assumed, above, that the theologian *qua* theologian is operating within a "universe of meaning" within which he has "bracketed out" the realm of ordinary discourse. For a further explanation of this view, see Alfred Schutz, "The Structure of the Social World," in *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. G. Walsh and F. Lehnert (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1967), pp. 139 ff.; or see Part I ("Pure Theory") of the same author's *Collected Papers II: Studies in Social Theory*, ed. Arvid Brodersen (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1964), pp. 3-90.

8. An explanation of the hypothetico-deductive analysis of science can be found in a variety of places; see, for example, Norman R. Campbell, *Foundations of Science* (New York: Dover, 1957), chap. 6 ("Theories"), pp. 119-58; Ernest Nagel, *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), chap. 3 ("The Deductive Pattern of Explanation"), pp. 29-46.

9. The term "theology" is often used in a broad sense so as to include any writings about religion. Once one acknowledges this fact, and is willing to adopt the view of the theologian as a man operating within a dimension of reality that (though the theologian remains grounded as a human being in the everyday world) is open to his insight and discourse alone, he may be willing to consent to the view that "God" in theology is both the subject and the target for theory and speculation.

10. Both of these terms point to two salient facts. First, the proposals of theologians are subject to the "intersubjective" critique of other theologians; second, a theological theory can be more readily "falsified" than "verified" in the consequences it may have within the broader context of religious life. For an explanation of "verifiability" and "falsifiability" see Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutschinson, 1959), chap. 6 ("Falsifiability"), pp. 78-92.

11. The discussion concerning the "old" and the "new" logic, of course, still continues; a good introductory essay to this subject is Karl Menger, "The New Logic," *Philosophy of Science* 4 (1937): 299-336; most introductory textbooks in logic direct themselves to some discussion of this issue.

12. See the variety of "logics" employed by theologians as outlined in Fredrick Ferre, *Language, Logic and God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), chaps. 5-9 especially.

13. There is a wide variety of expressions for a dictionary of reference (the term originally used by Campbell [n. 8 above], pp. 122-58): correspondence rules, operational definitions, coordinating definitions, rules of interpretation, and epistemic correlations.

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14. Some theologians would object, of course, to the expression "metareligion," arguing (with some validity, of course) that scholarly interest in religion does not qualify one to be a theologian.

15. Sir Edmund Whittaker once remarked that he knew of no set of theological principles which, if followed, would justify one in being a pure mathematician.