**Zygon®**: *Journal of*
**RELIGION & SCIENCE**

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# Theology and Policing

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This article assesses the notion of "policing" in John Perry and Joanna Leidenhag's *Science-Engaged Theology* to consider the contemporary practice of theological inquiry as a theoretical endeavor. Drawing on their construal of science-engaged theology, which involves a twofold resistance towards "authoritarian" tendencies of asserting theology as the queen of the sciences as well as modernity's "border police" who seek to exclude religion and theology from public discourse, this essay suggests that Perry and Leidenhag's vision for science-engaged theology not only brings to light one of the ways theology is sometimes deployed as a political mechanism for policing but also how theology itself can perhaps even be considered an act of "theological *de*-policing."

At the heart of John Perry and Joanna Leidenhag's vision for the relationship between science and religion in their recent *Science-Engaged Theology* is the geopolitical imagery of the national border and border policing. As Perry and Leidenhag (2023, 47) write in a pinnacle passage in their short but insightful book:

> [W]e do not think that the only way for theologians to speak with boldness and positively contribute to the contemporary academy is to be queen of the sciences, empress of natural philosophy, or to remember with nostalgia the bygone days of Christendom. Christendom no longer exists, and what exists on roughly the same landmass that it once did is the fragile and imperfect European Union. The EU provides something of a metaphor for our vision of the university. It is a trading zone where national borders remain, and cultural and linguistic differences can be celebrated, but where there is also a shared set of standards allowing for increased collaboration and the relatively free movement of goods and peoples.

This passage in brings together a few of the recurring themes and motifs in Perry and Leidenhag's fascinating book.

First, Perry and Leidenhag maintain that theologians must speak with boldness and positive integrity, and not simply give in to scientism or adopt scientific standpoints in an uncritical manner, but to do so not in a dominating fashion. Second, science-engaged theology, as they see it, is a theological approach that is distinctly post-Christendom or indeed modern, with a contemporary as opposed to historical or genealogical understanding of "science." Third, to practice science-engaged theology properly is to be attentive to the place of theology as an academic discipline within the modern—or even "secular"— university. As with their metaphor of the national borders within the EU, while science-engaged theology is committed to distinct borders and seeks to avoid "the border policing" or "gatekeeping" of academic disciplines. Understood as such, science-engaged theology is committed to (1) theological boldness and integrity, with the caveat of not recasting theology as the queen of the sciences, (2) an acute awareness of the peculiar conditions of modernity, and (3) a commitment to maintaining clear disciplinary "borders"—but doing so without falling into the practice of "policing." These three points will be treated one after another in what follows.

In many ways, Perry and Leidenhag's vision for science-engaged theology is presented as a critique of John Milbank ([1990, 6, 380] 2006, 6, 382), particularly his account of theology as "a master discourse," or even "the queen of the sciences,"[1] most famously articulated in his now classic *Theology and Social Theory*—whose 1990 first edition was notably and provocatively dedicated to "the remnants of Christendom."[2] Part of Perry and Leidenhag's worry is that Milbank's theological vision explicitly does not allow for any "autonomous

reason," whereby one can approach reality without any reference to God, which, in Milbank's view, opens up the possibility of secularity. For Milbank, there is no area of life or reality that can stand independently apart from God, for all created reality only exist by virtue of participation in God who is Being itself. Accordingly, just as there is no thing that can be ontologically independent from God, the proper knowledge of all things must also always be connected to God—and, by extension, to theology as the study and knowledge of God. In view of this all-encompassing theological vision, Perry and Leidenhag (2023, 34) argue that "Milbank's methods—his attempt to regain theology's place as queen—tend towards authoritarianism," drawing in part on an earlier critique put forward by Linn Tonstad (2020).

While Perry and Leidenhag are alarmed by the authoritarian tendencies of those who posit theology as the queen of the sciences, they are also critical of those who uncritically subordinate theological discourse to scientific findings: "On the one hand, some have used science as a proxy for rationality or emancipation and religion as a proxy for superstition and oppression. On the other hand, others have sought to declare theology queen of the sciences" (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 7). As Perry and Leidenhag point out, this narrative of *science* as a means for emancipation is a predominant theme of the modern political spirit held by those such as Thomas Jefferson. Such thinkers, they say, "joined Descartes and Locke on their quest for certainty and joined Voltaire and Jefferson on their quest for emancipation. They *created* something they called 'science' that was good, and something called 'religion' that was bad" (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 23). This brings us to the second point noted above: the peculiar conditions of modernity.

Following this modern Jeffersonian narrative, Perry and Leidenhag (2023, 22) point out that many theologians "retreated into a realm of private spirituality," holding that theology is no longer a public but "private matter." This is, of course, a characteristically modern condition which we sometimes call *secular*. And, indeed, it is one that is played out not only in the division between religion and science, but also—perhaps even more notably—between religion and politics. As Perry and Leidenhag (2023, 21) note, this purported division or conflict between religion and science "is quintessentially a part of the political, cultural and philosophical shifts that came to be known as modernity."

The parallel between the religion/science opposition and the religion/ politics division in modernity is particularly notable in a section titled "'Science' and Modernity's Border Cop" in Perry and Leidenhag's (2023, 24) book:

> [Thinkers such as Descartes, Locke, Voltaire, and Jefferson all shared the modern goal of] advocating for a universal and neutral criterion that could sort the rational wheat from the superstitious chaff. If deductive certainty or subjective taste preferences are the only options, into which box do theological

and ethical claims fit? It was never clear. William Wood labels those who would exclude theology and ethics from the rational discourse of public institutions, such as universities, the field's "border cop."

Not unlike the "secular" exclusion of religious views from the public political sphere, Perry and Leidenhag (2023, 24) describe the exclusion of theology and ethics from the rational—"scientific"—discourse of public institutions as "modernity's standard policing strategy."

As we can see from the passage quoted above, Perry and Leidenhag explicitly draw on the notion of "border patrolling" or "policing" from William Wood's (2021) recent *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion* to speak of the prohibition or even exclusion of religious and theological voices from modern secular discourse. A similar notion of the secular policing of religion and theology can already be found in John Milbank's aforementioned *Theology and Social Theory*. According to Milbank ([1990, 106] 2006, 106), there is "a secular policing or 'encompassing' of religion within the flattened dimension of modern public space," whereby religion and theology are "'policed', or kept rigorously behind the bounds of the possibility of empirical understanding." In Milbank's ([1990, 2] 2006, 1) own view, "to contest this secular positioning of theology," is not an authoritarian gesture but, to the contrary, an anti-authoritarian act of resisting such "secular policing" (cf. Wood 2021, 287–88).[3] However, the "policing" which Milbank's theology opposes is not only that of "secular policing", but also what he at one point calls the "arch-reactionary" position of neo-scholastic "two-tier" Thomism (Milbank 2005, 26)—which is also of relevance for some of the themes of Perry and Leidenhag's theological vision, as will be made clearer below.

Milbank's rejection of secular or autonomous reason is sometimes coupled with or even expressed in his theological refutation of the neo-scholastic Thomist notion of *natura pura*, or pure nature, in his theology of grace and nature. Just as there is for Milbank reason can never be neutral, autonomous or independent from God and God's revelation (cf. Wood 2021, 104–6), nature itself is so to speak always already graced, it can never be independent or separated from God's grace: there is therefore no such thing as a "*pure* nature" (see Milbank [2005] 2014).

Milbank's rejection of "pure nature" would presumably sit uncomfortably with Perry and Leidenhag's vision for science-engaged theology. For Perry and Leidenhag not only seek to maintain the "national borders" between theology and other academic disciplines (especially the natural sciences), but also explicitly call for theologians to "remember nature": that one "could think of science-engaged theology as a *memento naturam*" which reminds theologians that "science is one of the ways that Christians have learned to listen to God" (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 1, 6). But while Milbank's rejection of pure nature may be deemed too anti-modern or even too authoritarian by Perry and Leidenhag, at

the same time, Milbank's position on grace and nature has also been severely critiqued by some neo-Thomists for being too modern and too liberal (see Feingold 2010; Long 2010; Hütter 2012; cf. Healy 2008; Levering 2014). And, indeed, one might argue that the kind of neo-scholastic Thomist critiques of Milbank may be regarded as a kind of theological policing itself: policing not just in the sense of guarding the borders between grace and nature or between divine revelation and natural reason, but, to deploy Perry and Leidenhag's term, even in some authoritarian sense of using theological doctrines to police non-theological viewpoints and disciplines.

Indeed, such an account of the "authoritarian" use of theology could be found in Mark Jordan's 2006 book on Thomist theology, which opens with a chapter entitled "St Thomas and the Police," whose opening sentences are worth quoting in full:

> If only we could read Thomas Aquinas without encountering some other of his readers—especially the police.
>
> "The police" refers literally or figuratively. Figuratively we use the term to describe self-appointed guardians of social norms, as in "the decency police" or "the style police." Literally we use it to refer to the forces that keep internal order—municipal or state officers, the army on civic duty, and every other monitor or enforcer with the power of approved violence. . . . It is a remarkable fact about Thomas Aquinas's texts that they have been quoted so regularly by the police of various regimes—by papal or local inquisitors, of course, but also in service of Franco's victory in Spain or of the Argentine security forces during the 1970s and 1980s. (Jordan 2006, 1)

What we find in Jordan's critical depiction of the authoritarian scholastic or theological police is very much an inverse image of the kind of "secular policing" described by Perry and Leidenhag—as well as Milbank and Wood before them.[4] In this case, it is not religion or theology that is being "policed" by secular forces, but theology that "polices" the secular or indeed the world *qua saeculum*.

As opposed to Perry and Leidenhag's (2023, 2) "science-engaged theological" contention that the findings in natural sciences can serve as "correctives" to empirical claims that are sometimes made in theology, the theological police depicted and identified by Jordan argue that theology—and especially Thomist theology—can provide many scientific insights and indeed correctives for contemporary natural sciences (see Jordan 2006, 33–59). Whereas Perry and Leidenhag seek to remind theologians of "nature" and argue that nature can supplement or even occasionally correct theology, the theological police would hold that nature always needs superadded correction and regulation of grace and revelation, of the *sacra doctrina* as espoused by theological authorities such

as Aquinas. To paraphrase St Thomas himself, one might say that, for the "theological police," grace does not destroy nature but polices it (cf. *Summa Theologiae* I.1.8, *ad* 2).

The point of mentioning all this is not to attack Thomism or its neo-scholastic defenders and exponents. Instead, it is to highlight that theology is not always necessarily on the receiving end of policing by secular forces, but that theology itself can sometimes be (intentionally) used as a mechanism for policing—as Jordan points out, both figuratively and literally.[5] From this perspective, Perry and Leidenhag's "anti-authoritarian" theological vision can very much provide theologians with a model which can facilitate a kind of resistance against the type of theological policing mentioned above.

In the closing parts of their book, Perry and Leidenhag (2023, 54) argue that a science-engaged theology should be a "risky theology" and that "theologians already routinely make empirical claims, perhaps more often than they realize." Theologians are to take "risks" by allowing their claims to held accountable to empirical validation or verification. For according to them, "accountable theology is better theology" (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 56). Instead of remaining content in appealing to a certain set of theological authorities and to deploy pre-set theological frameworks for gatekeeping or indeed policing, to do good theology in this view is not only to take risks, but to be "open to critique and accountability from others" (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 54).

In Perry and Leidenhag's vision, science-engaged theology is not about subscribing to a particular set of methodological or metaphysical commitments or appealing to a particular school of thought or figure of authority. It is, as they say, "a disposition or mindset" of openness (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 64). To engage theology with science is not a way of equipping theologians with scientific tools and theories to police others and close down conversations, but instead to open theological inquiry and conversations beyond their traditional silos. As opposed to using theological doctrine to police others who view the world differently or to police the disciplinary borders of theology, to practice science-engaged theology is to cultivate the "epistemic virtue" of "opening oneself up to multiple sources of correction" (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 4).

But while Perry and Leidenhag's theological approach clearly differs from the kind of "theological policing" which Mark Jordan identifies among neo-scholastic Thomists, a question can perhaps be raised on whether Perry and Leidenhag's (2023, 32) pointed critique of "Milbank and countless others," who posit theology as the queen of the science may itself constitute a kind of "theological policing": one which ensures that theology stays within its "borders," putting theology back in its place within the modern secular world in the name of anti-authoritarianism and theological integrity. Indeed, echoing Deleuze and Guattari's (1987, 54) saying that "deterritorialization [always] has reterritorialization as its flipside or complement," if Perry and Leidenhag's

theological vision may be said to be an act of "theological *de*-policing" both against any assertion of theological dominance over other disciplines and against any secular policing over theology, one may more generally question whether all acts of *de*-policing may always have a kind of policing as its flipside or complement.[6]

We began this brief reflection by considering Perry and Leidenhag's metaphor of the European Union as a model for envisaging the borders between theology and other disciplines within the secular university and the secular world. Perry and Leidenhag speak of the EU as "*a trading zone* where national borders remain… but where there is also a shared set of standards allowing for increased collaboration and the relatively free movement of goods and peoples" (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 47, emphasis added). But the EU is of course not just a trading zone: It is not just an economic body but also a "political" enterprise. To envision the relation between theology and other disciplines as national borders through the geo-political imagery of the EU is thus also, at least implicitly, a comment on the political aspects and implications of theological practice.

This short paper has sought to unpack some of the political dimensions of Perry and Leidenhag's *Science-Engaged Theology*. The division between science and religion in modernity, as Perry and Leidenhag point out, is as much a political phenomenon as it is a cultural and philosophical one. To the extent that their construal of science-engaged theology involves a twofold resistance towards "authoritarian" tendencies of asserting theology as the queen of the sciences as well as modernity's "border police" who seeks to exclude religion and theology from public discourse, Perry and Leidenhag's visionary and stimulating book brings to light one of the ways theology is sometimes deployed as a political mechanism for policing. In this way, though *Science-Engaged Theology* may not be written as a treatise in political theology, Perry and Leidenhag's meta-theological insights offer an important and timely intervention in our understanding of the place of theology in contemporary secular society as well as a political vision for the future of theological reflection and practice as theologians—"science-engaged" or not—seek to comprehend and engage with the ever-changing world.

## Notes

1 In addition to their worry about casting theology as the queen of the sciences, drawing on Arne Rasmusson's (2021) critical analysis of Milbank's political theological outlook (cf. Perry 2017), Perry and Leidenhag (2023, 54–56) also criticise Milbank for making empirical claims that lack empirical validity.

2 See Milbank (1990, vi). In the second edition of *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank (2006, viii) clarifies that his book is dedicated to the Christendom Trust, and "*not*, as some have mistakenly supposed, to the memory of the Middle Ages!"

3 To the extent that God is Being itself—and not a being among other beings—and therefore exists in non-competitive or non-contrastive relationship with other beings, and that Christian Trinitarian theology posits that God is a triune being of harmonious difference, Milbank holds that (Christian) theology is not a discipline whose object of study is in competition with other disciplines and is in principle the only "master discourse" which can ensure that all other discourses can co-exist in harmonious difference. "This is why it is", Milbank ([1990, 6] 2006, 6) writes, "so important to reassert theology as a master discourse; theology, alone, remains the discourse of non-mastery." It is important to note that, for Milbank, theology is "the discourse of *non*-mastery"—following a *non*-competitive conception of the relation between God and creation, which forms the basis for a *non*-competitive account of the relation between theology and other discourses—and not of "*un*-mastery" (see Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 34–35), which would imply that theology would "*un*-master" any other rival discipline which seeks to assert "mastery" over theology. While Sarah Coakley's theological work is (understandably) not mentioned in Perry and Leidenhag's short book, it is perhaps worth adding here that the term "*un*-mastery" is notably deployed by Coakley (2013, 43) to describe her conception of theology explicitly in distinction from Milbank's.

4 More recently, the leading Thomist scholar Brian Davies suggests that one reason why many use Thomas Aquinas' thought for "policing" other views may not be (solely) due to political or authoritarian incentives, but to what he describes as "academic laziness" (Davies 2020, 639).

5 While Mark Jordan focuses on right-wing cases from the 1970s and 80s, one might also think of similar appeals to Aquinas in recent right-wing politics. See, for instance, the Conservative politician Jacob Rees-Mogg's surprising reference to Aquinas in support for his views on Brexit in his keynote address at the UK National Conservatism conference in May 2023: "St Thomas Aquinas, whose political work focussed on the state, in his fundamentally important explanation of a just war, he made it clear that legitimate authority belongs to the state rather than some ethereal international organization… I think I am the first person to claim Aquinas as a Brexiteer! It may surprise some of the Catholic theologians but I'm going to claim him as a Brexiteer anyway" (Rees-Mogg 2023, at 0m41s–1m00s and 31m58s–32m15s).

6 Of course, one could by extension question whether interpreting Perry and Leidenhag's work as an act of "policing" would itself also constitute another act of policing.

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