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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Analytic theology and science-engaged theology

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Abstract

This article contributes to ongoing discussions on the place of theology in secular research universities by examining the relationship between analytic theology and science-engaged theology. Writing in response to William Wood's *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion*, I consider if and how one might demarcate these two recent movements in academic theology given that both sociological and substantive definitions result in significant overlap. To show the extent of this overlap, I argue that both analytic theology and science-engaged theology are forms of faith seeking understanding, which use the tools and methods from other disciplines in order to make incremental progress on specific theological questions. I then offer two critiques of Wood's argument (made by analogy with the natural sciences) that the doctrine of creation provides theological warrant for the extension of common human reason seen in analytic philosophy and theology. My own attempt at a demarcation suggests that whereas analytic theology is best understood as an intellectual tradition, science-engaged theology is an intellectual disposition. This means that although science-engaged theology may not always be analytic, analytic theologians (and theologians more widely) should always be science-engaged.

Introduction

In *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion*, William Wood argues that '[a]nalytic theology represents one way that theology can find a place in the secular research university' (Wood (2021), 299). Wood is careful to emphasize that analytic theology is not the only way that theology can flourish in secular research universities. In this response, I ask Wood to consider the relationship between analytic theology and another way that theology can flourish in modern universities, namely by being science-engaged. This leads to three more specific questions and two critiques.

First, does Wood think we should demarcate analytic theology (AT) from science-engaged theology (SET)? After all, a significant part of the purpose of Wood's book is 'bridge-building' between current divisions within our guild (*ibid.*, v, 117, and 299). Wood stresses 'there are no absolute, fixed boundaries between analytic theology and other closely related forms of inquiry' (*ibid.*, 48). Perhaps I should embrace the overlap and leave it at that? I don't think so. For while we might seek to overcome division, we should not smudge-over theology's diversity. When combined with a generous spirit, such as Wood displays, the appreciation of such differences only leads to better, more self-conscious, scholarship.

If Wood agrees with the above, then the question becomes 'how should Wood demarcate AT from SET?'. Most of this article revolves around making this question harder for Wood. The next section shows that Wood's sociological definition is not enough to distinguish AT and SET. The following three sections show that when substantive definitions are offered, AT and SET are also characterized in much the same way. Analytic theology and science-engaged theology are both forms of faith seeking understanding, which use the tools and methods from other disciplines in order to make incremental progress on specific theological questions. While noting these similarities, the last of these three sections also offers two critiques against Wood's argument from analogy with natural science in his attempt to provide theological support for analytic philosophy as an extended form of human reason. These critiques are, briefly, (1) that Wood's argument is too permissive, and (2) that warrant for specific theological claims does not accrue in the way Wood stipulates. I hope Wood will answer these concerns.

Finally, I offer my own demarcation: AT is an intellectual *tradition* and SET is an intellectual *disposition*. One of the consequences of this differentiation is that, while science-engaged theologians may not always be analytic, analytic theologians should always be science-engaged. This results in a third question to Wood: does he agree with my suggested demarcation between AT and SET, and the prioritization of SET over AT that it implies?

Sociological definitions

The first reason why a comparison between AT and SET is apposite arises from the substantial level of similarity between these two movements. On a historical and sociological level, AT and SET are both relatively recent movements, emerging in the last decade or so, within (predominantly, but not exclusively, Christian) theology. Both have received significant financial support from the various Templeton grants, and a number of the same institutions (e.g. the University of St Andrews) and individuals (the present author included) participate in both discourses.

Theologians who could claim such a dual belonging two these two fields include those who are often cited as founders of AT, Michael Rea and Oliver D. Crisp, as well as the two figures whom Wood offers as paradigms of analytic theology, Tim Pawl and William Hasker. Such historical and sociological overlap is not insignificant. Wood refuses to offer an essentialist definition of AT in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead, he points to leading authors in the field and says, AT is what these scholars are doing (Wood (2021), 50). As far as definitions go, this is all well and good. However, if enough such paradigmatic scholars occupy multiple fields, then this raises the question of how different movements are to be distinguished.

There are also scholars who identify their work with either AT or SET, but not both. Such a reality reaffirms the need for a distinction to be maintained, even if this cannot be achieved on *purely* sociological grounds and even if there is a gradient of overlapping territory, rather than a hard border. To distinguish different intellectual movements or styles, we do not need to draw hard lines in the sand, but if labels are to be meaningful then we do need some understanding of distinctiveness and contrast. I offer a solution to this problem in the final section of the article, but first I want to continue to make the job harder.

Beyond sociology, a more substantive similarity between AT and SET can be seen in how both movements are loosely defined and how they understand their place within the wider academy. I will discuss the following definition in the next three sections of this article: *AT and SET both claim to be* (1) *forms of faith seeking understanding, which* (2) *use the tools and methods from other disciplines* (3) *in order to make incremental progress on specific theological questions.*

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Faith seeking understanding

AT and SET are first and foremost forms of theology understood as 'faith seeking understanding'. This is an argument that Wood defends at length in Part III of his book. As the younger movement, the definition of SET is less well established or agreed, but the SET projects I have been involved with emphasize that SET starts with a 'thoroughgoingly theological' problem or question (New Visions in Theological Anthropology (n.d.)). As with Wood, I endorse the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* as a way to articulate the transcendence of God and stress the primacy of the Creator/created distinction before initiating interdisciplinary engagement. But, even for theologians who prefer not to endorse this doctrine, both AT and SET encourage scholars to make their theological commitments the explicit starting point of inquiry.

For science-engaged theology, the desire to engage scientific literature, methods, or theories in answering theological questions is internally motivated by theological convictions about the scope and nature of human reasoning, which leaves space for using the natural/psychological sciences as sources for theological reflection (Perry and Leidenhag (2021), 248). The same need for a 'theological warrant for analytic theology' is also expressed by Wood, and I will discuss this section of the book in more depth shortly (Wood (2021), 79). In both AT and SET, theological convictions taken on faith from the authority of Scripture and/or ecclesial agreement do much of the heavy lifting in setting the research agenda and licensing the interdisciplinary approach to pursuing that agenda.

Use the tools and methods from other disciplines

AT and SET both use the language of borrowing the 'the tools and methods' of other disciplines in order to signify a pragmatic and granular approach to interdisciplinarity (*ibid*., 3, 50).[1] The basic thought is that the scope of theology is maximally expansive, covering 'God and all things in relation to God'. Theologians have their own 'tools and methods', such as biblical exegesis, conciliar and ecumenical commitments, an intellectual tradition of reflection, and practices of prayer and contemplation. But theologians have also always used the tools that other disciplines have developed for specialized investigation. The qualifiers 'analytic' and 'science-engaged', therefore, play the same role of signifying whose tools and methods theology is borrowing in each case.

Of course, the same grammatical point might be said for 'historical theology' or 'biblical theology', so is there anything new going on here? Wood suggests not. He writes:

> we should not suppose that analytic theology has no precedents in the Christian tradition. Everyone agrees that Christian theologians have always helped themselves to whatever they regard as the most useful philosophy of their day. So Thomas Aquinas drew on Aristotle, Paul Tillich drew on Heidegger, a whole host of twentieth-century German theologians drew on Hegel, etc. For a variety of reasons, we do not call the resulting work 'Aristotelian theology', 'Heideggerian theology', or 'Hegelian theology', but even though the names are different, the underlying relationship is the same. Analytic theology is just Christian theology that draws on analytic philosophy, analogous to the way Aquinas draws on Aristotle, and so forth. (*ibid*., 50)

I think this is too quick. For this analogy to be illuminating, a bit more needs to be said about how exactly Aquinas employed Aristotle in his work. As Aquinas scholars know well, this topic is frequently debated. I want to highlight two distinct ways in which Aquinas draws on Aristotle, and then see if these dynamics of influence apply to both AT and SET.

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In the case of natural law theory and the virtues, Aquinas sometimes seems to take Aristotle's theories directly. In such cases, Aquinas not only bypasses Aristotle's methodology, but diverges substantially from it by grounding the theory in divine revelation and specifically Christian understandings of God and creation (which can result in some interesting revisions of Aristotelian thought). On other occasions, as in the argument for a Prime Mover, Aquinas seems to apply the methodology of the *Posteriori Analytics* more directly.

I suggest that analytic theology primarily mirrors the latter, rather than the former, of these two dynamics. This is keeping with the claim that analytic theology borrows the *tools and methods*, rather than the arguments and theories, of analytic philosophy. Analytic theologians strive to *do* the same kinds of intellectual activities as analytic philosophers (i.e. perform linguistic and conceptual analysis, consult intuitions through thought experiments and possible worlds, employ the findings of science, respect folk opinion, and evaluate on the basis of theoretical virtues) (Nolan (2016), 159). Often, especially when the scholar in question could equally be described as an analytic philosopher themself, this method leads to the adoption of the same theories (i.e. Peter Geach's and Peter van Inwagen's use of relative identity theory, and Brian Leftow's presentism). But, in a way that is less common in how Aquinas used Aristotle (the temporal beginning of creation being a notable exception), analytic theologians do not necessarily (or even often) believe the dominant theories of analytic philosophers. I take this to be one of the reasons why analytic theologians never describe themselves as 'Fregeian', 'Russellian', 'Wittgensteinian', or 'Quineian', because theologians typically disagree with many of the arguments and commitments of both the fathers and contemporary leading figures in the analytic tradition.

Wittgenstein is a particularly pertinent example here because there are Wittgensteinian theologians, such as John Hick and D. Z. Phillips. However, as Simon Hewitt has pointed out, in Rea's and Crisp's landmark edited volume, *Analytic Theology*, these scholars are explicitly cited as paradigmatic examples of non-analytic theologians.[2] If analytic theology is just theology inspired by analytic philosophers as Tillich's theology is inspired by Heidegger's philosophy, then Hick and Phillips should be included. The fact that they were not suggests to me that, contrary to Wood, the analogy with how historical theologians have helped themselves to the philosophy of the day needs to be handled carefully.

What about science-engaged theology? Do science-engaged theologians adopt the methodology as psychologists, or biologists, or computer scientists, or are they just taking some central insights from these fields and employing them for their own purposes? Surprising as it may seem, I think science-engaged theology is ultimately orientated towards doing the former, although often the theologian is not suitably trained to go about doing experiments on her own (indeed, few scientists do experiments in isolation either). Instead, the science-engaged theologian should seek to partner with scientists trained in empirical methodologies, in order to formulate a hypothesis, design a suitable test, and interpret the results. Of course, currently many science-engaged theologians do not have a scientist to partner with, nor the necessary time and funding to engage in this kind of research. In this case, the science-engaged theologian does the next best thing. She looks around for empirical studies that have already been published by scientists, which she takes as a sufficiently close approximation of the kinds of studies the theologian herself would have liked to do, from which she can extrapolate the same kinds of theological implications. In this regard, then, even after closer inspection, AT and SET are employing the 'tools and methods' of philosophy and natural science in much the same way.

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There is, of course, a complication with the above analysis, which implies a wedge between methods and theories. Theories can be methodological and methods have theoretical presuppositions. If one does not share the same theoretical presuppositions, then it makes little sense to borrow the methods and tools. What analytic theology needs, which Wood attempts to provide, is a clear theological rationale for adopting these particular methods.

In order to make incremental progress on specific theological questions

This brings us to the third part of my substantive claim that SET and AT seek to make incremental progress on specific theological questions. To speak of 'progress' is to invoke debates around why certain methods are believed appropriate for particular epistemic goals. Why think that the tools and methods of analytic philosophy or empirical inquiry are suited to making progress in the quest to know and love God and all things in relation to God? I do not ask this question because these methods should be treated with a special kind of suspicion; all theologians should ask such a question. Like Wood, I think that methodological pluralism should continue to be the norm in theology (Wood (2021), 219). But, given the range of methodological options on the table, and the finite resources of any one scholar or institution, it also seems reasonable to provide some reasoning for our chosen approach; why do we think doing *this* will help us understand *that*?

Wood attempts to answer this kind of question in chapter 6, 'A Theology of Analytic Reason'. Since Wood draws heavily on a comparison with the natural sciences here, it is worth me briefly reconstructing his argument. Wood argues that '[t]he Christian doctrine of creation entails that human inquiry as such is valuable', because '[r]ational inquiry is just the project of using our God-given rational faculties for their designed purpose' (*ibid*., 82, 92). From here Wood states that, although 'the norms of reasoning can be highly tradition-dependent', they cannot be 'entirely tradition-dependent' (*ibid*., 96). Even after accepting the cognitive and epistemic effects of sin, there exists a thin 'common human reason' (*ibid*.). He then argues from an analogy that if the natural sciences are a theologically warranted extension of this common human reason, then analytic philosophy is as well (*ibid*., 100–101). The purpose of the analogy with the natural sciences, it seems to me, is purely as a persuasive device, and is not intended to imply any substantive similarity in forms of reasoning (and not because many analytic philosophers claim, under the auspices of methodological naturalism, to be doing metaphysics in continuity with natural science). Rather, Wood is drawing on the idea that as science gets more precise, more systematic, and moves further away from common human reason, it has become *more*, not less, reliable. Why not think the same for philosophy?

My objection to this argument is not that it is wrong, but that it is too permissive. Are there some topics to which this particular form of extended reasoning is better suited than others? Are there any extended forms of reasoning that are not permissible in theology? Even if Wood declines, surely there are some extensions of reason that are more or less permissible in theology? To be fair, Wood states that his goal is to defend the following, typically modest, claim: 'Analytic theology is not the only way, or always the best way, to try to understand God better. But it is a legitimate and valuable form of theological enquiry' (*ibid*., 82). I think that, across the book, Wood achieves this aim. But I've only got one life to live, and I want to learn to know and love God better; should I be an analytic theologian, a science-engaged theologian, and/or some other type of theologian? We can make this question more poignant when we remember that analytic philosophy (and some would argue natural science) has not been a particularly friendly intellectual tradition to Christian theology; so, of all the tools in the sandpit, why theirs?

One way to make the theological rationale for using the tools of analytic philosophy more persuasive would be to start with a stronger acknowledgement of the epistemic

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effects of sin. This would allow for greater nuance in how different methodological and sociological activities inculcate practitioners with either epistemic virtue or vice. What I want to know is not how a doctrine of creation warrants rational enquiry in general, nor how the particular tools and methods of analytic philosophy are 'no more vulnerable to idolatry' than others, but how they are virtuous and actively help theologians guard against idolatry and the effects of sin (*ibid*., 175).[3]

This is the line of justification that one finds in the writings of the founders of the Royal Society for their new empirical methods. It is the doctrine of sin, more than that of creation, that motivates their emphasis on controlled experimentation, relentless repetition of experiments, and intersubjective reasoning through streams of letters to one another reporting findings and questioning analyses (Harrison (2007); Higton (2012), 197–200). This is a theology of science, and it adds warrant to the specific methodological approaches of empirical inquiry, rather than merely any old extended use of common human reason. Does Wood feel the need to do something similar with a theology of analytic reason? What shape does he think this might take?

I want to raise one more query against Wood's analogy between natural science and analytic philosophy as warranted forms of extended common human reason capable of shedding light on the divine. Studying nature (as creation) and inferring some very general insights about God (this is what has commonly been called natural theology and is not without controversy) seems a far cry from the kind of precise and constructive claims that analytic theologians want to make about God on the basis of their form of extended common reason. Wood argues that, since natural science is warranted by the doctrine of creation, then surely analytic philosophy and theology are as well. I wonder what response Wood has for the theologian who does not think that the doctrine of creation warrants science to make such precise theological claims *about God*? Given that Wood himself affirms *creatio ex nihilo* (and thus that God is unlike any creature) this concerns needs answering to avoid inconsistency.

Conclusion: intellectual traditions and dispositions

Despite all the similarities outlined in this article, AT and SET are really different types of things; whereas AT is an intellectual tradition or school, SET is better described as an intellectual disposition or mindset.

Wood prefers a loosely sociological definition because he views analytic theology as an intellectual tradition. In the McIntyrean understanding, intellectual traditions do not have hard-and-fast conceptual boundaries, but are communities of thought extended over (sometimes large) distances of time and space. We know what AT is not just by pointing to one scholar and saying, 'It's what she is doing!', but by pointing to community and saying, 'It's what they are doing'. Through shared conversation and sustained disagreement, such communities come to have a shared language, an agreed set of norms for settling disputes, and a series of questions that are taken to exemplify the shared task.

AT is an intellectual tradition, but I do not think the same should be said of SET. This is not just because as the newer approach of theology, it has not had the time to build up the necessary amount of literature or to put in place the kinds of structural features that sustain intellectual traditions (their own learned societies, journals, book series, and postgraduate programmes). It is that I do not think SET should form itself as an intellectual tradition in this regard. It is more helpful to theology not as another intellectual subtradition for some and not others, but as an intellectual disposition that all theologians share and take into whatever conversations they are already engaged in. SET is a disposition to use whatever tool is most suited for investigating the specific theological claim that is being made. It is also a reminder that theologians often make empirical claims –

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claims about time and space, about emotions, about beliefs, about health and well-being, about humanity's relationship with other species – that can be tested. In such instances, the tools and methods of the natural and behavioural sciences ought to be seen as sources for theology.

One way to understand SET is as follows. Whenever theologians find themselves making an empirical claim, (i.e. regarding the nature of belief or other cognitive or psychological capacities, regarding what 'most Christians believe', regarding the nature of language, regarding embodiment, regarding ecology, etc.) then they should make sure they are, at minimum, abreast of and informed by developments in the relevant scientific field. At best, theologians could partner with the relevant type of scientist to perform new studies to test the empirical aspect of their theological claims. Likewise, when scientists find that their work relies on certain presumptions about order, intelligibility, necessity, normativity, or more particularly about why people hold religious beliefs, about human flourishing or spiritual well-being, etc. then they too should, at minimum read up on what theologians are saying on this topic, and, at best, employ the tools of theological argument and analysis to make sure that their work isn't making any false assumptions.

Although it would be possible (but not desirable) for SET to become an intellectual tradition, I don't think we can reverse engineer this and claim that AT was once a disposition that became a tradition. This is because while it is possible, at least in theory, to see when one is making an empirical claim (or asking an empirical question) and when one is not, it is not so clear when one is making an analytic claim or asking an analytic question. In fact, I'm not even sure what an 'analytic claim' or 'analytic question' are in this context, apart from claims and questions that a particular intellectual tradition happens to be interested in.[4] Analytic theologians have tended towards issues of epistemology and logic, but the movement clearly extends beyond these traditional topics to look at action, liturgy, gender, race, divine attributes, divine transcendence, narrative, and a whole host of other topics. Moreover, even the most paradigmatic concerns will not be unique to AT. AT applies the tools and methods of analytic philosophy to all and any area of theology, which is probably why some have found it undesirably imperialistic.

Above I used the phrase 'Whenever theologians find themselves making an empirical claim . . .' Science-engaged theology does not claim that all theology must employ the tools and methods of the sciences all the time. Instead, SET is occasional and highly circumstantial. SET is more likely to be found in a footnote, paragraph, a few pages or a chapter within a larger (otherwise non-science-engaged) text – rather than being necessarily the methodological approach of a whole monograph series. It is about using the right tools to answer the particular question at hand. It is not about using the sciences for science's sake, nor because of technological progress, nor cultural kudos. The SET disposition is to make sure one is using the right tools for the job. The overlap between AT and SET lies in the fact that SET is a disposition that many AT scholars already possess.

Notes

1. Wood also points to William J. Abraham's definition of analytic theology as 'systematic theology attuned to the deployment of the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy. It is the articulation of the central themes of Christian teaching illuminated by the best insights of analytic philosophy.' (Abraham (2009), 54). And to the description provided by the *Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology* book series: 'Analytic theology utilizes the tools and methods of contemporary analytic philosophy for the purposes of constructive Christian theology, paying attention to the Christian tradition and the development of doctrine' (Crisp and Rea (n.d.))

2. We might also name Rowan Williams, David Burrell, Fergus Kerr, Stanley Hauerwas, Donald McKinnon, and Herbert McCabe as 'Wittgensteinians', none of whom are typically associated with analytic theology (Ashford (2007)).

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3. Wood attempts something like this argument in chapter 10, but the analysis remains at the level of fairly general epistemic virtues such as attention and wonder and attachment. I'm not sure wonder and attachment are particularly prominent analytic traits, and while a particular form of attention certainly is, we still need a more detailed account of why *this* form of attention (which may include a screening off of some types of information, such as context, embodiment, emotion, and narrative shape) is better than others. I find his argument about transparency far more persuasive, because it is a more distinctive trait of the analytic style.
4. There are, of course, 'analytic claims' in the Kantian sense of claims that are true by definition.

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