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The Necessity of a Jewish Systematic Theology

ALANA M. VINCENT

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I.

Before engaging in an argument about the need to enshrine Jewish theology as a distinct discipline in the academy, it is useful to outline, briefly, the wider context in which such an argument takes place. The place of Jewish Theology is dependent in part upon its relationship to Christian systematic theology, and the place of that discipline has itself been in question over the past several years. I will here contend that: (1) the place of Christian theology is best secured within the academy by the introduction of non-Christian theologies alongside it, and (2) that securing a place for theological study is beneficial to the academic study of religion as a whole; these arguments will develop side by side as distinct, but not separable — the importance of the former is dependent on the legitimacy of the latter.

Two events in the academic year 2015–2016 draw attention usefully to tensions regarding the construction of theology and religious studies as a discipline, and the content of “religion” in general, both within the academy and in the perception of an increasingly secularised1 public which

1 I use this word with great hesitation, as secularity is too often understood as a state of religious neutrality, in which the public exercises no preference between, and possesses no particular knowledge of, any religious system. This understanding is already rooted in Christian concerns, a tendency to measure religiosity in terms of membership of and participation in particular institutions; it fails to account for the latency of religious worldviews which still inform the social order even in nations with markedly low church attendance (such as Sweden and the UK) or for the sharp differences in the way that the secular space is experienced by non-Christians and non-practising Christians. See Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003). Nevertheless, the past century has quite clearly seen a shift in the way that Christianity occupies public space, and the way that religion in general is understood by the public.
preceded by a one year term as Vice President. The office of Vice President is the only office in the presidential life-cycle that involves a direct election, and voting for Vice President is essentially voting for the person who will be president two years from now. Nominees are identified and vetted by the Nominations Committee. The process by which the committee works is not especially transparent; there is a long history of the committee presenting two nominees for each office who are from substantially similar demographic and disciplinary backgrounds. For example, the 2015 nominees for Treasurer are both senior male scholars of Jewish Studies; the 2014 nominees for Secretary were both male scholars of American Religious History. Also in 2014, the two choices for Vice President were both male African American Christian theologians; in 2013, two white Christian women—a professor of the history of Christianity and a professor of Christian theology—and in 2011, the choice was between two white Ashkenazi Jewish women, a scholar of psychology of religion and a scholar of ethics. The Nominations Committee, in short, has not been under any pressure to consider the task of ensuring demographic and disciplinary diversity amongst the AAR’s elected officers by ensuring that elections in which one identifiable subset of the academy’s membership is pitched against another identifiable subset simply never happen. Whether or not one commends this strategy, and the perception of the nature of “diversity” which animate it, it has been the AAR’s standard operating procedure for quite a few years, with few complaints, up until 2015, when the two nominees for Vice President were both male Christian theologians from relatively conserva- tive Evangelical backgrounds, who explicitly named the issue of Evangelical Christians feeling unwelcome in the Academy as an issue they intend to prioritise during their term of service. This touched a nerve amongst scholars whose primary disciplinary and methodological commitment is to the study of religion from a critical, outsider perspective—the most vocal of which, as far as I can gather, circles which overlap with my own, were Michael J. Altman and Russell T. McCutcheon.3 Altman protested that the candidates put forward did not fulfill the Nominations Committee’s mandate to select candidates which reflected the diversity of the Board of Directors, having understood the nomination pattern 1 detailed above as presenting demographically similar candidates who, nonetheless, have been positioned on either side of the methodological divide (one more theoretically oriented, one more oriented towards critical study). McCutcheon, by contrast, noted the pattern of previous nominations (with the exception of 2011) being slanted very much in favour of the study of Christianity and suggested that the troublesome issue in 2015 was that neither candidate fell comfortably within the liberal theological bias of the academy, characterising the controversy as a whole as symptomatic of “the problems of theology being seen as an academically legitimate pursuit within the study of religion.” McCutcheon has asserted that legitimate scholarship is primarily, if not purely, descriptive, oriented towards understanding religion as an aspect of human behaviour, as distinct from human experience or human culture. Altman has further expressed the view that theology is academically illegitimate because it is impossible to apply properly empirical methods to the task of “describing God.”4

II.

The second incident which garnered wider public recognition, was the firing of Larycia Hawkins from the political science department of Wheaton College, Illinois. On 10 December 2015, Dr Hawkins made a Facebook post declaring her intention to wear a hijab “as part of my Advent worship,” in order to express “religious solidarity” with her Muslim neighbours, because “as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God.”5 On 15 December, Wheaton, which is a private college with a commitment to Evangelical Christianity,6 placed Hawkins on administrative leave in order to give more time to explore significant questions regarding the theological implications of her recent public statements, including but not limited to those involving the relationship of Christianity to Islam.7

On 5 January, the College initiated termination procedures against Hawkins, citing her refusal “to participate in further dialogue about the theological implications of her public statements.”8 The implication was that Hawkins’s statement violated the College’s Statement of Faith; that the assertion that Muslims and Christians worship the same God undermined the Evangelical ethos of the College.

This incident attracted a wide range of public comment and debate, mostly focussed on the va-

3 The original post has either been made private or removed from Facebook, but it is archived at
https://web.archive.org/web/20151216164237/https://www.facebook.com/larycia/posts/1015332677365841 (accessed August 30, 2016). It is unclear which particular statement of Pope Francis that Hawkins is referring to; in late November he undertook an Apostolic Journey to Kenya, Uganda, and the Central African Republic, during which he made a number of speeches which touched on the relationship between Christians and Muslims, and while these speeches did convey the general sense which Hawkins reports, I have been unable to identify one which made use of the precise words that she references.
5 Again, the original statement from the College is no longer available, but is archived at
editorial is academically problematic; even leaving aside his sanitized gloss over the history of contention between Christians and Jews over the nature of the same God which they worshipped, the neglect of historical causality required to reduce the theological resistance among Evangelical Christians to a simple matter of politics, in which Muslims are the enemy and "it is not just that we insist that we aren't their enemies; we cannot have anything in common with them either" does very little to illuminate, let alone open a solution for, the theological problem. Due to the Gospels' grounding in and intertextual relationship with Hebrew prophetic literature, Christians have little alternative to accepting that they worship the same God as Jews; Christian scripture has no such dependency upon the Quran, and so Christians are less constrained in the terms in which they understand Islamic theology.

III

The problem with McCutcheon's restrictive view of legitimate scholarship as being concerned exclusively with explaining religion as an aspect of human behaviour is that it is ideologically pre-committed to at least the same extent as scholarship which presumes some validity, however limited, to the faith's religious system. Religion is regarded as the basis for its study — and, in my view, McCutcheon's approach is far more pernicious in its ideological pre-commitments for the degree to which it denies and therefore obscures participation in an ideological programme of any kind. The framing of religion as a set of data for understanding human behaviour, rather than as an element constitutive of a cultural system which scholars of religion are necessarily practitioners in and inheritors of, is founded on the historically progressive secularization narrative, which assumes not only the separability of religion from culture (or of culture from experience), but that such a separation is ultimately desirable. It is replicating the view-from-nowhere criticised as an epistemological framework by Sandra Harvey against Jewish monotheism is quite the same as the worship of a false god; John is not a Muracone.

ding and Donna Harraway, and as a basis for politics by Talal Asad, among others.9

9 For an example of the way that practitioners within academic theology view non-Christian religions, see the recent "state of the discipline" piece by Catherine Pickstock, "The Confidence of Theology: Frontiers of Christianity in Britain Today", in ABC [Australia

povertizes the broad field of theology and religious studies, as it prevents critical-constructive engagement with Christian scholars entering into the academic conversation, and thus ensures that knowledge of these traditions will remain, relative to knowledge of Christianity, limited, partial, and fragmented.

This is a reasonably compelling argument for why non-Christian communities should encourage critical-constructive insider scholarship of their own traditions (although the issues of academic legitimacy at the core of this argument also explain, in part, why this does not happen


While Pickstock situates theology as a discipline in multi-layered dialogue, and admits that non-Christian theological perspectives exist, she does assume that academic theology is academic Christian theology. Religious studies seems the ground where various spiritual discourses may meet, but Pickstock, when she notes that a "sense of shared wayfaring might indeed offer a useful model for the Church's relation with academic theology, and engagement with other discourses and faiths, including absence of faith" continues to differentiate between academic theology, which is connected to Christianity, and other discourses, connected to other faiths. See also Maurice Wiles, What is Theology? (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976), 10–13, which discusses the relationship between Christian theology, other religions, and religious studies; while there is a call for empathy and breadth of understanding, non-Christian theology is never mentioned, so that the implication is that the assumed place for other religions in the university is comparative study. Similarly, Colin E. Gunton, "Doing Theology in the University Today," 441–455 in The Practice of Theology (eds. C. Gunton, S. Holmes & M. Rae; London: SCM Press, 2001), discusses the increasing number of students in theology departments who are unbelievers or at least not committed Christians but never the idea of adherents to other faiths studying the discipline. One exception to this is David F. Ford who, in The Future of Christian Theology (Malden, MA, & Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 161, includes within theology the "tradition-specific" forms of religious thought. However, the paradigm of theology which he envisions in the book as a whole is entirely Christian, using Christian terminology and understanding of sources.

The assumption that theology is "describing God" is both etymologically accurate and, at least since the Renaissance, has served as a description of the actual content of the discipline. The American Emerging Church theologian Phyllis Tickle's re-translation of the Greek roots as "God-talk," comes somewhat closer to an accurate summary of the discipline's concerns: it is true that the material with which theologians work is discourse about God. It is also true that discourse about God is not the sole province of Christianity. Other religions also have long traditions of such discourse. Here, I will shift from speaking broadly of non-Christian religions and begin to draw examples specifically from Judaism, in order to become more precise in my argument and to address some particular objections that might be raised to the idea of Jewish theology. Judaism has a long tradition of discourse about the nature of God which exists in tension with its long tradition of prohibition against speculation concerning the nature of God. Very often this latter tradition is cited by Christian theologians as a justification for the exclusion of Jewish thought from the canon of theology, on the grounds that it would be unjust — colonising, even — to read Jewish texts as theology in spite of the expressed resistance of the Jewish tradition to that read-

with any great frequency), or why scholars from those traditions might be doing the wider academic community a service by taking upon themselves the very real professional risk of breaking from the methodological orthodoxy of religious studies. It does not answer the question of why established departments of theology, which have historically been dedicated entirely to the study of Christian traditions, should be welcoming to such scholars, or why such study should have a place on the curriculum even in places where there is not a significant non-Christian population. This is the argument to which the remainder of this paper will devote itself, beginning by addressing Altman's objection that it is impossible to apply properly empirical methods to the task of "describing God."
When, for example, the Talmudic prohibition against speculation on "what is above, what is beneath, what is before, what after" (Chagigah 11b), or Maimonides' arguments against anthropomorphising the deity, are prioritised as representations of "the Jewish tradition" over and against, for example, the image of God laughing in delight at the Talmud Rabbis' over-turning of a heavenly decree in Baba Mezia 59b, or the extended argument concerning the nature of God which forms the backdrop for Maimonides' arguments against anthropomorphism,13 what is actually happening is not a simple reflection of the role of theology in Jewish tradition, but a judgement about what the Jewish tradition ought to be; it ignores both historical evidence of Jews engaging in things-like-theology and a substantial body of contemporary work which labels itself explicitly as theology.

This judgement is often buttressed by an expressed resistance to the specific use of the term theology (rather than to activities which may be reasonably called theology) which appears in a number of Jewish texts.14 This resistance is typically founded upon an understanding of theology as a specifically Christian concern with describing the incarnation.15 While arguments found in seasons of the church year also show few qualms about presenting Old Testament texts as pointing directly to Christ's story.


14 In addition to Neusner and Bamberger, cited above, see Shubert Spero, New Perspectives in Theology of Judaism (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 26, which summarises the argument that Jewish thought about God is not recognised as theology because of its difference from Greek modes of thinking. Also see Norbert M. Samuelson, Jewish Philosophy: An Historical Introduction (London & New York: Continuum, 2003), 113, "rabbinic theology (i.e. philosophy about God?)."

15 This restrictive understanding of theology is undergirded by those Christian theologians who assume that the proper environment of theology is a community of faith whose loyalty they claim to express. For example the work of Stanley Hauerwas, who has written: "Theologians at least have the advantage (over most academics) that, though we often end up writing for other academic theologians, we are at least committed to write for people who identify themselves as Christians on this resistance are not frivolous per se, they are prescribing an exclusive focus on one particular aspect of the work of Christian theology over all others. Such exclusivity is an important aspect, to be sure, but not exclusively the only concern which Christian theology addresses.

A similar set of issues emerges if we take, as our point of departure, the Anselmian definition of theology as "faith seeking understanding"; we might, by that route, introduce some debate over the concept of "faith," and whether it implicitly prioritises belief over praxis, and from there go on to a consideration of whether Judaism is primarily a religion of belief or practice, which is an essay title I set for my first year students. Since this is not first year Judaism, however, I am content to skip straight ahead to the answer: it is both, and different traditions within Judaism draw different conclusions about the priority of one over the other, just as different strands of Christian tradition have developed different approaches to the vexed question of faith versus works. This approach does not, therefore, do much to advance any specific argument about the potential of Jewish theology, and nor do I expect it would do much to clarify a critique of the academic value of theology in general, such as Altsman, due to the construction's implicit presumption that faith is the ground upon which understanding rests (a presumption enforced by Anselm's other famously quotable maxim, credo at intellectum).

The case for theology as an academic discipline is helped much more by a consideration of its methods and its proximate, rather than ultimate, object of study. By this understanding, the material with which theologians work is, indeed, discourse about God (or, more broadly, discourses of faith), but the focus is on the discourse itself, as an artefact of cultural significance regardless of its truth value, rather than on the object of that discourse. There are two ways of pursuing this framing of the discipline, which I will consider in turn: first, a textual approach, and second, a methodological approach.
The textual approach sees the field of theology as something akin to a literary canon, a set of writings, and the work of theology as the interpretation and possibly the expansion of that canon. Much as in the case of literary canons, there is room for debate on the construction of the theological canon, and the questions are roughly similar: ought canon to be understood prescriptively, as an artefact invested with authority by means of the historical process which brought it into being, and bounded by fiat, or descriptively, as a collection of texts whose authority has accrued through the cultural process of repeated citation, and not bounded so much as defined by the interrelationships between its constituent texts? In reality, these positions operate as points on a continuum, and the disciplinary boundaries of academic theology are somewhere in the middle – I believe that most readers of this article would agree, for example, that the writings of Karl Barth belong in a theological canon (whether or not they occupy a central position in our own preferred canons), and from that agreement, we can derive evidence that the canon has expanded within the past century; however restrictively we may wish to define it, it is not closed.

The place of Jewish thought within the canon of theology is highly dependent upon the degree to which the canon is conceived of as open, although it does not follow from this that the ability of a Jew to “do theology” is similarly dependent; the more closed the theological canon, the more “doing theology” becomes an exercise in commenting upon, rather than adding to, and the less controversial contributions from non-Christians become. Anyone can comment on a text, after all. Whether that commentary is useful to others depends on a number of factors, not least of which is the particular “others” who constitute the commentary’s assumed audience. The enterprise of Jewish New Testament studies, to draw an example from a closely allied discipline, presents itself both as mining the texts of the New Testament for insight into Jewish history, and as bringing knowledge of later developments in Rabbinic Judaism to bear on particular problems in New Testament Interpretation. Simplicity, talking about a single theological canon; a more accurate mapping of the discipline might reasonably find it to encompass multiple intersecting canons, where works that are central to one are marginal to another – Aquinas and Barth remain apt examples, here. Even if texts produced by Jews cannot be understood as central, or even firmly located within, various canons of Christian theology, it is still meaningful to speak of canons of Jewish theology which may usefully be read and commented on by non-Jews, just as non-Christians may usefully read and comment upon canons of Christian theology – but there is a distinction to be drawn here between “studying” or “reading” theology and “doing” theology, which is best understood by turning to a discussion of theology as methodology.

As in the case of canonicity, there have been many books, and much controversy, over how best to describe (or prescribe) theological methods, and here I find it increasingly difficult to speak in general terms, without accidentally preferring one over another. I am too conscious of my own training, which prioritised hermeneutics and the Wesleyan quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience – although when I taught at Glasgow, the local tradition was to add a fifth source of theological legitimacy, an addi tion I find extremely constructive and which I have retained in my teaching and writing since. I find categorisations such as Christology, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology, etc., occasionally helpful for narrowing down the best way to frame a particular line of enquiry and for identifying potentially helpful interlocutors, but shy away from approaches which require that an enquiry be assigned an appropriate categorical label and restricted in scope to material which bears the same label in order to be considered rigorously theological. So my strong inclination is to describe theology as method as a practice of reading texts from a particular tradition with a view to understanding or contextualising them in a historical context and as somehow relevant to contemporary concerns, and I believe a close inspection of the various books written on theological method would reveal a host of strategies (and a considerable amount of dispute over prioritisation) for accomplishing precisely this core task.

That being said, I am aware that my preference for historical contextualisation may itself be controversial; it would be unlikely to convince those committed, for example, to understanding doctrine as the expression of eternal truths, even though in such a case I would hope that some agreement might be reached on the fact that even eternal truths must necessarily find expression in concrete historical moments. Certainly, the trend in papers delivered in theology sessions at the American Academy of Religion suggests that, in practice, historical contextualisation has become a disciplinary norm. At the
same time, the admission of the category of eternal truths as a valid (albeit not necessarily universal) reality within a theological methodology is unlikely to enforce the suspension with which theology is viewed by scholars committed to a purely secular religious studies methodology.

V.

The reason that I keep returning to the case made by critics of theology’s academic value is that the current state of the academic study of religion in general is poor. Departments are closing and consolidating, student numbers are dropping, research funding is evaporating. The field received a boost in the early years of this century when understanding Islam seemed to be an urgent national security concern, at least in English-speaking nations such as the US, UK, Canada, and Australia, and we are still feeling some after-effects of that. Religion and conflict tends to do quite well, in terms of student recruitment, book sales, and funding capture, but this is an anomaly in the wider landscape of theology and religious studies. That landscape, especially in Europe, is increasingly dominated by the secularist assumptions articulated by McCutcheon and Altman: religious belief is, at best, a private concern and at worst a threat to social cohesion; if people want to be religious let them do it on their own time, not in a state-funded university, which should be about something else, about promoting peace, understanding and countering the threat posed by religion; if religious organisations want to sponsor research or teach people about their faith then let them fund their own institutions; this is not a matter for academic inquiry. So part of my argument for the value of including non-Christian religious traditions within thedisciplinary umbrella of theology is that doing so paves the way for a viable alternative to the secularised, study-of-religion-as-a-strange-artefact-of-human-behaviour that is becoming dominant in public institutions. The other part of my argument is that including critical-constructive scholarship of non-Christian traditions in theological conversations will actually improve the way that we all do theology.

Given, then, an understanding of theology as a method of reading texts concerned with God or belief more generally, with attention both to their place within a particular tradition of thought about God or belief and to their implications within the reader’s own world, there appear to be few, if any, supportable arguments for suggesting that it is a discipline that ought to be restricted to the study of Christianity by Christians — aside from inertia, which I use in a technical and not a pejorative sense: in spite of the arguments I have constructed here about how theology can and ought to be understood, how we talk about God or belief in the modern world, one thing is clear: we all claim to worship the One God who created the world through God’s Word. First of all, this leads naturally to the equally unhelpful (indeed, in my mind, the absolutely counterproductive) urge to evaluate all religious discourse as a series of truth-claims, making the most urgent question that can be asked within theology of religious validity. How multiple, seemingly contradictory truth-claims might be either reconciled or else objectively prioritised. They cannot. There is no set of data likely to convince all parties of the objective viability of any such judgement, and so “objectivity” becomes, in reality, a cypher for compatibility with the researcher’s own worldview. Second, whether it is objectively true or provable or not, a claim such as “we all believe in one God” is insufficiently attentive to the very real differences in historical, geographical, economic, social, gendered, power contexts that have contributed to shaping the cultural inheritances of different religious traditions, which in turn dictate the vastly divergent ways in which the object of belief (or non-belief) is understood. And we must take the idea of cultural inheritance quite seriously: as atheist Jews and Muslims — not to mention radical Christian theologians — are well aware, it is possible to be deeply connected to a religious tradition, to speak from and through it, and still hold the conviction that it is the belief context “being belief” as it is normally understood.

I want to resist the cloying universalism which Larycia Hawkins and Miroslav Volf trafficked in when they insist that “we worship the same God,” or even the slightly more nuanced claim forwarded by Steve relates the fact that “we all claim to believe in one God who created the world through God’s Word.” First of all, this leads naturally to the equally unhelpful (indeed, in my mind, the absolutely counterproductive) urge to evaluate all religious discourse as a series of

33 Even if scholars such as Mary-Arr Leeds contest the historical narrative of Christendom as a whole, the early history of universities was still very closely bound up in the concerns of a Christian society and, specifically, with the training and dissemination of Christian theology. See Mary-Arr Leeds, Christen- dom and European Identity: The Legacy of a Grand Narrative Since 1789 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004); A History of the University in Europe, vols. 1—4 (ed. W. B. Harris, Cambridge University Press, 2010); David Ford, “Christianity and Universities Today: A Double Manifesto”, Third Lord Dearing Memorial Lecture, delivered 2011; archived at http://www.cathedralsgroup.ac.uk/Uploads/Dearing20 11.pdf (accessed May 16, 2017).

34 For example, Yonatan Kolatch reads it as a re- striction of the dissemination of Kabbalah, although the dates for the Mishnaic text appear to be slightly too early compared to the development of modern Kabbalah for that to be a historically accurate understanding of the original text. Yonatan Kolatch, Mas- ters of the Word: Traditional Jewish Bible Commen- tary from the First Through Tenth Centuries, vol. 1 (Hoboken, NJ: Aspen Publishers, 1997); and Yonatan Kolatch, The Same God, or the One God? On the Limitations and Implications of the Wheaton Affair” in ABC Religion & Ethics, 12/01/2016, http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/01/12/43 6793.htm (accessed August 31, 2016).
my own work – quite limited, examples of the potential of such an approach, in which defining the boundaries of a concept and carefully mapping their shift as it passes from one tradition to another help us to understand a bit better the public space which is now necessarily negotiated between inheritors of different religious systems.26

Whether or not we all believe in one God, the same God, or any God at all, our belief drives our actions in the world which we share with one another. It is therefore an urgent social issue to recognise that we understand that belief in distinct, not necessarily easily compatible ways. One of the main tasks of theology going forward must be to subject these differences to an intensely open examination.

Summary

Taking into account current disputes about the nature of theology and religious studies, both inside and outside of the academy, this article argues that the academic discipline of theology would benefit greatly by expanding its religious remit beyond the traditional field of Christian systematic theology to include constructive-critical insider engagement with the texts of other traditions – e.g., Jewish and Islamic theology.