

What makes theology theology?

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Abstract

Informed by a dialogue between the disciplines of law and theology on legal and theological dogmatics, the article describes nine levels that constitute theological normativity and weight. The first three levels deal with integrating concepts of God, with the historical, cultural, and theological weight of the biblical canon, and with confessional documents and multi-loci dogmatics, respectively. These are central parts of the spectrum. The ecclesial, academic, and contextual-ethical responsibilities (integral to truth- and justice-seeking communities), the professional ethos and the institutional frameworks are equally important. Finally, the radiations of these six levels with individual piety and a shared living faith and the reverse shaping powers of practiced religious experience are all indispensable for the enterprise of theology.

Keywords

theology and science, levels of normative impact, theology and law, biblical theology, the academy and the church

In the last 20 years Wentzel van Huyssteen and I have been—individually and together—very much engaged in projects that brought theology into international and interdisciplinary dialogue and cooperation. The dialogue with the sciences was of particular importance, but we also sought constructive interactions with other areas of research. Our common conviction has been that such projects require a strong sense of theological identity and that the theological topics should be very carefully selected in order to be fruitful for both sides.¹ It is in the light of these

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1. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); see also our contributions to the project *Concepts of Law in the Sciences, Legal Studies and Theology*, ed. M. Welker and G. Etzelmüller (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 205–24, 319–38.

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common interests and convictions that I want to contribute the following thoughts to this event in Wentzel van Huyssteen's honor.

The simplest definition of theology says, "Theology is talk about God." This basic definition, simple as it is, however, demonstrates the necessity for a more sophisticated answer, because it is obvious that not each and every remark about God is a theological one. There is talk about God or about religious matters which, for instance, is purely statistical or fact-related, and whose speaker can be totally indifferent to the statement. Examples of such an attitude would be sentences like: "In this African country, about 90% of the population seem to believe in a god." Or: "According to Greek mythology, Zeus was the highest Olympic god." These statements talk about a god, but they can hardly be regarded as truly "theological."

So what is the minimum requirement for an utterance to be acknowledged as theological? I should like to argue that at least two elements are necessary if a reference to God or to religious matters is to be qualified as a "theological" one. First, a theological utterance about God must show at least "a minimum level of conviction to relate to an encompassing sustaining, saving and ennobling power, at least a minimal degree of having been existentially grounded."² If this is not the case for the speaker, it should at least hold true for the persons or contexts the talk refers to—directly or indirectly. The second requirement for an utterance to be considered theological is that it is formulated in words and are comprehensible. Thus a silent prayer or a sigh directed to God cannot be regarded as theological utterances. These two minimum requirements seem to be very simple, even trivial, but in their combination they are actually quite demanding. In order to reach the level of theological propositions, religious utterances must express religious certainties that are communicable and comprehensible. They must be open to communication and development with regard to their content.

To be sure, theological utterances do not necessarily have to show a well-developed faith. They do not have to reach the levels of a confession or a proclamation. They can be fragmentary, rudimentary, and even distanced. But they have to unite at least a minimum of consistency of conviction and a minimum of consistency of subject matter. This means that theology does not only look for individual certainty and a common certainty in consensus. Nor does it look only for topic-related coherence and correctness. It has to connect both dimensions—namely subjective certainty and objective content and coherence, and thus it opens up the search for truth. Truth is often confused with mere certainty, particularly in religious matters. It is also often reduced to consistency and correctness, particularly in the academy. But theology requires both dimensions, subjective certainty and objective content

2. Cf. Michael Welker, "Is Theology in Public Discourse Possible Outside Communities of Faith?," in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Luis E. Lugo (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 110–22 (112).

and coherence. The mutual challenge of both sides takes theology into the search for truth.

Many good Protestants love the famous statement attributed to Luther at the Diet of Worms before the Emperor and the Empire in 1521: "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen." It is fairly uncertain whether Luther said these words at all. What is documented is his statement, "If I cannot be convinced by testimonies of Scripture or overt arguments of reason, my conscience is captivated in the words of God." This statement connects exactly the search for certainty and the search for rationally consistent and scripturally bound theological insight. In an exemplary way it marks the theological search for truth and the challenge that theology should be practiced in "truth-seeking communities."

With this basic challenge in mind, we will investigate the inner texture of an academic and ecclesial theology, the "theology" that we try to cultivate at seminaries, universities, and hopefully also in churches. How do individual religious insights and remarks reach the level of what we regard or should regard as "theology" in the strictest sense in the academy and in the churches? My own understanding has greatly profited from a multi-year exchange and dialogue with colleagues from the Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Law at the University of Heidelberg on the topic "Legal Dogmatics and Theological Dogmatics." Moreover, a guest professorship at the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University, Atlanta, last year gave me the opportunity to elaborate the astounding communalities in the areas of legal and theological dogmatics. No fewer than nine interdependent levels of normative impact are necessary in order to establish the great weight of legal and theological normativity. It has been interesting to see that both legal and theological scholars tend to select only some of these levels when they deal with the question, What makes theology theology? or, respectively, What makes jurisprudence jurisprudence? To be sure, in the following discussion of the nine interdependent levels of normative impact, I will concentrate on theology only.

Level I: Concentration on integrating concepts of God

On the first level, the seemingly trivial insight that "Theology is talk about God" is taken seriously. This level is concerned with the identification of integrating ideas, concepts or narratives of God, or of the divine. Even on this level, the spectrum of opinions is broad. Some theologians propagate integrating concepts of God such as "God is the ultimate point of reference," or "God is the ground of being." Others prefer religious ciphers—"the transcendent," or "the numinous"—and demand respect for the apophatic and the unknown. Even among the group who searches for theological clarity, there is a vast difference between those who insist, for example, on a trinitarian theological basis or on other concepts of God which are compatible with revelation and Christology, and those who are quite satisfied with a *prima causa* or an "all-determining reality."

A recent contribution of a philosopher at the Heidelberg Academy who tried to argue for a strong “theological” interest of all serious philosophy opened my eyes to a very important fact.³ Theology should insist on a clear differentiation between theology and a totalitarian metaphysics which works with all sorts of concepts of “the absolute.” It should insist on the insight that a serious concept of God cannot remain soteriologically empty. A “first cause” or a “ground of being” without any saving, elevating, and ennobling powers cannot be regarded as “God,” and the best reflections on it do not make a theology.

Once we have seen this, it is clear that the mere search for an “ultimate thought” is not at all sufficient to make theology. You cannot pray to an “ultimate thought” and you cannot expect salvation from an “ultimate thought.” If the question, What makes theology theology? asks for Christian theology, it has to insist on a differentiated unity of God which makes sense of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. This differentiated unity is expressed by trinitarian theology. Even a more general answer than the Christian one to the question, What makes theology theology?, should insist on a differentiated integrating thought or idea of God. If theology is “talk of God” or even “teaching about God,” a merely apophatic or numinous or radically monistic and absolutely simple entity will not suffice on this first level.

Level 2: Respect for the weight of the biblical canon

The fact that a mere “ground of being” cannot be regarded as “God” becomes very clear when we focus on the second level needed for an understanding of what theology is, namely, the normative weight of the codified and canonical texts. In some churches the Church Fathers belong to the ecclesial-theological traditions to be considered on this level, and many churches hold confessions in high esteem. Serious academic and ecclesial theology grounds its talk about God above all on the weight of the biblical canon. It cooperates with exegetical and historical research. I have proposed to speak of a “fourfold weight” of Scripture in order to explain the Reformation principle *sola scriptura* in contemporary contexts.⁴ First, there is the great historical weight of the biblical canon which grew over one millennium and includes an enormous array of witnesses to God and God’s workings in the most different traditions of peace and war, times of tyranny and chaos and times of freedom and joy, individual suffering, sorrow, and distress, but also experiences of deep gratitude and the fecundity of life.

Next, there is the enormous cultural weight of Scripture. It radiates not only into the area of religion, but also into the arts, into the general culture, the academy, and education in vast parts of the world. This radiation, to be sure, was not only and not always for the good of humankind. Reference to Scripture was also used in religious,

3. Jens Halfwassen, “Gott im Denken. Warum die Philosophie auf die Frage nach Gott nicht verzichten kann,” in *Gott–Götter–Götzen*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Leipzig: EVA, 2013), 187–96.

4. Michael Welker, “Sola Scriptura? The Authority of Scripture in Pluralistic Environments,” in *A God So Near*, ed. B. Strawn et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 375–91.

political, and moral oppression. But in any case the overwhelming cultural powers of biblical rationalities, symbols, and imaginations can by no means be denied.

Then there is the canonical weight. The different biblical traditions do not follow one line of thought. They do not simply support one idea or one value. But in multifarious ways they are deeply interconnected and cultivate a whole network of interconnected values. They combine complexity of insight and coherence of religious, social, cultural, and moral orientation.⁵ This canonical weight is one of the reasons for their great orienting power over the ages and their normative gravity.

The historical, the cultural, and the canonical weight in their turn are grounded in the decisive theological weight of Scripture, in its reference to God, God's revelation, and God's sustaining, saving, and elevating relation to creation and to humankind. It is therefore correct to say that the relation to Scripture makes theology theology. This is not yet the whole answer, but an indispensable part of it.

Under the rubric of "biblical theology" we have organized many processes of international and interdisciplinary theological cooperation.⁶ We wanted to work against a tendency in Old and New Testament exegesis to develop itself into merely philological, historical, and cultural studies disciplines. Moreover, we wanted to work against all sorts of reductionist systematic and practical theological thinking which often replaces theology by self-made popular religious philosophies and leads to self-secularization and self-banalization in contemporary theologies and churches. We learned that serious work with the biblical traditions can very much improve the standing of theology in the general academy, even in dialogue with the sciences. And yet this move alone does not provide a sufficient answer to our question.

Level 3: The orienting power of specific theological topics, respectively the dogmatic loci

If theology had nothing but a concept of God (level 1), it would be dried out by reductionism. If theology had nothing but Scripture (level 2), it would be flooded by and drowned in an ocean of narratives and disparate insights. On the third level, theology in general and theological dogmatics in particular have to concentrate on a selection of interdependent specific topics which demonstrate the orienting value of the first two levels in specific contexts and with respect to specific questions and problems.

The third level has to show the topic-centered weight of theology. A classic form to do this was and still is a multi-loci dogmatics. Theology has to unfold its leading and integrating general thoughts of God, and it has to reduce and to structure the enormous complexity of the witnesses of Scripture. A sound and fruitful theology

5. Cf. Jan Assmann, "Fünf Stufen auf dem Wege zum Kanon. Tradition und Schriftkultur im alten Israel und frühen Judentum," in idem, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis* (Munich: Beck, 2000), 81–100.

6. Cf. as one successful example among many the *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag), 1986–2015.

has to deal with a limited polyphony of topics and perspectives. The biblical canon, the multi-loci dogmatics, the voices of the Church Fathers, the positions of the reformers, the ecumenical constellations—they all require to come to terms with what I have called a “structured pluralism.”⁷ This structured or organismic pluralism should not be confused with a diffuse “plurality,” with radical individualism and relativism.

On this level, the exegetical, historical, and systematic approaches of theology have to bear fruit. These fruits do not necessarily have a direct contemporary relevance. They are not necessarily plausible to everyone in today’s concrete environments. This is why we need the further levels (4–9) for a satisfactory answer to the question, What makes theology theology?

These further levels suffer from the great divide between academic theology and ecclesial theology. Ideally, both types should support each other, correct each other, and demonstrate the wonderful power of two different yet related “truth-seeking communities.”⁸

Level 4: A purely academic theology

In reality, however, we often see a divide between those who think that theological truth claims are best articulated and best tested in the church and those who prefer the academy and the orbit of highly interdisciplinary universities, which make it the theologians’ duty to justify their claims in philosophical, psychological, sociological, philological, historical, and even scientific discourses. In the second perspective, a purely academic theology would be what makes theology theology. This answer, however, is easily misleading because in this development we often witness a loss of dogmatic responsibility and content. In our days, many colleagues are quite happy to see themselves transformed into scholars of religious or cultural studies, into philosophical theologians, historians, or sociologists—maybe with a specific competence in theological issues. But with all due respect to a seemingly pure academic ethos, we should calmly acknowledge that this approach offers many ways not to “make,” but rather to distort or even destroy theology within theology.

Level 5: Academic theology in its educational and practical responsibilities

We need the complicated connection of an academically well trained systematic, biblical, and historical theology with a practical theology. We need the strong understanding that the former has not only to contribute to the development and flourishing of the academy, but that it should also reach people outside of

7. M. Welker, *Kirche im Pluralismus* (Kaiser: Gütersloh, 1995; 2nd ed., 2000); “Calvin’s Doctrine of the ‘Civil Government’: Its Orienting Power in Pluralism and Globalization,” in *Calvin Today: Reformed Theology and the Future of the Church* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 206–14.

8. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, *Faith in the Living God: A Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 2001).

the academic orbit, people who are deeply interested in theological and spiritual issues or who should become convinced that these issues are of great importance. The fact that in the academy future pastors and teachers are trained makes this task of reaching out beyond the academy indispensable for academic theology. It is, however, not only the training of the academic elite of the future which sets the standards for a good theology in universities and seminaries. It is above all the elite of practical theology in churches and educational institutions which is the test case for an answer to the question, "What makes theology theology?" To be sure, the answer can by no means be that the education of mere theological practitioners and theological technicians makes theology theology. It is exactly the bridging between two types of truth-seeking communities—that is, the academy and the church—it is their mutual support and their mutual constructive critique which should be cultivated by a good theology.

Level 6: Practical theology in ecclesial and concrete cultural contexts

On the sixth level, it is not satisfactory to argue that it is the theology of individual pastors, of teachers of religion, and of church leaders which makes theology theology. We should certainly acknowledge the enormous normative power of theology exercised in and by these professional individuals and groups. It is their respect of and their constant work on a good dogmatic orientation, on adequate concepts of God, on an adequate scriptural, exegetical, and historical grounding, on a constant dialogue with the ongoing academic theological research, which offer the first part of a comprehensive satisfying answer to the question, "What makes theology theology?" Here it is a responsibly practiced theology that comes before our eyes. It is a theology that constantly relates to practiced piety, to general theological claims and doubts, and to religious indifference and skepticism in today's ecclesial and secular environments.

On this level we have to deal with the tempting answer, "It is ecclesial theology that makes theology theology." This answer is not false, but without a differentiated qualification it can become as one sided and misleading as the reference to the integrating concepts of God or the Bible. All too easily "ecclesial theology" can turn into a domination by church hierarchies, by academic professionalism, by institutional normative powers, by religious moral moods, or pressing actual problems that can be related to the life of the church. We have to take all the other levels into account in our search for an answer to the leading question in order to overcome these dangers.

Level 7: Institutionalized theology with a differentiated professional ethos

Practiced theology is not just a poly-individual enterprise of more or less inspired religious leaders with more or less developed inclinations to serve as theologians

proper. In a multitude of forms and with many cultural means, the academy, the church, the ecclesial communities, but also other parts of modern societies want to ensure the specific quality of practiced theology in churches, schools, and beyond. Practicing theologians have to pass exams, ordinations, and visitations; as a rule they work in schools and not in parks, in churches and not in coffee houses—that is, they operate in the framework of institutions and in what is known as “public places.” They are under many forms of public and professional control.

Since we want to invite the communication and participation of potentially all individuals in our societies in the practicing of theology, we as a rule do not over-emphasize the fact that theology is a very seriously organized and institutionally loaded business. Thus we do not rub it in that “it is its discipline and its seriousness and its institutional powers that makes theology theology.” In a more sublime way, we refer to and address all the other levels when we say, It is the respect for the word of God that makes theology theology. It is the orientation towards Scripture that makes theology theology. It is the concentration on specific central theological topics (for instance, Christology) that makes theology theology. It is the serious study in the search for truth that makes theology theology. It is the orienting power in the life of the community and the church that makes theology theology.

If we try to avoid the reference to the word of God, to the revelation of the triune God in Jesus Christ, to Scripture, grace and faith (the famous “four sola” of the Reformation) we easily run into the danger of idolizing institutional and cultural artefacts as making theology theology.⁹ Although we should not underestimate the power of church buildings, church music, well-orchestrated worship, good techniques of education and social organization in the life of the church—it all remains on the levels of supporting theology, but it cannot make or even replace it.

Level 8: A theology with orienting power in existential situations

The penultimate answer takes us to a decisive test of all dogmatic, academic, and ecclesial theology: Does it help and orient and inspire people in their search for God, for God’s guidance, in their quest for comfort and salvation, in their attempts to understand the sustaining, saving, and ennobling work of God in the midst of an ambivalent creation and in the midst of massive sin and pain among human beings? In late modern societies, most professional and practical theologians seem to be far too little pressed by burning theological questions. To be sure, many people contact them in situations of important transitions in their lives such as birth, maturation, marriage, and death; very often they not only seek good and pleasant rituals, but also solid theological messages and answers which can comfort their hearts and

9. Cf. Berndt Hamm and Michael Welker, *Die Reformation. Potentiale der Freiheit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); M. Welker, “Die Reformation als geistliche Erneuerung und bleibende Aufgabe in Theologien und Kirchen,” *Evangelische Theologie* 73 (2013): 166–77.

souls, give peace to their conscience, satisfy the demands of their reason and illuminate their spirit.

People in complicated existential and ethical situations not only seek pragmatic practical solutions, but they want to get truly comforting and truthful theological insights that can orient or reorient their lives. In such existential and pastoral situations there is no single and no simple answer to the question, What makes theology theology? Still it is clear that in such cases people do not primarily look for the individual answer of a good pastor or teacher, but for the word of God. And without sound orientation provided at the other levels of theological normativity, relevant theological questions and answers are hard to articulate.

Level 9: A theology that shapes the religious and theological mentalities

On the ninth level, we have to acknowledge that the professional theology on which we have concentrated in the search for an answer to the question, What makes theology theology? has to serve the serious non-professional theological search we set out with. It has to respect the individual search to understand God, God's word and work, the search for comfort and illumination, the attempt to develop faith in God's revelation and to live a life in its light, or at least to cultivate an honest religiosity which stands firm in the diversity of cultural life with claims both from strict fundamentalism and aggressive atheism at its edges.

On the other hand, the isolation of the ninth level is one of the greatest threats to theology in our days. Many well-meaning people, but also many neo-Protestant theologians, would answer our question by saying, "It is subjectivist faith which makes theology theology."¹⁰ However, the reference to my inner voice, my "inner Other," the reference to my religious certainty, is as problematic as the isolated ultimate God-thoughts that we discussed on the first level. The concrete individual attempt to relate to God, the search for religious certainty, is indeed an essential element for all theology, but it does not make theology. It can rather destroy all theology in its very beginning. We therefore have to serve on all the other levels in order to make sure that the various religious searches in all environments can reach the level of theology. And this means that they can talk of God and teach about God in ways that allow for shared spiritual communication in the individual and common search for truth and salvation.

It is on all these nine levels that the question, What makes theology theology? has to be answered. This differentiation makes us understand that different people privilege only some and certain of the nine levels over against others, depending on their interests and concerns. We can explain why theology taught in seminaries and at universities needs a differentiation of disciplines for its flourishing. On this basis

10. Cf. my detailed critique of "subjectivist faith as religious trap" in *Gottes Offenbarung. Christologie* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2012) (ET = *God the Revealed: Christology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013]).

we can work on a mutual strengthening of the different attempts to give a satisfying answer to the burning question, What makes theology theology? There is no simple answer to this question. But we can identify consistent and fruitful connections between the different answers which address different aspects in the attempt to serve the word of God, to serve the search for truth, and to serve the well-being of fellow human beings. And we can aim at a polyphonic consonance of the different perspectives and their truth-seeking contributions to the great task that makes theology theology.

Author biography

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