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Normative Pictures

The History of Christianity from a Theological Perspective

Henk van den Belt

The fact that theology relates religion to God makes its position problematic in an academic context where the study of religions is determined by an empirical approach to reality. Can theology meet the requirements of “methodological atheism” or “methodological agnosticism” without committing suicide? The answer to this question not only depends on the definition of theology, but also on the way in which neutrality in studying religion is understood. Defining neutrality in a positivistic way clearly excludes theology from academic discourse. An awareness of any researcher’s “positionality”, however, puts the theologian more on a par with the anthropologist, sociologist and historian of religion.

This chapter first investigates why theology’s relationship with religious studies is complicated and tense. Then the question regarding theology’s proper limitations and object is answered from one of the classic theological traditions: scholasticism. Next, it reflects on the issue of whether a theological perspective makes any difference for historical research. This will be illustrated from the analysis of some woodcuts from the period of the Reformation. The section finally explains what a theological perspective can add to the general understanding of the history of Christianity and how this perspective relates to a comprehensive worldview.

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From the perspective of religious studies, the limitations of theology seem to be obvious. Theology presupposes the existence of God or the divine and refers to revelation as a source of knowledge. It does not take a contextualized notion of religion for granted but contests that notion, departing from an essentialist definition of religion. Its main limitation, therefore, is the presupposed belief of the scholar that excludes communication of the scholarly results with non-believers, even when the positionality of every researcher is taken into account. Even in the field of anthropology, however, some assert that the membrane between belief and disbelief is rather thin. Therefore, this section seeks to explain how the scholarly results and conclusions of theology can be communicable within an academic context and how theological reflection can take place in the arena of the public academy.

Theology and Religious Studies

Historically speaking, theology is a core business of the university. Until the eighteenth century, basically all the universities in Western Europe had theological faculties and theology was seen by many as the queen of the sciences. In the context of modernity, theology, however, has become

a stepdaughter of the university. Of course, that has everything to do with the claim that theology is about God and with the conviction that it is impossible to say anything academically about the divine, because God does not belong to empirical reality. Faith in God is fine, it is religion, and it can be studied, but God himself – if he exists – is beyond the reach of the human intellect, therefore theology as “discourse about God” is improper at the academy.

If a theological faculty is maintained at a public university, this is mostly out of respect for the historical tradition. More often theology is studied in the context of seminaries or divinity schools, sometimes closely related to a broader public university, but mostly separated from them institutionally. The study of theology takes a distinct approach – either called “confessional” or labelled as an “inside-perspective” – that is not appropriate at the public university. Theology is taught in a close affiliation with churches serving the education of their professionals. In practice, theology at a public university is restricted to the study of the empirical reality of a given religion – Christianity in the Western context – and the study of this religion is subject to the common academic methodological principles of the humanities. As a result, there is hardly any difference in academic practice between theology and religious studies, albeit that religious studies often – though not necessarily

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– compares diverse religions, whereas theology studies one religious tradition. The discipline of religious studies – historically a daughter of theology – has emancipated itself from and even swallowed its mother.

The Problem of Revelation

One of the first professors of the Groningen faculty of theology, the Reformed theologian Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641), defined theology as *sermo de Deo*, discourse about God: “Theology, derived from the word *theologos*, according to its origin and use in Greek, does not properly mean “discourse of God,” but “discourse about God”” (Gomarus 1644: 3:1). An etymological definition of theology is still popular today, as Kelly M. Kopic’s excellent short introduction to the study of theology *A Little Book for New Theologians* illustrates: “The term “theology” means a word (*logos*) about God (*theos*), so when anyone speaks about God ... he or she is engaged in theology” (Kopic 2012: 15).

In the seventeenth century, theology was generally defined as discourse about God, although Gomarus’s definition reveals some hesitance: Is God himself speaking in theology or are we speaking about God? Although he did not choose the discourse *of* God – “revelation” in theological terms – as a proper definition of theology, still revelation was the presupposition of all human discourse about God. After four centuries this has not changed: theology presupposes the existence of the divine and the possibility to say something about the divine that makes sense and therefore is founded upon something that has been “revealed”. So today many theologians will still agree with Gomarus’s definition of theology as God-talk (*sermo de Deo*).

What has changed fundamentally, however, is the modern idea of science, as principally pertaining to empirical reality. Therefore the most fundamental problem for theology as an academic discipline is the

notion of revelation. Claims about God or about what God reveals can neither be empirically verified nor falsified, which in the modern context is an essential condition for any scholarly or scientific claim.

Any theological claim seems to rest necessarily on “esoteric” knowledge that may be fine for the church or the seminary, but is not allowed as a source for knowledge in a (public) university, because it is inaccessible for those who reject the general possibility – or a specific claim – of revelation.

A solution for this problem might be the restriction of theology to the study of that what is said about God by human beings. In that case it concerns neither a discourse of God, divine revelation, nor a discourse

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about God, reflection on divine revelation. Rather, theology then pertains to an analysis of what is, properly or improperly, said about God. In such an approach, the object of theology is not God, but “God” between quotation marks. The academic theologian refrains from normative statements, but critically relates himself to what other people believe or claim to believe about God. Theology, then, is rather the analysis of God-talk than God-talk itself.

This “solution”, however, leads to two problems. First of all, how can a theologian in this case decide whether the analysed discourse of others about God is proper? This seems to be impossible without actually making at least implicit normative statements about the divine. Secondly, if the theologian deliberately decides to refrain from normative statements his analysis does not differ from psychological, sociological, or anthropological perspectives. The Gordian knot of theology is that it either, by definition, exceeds the limits of empirical reality or it does not differ from religious studies.

Pilgrim Theology

In the premodern context, scholastic theologians already had nuanced ideas about revelation and our knowledge based on it. We will not dig into the historical details and complexities of the philosophy that dominated academic theology from its beginning at the first universities of the twelfth century until the rise of the early Enlightenment in the seventeenth century, and which can be labelled as “Christian Aristotelianism” (Muller 1998). This system of thought offered the basic technical tools and the fundamental structure for scholastic theology, covering a range of positions from medieval academic theology to the variety of Lutheran, Reformed and Roman Catholic theologies after the Reformation.

Two elements in the self-understanding of scholastic theology are useful for the understanding of academic theology today. The first one regards the limitations of theology. Scholastic theology was careful to make a distinction between divine truth and human knowledge of that truth and held a nuanced view of what can and what cannot be said concerning God.

In protestant scholasticism, the distinction between divine truth and our knowledge of it was expressed by differentiating between archetypal theology – the knowledge that God has of himself – and ectypal theology – the knowledge that creatures can have of God. In a very instructive application of this scholastic distinction, John Webster summarizes:

“Archetypal theology is God’s self-knowledge; ectypal theology is the

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knowledge of God possible for finite rational creatures. The former is God’s simple, eternal intelligence of himself, the latter can be described in its temporal unfolding” (Webster 2009: 62).

This temporal creaturely knowledge of the divine was again subdivided into several sorts, for instance the knowledge of angels or of saints in heaven. The weakest sort of knowledge was called *theologia viatorum* or pilgrim theology, the knowledge about God that sinful human beings can derive from God’s revelation (Van Asselt 2002). This knowledge is imperfect because human beings are mere creatures and because their intellect is fallible, still it is trustworthy as far as it is in agreement with revelation.

The nuanced scholastic distinction is rooted in an awareness of God’s transcendence. He could be known because he had revealed himself, but he was also greater than his revelation, because he is hidden in and behind it. Although theology was defined as a discourse about God, based on a discourse of God, it was nevertheless always viewed as tentative and provisional. This implies a principal caution in scholastic theology grounded in the distinction between Creator and creature; the gap between both could only be bridged as far as it pleased the Creator to reveal himself and even then human knowledge was partial and provisional *per se*. To be honest, the fierce debates between theologians about the theological truths – based on the revealed knowledge – often contradict this principal caution.

Theology today can learn from scholasticism to be modest in its claims about God, not in the first place because of modern scepticism about revelation and postmodern relativism, but for intrinsic theological reasons.

Theological modesty – any discourse about God is provisional and partial – is rooted in the first article of the Christian creed, in the faith in God who as Creator differs essentially from his creatures. Theologians today are often very modest in their claims and therefore discussion about the academic status of theology is not helped by the caricature that theologians can claim anything about the divine with an appeal to the esoteric category of revelation.

God as First Cause and Final Destination

Next to the scholastic reflections on theology, the scholastic view of the diverse aspects of reality, based on the Aristotelian concept of the four causes, is still helpful to define the relation and distinction between theology and religious studies. In his *Physics* II, 3 and *Metaphysics* V, 2, Aristotle distinguishes between four causes: the material cause, the matter out of

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which something exists, the formal cause, the form in which it exists, the efficient cause, the reason why it has come into being, and the final cause, the goal or end for the sake of which it exists.

All things (1) are affected by something else, (2) exist of material, (3) have a form, and (4) exist for a purpose. Take, for example, a boy who is building a tower. The boy is (1) the efficient cause, but he cannot build without blocks, (2) the material cause. To build a tower, however, he must

have some perhaps unconscious idea in his mind of what a tower is, (3) the formal cause. In the case of this example the ultimate joy of throwing everything down is perhaps (4) the final cause of the existence of the tower.

Scholastic theologians used the Aristotelian causes to organize their theological texts, presuming that everything that exists has these four causes or four different aspects. They mostly structured a discussion of a particular theological topic starting with (1) the efficient cause, next they discussed (2) the matter and (3) form, and lastly, the (4) final cause. In distinction from ancient philosophy, Christian theology did not understand the four causes as ontological categories that determined the nature of reality. According to ancient philosophy form and matter constituted the individual existence of the things. According to the theologians, however, form and matter were only aspects of reality that was constituted or created by God.

In scholasticism, God was seen as the ultimate efficient cause of all that existed. He stood somewhere behind the visible and intelligible world of matter and form – that was not eternal or self-constitutive – and constituted and sustained all things. This did not imply an immediate causal relationship between God and everything that existed, for the term *causa* in scholasticism referred to an aspect of reality rather than to a cause with an immediate effect. Scholastic theology introduced the concept of instrumental or secondary causes – you could number them as (1b) in the scheme – to explain how God’s rule over all related to human responsibility. That God, for instance was the efficient cause of every newborn baby, did not exclude human secondary or instrumental causes. This distinction was important to understand the existence of evil in combination with the belief in God’s omnipotence and perfect goodness. God was not held responsible for evil. Evil was not seen an independent substance, it was literally a no-thing; it was a parasite of the good creation and existed only as the holes in a cheese exist. Nevertheless, God was seen as somewhere behind the scenes of all created things and therefore he was first cause, because nothing could come into being or remain in existence, except for God’s creation and sustenance.

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At the same time God was seen the final cause or goal of all things that exist. The glory of God is the world’s final end, though things may, of course, also have other sub ultimate goals. These are sometimes called proximate final causes – which you could number (4a) in the scheme – as opposed to the ultimate final cause – number (4b) – which is God. Prayer, for instance, might serve to comfort believers and this comfort is one of the final causes of prayer, but the ultimate final cause is God, because prayer ultimately aims at communication with God. In sum, according to scholastic theology, we can discern six causes or aspects:

- 1a the efficient cause (*causa efficiens*);
- 1b the secondary or instrumental cause (*causa instrumentalis*);
- 2 the matter or material cause (*causa materialis*);
- 3 the form or formal cause (*causa formalis*);
- 4a the sub-ultimate final cause (*causa finalis proxima*); and
- 4b the ultimate final cause (*causa finalis ultima*).

The Objects of Theology and Religious Studies

This scholastic understanding of the divine as the first cause and final destination of all that exists can still be helpful today to explain the difference between theology and religious studies, especially with regards to their objects. Theology relates to the ultimate questions of where things come from and what they are meant for. Although these questions do not belong to the field of empirical research, this does not imply that they are irrelevant or should be excluded from academic reflection. Philosophy – as far as it is more than the study of the history of thought – shares this interest in ultimate questions with theology.

The object of theological reflection transcends the object of religious studies, since it not only analyses phenomena and intends to explain them intrinsically, but also faces the question of why religion exists after all and what its ultimate goal might be. Of course, it is also possible to answer these questions on the intrinsic level of the instrumental, formal and material causes of the rituals and creeds, or even to explain religion as such as a functional aspect of the evolutionary development of humankind. Theology, however, does not exclude the possibility of the reality of God and of divine revelation in advance, but intends to understand religious phenomena also from the perspective of their first cause and final destination.

Yet, theological reflection also has much in common with the other humanities and especially with religious studies. In scholastic terms,

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theology and religious studies have the (1b) instrumental, (2) material, (3) formal, and (4a) proximate final causes or aspects of religion as their common research object. For (1b) the instrumental aspects, one might think of important historical events or of the transmission of religious beliefs and practices in a certain tradition. The (2) material aspects of religion, of course, are not restricted to material artefacts as such, but also include texts and the thoughts expressed by them. The (3) formal aspects of religion comprise rituals and any other forms of religious expression. A (4a) proximate final goal of a religious practice might be comfort or social cohesion.

Prayer, for instance is (1) part of a tradition, (2) has a certain content, (3) includes a form of words and gestures, and (4) is practised for certain purposes. Theology and religious studies both deal with the same questions. Where does prayer come from, what is it, how do you practice it and what does it do? Theology, however, also relates prayer to God as its source and ultimate goal. Theology and religious studies assess these four groups of aspects of religion with similar empirical and historical methods. Only theology, however, reflects on the (1a) efficient and (4b) ultimate final causes or aspects of religion with a specific theological method. In order to do so it presupposes the existence of God and the possibility of revelation. These presuppositions, of course, may also influence the answers given to questions related to the four aspects that theology has in common with religious studies, but that is due to the positionality of the researcher.

Respecting Religious Claims

The exclusion of these aspects from academic reflection merely because

of the impossibility to study them empirically leads to an understanding that fundamentally differs from the self-understanding of the religions, a self-understanding with which theology seeks to be positively – though not uncritically – engaged. Theology presupposes a certain acceptance of the religious claims about the existence of God – as first cause and final destination of religion – and about the possibility of revelation. The extra theological dimension or the specific theological perspective does not discern things that are totally different from those researched from the perspective of religious studies, but it intends to understand that same reality – consisting of instrumental causes, matter, forms and proximate goals – in a different way.

According to the scholastic understanding of theology as “pilgrim theology”, theologians should always be cautious with respect to bold

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truth-claims about the divine. If these claims are made, they refer to aspects of reality that are principally behind the scenes of the visible and tangible world. Religious claims intend to answer ultimate questions about the origin and purpose of what exists. It is essential for religion to offer answers to such ultimate questions.

These questions by nature go beyond what is commonly understood as the proper object of scientific or academic study. It is not necessary or even desirable, however, to exclude a discussion of these questions – including a possible clash of answers – completely and dogmatically from the academic debate. Otherwise, non-religious ways of dealing with these questions in philosophy and ethics would also have to be excluded. Ultimately, such an exclusion would lead to a taboo on any normative statements in academia, because these statements always presuppose a certain religious or secular worldview or perspective. Theology is a modest and careful way of dealing with religion, including its self-definition and self-understanding as a relevant reference to God or the divine.

On the other hand, it is important to note that theology has much in common with the other humanities and especially with religious studies, not only with respect to the common object of research, but also methodologically. Practical theology, for instance, reflects on the practices of the church and uses the same tools for the empirical study of these practices as anthropologists or sociologists. Biblical studies use the same techniques for reconstructing the text from the manuscripts and interpreting the possible intentions of the human authors as any other study of ancient texts would do, even when the scholar, as a theologian, is convinced that the text contains divine revelation.

Only that part of theology which is mostly called “systematic theology” or the sub discipline of “dogmatics”, has a specific object in God and in revelation that exceeds the limits of what other academic disciplines – including religious studies – is able to study. Systematic theology reflects immediately on the divine and on revelation, by facing questions regarding the existence and character of God and regarding the truth of revelation, for instance with respect to the resurrection of Christ. Therefore systematic theology is the most difficult discipline to maintain in the present academic context.

Not all theology consists of dogmatics, however, and if systematic theology maintains its caution as pilgrim theology, its reflection on the first

cause and final goal of religion should not be excluded from academic discourse. In the meantime, the other theological subdisciplines that focus on the history, the sources, and practices of a religion are also theological insofar as they intend to relate these objects of research to their

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first cause and final goal. In sum, religious studies and theology have partially common research objects. But they look at these objects from different perspectives, religious studies do not and theology does reflect on the possible relationship of the research object with the divine. The similarity and the difference in methods will now be illustrated for historical theological research from the period of the Reformation.

Woodcuts as an Example

A theological perspective on the history of the church and of theology approaches the sources by primarily using historical methods, focusing on the instrumental, material, formal and proximate final aspects of the history of religion. All historians strive or should strive for objectivity or at least transparency in their research, although “objectivity in historical study does not, and cannot, exist if it is defined as an absence of involvement with or opinion about the materials” (Bradley and Muller 2016: 47–48). Therefore it is important for any historian, and especially – though not exclusively – for historians who take a theological perspective, to be aware of and open about their own position regarding the sources.

Theologians should express their intention to relate the historical material to the theological questions and distinguish carefully between the historical results of their research and the theological reflections on them. A specific example from my historical research serves to illustrate what a theological perspective on the history of religion has in common with other perspectives and in which respects it differs from them.

An interesting aspect of the material heritage of the Reformation consists of the woodcut illustrations in early catechisms. Martin Luther included woodcuts in his *Deutsch Catechismus* to illustrate the main topics of the creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments (Luther 1529). These woodcuts became very influential in the Lutheran catechetical tradition. The specific illustrations and texts and the authorial intentions – as far as they can be reconstructed – do not necessarily beg for a theological perspective. In scholastic terms, the matter and form are common ground for anyone who would want to research them. I recently published an article on these woodcuts. My historical research question regarded the authorial intention of the woodcuts in their relation to the text of the catechism. This is, of course, not necessarily a theological question (Van den Belt 2017). My analysis intended to be transparent, communicable, and verifiable for anyone else.

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From the perspective of art, the woodcuts are not very impressive. The illustration of the third commandment – remember the Sabbath day – pictures a preacher, probably Martin Luther, on the pulpit with the congregation listening to him. The scene, however, seems to be an open-air preaching, because the background shows someone who is collecting wood. The reference is to a story related in the Bible (Numbers 15, 32–36), where someone is punished for collecting wood on the Sabbath.

In her study of the Ten Commandments in paintings and other illustrations in the late medieval and early modern periods, Veronika Thum shows that the picture was originally a woodcut of a preacher and a congregation, with the crucifix in the middle and the preacher pointing to it. For the illustration of the third commandment the crucifix was simply cut out of the woodblock and replaced by the scene of the wood collector; the remains of the loincloth are still visible (Thum 2006: 84).

In Luther's *Enchiridion* or *Kleine Catechismus* the illustrations are only accompanied by the text of the commandment and one short question and answer, for instance: "The first commandment. You shall have no other gods. What does that mean? Answer: We must fear, love and trust God above everything."¹ The answers that explain the other commandments all start with the phrase that we must fear and love God. The ninth commandment, for instance, means that "We must fear and love God, lest we craftily seek to get our neighbour's inheritance or house, and obtain it by a show of justice, etc., but help and serve him to keep it."²

Melanchthon

To answer the question about authorial intention it is important to know that the woodcuts were made by the Wittenberg artist Lucas Cranach and that they were not intended for the catechisms, but for large placards or posters (Luther WA 30/1:561, cf. Thum 2006: 80). Most probably all of the woodcuts for the Ten Commandments were printed on one broadsheet together with the text of the commandments. The illustrations were chosen by Phillip Melanchthon who wanted to use them for his own catechism. Ultimately only a fragment of that catechism was printed,

1. "Das Erste gebot. Du solt nicht ander Götter haben. Was ist das? Antwort. Wir sollen Gott vber alle ding fürchten / lieben / vnd vertrawen" (Luther, WA 30/1:354). The translation is mine.

2. "Wir sollen Gott fürchten vnd lieben / Daß wir vnserm Nehesten nicht mit liste nach seinem Erbe oder Hause stehen / vnd mit einem schein des Rechtens an vns bringen / etc. Sondern jhm dasselbige zu behalten / fürderlich vnd dienstlich seyn" (Luther, WA 30/1:361). The translation is mine.

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because Melanchthon decided not to compete with Luther's catechisms. The illustrations developed over the years, with various printers and artists, but remarkably enough, the chosen stories from the bible always are the same, though there is no reference to these stories in the catechism texts.

In sum, Melanchthon asked Cranach to make woodcuts for his catechism; they were first printed as posters to illustrate the texts of the Law, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer; later they found their way to Luther's *Deutsch Catechismus*, and, finally, the pictures of the biblical stories became standard illustrations in the Lutheran catechetical tradition. This narrows the research question after the intention for the woodcuts down to the question why Melanchthon chose these bible stories to illustrate the commandments. The accompanying texts of his only fragmentarily published catechism show that the original intention of the pictures was to warn and admonish potential sinners to obey the commandments in the belief that God is the hidden witness and judge of all human actions.

The text accompanying the woodcut on the third commandment, for instance, says: "Sanctify the Holy Day. That means that you should sanctify the Holy Day by learning and hearing God's word. Such disobedience is found to be punished in Numbers 15 to the person who gathered wood

on the Sabbath.”³ Thus far, the analysis shares common ground with a general historical approach. So what makes the difference if the same material is assessed from a theological perspective and how can the intentions of Melanchthon be evaluated theologically?

Law and Gospel

Some specific aspects of the woodcuts seem to be important for a correct theological understanding. In the first place, Melanchthon chooses stories from the Bible to illustrate the commandments. Medieval illustrations of the Ten Commandments in churches mostly do not refer to the Bible and even Martin Luther’s explanations of the Ten Commandments that were printed prior to his catechisms use illustrations from everyday life rather than the Bible. The sixth commandment, for instance, was illustrated by a man and women in bed and the seventh by a pickpocket (Luther 1520). Melanchthon’s shift to Scripture is remarkable.

3. “Du solt den feiertag heiligen. Das heist heiligen den feiertag, das man Gottes wort leret und höret. Solchen ungehorsam aber findet man gestrafft *Numeri* am. xv. an dem, der holtz las am Sabbath” (Melanchthon 1915: 74).

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It is also important to note that the illustrations are exclusively chosen from the Old Testament. This can hardly be coincidental, considering that the illustrations of the petitions in the Lord’s Prayer are exclusively from the New Testament. All the Old Testament stories to which the illustrations for the Ten Commandments refer, emphasize that transgression of the commandment is punished. The only positive example is Joseph who refuses to have sex with Potiphar’s wife and whose obedience to the tenth commandment is tested and ultimately blessed.

Theologically the choice for the Old Testament corresponds with the Lutheran emphasis on the pedagogical function of the law. The law confronts us with sin and its consequences in order to lead us to Christ. To quote Luther’s *Short Form of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer* (1520), an early predecessor of the catechisms: “The commandments teach man to recognize his sickness, enabling him to perceive what he must do or refrain from doing, consent to or refuse, and so he will recognize himself to be a sinful and wicked person.”⁴ The goal of the law is to teach people that they are ill. Next, the Gospel, summarized in the Apostle’s Creed, teaches where to find the medicine of grace, namely in Christ.

Thirdly, to understand their theological meaning, it is important to realize that the woodcuts originally were intended to speak for themselves in the education of children and other illiterate people by referring to the biblical stories as illustrations of the commandments. The woodcuts, just like the images in Lutheran churches, functioned as books for the laity.

Finally, the catechisms and the illustrations originated within the context of the visitations in Saxony between 1528 and about 1531, initiated because of concern for the chaotic conditions in the Lutheran parishes. In 1527 Melanchthon drafted the *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors*. He stresses that the law must be preached in order that the hearers repent from their sins and fear God. “Therefore they shall often and diligently preach, explain and apply the Ten Commandments, and not only the commandments, but also how God will punish those who do not keep them, as God has often inflicted such temporal punishment. For such examples are written in order to be presented to the people.”⁵

4. Also lehren die Gebote den Menschen seine Krankheit erkennen, daß er stehet und empfindet, was er thun und nicht thun, lassen und nicht lassen kann; und erkennet sich einen Sünder und bösen Menschen (Luther, WA 7, 204); the English translation is from Lyle Bierma (2013: 22).

5. "Darumb sollen sie die zehen gebot offt und vleyssig predigen, und die auslegen und anzeigen, nicht allein die gebot, sondern auch wie Gott straffen wird die, so sie nicht halten, wie auch Got solche offt Zeitlich gestrafft hat. Denn solche exempel

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In sum, I concluded from my research that the illustrations were meant to correct the ignorance among the common people in the villages and to amend wrong inferences from the message of the Reformation. In this case Luther and Melancthon were especially concerned about the opinion drawn from the gospel of grace that Christians can ignore the commandments. The woodcuts underline that God as the witness and judge of human actions punishes sin and blesses obedience. This emphasis, in turn, intends to evoke an interest in the gospel of the grace of Christ.

Theological Reflection on a Material Level

All these conclusions can still be shared by theology and religious and historical studies in general. Obviously, good historical research by a theologian concerning the church or the doctrines of the church meets the requirements of the historical methodologies. To define the specific theological contribution to this kind of research, one can distinguish between three levels.

First of all, theological expertise is essential to understand the message of Melancthon's pictures. Theology focuses on the doctrines and practices of one specific religion – in this case Christianity and specifically Lutheran Protestantism. Whereas the comparative study of religion might study practices and doctrines as religious rites and theories, theology tries to understand and interpret these practices and doctrines from within the framework of a specific religion.

On this material level, theology can be defined as an approach in which the final object of reflection is human thought about and claims regarding God, either the God of Judaism, Christianity or Islam. On this level, however, the difference with religious studies only regards the focus of theology on one religion. It is possible to be an expert in the history of Protestantism without being a theologian. On the other hand, no one will deny that theological expertise – in the sense of knowledge about the thought about God – is important for the right understanding of religious phenomena. In any case, it is important to remember that theology does not necessarily entail systematic theology or a normative discourse about God. In the terms of scholasticism, theology can deliberately stick to the material and formal causes or aspects of religion and join the debate with religious studies, without adding anything specifically theological. On the material level, theology applies the same *sind geschriben, das man sie den leuten für halte*" (Melancthon, CR 26, 52). The translation is mine.

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methodologies as the humanities, for instance, historical methodology. On this level there is no principal difference between theology and history or religious studies, though there might be a specific theological expertise in the way in which the material is dealt with.

Theological Reflection on a Methodological Level

On a second level, which I call methodological, there is more tension between a theological and a mere historical approach. Here, theology turns to a normative evaluation of the religious phenomena that transcends the field of religious studies or history. For that reason, theology is sometimes defined as an “inside perspective”, a perspective from a specific and often normative or confessional point of view, in which the shared confessional tradition is presupposed as the basis for an engaged discussion.

This “inside perspective” should not be understood as prejudiced or biased by definition, in contradistinction with a so-called “outside perspective”. Post-modern understandings of the philosophy of science acknowledge that all researchers have their inside perspectives, because no one is objective. All scholars should be aware of and transparent about their presuppositions rather than deny that they have them. Everyone has an inside perspective and a public university is an arena for the debate about these perspectives and not a place where certain perspectives are excluded in advance.

In the example of the woodcuts, on the methodological level, the research question is not which message Melanchthon intended to communicate, but rather how this message relates to his confessional presuppositions.

This question is not asked in a general way – then it could be a historical question – but theologically by a researcher who shares these presuppositions. Of course, a theologian can also reject these specific presuppositions from his own understanding of God and revelation.

In that case he will bring his own view into a critical discussion with the results of the research on the first and material level.

This second level is “methodological” because it implies the use of a specific theological method, namely that of the critical theological discussion on the normative basis of a shared or contested confessional identity. Religious studies can analyse a religious practice by comparing it to practices in other religions. A theological interpretation, however, understands and assesses the practice from a confessional perspective. Normative theological statements can only be made on the basis of belief in God and divine revelation. This approach does not necessarily imply

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a defence of the shared theological position, for one can also be critical of the particular approach. According to Melanchthon, for instance, obedience is blessed and disobedience punished, but this emphasis can be manipulative and lead to fear for God instead of obedience out of love. A question like “What do you think about Melanchthon’s interpretation and why do you think so?” should not be excluded from the academic discourse, because of its normativity. Historical theology answers these kinds of questions from shared confessional presuppositions. Of course, there are other possible normative assessments of Melanchthon’s illustrations. His authorial intentions can be appreciated or rejected on other grounds than the shared Protestant or even Christian belief in the Christian revelation. An absolute prohibition of normativity in humanities is untenable. That would leave the historical discipline, for instance, with the two options of a reproduction of the facts of history or an endless deconstruction and reconstruction of the historical narrative. The humanities need ultimate perspectives and some of them might be

theological rather than philosophical. In any case, it is more fruitful to be transparent regarding these perspectives than to deny having any.

Theological Reflection on an Epistemological Level

Any normative valuation of history – or of contemporary religious phenomena – implies a perspective that goes beyond the limits of empirical research. This perspective is either immanent, non-religious, or transcendent and religious. If it is religious it interprets reality from the ultimate efficient and final causes beyond matter, form and empirical causality.

According to Alvin Plantinga (2010: 676), “belief in God is perfectly proper and rational, perfectly justified and in order, even if it is not accepted on the basis of [scientific] arguments.” Belief in God as the incomprehensible Creator and as the first cause and final goal of all that exist, offers a comprehending perspective not only for theology but for knowledge in general. Too often theologians have reserved the idea of revelation for something special, for the work of Christ or for the Bible. I have learned from the theologian Herman Bavinck (2003: 233) to see the world as the embodiment of God’s thoughts; it looks like a book that we can read. When we gain knowledge, we are, in fact, re-thinking and re-considering the thoughts of the Creator embodied in creation. If this is the case, then all knowledge rests in revelation, although this is, of course, a theological interpretation of knowledge.

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This epistemological level, however, is only relevant in an academic sense as far as academia is the arena where the debate about diverse worldviews and perspectives of reality takes place. If discourse about the possible foundations of our knowledge and about the ultimate presuppositions of our normative statements is excluded from academia, where on earth will it then be possible to discuss these issues?

Although, as a historian, the theologian is primarily interested in the sources of Christianity and does not want to be bothered too much by philosophical presuppositions, as a theologian, the historian is critically aware of his worldview in which he connects all knowledge to his basic convictions and beliefs regarding God’s relationship to the world and its history.

This epistemological level should not influence the results of the academic study as such, as far as they regard matter, form and empirical causality of the historical religious phenomena. However, neither should it be dogmatically excluded from academia, given the fact that all researchers have to be aware of and reflect on their own presuppositions and positionality.

Religion Related to God

The fact that theology relates religion to God is less problematic than it might seem to be. As we have seen, theology is limited and cautious of too bold claims, not because of methodological atheism or agnosticism but for very theological reasons. Although some theological statements are not generally communicable because of presupposed belief in God and revelation, theological reflection has much in common with religious studies. The scholastic distinction of several causes or aspects of reality is helpful in showing both where theology and religious studies overlap and where they differ. The ultimate questions regarding the source

and ultimate goal of religion are not always at stake and the theological approach of the matter, form and empirical causality of religion is just one of the many perspectives of religion.

This theological approach or perspective is limited because it relates religion to divine revelation. Therefore, it is important to discern the different levels on which theology plays a role. On the material level the expertise of the theologian regarding one specific religious tradition adds to the more comparative approach of the anthropologist, sociologist or historian and on this level there is no principal difference with religious or historical studies. On the methodological level there is more tension, because theology turns to a normative evaluation of religion

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from a belief or confessional tradition. The use of the theological method of critical evaluation on the normative basis of a shared or contested confessional identity, however, does not principally differ from other normative assessments of religion that are rather inescapable not only in religious studies but in the humanities in general.

Theological reflection on the epistemological level relates the study of religion, and of reality as such to basic pre-scientific convictions and beliefs regarding God's relationship to the world and its history, that is to one's worldview. On this level theology is not just a weird and tolerable species of religious studies. It is the other way around. The comparative study of religion studies human religious behaviour as a small part of God's world. Theology claims that religious studies, – together with all the sciences – are rethinking the thought of God. On the epistemological level, theology is not one of the forms of religious studies, but religious studies contributes to theology, because it studies a part of reality that from a theological perspective also tells us something about God. Religious studies – together with all other sciences – reflect on God's world and thus contribute to the *sermo de Deo*.

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