

## The Necessity of a Jewish Systematic Theology<sup>1</sup>

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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 secularised<sup>2</sup> public which the academy serves. The first incident, a controversy over the candidates for Vice President of the American Academy of Religion in November 2015, is illustrative of the tensions within the broad discipline of Theology and Religious Studies which necessarily inform any discussion about the place of non-Christian theologies in the academy, and therefore provides grounding for my contention that the way the boundary between Theology and Religious Studies—or History of Religion—is drawn leaves non-Christian scholars of non-Christian traditions locked out of productive work in both disciplines, that this exclusion is bad for the field in general and theology in particular, and that it is best addressed from within the discipline of theology.

Officers of the American Academy of Religion typically serve three-year terms, with the exception of the President, who serves only one year in that particular office—but the Presidential year is preceded by a one year term as President Elect, and that term is preceded by a one year term as Vice President. The office

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<sup>1</sup> With gratitude to M. A. Godin for research assistance.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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 woman, a scholar of psychology of religion and a scholar of ethics. The Nominations Committee, in short, has historically taken upon itself 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 assumptions about 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 conservative 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, at least in the circles which overlap with my own, were Michael J. Altman and Russell T. McCutcheon.<sup>3</sup> Altman protested that the candidates put forward do not fulfil the Nominations Committee's mandate to select candidates which enhance the diversity of the Board of Directors, having understood the nomination pattern I detailed above as presenting demographically similar candidates who, nonetheless, have been positioned on either side of the methodological divide (one more theologically 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 suggests that the troublesome issue in 2015 was that neither candidate falls 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

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<sup>3</sup> Altman: <http://michaeljaltman.net/2015/10/15/the-aar-vice-presidential-election-and-the-illusion-of-choice/> Accessed 16 March 2016.

McCutcheon: <http://religion.ua.edu/blog/2015/10/the-tremendous-irony-of-it-all/> Accessed 16 March 2016.

the view that theology is academically illegitimate because it is impossible to apply properly empirical methods to the task of “describing God”.

## 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.”<sup>9</sup> On 15 December, Wheaton, which is a private college with a commitment to evangelical Christianity,<sup>10</sup> 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 indicating the relationship of Christianity to Islam.”<sup>11</sup> 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”.<sup>12</sup> 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 validity of Hawkins’s initial claim--and the consequent correctness of the College’s move to terminate her. While many of the commentators weighing in on the issue were themselves theologians, the extent of wider media attention the incident received is suggestive of a notable degree of public interest, likely undergirded by more generalised anxieties about Muslim integration in the United States. Just as these anxieties are not restricted solely to the US, however, the theological arguments put forward both for and against Hawkins’s position are not restricted solely to the question of boundaries between Christianity and Islam; they are really arguments about the ways in which and extent to which Christian understandings of God can and should account for the existence of other religions.

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<sup>9</sup> The original post has either been made private or removed from Facebook, but it is archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20151216182237/https://www.facebook.com/larycia/posts/10153326773658481> (Accessed 30 August 2016). It is unclear which particular statement of Pope Francis 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.

<sup>10</sup> See Wheaton’s Statement of Faith at <http://www.wheaton.edu/About-Wheaton/Statement-of-Faith-and-Educational-Purpose> (accessed 30 August 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Again, the original statement from the College is no longer available, but is archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160123214915/http://www.wheaton.edu/Media-Center/Media-Relations/Statements/Frequently-Asked-Questions-Regarding-Dr-Larycia-Hawkins-Administrative-Leave-from-Wheaton-College> (Accessed 30 August 2016).

<sup>12</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20160219075340/http://www.wheaton.edu/Media-Center/Media-Relations/Statements/Statement-Regarding-Notice-of-Recommendation-to-Initiate-Termination-of-Dr-Larycia-Hawkins> Accessed 30 August 2016.

Notable among these are Miroslav Volf's editorial in *The Washington Post*, in which he explicitly notes the parallel between Islam and Judaism's doctrinal positions regarding the Trinity, and the therefore puzzling discontinuity in Christian reactions to the two non-Trinitarian Abrahamic faiths: "Instead of rejecting the God of the Jews, Christians affirmed that they worship the same God as the Jews, but noted that the two religious groups understand God in in partly different ways."<sup>13</sup> Volf's appeal to history in this editorial is academically problematic; even leaving aside his sanitized gloss over the history of contestation 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 our 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 claims of a particular religion 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

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<sup>13</sup> Volf, Miroslav "Wheaton professor's suspension is about anti-Muslim bigotry, not theology", *Washington Post* 17 December 2015 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/17/wheaton-professors-suspension-is-about-anti-muslim-bigotry-not-theology/> Accessed 31 August 2016. Volf's argument is supported, and elaborated upon, by Bruce L. McCormack, "'Reflections on the 'Same God' Thesis", <http://noaholy.tumblr.com/post/137130607348/reflections-on-the-same-god-thesis-by-bruce> Accessed 31 August 2016. McCormack's argument is further elaborated upon by Ben Myers, "Another thing about Wheaton: do Christians and Jews worship the same God?", *Faith and Theology* 13 January 2016 <<http://www.faith-theology.com/2016/01/another-thing-about-wheaton-do.html>> Accessed 31 August 2016. Myers arrives back at the point which I critique in Volf's argument, the assumption that Jews and Christians must be understood to worship the same God; he highlights the writings of John of Damascus as an example of early Medieval Christian theology which rejected this assumption, although it is not clear to me that the charge of heresy (incorrect belief) John levels against Jewish monotheism is quite the same as the worship of a false god; John is not a Marcionite.

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 participants in and inheritors of, is founded on the historically progressivist 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 Harding and Donna Haraway, and as a basis for politics by Talal Asad, among others.<sup>16</sup>

Harding and Haraway's critique of the view from nowhere, and subsequent development of standpoint epistemology, insists on the particular social, cultural, and embodied situatedness of each knower as the foundation upon which knowledge is constructed, and names the denial of this situatedness as, itself, an ideological position deeply implicated in imperialist practices. It is important to note that, in spite of critiques linking it to postmodern relativism in which everything is contingent and constructed and thus cannot be known because it never properly existed, standpoint epistemology is not necessarily a denial of the existence of an objective truth or a "real" object of study, but rather a denial of the capability for any one individual viewpoint to fully encapsulate and understand its object. Asad's critique of secularism details the way that the faux-neutral ideological position operates specifically in discourse about religion, obscuring the degree to which "secular" European culture has been shaped by religious (and particularly Christian) influences while at the same time emphasising the distinctive role of religion in (and therefore the religious otherness of) non-Christian, non-European cultures.

The assumption of secularism as the privileged epistemological position within the study of religion is thus particularly detrimental for non-Christian scholars of non-Christian traditions, who find that the only academically acceptable way to approach the study of their own culture is as methodological outsiders.<sup>17</sup> This

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<sup>16</sup> See Sandra Harding, 'Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is "Strong Objectivity"?' *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual & Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York and London: Routledge, 2004) 127-40; Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, 81-101; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003) pp. 12-17.

<sup>17</sup> 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' ABC [Australia Broadcasting Corporation] Religion and Ethics, 15 April 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/04/15/4444059.htm> 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 guiding image 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 or none. See also Maurice Wiles, *What is Theology?* (Oxford: OUP, 1976) 10-3, 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

impoverishes the broad field of theology and religious studies, as it prevents critical-constructive scholarship of non-Christian religions from 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 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".

#### IV.

The assumption that theology is "describing God" is both etymologically accurate and, at least since Schleiermacher, deeply inadequate 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

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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' in Colin E. Gunton, Stephen R. Holmes, and Murray A. Rae, eds., *The Practice of Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2001) 441-55, 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, and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) 161, includes within theology that is available to be taught within the university all '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.

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 reading.<sup>18</sup> The deployment of this objection is, in light of the way Jewish prophetic texts have been, and continue to be, used by Christian theologians, quite frankly adorable.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> While Christian theologians rarely cite examples of Jewish resistance to the term theology as arguments against allowing Jews to participate in theology in their own way, the resistance is noted even by those who are known to turn to Jewish thinkers for theological source material. For instance, Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) 2 writes:

‘Many years ago, when I was teaching religion, I once visited Martin Buber in Jerusalem. I had thought of myself as a theologian, as a teacher. He looked at me for a long time and eventually said: “Theology—how do you do that?” At that point I understood for the first time the depth of the difference between Hebrew and Greek thought: how can one grasp the experience with God of which the people in the Bible tell—that God encounters them, challenges them, requires something of them, gives something to them, refuses them? How can one grasp this living but many-sided experience in a system with the help of technical terms and logic? Certainly the Hebrew Bible contains an implicit understanding of the existence of human beings before God. But this understanding is seldom the object of systematic theological reflection.’

In this, she makes explicit the idea of a great difference between the Hellenistic philosophical tradition seen to be at the roots of most European theology and Hebrew thought, a difference later taken up by fellow progressive theologians such as John Douglas Hall. It is more common to find statements about the non-existence of Jewish theology in sources written by Jewish authors. Judith Plaskow, in Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes, ‘Interview with Judith Plaskow,’ *Judith Plaskow: Feminism, Theology, and Justice*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 97-138, 103, states that she has been told there is no such thing; Cass Fisher, *Contemplative Nation: A Philosophical Account of Jewish Theological Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012) notes an argument that the division of Jewish Studies into focused specializations means that one cannot speak of “Jewish theology”; Neil Gillman, ‘Theology in Contemporary Judaism,’ *The Blackwell Reader in Judaism*, eds. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 363-77, 363, declares that ‘Theology, it has often been maintained, does not come intuitively to Jews or to Judaism.’

Other Jewish writers approach the issue by arguing that Jewish theology has not been recognised as theology not because it does not exist but because it has taken a different form than most of what Christianity or Islam thinks of as theology: where Christian and Islamic theology is propositional and logic-based, taking its cue from Hellenistic philosophy, Jewish theology is traditionally “exegetical” or “hermeneutical”—see Jacob Neusner in Neusner and Bruce Chilton, *Jewish-Christian Debates: God, Kingdom, Messiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) 20—or unsystematic and “experimental”—see Bernard J. Bamberger, *The Search for Jewish Theology* (New York: Behrman House, 1978) 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> This is most notable, at least among mainline church traditions (Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, Reformed) in ecumenical liturgical uses of “Old Testament” texts, particularly during seasons such as Advent and Lent, when nuanced readings very often give way to interpreting the texts as straightforwardly foretelling events in the life of Jesus.

Reading cycles, such as the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) used or recommended for use by most anglophone mainline denominations, match seasonal Gospel readings with Old Testament readings by theme. For example, on the Sunday before Christmas, depending on the year, churchgoers will hear Isaiah 7:10-16 on the sign of a young woman bearing a son to be called Immanuel, 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 about David’s throne being established forever, or Micah 5:2-5a prophesying that a ruler will come from Bethlehem. Members of the Consultation on Common Texts, the group which produced the RCL, admit that one of their major concerns was figuring out how to handle the Old Testament. They note that it would be an ‘error, in the estimation of many, [...] to read it only as a kind of completed or fulfilled prophecy which has been “superseded” by the New Testament Church and its writings, rather than reading and exegeting it as Scripture in its own right, rite, and historical context. However it is surely not theologically permissible to read the Old Testament at eucharistic worship, or Christian worship

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’ overturning of a heavenly decree in Baba Mezi’a 59b, or the extended argument concerning the nature of God which forms the backdrop for Maimonides’ arguments against anthropomorphism,<sup>20</sup> 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;<sup>21</sup> this resistance is typically founded upon an understanding of theology as a specifically Christian concern with describing the incarnation.<sup>22</sup> While arguments founded 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—obviously an important aspect, to be sure, but not actually 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

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in general, as though there were no linkage with Christian belief and prayer’ (Consultation on Common Texts, *The Revised Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992) 17). In the end they compromised by having two optional Old Testament readings for most Sundays between the end of the Easter season and the beginning of Advent, one being semi-continuous from week to week and the other connecting specifically to themes encountered in the Gospel reading. But Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter remain thematic; and while the producers of the RCL worried about supersessionist readings, interpreters of the given texts in church pulpits might not—and many traditional hymns connected to seasons of the church year also show few qualms about presenting Old Testament texts as pointing directly to Christ’s story.

<sup>20</sup> See *Guide for the Perplexed* I:1-20.

<sup>21</sup> 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)’.

<sup>22</sup> This restrictive understanding of theology is undergirded by those Christian theologians who assume that the proper environment of theology is a community of faith--by which they mean the church. See 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 (*The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015) 20-1). Not only does this underline an idea that theology is a Christian discipline, but also that it is primarily for Christians.



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's 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 my specific argument about the potentials of non-Christian theology, and nor do I expect it would do much to pacify a critic of the academic value of theology in general, such as Altman, 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 ut intelligam*).

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 related texts, 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 constitutive 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.<sup>23</sup>

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,

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<sup>23</sup> A much longer discussion of my own understanding of canon formation can be found in Vincent, *Culture, Communion and Recovery: Tolkienian Fairy-Story and Inter-Religious Exchange* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2016) pp. 17-21.

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 exegesis.<sup>24</sup>

By contrast, in an open canon, to “do theology” is not commentary but contribution, a deliberate augmentation of the existing canon, and the extent to which a text by a Jewish author stands in a useful relationship to the existing theological canon depends, in the first instance, upon precisely how that existing canon is conceived of: here, the heritage of theology as an historically Christian discipline comes into play. Even leaving aside the vexed issue of the ownership of Hebrew Scripture, it is relatively uncontroversial to note that Aquinas’s thought on a number of metaphysical issues owes a great deal to Islamic thinkers such as Avicenna, or that Jewish thinkers such as Levinas have been tremendously influential upon twentieth century theology.<sup>25</sup> More controversial is the question of how such sources are received: are they being read into the canon as theological in their own right, or are they being used as data which is auxiliary to the work of theology proper? This is itself a complex and vexed argument, which I will not be able to pursue fully here, but clearly if the canon of theology has previously included non-Christian sources, it may do so again. If, by contrast, we view these earlier works as mere data which supplements, but does not expand, the field of theology, then it is more difficult for future works to claim their own place in the canon.

I have been, for the sake of 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.

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<sup>24</sup> See “The Editors’ Preface” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. A. J. Levine & Mark Z. Brettler, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) xi-xii.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Andrew Root, “Practical Theology as Social Ethical Action in Christian Ministry: Implications from Emmanuel Levinas and Dietrich Bonhoeffer” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 10.1 (2006) pp. 53-75; Stephen H. Webb, “The Rhetoric of Ethics as Excess: A Christian Theological Response to Emmanuel Levinas” *Modern Theology* 15.1 (1999) pp. 1-16; Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jeffrey L. Kolsky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion* (Indiana University Press, 2001); Graham Ward, *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Blackwell, 1997); Phillip Blond, ed., *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (Routledge, 1997), especially the contributions from Phillip Blond and Kevin Hart.

As in the case of canonicity, there have been many books, and much controversy, over how best to describe (or prescribe) theological method, and here I find it increasingly difficult to speak in general terms, without accidentally preferring one over another.<sup>26</sup> 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 theology, imagination, an addition 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 those texts both in their 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.<sup>27</sup>

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,<sup>28</sup> though even 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.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the

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<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward *Theological Reflection: Methods* (SCM Press, 2005); Colin E. Gunton, Stephen R. Holmes, and Murray A. Rae, eds., *The Practice of Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2001); Rachel Muers and Mike Higton, *Modern Theology: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 3: "Three elements which govern systematic theology can be recognised in these preliminary reflections. The task of systematic theology is to identify these three elements and at the same time to relate them to one another. The elements are:

Scripture and tradition, or: the *text*;

the historical situation of the text and its interpreters, or: the *context*;

the community of believers, or: the *people of God*."

<sup>28</sup> See Christine Helmer, *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014) for one account of the development of this understanding of doctrine as a dominant strand of modern Christian theology.

<sup>29</sup> Taking 2014 (the conference immediately preceding the eruption of the nominations controversy, whose contents would have been knowable by all parties involved) as an example, it is true that the titles of many of the papers in the Christian Systematic Theology Section might raise the eyebrows of scholars committed to entirely descriptive practice, papers focussed on historical contextualisation of particular ideas were delivered in groups such as Augustine and Augustinianisms; Bonhoeffer: Theology and Social Analysis; Comparative Theology; Evangelical Studies; Kierkegaard, Religion, and Culture; Liberal Theologies; Martin Luther and Global Lutheran Traditions; Nineteenth Century Theology. While Christian Systematic Theology is by far

admission of the category of eternal truths as a valid (albeit not necessarily universal) concern of theological method is quite likely to enforce the suspicion 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.<sup>30</sup> 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, whose work should be oriented towards understanding and counteracting 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 religions within the disciplinary 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

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the largest single theology-focussed group in the AAR, the papers presented at the other groups combined comprise by far a majority of theology papers presented at the annual meeting.

<sup>30</sup> This assertion is, admittedly, based largely on anecdotal data, drawn from observation of shifting student interests in the institutions where I have taught over the past ten years, together with some fairly broad analysis of recruitment trends. For Canada and the United States, the Association of Theological Schools records extensive data concerning member institutions (Christian and Jewish); see their website [www.ats.edu](http://www.ats.edu) (accessed 26 August 2016). Information from the equivalent organisation in the United Kingdom, TRS-UK, is not nearly as extensive, but a recent report specifically on gender of students, researchers and teachers in the discipline also provides a summary of the overall state of academic programs (Mathew Guest, Sonya Sharmer, and Robert Song, *Gender and Career Progression in Theology and Religious Studies* (Durham, UK: Durham University, 2013)).

constructed here about how theology can and ought to be understood, it cannot actually be divorced from the historical context in which it developed, which was largely within the tightly controlled monoculture of Christendom.<sup>31</sup> I am not naively suggesting that we just start over again as though the past two thousand years never happened. I am, rather, wanting to look for a way forward: starting from where we are now, carrying our problematic cultural and disciplinary inheritances with us into our uncertain future.

So how might this work in practice? To return to an example from earlier in this paper, there is, within Judaism, a tradition of discourse on the reasons behind the Talmudic prohibition against speculation on the nature of God, creation, and the afterlife: whether it is best understood as an attempt to discourage withdrawal from the world into areas of study in which no conclusions can ever be reached, whether it is an intentional polemic against a particular tradition of mysticism that risked destabilising the religious authority of the Tannaim,<sup>32</sup> whether it is simply a warning against over-reaching the capacity of human understanding. There are good arguments to be made for each of these positions, and in each case it is also useful for the tradition of interpretation stemming from the passage to be heard properly as a critique of theology from within a theological system, rather than a prohibition of theology from the outside.

I want to resist the cloying universalism which Larycia Hawkins and Miroslav Volf traffic in when they insist that “We worship the same God”, or even the slightly more nuanced claim forwarded by Joshua Ralston that “we all claim to worship the One God who created the world through God’s Word”.<sup>33</sup> 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 religions about how multiple, seemingly contradictory truth-claims might be either reconciled or else objectively prioritised. They can’t. 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,

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<sup>31</sup> Even if scholars such as Mary-Ann Perkins 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 teaching and dissemination of Christian theology. See Perkins, *Christendom and European Identity: The Legacy of a Grand Narrative Since 1789* (Walter de Gruyter & Co, 2004); *A History of the University in Europe*, vols I-IV, general editor Walter Rüegg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992-2010); David Ford, “Christianity and Universities Today: A Double Manifesto”, Third Lord Dearing Memorial Lecture, delivered 2011; archived at <http://www.cathedralsgroup.org.uk/Uploads/Dearing2011.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> For example, Yonatan Kolatch reads it as a restriction 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. *Masters of the Word: Traditional Jewish Bible Commentary from the First Through Tenth Centuries* (Jerusalem: Ktav, 2006) p. 239.

<sup>33</sup> Joshua Ralston, “The Same God, or the One God? On the Limitations and Implications of the Wheaton Affair” ABC Religion & Ethics, 12 January 2016 <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/01/12/4386793.htm> Accessed 31 August 2016.

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 into that tradition, without one's source of connection being "belief" as it is normally understood.

Likewise, I want to find a way of avoiding either the easy slide into relativism or a turn to comparative study simply for the sake of comparison. It is poor reasoning to presume the conclusion, and while "every religion has something to offer the world" may get points for optimism, it is a question no less begged than the superiority of Christianity which has animated so much of the disciplinary history of theology. We should take seriously the critique of the category of religion, and categories such as "scripture" and "transcendence", attempting not to replicate the errors made in previous generations of ascribing religious significance only to the aspects of a system which appear to have some analogue in already-existing Christian theological categories.

In so doing, it is to be expected that new categories will emerge, and existing categories be destabilised. My work on memorialisation, or, more recently, on the assumptions underlying discourses of forgiveness in modern Judaism and Christianity, or Jayne Svenungsson's work on messianic ideas in the philosophy of history are very early, and still—especially in the case of 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.

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.