
Theologies and Scholars

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In his response to Bron Taylor's introduction to the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* (2007), Mark I. Wallace singles out one aspect of Taylor's investigation and declares that this aspect represents a basic misunderstanding and a conscious disregard of the place of theology in the study of religion, nature, and culture. In so doing, Wallace applies a rhetorical strategy of synecdoche, in which one part is used to represent the whole of what Taylor has to say. While this may be seen as an interesting and legitimate strategy, the way Wallace proceeds from his point of departure is neither coherent nor helpful. In order to clarify what is at stake here, and to put this discussion into a more consistent referential framework, it is important to take a few simple considerations into account.

What is theology? In contrast to the notoriously ambiguous concept of 'religion', there is a considerable agreement among theologians and non-theologians about the basic meaning of the term 'theology' and its use in the discipline of the same name. No matter which dictionary of religion or theology one may consult, the respective entry will report more or less the following: in accordance with its etymology (Greek *theos*, 'god'; *logia*, 'sayings, doctrine'), the concept of theology refers to the discussion of God or the gods, in its Greek context the speaking and writing about the Olympic and pre-Olympic gods, such as in Homer and Hesiod. In classical Greek philosophy, *theologia* was blended with metaphysics, meaning reasonable thinking about the abstract and non-corporeal aspects of the divine entities. After the rise of Christianity, in Jewish thought that was influenced by Greek philosophy, and later in Islam as well, the term 'theology' was used to describe the study of the will, nature, and attributes of the God of revelation. It was in medieval

Christianity that the modern understanding of theology fully emerged. Now *theologia* referred to the study of the one God and also to the corpus of doctrines attributed to his works in the world, including creation, redemption, sanctification, and the human duties and responses to his will. This is the historical reason for why some scholars limit the term 'theology' to its Christian understanding, although there is no necessity for doing so (see Rudolph 2001: 190). Put differently: 'God talk' can be found in many non-Christian theologies.

To be sure, since the late nineteenth century, a deep transformation of the discipline of Christian theology has taken place, particularly due to the influence of Protestant theologians who challenged older doctrinal approaches. More recently, the impact of so-called 'postmodern' criticism and of deconstructionist and postcolonial attempts to reconsider the basis of academic knowledge has been felt in Christian theology, as well. Wallace belongs to a branch of Christian theology that responded openly to these challenges (see Wallace 1999, 2001b). But modern theology has to face yet another challenge—the emergence of an academic discipline called *Religionswissenschaft*, or the academic study of religion, which since the beginning of the twentieth century had been institutionalized in a number of (particularly German and Dutch) universities in philosophical faculties and departments. The heated discussion regarding the theoretical status of the academic study of religion notwithstanding, what is important for us here is the fact that professional theology had to respond to the emergence of an approach to religion that claims to be agnostic and non-confessional.

These responses have varied widely. A coherent if controversial solution to the problem is offered by the current official Vatican theology. Time and again, Pope Benedict XVI reminds his Church that reason alone would lead to tyranny and faith alone would lead to fanaticism. He argues that

there are pathologies in religion that are highly dangerous and that make it necessary to regard the divine light of reason as a tool, so to speak, a means by which religion must be purified and put in order again and again—which, by the way, was also the intention of the Church Fathers. But...there are—and mankind today is, in general, not as aware of this—also pathologies of reason, a hubris of reason that is not any less dangerous (Benedict XVI 2006: 267).

He ends his reflection with the statement: 'As a result, a universal process of cleansing can grow, one in which the essential values and norms that are somehow intuited by all people can finally attain new power to illuminate, in order that what holds the world together can again have an effective influence on humanity' (2006: 268). Needless to say, 'what

holds the world together' is the revelatory presence of the 'living' Christian God.

The clarification of the relation between the rational, agnostic study of religion ('reason') and the approach to religion that reckons with the working of a divine entity ('faith') can be much more nuanced than Benedict XVI has it. A good example of a modern, critical theology is the position presented by Ingo U. Dalferth. Coming from a Protestant background, he avers that theology always has to include the 'working presence' of God.

In my view, the *self-understanding* of evangelical theology says that theology is a *practical discipline for giving orientation of life by critically unfolding Christian faith and its understanding of reality*, not a theoretical discipline whatsoever and even less a historical-empirical discipline. Its central task vis-à-vis the academic study of religion is to remain *theology* and to distinguish itself *as theology*. This is done by clarifying the specific *questions*, the engagement with which makes the discipline into theology and not into the academic study of religion. This question is *practical* and the point is that in the unfolding of the life-orientation of faith everything that is real and possible is understood within the horizon of God's presence (Dalferth 2001: 18, italics in original, my translation).

It is a common denominator of Christian theological positions that the talk of God is theology's *conditio sine qua non* and the ground on which this discipline is built (explicitly so in Dalferth 2001: 16-17). This is true even for theologians influenced by deconstructionist philosophies; Mark I. Wallace, for example, repeatedly puts 'God' into the center of his work (see Wallace 1996 ['spirit'], 2001a, 2005). Hence, there is nothing controversial in Bron Taylor's observation that 'Theology, whether or not it is fused with ecology, presumes and seeks to understand God in some way. It assumes, therefore, many things about the nature of reality that are not obvious to unbelievers and are admittedly not verifiable empirically' (2007: 8). More open for controversial debate is Taylor's conclusion that 'Such premises limit the range of possible interdisciplinary discourse' (2007: 8). I will come back to this but first wish to add another dimension to my argument.

Having identified the talk of God as a basic component of theological reflection, with God being an important object—and sometimes even the mystical subject—of theological scrutiny, we can say that the object of the academic study of religion cannot be the divine, the 'spirit', 'God', or the gods; rather, it is the *talk* about these entities and the discursive place of such a talk that is an important object of the academic study of religion. Since there is only *communicated religion* (see von Stuckrad 2003: 263-64), the reality and the core of the divine is *a priori* inaccessible for

scholars of religion. If they address the nature of the divine, they are practicing theology. Therefore, Wallace is wrong when he notes: 'Theology, then, is discourse-analysis about the fundamental beliefs and normative practices that ground and orient particular persons and groups'. This is not a defining characteristic of theology but of the academic study of religion. The ontologies and normativities of theological systems of thought are *data* for the academic study of religion (see von Stuckrad 2007). Contrasting Wallace's claim that 'Theology *analyzes* language about God (or the gods) or Spirit (or spirits) or the Other (or otherness as such)' (my italics), the fact remains that theology *is* language about God or the divine.

Why, then, this confusion? In my view, the main reason for many misunderstandings between theological and non-theological approaches to religion is the difference between theology as a discipline and theologians as practicing scholars. There are many theologians who are doing excellent historical or comparative research and who are analyzing the place of religion in various cultural settings with the use of sociological or other methodological tools; as a matter of fact, these theologians are operating within a referential framework of the academic study of religion. Conversely, there are scholars of religion who are engaging in speculations about the nature of the divine, of God, or the gods. They do this sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly. An implicit theology is, for example, the name of the discipline of 'Pagan Studies', because in contrast to an 'academic study of Paganism' this subdiscipline tends to prioritize the view of the believer and also the engagement with the nature of the pagan divinities. An example of an explicit theology, also referred to by Wallace, is Michael York's attempt to systematize Pagan beliefs and concepts of the divine (York 2003). It is a clear indication of this confusion between theology and theologians when Wallace files the contributions of Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Derrida under 'the better work in contemporary Christian and Jewish theology'. Žižek, a critical Marxist sociologist and philosopher, would certainly regard this as a doubtful honor (the same goes for Derrida). However, Wallace is right when he calls York's and Žižek's contributions to religious discourse a '*theological voice*'.

At this point, let me come back to Taylor's remark that theological premises 'limit the range of possible interdisciplinary discourse' (Taylor 2007: 8). Wallace attacks this statement as an intolerant exclusion of theological voices and an attempt to artificially give preference to 'a sort of presumptive atheism'. Wallace then asks: 'why not simply keep the question open about the supernatural or natural origins of religion?' This is exactly what a journal, which is operating within a referential

framework of the academic study of religion, should do. However, Wallace is mixing up categories again. Within the conceptual framework of theology it is *impossible* to leave the question about the origin of religion or the divine open. These origins are part and parcel of theological self-understanding and inquiry. Hence, Taylor has good reasons for prioritizing a title for the journal that does not carry theology in its name (Taylor 2007: 8).

While being clear about the referential framework (and the title) of a scholarly journal, it is another question whether a journal should allow various perspectives on its topics. Unfortunately, Wallace does not quote Taylor's unambiguous, programmatic remarks about this.

I am wholly convinced that the richness and potential of this developing field of inquiry can only be realized by (1) counteracting disciplinary myopia, encouraging all involved to acquaint themselves with the ways in which scholars with other backgrounds approach the same phenomena, and (2) creating taboo-free inquiry zones, where no question is illicit and no approach or argument is precluded by facile hopes or *a priori* assumptions (Taylor 2007: 7-8).

The differentiation between conceptual disciplinary frameworks and practicing scholars, as outlined above, can help us to eliminate possible misunderstandings. Implicitly, Wallace himself gives the answer to the problem: 'My hope is that scholars of the emerging field of religion, nature, and culture studies will not be as "theological" as some past theologians have been about protecting particular fields of inquiry from the contagion of outsiders who ask questions at odds with the received wisdom'. If scholars—theologians or not—are operating independently of a theological framework of reference, then their contributions are exactly what Taylor's mission statement is referring to. If scholars—theologians or not—think that this journal is a place for engaging the reality of God or the true presence of the divine, then they will certainly find other venues for publishing their work.

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