

Analytic Perspectives on Method and Authority in Theology

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Analytic Theology as Systematic Theology

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Abstract: It is often said that analytic theology is not really systematic theology; it is something else entirely. However, specifying what this “something else” amounts to has proven a little more difficult. In this article I argue that analytic theology may be a species of systematic theology. I show that there is no agreed view on the nature of systematic theology amongst several leading practitioners of systematic theology by comparing the work of John Webster, Brian Gerrish, and Gordon Kaufman. I then set out the *Shared Task of Systematic Theology* (*Shared Task*), which is a conceptual threshold for systematic theology that reflects the thought of Webster, Gerrish, and Kaufman. With this in mind, I argue that analytic theology can meet this threshold, and count as a version of systematic theology.

Keywords: Analytic theology, *Shared Task*, systematic theology

According to William Abraham, “The emergence of systematic theology as analytic theology was ... an accident waiting to happen.”¹ Since the publication of the original symposium in which his essay appeared in 2009, analytic theology (hereinafter, AT) has indeed emerged as a serious intellectual enterprise that includes a monograph series, several professional journals, a recently published introductory text, and an ever-increasing number of articles, essays, monographs, and edited books that address a wide range of topics in contemporary doctrinal theology from the arcane heights of the Trinity, incarnation, and atonement to theological practices of spiritual theology, prayer, and liturgy.² Perhaps it was an accident waiting to happen. But are the results really theology? Is AT actually systematic theology, or is it something else? That is one of the most persistent questions that has been asked of practitioners of AT by those who are non-analytic systematic theologians in the last 7 years. In his 2009 answer to this question, “Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,” William Abraham answered in the affirmative that “Analytic theology can be usefully defined as follows: ... systematic theology attuned to the deployment of the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy. It is the articulation of the central themes of Christian teaching illuminated by the best insights of analytic philosophy.”³ That is a good place to start. He goes on to elaborate how AT might approach topics of systematic theology, focusing on the doctrine of God and Anselm’s vision of the divine. Nevertheless, the worry that AT is really a wolf in sheep’s clothing, that is, philosophy pretending to be theology, has persisted.

¹ Abraham, “Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,” 54.

² Examples include the titles in the *Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology* series published by Oxford University Press (<https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/oxford-studies-in-analytic-theology-osat/?cc=ca&lang=en&>), the *Journal of Analytic Theology* (<http://journalofanalytictheology.com/jat/index.php/jat>), scholarship appearing in *TheoLogica* (<http://revistatheologica.com/index.php/rtl>), and works like Diller, *Theology’s Epistemological Dilemma*, and Farris and Taliaferro, *The Routledge Companion to Theological Anthropology*. The literature is growing rapidly; this represents an indicative sample.

³ Abraham, “Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,” 54-55.

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The same topic has been taken up and elaborated upon by Thomas McCall in his more recent book, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology*.⁴ Like Abraham, he thinks that “theologians should be able and willing to do *analytic* theology. They should, in other words, do theology that is able and willing to employ the skills and tools of the analytic tradition [of philosophy].” What is more, McCall urges analytic theologians to do theology.

Analytic theology—as *theology*—should be (to borrow John Webster’s phrase) ‘theological theology.’ It should be grounded in Holy Scripture, informed by the Christian tradition and attentive to the potential and pressing challenges faced by God’s people in the world. But there is more—analytic theology should be oriented toward its proper end, and analytic theologians should be attentive to the proper approach and posture of theology.⁵

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I am sympathetic to both Abraham and McCall, and applaud McCall’s notion that AT should be a properly “theological theology.” Nevertheless, even here there is some indication that AT is still not always regarded as proper theology, and even that some practitioners of AT may not be doing genuine theology after all—hence McCall’s injunction that analytic theologians do *theology*, which I take to be a plea for practitioners of AT to do genuine theology rather than ersatz theology, or philosophy dressed up as theology. Such a concern would only arise if there was some uncertainty about whether AT is a species of theology.

This essay is a further attempt to address the question of whether AT is systematic theology (hereinafter, ST). Because I think this is an important matter, and because it seems to me that there is still widespread misunderstanding about the nature and scope of AT amongst non-analytic practitioners of ST, I venture to think that yet another attempt to address this question is worthwhile, in the hope that we may get past this largely formal matter and onto more productive material ones.

1 What is Systematic Theology?

Let us begin by thinking about the nature of ST. My central claim in this essay is this: *AT can (and should) be practiced as a species of ST*. Hence the title of this paper: Analytic Theology as Systematic Theology. This seems to me to be the central claim of McCall’s invitation to analytic theology. But it is subtly different from that offered by Abraham. Whereas Abraham claims that AT just is ST of a particular variety, my claim is more modest: AT may be practiced as a form of ST, and should be received as such by the ST guild when it is practiced in this way. Nevertheless, this is consistent with the notion that AT may not always be a species of ST. To see why this may be the case, consider the fact that someone may work on natural theology with the sensibilities and ambition of a practitioner of AT (and many today do so). Yet on one widely accepted way of thinking about the project of natural theology it does not fall under the description of ST because it involves reasoning about matters theological without recourse or appeal to special revelation or ecclesiastical tradition, using evidence and premises that are accessible to all reasonable human beings, irrespective of theological persuasion.

There is now overwhelming evidence for the conclusion that AT is being practiced as a species of ST in the published body of work being produced by practitioners of AT. Non-analytic theologians may claim that such AT is not, in fact, *genuine* ST. But in order to make good on this objection, the practitioner of ST would have to be able to show that nothing that falls under the description of AT as it is understood by its leading practitioners is within the bounds of what falls under the description of ST as it is understood by its leading practitioners. The problem here is that there is no set of necessary and sufficient conditions for ST, no description under which “such-and-such counts as ST” is agreed upon by the leading members of the ST guild. In fact, there is wide divergence amongst members of the ST guild about the nature of ST, and about its relationship to philosophy, the social and natural sciences, and other intellectual disciplines. Because there is such difference of view about the nature of ST amongst members of the ST guild, judging whether

⁴ McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 161-162.

AT falls within the bounds of ST is not quite as straightforward as it might at first appear. For if there is no agreed criteria for what constitutes a particular intellectual sub-discipline like ST, then judging whether a particular work counts as an instance of the particular discipline in question is a rather difficult task.

To make this point sharper, let us consider some representative examples of contemporary ST. I choose three theologians whose work marks them out as inheritors of different approaches to the theological task in modern theology.

(a) *John Webster*

Since we have already mentioned him in passing, let us begin with the late John Webster's view of the nature of ST, which is currently one of the most influential. In a recent paper entitled "What Makes Theology Theological?," he writes that "An understanding of the nature of theology comprises, *inter alia*, an account of theology's object, its cognitive principles, its ends, and the virtues of its practitioners. Acts of creaturely intellect are theological to the extent that they are directed to this object, operate on the basis of these cognitive principles, pursue these ends, and are undertaken by persons in whom these virtues may be discerned."⁶ Theology's object is primarily God and secondarily the works of God in creation; its cognitive principles are intellectual acts like reading and interpretation, historical inquiry, conceptual abstraction, and practical judgment.⁷ In an earlier essay, entitled "Principles of Systematic Theology," Webster puts it like this, "The Holy Trinity is the ontological principle of Christian systematic theology. Its external or objective cognitive principle is the divine Word, by which ... God's incommunicable self-knowledge is accommodated to the saints. The internal or subjective cognitive principle is the redeemed intelligence of the saints. Systematic theology is thus ectypal knowledge ... and a subaltern or subordinate science. Its matter is twofold: God, and all things in God."⁸

From these different essays a fairly cohesive account emerges. According to Webster theology ought to be about the nature of the triune God, and focused upon understanding him in an appropriate, worshipful manner by means of the Word of God. Then it should be about God's works in creation, understood by means of redeemed intelligence. It brings to bear a breadth of different tools from allied disciplines like biblical studies, historical theology, and, perhaps, philosophy, to bear upon the theological task. But its principles, goals and aims are all properly theological, both in the sense of belonging to the discipline of ST (rather than critical theory, or sociology, or whatever), and in the sense of being focused principally upon Theology Proper, that is, the doctrine of God.

(b) *Brian Gerrish*

Let us turn to another contemporary conception of the theological task. This time, we consider Brian Gerrish, himself a Reformed theologian like Webster, though of a Presbyterian rather than Anglican persuasion. In his recent one-volume systematic theology, *Christian Faith: Dogmatics in Outline*, Gerrish begins with the following dogmatic thesis-statement: "Christian dogmatics, as part of Christian theology, has for its subject matter the distinctively Christian way of having faith, in which elemental faith is confirmed, specified, and represented as filial trust in God the Father of Jesus Christ."⁹ In his second chapter on the definition of dogmatics, the dogmatic thesis-statement reads "Christian dogmatics is distinguished from every other part of Christian theology as the theoretical, critical, and systematic discipline that seeks to establish the unity, and to test the adequacy, of the beliefs and dogmas in which Christian faith is expressed."¹⁰ Here the focus is on religious experience rather than upon doctrine. ST, or dogmatics (the words are apparently

⁶ Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?" 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸ Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theology," 56.

⁹ Gerrish, *Christian Faith: Dogmatics in Outline*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

interchangeable for Gerrish¹¹) is primarily concerned with Christian faith. Doctrine (here: beliefs and dogmas) is a second-order attempt to express or capture something of this faith, so that systematic theology (i.e. dogmatics) is tasked with testing the adequacy of these doctrines relative to the faith Christians express.

(c) *Gordon Kaufman*

A third example: this time, the Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman. In his constructive theology, *In the Face of Mystery*, he maintains that God is a symbol, a value to which we aspire in our thinking about our own lives and worldview in relation to God. We do not have any unmediated access to the divine. Our thoughts and conceptions of God are our own, not the product of some immediate revelation. Consequently, “theologians should attempt to construct conceptions of God, humanity, and the world appropriate for the orientation of contemporary human life. As we have been observing, these notions are (and always have been) human creations, human imaginative constructions; they are our ideas, not God’s. What is needed in each new generation is an understanding of God adequate for and appropriate to human life in the world within which it finds itself, so that human devotion and loyalty, service and worship, may be directed toward God rather than to the many idols that so easily attract attention and interest.”¹²

Kaufman eschews the tradition-bound biblicism of the past as an outmoded way of thinking of the constructive theological task. Instead, he regards systematic and constructive theology as disciplines concerned in each new generation with the forging of imaginative ways of thinking about the divine that are adequate for particular communities and people. But on this way of thinking, theology is very much a human activity directed godward. It is not about rightly discerning the meaning of some deposit of revelation bequeathed to us.

In assessing these three examples we can see that Webster’s view is similar to, though not identical with, a certain post-Barthian trajectory in contemporary theology often called “dogmatic theology.” As we have already noted, Gerrish is also concerned with this task. It is just that he conceives of it in rather different terms as principally about Christian faith and only secondarily as the conceptualization of that in doctrine. This has a greater affinity to Schleiermacher, and to the classical liberal tradition than to Barth. Kaufman’s project is much more clearly revisionist in nature, and owes more to the sort of theological trajectory in modern theology traced by the likes of Paul Tillich. But his too might be thought of as a piece of systematic theology if we include within the bounds of ST the task of theological construction—which I think we must. Although that may not be the whole of ST, it is often thought to be a part of it, and Kaufman’s position is one live option for those engaged in ST as construction.

As these three cameos indicate, there is very limited agreement amongst these practitioners of ST regarding the nature of their task. Is ST principally concerned with understanding the mystery of the triune God as apprehended in Scripture? Or is it primarily about Christian faith and only secondarily about doctrine as that doctrine expresses something of the faith experienced? Perhaps it is neither of these things. Maybe ST is about imaginative human construction instead; the attempt to build an intellectual tower of our own making towards God. Or is it something else, some other way of thinking about theology that we haven’t even addressed?

Advocates of AT might be tempted to argue *ad hominem* that if practitioners of ST don’t have clear criteria for what counts as ST then it is rather difficult for practitioners of AT to know what it is that is missing from AT that means it is not an instance of ST. However, let us leave that to one side. Instead, it may be more fruitful to consider what these different accounts of ST share in common. Despite their significant areas of difference, it looks like they all share the following (perhaps more than this, but at least this much):

¹¹ Gerrish points out that systematic theology has often been identified in Protestant curricula as the compound of apologetics, dogmatics, and theological ethics. However, this does not seem to be how he conceives of dogmatics since he thinks it is a theoretical, critical, and systematic discipline that “seeks both understanding of Christian faith and ... reformation of the doctrines in which it is conveyed.” (Gerrish, *Christian Faith*, 19.) This, he avers, distinguishes it from apologetics, historical and biblical theology, practical theology, and moral theology. So on his way of thinking dogmatics/ST has a regulative function (giving an account of Christian doctrine), as well as a constructive one (correcting mistaken doctrine and “system-building”).

¹² Kaufman, *In the Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*, 31.

Shared Task. Commitment to an intellectual undertaking that involves (though it may not comprise) explicating the conceptual content of the Christian tradition (with the expectation that this is normally done from a position within that tradition, as an adherent of that tradition), using particular religious texts that are part of the Christian tradition, including sacred scripture, as well as human reason, reflection, and praxis (particularly religious practices), as sources for theological judgments.

Let us call this the *Shared Task of Systematic Theology*, or *Shared Task* for short. There is much more that could be said about each of the claims that make up *Shared Task*, but for now, let us assume that *Shared Task*, or something very like it, is what we might call a conceptual threshold for ST. On this way of thinking, in order for an approach to theology to count as ST, it must meet the conceptual threshold of *Shared Task*.

Now, recall what Abraham and McCall say about AT. It is, says Abraham, “systematic theology attuned to the deployment of the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy. It is the articulation of the central themes of Christian teaching illuminated by the best insights of analytic philosophy.”¹³ Or again, it ought to be, according to McCall, “‘theological theology.’ It should be grounded in Holy Scripture, informed by the Christian tradition and attentive to the potential and pressing challenges faced by God’s people in the world. But there is more—analytic theology should be oriented toward its proper end, and analytic theologians should be attentive to the proper approach and posture of theology.”¹⁴

This brings us to the heart of the matter: does the characterization of AT presented by these two practitioners of AT fall within the parameters of ST that seems to be held in common by the rather different approaches to ST we have just canvassed (irrespective of whether we think AT just is ST, or whether AT *may be practiced as* ST)? Does it meet the conceptual threshold of *Shared Task*? Let us see.

First, concerning the ways of thinking about AT that Abraham and McCall set forth, is there a stated commitment to an intellectual task that normally involves (though it may not comprise) explicating the conceptual content of the Christian tradition (with the expectation that this is a task normally done from a position within that tradition, as an adherent of that tradition)? Clearly, there is such a commitment. AT is the “articulation of the central themes of Christian teaching illuminated by the best insights of analytic philosophy”; it is “‘theological theology’” that “should be grounded in Holy Scripture, informed by the Christian tradition” and that “should be oriented toward its proper end, and analytic theologians should be attentive to the proper approach and posture of theology.”

Second, is AT an approach to theology that uses particular religious texts that are part of the Christian tradition, including sacred scripture, as well as human reason, reflection, and praxis (particularly religious practices), as sources for theological judgments? Yes, it has that intellectual ambition. AT “articulates central themes of Christian teaching illuminated by the best insights of analytic philosophy.” And, as “theological theology” it should be grounded in Scripture and informed by the Christian tradition, as well as being oriented to its proper end.

In short, as it is characterized by two of its leading proponents, AT falls squarely within the bounds of the common ground occupied by the different approaches to ST we have considered in *Shared Task*. It does not come to the task of ST in quite the same way as these other approaches to contemporary ST. But the reasons why it does not come to the subject matter of theology in quite the same way is not because it fails to qualify as ST. If the characterization of the common ground shared by the three different approaches to ST we have considered here is on-target, then practitioners of AT are doing ST provided they approach their task along the lines laid out in *Shared Task*. Some practitioners of ST will still worry that practitioners of AT are outsiders to the guild trespassing upon theological territory. But it is difficult to see why that should be a problem if the practitioner of AT is attempting to do theology in a manner that conforms to *Shared Task* since this seems to be sufficient to qualify as ST—at least as it has been practiced by three of its leading contemporary proponents. In other words, AT is not (or is not necessarily) ersatz theology. In fact, one could practice AT in a way that shares much of the sensibility of a Webster, or a Gerrish, or a Kaufman—McCall’s characterization of AT has much in common with Webster in this regard, and there are practitioners of AT sympathetic to Schleiermacher’s project. (I have yet to meet one sympathetic to the revisionism of Kaufman, but in principle it is possible.)

¹³ Abraham, “Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,” 54-55.

¹⁴ McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology*, 161-162.

Well, then, if AT may be practiced in such a way that it falls within the bounds of the *Shared Task*, what about it marks it out as something different from these other ways of approaching ST? Let us consider two further candidates that are attempts to refine the objection to AT as ST from non-AT practitioners of ST as a way of trying to give some content to this difference. Neither of these options is right, as far as I can see. Nevertheless, these are objections that are often discussed in connection with AT, so it behoves us to consider them. Having done so, we will be in a position to say something in closing about why AT is different from the other approaches to ST we have considered here.

2 Analytic Theology and Theological Theology

Despite McCall's enthusiasm for AT as a properly "theological theology" many of those who represent the sort of view expressed by John Webster will worry that *Shared Task* doesn't get at what makes AT theologically suspicious. There is something more intangible at work that distinguishes AT from ST, something that has to do with the characterization of ST as "theological theology." Let us consider this more carefully.

As we have already noted, "theological theology" is a term coined by John Webster as a way of demarcating a particular approach to ST, one which is not merely concerned with theoretical matters, but with the life of the church. In his inaugural lecture as the Lady Margaret Professor in Oxford, Webster worries that the eponymous theological theology of his lecture's title is not a practice fostered in the modern research university, which is interested in the development of the everyman educated in the human sciences or *wissenschaften*, a generic human enterprise, not *bildung*, the formation of individuals with particular habits of mind aimed at the true and the good.¹⁵ Theology has lost its way. It has bartered its substance away in transactions with other disciplines whose integrity is not so contested in the modern university, such as biblical studies, philosophy, and the social sciences. Instead, following Colin Gunton, Webster avers that theology should "contribute from Christian sources things that would otherwise not be said."¹⁶ His is a vision of a Balkanized university in which different disciplines have their own modes of inquiry that may include practices that are tradition-specific. In the case of theology this means being oriented to the object of the discipline (God) who is the agent that gives us the material by means of which the subject-matter of the discipline is organized, namely, Holy Writ.

This sort of theological vision owes much to the work of Karl Barth and his disciples. Theological theology on this way of thinking is a confessional practice quite distinct from the study of religion, whether that study is conceived of under the aegis of the social sciences, or of philosophy. We might dub this, the *theology as confessional dogmatics* approach. It presumes that any interaction with other, non-theological disciplines should be at the behest of theology, and for particular purposes that are ancillary to the central dogmatic task of unfolding the Christian faith for the life of the church.

Well then, what is the objection to AT given this view? It is difficult to say exactly. But perhaps we can put it like this. Those who espouse the theology as confessional dogmatics approach to ST think that any other approach to ST, whether it is from within theology, such as the imaginative-constructive project of Kaufman, or from without theology, such as the sociology of religion, or the philosophy of religion, is inadequate theologically speaking. These other approaches are lacking something that confessional dogmatics brings to the table. That missing ingredient is confessionalism (understood as an approach to theology which is a confession of its truth), and an ecclesial focus for doing theology. But it should be clear from the foregoing that there is no reason why AT cannot be practiced in this manner. In fact, as we have seen, McCall thinks this ought to be an intellectual ambition for AT—that it ought to be a properly "theological theology."

Still, some will be unpersuaded by this. The real worry, they will say, is that AT is just ersatz theology. It is philosophy thinly disguised as theology. For aren't many of its practitioners philosophers? And don't many of these think of AT as nothing more than philosophical theology? And isn't philosophical theology

¹⁵ See Webster, "Theological Theology."

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24, citing Gunton, "The Indispensability of Theological Understanding: Theology in the University," 276.

precisely the philosophical assessment of theological claims, theology done from outside the pale of the theological guild and therefore not “theological theology” after all?

It is true that some practitioners of AT think of it as on a continuum with philosophical theology, or as just a rebranding of philosophical theology.¹⁷ But by the same token, many have argued that existentialist theology is really just a species of philosophical theology, or that Tillichian theology is just a species of philosophical theology. If practitioners of AT are doing theology in conformity to *Shared Task*, and with the desire to produce confessional dogmatics, that is, theology that is for the church, done from the perspective of a particular confession for the sake of the church, then it is being done as ST, not as ersatz theology, or as thinly veiled philosophy. Given its origins in analytic philosophy of religion and latterly, analytic philosophical theology, AT does have an affinity with analytic philosophy and there will inevitably be overlap between that discipline and AT. But the issue cannot be the use of philosophy in theology since all theologians use philosophical ideas, and very often align themselves with one or more philosophical tradition (Aristotelian, Platonic, existential, continental, hermeneutical, and so on). I take it that the worry here boils down to the suspicion that AT is philosophy not theology, or something very similar, namely, that it is rationalism. That is, the worry is that AT makes theology beholden to philosophy, or enslaves theology to a particular philosophical purview. But, as practitioners of AT have labored to show from its inception, AT is not necessarily rationalistic, and as it practiced today is almost without exception done in a manner that makes philosophy’s role that of the traditional handmaiden to the Queen of the sciences. There is surely nothing theologically objectionable about that.

3 Philosophy as Secular Theology

However, this brings us to our second objection to AT that concedes *Shared Task*, but still finds reason to be suspicious of the claim that AT is ST. This second sort of objection pursues the “AT is philosophy” line in a slightly different way. One way to get at this worry can be found in the work of the ecumenical Lutheran, Robert Jenson. He is well-known for his assertion that philosophy is just a secularized theology, the theology of the ancient world, or what he refers to as Olympian-Parmenidian religion.¹⁸ There is no such thing as philosophy on his way of thinking. Or, more precisely, there is something *called* philosophy. But it is not a discipline distinct from theology. It is just a rival sort of theology, one that originates in the hellenistic world and its religions. Once we see this, our desire to conform our theology to its dictates, as if philosophy were somehow capable of providing an independent, objective standard of rationality to which all other disciplines must pay lip service, should evaporate. For, on Jenson’s way of thinking, we shall then see that philosophy really is a rival theology. What is more, we shall see that the attempt to construct theology using philosophical tools is tantamount to borrowing ideas and sensibilities from a rival religious tradition. Rather than Radical Orthodoxy’s penchant for out-narrating secular approaches to religion, he takes a leaf out of Karl Rahner’s book, and regards philosophers as anonymous theologians.

Jenson’s vision of “theological theology” (although he doesn’t use the term) is beguiling because it provides a plausible explanation of why it is that theologians so often feel the need to apply to the ideas of philosophers in order to furnish their thought with a certain intellectual credibility, or with particular notions, concepts, and arguments. But for this very reason it is also mistaken. To equate philosophy *per se* with a deracinated ancient theology is like saying modern scientific cosmology is just secularized astrology. Astrologers might find this appealing, for it is certainly true that there is some conceptual overlap between

¹⁷ See, e.g., Wolterstorff’s essay, “How Philosophical Theology Became Possible within the Analytic Tradition of Philosophy,” and Stump, “The Problem of Evil: Analytic Philosophy and Narrative.”

¹⁸ He writes, “The secular mood by which some forms of ‘philosophy’ contrast with Christian theology and that tempts us to taken them for a different kind of thinking is simply a character of Olympian religion itself, which pursued a divinity purged of mystery. Insofar as Western philosophy is now reduced to the pure study of logic, it is still in fact theology, Christian or Olympian-Parmenidean. Theologians of Western Christianity must indeed converse with the philosophers, but only because and insofar as both are engaged in the *same* sort of enterprise.” See Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1: The Triune God*, 10.

these two disciplines. But few outside the guild of astrologers will think that it is *the same sort of discipline* as cosmology, or that cosmology is a secularized astrology.

So if the worry is that AT subordinates Christian theology to an alien and fundamentally incompatible theological tradition—that of the “secularized theology” we find in contemporary philosophy—then this is, I think, a mistaken view of AT for two reasons. First, because it is a mistaken view of the nature of philosophy, as least, as it is widely understood and practiced in the analytic tradition. Second, it is mistaken because AT is not necessarily philosophy but theology, when it is practiced in a way that is consistent with *Shared Task*. I think this is also a rather naive way of thinking about the enterprise of ST, as if practitioners of ST can carry on their task independent of any other discipline, and without reference to the philosophical notions around us. Theologians have always been intellectual magpies and have borrowed philosophical ideas, even philosophical systems (just consider Thomism’s use of Aristotle!) baptizing them for the theological task. AT is doing nothing different from this.

4 The role of traditions, texts, and academic socialization

This brings us, in a final section, to outline some reasons that help clarify what AT is, and why it may be practiced as a species of ST. Here I want to suggest that the reason why many non-AT practitioners of ST are suspicious of the claim that AT is ST is better understood to be a difference about what we might call *intellectual cultures*, rather than a difference of intellectual discipline. For the purposes of this essay, an intellectual culture is a rough grouping within a particular intellectual discipline (such as philosophy, or theology) that identifies itself as having a distinctive perspective on its subject matter, and a particular methodological approach to its subject. Such intellectual cultures are something like MacIntyrian intellectual traditions, though as I am using the term an intellectual culture is less totalizing than a MacIntyrian tradition, being more of a discernible group within a given discipline.¹⁹ Members of a particular intellectual culture pay attention to particular texts, to particular thinkers, and privilege certain intellectual virtues and approaches over others. To be a part of such an intellectual culture is to be socialized into a way of approaching a particular intellectual discipline. This applies across subjects, I think, but it certainly applies to philosophy and theology, which are the two intellectual disciplines that I know best. The three approaches to contemporary ST that we began with each represent a particular intellectual culture in ST. AT represents another such intellectual culture, and one that also reflects a particular trajectory in ST. Objections from other intellectual culture to AT have often at their roots been about which texts to privilege, which scholars to pay attention to, which intellectual virtues to privilege, and how practitioners of AT are socialized into their particular intellectual culture (via conferences, networks, journals, and so forth).

In the early phase of AT, practitioners sought to distinguish it from other approaches to theology by way of a rather “thin” understanding of AT as a particular method. On this way of thinking, AT does not commit its practitioner to particular substantive doctrines. It is simply a way of approaching the theological task, paying attention to the tools and sensibilities of analytic philosophy and things like clarity, simplicity, and brevity in writing, giving clear arguments for positions, uncovering the logical form of a given view, and so on. I myself have characterized AT in this way. However, in more recent times the Oxford theologian William Wood has pointed out that the issue of what I am calling intellectual cultures is at least as important as these other matters, and—more importantly—carves the difference between AT and other approaches to ST at the joints in a way that these other ways of thinking about what distinguishes AT do not.

¹⁹ Recall, Alasdair MacIntyre characterizes an intellectual tradition in these terms: “an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted”, MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 12.

I think he is right. Wood observes,

Analytic theology as currently practiced has an ambiguous character. It may be understood either formally, as any instance of theology that draws on analytic philosophy, or substantively, as a cohesive theological school that draws on analytic philosophy in defense of traditional Christian orthodoxy. Both conceptions assume that analytic philosophy furnishes ‘tools and methods’ to the analytic theologian. Yet on the best recent accounts of analytic philosophy, analytic philosophy has no unique tools and methods.²⁰

This is also true. There are no necessary and sufficient conditions for analytic philosophy, any more than there are such conditions for demarcating ST or AT. How should we think of AT, then? According to Wood, as “a robust and distinctive intellectual tradition,”²¹ which is tantamount to what I am calling an intellectual culture.

He goes on to say that it appears from the way in which AT is developing that it “continues to move away from its origins in philosophy of religion and may well be evolving into a distinctive ‘school’ of Christian theology.”²² This is not quite right, I think. There are certainly differences among those who practice AT, and differences are emerging over how AT is understood. (In this regard, Wood distinguishes between what he calls “formal” approaches to AT, and “substantive” approaches.) Nevertheless, it seems to me that there is good reason to think AT has always been understood by many of its practitioners as a species of ST. Abraham is a clear example of this. As we have seen, McCall’s approach is more circumspect, allowing that AT can be practiced as ST (and should be). But even given this more modest approach there is the expectation that nothing prevents the practitioner of AT from doing ST—even that there is an expectation that practitioners of AT will do ST much of the time. However we conceive of AT, whether as a species of ST, or as something that may be practiced under the description of ST in *Shared Task*, AT as ST requires training and care. Wood is clear about that. It also requires theologians to become “bilingual,” capable of reading and understanding both analytic philosophy and ST. As Wood remarks, “if philosophy presents the theologian with intellectual tools, only a full member of the analytic tradition will know how to use analytic tools expertly. At the same time, only a suitably expert theologian will know how to use analytic tools to construct an edifice worth inhabiting.”²³ And, as with any intellectual culture, we can point to paradigms of the sort of expertise we are concerned with, which act as exemplars for further work in the field, just as Webster, Gerrish, and Kaufman are exemplars of other contemporary approaches to ST.

So, AT is an intellectual culture, one of several such cultures that co-exist in contemporary ST. But it is not a “club.” In her 2013 contribution to the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion’s* Round Table discussion on AT, Sarah Coakley avers, “rather than hoping to find the essence of Analytic Theology in a club with certain defined rules and requirements for admission, it would seem more profitable, in the spirit of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, to speak of us analytic theologians as a ‘family resemblance’ group who share some, but not all, of a range of overlapping and related goals and aspirations.”²⁴ She continues, “And if this is right, it is pointless to look for one *essentialist* definition of our project.”²⁵

I am sympathetic to this. Coakley is right that AT was never a monolithic enterprise, even in the original volume to which she contributed. She is also right that “family resemblance” is a good way of characterizing much of what goes under the aegis of AT. This is similar in some respects to the notion of an intellectual culture, since any tradition tolerates a certain amount of diversity of views within its bounds. Warming to this theme of “family resemblance” groups, we might even say that AT is not so much a *bounded group*, where a perimeter is policed so that one is either “out” or “in.” Rather, it is something more like what might be termed a *centered group*, where we can see a cluster of members that are right at the heart of the movement, and others less central, or more peripheral, with others still further out with some connection, but without being entirely identified with the movement. AT is much more like that—and that is what I think Coakley is getting at in her remarks about AT not being a club.

²⁰ Wood, “Trajectories, Traditions, and Tools in Analytic Theology,” 254.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 259.

²³ *Ibid.*, 264.

²⁴ Coakley, “On Why *Analytic Theology* is Not A Club,” 602-603.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 603.

5 Summary and conclusion

Let us sum up: Following recent work by William Wood, I have reasoned that AT is an intellectual culture that overlaps ST, and that pays attention to particular texts, figures, ideas and intellectual virtues in the pursuit of ST. It meets the threshold requirement of *Shared Task*, so that we can say of AT that its practitioners demonstrate commitment to an intellectual undertaking that involves (though it may not comprise) explicating the conceptual content of the Christian tradition (with the expectation that this is normally done from a position within that tradition, as an adherent of that tradition), using particular religious texts that are part of the Christian tradition, including sacred scripture, as well as human reason, reflection, and praxis (particularly religious practices), as sources for theological judgments. Its distinctive approach to ST has much in common with historic theology, particular scholastic theology (though we have not explored that relationship in detail here). Like dogmatists interested in “theological theology” it can be practiced in a way that takes seriously the Christian tradition, and the place of Scripture as a pre-eminent norming norm of Christian doctrine. If I may be permitted an aspiration, at its best AT as ST is *a way of doing ST that utilizes the tools and methods of contemporary analytic philosophy for the purposes of constructive Christian theology, paying attention to the Christian tradition and development of doctrine*.²⁶ That sounds like a properly “theological theology” to me.

Let me close with an injunction. Some years ago Nicholas Wolterstorff, himself an analytic theologian (though trained in philosophy), wrote a short essay addressed to his theological colleagues, and students at Yale who were intending on becoming theologians. It was entitled, “To Theologians: From One Who Cares about Theology but is Not One of You.”²⁷ In the course of that essay, he sets out a vision of the task of being a theologian with which many practitioners of ST, whether AT or not, can certainly resonate. I hope that however we pursue ST, we will take seriously the call to the particular vocation that Wolterstorff enjoins upon us. Here is what he says:

To my young grad students who aim to become theologians I say, with all the emphasis I can muster: *be theologians*. Do not be ersatz philosophers, do not be ersatz cultural theorists, do not be ersatz anything. Be genuine theologians. Be sure-footed in philosophy, sure-footed in cultural theory, and the like. And struggle to find a voice that can be heard, if not agreed with, not just by theologians but others as well. But then: be theologians. There will be cultural theorists around to tell us how things look from their perspective; there will be sociologists around to tell us how things look from their perspective. What we need to hear from you is how things look when seen in the light of the triune God—may his name be praised!—who creates and sustains us, who redeems us, and who will bring this frail and fallen, though yet glorious, humanity and cosmos to consummation.²⁸

These are surely words to live by. Let us pursue our theologizing *sub species aeternitatis, et ad maiorem dei gloriam*—under the aspect of eternity, and to the greater glory of God, as well as with a desire to promote charity and understanding between the different intellectual cultures of contemporary systematic theology.²⁹

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²⁶ With some adaptation, this is the notion of AT used in the *Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology*.

²⁷ Wolterstorff, “To Theologians: From One Who Cares about Theology but is Not One of You.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

²⁹ I am grateful to members of the Analytic Theology Seminar at Fuller Theological Seminary, and to James Arcadi in particular, for comments on a previous draft of this essay.

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