




BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Analytic theology and the academic study of religion: an overview

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Abstract

Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion aims to explain analytic theology to other theologians, and to scholars of religion, and to explain those other fields to analytic theologians. The book defends analytic theology from some common criticisms, but also argues that analytic theologians have much to learn from other forms of inquiry. Analytic theology is a legitimate form of theology, and a legitimate form of academic inquiry, and it can be a valuable conversation partner within the wider religious studies academy. I aim to articulate an attractive vision of analytic theology, foster a more fruitful inter-disciplinary conversation, and enable scholars across the religious studies academy to understand one another better. Analytic theology can flourish in the secular academy, and flourish as authentically Christian theology.

Keywords: analytic theology; religion; religious studies; secular; inquiry; university

Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion is primarily a defence of analytic theology, but it is also an exercise in bridge-building.¹ I want to explain analytic theology to other theologians and to scholars of religion, and to explain those other fields to analytic theologians, many of whom remain far more steeped in philosophy than in theology, let alone in the academic study of religion. I am convinced that all sides would benefit if analytic theology were given a seat at the interdisciplinary table where – ideally – theologians, continental philosophers of religion, and scholars of religion sometimes gather. Analytic theology can flourish in the secular academy and, moreover, flourish as theology, rather than as philosophy of religion aimed at solving specifically Christian puzzles.

The book begins with three very brief chapters that collectively introduce the work as a whole. Chapter 1 attempts to distinguish analytic theology from related forms of inquiry. Analytic theology uses the tools and methods of analytic philosophy in the service of Christian theology, with a particular focus on elucidating the meaning, coherence, and truth of Christian doctrines. (Throughout the book, I consider only analytic *Christian* theology, although much of what I have to say would also apply to analytic theology in other religious traditions.) Chapter 2 discusses three common theological objections to analytic theology: the objections from history, mystery, and practice. These objections do not succeed as objections to analytic theology as such, though they may apply to individual analytic theologians. Chapter 3 turns to the academic study of religion. Many contemporary

scholars of religion do not regard theology as a genuine form of academic inquiry. Yet contemporary analytic philosophy shows that theology need not confine itself to historicist or empiricist methods in order to count as a genuine form of academic inquiry. The methods of analytic epistemology and metaphysics – which flourish in every philosophy department – are also appropriate tools with which to investigate questions about the divine. Analytic theology draws on these same tools.

In Part II, I discuss the foundations of analytic theology, and try to get clear about what analytic theology and analytic philosophy really are. I begin with a brief discussion of contemporary analytic philosophy, understood as a distinctive style of writing and thinking. I conclude Chapter 4 with a question that few analytic thinkers ever consider: In addition to its virtues, are there limitations to the analytic quest for clarity? However analytic philosophers might answer this question, analytic theologians, steeped in the Christian narrative of the Fall, should agree that there are such limitations. Chapter 5 considers the still open question ‘What is Analytic Theology?’ In dialogue with Timothy Pawl and William Hasker, I argue that analytic theology is a form of faith seeking understanding and a form of constructive theology. I then consider some efforts to push analytic theology into comparatively neglected areas, including topics related to social justice. I focus especially on Sameer Yadav’s call for analytic liberation theology.

I develop the argument that analytic theology really is theology in Part III, ‘Theological Analytic Theology’. Chapter 6 argues that the Christian doctrine of creation furnishes a theological warrant for analytic theology. Chapters 7–9 are a connected response to some of the most common theological objections to analytic theology. Those objections concern idolatry, ontotheology, univocity, and so-called ‘theistic personalism’. I argue that analytic theologians can avoid this contemporary syllabus of errors by preserving the creator/creature distinction and theorizing with an attitude of worship. In order to make this case, I first try to get clear about what is actually wrong with each of these theological errors. Chapter 10 picks up the theme of worship, and argues that analytic theology can be understood as a form of spiritual practice.

Having argued that analytic theology really is theology, I turn in Part IV to the academic study of religion. I argue that analytic theology can flourish in the secular academy, and can serve as a valuable dialogue partner for scholars of religion. In order to argue that analytic theology counts as ‘properly academic’ inquiry, I first try to understand what the norms of academic inquiry and argument really are (Chapter 11). I then draw on my own background in analytic theology to intervene in three debates that currently preoccupy the academic study of religion. The first debate concerns naturalism and reductionism. While individual scholars of religion can, and often should, practice methodological naturalism, attempts to justify methodological naturalism as a global, field-defining norm inevitably presuppose controversial metaphysical claims, and thereby collapse into ontological naturalism – a position that I call ‘ontological naturalism on the cheap’ (Chapter 12). The second debate concerns the role of ‘critique’ in the academic study of religion, where ‘critique’ is understood as a specific discourse – something more than mere criticism. Critique remains valuable, but in the contemporary religious studies academy, it has become hegemonic, to the point where it threatens to crowd out other equally legitimate methods of inquiry (Chapter 13). This engagement with critique sets the stage for the third debate, which concerns the vexed role of normative inquiry in the academic study of religion (Chapter 14). I endorse normative inquiry, and argue that analytic theology is a form of post-critical, normative inquiry that prizes attachment and ‘rigorous appreciation’. As such, analytic theology can contribute to the study of religions while also maintaining its own distinctive focus on evaluating Christian truth claims and practices. I conclude the chapter with a modest proposal on behalf of comparative analytic theology.

The book concludes with a chapter called 'Analytic Theology After the Postsecular'. For all their differences, contemporary theologians and scholars of religion typically endorse the 'postsecular consensus', which holds that 'the religious' and 'the secular' are specifically Christian-theological constructions that emerged together, in early modernity. Analytic theology stands in a complicated relationship to the postsecular consensus. Analytic theology is a modern form of inquiry, and that is why it can flourish in the secular university, which continues to enforce modern intellectual norms. Yet analytic theology is not exclusively or deleteriously modern, and that is why it can also count as fully theological. These two claims pull together several strands of argument found across the book as a whole, and so they serve as its fitting conclusion.

Note

1. In this precis, I take the liberty of reproducing text from the book's preface, as well as from the summary statements that introduce each section.