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Mark R. McMinn

George Fox University, mmcminn@georgefox.edu

Jeannine Graham

George Fox University, jgraham@georgefox.edu

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Theology as Science: A Response to “Theology as Queen and Psychology as Handmaid”

Mark R. McMinn

Jeannine Michele Graham

George Fox University

In response to Porter's article, "Theology as Queen and Psychology as Handmaid," three criteria are offered for theology as science. A scientific theology must be open to new discovery, it requires a community, and it is available for practical application. In addition to the benefits offered by Porter, viewing theology as science can promote practical helping efforts within the church.

We congratulate Porter (2010) on crafting a succinct and compelling argument affirming the authority of theology vis-à-vis psychology. His title is likely to be controversial, perhaps especially among psychologists, but a close reading of his article reveals that Porter respects psychology and allows it to have full authority on issues where theology does not speak. Further, he is respectful of the hermeneutic processes involved in both theology and psychology, recognizing that error can (and does) enter into all human appraisals, including theological appraisals.

Given our agreement with Porter, the purpose of this response is neither to quibble with his conclusions nor repeat his argument. Rather, we would like to extend his reflections by further considering the implications of theology as science. One of us (Graham) is a theologian, and the other (McMinn) a psychologist, which we hope contributes to the integrative tone of this response.

Near the end of his article, Porter suggests two reasons why it is important to consider theology as queen of the sciences. The first is to reassure those who resist psychology and the second is to allow room for theological commitments that lie outside the realm of naturally observed phenomena. We will offer a third benefit to considering theology as queen of the sciences at the conclusion of this response, but first we offer several criteria that ought to be met if theology is to be considered a science at all.

Theology Behaving as Science

Accepting theology as the queen of sciences first presumes that theology behaves as science. Some may tend to perceive theology as a set of propositions, or even proclamations, that are based on presuppositions that can never be tested. When theology behaves this way it probably should not be deemed the queen of the sciences. After all, science has established certain checks-and-balances and it wins people's confidence because its truth claims can be tested and affirmed, or tested and discarded.

Is it possible for theology to behave as science? We suggest that it is, and we offer three distinctive features of such a theology, with the first being our primary emphasis: it is open to new discovery, it requires a community, and it is available for practical application.

Open to New Discovery

With regard to theology's openness to new discovery, we discern in Porter's discussion an underlying contention we characterize as such: theology is authoritative without being dictatorial. Granted, authoritative and dictatorial might sound somewhat synonymous in the minds of some. However, Porter is meticulous in critiquing various grounds on which Scripture has been viewed as authoritative while setting forth his own proposal, which undergirds biblical authority while steering clear of dictatorial heavy-handedness that silences dialogue.

In making a distinction between Scripture itself as the vehicle of God's self-disclosure and theological interpretation of Scripture, Porter helpfully reminds us that theological reflection, like any human inquiry, can be susceptible to misinterpretation and fallibility. Hence, theologians must tread humbly in their pronouncements. And yet at the same time he is uncomfortable regarding

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Mark R. McMinn, Ph.D., Graduate Department of Clinical Psychology, George Fox University, 414 N. Meridian St., Newberg, OR 97132; mmcminn@georgefox.edu.

theological claims as having equal status with scientific claims. His proposal that well-grounded theological claims have inherently greater authority than well-grounded psychological claims ultimately revolves around his understanding of Scripture as God's word. Recognizing "God's superior epistemic credentials," God is in a better position to know the truth about a given subject than any human person. Hence, the very nature of Scripture as giving access to the mind of God not only commands higher authority than any merely human source but also creates the possibility of a derivative authority accorded to theological claims insofar as they exhibit sound hermeneutical understandings of biblical texts.

At one point Porter admits that the precise meaning of Scripture as God's word is left ambiguous in his discussion, though he senses his argument can still work given a variety of meanings. To this we would offer the nuance of Scripture as "God's word through human words." The humanness of the biblical texts adds a dimension that goes beyond mere scribal dictation. The participation of the human authors in terms of their own linguistic styles of expression, the social location culturally and historically out of which they wrote, the numerous decisions which factored into the unique organization and literary shape of each biblical writing all not only underscore the rich complexity of Scripture but also remind us that the ultimate source of biblical authority is not the Bible itself but the Reality to which it points—namely, the Living God made accessible to us in Jesus Christ. As eminent Scottish theologian T. F. Torrance (1982), echoing John Calvin, trenchantly observes,

"... understanding and interpretation of the Scriptures does not focus myopically, as it were, upon the words and statements themselves, but through them on the truths and realities they indicate beyond themselves ... their real meaning lies not in themselves but in what they intend. Regarded in this way, the Holy Scriptures are the spectacles through which we are brought to know the true God in such a way that our minds fall under the compelling power of his self-evidencing Reality (pp. 64-65).

At the risk of sounding colloquial, the authority "buck" does not stop with Scripture itself but

rather with the Self-revealing God to which the Scriptures faithfully witness. The epistemological significance of the incarnation and, in fact, the entire Trinity is relevant here, as expressed in Ephesians 2:18: "Through Him [the Living Word—Jesus] we have access to the Father by one Spirit." In his rebuff of the Pharisees, Jesus himself shines an unmistakably incarnational spotlight on the focal point of revelation when he rebuked the Pharisees yet again for missing the exegetical point: "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you possess eternal life. But it is they that bear witness of me" (John 5:39). The authority of the written divine/human word (Scripture) is in this sense derivative from the authority of the Living Lord it attests. Scripture's authority derives not from static precepts but rather from God's continual self-giving through the Living Word of Christ made accessible to us through the written words of the Bible. Porter's acknowledgment of the need for the aid of the Holy Spirit in the explication and application of biblical truths further underscores the dynamic nature of divine revelation.

Likewise, theological statements can also exercise what Porter calls a derivative authority to the extent that they exercise a listening obedience to the Truth as it discloses itself to us. Inasmuch as Torrance (1969) has written extensively on the subject of theology as science, we find his definition most relevant:

A scientific theology is ... a rigorous, disciplined, methodical and organized knowledge. It is a knowledge that insists upon the truthfulness of its undertaking and is dedicated to the detection of error and the rejection of all that is unreal. It will have nothing to do with a method that is not governed by the material content of its knowledge, or with confused, disorderly or loose thinking, or with hypothetical objects. Everything has to be tested and undertaken in a reliable and trustworthy way, with strict attention to correctness. Therefore it must be controlled knowledge that operates with proper criteria and appropriate methods of verification, knowledge that is answerable to inexorable conscience.... In all genuinely scientific operations we interrogate realities in such a way as to let them disclose themselves to us, so

that they may yield to us their own meaning and be justified out of themselves, without the arbitrary application to them of criteria that we have developed elsewhere and subjected to our disposal (pp. 116, 331).

Seeing theological inquiry in this light, the theologian cannot help adopting a posture of humility, for the primary focal point of theology—God—is not amenable to being captured and contained by even our best theological formulations. Rather, as the Subject who has made and continues to make himself object to and for us, God discloses not only information but his very Self to us. Epistemologically, theology operates within this relational interchange in which the theologian not only poses questions that drive inquiry but also must be open to having her or his preconceptions brought into question, sometimes even overturned, by the Living Reality she or he is probing. Hence, such expressions as “repentant rethinking,” “fluid axioms,” “disclosure models of thought,” “unceasing renewal and reform” (Torrance, 1982, pp. 47-51) reflect this vital attitude of humility by conveying the ongoing need to realign theological concepts so as to be ever-faithful to the Reality they are attempting to grasp. Once again, Torrance (1969) expresses well the theologian’s need for humility and openness:

Inquiry that is open to new knowledge takes the form of questioning in which we allow what we already know or hold to be knowledge to be called in question by the object. We must submit ourselves modestly, with our questions, to the object in order that it and not we ourselves may be the pivotal point in the inquiry. Therefore even the way in which we shape the questions must finally be determined from beyond us, if we are really to pass beyond the stock of previously acquired knowledge ... It is only through the unremitting questioning of our questions and of ourselves the questioners, that true questions are put into our mouths to be directed to the object for its disclosure to us.... In order to achieve that we have above all to struggle with ourselves, i.e., to repent. As Oppenheimer has put it, “We learn to

throw away those instruments of action and those modes of description which are not appropriate to the reality we are trying to discern, and in this most painful discipline, find ourselves modest before the world.” (pp. 120-122)

As an undertaking in the service of the divine Truth, wherever it encounters it in this world, theology is dedicated to sheer truthfulness in all its processes, and therefore must always be open for self-criticism in the face of new learning and reasonable argumentation on its own ground. (Torrance, 1969, p. 282)

Embracing the above-mentioned values of humility, self-criticism, and openness to new discovery, the theologian is well situated to appreciate the viability of dialogue with other disciplines such as psychology. The behavioral scientist, rather than seeking to dismantle biblical and theological foundations of authority, can actually benefit the theologian by prodding a rethinking of theology’s authoritative range on a given matter and encouraging a re-examination of relevant biblical texts. Likewise, theology can hold psychology accountable—for instance, wherever passion for psychological modes of exploring human personhood might subtly slide into pretentious privileging of psychology as “the one and only way of penetrating into the ultimate secrets of the universe” (Torrance, 1969, p. 283-284). That biblically grounded, well-formed theological claims can function authoritatively while not bullying through dictatorial tactics creates space for genuine dialogue and continual refinement.

Requires a Community

Science is a community event. Findings from one laboratory are published, often provoking other laboratories to attempt replication studies or to extend the findings with innovative new studies. Truth is not so much discerned by a single scientist at a single moment in time (though this does happen, rarely), as it is detected by a community of scholars who challenge and encourage one another, often over a prolonged period of time. The term “armchair psychology” is often used as a derogatory reference to those who pontificate about the nature of reality without exposing their ideas to the scrutiny of science and a community of scholars.

In the same way, if theology is a science then it is not something accomplished by a single individual sitting in an armchair and pondering about God. A science of theology must be a community process, involving discovery, publication, dialog and debate, respect for diverse perspectives, more discovery, and so on. This theological process, which reflects the verdant life of academia, is sometimes disparaged in faith communities—as if all truth is directly revealed in scripture and there is little need for the musings of academic theologians. In contrast, a science of theology embraces the academy, the scholarly disagreements, so-called liberals and conservatives, and perhaps even the tenure process.

Theological communities are both contemporary—as is the case of any scholarly discipline—and historical. Today's theologians engage in a scholarly "conversation" with one another, but also with those who have come centuries before—Jesus, Paul, Peter, Irenaeus, Athenasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Barth, and so on. Of course all sciences have a historical community of sorts, but theology's historical community is distinguished by its longevity and diversity.

Available for Practical Application

Scientists refer to basic and applied science, noting that the two are ultimately connected. The scientist who studies goldfish retina (basic science) hopes that his or her research will ultimately add knowledge to how vision occurs in other organisms, and thereby contribute to how we live well in the world. The prominence of the applied discipline of clinical psychology illustrates how psychological science has applications that can enhance human welfare.

In the same way, a scientific understanding of theology should be open to application. As important as the academy is in theological discourse, it is also appropriate for theology to reach into the practical matters of how we live well in today's world. This view of theological science leads us to an additional implication of theology being queen of the sciences—one that Porter (2010) did not mention.

A Third Benefit to Viewing Theology as Queen

Porter (2010) notes that viewing theology as queen of the sciences helps restore confidence among those who question psychology (and presumably, other sciences), and affirms the possibility of theological commitments that may run

contrary to other scientific conclusions. In addition, we suggest that viewing theology as queen of sciences also serves as a reminder that theology can and should guide the practical matters of application that are the logical end of scientific activities.

Ellen Charry (2001), a respected theologian at Princeton Theological Seminary, offers the following critique of how the applied dimensions of theology have been overlooked. She does not fault the psychologists in this, though psychologists surely share some of the blame, but rather she suggests that theologians need to reassert the applied dimensions of their discipline.

Secular psychology has been helpful in revealing the complexity of the self and its functioning. Genetic factors, family dynamics, socio-economic circumstances, educational background, and even chance weave intricate patterns that form each individual personality like a snowflake. Secular psychotherapy has been far more sensitive to the texture of the personality and temperament than has its Christian counterpart. Modern sensibilities are of interest to doctrinal theology, however, only to the extent that they enable theologians to offer pastoral practitioners deeper insight into a genuinely theological understanding of the self. For it is theology's responsibility to provide a salutary theological frame of reference that can strengthen, correct, and empower the Christian for discipleship. This, perhaps, is finally what divides pastoral theology from secular psychology. We theologians have abandoned the practitioners, and we should be ashamed. Perhaps it is not too late to begin repairing the damage. (p. 133)

Perhaps it is also true that Christians in professional psychology have abandoned the theologians, that we also ought to be ashamed, and that we should work to repair the damage. Porter's (2010) article is a step in the right direction.

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Authors

Mark R. McMinn (Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, Vanderbilt University, 1983) is Professor of Psychology at George Fox University.

Jeannine Michele Graham (Ph.D. in Systematic Theology, University of Aberdeen, 1993) is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at George Fox University.