

# Turning Philosophical Water into Theological Wine

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Twenty years ago, on a beautiful May morning, to be a wee bit more precise, a Sister of the Holy Cross from Notre Dame was crossing from the South to the North of Ireland through the picturesque village of Pettigo. Pettigo lies cut in two between the counties of Donegal and Fermanagh. As it happened, as Sister Brigid (which in ancient Irish means “exalted one”) pulled up the little hill that is the entrance to the North, her car ran out of gasoline. She immediately went up to the nearby gas station to find help. Unfortunately neither she nor the attendant had any kind of gasoline can in which to convey the much needed petrol to her car. So she improvised. As a collector of antiques she had picked up the day before over in Sligo a pee-pot, that is, one of those handy-dandy containers that we used to keep under the bed in cases of emergency during the night before we got civilized. She took her little antique pot, filled it with gasoline, paid the attendant, and headed back to her car to solve her problem. Everything was going well, when out of the blue a Protestant truck driver, one Mervin Rowe by name, happened on the scene. Not believing what he saw, Mervin stopped, rolled down the window, and called out audibly enough for her to hear: “Sister, I wish I had your faith.”

These are interesting times for the relationship between philosophy and theology. Forty years ago, theologians were abandoning theology to take up philosophy because of loss of faith. Now philosophers are taking up theology because of the intensity of their faith. In the nineteen sixties theologians, alienated from theology, became philosophers; now philosophers, alienated by theology, are becoming theologians. What a turn-around! What a revolution!

Consider the testimony of Van A. Harvey, given at a conference on the future of philosophical theology held in Chicago in nineteen seventy. His paper was called “The Alienated Theologian”.

One of the most striking characteristics of Protestant theology in the last two centuries has been the emergence of what I shall call the alienated theologian, the professional who is concerned with the articulation of the faith of the Christian community but who is himself as much a doubter as a believer (Harvey 1971, 113).

Of course, theologians have always doubted this or that marginal element of the faith; the issue, as Harvey saw it, was doubt about the essence of faith itself.

Many theologians had become unhappy lovers of Christianity, deeply estranged from their work.<sup>1</sup> Their unhappiness took various forms: some could be strident and humorless, some urbane and witty; some, at home in the world of technology and sex, looked for piecemeal conformity to the secular *Zeitgeist*; others bet the store on metaphysical translation.

Harvey deploys a felicitous allegory to make his point.

Imagine the Christian community to be like the Children of Israel, who wandering across the desolate wasteland, believe God has miraculously delivered them from the fleshpots of Egypt and now sustains them with the manna from heaven and the pillar of fire. The Israelites huddle about their campfires at night and sing the praises of their deliverer. On the edges of the camp, there are some stragglers. They were once Israelites, but, for various reasons, they have become disenchanting. They stay alive by picking up the crumbs of the manna left over by the Children of Israel, and at night they warm themselves at the outer edges of the campfires. But they do not like the songs the Israelites sing, and they find the evening songs dull and filled with cheap apologetics (Harvey 1971, 115).

Harvey deftly catalogues the moves made by the prevailing theologians of the day to salvage the faith. 'Our talk about divine deliverance is really a moral policy.' 'Tales of miraculous divine action are really symbolic; they actually speak not of divine mechanical power but of a power to influence the exercise of power by others.' 'The hallmark of a theologian is not certitude but doubt; what matters is the ultimate concern expressed mythologically in the stories they tell not the literal details.' Harvey understood the lure of these slogans but he refused to be seduced by any of these moves. "They are neither good philosophy nor good theology. The truth is we [alienated theologians] are spiritual parasites living off the faith of the Israelites. Perhaps it would be better to confess this and go on as we are, as alienated theologians" (Harvey 1971, 117). In the end he gave up on theology altogether, spending the rest of his career as a skeptical student of religion, furnishing a splendid volume on Feuerbach (Harvey 1995).

Harvey's fundamental reasons for departure were epistemological. He initially developed his worries when he was teaching at Perkins School of Theology, SMU. Ironically, his book, *The Historian and the Believer*, was one of the two books that propelled me into graduate work in philosophy of religion. The other was Ronald Hepburn's *Christianity and Paradox*.

In this setting I can put the issue very simply. While Harvey focused on the epistemology of history and its impact on Christian theology, his real concerns were more general. He was convinced that the morality of knowledge developed in the

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<sup>1</sup> For my own take on these developments see Abraham (1989, 557-63). For an extension of this paper see Abraham (1991, 242-86).

Enlightenment was correct. “This morality of knowledge....embodies such virtues as skepticism against unfounded assertions, the suspicion of irrationality authority, the prizing of logical candor, the appeal to evidence, and the careful qualification of one’s claims” (Harvey 1971, 118-9) “...a man had no more right to an opinion for which he could not account than for a pint of beer for which he could not pay” (Harvey 1971, 118-9). Harvey catalogues the full ramification of this principle as it applied across the disciplines that impinged in theology; but for Harvey, himself, it was the embodiment of this maxim in historical investigation that turned him into an alienated theologian. In the end this morality of knowledge cut into liberal versions of Christianity too (the theology of Tillich, The New Quest for the Historical Jesus, the Theology of Hope); once this happened the game was up. Fleeing to the metaphysics of process philosophy, taking a leap in the dark with fideism, or appealing to religious experience, none of these proved satisfactory. Harvey, to be sure, shows considerable sympathy for the last option. There are, he thinks, various sorts of experiences that keep alive the issue of the existence of God, but he is profoundly at a loss to know what to do with these conceptually and metaphysically. Hence we are left with a kind of mitigated alienation in Harvey’s case.

I need not in the present setting rehearse what is going on here in Harvey’s pilgrimage away from theology. Harvey is committed to a version of evidentialism, with or without classical foundationalism. In Britain this was undermined (in a story that has never been properly told) by the work of Basil Mitchell. Taking a cue in part from John Henry Newman, Mitchell attacked the hidden assumptions about the nature of evidence and cracked open the whole evidentialist enterprise from within. In North America, as we all know, Alvin Plantinga and others dismantled the whole evidentialist enterprise more radically by challenging the need for the kind of evidence that Harvey championed. We now know that the whole field of epistemology is up for grabs; the range of *desiderata* has multiplied; so the space for robust forms of theism is enormous. These revolutionary developments in turn explain in part the emergence of the alienated philosopher who turns to theology.

The sources of this alienation are manifold. At one level it involves the upending of the kind of evidentialist epistemology championed by Harvey. Once evidentialism is overturned (or its demands met) then space opens up for the kind of robust theism that Harvey found so alienating. More generally, the wider changes in epistemology over the last generation have completely altered the landscape where the prospects for theology are concerned. At another level philosophers who are Christians find much of the theology on offer terribly anemic and thin. They think that theologians have given away the store either prematurely or for no good reason. Drawing on a term made famous by Harry Frankfurt, analytic philosophers are fed up with the bullshit that shows up in theology and are determined to fix theology by doing it themselves. At yet another level, analytic philosophy of religion has extended its range of interests into the domain of theology itself, taking up, say, conceptual issues evoked by specific Christian doctrines like Trinity, Incarnation, atonement, original sin, and the like. Hence we witness the emergence of analytic theology as a natural development within analytic philosophical theology. Alienation at this point stems from the indifference of theology to the kind of skills and interests the philosopher brings to the table. However we explain the etiology,

philosophers have started doing theology in a serious manner. If this is not a counter-revolution, then I do not know what that word means. The alarm bells are already going off in theological circles. Many theologians are looking for the fuse box to switch them off or are developing special earplugs to shut off the noise.

Before I proceed, let me confess that as a theologian I am all in on the project of analytic theology. I would have been entirely happy to spend my career working in ethics and philosophy of religion. It was acute dissatisfaction with theology in my initial theological training, in my exposure to theology in my graduate studies at Oxford, and in my early teaching career in Ireland that evoked the transition into theology. By analytic theology I mean here systematic theology attuned to the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy, broadly conceived. My interest tonight is in the prospects and character of analytic theology. So I want in the time that remains to take up the following topics: drafting an initial list of serious objections to the whole idea of analytic theology; delineating the importance of two contrasting types of analytic theology; and gently urging the imperative of affectionate collaboration across deep differences within analytic philosophy as crucial to the future of analytic theology.

We can expect that the development of analytic theology will be met with steep resistance from within theology. Consider this catalogue of objections.

First, analytic theology appears totally unrealistic when you look at what is needed to get the job done in theology. Theology is a field-encompassing field. It involves initiation into several ancient and modern languages, into the historical study of scripture, into the history of the church and its teachings, and into normative assessment of the practices, ethics, and doctrines of the tradition; it also involved forays into other disciplines like sociology, philosophy, and the like. Imagine a theologian showing up and offering to do philosophy without serious immersion in the whole history of philosophy (ancient, medieval, and modern), and without first-order work in epistemology, normative ethics, metaphysics, logic, and philosophy of language. The whole idea of analytic theology looks hopelessly unrealistic, if you add up the dispositions and skills that have to be attained. Even theologians themselves fail again and again; they hide away in historical narrative and study, and do what they can to deliver the goods normatively. Philosophers do the same, of course, for similar reasons.

Second, theology is not just a hit and run foray into a small set of topics (incarnation, Trinity, sin); it involves a complex interconnection of loci. You cannot simply work on the basis of a lucky-dip or I-can-pick-my-own-topics and leave it at that. The work on the comprehensive loci of theology has to be comprehensive and then coordinated and integrated into a single whole. The issues have to be thought through eventually as one single enterprise; it looks as if no philosopher is in a position to do this. It is not enough to say in reply that one finds this or that great theologian deployed philosophical arguments and resources (Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Edwards, and the like). Of course, they did. However, this crucial work was in the service of a bigger agenda, the agenda of articulating the whole gamut of Christian doctrine in an integrated way. They were not simply philosophical theologians; they were theologians who used philosophy in a fruitful manner.

Third, the theologian cannot but be dependent on special divine revelation, on religious experience, and on the witness of the church across the centuries. However, these are generally seen as off limits epistemologically to the philosopher. The best the guild philosopher can do is the meta-task of exploring the epistemic validity of these notions; the likelihood of their really deploying them in practice is not impossible but it is initially implausible. So the philosopher is handicapped from the beginning. On his way into the philosophy department, he or she has already taken a contraceptive pill that will stifle certain kinds of intellectual birthing before it can be lodged in the wall of the womb. Professional standards, rewards, and honors, require that they stay on the epistemological pill for life; these constraints are generally seen as compulsory not optional.

Fourth, consider the potential goals of the theologian's work. The theologian's responsibility is to speak of God and of everything else insofar as it relates to God. This in part is why the discipline is so difficult. However, this is but one half of the story; theologians will also have as *desiderata* (and I think they should have as *desiderata*) the cultivation of love of God and neighbor, the development of spiritual wisdom, the evocation of appropriate devotion and praise, and even the revitalization of church and society. Whatever the emotional and aesthetic goals a philosopher may engender or evoke, it is hard to see how these will be accepted as legitimate goals for the analytic philosopher. Thus when the full range of *desiderata* of theology comes to the fore, we can expect some analytic theologians to offer excuses and reach for the nearest exit.

Fifth, theologians do not begin from scratch. They operate in and through a theological tradition even when they set out to subvert, revise, reform, and reconstruct that tradition. Where does the analytic theologian fit in the narrative of development? What tradition are they serving? We know the answer to that question when it comes to Analytic Thomism. The Analytic Thomist is advancing the agenda of Thomas Aquinas. What theological agenda is the analytic theologian serving? Calvinism? Scholastic Reformed Protestantism? Fundamentalist Evangelicalism? Perhaps the answer is any and all of these and more. But then we want to know, what theological constraints are in play here from the beginning? How far is there a hidden apologetic strategy rather than a full and free industrial strength exercise in theology? Put differently, how far is analytic theology itself compromised by a *theological* negotiation already conducted off site and hidden from view? If this is the case, we need a lot more critical examination of the theological tradition being served by the analytic theologian and what that means.

Sixth, theologians generally have a very particular audience. At one level their audience is the academic community, at another level the wider social or national community they inhabit, but most of all the church. In the latter case theologians operate as a kind of research and development. They revisit the tradition across the centuries; they retrieve important materials and practices that have been lost or suppressed; they defend the faith against uncharitable and inaccurate accusations; they make constructive suggestions. All these set constraints on the genres, linguistic strategies, and literary style of their writings. So the question that arises is this. How far do the procedures and style of analytic philosophy transfer over into these multiple arenas? How does the analytic

theologian operate in these worlds without sacrificing the unique modes of argument and linguistic strategies that are constitutive of analytic philosophy?

Seventh, theological work is as much a human and spiritual enterprise as it is an intellectual enterprise. So a raft of questions naturally arises. Does not Analytic Theology promote the development of various spiritual vices or infirmities that are ultimately poisonous of first-order spiritual commitment and maybe even poisonous to being a sensitive human being? Does it, for example, inhibit the use of metaphor, parable, and story in coming to understand God and the life of faith? Does the privileging of clarity and precision modeled, say, on geometry or probability theory, lead to certain kinds of intellectual arrogance that inhibits appropriate contemplative practices which are essential to growth in insight? Does such privileging undercut a robust sense of the apophatic before the Divine? Does it constrain the reading of scripture towards a propositional reduction of the complexity of the texts? I put these questions sharply to indicate their importance. For the moment, I leave them unanswered, allowing that they can indeed be answered in ways that speak favorably about the possibility of analytic theology.

More generally, I will not here attempt to deal with these formidable objections. I lay them out because they strike me as both interesting and fruitful. The homework over the next decade and more is in part to respond to these objections both theoretically and materially. Just do it, as the slogan says.

For my part I think analytic theology has a future for several reasons. First, it is hard to think of a topic in systematic theology where analytic philosophical work cannot be illuminating. Second, one way to think of the backbone of systematic theology is to think of it as reflection on divine agency and divine action. On this score analytic work on agency theory and on action is pivotal in understanding the problems that have arisen over the last fifty years and how they might be tackled. Third, the time is ripe for harvesting the wealth of work done on specifically theological topics over the last generation. So as I noted earlier, I am all in on the project of analytic theology.

Rather than addressing this raft of challenges, I want instead to consider an eighth objection and deal with it in some detail because I think it helps open up the agenda for analytic theology before it gets set in stone.

As a point of entry into this final objection, let's put on the table one of the best initial accounts of analytic theology that is currently available. "As I see it, [writes Michael Rea], analytic theology is just the activity of approaching theological topics with the ambitions of an analytic philosopher and in a style that conforms to the prescriptions that are distinctive of analytic discourse" (Rea 2009, 7). Rea adds as a third characteristic the requirement of engaging the literature that is constitutive of the analytic tradition, employing some of the technical jargon from the tradition, and the like; but this is less central. What is central are the ambitions and the style. What are the ambitions? First, to identify the scope and limits of our powers to obtain knowledge of the world; and, second, to provide such true explanatory theories as we can in areas of inquiry (metaphysics, morals, and the like) that fall outside the scope of the natural sciences. The first is essentially epistemological in nature, the second broadly metaphysical. As to style, here are the prescriptions:

P1. Write as if philosophical positions and conclusions can be adequately formulated in sentences that can be formalized and logically manipulated.

P2. Prioritize precision, clarity, and logical coherence.

P3. Avoid substantive (non-decorative) use of metaphor and other tropes whose semantic content outstrips their propositional content.

P4. Work as much as possible with well understood primitive concepts and concepts that can be analyzed in terms of those.

P5. Treat conceptual analysis (insofar as it is possible) as a source of evidence (Rea 2009, 5-6).

Let me flag two queries prompted by this account of analytic theology but confine my attention to the second. On the one hand, by foregrounding the prior philosophical resolution of certain epistemological and metaphysical commitments, theology will be playing second fiddle from the outset to these commitments. We are *first* to arrive at an account of the scope and limits of human knowledge and *first* develop explanatory theories of what lies outside the epistemic capacities of science. On the other hand, we are to limit ourselves to what can be formalized, to what can be logically manipulated, and to what can be captured in well-understood primitive concepts and their derivatives. This in turn appears to mean that the theologian must operate within a tight set of closed concepts, that is, those that can be delivered in terms of the necessary and sufficient conditions of their meaning. Again the theologian will be playing second fiddle to the philosopher *ab initio*.

I want to set aside as best I can the first worry (the danger of cooking the books in epistemology and metaphysics) and concentrate on the second (the constraints on the concepts used). I want to take up the issue of conceptual precision, to what Rea considers to be a matter of the style of analytic theology.

The issue is whether analytic theology should limit itself to this constraint, to this vision of conceptual analysis. Note I am not rejecting this as an apt constraint when appropriate; I simply want to call into question whether the analytic theologian should be limited to this constraint. My answer to my own questions about conceptual constraints begins by identifying two different strands in analytic philosophy of religion. The alternatives by no means exhaust the options, but I think it is illuminating to stick to these two strands for the moment. I shall briefly describe one strand in analytic philosophy, compare it with another strand, and then argue that the second strand has *prima facie* resources the first one might not have. I shall then illustrate the difference as it applies to the work of the analytic theologian on scripture and finish with a very brief call for affectionate collaboration and cross-fertilization.

The first strand I shall call the strand of St. Alvin. I do not need to say much about it because everybody here in this conference knows it intimately. This strand

has its own narrative of twentieth century analytic philosophy (think of Nicholas Wolterstorff's magisterial summary in "Philosophy after Plantinga" here last May), its own canon of exemplars (Plantinga and Chisholm), its own sites of operation (North America), its own theological origination (the Reformed tradition) its own canon of literature (consult your own internal floppy disk), its own methodological strategies (work off well understood primitive concepts), and its own privileged intellectual virtues (clarity, precision, logical dexterity, probability lattices, and no metaphors please). For my purposes let's take Michael Rea's account of analytic philosophy and analytic theology as a first rough draft of what is at stake in the tradition of St. Alvin.

The second strand I shall call the strand of St. Basil. The story – which I cannot tell here – would include a lengthy treatment of the essays in *Faith and Logic* (1957), displacing the role given either to *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (1955) or to *Faith and Rationality: Reason in Belief in God* (1983) in the conventional narratives. The canon of exemplars is different: Basil Mitchell, John Lucas, I. M. Crombie, M. B. Foster, and Austin Farrer, for starters. The site of operations has different: Oxbridge and various outposts. The theological heritage in which it originates is different: Anglo-Catholic Anglican, and Arminian. The canon of literature is different: start with *Faith and Logic* and the material subsequently published by the authors included. So too are the methodological strategies and the prized intellectual virtues. Consider the following laundry list of maxims: Pay attention to the historical etiology of our concepts, allow for the possibility of open as opposed to closed concepts, be especially aware of essentially contested concepts, make ample use of parable and apt metaphor, avoid convoluted imaginary examples, write in a way that allows access to those interested in the big questions that motivate philosophical inquiry, cultivate wisdom and other informal intellectual virtues, and allow elbow room for growth in insight and spiritual perception.

Now we all know that contrasts like this can be invidious and bogus. My modest and only aim is to sketch a horizon and insist that analytic theology done from within the horizon of St. Basil is likely to be quite different from that of St. Alvin.

If you want a kind of litmus test for membership in the order of St. Basil, then here it is. Do you think W. B. Gallie is correct about the provenance and significance of essentially contested concepts? Now do not all answer at once! Maybe some of you think that Gallie is the name of an Irish leprechaun who haunted sunken ships off the coast of Cork. W. B. Gallie was my first professor in philosophy; he went on to do fascinating work on the nature of war. But my question was, of course, a trick question! I suspect many of you have never heard of Gallie, much less his essay on essentially contested concepts; but I may be wrong here.<sup>2</sup> My point here goes to the heart of the nature of analytic theology. Are we going to confine ourselves to closed

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<sup>2</sup> It was reprinted in Gallie (1968), his fine collections of essays.



concepts?<sup>3</sup> Are we prepared to open up the canon of clarity and allow for greater diversity on the kind of concepts that we may deem essential to work in analytic theology? Are we prepared to take on board the historical and conceptual sensitivity that many analytic philosophers have judged to be crucial in analytic philosophy?

This is not the first time that this kind of issue has been raised in the history of philosophy. Consider the remarkable case of the great Jewish philosopher and saint Franz Rosenzweig. Here is a passage from his remarkable *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy, A View of World, Man, and God* (1999). He invites us to imagine a man who wants to buy a pound of butter.

If we imagine the mental process of the buyer, we discover two possibilities: either he left home with the intention of buying or he decided to do so when he passed the shop. Both possibilities have one thing in common – the slab of butter he finally buys is a very definitive slab. Now when did it become that particular piece? The instant the man at the counter sliced it. Or perhaps, even earlier. If the latter, it may have happened when he discovered the butter in the shop window. What had it been previous to this? Nothing. And if the buyer did set out from home with the intention of buying butter, was it only butter in general that he had in mind? Certainly not.

His intention of buying butter requires the memory of another, and a very specific slab of butter, eaten by him, let us say, yesterday. Even in this instance, the general concept “butter” serves only as the intermittent link between the particular slab, the taste of which lingers on his tongue, and the other particular slab which he finds in the grocery store. This intermittent link of “butter in itself” may be given, but the example of a sudden decision to buy shows that it does not have to exist. The assertion that it must exist, even in the latter case, is unfounded.

What is the root of this assertion? An observation so simple it is scarcely worth mentioning. The butter remembered, the butter desired, and the butter finally bought are not the same. But they are always a “something.” It follows that some bond between them must exist. The idea – that of a connecting link – is closely bound up with the general concept of “butter in itself,” which, as we have seen, sometimes does act as a connecting link (Rosenzweig 1999, 47-8).

Here is how Hilary Putnam presents this line of reasoning as it might show up at an analytic philosophy conference:

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<sup>3</sup> For a much neglected discussion of the nature of concepts see Weitz (1977).

Prof. A: Suppose I want a slab of butter. It could be that, unknown to me, there is no butter in existence – it was all destroyed a few minutes ago. But I still want a slab of butter. That is true whether there actually exist slabs of butter or not. So the expression “a slab of butter” cannot have its normal function of referring to slabs of (actual) butter in “I want a slab of butter”. What “I want a slab of butter” actually means is that I want there to be an X such that X is in my possession and X has the *attribute* Being a slab of Butter. The expression “slab of butter” has what Frege called an “oblique” sense and reference. It really refers to the *attribute* Being a Slab of Butter when it occurs as the object of the very “to want”.

Prof. B: Talk of “attributes” invokes immaterial, mysterious, hard-to-identify Abstract Entities. All that is mystery-mongering. What the sentence means might be expressed by saying, “I want-true the sentence ‘I have a slab of butter’”.

Prof. C: What of third-person sentences, such as, “John wants a slab of butter”?

Prof. B: That means: John wants-true “I have a slab of butter” spoken by John.

Prof. C: So “Pierre wants a slab of butter” means “Pierre wants-true the *English Sentence* ‘I have a slab of butter’ spoken by Pierre.” What if Pierre doesn’t know English?

Prof. D: I suggest: “X wants a slab of butter” means “X wants-true some sentence which stands in the relation of synonymy to the following: ‘I have a slab of butter’” (Putnam 1999, 5).

Rosenzweig’s worry in part is that a certain kind of precisionist analysis can take us off track. The quest for the right semantics, in this case the right semantics of ‘want-sentences’, understood in a particular way, takes us away from reality, works on pumping up certain arbitrary intuitions, and ultimately destroys the deeply felt truths of religion. Rosenzweig is worried that the whole enterprise is harmful, so much so that we need medical help. The affinities with Wittgenstein and its inimitable Welsh version readily come to mind here. This is not, however, where I want to take the conversation. My aim is more modest. I want to loosen the grip of certain ways of thinking and to insist on the importance of conceptual excavation, of much greater historical self-scrutiny, and above all of conceptual depth and diversity. Let me pursue this by looking schematically at the issue of canonicity and scripture.

Let’s begin with the concept of canon. Virtually everyone takes this as meaning a norm, a rule, a criterion. As such it is restricted to the canon of scripture. To refer to scripture as canon means that scripture is a norm of truth and falsehood in theology. This claim in turn is usually grounded in a theory of unique divine

inspiration relative to scripture. Inspiration is paired up with divine authorship and divine authorship is lined up with propositional revelation. All these are then construed as the 'classical' view of the inspiration of scripture.<sup>4</sup> So the concepts of canon, criterion, scripture, and divine inspiration are interrelated. The crucial move here philosophically is that scripture is ascribed epistemic properties.

And immediately the questions multiply. Is it the norm on everything its authors or editors may affirm? Or is it restricted to the essentials of salvation? Is it an exclusive norm? If it is not, does it permit the appeal to tradition, reason, and experience? Note now that tradition is being conceived in epistemic categories and lined up with reason and experience. How is the appeal to these to be adjudicated when they conflict? Then there are the perennial issues of the warrant for the identification of scripture. Does the church decide what counts as scripture and does she function as the final authority on interpretation? Which church? What warrants did she deploy to determine what counts as canonical scripture? What epistemic mechanisms are in play in the church to determine the proper interpretation of scripture? How do we interpret the interpretations of the church? Are these self-interpreting?

This network of questions has been at the very heart of western theology and philosophy. The epistemic and political turmoil that grew out of the disputes after the Reformation were sufficiently radical to generate the Enlightenment. The classical foundationalism that was first developed in theology over the problem of canon and norm was internalized in the work of Descartes and Locke and their successors and the rest of the history is well known.<sup>5</sup> The earlier theological phase of the story is not seriously pursued, much less known. The history of western theology can legitimately be read as the unending and bitter quest to salvage the great truths of the gospel even as they were undermined by epistemological revolutions birthed in western theology and philosophy. Initially philosophy was hostage to the travails of philosophy; theology in time became hostage to the revolutions in epistemology. The alienated theologian was simply an accident waiting to happen. There have been many accidents and many casualties of those accidents in theology.

In this trajectory the task of the analytic theologian, insofar as it involves a defense of robust forms of Christianity, will involve the shoring up a vision of scripture as canon in the sense of a criterion of truth and falsehood. It does not matter whether it is Protestant or Catholic; both will resolve the issues pretty much in terms of the standard categories that have been around for a millennium and more. The crucial issues will be the meaning and epistemic status of scripture, inspiration, revelation, tradition, the *magisterium* of the church, papal infallibility, the inerrancy of scripture, reason, and experience. Even the way the history of these

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<sup>4</sup> It is a complete myth to think of a classical view of the inspiration of scripture shared by Catholics and Protestants. Even a preliminary scouting of the history of the concept of inspiration would totally undermine this way of describing this option.

<sup>5</sup> This is the burden of my argument in Abraham (2002).

disputes is excavated and narrated will reflect the epistemological orientation governing a certain reading of the concept of canon. The operation will essentially be one more salvage operation for theology. It will be a noble attempt to bind up the wounds of the tradition; it will be a concerted venture in damage control. We can be sure that it will make St. Alvin happy; as a revisionist Calvinist, he deserves all the happiness he can get!

Suppose, however, we start from a very different conception of canon, a much more deflationary conception of canon, canon as a list. The canon of scripture is essentially that list of sacred writings designated to be read and homiletically deployed in church liturgically and designated to be perused, learned, and inwardly digested in personal devotion. The philological evidence for this claim was initially developed by Theodore Zahn and recently endorsed by Harry Gamble (1985). With that in view, we notice that canon was not at all confined to scripture. There was a canon of faith or truth, a canon of bishops, a canon of Fathers, a canon of Theologians (John, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Symeon the New Theologian) a canon of saints, canonical councils, canon law, and the like.<sup>6</sup>

If we follow up this historical line it is clear that treating canon as an epistemic norm simply will not work. The referent for canon is simple too diverse to allow this. So we will need a different theological vision of canon. Following the famous passage in 2 Timothy 3:16, suppose we think of the canon of scripture soteriologically. In that passage the scripture envisaged is the Septuagint, which when accompanied by the gospel and the informal oral teaching of the family, is to be seen “as profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man and woman of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” By extension, refiguring the canonized materials, practices, and persons of the church as the canonical heritage of the church, we can think of this as a wonderfully differentiated means of grace. Rather than reach for epistemic categories (scripture, tradition, reason, experience) we think of the canonical heritage of the church as wonderfully designed by the good and life-giving Holy Spirit; its goal is spiritually therapeutic, emancipatory, and soteriological; the ultimate aim is to cultivate the mind of Christ in the life of faith.

On this reading, we get a much more coherent account of the history of the canonization of scripture; indeed a proper reading falsifies rather than supports the idea of canon as criterion.<sup>7</sup> From this starting point we have to develop a whole new reading of the place of epistemology in the life of the church; it is essentially secondary rather than primary, as happens on the first reading of canon. That in

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<sup>6</sup> I leave aside the issue of the inspiration of scripture at this point and the wider issue of inspiration in the church as a whole. It is beyond belief that analytic philosophers, who are supposed to pay careful attention to the use of language, should confuse divine inspiration with divine authorship and with divine revelation. Compare: X authored a book and X inspired a book as applied to human agents; X inspired Y and X revealed himself to Y by asserting various propositions.

<sup>7</sup> At this point I invite you to read the standard histories and see whether they cohere with the conception of canon in operation.

turn provides a radically different perspective on the bondage of theology to the constraints of modern epistemology. Consequently we are likely to have fewer alienated theologians. We will be able to shut down one wing of the causality ward and spend more time on developing constructive, healthy exercises for future theological students.

This reading can also open the way for a radically different way to do systematic theology. On the criteriological reading, systematic theology is the effort to systematize the teaching of scripture either by following the hermeneutically privileged teaching of an epistemically privileged canon of bishops (the Catholic option); or by working in a kind of contemporary scientific fashion by developing hypotheses to the best explanation (one Protestant option); or by developing a more virtue-oriented, poetic vision of scripture as a means of intellectual formation (a second Protestant option). On the soteriological reading systematic theology may be profitably reconceived as a form of graduate level critical initiation into the full wealth of Christian conviction aimed at the transformative care of souls, the church, culture, society, and the physical universe. In this trajectory analytic theologians (and other theologians who pay attention to them) will come off the pill once and for all. They will have lots of very pleasurable intercourse with the full array of materials across the whole church, East and West, Protestant and Catholic, Scholastic and Pentecostal, old and new. They should also get ready for a lot more activity in the theological maternity ward.

This alternative trajectory will also involve a whole new approach to the epistemology of theology. It is not that it rules out a second-order appeal to scripture under the auspices of divine revelation (thus it can pick up and repair the prime motivation for epistemic readings of canon). Rather it explores afresh from within contemporary epistemology the whole gamut of *desiderata* that has recently emerged; it looks afresh at the epistemic proposals that show up inside and outside scripture; it rereads the history of epistemology with theological sensitivity; and it looks for apt epistemic fit with the actual form and content of theological truth claims.<sup>8</sup>

What am I driving at here? I am calling for a very different analysis of the concept of canon, one that takes seriously the original philological options, that does not ignore its range of application, and that takes to heart the actual process of canonization as it developed historically. More importantly I am suggesting that conceptual issues cannot be treated merely as a matter of style. What kind of concepts we allow and how we treat their history are substantial issues. Moreover, conceptual decisions bleed into epistemological and metaphysical considerations, and vice versa. Furthermore, this line of inquiry fits nicely within the kind of analytic philosophy that operates within the stream of St. Basil. What I have said here can be explored *mutatis mutandis* across the whole spectrum of topics taken up in systematic theology from creation to eschatology.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This is the burden of Abraham (2006).

<sup>9</sup> For an example of this see Abraham (2010, 170-182).

It is time to draw this presentation to a close. In my judgment we have reached not the end of an era but the end of an important phase of analytic philosophy of religion. In the analytic philosophy of religion we are now ready to move on beyond the extraordinary pioneering work of St. Alvin and St. Basil. We are in a period of incubation after the revolution that took place from the fifties through the sixties. If Plantinga and his cohorts instantiate one way of doing analytic philosophy of religion, Basil Mitchell and the “Metaphysicals” represent another way of doing analytic philosophy of religion. These complement each other in important ways; they also represent significant differences of emphasis, epistemic commitment, standards of success, and ethos. As these streams play into analytic theology, we need to make the most of this affectionate and friendly rivalry in order to provoke one another to good theological work. Even then, we are by no means confined to these two options. In this period of incubation, we need to lay a variety of fertile philosophical eggs in our theological nests.

The time is ripe to press on and engage in substantial work in analytic theology. The lines at this point between analytic philosophy of religion and analytic theology will be blurred and should remain so; so too should the lines between different streams of the analytic tradition; so too should the lines between the analytic and non-analytic traditions. The hallmark of analytic theology is that it shall produce theological theology and not just philosophical theology. Analytic theologians can and should explore the whole gamut of topics that engage the theologian rather than cherry pick this or that favored theme. Within analytic theology, it is crucial that we not just permit but that we aggressively cultivate the full range of resources, skills, and dispositions that have emerged within analytic philosophy and the competing canons of excellence that it has produced.

Recall at this point my story about the nun from Notre Dame; recall the misunderstanding of my Protestant friend, Mervin Rowe. He thought that Sister Brigid (the “exalted one”) had turned pee into petrol. We can expect to go one better: we can turn good philosophical water into first-rate theological wine.

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