Analytic Perspectives on Method and Authority in Theology
Editorial

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Introduction to the Topical Issue "Analytic Perspectives on Method and Authority in Theology"

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Analytic theology (AT) is a particular approach to theology and the study of religion that engages with the tools, categories, and methodological concerns of analytic philosophy. As such, it is neutral with respect to particular substantive, denominational, or religious claims. It is a relatively newly-named approach, yet it has specific antecedents in the last century and formal antecedents in much of the history of Christian theological reflection. It is a fast-growing and well-resourced initiative, and—likely in virtue of this—has proven somewhat controversial. This special issue of *Open Theology* engages AT with a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, essays in this collection bring the analytic slant to bear on perennial topics in theological prolegomena. Yet, on the other hand, some essays offer critical engagements with AT and ways of integrating AT with other well-attested theological methods. Essays of both kinds push AT further into realms of greater rigor and attractiveness. In this introduction, we highlight some of the history and concerns of AT as a means of offering a tentative location for this special issue on the disciplinary map.

As a named-entity, AT arrived on the academic scene with the 2009 Oxford University Press publication, *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, edited by Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea. AT was arguably represented, prior to this publication, by the proto-analytic theologian Richard Swinburne in his noteworthy works on Christian doctrine (e.g., *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, *Responsibility and Atonement*, *The Christian God*, *Faith and Reason*, and *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*). Since the time of the published collection by Crisp and Rea, AT was quickly followed by a three-continent funding initiative by the John Templeton Foundation for projects housed, in North America, at the University of Notre Dame's Center for Philosophy of Religion; in Europe, at the Munich School of Philosophy and University of Innsbruck; and, in the Middle East, at the Shalem Center and then later the Herzl Institute in Jerusalem. More recent Templeton-funded initiatives include a three-year project at Fuller Theological Seminary in California and the establishment of Logos Institute for Analytic and Exegetical Theology at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. The movement continues with ambitious publication schemes in the journals *TheoLogica* and the *Journal of Analytic Theology*, as well the Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology series published by Oxford University Press. However, AT is not just some newcomer on the academic scene. While the fruits of the methodology are presently now ripe, the seeds of AT were sown in the first centuries of the Christian church and heavily fertilized in the last century.

One could make the observation that within the Christian tradition, theology has always been done in conversation with philosophy (even if, at times, that conversation were an adversarial one). Whether the conversation partners were Augustine and Neoplatonism, Thomas Aquinas and Aristotelianism, John Calvin and Renaissance Humanism, or Karl Barth and Hegelianism, Christian theology has not operated in a philosophical vacuum. In fact, a theme that has emerged within Christian theology has argued

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that philosophy should be seen as an assistant to the theologian in attempting her task. St. Clement of Alexandria famously characterized philosophy as the "handmaid" of theology. Clearly theologians such as Clement himself or Thomas Aquinas have utilized the philosophy of their day as handmaids to their theological work.

In the last century, despite the fact that analytic philosophy was the predominant form of philosophy found in philosophy departments in the English-speaking world, it was not as often the handmaid employed by theologians, many preferring the philosophy of the—so-called—continental or hermeneutical traditions. The impetus for utilizing analytic philosophy to treat theological topics emerged, not from the theological side of the conversation, but from the philosophical side. Luminous professional philosophers of religion such as Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Richard Swinburne, William Alston, Eleonore Stump, Basil Mitchell, Keith Yandell, Paul Helm, Stephen T. Davis, and others began addressing such topics as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the nature of faith, and other topics that were traditionally the purview of theology alone. Anachronistically, the term "analytic theology" seems to aptly describe the work of these philosophers of religion.

Within the discipline of analytic philosophy of religion, one can detect a sub-discipline: philosophical theology. Philosophical theology is the study of theological topics or doctrines, perceived from the inside or from the outside, with the particular aim to offer clarity and development through the use of analytic philosophical tools. Charles Taliaferro and Chad Meister describe philosophical theology as a kind of holistic process of philosophical reflection on a particular theological tradition.[1] It is important to highlight that this not *mere* philosophy of religion with its interest in religious issues generally, but the disciplined practice of philosophical reflection on or within a particular theological and dogmatic tradition. The analytic practitioner is interested in philosophical clarification, justification of religious beliefs, discerning the coherence or incoherence of theological beliefs, and the use of imagination on a dogmatic theological tradition (e.g., Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism).[2]

It is not entirely clear how it is that analytic philosophical theology is distinct from analytic *theology*. In fact, some construe the projects as nearly synonymous. Analytic *theology* may simply be analytic philosophical theology simpliciter. Oliver Crisp recognizes the intimate relationship between the disciplines, when he states:

> It seems to me that the boundaries between philosophical theology and systematic theology are rather porous. Systematic theology always involves appealing to some sort of metaphysical claim or other—a matter that the American Lutheran theologian, Robert Jenson, makes plain in his *Systematic Theology.* But I am not sure that "integration" is the right word. Bridge-building might be more like it. How can bridges be built between analytics and theologians that might be mutually beneficial and that might mean there is more traffic between the two disciplines? That is an important question, I think. And it is not all one-way traffic, either. There is important theological work that analytics can benefit from, e.g., the recent re-evaluation of St. Augustine of Hippo by people like Michael Barnes and Lewis Ayers.[3]

One might be tempted to see Crisp as equating philosophical theology and theology within the analytic tradition, but it is not clear that he makes this additional move. He recognizes the importance of the disciplines of philosophy, particularly philosophy of religion, and theology for one another. Philosophers and theologians can and ought to learn from one another. No doubt there is an important overlapping relationship between philosophical theology and analytic theology generally, given that they are both productive movements following on the heels of success in the analytic philosophy of religion.

We propose that there may be at least one distinction between the aims of philosophical theologians and systematic theologians and this amounts to what is more than mere accidental distinctions or sensibilities garnered from the individual practitioner's tradition or training, however important that is for one's method. Systematic theologians are interested in what we will call *theoconceptual* architecture.

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1 Taliaferro and Meister, *Contemporary Philosophical Theology,* 3-4.

2 Ibid., 4-8. Taliaferro and Meister encourage not only the deployment of logical rigor and clarity, but also the use of one's imagination on religious concepts.

3 Crisp, "Analytic Theology: Interview with Editors Crisp and Rea".

What this means is that systematicians are interested in the macro-connections between doctrinal topics and how it is that these topics are located within a large web of interlocking dogmatic beliefs informed by several inseparable theological sources of authority (e.g., Scripture, creeds, confessions, theologians, substantive and procedural reason, and experience). Theologians often bring with them assumptions, principles, and an overarching frame of reference that shapes the foundations and contours of the entire theological project. Philosophical theologians are interested in testing the coherence, justification or parts within the overarching system of thought of a dogmatic tradition. In these ways, there close relationships between the two, and, no doubt, the philosophical theologian depends on the work of systematicians, as the systematicians depend on the products of philosophical theology.

With the intimate relationship between the disciplines, one should also recognize the diversity of ways analytic *theologians* methodically proceed to the making of theological claims. We suggest, as reflected in the articles that follow, that the aims, tools, and sensibilities of the analytic *theologians* vary quite drastically. Given its origins, it is no surprise that some perceive analytic theology as a guise for philosophical speculation. From one perspective, some are tempted to think that analytic theology is just another playground for philosophers, and its easy to see why given its relationship to analytic philosophy of religion. Reactionary responses of these kinds are understandable. We have suggested that this is not the case and theologians that understand AT in this way have misunderstood the leaders of the movement. To the philosopher as well who perceives AT as just one other philosophical project, we suggest the same. In the articles to follow, the reader will find several representative models for practicing analytic theology. Some of the articles that follow offer analytic resources that augment the broader theological enterprise (see the contributions by Tyler D. McNabb and Eric Baldwin, Nathan A. Jacobs, Manuel Fasko, and Charles Taliaferro and Elliot Knuths). Others are concerned to situate AT within a well-rounded methodological approach (e.g., Scott Harrower, Ryan S. Peterson, Steven Nemes). And, others still, clarify what it means to practice AT (see Oliver Crisp and Jordan Wessling). We include the contribution of an AT ally, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, who recognizes the importance of AT for theological construction with his modest endorsement of the project. What you have in front of you is a set of fresh reflections on several important aspects of analytic theology. These articles make clear that AT is a movement worth taking seriously, and not just for philosophers but for the entire guild of theologians and scholars of religion.

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