

Is theology a science?

Unfortunately, the answer given to this question in Notebooks, 10 September 2002; rev. 6 April 2004, simply will not do. Although the answer itself still seems to me to be correct—theology is *not* a science, properly so-called—the argument given in support of this answer is seriously confusing and confused

The essential point of a more adequate answer may be made as follows: Whereas a science, properly so-called, is not only constituted but also proximately oriented by an *intellectual* question, theology is oriented, proximately as well as remotely, not by an intellectual question, but by an *existential* question, i.e., *the* existential question about the meaning of ultimate reality for us.

This obviously presupposes that one can and should distinguish between two levels of orientation, proximate and remote. Just as properly intellectual questions are commonly derived by abstraction from properly existential questions, so properly intellectual questions commonly remain oriented by the existential questions from which they are abstracted. Therefore, a science constituted as well as *proximately* oriented by an intellectual question may be oriented *remotely* by the existential question from which that intellectual question has been derived.

Another point that needs to be kept in mind is that theology, by definition, is theoretical, in that it is constituted as such, as theology, by strictly theoretical questions as to meaning and validity, whereas a science may or may not be theoretical, being already constituted (as well as proximately oriented) by the intellectual question it exists to answer.

Finally, the concluding paragraph of the earlier answer seems to me to be as valid as ever. Theology, like philosophy, is properly a form of wisdom, not of

science—that form, namely, which has to do with the meaning of ultimate reality, including strictly ultimate reality, for us.

24 June 2006; rev. 14 June 2009

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The answer depends on what, exactly, is meant by "a science." If all that is meant is some form or other of critical reflection and proper theory concerned somehow with clear and consistent conceptualization and employing some kind of objective argumentation, then, yes, theology is a science—in much the same way, or for essentially the same reasons, that philosophy would be a science.

But if one holds instead, as I do, that the conditions mentioned above are necessary but not sufficient to the meaning of "a science," because "a science," properly so-called, is also some form of *intellectual*, as distinct from existential, reflection, then, no, theology is not a science. For although theology is *constituted* by properly theoretical questions about the meaning of Christian witness and the validity of the claims that bearing this witness makes or implies, it is nonetheless *oriented* by the same existential question to which Christian witness is an answer—i.e., an answer that claims to be *the* answer. A proper science, on the other hand, is not oriented by this or any other existential question, but rather by some *intellectual* question—the difference between the two types of questions being that all existential questions ask about *the meaning of reality for us*, whereas all intellectual questions ask, by a characteristic abstraction, about *the structure of reality in itself*.

By this criterion, theology is no more a science than philosophy would be—and for the same reason: because it is oriented by the existential question about the meaning of ultimate reality for us, even though it is constituted by theoretical questions about meaning and validity—in the case of theology, the meaning and validity of Christian witness; in the case of philosophy, the meaning and validity of religion and culture generally.

On the other hand, the many so-called special, or ontic, sciences, social or human as well as natural, are sciences precisely because they are oriented by one or another intellectual question about the structure of reality in itself. And so, too, with the one ontological science of metaphysics, which is likewise oriented by an intellectual question, although, in this case, a question

that asks about the structure in itself of *ultimate* reality, including *strictly* ultimate reality.

My answer to the question, then, is no, theology is not a science, provided "a science" is strictly and properly understood. Rather, theology, like philosophy, is a form of wisdom—that form, namely, which has to do with the meaning of ultimate reality, including strictly ultimate reality, for us. This, as it happens, is the same conclusion I reached some years ago when I said, "even when it is most theoretical, theology can be itself only by being what it has traditionally been described as being: *sapientia eminens practica*" (*On Theology*: 17).

10 September 2002; rev. 6 April 2004

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I have argued (10 September 2002; rev. 6 April 2004) that it isn't, on the grounds (1) that a necessary condition of an inquiry's being properly "a science" is that it be oriented, not by any existential question, but by some intellectual question; and (2) that theology both in the generic/specific sense of "Christian theology," "Jewish theology," "Islamic theology," and so on, and in the sense of "philosophical theology" is oriented, not by any intellectual question, but by an existential question—indeed, *the* existential question about the meaning of ultimate reality for us.

But if I am right in distinguishing, as I've also done, yet a third sense in which "theology" means "*metaphysical* theology"; and if "metaphysics," properly understood, *is* precisely a science, i.e., the unique *ontological* science, then, clearly, there is one sense of "theology" in which the answer to the original question can only be affirmative—i.e., the sense fully explicated by "metaphysical theology."

1 September 2003; rev. 6 April 2004