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Theology as science? The position of Christian theology within an academic setting

ABSTRACT

Within an academic setting, the traditional tension between faith and reason is always at stake. It is argued that in terms of the hermeneutical paradigm, theology could be viewed as a science. Instead of an explanatory model or even a positivistic model with its emphasis on verification and falsification, a hermeneutical model opts for understanding and interpretation wherein the human quest for meaning plays a decisive role. Theology should be defined in terms of a fourfold description which takes critical reflection, communication, action and hope as ingredients of a scientific approach seriously: *fides quaerens intellectum; fides quaerens verbum; fides quaerens actum; fides quaerens spem.*

INTRODUCTION

It is indeed a question to debate, whether theology is a science and whether it has got a place in academic training. From a more confessional point of view, it is sometimes argued that theology is an issue of faith and not of rational, critical reflection. This indeed creates a problem: "...our problem is how to struggle with the meaning of academic freedom within a confessional context" (Calian 2002:29). An academic approach is constantly exposed to what Benne (2001:20) calls the dominance of the so-called "Enlightenment paradigm". R T Hughes (1997:1) warns against the tendency in theological institutions to eventually abandon their Christian orientation in the interest of a purely Enlightenment-based search for truth.

The question to be raised is whether theology can be viewed as a science, taught at universities and still be truthful to the confessions of the Christian tradition? Can faith be linked to critical reflection?

Before we try to get more clarity on this question, the article firstly wants to argue the thesis that theology is a contextual issue determined by culture. By culture is then meant philosophical and life issues as determined and structured by values, norms, rituals, tradition, language and national issues. Culture reflects a way of life and refers to paradigms by which people express their basic human quest for meaning. Within theology therefore, culture determines how people reflect on the link between meaning and transcendence, between our being human and the reality of God. Due to this impact of culture on theology my basic assumption is that theology is necessarily a "cultural misconception".

Inevitable we need language and make use of existing schemata of interpretation. Theology, in its link to existing paradigms and patterns of thinking, should therefore always be humble due to the relativity of cultural influences (the danger of misunderstanding and misconception).

On the other hand, due to culture, theology is a sort of "enfleshment in words." Schemata of interpretation help theology to communicate the core meaning of faith within rational categories

which illuminate our search for meaning. These categories can be appropriate or inappropriate. Thus the introduction of the concept: “misconception” and the warning against positivistic speculation and metaphysical exploitation pertaining the relationship between God and our being human; between revelation and experience. Misconception therefore refers to the probability, uncertainty and relativity within theological reflection and not to the moral categories good or bad.

1. THEOLOGY AS A NECESSARILY “CULTURAL MISCONCEPTION” — DIFFERENT SCHEMATA OF INTERPRETATION

Within the history of Christian reflection and doctrine, several different schemata of interpretation can be determined. The following patterns of thinking can help us to understand better the mediatory function of theology despite cultural limitations and the possibility of misinterpretation:

- ❑ The *Hellenistic schema*. In this model, God is interpreted in terms of a causal and logical principle. As the cause of all things and events, God is viewed in terms of immutability and apathy. Suffering does not affect God at all: *God's immutability and the principle of causality*¹.
- ❑ The *metaphysical schema*. God's transcendence is understood as being remote from historical events. Essentially, revelation implies God's concealment. Behind revelation “another God” exists. The otherness of God therefore introduces an ontological schism between God and our human existence: *God's transcendence - God as ultimate Being*.
- ❑ The *imperialistic schema*. According to the Constantine paradigm, God's kingdom should be understood in terms of militant power. God reigns as a “Caesar” and determines every sphere of life. Ever since, it has been a real danger to fashion God in the image of the “cultural gods” – the imperial rulers of the Egyptian, Persian and Roman empires. The church gave unto God the attributes which belonged to Caesar. (See also Inbody 1997:139.) The church becomes a cultural institution with God as the official Head of a powerful establishment: *God's omnipotence - God as Pantokrator*.
- ❑ The *patriarchal schema*. God acts as a great Patriarch and dominates human beings. Therefore, God's actions in suffering are regarded in terms of purification/edification and retribution. As Patriarch, human beings face a very stern God: *God as an authoritarian Father*.
- ❑ The *hierarchical schema*. Life is viewed as an ordered system. At stake are position and differentiation. The latter is structured in terms of importance, status and position along the lines of class differences. In such a model, the tension between superiority and inferiority determines people's understanding of God: *God as royal King, Lord and ruling Judge*.
- ❑ The *economic and materialistic schema of wealth, achievement, development and affluence*. God becomes an official and public idol: a God who safeguards prosperity. He is then hijacked to serve our selfish needs. Belief becomes a public religion - it is misused as a safe investment with which one can bypass tragedy. The kingdom of God becomes a stock exchange to be manipulated by achievement ethics: *God as Director and Manager*.
- ❑ The *political and societal schema*. Due to the role of liberation theology, God becomes a liberating God who sides with the oppressed, takes care of the underdog as well as

1 Inbody 1997:139: “The notion of God as the ‘unmoved mover’ is derived from Aristotle, at least so far as Western thought is concerned.”

those discriminated against. The kingdom of God is then interpreted in terms of the exodus theme as well as our human dream for freedom and endeavour for justice by means of violent intervention: *God, the Liberator and "Freedom Fighter."*

In the light of the previous outline, the following question should be posed: what is in a post-modern context a more appropriate paradigm and how does it influence the question pertaining the scientific character of theology?

The basic hypothesis of the article is that hermeneutics could be viewed as a possible alternative to the previous schemata of interpretation in order to avoid falling back into a positivistic stance, i.e. the attempt of theology to determine and to define the being of God in pure rationalistic and explanatory categories. A hermeneutical approach does not necessarily imply that the previous schemata are not existent anymore or totally invalid. There is never a "pure" schema for theological reflection. The fact is that hermeneutics provides a paradigm that can possibly help theology to understand its contribution to academic education and science in a more appropriate way.

2. HERMEUTICS AS A POSSIBLE NEW PARADIGM FOR VIEWING THEOLOGY AS A SCIENCE?

One of the most difficult problems is to:

- (a) define what exactly is meant by "theology"; and
- (b) to attain clarity on the question whether theology could be assessed as "a science", especially when the following two important demands for a scientific character are taken into account: *verification* (testing for truth in terms of actual provability; factual statements) and *falsification* (the possibility of proving a statement to be false - refutation). (Popper (1983) uses the term "falsification" when referring to the logical process of trying to prove that a hypothesis is wrong. This is done by showing that the testable instances [or cases] of the hypothesis are not supported by evidence.)

Later developments in a theory of science, indeed, brought about a shift which pointed out the unilateral emphasis on rational provability (the logical positivists' demand for verification) as untenable. Hence the development towards falsification. Popper (in Van Peursen 1980) contends that the verification demand is logically inadequate. He substitutes it with the falsification prerequisite: a counter-example, a refutation can make the logical universal validity of an assumption powerless. (All Xs have the characteristics of F; however, here is an X, called A, which lacks the characteristic. Thus, the general contention is false.) This shift by Popper (1983), a deviation from logical positivism to critical rationalism, could be seen as a shift away from positivism to post-positivism. A theory of science attains more room for the factor of *probability* and *uncertainty*. Popper thus combines the demand for falsifiability with the philosophy of critical rationalism, which entails, inter alia, that each theoretical contention should be constructed in such a way that it is as far as possible open for *correction*. To him a general contention which is not open for correction, which cannot be falsified in principle, is "metaphysical", i.e. scientifically inadequate.

Currently the tendency within the general theory of science in human sciences is to be dominated by *empiricism*: testing facts by perception and observation. This gives rise to the cyclical process in a theory of science: i.e. *induction* (from the multiplicity of perceived observations, through a logical process of reduction until a general conclusion can be reached [theory formation]); *deduction* (from the one general premise or preconceived theory, the one principle is applied to the variables); and *verification* [logical provability and actuality]).

The question which arises is: where does theology as “science” fit in? By “science” is meant more or less the following:

- *validity* (truth)
- *perception* (experiential)
- *observation* (controlled perception, structured perception);
- *description* (a phenomenological account)
- *classification* (marshalling, demarcation and arranging according to characteristics)
- *explanation* (to establish relations and connections between phenomena); and
- *conceptualisation* (comprehensible demarcation)
- *testability* (evidence).

The following question should be raised: does theology, as a science, conform within this demand for explanation, validation and perception? How does theology react to the demand for verification and falsification?

Van Peursen (1980:70) comments that the demands for truth (verification) as well as the possibility or probability of facts being false (falsification) are border cases which hardly appear in their absolute form. Science confronts one with probability. Also, the demand for falsification (refutation) is conceived to be logically too absolute. Mere *degrees of probability* exist. Hypotheses should not always only be refutable, but there should also be the possibility for enhancement and adaptation.

However, Thomas S Kuhn (1970²) pointed out that knowledge does not develop merely cumulatively, evolutionarily or linearly, but often revolutionarily in terms of leaps. The latter often are not logical leaps, but develop instantly as new discoveries are made and paradigm shifts are needed. The development of knowledge thus is paradigmatic, i.e. it changes according to a shift in mind set, belief system, value system and scheme of interpretation (scientific revolution).

According to Kuhn, knowledge is embedded within a historical and cultural context within which values influence the knowing process. Therefore, knowledge is never “purely objective.” Subjective factors and presuppositions (belief systems) still play a role in theory formation. The possibility of refutation (Popper) provides a leeway for many surprises. Even in its theoretical explanations, science is tentative – theories are a schematic accord between incomplete reality and a developmental spirit/mind (Gonseth in Van Peursen 1980:82).

Kuhn and Popper’s view opens the way for a reinterpretation of “theology as science.” Religious presuppositions and perspectives are thus not necessarily “unscientific.” The nature of theological research is thus especially paradigmatic (systematising within a specific interpretative scheme and religious framework) and hermeneutic (explanation in the sense of interpretation and understanding and not in the sense of factual evidence).

The philosophers, Gadamer (1999) and Ricoeur (1995), made a further important contribution in this regard by introducing the question of hermeneutics into the theory of science. Besides the factor of *explanation* (German: *erklären*), which focuses on a causal argumentation, science also works with *understanding* (*verstehen*). “*Verstehen*” focuses on an interpretation of data (to understand a text from the inside out). Therefore understanding is the attempt to penetrate, through the words of a text, into the initial hidden meaning or intention of a text (Van Peursen 1980:76).

2.1 The philosophical background of hermeneutics

Hermeneutics operates with the assumption that to understand is a basic trait and structure of human existence. In a certain sense it is a pre-scientific structure, i.e. an experiential structure which transcends the theoretical and methodical truth of the formal sciences. The contention is that the hermeneutic problem is no longer an epistemological or methodological problem, but an

ontological problem: a fundamental problem of being (Schoeman & Van Veuren 1989:114). Therefore, truth and reality are more than the reduction which takes place as a result of the methodical attitude of the researcher. The process of understanding lies deeper than the methodical attempt to *control* — understanding is a process of *participation* in the reality in which tradition plays a decisive role (Gadamer). In other words, understanding is an existential event which was given originally to the structure of our being human. It is an event which correlates with *Dasein* (M Heidegger 1963¹⁰).

To know is to move in a horizon of truth and meaning/significance. Therefore, the only way to truth is communication and dialogue. With this view, Gadamer wishes to relativise the claims of rationalism. Within the framework of the language context, the narrative tradition, the meta-theoretical factors which play a role in the formulation of scientific questioning, must be taken into account.

Ricoeur's criticism on Gadamer's hermeneutic was that it was too far removed from any link with the knowing activity of the human subject. Thus, any link with criticism was discouraged. According to Ricoeur, concrete reflection should take place by hermeneutic experiences being based on the reading of texts, and not on history and historicity (tradition), as with Gadamer. (Text = monuments, works of art, non-written traditions, as well as written texts.)

While Gadamer ascribes all functions of objectivation to method, he fails to appreciate, according to Ricoeur, a type of objectivity (independence) which is unique to texts and not ascribed to the employment of method. (Texts are, with regard to their meaning, not restricted and limited to the author's intention; texts are independent of the socio-cultural circumstances in which they originated; are independent of any specific addressee; the meaning of texts is not limited to any specific situation.)

Human behaviour can also be taken as analogue to a text and can then be interpreted as documents. Various possible interpretations can arise from the same document, so that one interpretation may be refuted by another. In this way Ricoeur again opens the way for a critical hermeneutic which seeks the significance of human behaviour (as text), also of other texts. (The meaning does not lie *behind* the text or in the author, but at hand, in the text.) The meaning of texts also influences the reader, leading to self-understanding.

The value of critical hermeneutics for theology resides in the fact that texts of faith (the Scriptures and the church's tradition) which refer to the reality of God, imply and reveal a certain intention and meaning of God's actions which can be unlocked through reading the texts. This process of understanding leads to a better self-understanding. It could thus be said that the reading of a theological text implies a certain understanding of God, which, if unveiled, would give rise to a self-understanding of the believing subject.

The introduction of hermeneutics in methodology opens new avenues for theology to be classified as science. Theology, as science, is thus probably not about the demand for verification or falsification, but about the demand for understanding because the "words" and "text" of theology (revelation) have a symbolic and metaphoric character. Should this statement, theologically speaking, be "true," then theology, assessed as science, could be viewed as a *metaphorical* and *hermeneutical science*. Theology finds its real character within the field of *faith*, not within the field of *perception*.

This statement does not imply that theology (being aware of the scientific demand for comprehension) does not also have a rational and an experiential component. ("*Verstehen*" is not irrational.) Therefore, in theological science there should be room for both theory formation (reflection) as well as empirical observation (experience).

2.2 The unique problem of theology as science

The above exposition makes the reader aware of the unique problem in a *theological science*. When the fact is accepted that a theological theory of science, methodologically speaking, is strongly oriented to paradigmatic problems, then the following could be viewed as the basic problems facing methodology in a theological theory of science:

- (a) the problem regarding the relation between *revelation* (transcendence) and *experience* (the level of general perception and observation).
- (b) the relation between *understanding* (interpretation) and *explanation* (causal connectedness).
- (c) the role of reason (*rationality*) in the process of understanding from the perspective of the Christian faith. (Although a theological understanding is not completely verifiable, it is not necessarily *unlogical*, *ir-rational*. Is faith and *reason* two comparable and homogeneous/similar entities/concepts or are they heterogeneous/dissimilar? Does the relation, faith and reason, necessarily introduce tension? How should this tension be viewed?)
- (d) The unique character of the theological *truth* (validity and the epistemic demand). What validates the investigation? How valid is the source (text)? What is the unique nature of the truth which theology applies?
- (e) How does “God,” as a prominent factor, affect the object of theological research? Is God involved as an ontological reality, or is God “unobjectifiable” and also “unknowable” (the *Deus absconditus*), so that the theological research is not *only* human work, but also research done with *mere* human material and objects? Is there a *multiple* dimension in theology (the beyond) so that *transcendence* is part of the nature of theological research? What then is the relation between *transcendence*, *mysticism* and the *process of knowing*?
- (f) Does theology seek the *right doctrine* (orthodoxy) or the *right praxis* (orthopraxis)? Does a right/true doctrine exist, or should one rather speak of an appropriate interpretation and an appropriate praxis of the church/actions of faith, where relationships are established between believing and doing, confession and life?

The following question should be posed: is it possible that theology is more *heuristic* by nature, and less *explanatory*? (Heuristic stems from the Greek verb *eurisko* which means: to find out, to discover, to make an unexpected discovery.) “Heuristic,” then, in the sense that it is the task of theology as science to *unveil meaning* with the view to *discovery* and *understanding* of the *human identity*.

3. WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

Theology literally means reflecting on, and understanding of, God (the *logos* with regard to the *Theos*). “Theology literally means ‘thinking about God’” (Badham 1996:101-106).

In terms of the previous thesis, it becomes clear that, should theology not deal in one way or another with *God* or at least the relationship/encounter with God, then theology will have difficulty in sustaining the epistemic demand for truth (true to the issue which theology is about, i.e. faith in God and his saving engagement with our human misery).

3.1 The process of theologising

The process of theologising takes place within a very unique field of tension: the interplay between faith and reason. How should this tension be understood?

Theology and the whole process of theologising immediately bring two specific powers in into play: on the one hand, the claim of the Christian faith (faith regarding God in Christ), and, on the other, the claim of science (the possibility that God's being is not a necessity) (see Jüngel 1972:12). Theologising presumes faith; simultaneously theologising turns faith into an object – to a reflective activity and so the *tension* between faith as event, and faith as object of reflection (science), arises. Theological science can be nothing but theology, and theology, on the other hand, nothing but *reflection on the meaning of faith (intellectus fidei)* (Jüngel 1972:13). This reflection engenders a further tension, which affects especially theological training: the tension between academic theology in a *university faculty* and congregational theology as a *church function*.

This tension Schleiermacher (1995; see also Bucharth 1983) wanted to accommodate when he made the choice for theology at a university, on the basis of the fact that, according to him, theology is a “positive science,” viz a science which is determined like other positive sciences (e.g. medical) by the need for praxis besides theory. Hence the organising principle in theology is the principle of congregational policy/ministry (*Kirchenleitung; Kunstregeln*).

Because of this tension, theology is threatened from two directions: from the side of the more positivistic stance in science (*objectification*), so that eventually theology is forced to neglect its key assumption: faith in God's presence and involvement (revelation) as well as from the side of the church: the *clericalisation* of theological science, so that theology has to abandon its component of reflection in favour of confessional faith (confession without any critical, reflective activity).

It becomes clear that one must accept the fact that theologising takes place in the midst of a constructive tension between faith *and* reason. Here neither a dualistic separation, nor a sterile, total identification is valid. “*Das Denken aber hat im Gegenüber ein Kriterium*” (Jüngel 1972:17). This means that faith itself is not a purely anthropological category, viz. a human deed of acknowledgement (an achievement); faith is thus not a purely subjective and philosophical category which is completely construed and constituted by subjective, reflective categories.

The uniqueness of faith means that even the statement *fides quaerens intellectum* cannot be conceived as though faith and reason are comparable with each other, as though they were analogous and identical entities (apples = apples). Faith is not a means of knowing, which tries to compete with another means of knowing (ratio, *intellectus*, reason). The same goes for the distinction, *fides quae creditur* (knowing act) and *fides quae creditur* (the known object/content). The scientific act of obtaining knowledge could always threaten the validity of the known object. The latter is always a possibility in scientific research. Faith, however, is unique in the sense that it is an act of knowing directed at, and dependent on, revelation (Jüngel 1972:20-21). 2 Corinthians 5:7 then is applicable as a basic rule for faith: “We live by faith, not by sight.” Therefore, faith is not primarily a human knowing act of decision and obedience, but an event in which the blessing of faith is granted to humans (a gift by God's grace). Faith is presented to human beings – it is received as a gift via the proclaimed Word regarding God, through which the crucified Christ makes Himself known as the resurrected Lord. In this *hearing* faith occurs. (To discover the Resurrected Christ in the Crucified - that is the richness and awe of faith [Jüngel]).

It could thus be contended that faith is *not alien to “experience.”* It is, indeed, *heard and accepted* (obedience). It is riddled with “subjectivity.” Although faith is thus not alien to our human experience, it is not a human achievement. Concerning its constitutive nature, faith is not a *human act*, but an *act by God's grace*.

In order to prevent faith becoming speculative and alien to life (a-historical), theology has the task of linking faith to historicity – that which Jüngel (1972:29-30) calls the poverty of the historical Jesus. Theology connects faith, as a reflective activity, to historical reality. While faith is a gift, theology is human work. Theology, itself, is not faith, but the *reflection* on faith. As a

reflective activity, theology is involved with faith, yet distinct from faith. “*Die Theologie lehrt die Sprache des Glaubens verstehen. Der Glaube spricht die Sprache des Glaubens*” (1972:31). Theological science is a historical, thus contextual, consequence of the fact that theology is faith’s reflective activity. The danger in theology is that *reason* attains domination over the object (faith). Conversely, theology should be determined by faith: “*Der Gegenstand der Theologie ist der Glaube*” (1972:32). And this faith, according to Jüngel, is not human work (achievement), but the pneumatic gift with which the Gospel addresses human beings. Theology’s actual tension is not between reason and faith, as such, but between *faith* (the content of the Gospel) and the thinking and critical activity of faith (the limitedness of our receptivity). Faith then is conceived as an *instrument* and not a constitutive human achievement, that which Berkouwer (1975:187-188) calls “de leegheid van geloof” (the emptiness and receptivity of faith).

3.2 A possible description of theology?

In terms of the previous argumentation, and bearing in mind the constructive tension between faith and reason, one could indeed argue that theology is not an “unscientific” endeavour. As the reflective activity within faith, the following possible descriptions of theology should be considered. These formulations can help theology to position itself within an academic and university setting.

[A] The classical formula for theology is that of Anselm: *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding).

Thus, theology is about a conceptual and systematised process of understanding in the light of the content of the Christian faith. But what is the content (the what) of this process of understanding (a hermeneutics of faith)?

This question, *theo*-logically speaking, could have but one answer: faith as related to God’s intervening action of grace and as revealed in the cross and resurrection of Christ and directed towards our human misery. The process of understanding is about the categories: *God* and *Heil/salvation/grace*. The latter determines qualitatively the character of faith. Faith is a receptive event - primarily faith is not merely a human thinking activity, but also an event initiated by the Spirit. However, faith *also* seeks understanding in terms of our human reason.

Three things are implied by the word “understanding”:

- (a) *Comprehensivity* and *conceptualising* (knowledge). *Intellectum* definitely is comprised of a *rational component* which intends verbalising comprehensibly the truth about God and grace (*interpretation*).
- (b) “Understanding” is not mere intellectual knowledge, but, as a knowledge of faith, it is actually a *knowledge of relationships embedded in fellowship and worship*. Biblical truth has a relational nature (epistemic demand). Knowledge of faith is about a relationship of communion with a personal God.
- (c) Understanding is aimed at the discovery of *significance* and *meaning*. Thus, understanding also implicates the human understanding of self, *coram Deo*, as well as the finding of identity. Understanding thus points to an element of existential self-understanding and human identity (humanity and significance).

[B] Is theology merely about understanding (*intellectum*) or is it also about a process of communication? The Bible calls it *witness* regarding the truth and *proclamation* of the truth. *Fides quaerens intellectum* should be amplified with the following definition of theology: *Fides quaerens verbum*: faith seeking valid ways of conversing, dialoguing

and communication: methods of discourse; witness, proclamation (demand for *kerygma* and communication).

[C] But is theology merely about reflection without any consequence for human deeds? *Fides quaerens actum*. Theology as action within different contexts. (Strategy, planning, transformation and models for praxis) and a reflection on the functioning of communities of faith (see Dingemans 1996:32, 56).

[D] But what then is the impact of theology on our human quest for meaning? *Fides quaerens spem*. Theology as anticipation of the future. Eschatology and the tension: already and not yet within the context of the fulfilled promises of God. Theology fosters a vivid hope according to the faithfulness of God and his fulfilled promises.

Conclusion: Theology, by nature, is determined by the event of a *Word*. It is about God's Word (address) and a human response. Hence the *dialogical character* inherent to a theological methodology.

Theology is faith seeking to be understood in order to be able to communicate (speak, discourse) clearly who God is for human beings and the creation. *Theological discourse* thus has a specific address: not God Himself, but the meaningful existence of humans within contexts. With this in view, theology seeks a *language* which could illuminate meaningfully the encounter between God and a human being. The language and interpretation of God takes place by means of symbols and signs, so that essentially theology is metaphorical. Hence the following methodological demand for theology: to be *metaphorical theology*. The *basic motive* for metaphorical theology is the *meaningful* interpretation of God's grace in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, in terms of contextual issues. Such a meaningful interpretation is determined by the theological and ethical concept of *love*. "In other words, knowing *and* loving God should again locate people in the world" (Charry 1993:90-104).

From the preceding, it could be deduced that theology ultimately focuses on a *wisdom* (sensitive ability to discern, focusing on meaningful everyday human life) which will convince people (*knowledge* which understands). Wisdom and knowledge are part of the unique nature of theology.

3.3 The healthy and constructive theological tension: *scientia* - *sapientia*

In *De Trinitate* (books XII-XIV) Augustine distinguishes between *scientia* (God's judgement which implies rationality) and *sapientia* (to enjoy God's grace; "delight in the grace of God" [In Charry 1993:91-92]). Knowledge (rationality) refers to temporary things, while wisdom refers to things eternal. Translated in current terms, this means that the rational component of knowledge refers to an experiential dimension, while wisdom is connected to a spiritual and transcendent dimension. In the light of this distinction made by Augustine, one could conclude that the relationship between *scientia* and *sapientia* introduces a healthy tension in theological methodology: the tension between experience and revelation; between empiricism and transcendence; between rationality and wisdom; between knowledge and mystery.

Scientia includes moral judgement as well as a historical and experiential knowledge of life taken from the incarnated Word. Therefore, for Augustine faith includes rational knowledge - the active capacity of the human mind. *Scientia* encompasses the following:

- *experience* gained from events and memory;
- *abstract ideas* in which the imagination plays a role in creating new ideas;
- *judgement* of our human history and temporal events in terms of universal norms.

Thus, knowledge is the faith that is believed, but also the rational means by which that knowledge is grasped, the knowledge of absolute certitude, and proclaimed by knowledge of self (consciousness) (XIII:3)” (in Charry 1993:93).

- *Scientia* = cognitive: the knowledge of faith.
- *Sapientia* indicates devotion and an enjoyable experience of God: *the wisdom of love* (*sapientia* = affective). “Its goal is to bring happiness and it means love (XVII:2).” “... For Augustine, as we know from the Confessions, resting in God is the key to happiness” (in Charry 1993:93).

Augustine views *sapientia* also as “contemplation,” implying devotion and love for God (piety).

“In short, Augustine’s distinction between *scientia* and *sapientia* was between knowing about God’s grace and loving God as a result of that knowledge, the former being cognitive, the latter being affective knowledge” (Charry 1993:93).

Later on, in the history of theology, there were attempts to ease the relation between *scientia* and *sapientia*. So, for example, Abelarde (In Chary 1993) was afraid that a sensory dimension could dim rational understanding (doctrine, dogma). Abelarde wanted theology to speak more logically about God (*scientia*). With his emphasis on rational analysis, he initiated the so-called “academic theology.”

Beside Abelarde, Lombarde (In Charry 1992) wanted to free *scientia* from being subordinate to *sapientia*. He introduced *intelligentia* as a valid theological practice. Lombarde intended to introduce rationality as a philosophical practice of argumentation and to view *intelligentia* as a theological method. “He (Lombarde) defined *intelligentia* as active knowledge pertaining to invisible and spiritual things in the temporal realm, marking it off from Augustine’s definition of *sapientia* that contemplates eternal truths ...” (in Charry 1992:96). In this way he introduces the cognitive dimension of logic and philosophic argumentation as a legitimate method to enhance the quality of contemplation and wisdom.

We could contend that theologising thus consists of *scientia* (rational-historical analyses of experiential data), *sapientia* (wisdom and reflection/contemplation about the transcendent dimension of faith) and *intelligentia* (cognitive analysis along the lines of a logical and philosophical argumentation). Should both *scientia* and *intelligentia* be separated from *sapientia*, then theology would degenerate into either a rationalistic practice (speculation) or a sensory enterprise (empiricism).

The climax of the so-called “academic theology,” with its emphasis on logic and rationality, was Thomas of Aquino (In Charry 1993) who wished to formulate the truth of faith in objective scientific systems. Thomas absorbed *sapientia* into a rational theology – a new type of wisdom in which rational judgements and pronouncements about God are determined by the *habitus* of virtue.

“The new type of knowledge (Thomas) has broken completely with Augustine. It is based not on gratitude in response to knowledge of divine grace, but on objective judgements resulting from disciplined study, ‘as one who is versed in the science of morals can judge of virtuous actions even though he is not virtuous’” (Charry 1993:97).

Dogma (doctrine), based on moral-rational decisions and disciplined study, thus gained the upper hand over wisdom. In this way theology became an academic enterprise apart from any necessary confessional commitment. Thus the way was opened for the process of theologising without any faith commitment – the first step towards secular theology.

Comment: Theologising needs all three: *scientia*, *sapientia* and *intelligentia* - i.e. experiential analyses, devotion, and logical-philosophical analyses. Faith and life, faith and experience, faith and reason, faith and devotion, are all part of the dynamic tension which is inherently part of the process of theologising.

Theology thus is about both *faith* and *understanding*. The whole problem of understanding brings faith into touch with the demand of comprehensive and rational understanding. Theologising, therefore, does not exclude human reflection, and in this process it wishes to create virtuous people: people with a moral awareness and a profound devotion to God.

3.4 The epistemological problem in theology

As a science, theology cannot avoid the epistemological question, i.e. how to attain reliable and valid knowledge. In this regard the question about the *source of knowledge* surfaces.

Traditionally in Reformed theology the Bible is viewed as the source of knowledge. The main emphasis then is on the *content* of faith (*fides quae*), and less on the process and events of knowing and believing (*fides qua*).

As a result of various developments, especially under the influence of the *historical-critical method*, even the Bible was questioned as a source of knowledge. The historical-critical method searches for the author's original intention in order to determine the authentic character of a biblical document. This gave rise to the problem of the authority of the Bible.

Increasingly the Bible is viewed as a human book which describes people's *experience* of God, but not necessarily brings the reader into contact with God Himself.

In a more secularised and post-modernistic context, the question thus arises whether theology could be viewed as an understanding of God's revelation, as reported in the Bible. This raises the problem of a *biblical theology*.

A methodological question results: does theology study God, or our experiences of God; in other words, is the object of study *religious experiences*, faith experiences, or the revelation of God?

The shift in the direction of religious experience came as a result of, inter alia, the scientific demand for perception and observation (as the influence of phenomenology and empiricism) (see also Immink 1994:15). Consequently, it is the conviction of many theologians that theology does not study God, but faith *in* God. While God is the object of faith, faith experiences are the object of theology. Therefore, God is not the direct object of theology, but the *indirect object* (Van der Ven 1990:120-122).

The question about the relation: *direct* understanding or *indirect* understanding of God, is part and parcel of the quest for methodology in theology. Should it be maintained that God is the direct object of faith, and an indirect object of theology (Van der Ven 1990:120-122), would this imply that theology should not *problematise the reality of God*?

According to Pannenberg (1973:316), it is true that theology can only know God *indirectly* via religious experience. "Wir gingen davon aus, dass Theologie als Wissenschaft von Gott nur indirekt möglich ist, nämlich im Hinblick auf die Wirklichkeit im ganzen." (The latter refers to general religious experiences. Pannenberg calls these experiences Christian religion [Christianity.]) Without the reality of God, theology will become a sterile endeavour. "Die Wirklichkeit aber, an der christlicher Glaube letztlich hängt, ist die Wirklichkeit Gottes" (1973:298).

With regard to the question whether, or not, theology as a science addresses God, the following statement applies:

Statement: Theology not only studies our human experience and interpretation of God. Theology, indeed, is human work and, as such, preliminary interpretation with a high degree of probability. However, in so far as theology acknowledges a discourse *about* God (the reality of God) and accepts (faith) that a portrayal of God exists through the Scriptures (revelation), theology, as an endeavour of the Spirit (pneumatology), touches the reality and presence of God. Otherwise "God" Himself becomes a speculative product of the human mind (idea) and theology, essentially, becomes anthropology: an analysis of human ideas and thoughts.

We conclude: in a theological methodology, one should not abandon the notion of the encounter with God and the conviction that the faithfulness of God is the source for every theological finding. The view: revelation as encounter (cf Berkhof 1973:35), as well as the faith category: the “faithfulness of God” and the “presence of God,” are fundamental for a theological epistemology². Without the reality of God, theology becomes mere human speculation³.

Central to theology’s whole problem lays the core truth: God reveals Himself in both the creation and the recreation. The revelation’s focal point and scope is salvation, as enfleshed in Christ’s incarnation, cross and resurrection. Having taken the preceding into account: does theology not isolate itself in this way from all other sciences? Does the whole concept of salvation not lead to Christian theology’s isolation from other human sciences?

3.5 Interdisciplinarity and methodology: the Chalcedon model

Methodologically speaking, interdisciplinarity implies that a correlative relation should exist in the theory of science between theology and the *humaniora* (social sciences). How must one understand such a mutual relationship? This association does not necessarily presume equilibrium and complementariness. In spite of symmetry, the emphasis should be on *asymmetry*. The relation of *asymmetry* in Reformed theology is known as a *theonomous reciprocity*. Although there is a correlative link of reciprocity, the character of this link, however, is determined and constituted by the uniqueness of the involvement of God (salvation) (*theonomous*).

In theology, the choice for a *bipolar model* (the interaction between God *and* human beings) must therefore be amplified by a *convergence model*. The centrifugal position (God) determines, and therefore converges the centripetal position (human beings). In a convergence model God qualifies the human factor, although God Himself is not the focal point, but our humanity. Why? Because salvation is focused on our being human, and humanity is determined by a very specific norm: love. In a convergence model, the principle ethics is an ethics of unconditional and sacrificial love. The implication of such an ethics and convergence model is that human beings obtain a centripetal position, i.e. human beings are dependent on God for their significance.

Bipolarity and convergence could also be described in terms of the so-called *Chalcedon model*. In this model the association between the divine and human nature of Christ is described in terms of a dual tension and paradox - unity (without separation or division) and differentiation (without confusion or change). *Unity* and *differentiation* exists. In the midst of symmetry (there is free movement between the two without each pole losing its uniqueness) there is asymmetry: the nature of each is unique with the divine pole dominating. The divine pole is constitutive for the nature of the relation.

The following are the characteristics of the Chalcedon pattern:

- *Unmixed differentiation* – a reciprocal relation without compounding or loss of own identity.
- *Undivided unit* – a simultaneous event, inseparable.
- *Immutable and irreversible order of asymmetry* - the one pole has greater logical value than the other, because of the constitutive nature of the Godly which determines the cooperation of the human pole.

2 Menselijke ervaring is ervaring van *iets of iemand*. Dat wil zeggen de ervaring is ergens op gericht en wordt door iets dat buiten onze ervaring ligt aangedreven. Naast de subjectsfunctie is er dus ook een objectszijde. Zo ook in het geloof. Christelijke geloof is een betrekking van de mens tot God, tot Jezus Christus (Immink 1996:103).

3 En het valt denk ik na enige nadenken ook niet vol te houden dat geloofuitspraken primair menselijke interpretatie zijn: er wordt een *werkelijkheid* beschreven die ons aangaat, die vreugde en houvast geeft, hoop en verwachting (Immink 1996:107).

This Chalcedon pattern sheds light on the unique nature of a theological methodology and is applicable to the relation between theological disciplines and human sciences (*humaniora*). Because of the asymmetric factor, there is a necessary demand for *intradisciplinarity*, viz. the methods of the human sciences are determined by the unique needs of theology in order to adapt to this discipline's unique requirements.

As a science, theology cannot relinquish the demand for *interdisciplinary cooperation*⁴. Hence the interest in experience, praxis, pluralism, language, text, story. While theology focuses on practice, the methods of social sciences become vital for theology's enhanced understanding and interpretation of the human being. As a hermeneutic science, theology thus is receptive for other methods and theories. This means that a *deductive* discourse must also make allowance for an *inductive* discourse. Furthermore, this means that, methodically speaking, a mere *exegesis* of the scriptural passages can no longer suffice for theology. Also, the human text and context are important, but then interpreted from the perspective of faith and salvation. Methodologically speaking, theology as a science operates from a unique perspective nature (perspectivism). Within practical theology the method of *dialogue* and *communication* are becoming more and more important for theology (applied theology and doing theology)⁵.

Hermeneutically speaking, the believing subject also plays a role in the discourse about God and therefore also in the process of theologising. Interpretation also enhances a person's self-understanding (P Ricoeur). An understanding of God influences our self-understanding.

Yet, a reservation should be placed on Melkevik's (1994:108) contention that theology is merely a discourse about God. Theology is not a mere discourse about God. Pneumatologically speaking, it is *also: God's discourse* with us. Without this act of speech, theology will be buried under the lava of human speculation. Although theology is about the presence of God, theologising itself is a human, relative and often most speculative practice. God Himself, however, is not a speculative concept. Within the Spirit's language of faith, God is *faithful* and *reliable*. God's acts of salvation, as revealed in the history of salvation, comprise the *truth* of theology (epistemic demand). This assumption (faith) determines the enterprise and endeavour of theologising (the process of rational reflection).

Theology is thus not merely interdisciplinary. It is also *intradisciplinary*; in other words, it uses the methods of other sciences in order to adapt its own methods, i.e. understanding God within contexts. For this reason theology makes use of the philosophical methods of hermeneutics and is closely linked to the science of philosophy.

The emphasis on an intradisciplinary method means that theology, in its rationality (understanding, thinking activity), is obliged to leave room for what Rahner calls: the mystery of God, which cannot be expressed adequately in clear cognitions. "At the very outset Rahner reiterates his conviction that theological reflection begins and ends in the holy mystery of God; hence an awareness of how and why theology must become a "Reductio in Mysterium" is, he notes, a well-needed methodological point" (Kelly 1992:333). Methodologically speaking, the source of inspiration for theologising remains the grace of God – God's presence through his Spirit.

4 "De interdisciplinaire methode is momenteel in de theologie een algemeen toegepaste werkwijze" (Fortin-Melkevik 1994:117).

5 "Het introduceren van het hermeneutische paradigma heeft een verandering teweeggebracht in de voorwaarden zelf voor een mogelijk object van de theologie: dit object kan niet meer 'God' zijn, maar eerder het 'spreken over God.' Dit spreken is niet meer alleen het object, het is het theologie bedrijven zelf" (Fortin-Melkevik 1994:108-109).

“Precisely today it is of the utmost importance that we shall understand the significance which theology has as *reductio in mysterium*, that is, we must understand that this *reduction* constitutes not a regrettable imperfection in theology, but rather that which is most proper to its very nature. Theology must be bold enough to make it clear to modern human beings that this *reductio mysterium* is its positive distinguishing characteristic and at the same time the most proper to it ... If theology fails to do this, then in an age which sets a premium upon scientific knowledge, human beings will inevitably receive the impression that theology is the mere external facade for an intellectual discipline which increasingly dissolves and frees itself from theology itself” (K Rahner, cited in Kelly 1992:336).

Theology then is to be understood as the “science” of mystery as such (p.337). Rahner views this mystery as that basic experience of grace which enables the understanding and also the human activity of theologising.

The answer to the question whether theology is a science, must be as follows: should the methodological criteria for scientificity, i.e. clarity, evidence, perceptibility, controllability, consistency, coherency, generality, precision, simplicity, explanation and prediction, all be applicable simultaneously as such on theology, then it is doubtful whether theology in this sense could be a pure science. But even science cannot fulfil all these criteria simultaneously. It is seldom possible to draft theories which comply with all these criteria. “Wie in wetenschappelijke theorieën heilige kennistempels ziet, kent aan methodologische criteria veel kracht toe” (Van der Steen 1994:129).

Should *understanding* indeed be valid as a criterion for scientificity and truth could also be formulated in faith categories, then theology definitely is a science in its own right. *Sapientia* does not exclude *scientia*.

3.6 Theological hermeneutics and the hermeneutical circle

It now appears that theology in fact is about God. Literally, theology then also means discourse/reflection (*logos*) about God (*theos*). This discourse about God in language, presumes a unique method of discourse, viz. the language of faith (see also Augsburg 1986:74; Hodgson 1994:10; Borneman 1991:117).

Theology’s language of faith seeks understanding and comprehension (*fides quaerens intellectum*), and various methods of discourse and communication (*fides quaerens verbum*). Both comprehension and understanding refer to a very specific issue in theology: God’s intervention in history and the encounter between God and humans with the view to salvation and healing. Salvation is established in and through Christ’s person and work, so that theology actually is Christian theology.

The whole process of understanding is aimed at clarity on what theologically speaking truth is about. Profoundly and *methodically* speaking, theology thus is about *understanding* and *interpretation*. We could thus contend that the whole undertaking of theology in fact is a project of interpretation.

Within an academic field, “interpretation” means critical reflection and analysis. In this sense, academic theology is science (*scientia*). Yet, it may never be separated from the basic intention of theological practice, i.e. to get to know, serve and love God better. Thus, theology focuses profoundly upon wisdom (*sapientia*) and devotion (a new *habitus*).

Methodologically, it could be contended that the *hermeneutical paradigm* is the most satisfactory for the practice of present day theology. By “hermeneutics” is meant the science of understanding and interpretation. This implies a process of ongoing communication.

Theological hermeneutics is involved in what is known as the *hermeneutical circle*. This circle consists of three elements: a pre-text (events), a text (medium), and context (situation). In other words: a message, a source and a concrete living situation. Within this circle two movements develop. The first is a critical, analytical, interpretative movement *backwards* from the interpreter, via the text (medium) to the revelation's root events and the intended message. This shift presumes a process of critical distance (objectivising, detachment).

The second shift is a practical reflection of application (doing reflection and implying meaning) which takes place existentially. This is a movement *forwards* from the basic experience and message, via the text, to the interpreter and the context. This generates a process of self-understanding and influencing which affects the interpreter's concrete situation.

The hermeneutical circle's presumption is that both the backward and forward movement will generate meaning and make the future possible. Within the wider framework of the eschatological paradigm in a Christian theology, this means that hermeneutics focuses on new ways of existence and engendering hope/future.

CONCLUSION

Theology is a science because it focuses on that *understanding* and explanation which strives to establish a *relation* between God and human beings (encounter). It is a hermeneutical science which concerns the interpretation and translation of God within contexts. Theology, thus, is not solely about God as an object, but about faith in God and the relationship between God and humans. It also tries to link our human quest for humanity and significance to the presence and will of God. As *fides quaerens intellectum*, *fides quaerens verbum*, *fides quaerens actum* and *fides quaerens spem*, it has indeed a place within an academic and university setting. With other disciplines, within the *humaniora*, it should take up its position as an academic endeavour and voice our human quest for meaning. This is exactly what is meant by cross and resurrection: it adds *sapientia* to *scientia*. Salvation opens up new avenues for the interpretation of lives; it opens up new perspectives for hope: *fides quaerens spem*.

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