

Abstract of the thesis submitted to MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society:
Systematic Theology as Rationally Justified Public Discourse about God

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This thesis answers the following research question: How can Systematic Theology (ST) best be construed as a scientific discipline?

The thesis consists of four main parts. The first part covers the introduction and the historical background for the research question. The second part presents the conception of ST to be discussed. Part three discusses five central arguments against ST as a scientific discipline. The fourth part summarizes the findings and states the conclusion.

Chapter one introduces the thesis and states the research question. The central notion of presenting “rationally justified public discourse about God” is introduced as the catchphrase for what theologians aim to do. A critical aspect here is also the presuppositions which are stated as “realism” and “truth.” These terms are presupposed as structural for the development of the arguments. Realism is understood in a coarse-grained sense as the view that parts of reality exist mind-independently, and truth is understood as maximal coherence of the largest set of data.

Chapter two introduces the historical background with a selected overview of four important debates about theology as a scientific discipline in the 20th century. The debate between Karl Barth and Heinrich Scholz; the debate in Germany in the 1960s through 1980s as represented by Hermann Diem, Gerhard Sauter, and Wolfhart Pannenberg; the debate in Sweden between the schools in Lund and Uppsala; and lastly the debate in the US between the schools in Chicago and Yale.

Chapter three presents the thesis’ understanding of ST as a stratified discipline. ST is understood as a discipline with three strata that are distinct, pursuing different aims by their respective methods, even though there is a continuous exchange of concerns, insights, and arguments among them. ST1 is understood as the systematic explication of the religious expressions (semantics) found in the lives of Christian believers. ST2 is the development of theories of the Christian faith—theories that I suggest are best assessed by their degrees of internal coherence. ST3 is the development and comparison of ontologies which are assessed by their degrees of coherence relative to external alternatives. The basic argument is that only ST3 is scientific in itself but that because it is sustained scientifically, it lends credence to ST1 and ST2.

In chapters four through eight, five objections to ST as a scientific discipline are discussed. In chapter four the objection is that scientific theories must be testable but that ST theories are not. The counterargument to this objection is that ST theories are testable through an assessment of their degree

of coherence. Coherence is understood with Nicholas Rescher and Lorenz Puntel as consistency (non-contradiction), cohesiveness, and comprehensiveness of data.

In chapter five the objection is that ST theories are not falsifiable. The counterargument to this objection is that ST theories are falsifiable through an assessment and comparison of overall coherence. If ST theories are clearly less coherent than alternative positions, we should count ST theories as falsified. Since ST is not clearly less coherent than alternative positions, ST is not falsified, but falsifiable, and thus scientific.

In chapter six the objection is that science must be intersubjective but that ST is not. The response to this objection is that ST makes data, tests, and results accessible to other researchers and thus open for criticism. Nevertheless, it is also accepted that ST gains a lower score on the scale of intersubjectivity than other sciences because it is more open to question what counts as data, tests, and results and how good these are. However, this lower score is not found to be compromising.

In chapter seven the objection is that ST is normative, which should not be the case for a science. The counterargument to this objection is to clarify what is meant by normativity. Normativity is seen in two versions, a mild and a strong one. The mild version is unproblematic and present in all scientific disciplines. It is simply to hold a theory to be true about natural entities. The strong version is to hold a theory to be true about supernatural entities. It is argued that this should be accepted because the arguments in chapters four through six have shown that the development of such theories can be done in a legitimately scientific way.

In chapter eight the objection is that a scientific discipline must do good research by virtue of being the discipline that it is. Good research is understood as research that is unique, yet scientific. The objection against ST is that ST is only scientific when it is indistinguishable from related fields like philosophy or religious studies (RS) and that when it is uniquely theological, it is not scientific. The counterargument to this objection is that ST can be distinguished from RS by its focus on truth (strong normativity) and from philosophy by its commitment to specific data and a theistic ontology. This makes ST unique, and with the subconclusions in chapters four through seven it is argued that the work it does is also science, and therefore good research is sustained.

In chapter nine, the conclusion is stated. All the objections against the version of ST presented in the dissertation fail. The answer to the research question is that ST is best construed as a scientific discipline by being thought of as a rationally justified public discourse about God stratified as a tripartite discipline that meets common criteria for science by making scientific progress in the sense of upgrading its degree of coherence.