

Theology as a Science: An Historical and Linguistic Approach

A Position Paper By

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Editor's Note: The "Invited Position Paper" segment is a unique feature to SHERM journal where hand-selected scholars are invited to write their particular standpoint or attitude on a specific issue. While the position paper is intended to engender support for the paper's line of reasoning and overall conclusion, the paper is not intended to be a simple op-ed piece. Rather, each essay must be academic in nature by deriving its position from verifiable data and/or the author's training and experience as a scholar in a particular field of study.

In this particular case, the author was asked to answer the following question:

"Can the study of theology and/or metaphysics be classified currently or ever qualify in the future as a scientific endeavor? Why or why not? If yes, what criteria or methods would need to be in place and practiced to make them scientific? If no, what is it about 'science' that prevents theology and/or metaphysics from qualifying?"

Abstract: This article argues that, given the historical and linguistic background of the terms involved, the study of theology can, in fact, be considered a scientific endeavor, but one must clearly note what is inferred by the term "scientific." Historically, the term "science" or "scientific" has dealt with the realm of knowledge of both the natural and supranatural world. The question of whether theology should be classified as a science arose during the formation of the medieval universities in the thirteenth century, as well as the formation of modern German universities in the nineteenth century. Theologians from Aquinas to Schleiermacher argued that theology should be considered a science and, therefore, a proper subject of study in the university. The affirmation of theology as a science in this article is based on this historical survey, as well as the broader linguistic understanding of the term "science."

Keywords: Theology, Metaphysics, Science, Wissenschaft, Knowledge, Wisdom

Introduction

THE CURRENT DIVIDE BETWEEN science and faith appears ever-widening. Clear battle lines have been drawn and the two camps seem happily separated. As long as each respective discipline stays on their own side, nobody

gets hurt. For some, in both the scientific and theological communities, the question of whether the study of theology could be considered a scientific endeavor deserves an emphatic ‘no.’ For those seeking unity, or with a desire to elevate theology back to a place of prominence in the marketplace of ideas, a quick ‘yes’ is uttered. However, this question has no simple answer. Our initial reactions simply expose our prejudices, even the good ones.

In order to properly answer this question, we need to slow down these prejudgments and recognize the presuppositions we each bring to the discussion. I write this position article as a theologian, not as a scientist, therefore I will examine this question through the lens of theology. It is important to note that this is not the first time this particular question has been raised. The current tension between science and faith makes the issue appear novel, but it has, in fact, been debated for at least eight hundred years. In order to answer this question, we will survey the historical development of the problem in church history, beginning first in the thirteenth century all the way through the formation of nineteenth-century German universities. We will also examine the linguistic issues surrounding the term “science,” particularly how it was used historically in these earlier discussions and the shift of meaning which occurred in the English-speaking West. For me, the question is not whether theology should be considered one of the positive sciences but, rather, how the shift of meaning regarding the term science has affected the way people perceive theology (and the rest of the humanistic sciences, for that matter) as a source of knowledge and truth.

Historical and Linguistic Development

The question of theology’s consideration as a science enjoys a rich history, particularly in the thirteenth century scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas and later in nineteenth-century Germany where the discussion centered on whether theology should be included in university curriculums, the *universitas litterarum*.¹ Before the medieval conception of the university, early Christian

¹ Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany: From F. C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199641918.001.0001>. See also Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), 15–17 and Matthew J. Aragon Bruce, “Schleiermacher and Barth: On Theology as the Science of the Divine Word,” in *Karl Barth in Conversation*, ed. W. Travis McMaken and David Congdon (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 27.

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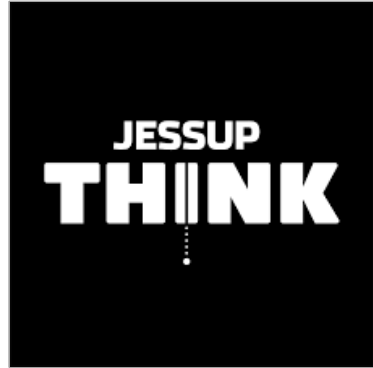
[Mark Moore](#) is an assistant professor of theology at William Jessup University. He holds a PhD in theology and apologetics and focuses his research on theological methodology, creedal theology, and theology in relation to popular culture. He is the cohost of the podcast, Jessup Think, as well as an author and speaker.

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