

Is Theology Respectable as Metaphysics?

Nicholaos Jones

Penultimate version.

Published in *Zygon: Journal of Science & Religion* 42:3 (2008): 579-592.

The final publication is available at www.zygonjournal.org/

Please cite only the published version.

Abstract

Theology involves inquiry into God's nature, God's purposes, and whether certain experiences or pronouncements come from God. These inquiries are metaphysical, part of theology's concern with the veridicality of signs and realities that are independent from humans. Several research programs concerned with the relation between theology and science aim to secure theology's intellectual standing as a metaphysical discipline by showing it to satisfy those criteria that make modern science reputable, on the grounds that modern science embodies contemporary canons of respectability for metaphysical disciplines. But, no matter the ways in which theology qua metaphysics is shown to resemble modern science, these research programs seem to be destined for failure. For, given the currently dominant approaches to understanding modern scientific epistemology, theological reasoning is crucially dissimilar to modern scientific reasoning in virtue of treating the existence of God as an absolute certainty immune to refutation. Barring the development of an epistemology of modern science that is amenable to theology, theology as metaphysics is intellectually disreputable.

Keywords: epistemology; evidentialism; falsification; metaphysics; modern science; rationality; respectability; scientific method; scientific reasoning; theological reasoning; theology

Please address correspondence to:

Nicholaos Jones

Department of Philosophy

Morton Hall 332

University of Alabama in Huntsville

Huntsville, AL 35899 USA

email: nick.jones@uah.edu

Is Theology Respectable as Metaphysics?

1 The Desire for Respectability

Roughly speaking, theology has two components. On the one hand, theology involves inquiry into the significance of (putative) events like Jesus's resurrection and the meaning of claims like "God created man in his own image". These inquiries are hermeneutic, part of theology's concern with the interpretation of various revelations, texts, historical events, and signs in general. On the other hand, theology involves inquiry into God's nature, God's purposes, and whether certain experiences or pronouncements come from God. These inquiries are metaphysical, part of theology's concern with the veridicality of signs and realities that are independent from humans. (These are concerns within "Western" or Abrahamic theologies; the paper is restricted in scope to a discussion of these kinds of theology.)

The hermeneutic and metaphysical aspects of theology are interdependent. The significance of a sign often depends upon its truth or source; and whether a sign is true often depends upon its meaning. Nonetheless, it is possible to consider these components of theology separately, asking of each kind of inquiry whether it is a respectable kind of inquiry. For example, one might ask whether theological methods of interpretation are respectable methods, without regard for whether its methods of supporting metaphysical claims are respectable. This paper focuses on the respectability of theology as a metaphysical discipline, ignoring the issue of whether the hermeneutic component of theology is respectable. (Accordingly, terms like *respectable*, *reputable*, and their cognates are used as applying to the metaphysical component of theology. For instance, the claim that theology is respectable should be understood as the claim that theology is respectable as a metaphysical discipline.)

Considering the metaphysical component of theology, Nancey Murphy notes that "The development of scientific method at the beginning of the modern period had dramatic effects on epistemology, and theology's inability to account for itself in the terms of that new epistemology has been devastating" (2001, 513). Taking this sentiment to heart, some contemporary advocates of theology seek to restore its reputation (as a metaphysical discipline). Their task is made difficult by the apparent fact that "The empirical sciences have control of human rationality, in the sense that they are, today, the arbiters of what constitutes the reasonable" (Gerhart and Russell 1996, 121). If modern empirical science today embodies the canons of respectability (for metaphysical disciplines), it seems that the only way to redeem theology as metaphysics is to show that it satisfies whatever criteria make modern science reputable.

Several authors undertake this task. Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp (1996, 134) propose a theory of rationality for religious beliefs that is "best understood in terms of the 'inference to the best explanation' model adopted from the philosophy of science." Similarly, Arthur Peacocke (2000) argues that theology should adopt inference to the best explanation as a primary form of reasoning. David Klemm and William Klink suggest that the way to make theology relevant today, in the way that it was relevant during the time of figures like Paul Tillich and Martin Buber, is to have theology model itself after science by making testable knowledge claims (2003, 498). (Klemm and Klink "intend to

generalize our way of understanding scientific method to theological thinking, which means grappling with the question of how theological models can be shown to be wrong or inadequate" (2003, 500).)

These research programs, and others like them, promise to show that theology is reputable -- or, at least, that it can be made to be so. Such programs seem to assume that the way to fulfill this promise is to demonstrate that theological reasoning conforms to the key elements of modern scientific reasoning. For each program identifies some important feature of scientific reasoning and proceeds to advocate the adoption of that feature within theology. But, no matter the ways in which theology is shown (or made) to resemble modern science, these research programs seem to be destined for failure. They cannot succeed in showing (or making) theology respectable as metaphysics, because modern science constitutes the canons of respectable reasoning for metaphysical disciplines; but, given the currently dominant frameworks for understanding modern scientific epistemology, theological reasoning is crucially dissimilar to modern scientific reasoning, in virtue of treating the existence of God as an absolute certainty immune to refutation.

The remainder of this paper develops the details of this argument and rebuts three objections, namely: that theology has canons of respectability independent of the canons given by modern science; that the argument is dialectically impotent because the status of modern science as arbiter of respectable reasoning is an historical accident; and that religious life does not require treating the existence of God as an absolute certainty. The paper ignores the issue of whether theology is respectable as an hermeneutic discipline.

2 The Respectability Argument

One way to secure the intellectual reputation of theology, given the hegemony of modern science on such matters, is to show that theological reasoning is relevantly analogous to modern scientific reasoning. For example, Nancey Murphy claims that, "given an adequate account of scientific reasoning, it can be shown that theological reasoning does, or at least could, meet exactly the same criteria ..." (2001, 513). According to Murphy, theology "must be ... the science of God. And its claims must be supported by means of arguments [which] turn out to be very similar, in their form and complexity, to those used to support scientific research programs" (1996, 153). Philip Clayton (1997, 96) concurs, holding that "the theoretical activity of scientists reveals crucial parallels with that of theologians and religious believers."

Murphy and Clayton, as representative of those concerned to restore theology's reputation in the modern world, seem to endorse the following Respectability Argument:

- (1) Modern empirical science constitutes the canons of respectable reasoning.
- (2) *Hence*, a discipline is respectable just in case reasoning within that discipline is relevantly similar to modern scientific reasoning.
- (3) Theological reasoning is relevantly similar to that of modern science.

(4) *Therefore*, theology is respectable.

The first premise reflects what seems to be the dominant contemporary attitude toward empirical science. The second premise makes this attitude more precise. Regarding the third premise, Murphy claims that theological reasoning is relevantly similar to modern scientific reasoning because they are identical; Clayton is more reserved, only claiming that the two methods of reasoning are crucially analogous.

3 Is Modern Science the Standard of Respectability?

Nicholas Wolterstorff apparently rejects the first premise of the Respectability Argument. He takes rationality, and so respectability, to be a matter of "being entitled to hold some belief" (1996, 146). He then considers a situation in which theological reasoning does not resemble scientific reasoning, so that it would be disreputable to hold certain theological beliefs if modern science were constitutive of the canons of respectability. But he denies that it would be disreputable to hold those beliefs in such a situation, on the grounds that scientific standards of respectability do not dictate when theological reasoning is respectable. According to Wolterstorff,

... the Christian community is obligated to assess the import of whatever is seriously alleged against its beliefs. But it will have to assess the import *for itself*, and act accordingly. I fail to see any reason for supposing that, just because the verdict of the majority of the scholarly community goes against it, the Christian community is no longer entitled to its beliefs (1996, 148).

Wolterstorff's claim seems to be that the theological community has its own standards of respectability. This entails that whether beliefs or modes of reasoning violate *scientific* standards of respectability is irrelevant to the *theological* appraisal of those beliefs or modes of reasoning.

Although Wolterstorff's approach is admirable for its insistence that modern empirical science is not the sole measure of respectable reasoning, it is unsatisfying, for at least two reasons. First, both scientific reasoning and theological reasoning are *human* reasoning. So there is a *prima-facie* expectation that canons of respectability are invariant across disciplines. Wolterstorff gives no reason for supposing that this expectation does not apply to the relation between scientific and theological reasoning. Secondly, Wolterstorff's approach ignores the dominant modern attitude toward science, according to which modern science not only *exemplifies* the canons of respectable human reasoning, but also *constitutes* those canons. Since there is no standard for respectable reasoning that is independent of modern scientific canons, to say that each discipline is its own standard of respectability is, in effect, to obliterate the distinction between reputable disciplines and disreputable ones. For without an independent standard, anyone may claim respectability for any mode of reasoning.

This point deserves elaboration. Some disciplines are respectable and others are not -- modern engineering and numerology are cases in point, respectively. Accordingly, there must be some standard that distinguishes the respectable disciplines from the disreputable ones. This standard cannot be relative to each discipline, lest there be no

possibility of legitimately (and categorically) judging a discipline to be disreputable. But clearly sometimes such judgments are legitimate (and categorical).

For the modern mindset, the standard of respectability is modern empirical science. It is part of the dominant modern attitude that a discipline is respectable only if reasoning within the discipline does not violate the canons of reasoning exemplified by modern science. Hence, contra Wolterstorff, the reason that the Christian community would no longer be entitled to its beliefs if the majority of the scholarly community were to go against it, is that the majority (presumably) accepts the standards of modern science, and those standards *dictate* -- at least in the modern world -- when one is entitled to one's beliefs. This is not a fallacious appeal to the authority of the many, or even to the authority of a select academic minority.

4 Does it Matter Whether Modern Science is the Standard of Respectability?

If modern science is the standard of respectable reasoning, it seems as if those disciplines that do not conform to the canons of modern scientific reasoning are disreputable. One might object to this line of argument, on the grounds that the status of modern science as the arbiter of respectability is merely an historical accident. (See, for example, Holcomb 2001.) According to this objection, empirical science's status is not justified, because it is an historical accident that science is nowadays the dominant paradigm of thought. At other times and in other places, other disciplines provide the canons of respectable reasoning. So there is no good reason for accepting modern science as the arbiter of respectability.

The objection continues in the following manner. Since this status of modern science is unjustified, criticisms of other forms of reasoning based upon appeal to the canons of modern science are unjustified. There is no good *epistemic* reasoning for finding such criticisms persuasive unless one antecedently assumes that modern science provides the canons of respectability. But this is a question-begging assumption for those who reason within a discipline that violates such canons. Hence, criticisms of other disciplines based upon appeal to the canons of modern science lack dialectical force -- they are preaching to the science-enamored choir, so to speak, full of sound and fury but dialectically bankrupt.

This objection is a curious one. It assumes that the phrase 'respectable reasoning' could have a meaning that is independent of any particular canon of reasoning. For the objection assumes that there could be some reason for selecting one discipline as the standard of respectability rather than some other, and then proceeds to claim that there is no such reason for taking modern science to be such a standard. This assumption is questionable, because a good part of the modern meaning of the phrase 'respectable reasoning' is 'conforms to the canons of modern scientific reasoning'. That is, the canons of modern scientific reasoning are *constitutive* of what it is for reasoning to be respectable -- in the same way that objects in a vault in Paris were at one time constitutive of what it meant for something to be a meter or a gram. So to hold that there could be a form of reasoning that is reputable despite its violating the canons of modern scientific reasoning is either false or else an equivocation on the phrase 'respectable reasoning'. It is analogous to holding that something could be a meter in

length despite having a different length than the standard meter bar in Paris, in the time when that bar was constitutive of what it is to be a meter in length.

The objection is further flawed by its assumption that there is no good epistemic reason for taking modern science to constitute the canons of respectable reasoning. There do seem to be good epistemic reasons -- and not just pragmatic reasons that concern the success or utility of the results of modern science. These reasons can be found in the writings of Charles Peirce (1877).

According to Peirce, one of our primary epistemic goals is to have beliefs that we are confident to be true, beliefs on which we would be willing to bet. Peirce considers several methods of belief formation. One way is to tenaciously repeat something to oneself over and over, isolating oneself from contrary opinions. A second method is to believe whatever one is told by some external authority, on the testimony of that authority. A third method is to believe whatever seems reasonable, to believe whatever one has a natural tendency to believe. Peirce argues that these three methods do not produce confidence in the truth of one's beliefs because, according to these methods, the criterion for whether a belief about the world is true is not the world. Instead, the criterion is oneself or one's authority or one's natural inclinations -- in each case, something person-relative and therefore subject to variation among different groups of humans. Such variations inevitably produce disagreements about what is true, and these disagreements cannot be resolved without adopting a method of belief formation according to which the criterion of truth is not person-relative.

Peirce argues that a fourth method -- the scientific method -- is able to resolve disagreements, and to produce confidence in the truth of one's beliefs about the world, because its criterion of truth is the way the world is. Assuming that the methods enumerated by Peirce are exhaustive, only the scientific method allows us to satisfy our epistemic goal of having beliefs in whose truth we are confident. This is a good epistemic reason for taking the canons of modern science to be constitutive of respectable reasoning. For only reasoning that accords with the canons of scientific method allows us to attain the aforementioned epistemic goal.

Given that modern empirical science constitutes the canons of respectable reasoning, the only way to show that theology is respectable is to show that theological reasoning is relevantly similar to modern scientific reasoning. Hence, it will not do to argue that sometimes reasoning involving a "doxastic venture" or "leap of faith" is respectable (see Bishop and Aijaz 2004; Bishop 2002). For it is not part of the scientific method to accept claims as absolutely certain on the basis of faith alone: whereas forming beliefs on the basis of the scientific method allows for resolution of disagreements about what is true (through comparison of hypotheses with observations or experimental results), forming absolutely certain beliefs on the basis of faith alone does not.

5 Is Theological Reasoning Relevantly Similar to Modern Scientific Reasoning?

Perhaps the most contentious premise of the Respectability Argument is the third, according to which theological reasoning is relevantly similar to modern scientific reasoning. This premise challenges modern stereotypes about the relation between

religion and science. Certainly both scientific and theological reasoning operate at high levels of abstraction, as Thomas Lawson emphasizes (2005, 557). And perhaps Stanley Grenz is correct in saying that both forms of reasoning construct a world for human habitation (2000). But does this make them relevantly similar?

By and large, there are two competing frameworks for understanding the epistemology and methodology of modern science, falsificationism and evidentialism. According to falsificationism, the distinctive feature of modern science is that its claims about the world are falsifiable: for every scientific claim, there is a logically possible circumstance that would count as a refutation of the claim. For instance, according to falsificationism, string theory is scientific to the extent that its predictions are inconsistent with at least some logically possible occurrences. (To the extent that string theory fails to rule out any logically possible circumstances, it is pure mathematics rather than empirical science.) According to evidentialism, the distinctive feature of modern science is the requirement that one's degree of confidence in the truth of a claim be proportional to the evidence one has in support of the claim. For example, according to evidentialism, accepting a plurality of models about the division of labor in social insects is justified to the extent that the available evidence supports each model. (For details about these models and their interrelations, see Mitchell 2002.)

Clayton and Knapp adopt a falsificationist approach in arguing for the third premise of the Respectability Argument. According to Clayton and Knapp, scientific reasoning is rational -- and so respectable -- because its content is constantly held open, in an intersubjective context, to feedback, testing, and rational discussion concerning its descriptive and explanatory adequacy, and because content shown to be less adequate than rival content is rejected (1996, 132-135, 138). "The epistemic requirement for rationality is merely that all beliefs be held open to criticism in principle and that those beliefs (or groups of beliefs) that are shown to be less adequate than their rivals be rejected" (1996, 135). They suggest that theological reasoning, especially as used in Christian apologetics, be made to satisfy these requirements if it does not already satisfy them, by formulating testable hypotheses amenable to intersubjective assessment and genuine feedback, and by avoiding immunization techniques (1996, 138-139). "The goal ... is that theological proposals be available to discussion and criticism in the way that scientific proposals are available to discussion and criticism (or something like that way)" (1996, 140). For theological reasoning is rational -- and thereby respectable -- only insofar as it resembles scientific reasoning. (Note the implicit claim that this account of what makes modern science rational omits nothing that could mark a relevant difference between modern scientific reasoning and theological reasoning.)

Nancey Murphy offers a more elaborate argument in favor of the same premise. Murphy's argument goes beyond Clayton and Knapp's, in virtue of providing a more detailed account of modern science.

- (A) Following Imre Lakatos, Murphy claims that scientific reasoning within a research program is marked by three elements: a hard core, which is a central theory that constitutes the research program; a protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses, which shields the core theory from falsification and contains theories that apply the core theory, theories of instrumentation, and initial

conditions; and data, against which results from the combination of core theory and auxiliary hypotheses is tested.

- (B) *Hence*, scientific reasoning is an activity in which people pursue research programs, using data to test core theories and auxiliary hypotheses, and revising or supplementing auxiliary hypotheses in order to protect the theory core from falsification by data and preserve the research program for as long as possible (2001 p.515).
- (C) Murphy claims that reasoning within (Christian) theology instantiates Lakatos's three elements: the hard core is probably "one's non-negotiable and most general understanding of God and of God's relation to the created order"; auxiliary hypotheses are "the remainder of Christian doctrines: theories of the Church, of the person and work of Christ, and so on" as well as theories of interpretation (in place of theories of instrumentation); data include scripture, history, and religious experience (2001, 516-517). Klemm and Klink make similar claims (2003).
- (D) *Hence*, theological reasoning is *also* an activity in which people pursue research programs, test core theories and auxiliary hypotheses against data, and revise or supplement auxiliary hypotheses in order to protect the theory core from falsification by data and preserve the research program for as long as possible.
- (E) *Therefore*, theological reasoning is identical (and so relevantly similar) to modern scientific reasoning.

Despite these details, Murphy's account of modern science is basically falsificationist. (Lakatos is a well-known advocate of falsificationism.)

Arguments like these proceed in three stages. The first stage lists some characteristics of modern scientific reasoning. The second stage shows that theological reasoning shares these characteristics. The third stage infers that theological reasoning is relevantly similar to modern scientific reasoning in virtue of sharing these characteristics. The arguments given by Murphy and Clayton and Knapp founder at this third stage. Although much of theological reasoning is -- or could be made to be -- similar to modern scientific reasoning in the ways noted, those similarities do not suffice to make theological reasoning respectable because theology treats the existence of God as an absolute certitude that is immune to revision. This attitude toward God's existence violates modern scientific method according to both falsificationism and evidentialism.

5.1 Theology and Falsificationism

The claim that God exists is not like the claim that zero plus one equals one. The claim "zero plus one equals one" is true given base 10 arithmetic but false given base 2 arithmetic. In contrast, if "God exists" is true, it is true given any sort of thought system one cares to adopt. Theology treats the claim that God exists as a categorical claim rather than an hypothetical one. (Categorical claims have the form "p"; hypothetical claims have the form "Given x, p". Admittedly, this distinction is imprecise. For instance, "All swans are white" seems to be categorical, because it affirms of swans unconditionally that they are white. However, the notation of modern formal logic suggests that "All swans are white" is hypothetical, since it has the form "If something is a swan, then it is white". This imprecision does not affect the legitimacy of the

distinction as applied to the claim "God exists", since that claim is not a borderline case like "All swans are white".)

Falsificationism requires of each categorical claim that, in order for it to accord with the canons of modern scientific method, there be some logically possible circumstance that would count as a refutation of the claim. (It is less clear what falsificationism requires of hypothetical claims, such as claims from mathematics; but this issue is irrelevant to the concern about whether claiming that God exists violates the canons of modern science by falsificationist standards.) Whether the claim "God exists" is falsifiable in this way depends on what the term *God* means; this is an artifact of the interdependence between metaphysics and hermeneutics. Still, under any reasonable and plausible interpretation of that term, and in virtue of being the science of God, theology treats the existence of something called "God" not only as a categorical claim about the world, but also as an unquestionable platitude that is to be retained in any circumstance: the existence of evil is evidence of God's purposes for us; the unobservability of God is evidence of God's transcendence; and so on. Hence, according to the falsificationist approach to scientific epistemology, the claim that God exists is not scientific. Accordingly, since theology, as metaphysics, involves reasoning from or presupposing the truth of God's existence, theology is crucially dissimilar to modern science. (See Gilkey 2003 for a similar, but less forcefully stated, criticism.)

One might object to this argument, on the grounds that one should not expect there to be a logically possible situation that would refute God's existence, since "God exists" is a necessary truth. But such an objection is ad hoc. Other necessary truths are either logical truths or hypothetical -- truths like the principle of non-contradiction and the Pythagorean theorem. If "God exists" is a categorical truth, then it is ad hoc to claim that it is also a necessary truth without providing other examples of truths that are both necessary and categorical (and not truths of logic). Barring such examples, one might claim that "God exists" is a hypothetical claim, of the form "Given what we mean by the term 'God', God exists". However, since the history of attempted ontological arguments is riddled with failure, this approach does not seem to be particularly attractive.

5.2 Theology and Evidentialism

Falsificationism entails that theology is crucially dissimilar to modern science, because theology treats God's existence as unfalsifiable. Evidentialism delivers the same verdict, but for the reason that theology treats God's existence as an absolute certitude. For example, Martin Luther famously declares that "The Holy Spirit is no Skeptic, and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience." Dean Martin provides a more contemporary formulation of this attitude:

Concerning such articles of faith as found, for example, in the Christian creeds, the believer has no thought about verification. These beliefs simply stand fast for the man of faith. He treats them as absolutely certain -- not because their truth is well-established but because they form the ground for what can be said and thought within religious life (1984, 602).

The reason that treating the existence of God as an absolute certitude violates the canons of modern science according to evidentialism is not that there is no evidence for the existence of God. Nor is it *merely* that the existence of God is treated as a certainty. The reason for the violation is that the evidence does not support such a degree of confidence.

The claim that God exists is an a posteriori claim about the way the world is. Evidence in support of an a posteriori claim itself must be a posteriori, taken from the world. This is because, according to evidentialism, and as expressed by Peirce, the scientific criterion for the truth of claims about the world is the world itself. This evidence can include formal arguments, such as Thomas Aquinas's five ways, design arguments, or Pascalian wagers. It can include less formal reasons, such as appeals to personal experience or appeals to the guidance of conscience. For the sake of argument, this evidence even can be allowed to be convincing only to those who already accept that God exists. (That evidence in support of an a posteriori claim must be a posteriori would be false if there were a successful ontological argument in favor of God's existence, since such an argument would provide a priori evidence for an a posteriori claim. But, as noted, the prospects for such an argument are dim.)

Whatever evidence is marshaled, it can support the claim that God exists only in a way that renders that claim highly probable. For all a posteriori evidence for a claim only supports that claim in a way that makes the claim highly probable (at best). Perhaps the evidence marshaled in support of God's existence gives an incredibly high degree of support to confidence in belief in the existence of God. Even so, this degree of support falls short of certainty, since the evidence is a posteriori and hence at most can support a near-certain degree of confidence in any belief.

There are those who, like Blaise Pascal, John Locke, and Cardinal John Henry Newman, suppose that this conclusion does not follow, on the grounds that a sufficient confluence of independent evidence, all of which supports a high degree of confidence in a belief, can thereby support a degree of confidence that takes the belief to be certain. But this is false, as is evident from the rules of the probability calculus. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the truth of a belief is the only explanation of any instance of a confluence of evidence. So the evidence in favor of God's existence does not support certainty in the belief that God exists, even granting as relevant all the kinds of a posteriori evidence typically taken to support belief in the existence of God, and even granting that this evidence supports that belief to an incredibly high degree. Hence, since theology takes the existence of God to be a certainty, it violates the canons of modern science according to evidentialism.

6 Does Theology Treat the Existence of God as a Certainty?

On both falsificationist and evidentialist accounts of the epistemology of modern science, theology as a metaphysical discipline is disreputable in the modern world. Those who wish to avoid this conclusion have two options. Either they must allow that theology need not treat the existence of God as certain, in which case theology must abandon any advocacy of or reliance upon an unconditional and unreserved assent to the claim that God exists. Or they must defend an account of modern scientific

methodology that is neither falsificationist nor evidentialism, and that shows theology to accord with the epistemology of modern science.

Abandoning certitude in God's existence seems to be more a concession of defeat than a vindication of theology, since unconditional assent to God's existence has been a hallmark of theology for centuries. Nonetheless, N.K. Verbin provides an argument to suggest that it is possible to treat the existence of God as less than certain without thereby abandoning a hallmark of theology, because it is not in fact a hallmark of religious belief that God's existence be treated as a certitude. Verbin's project is "to point out other believers who are neither mystics, nor martyrs, nor fanatics, who doubt God's goodness, justice and even God's very existence, who do not trust God at various points in their lives, but who play a paradigmatic role for us, *as exemplars of faith*" (2002, 5). So although Verbin is not directly concerned with the respectability of theology, her project is relevant to the issue.

Verbin cites Qoheleth, who is led to doubt whether life has a meaning in the fact of experiences of suffering, death, and injustice, and thereby led to doubt whether there is a God in the world. She cites C.S. Lewis, who questions the presence of God upon the death of his wife; and she mentions Job, who became estranged from God after prolonged suffering and misery. Verbin concludes that

Despair, struggle, and doubt concerning God's reality ... play an integral role within the life of those that we view as our heroes of faith. They are as much a part of the religious life as praise, hope, and trust in God. Expressions of absolute certainty ... are surrounded, both on the personal level as well as on the communal one, by expressions of doubt and mistrust. The believer's relationship with God is constantly challenged. It constantly shifts (2002, 10).

According to Verbin, an attitude of certainty towards God's existence is not an essential part of religious life. Far from it, Verbin takes such an attitude to be inimical to that life: "Being uncertain about God, being confronted with God's hiddenness is part of the very nature and possibility of having faith, coming to it, and losing it. If we imagine this primitive uncertainty disappearing, religious discourse too, as we know it, would disappear" (2002, 32).

Verbin's observations, while interesting, do not show that theology need not treat God's existence as a certitude. (This is no criticism of Verbin's paper, of course, which is not concerned with theology's intellectual reputation.) Theology as a discipline differs from the intellectual life of a religious believer. Although it might very well be the case that uncertainty about God's existence is not required to lead a religious life, it is also the case that theology would cease to exist as a discipline were it to abandon the claim that God exists. Theology is the science of God -- the science of God's nature, God's revelation, God's relation to the world, and so on. In the same way that phlogiston theory ceased to exist upon the discovery that there is no phlogiston, theology would cease to exist as a research program were it to reject the claim that God exists.

Acceptance of the claim that God exists is a necessary part of theology; this is not a claim that theology could abandon without eradicating itself. Hence, so far as theology

is concerned, God's existence is to be treated as an absolute certitude that is not open to falsification. This is compatible with allowing for the fact that religious believers can (and sometimes should) doubt God's existence; but every (traditional) theology invariably will interpret doubt about God's existence as something to be overcome rather than as something in which one may acquiesce.

7 Is There an Alternative Epistemology for Modern Science?

Since theology requires that God's existence be treated as an absolute certainty that is not open to refutation, and since this treatment violates the canons of modern science according to both falsificationist and evidentialist epistemologies, the only hope for restoring theology's respectability lies in developing an alternative account of modern science's epistemology. Such an approach inverts the focus of Murphy, Peacocke, Klemm and Klink, and Clayton and Knapp -- rather than showing that theology fits the scientific mold as usually construed, this approach aims to show that science fits an epistemology that is amenable to theology (and that is superior to rival epistemologies).

For instance, in pursuit of this aim, one might argue that the proper epistemology of modern science is something like Alvin Plantinga's reformed epistemology. According to Plantinga, a belief is warranted if it is both caused by properly functioning belief-forming mechanisms and defended against known objections. (See Plantinga 1993a and 1993b for details.) Plantinga argues that belief in God's existence is warranted in this sense. Hence, if it were shown that the crucial feature of modern science is that its claims are warranted (rather than falsifiable or appropriately supported by evidence), it would follow that theology is relevantly similar to modern science. Developing such an argument, or an argument based upon a different epistemology, is well beyond the scope of this paper.

8 The Respectability Argument Revisited

The upshot of all this is that, barring the development of an epistemology of modern science that is amenable to theology, the Respectability Argument fails to secure the respectability of theology. Furthermore, portions of that argument can be used to show that theology is disreputable. The metaphysical component of theology is respectable just in case it is relevantly similar to modern science, because modern science constitutes the standards of respectability for metaphysical disciplines. There are, admittedly, parallels between scientific and theological reasoning. Both operate at high levels of abstraction; both are activities in which people pursue research programs; both consider claims that are open to revision or refutation. Yet theology, in virtue of being the science of God, treats the existence of God as an absolute certitude immune to refutation. Hence, whether the epistemological canons of modern science are falsificationist or evidentialist, theology violates those canons. Therefore, theology as metaphysics is disreputable. Philosophical research programs that seek to secure the reputation of theology's metaphysical component by showing that theological reasoning conforms to the canons of modern science are dead-ends given our current understanding of modern scientific method, no matter how many parallels they are able to discover between theological and scientific reasoning.

References

- Bishop, John. 2002. "Faith as Doxastic Venture." *Religious Studies* 38: 471-487.
- Bishop, Joseph and Imran Aijaz. 2004. "How to answer the *de jure* question about Christian belief." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 56: 109-129.
- Clayton, Philip. 1997. "Philosophy of Science: What One Needs to Know." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 32(1): 95-104.
- Clayton, Philip and Steven Knapp. 1996. "Rationality and Christian Self-Conceptions." In *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue*, ed. W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman, 131-142. New York: Routledge.
- Gerhart, Mary and Allan Melvin Russell. 1996. "Mathematics, Empirical Science, and Religion." In *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue*, ed. W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman, 121-129. New York: Routledge.
- Gilkey, Langdon. 2003. "Problems and Possibilities of Theological Models: Responding to David Klemm and William Klink." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 38(3): 529-534.
- Grenz, Stanley J. 2000. "Why Do Theologians Need to be Scientists?" *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 35(2): 331-256.
- Holcomb, Justin S. 2001. "Knowledge Falsely So-called: The Theological Case Against Scientific Realism." *Quodlibet* 3(3): available online.
- Klemm, David E. and William H. Klink. 2003. "Constructing and Testing Theological Models." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 38(3): 495-528.
- Lawson, E. Thomas. 2005. "A New Look at the Science-and-Religion Dialogue." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 40(3): 555-564.
- Martin, Dean. 1984. "On Certainty and Religious Belief." *Religious Studies* 20: 593-613.
- Mitchell, Sandra D. 2002. "Integrative Pluralism." *Biology and Philosophy* 17: 55-70.
- Murphy, Nancey. 1996. "On the Nature of Theology." In *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue*, ed. W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman, 151-159. New York: Routledge.
- . 2001. "Theology and Scientific Methodology." In *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson, et. al, 513-530. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Peacocke, Arthur. 2001. "Science and the Future of Theology: Critical Issues." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 35(1): 119-140.
- Peirce, Charles S. 1877. "The Fixation of Belief." *Popular Science Monthly* 12: 1-15.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 1993a. *Warrant: The Current Debate*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 1993b. *Warrant and Proper Function*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Verbin, N.K. 2002. "Uncertainty and Religious Belief." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 51: 1-37.
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 1996. "Entitled Christian Belief." In *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue*, ed. W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman, 145-150. New York: Routledge.