

Theology as Science

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Since I retired from the parish ministry in September of 1994 I have been writing and teaching in several contexts. This Fall I will be teaching "Theology" to a group of Lay leaders under the jurisdiction of my denominations Church Leadership Institute.

What I will do is present "Theology" in a style and language that non-professionals can grasp, without oversimplifying the material. It occurred to me as I began to review the course in my mind that some of the foundation principles might be of interest to my general readership. So, we will give it a try and hope I'm right.

The first observation I would make is that "Theology" is a science. The prefix is the Greek word for God. The suffix is the Greek word "logos," or reason, speech, science. The distinction made between "science" and "religion" is essentially a false one. All science, including theology, is based on the laws of reason, both inductive and deductive.

Induction works from the data to general conclusions, which are then tested. Deduction works from tested conclusions, through logic, to further conclusions.

The various sciences use differing standards as to what they will admit as data. As an illustration, the physical sciences will not admit data which is not observable, repeatable and constant. Newton's apple always fell down; never up. History and Archaeology on the other hand could not use those standards. Their data is often one of a kind - documents, artifacts,

inscriptions, buildings and monuments. One approach is no less “scientific” than another.

Theology, or at least biblical theology, uses the data of the Bible as it claims to be “inspired,” or “Spirit Breathed.” A little thought will clarify the logical necessity of such an approach. Since God is an infinite personal spirit, there is no data unless God himself chooses to give it. The finite human mind cannot figure out God. Only God can give us data about God. For Jews and Christians that body of data is contained in the Hebrew and Greek scripture.

What usually happens when religion is disparaged as “unscientific” is that the accuser refuses to accept the data the theologian works with. This kind of narrow thinking is common today. The biologist may refuse to recognize the data of the historian, or the historian may refuse to permit the data of the archaeologist. It would be more accurate to use the term “unbeliever” than “unscientific” in such cases. The scientific methodology is used by the theologian as rigorously as it is used by the physicist. The difference is in what is permitted in the “science” as data.

All science, including theology, must submit its data to the critical test of reason. However, that test is the same for all science. One science cannot apply its criterion for data to another science, which uses a different standard. All data used by any particular science must be rationally consistent with all other data being used. In addition it must fit the available facts.

Let me illustrate with the biblical story of Jericho, which, in theology, bears on God's choosing of Israel and his placing them in the Chosen Land. The archaeologist is limited by the rules of the game to the evidence of material culture exposed in carefully conducted field work. Without getting into the details of the excavations, it does appear that neither Garstang nor Kenyon turned up direct evidence of a city in the time of Joshua, although Garstang found pottery from the time of Joshua. Some archaeologists have concluded from this that the biblical story is not true. On the other hand, the theologian can use data from the Bible, which the archaeologists cannot properly use within the constraints of their own science. Biblical theologians may conclude that the story of early Israel is true on the basis of their available data. However, the facts of archaeological science cannot be dismissed. Whatever explanation is given it must take into consideration all the facts. Several reconstructions of the available facts of the Joshua story are possible without rejecting the details given in the Bible.

It is not uncommon for all the sciences to break their own rules of evidence. Theologians draw conclusions not warranted by the information given in Scripture. Physical scientists set forth conclusions for which no evidence exists.

The theory of evolution is a case in point. In the physical sciences all data must be observable, repeatable and constant. It is obvious

that no scientist observed the beginning of the universe, nor can it be repeated nor tested for consistency. In order to give an explanation of origins the physical scientist has to leave his discipline and become a philosopher or a theologian. However, there seems to be a reluctance to admit this limitation. Many have refused to concede that philosophy and theology are legitimate sciences in their own right, and in so doing they have painted themselves into the corner of absurdity.

Theology, must take into account the facts of science, but there is no need to concede conclusions based on cheating. Similarity and orderliness in nature is much better explained by a common Designer/Creator than by assigning it to chance. In sympathy with the physical scientist, we understand this information is not admissible within the rules of his game. But, he should understand that his game is not the only one in town.

The biblical story of the battle of Jericho is a clear illustration of different approaches to the Bible precisely because it contains supernatural elements. For a biblical theologian God has both acted and spoken in and to the world. What God has done and what he has said are recorded in the sacred text through the influence of the Spirit of God upon the writers. Thus, the story of Joshua and Jericho do not need to be “proved.” They are the raw data of theology.

On the other hand, the atheist, the liberal biblical scholar or any other anti-supernaturalist will reject the Jericho story immediately, and without critical consideration. If history contains no supernatural interface, then such a story is beyond consideration.

Neither of these positions is a studied conclusion. Both are presuppositions. That is, they are the unproved starting points for the science that is to follow.

For theology the story of Jericho does not have to be proved, but it is not freestanding. If it is accepted as true, it should fit with other facts available. It should also be consistent with other information we have about God from scripture.

I am reading a new book written by Israeli scholars, Chaim Herzog and Mordechai Gichon entitled “BATTLES OF THE BIBLE.” Both men are historians with a military background. Their approach to the campaign of Joshua is interesting, because they are not concerned with miracles, but with military strategy. They observe, “This logical strategy, so alien to purely mythological tales of war and conquests, is proof for the existence of an essentially true kernel of the biblical account.” They compare the encircling maneuver of the Israeli army around the city to similar strategies used by Rome, Britain and Egypt in

ancient, as well as modern, times. In other words, the story fits the facts we know about how battles are fought.

This kind of demonstration, that the knowledge that comes from the Bible fits well with other branches of human study, is what is required from the science of Theology. What cannot be accepted is the demand that theology accept the restrictive definitions of acceptable data other sciences use. And certainly the theologian cannot be required to concede to the presuppositions of opposing philosophies. Such demands are irrational and even ludicrous.