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Distinguishing Doctrine and Theological Theory – A Tool for Exploring the Interface between Science and Faith¹

This article explores the value of the distinction between doctrine and theological theory for creating space at the interface between the natural sciences and theology. It argues that in a taxonomy of theological statements, doctrines have a different role and greater weight from theological theories. Doctrines express the teachings of the church that guard Christian identity and regulate the Christian life. As such they also make truth claims that can be in tension with scientific theories, for example concerning the origin of the human species. However, these tensions are often experienced more particularly at the level of theological theories, which are developed to gain a deeper understanding of the reality of the Gospel behind these doctrines. Though these theories are important as an expression of our desire to know God, in order to understand the different facets of human experience and for apologetic reasons, they are of secondary importance compared to doctrines and should be held more lightly. Because theological theories are often more deeply shaped by available cultural thought-forms than doctrines, they can be and sometimes should be exchanged for alternatives that make more sense in the light of the totality of our experience, including insights gained from the natural sciences.

Keywords: doctrine, theological theory, scriptural authority, truth claims, dogma, the Eucharist

Introduction

Many Christians and non-Christians perceive a deep tension between the modern evolutionary account of the origin of the human species and the biblical narrative. For Christians this may be a reason to reject certain

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findings of evolutionary science, for the latter to reject the biblical picture altogether. And for some it simply leads to 'cognitive dissonance'; they experience a profound strain between deeply held convictions in different areas of their lives and in the responsibilities they have to the different communities to which they belong.

This tension is perceived and experienced at two different levels. The first is a conflict between the biblical description of human origins, particularly in Genesis 1-3, and the evolutionary account. Part of the solution is the development of a greater hermeneutical sophistication. How do these particular biblical texts work, what is their genre and what did their divine and human authors want to communicate through them? A further hermeneutical issue concerns the incidental cultural meaning and the core theological meaning of a text: if the human author of Genesis 2 did indeed think that the first human being was made out of mud, does this necessarily mean we ought to accept this detail as an authoritative part of the biblical message?

This article concentrates on a second level of tension, namely between the perceived implications of evolutionary theory and foundational Christian doctrines. The tension is not just between two different pictures, but between two fundamentally different understandings of what it means to be human. For instance, the traditional Christian belief in the soul maintains that humankind is distinct from the rest of creation and the animal kingdom because human beings are endowed with a spiritual and eternal soul which other creatures do not have.² In contrast, evolutionary theory suggests a much greater continuity between the human species and the rest of the animal world. Similarly, it is argued that the Christian understanding of sin as not endemic to original human nature (human beings were created guiltless) presupposes a historic fall. Moreover, according to a widely held logic, the goodness of the Creator can only be safeguarded if death came into the world as a consequence of human disobedience.

This perceived tension between biological evolution and biblical doctrine runs deeper than the strain between the related pictures in Genesis and evolutionary science.³ For these relevant doctrines rely not only upon the content of the first few chapters of Genesis and, one could argue, little may be lost to these doctrines if these chapters never existed in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Of course, our doctrine of creation would lose some of

2 Some Christian theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, hold that animals also have souls, but that humankind is unique in having an eternal soul.

3 The argument developed here presupposes a post-foundationalist understanding of the relationship between Christian doctrine and the Scriptures; cf. Grenz, S.J. & Franke, J.R. *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (2001)). In a foundationalist model even the most central Christian doctrines always have an authority which is lower than the actual words of Scripture, e.g. Erickson, M.J. *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker (1983 – 1985), pp. 79f.

its rich detail, but the doctrines of the goodness of both creation and of the Creator and of the reality of sin do not depend solely on these particular chapters. Yet, if science did indeed undermine the fundamental Christian doctrines concerning (a) the uniqueness of humankind as created in the image of God, (b) the fact that sin remains a 'second nature' rather than our true nature and (c) the goodness of God, this would demand a radical reinterpretation of the historic understanding of the Gospel. If we want to hold on to the belief that the Christian faith deals with the nature and salvation of our concrete historical and created existence, then we cannot appeal to 'non-overlapping *magisteria*' in order to eradicate the tension.⁴

A proper consideration of these issues will need to look critically at both the evolutionary science and the theology involved. How well are the scientific theories established? What are the virtually inescapable conclusions and what are simply conjectures on the basis of limited data? What is proper science and what are ideological extrapolations that cloak themselves with the authority of scientific discovery? We must equally question the theology involved and distinguish our own *understanding* of biblical truth from the truth which belongs to God himself. '[W]e must be careful to recognize that our understanding and interpretation are influenced by our own circumstances in history, lest we mistakenly identify the form in which we state a biblical teaching with its biblical essence.'⁵

This article focuses on an important methodological issue when considering the question of human origins. I take it as given that not all doctrinal convictions are equally important or authoritative. I propose that a helpful way of distinguishing between what is closer or further removed from the core of the Christian faith is the distinction between 'doctrines' and 'theological theories'. In conformity with its original meaning, I use 'doctrine' to refer to what the Church teaches on the basis of the canonical Scriptures concerning the nature of God, of the human condition and salvation in Christ through the Holy Spirit. 'Theological theories' are theoretical efforts at making sense of the reality that is the object of the church's teaching. The doctrine of original sin, for example, *teaches* that every human being is naturally prone to sin and depraved. Theologians have developed different *theories* which explain how the unity of the human race can be understood in relation to original sin, such as the idea of a natural unity as expressed by Augustine or the idea of a federal or covenantal unity as expressed by Calvin.⁶

4 contra Gould, S.J. *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, New York: Ballantine (1999).

5 Erickson *op. cit.*, (3), p. 124.

6 There are interesting parallels of these distinctions in the natural and social sciences. Theodosius Dobzhanski's dictum 'Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution' could be counted as a *doctrine* or even a *dogma* (Dobzhansky, T. 'Nothing in Biology makes sense except in the light of evolution', *American Biology Teacher* (1973) 35, no. 3,

The truth, validity and relevance of a particular doctrine are not necessarily bound up with one particular theological theory and not even with the availability of any theoretical understanding. Distinguishing between doctrines and theological theories therefore creates space to look critically at different *theological theories* – such as those explaining original sin or the image of God or the origin of evil – while realising that this will not necessarily place more central *doctrines* under unbearable pressure.

We begin by exploring the need to stratify doctrinal commitments in more detail. In the subsequent sections we look at the nature of doctrine and the nature of theological theories. We also explore how the ‘social coefficient’ of knowledge, that is cultural and historical factors, influences theological theories, before drawing conclusions. Throughout the article we focus on the value of this distinction in the context of scientific and theological accounts of human origins.

This article concentrates on the elaboration of this analytical tool. It is part of a wider project ‘Configuring Adam and Eve: Exploring Conceptual Space at the Interface between Theological and Scientific Reflection on Human Origins’ in which a team of scientists, philosophers and theologians have used this and other tools to explore the interface between science and religion.⁷ Elsewhere, I have used this tool to explore the value of the cultural inheritance theory of original sin for the relationship between the doctrine of original sin and contemporary understandings of the co-evolution of human genes and culture.⁸

Doctrine and theological theory

It is intuitively clear that Christian theology needs to distinguish between different levels of certainty, centrality and authority in its statements. All theologians recognise something like a ‘doctrinal taxonomy’,⁹ even if they use different terms to indicate this difference, for example referring to ‘secondary issues’ or *adiaphora* in contrast to *dogma* or, more informally, a ‘Gospel issue’. Theological traditions differ as to how such distinctions should be made. The classical Roman Catholic handbook written by Ludwig Ott makes these distinctions based on the degree to which

125–129). Subsequent *theories* use an increasing field of data to explain the mechanism of natural selection. Darwinism, the New Synthesis (from the 1930s incorporating genetics) and the New Consensus (the currently dominant model incorporating gene/culture co-evolution) are all efforts at explaining the mechanisms involved (I am grateful to Dr Andrew Gosler from Oxford University for this example).

7 This tool has been applied more broadly in collection of popular essays coming out of this project: Rosenberg, S. et al. (eds.) *Finding ourselves after Darwin: Conversations about the Image of God, Original Sin and the Problem of Evil*, Grand Rapids: Baker (forthcoming).

8 van den Toren, B. ‘Human Evolution and a Cultural Understanding of original sin’, *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, (March 2016) 68, no. 1: 1–10.

9 Sawyer, M.J. *The Survivor’s Guide to Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan (2006), chap. 5.

the teachings concerned are explicitly authorised by the Church.¹⁰ Emil Brunner's neo-orthodox perspective is reflected in his focus on the biblical *kerygma* as primary and *dogma* or doctrine as theological reflection that thinks through the nature of God who stands behind the *kerygma*.¹¹ In a traditional evangelical understanding, represented by Millard Erickson's *Biblical Theology*, the level of certainty and authority depends on the relationship to direct pronouncements of Scripture. He outlines six levels of authority and certainty found in Scripture. In descending order they read as:

1. Direct statements of Scripture
2. Direct implications of Scripture
3. Probable implications of Scripture
4. Inductive conclusions from Scripture
5. Conclusions inferred from general revelation
6. Outright speculations.¹²

If scriptural authority is defined within a foundationalist epistemological framework where Scripture is the basis of all our knowledge and everything else is constructed on it, then the above taxonomy seems logical.¹³ It becomes problematic, however, when we realise that it is not always self-evident what different passages of Scripture teach: how should we understand what is said? Given their cultural context, what do these texts simply presuppose and what do they actually affirm? Part of this hermeneutical problem is the question of genre and what different genres intend to do. Most of Scripture does not consist of 'doctrinal statements'. Even if certain doctrines may be implied, their primary intention may be to glorify God, to express emotions, to share wisdom, or to narrate the story of God's covenant with his people. This raises the important question of how we move from the genres of Scripture to the genre of texts that we label 'doctrine' or 'theology'. Given the complexity of interpreting scriptural texts and of working out what God wants to communicate through them, it seems improbable that we would view the words spoken to Job by his friends and his wife, or an offhand remark of king David as more authoritative than the Nicene Creed (325 AD) which was agreed by a Church Council after decades of careful reflection.

The importance of interpretation suggests that we also need to give

10 Ott, L. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, St. Louis: Herder (1960).

11 Brunner, E. *Dogmatics. Vol. 1, The Christian Doctrine of God*, Wyon, O. (trans.), London: Lutterworth Press (1949), pp. 205f.

12 Erickson *op. cit.*, (3), pp. 79f.

13 cf. Topping, R.R. 'The Anti-Foundationalist Challenge to Evangelical Apologetics', *Evangelical Quarterly* (1991) 63, 45–60.

more weight to what we learn from 'general revelation' and from the sciences than we are accustomed to in the evangelical tradition. Thankfully, this is in line with Erickson's practice of theological reflection, although at odds with his principles stated above.¹⁴ Giving more weight to general revelation involves the risk that we diminish God's actions to the level of our ordinary experience. We need to cast a critical eye over our ordinary experience, but we cannot get round the fact that we are always part of a hermeneutical circle between the Scriptures and other dimensions of our experience. This practice is based on the fundamental Christian conviction of the unity of truth, whatever its origin, in conjunction with the long tradition that God speaks to us in two books: the book of Scripture and the book of nature.

A doctrinal taxonomy is not only influenced by theological and hermeneutical considerations, but also by its purpose. Do we distinguish them with regard to their certainty, authority, importance for spirituality and discipleship, or the question of how committed we should be to these doctrines in witness and apologetic dialogue? Such differing taxonomies may show important similarities, but may not be identical.

When reflecting upon human origins, the question is not primarily which beliefs are most certain, but which doctrines are most central to our Christian identity. What beliefs cannot be given up without jeopardising our identity as Christians, before our understanding of ourselves, of salvation and of the Christian life radically changes from both the biblical and historical Christian understanding?

I propose that it is helpful here to distinguish between 'doctrine' and 'theological theory'. In this context, I use 'doctrine' for the more central teachings (the Latin *doctrina* means teaching) that guide the Christian community in its proclamation, discipleship and spirituality. I use 'theological theory' for theoretical efforts at explaining the reality presupposed in these teachings. In this sense, theological theories bear a similarity to scientific theories that are proposed to explain a range of interrelated phenomena. This distinction can of course be made both at the level of the Christian identity on the widest ecumenical level and of the identity of different Christian denominations or movements. In an article predating his influential study *The Nature of Doctrine*,¹⁵ George A. Lindbeck makes a similar distinction between 'doctrinal standards' and 'theological theories' in view of ecumenical dialogue between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches.¹⁶ It is evident that this distinction has an equal importance for ecumenical debate, because it helps to distinguish between doctrinal

14 Erickson, *op. cit.*, (3), pp. 72f.

15 Lindbeck, G.A. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press (1984).

16 Lindbeck, G.A. 'Doctrinal Standards, Theological Theories and Practical Aspects of the Ministry in the Lutheran Churches', in *Evangelium, Welt, Kirche: Schlussbericht Und Refer-*

standards that are crucial to the identity of a certain denominational tradition and theological theories that denominational schools of thought may have used to explain or elaborate these doctrines. This does not by itself determine the truth of a doctrine or theory, but allows for greater flexibility in discussing the latter than the former.

The value and nature of this distinction will become clear by looking at a number of examples. Most Christian denominations *teach* that the Eucharist or Holy Communion is a symbolic meal in which the death of Christ on the cross is remembered and in which Christ is truly present to the communicants.¹⁷ Yet, when it comes to explaining how the presence of Christ may be understood, opinions show a greater difference of opinion. Roman Catholics since the Middle Ages have used Aristotelian metaphysics to explain Christ's presence in terms of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Luther used the same metaphysical tools, but talked about 'consubstantiation'; the bread and wine remaining bread and wine but also becoming the body and blood of Christ. Calvin focused less on the physical elements of bread and wine, and saw the real presence of Christ happening through the presence of the Holy Spirit in the community. More recently, theologians have explored whether we may use speech-act theory to explain what happens in the Eucharist as an example of performative language that does not describe, but creates a new reality.¹⁸

In the introduction I pointed to different theoretical explanations of the unity of the human race and the transmission of sin that is presupposed in the teaching of original sin. Apart from the theories of natural and federal unity, we can also point to the idea that the unity of humankind in sin should be understood as a cultural unity: we inherit the sin of our biological or adoptive parents by being socialised in a family and in the surrounding community.¹⁹

ate Der Römisch-Katholisch / evangelisch-Lutherischen Studienkommission 'Das Evangelium Und Die Kirche', 1967-1971, Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck Verlag; Verlag Knecht (1975), pp. 263-283.

17 The real presence of Christ is denied in the Zwinglian Reformation and currently in the Baptist tradition and its varieties. It could be argued that this is because of the difficulty of understanding Christ's presence as real while wanting to deny what is perceived as an unhelpful Roman Catholic sacramentalism. One does see a return to a greater stress on the presence of Christ in some more recent Baptist documents, e.g. Colwell, J. *Promise and Presence: An Exploration of Sacramental Theology*, Bletchley/Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster (2005). It would be worth exploring whether the fast growing Pentecostal and neo-charismatic churches that have roots in older evangelical often Baptist churches have a stronger sense of the real presence of Christ, but understood in terms of a rich pneumatology.

18 Tinker, M. 'Language, Symbols and Sacraments: was Calvin's View of the Lord's Supper Right?', *Churchman*, (1998) 112, no. 2, 131-149.

19 For the latter position, see e.g. Edwards, D. *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology*, New York: Paulist Press (1999), pp. 64-70.

In the context of evolutionary theory, we should also point to the doctrine of the creation of humankind in the image of God. Here the distinction between doctrine and theological theory is somewhat harder to make, but it is not unreasonable to say that the idea of the image of God is crucial to the teaching of a unique relationship with God and a unique calling in this world. Whether this uniqueness appeals to certain relational features, rational capacities, or function in the order of creation, it is true in each case that the teaching of the *imago Dei* presupposes some kind of human uniqueness alongside the rest of creation. The teaching of the church concerning the uniqueness and calling of humanity can be maintained in combination with a variety of understandings of the image of God.

In the case of the examples mentioned above, the doctrines of the church show a far greater continuity over history than the theological theories which tend to be more deeply influenced by the thought patterns available to make sense of these teachings at the time. The Dutch theologian Henk Berkhof has perceptively noted that the history of the understanding of the image of God should be read in conjunction with the history of philosophical anthropology, which it closely reflects.²⁰ Furthermore, one can equally see this influence when comparing different cultural settings of the global church. It has often been noted that the *Christus Victor* model for understanding the atonement has an enormous appeal in sub-Saharan Africa compared to the forensic understandings imported by Western missionaries. John Kombo from Kenya has similarly shown how the theological models used to understand the Trinity have been deeply influenced by the philosophical terminology at hand in different times and that we should currently explore the heuristic value of certain African concepts to understand and explain the Trinity.²¹

The importance of the distinction between doctrine and theological theory for the interface between science and faith is clear. It allows for a greater flexibility in adapting theological theory in the light of contemporary challenges while maintaining greater continuity with regards to Christian doctrine. Doctrines are primary in guarding the Christian understanding of God and salvation, in maintaining Christian identity and in growing in discipleship. Theological theories have a secondary role in so far as they help us understand these teachings and explain the reality that they presuppose. However, it is imperative to note there is more than one way of understanding and explaining this reality. Doctrines do not stand or fall with a specific theological theory. Both doctrine and theory are important, but both have different functions.

20 Berkhof, H. *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1979), p. 179.

21 Kombo, J.H.O. *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics, and the African Intellectual Culture*, Leiden; Boston: Brill (2007).

The nature and role of doctrine

Discussions concerning the nature and function of doctrine have become central to the theological debate since the publication in 1984 of George Lindbeck's seminal work *The Nature of Doctrine*. Lindbeck criticised what he labelled 'cognitive-propositional' theories championed by conservative Roman Catholics and Protestants who understand doctrine solely as propositions that describe an objective divine reality. He equally criticised liberal 'experiential-expressivist' approaches, which see doctrines exclusively as expressions of religious experiences that can never be captured in human words. Lindbeck proposed a different understanding of religion, doctrine and theology which he called a 'cultural-linguistic' theory. This approach understands religions like cultures, similar to Clifford Geertz's semiotic systems or Wittgensteinian 'language games'. Such cultural systems or language games do not have their primary meaning in relation to an extra-linguistic reality which they describe, but instead reflect the life and practice of a community. Neither do they express pre-linguistic religious experiences. Doctrines, and the practices they regulate, shape religious experience.

In line with this cultural-linguistic understanding, Lindbeck sees the role of doctrine as primarily or exclusively regulative for a particular community. Doctrines are like rules of grammar in that they regulate what language is acceptable in the Christian community. The doctrine concerning the two natures of Christ, for example, does not intend to describe the nature of Christ, but rather to regulate the language of Christian worship, prayer and witness: one should never speak of Christ in a manner that might diminish his full divinity nor in a manner that might diminish his true humanity.²²

In the discussion that has ensued, many commentators have agreed that pointing to the regulative function of doctrine is indeed a crucial insight. Doctrines have a social function in that they draw the boundaries of what beliefs are acceptable within the Christian community. This may not be true of all doctrines but it is for the selected group of doctrines we call dogma and which delineate orthodoxy and heresy.²³ Other doctrines have a broader regulative role in that they give guidance to the Christian life of discipleship in the theatre of the contemporary world.²⁴ This is, however, not the only role of doctrines.

Doctrines provide an interpretation of the biblical canon²⁵ or biblical

22 Lindbeck *op. cit.*, (15), pp. 92ff.

23 McGrath, A.E. *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism*, Oxford/Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell (1990), pp. 37ff.

24 Vanhoozer, K.J. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (2005).

25 *ibid.*

narrative.²⁶ The Scriptures contain a variety of genres yet narrative is possibly the most important. Doctrines provide an interpretation of the biblical story in another genre that is more conducive for the teaching ministry of the church. They help understand and define the character of the main actors in the story: the Trinitarian God who relates to us as Father, Son and Spirit, humanity, Israel and so on.²⁷ As such, doctrines also make truth claims.²⁸ They can only legitimately regulate the Christian life and the life of the church if they are based in the reality of God's self-revelation to us. Otherwise the regulative function of doctrine can easily turn into a power game by which the mighty in the church control dissident groups and marginalise weaker elements. Furthermore, doctrine interprets experience.²⁹ Significant elements of Christian doctrine were generated by the experiences of the first disciples in their encounters with the crucified and risen Christ. Yet, doctrine in turn helps the Christian community interpret a great variety of experiences of suffering and victory in the light of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. At the same time, the experience of Christian believers continues today to challenge certain shallow and flat interpretations of the Christian faith. Therefore, the 'cultural-linguistic' approach Lindbeck offers only finds meaning in, and cannot be separated from, the claims of the other two approaches to doctrine.

We can draw a number of initial conclusions. First, doctrine is crucial to the Christian life, and so is the question of truth. In its doctrines, the church teaches who God is, how He relates to us and how the Christian life should be lived given that this God is God. Second, not all theological reflection has the status of 'doctrine' in this more narrow sense. Theological reflection can also be exploratory, or even speculative as an expression of the desire to love God with our minds, to grow in understanding or to find new ways to give an account of our faith without these ideas having a similar regulative function for the Christian life and community. Third, there is a very limited range of doctrines that have the status of 'dogma' in that denying them does mean undermining what is essential to the Christian understanding of salvation and would place oneself outside the orthodox Christian community.³⁰

With regards to the interface between theological and evolutionary accounts of human nature and the human condition we therefore need to ask the following questions:

26 McGrath *op. cit.*, (23), pp. 52ff.

27 Kelsey, D.H. *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press (1975), pp. 39ff.

28 McGrath *op. cit.*, (23), pp. 72ff.

29 *ibid.*, pp. 66ff.

30 cf. Schleiermacher, F. *The Christian Faith*, Mackintosh, H.R. & Stewart, J.S. (trans.), Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark (1928), par. 22; McGrath, A.E. *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth*, New York: HarperOne (2009), pp. 92ff.

1. Are there Christian anthropological beliefs that have the status of dogma in that they are an *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*? This was an expression in the Lutheran tradition (sometimes ascribed to Luther himself) used with regard to the doctrine of justification.³¹ A doctrine was considered ‘an article (of faith) by which the church stands or falls’, because our salvation depends on this truth. Distinguishing which doctrines are and which aren’t essential to the Christian identity is itself a matter of debate. Most theologians agree that the doctrine of original sin does imply the idea that all human beings have from birth an enslaving sinful disposition. Many also believe that this doctrine implies that all human beings inherit original guilt from their parents. The latter view may not only be based on a questionable exegesis of Romans 5, but also on an understanding of infant baptism as needed for the forgiveness of inherited original guilt. Others may provide a different exegesis of Romans 5 and either opt for believer’s baptism or for baptism as a sign of the entrance into the eschatological new life in Christ that does not depend on the secondary meaning of baptism as forgiveness of sins.³²
2. Which Christian anthropological beliefs have a regulative function in relation to the Christian understanding of God, the Christian identity and Christian discipleship and should, if at all possible, be carefully guarded? We may be helped here by the classic Anglican distinction between the *esse* and *bene esse* of the church.³³ Dogmas are essential for the ‘being’ of the church: they are essential to its identity. Other doctrines may be important for the ‘well-being’ of the church: they are to be defended because believing in them and the corresponding practices is important for the well-being of the Christian community. For example, personally, I believe that the doctrinal debate between infant and believer’s baptism is not a dogma: it is not a doctrine that should define the social boundaries of the church (such as the doctrine of the Trinity) and that therefore automatically labels those who deny infant baptism heretics. The doctrine and practice of infant baptism is, however, a great gift to the church and therefore important for its *bene esse*.
3. Which Christian anthropological beliefs function like theological theories of a more explanatory, exploratory or even speculative nature which we should hold in esteem as our inheritance but hold more lightly than doctrine and indeed dogma?

Let us now explore the nature and function of such theories.

31 Theodor Mählmann, ‘*Articulus Stantis et (vel) Cadentis Ecclesiae*’, Betz, H.D. et al. (eds.) *Religion Past & Present: Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, Leiden/Boston: Brill (2007).

32 cf. Cullmann, O. *Baptism in the New Testament*, London: SCM Press (1950).

33 Lindbeck *op. cit.*, (16), p. 266.

The nature and role of theological theories

In practice people tend to identify strongly with certain theological theories. This may be, first, because theological theories have often divided different Christian traditions and therefore determined Christian identities in times when theologians had the luxury of spending most energy on internal Christian divisions. Second, we are often more aware of the limitations of the theological theories we do not agree with than of those we embrace ourselves. Those who adhere to a particular theological theory will often be aware that it should not be developed where it distorts our understanding of God or of the Christian life. For instance, most defenders of a Calvinist understanding of providence will stop short of fatalistic conclusions, not because of anything in their theory but because of the reality they try to understand. Similarly, Roman Catholics are well aware that the transubstantiation understanding of the Eucharist cannot be extrapolated to the point which suggests that grace is automatically received independent of the attitude of the communicant.³⁴ Third, theological theories are based on foundational metaphors.³⁵ As such they present ‘pictures’ and are therefore closely related to metaphors that are central to people’s spirituality (the social metaphor for the Trinity, the forensic metaphor for the work of Christ, the federal model for original sin etc.). Fourth, metaphors often have a degree of plausibility precisely because they reflect the dominant patterns of our culture or sub-culture.

We need to realise, however, that metaphors can never replace the reality which they describe (e.g. the Trinity isn’t a family) and that multiple models may actually be needed to understand complex and multi-layered realities. There are at least three reasons why theological theories, and the corresponding theological metaphors or models, remain secondary compared to the corresponding doctrines.

1. Contrary to our strong attachment to theological theories, such theories are theologically one step removed from day-to-day Christian proclamation and discipleship. The church proclaims that Jesus Christ is God with us, but does not proclaim a theory about the *communicatio idiomatum*. Christian self-understanding and spirituality is deeply influenced by the doctrine of original sin, but not as directly

³⁴ We should furthermore realise that even in science there are limitations to a theory. A single anomaly does not falsify an explanatory theory. Such anomalies are rather invitations to further exploration or to use additional hypotheses (Duhem, P.M.M. *La théorie physique: son objet, sa structure*, Paris: M. Rivière (1914); McGrath, A.E. *A Scientific Theology*, vol. 3, *Theory*, London/ New York: T. & T. Clark (2006), pp. 204ff). The question is rather which scientific theory gives the best explanation of the widest range of phenomena. This is a matter of judgment, not least a matter of judgment concerning which phenomena should be taken into consideration.

³⁵ cf. Gunton, C.E. *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1989).

by a specific model, for example a federal understanding of the unity of the human race.

2. Theological theories are normally easier to change without altering the structure of the Christian faith and identity than doctrines are. Using the model of a web in W.V. Quine and J.S. Ullian's *The Web of Belief*,³⁶ we can say that these theories are one step further removed from where the web of Christian belief touches the reality of God's revelation in Christ and the practice of the Christian life. According to Quine and Ullian, beliefs are like a web of convictions that are all closely intertwined, but that are only related to our experience of reality through a conglomerate of interpretative models that help us make sense of reality. In practice, different theories are able to make sense of a whole range of experiences.³⁷ Where central Christian doctrines are meant to safeguard the truth of Christ we encounter in the Scriptures, these central doctrines may be combined with a variety of theological theories in the web of belief, theories that are one step further removed from where this web touches the Scriptures and contemporary religious experience. Similarly, the Christian conviction that sinfulness is like a second nature to every human currently born in this world does not depend on a specific theological theory.

This conviction does not even depend upon having any theoretical explanation at all. Critics of the Christian faith will often suggest that certain aspects of the faith simply cannot be true because we cannot understand them. There are, however, many things we believe without understanding. Believing and the legitimacy of believing that atomic energy, light, love, morality or other persons exist does not depend on my having an adequate theory to explain such realities or to explain how we know them. Even if a theory I once held concerning certain realities subsequently appears to be fatally flawed, I will normally not stop believing in these realities. Rather, I will look for better ways of understanding a reality I know about independently of such theories. The doctrine of original sin is a case in point. According to a famous quotation of Blaise Pascal:

Certainly, nothing jolts us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet, but for this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we remain incomprehensible to ourselves. The knot of our condition was twisted and turned in that abyss, so that it is harder to conceive of

36 Quine, W.V. & Ullian, J.S. *The Web of Belief*, New York: Random House (1978).

37 The statement that beliefs form a web that only relates to reality at the edges does not necessarily lead to a relativistic conclusion as if any web is as good as another. Certain webs of belief do take reality much more seriously than alternatives (cf. van den Tooren, B. *Christian Apologetics as Cross-Cultural Dialogue*, London: T. & T. Clark (2011), pp. 135ff).

man without this mystery than for man to conceive of it himself.³⁸

The fact that it is hard to develop an adequate theory that helps us understand this doctrine does not undermine the fact that it has a solid grounding in both Scripture and in experience.

3. As we have seen, theological theories tend to be more deeply influenced by available models and patterns of thought, an issue that will receive more attention in the next section.

Theological theories, therefore, only have a *relative* value in relation to doctrines. They do, however, still have *important* value for the Christian faith on at least five different counts.

1. They are an expression of the Christian desire to know God and a call to love him with all our minds – and possibly of a universal human desire to know the truth.³⁹ The medieval maxim *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith that searches to understand) wasn't driven by the idea that faith did not count as knowledge – it did – but rather by the conviction that understanding was a higher form of knowledge which was worth striving for for its own sake.⁴⁰
2. Good theories may help us make better sense of the Scriptures and the doctrines that arise from them. For example, one theological theory about the incarnation may make more sense of the Christ we encounter in the Scriptures than an alternative theory. One theory of the image of God may do better justice to the specific texts on the image of God and the overall biblical picture of human nature, the human condition and the purpose of human existence than alternative theories. The ability to take the concrete shape and varied content of the biblical story and scriptural revelation into account is in fact one of the principle tests for the adequacy of theological theories.
3. Good theological theories help us to make better sense of our overall experience, including the experiences with which the natural and social sciences interact. If the same God who has written the Scriptures has also written the 'book of nature', a good theological theory will help make sense of both. This remains true if we consider the Scriptures as the primary hermeneutical key that should help us to make sense of 'the book of nature'. This is, of course, crucial for the interface between faith and evolutionary science. Theological theo-

38 Pascal, B. *Pensées*, Krailshheimer, A.J. (trans.), London/ New York: Penguin Books/ Penguin Books USA (1995), no. 131.

39 cf. Aristotle *Metaphysics*, Lawson-Tancred, H. (trans.), London/ New York: Penguin Books 1(998), I,1.

40 cf. Anselm of Canterbury, *St Anselm's Proslogion. With a Reply on Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilo and The Author's Reply to Gaunilo*, Charlesworth, M.J. (trans.), Oxford: Clarendon Press (1965), ch. I.

ries will have to make sense not only of the Scriptures, but also of the human being whose true nature, condition and purpose is revealed in the Scripture and who is also studied in evolutionary science.

4. Developing good theological theories is important for apologetic reasons. It is apologetically important that we do not need such theories in order to believe, as we just noted. Yet, many non-Christians cannot believe, even if they would want to, because they cannot reconcile fundamental Christian convictions with what they otherwise 'know' to be true.⁴¹ In this case, Christian apologetics will be greatly helped by an argument that can be developed which either shows that what they believe to be true should be questioned or that a theological theory can accommodate both their view and the relevant doctrine. The apologetic value of theological theory is of course not limited to non-Christians, but also concerns Christians who experience a deep cognitive dissonance between elements of their Christian faith and what they tend to believe for other reasons.
5. Even though doctrines are more important than theological theories for Christian practice, theological theories do have some influence on Christian practice. This is visible, for example, in how different understandings of the mechanics of the Eucharist lead to different attitudes to the consecrated elements of bread and wine. However, the more fundamental experience of and practices related to the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the more fundamental practices of the Christian life do depend on doctrines of the real presence, and not on a specific theory one holds concerning those doctrines. In the same way different understandings of how original sin is propagated may influence the practice of infant baptism. The more fundamental experience of and practices related to the doctrine of original sin, however, do not depend on a specific theological theory.

All this suggests that theological theories function in many ways parallel to scientific theories that through 'abduction'⁴² aim at giving the best

41 In this respect it may not be a problem if certain theological theories are outright speculative, as long as we recognise that this is what they are: speculations. We may for example speculate how we might conceive of a historic fall into sin of the human species somewhere along the line of the evolutionary trajectory of *homo sapiens*. If the Genesis narrative does not intend to give a historical account and given that there is no paleontological or biological evidence of such a fall, developing potential scenarios is necessarily speculative. However, it may still be a worthwhile exercise if it helps argue that an evolutionary account of the development of the human species and the Christian doctrine of the human condition are not inherently at odds but can be synthesised.

42 It seems to me that 'abduction' is a much better way of considering the relationship between Scripture and theology than either induction or deduction. Charles Hodge is a well-known example of the deductive approach (Hodge, C. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1953), pp. 9ff.), though in practice more sophisticated than his theory suggests. This is in itself an interesting clue for further reflection on the value of 'theory'. Both the inductive and deductive approach suppose that the truth of Scripture rests prima-

explanation⁴³ of a certain range of phenomena, in the Scriptures and beyond. What this entails for the practice of theological reflection is clarified by T.F. Torrance's helpful ideas on the 'stratification of truth'.⁴⁴ Following Albert Einstein's lead,⁴⁵ Torrance sees the ontological order of reality as it exists in itself as the true object of science. In the case of theology, the true object is God in himself and in his relationship with the world. The value of 'dogmas' is therefore secondary to what he calls the primary reality of 'dogma' itself, the fundamental datum of divine revelation.⁴⁶ Dogmas, therefore, are only of value because and in so far as they are a window on God's self-revelation. Theology obviously spends much time studying Scripture and the history of dogma, but not as an end in itself. Dogmas rather serve to penetrate beyond them into the reality of God and His self-revelation.

When considering the issues of theological anthropology in relation to modern evolutionary science, we have to consider at least three levels of this stratification of truth. The primary object is the ontological reality of humankind in its relation to God and to the wider creation. The secondary reality is the teaching or doctrine of the church that points to this reality, that has traced a number of its defining characteristics and that has drawn certain boundaries that should be respected in order to understand this reality properly and remain orthodox. On a third level we find a number of theological theories that have been developed to understand and 'explain' the primary reality to which the secondary reality of the teaching of the church points. In their desire to understand, Christian theologians have developed theories that take as much of the phenomena of revelation, creation and history into account as is possible, making critical use of thought patterns available to explore and penetrate this world as it exists in itself.

rily in the words of Scripture, from which other truths may be induced or deduced, rather than in the reality of God's nature and action in history which the words of the Scriptures reveal and witness to. The latter approach does not in any way devalue the Scriptures as if they are no longer themselves the 'Word of God', but recognises that they are the Word of God precisely because they point beyond themselves to a primary reality. The Scriptures are the primary data for theological science, yet the object it tries to understand is not the Scriptures themselves, but the God revealed in the Scriptures.

43 On 'explanation' in theology and other sciences, see: McGrath *op. cit.*, (34), pp. 133ff; Clayton, P. *Explanation from Physics to Theology: An Essay in Rationality and Religion*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1989); Banner, M.C. *The Justification of Science and the Rationality of Religious Belief*, Oxford/ New York: Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press (1990).

44 Torrance, T.F. *Reality and Scientific Theology*, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press (1985), pp. 131–159; cf. Torrance, T.F. *Theological Science*, London/ New York [etc.]: Oxford University Press (1969), pp. 337–352.

45 Torrance *op. cit.*, (44a), pp. 131ff.

46 Torrance *op. cit.*, (44b), p. 344.

The social coefficient of knowledge

Because theology, and human reflection in general, always starts with the models and thought patterns that are initially available, all human thought is somehow bound to its cultural and historical context. We noted how theological reflection on the image of God, the Last Supper, original sin and the Trinity reflects culturally available thought patterns when these theological theories were initially devised. There are additional examples, such as theories of the atonement. For example, it has often been pointed out that St Anselm's theory of the atonement developed in *Cur Deus homo* understood the relationship between God and humanity in terms of the relationship of a feudal Lord with his vassal. This social aspect of knowledge should not drive us to relativistic conclusions, for the fact that all knowledge is personal and social does not mean that it cannot critically relate to a reality that exists independent of this knowledge.

In all authentic knowing we distinguish what we know from our knowing of it and at the same time we distinguish ourselves from whatever we know. ... It is this personal mode of being as subject which is precisely the mode of being in which we are aware of the objective world around us.⁴⁷

The culturally embedded church and the Christian tradition functions, therefore, as the 'social coefficient of knowledge',⁴⁸ in which cultural thought patterns are used to understand the reality of the Trinitarian God and his salvation history as revealed in the Christian Scriptures. Concrete theological ideas always grow in and through the encounter of the Word of God with human thought patterns that are moulded by this new reality, but also tied to the world from which they originate.

[W]e must take into account the fact that all knowledge on man's [*sic*] part is socially, culturally and historically conditioned, so that we have to reckon constantly on a tension between an adequate social coefficient that arises out of actual knowledge of God mediated through his self-revelation and a social coefficient that has as a matter of fact arisen on other grounds in other areas of human experience.⁴⁹

Sometimes such thought patterns are increasingly scrutinised, purified and 'sanctified' so as to become apt to describe the reality of the Trinitarian God, salvation in Christ and the true nature, condition and purpose of human existence. This may have been the case when available Greek terminology such as *ousia* and *hypostatis* was co-opted to describe the nature of the Trinity, but acquired new meaning in order to be able to do justice

47 Torrance *op. cit.*, (44a), p. 109; cf. Polanyi, M. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1962); Toren *op. cit.*, (37), pp. 120ff.

48 Torrance *op. cit.*, (44a), pp. 98ff.

49 *ibid.*, p. 105.

to the unique being of the Triune God.

In other cases, believers may have simply been using cultural thought patterns that were relatively neutral and that could be exchanged for others when these theological ideas were expressed in a changing or different cultural environment. Sometimes theologians may not be able to resist the pressure to adapt to thought forms that are less adequate to express the unique content of the Gospel and they may, therefore, end up with some measure of syncretism between the Gospel and an incompatible approach to reality.

In conclusion: the task ahead

In this article, we have proposed and elaborated a distinction between doctrines as the fundamental teachings of the church and theological theories as theories intended to make sense of those doctrines. We have argued that this distinction helps to create space at the interface between Christian doctrine and developments in the world of science that at first sight seem to be in tension with the Christian doctrines handed over to us. It is just a tool, which is of service only when we start handling it. The many examples used so far can do no more than suggest how this tool may be used. This is where the unavoidable hard work needs to be done when traditional theological theories encounter new challenges such as those related to the evolution of the human species. As Erickson reminds us: ‘The translator must carefully distinguish the message from the interpretations and traditions which have grown up about it. The latter sometimes have become as influential as the message itself.’⁵⁰

In the second section of this article we asked questions that intended to distinguish dogma, in the narrow sense that defines orthodoxy, from other doctrines that have a broader function in the teaching ministry of the church and from theological theory. In the light of the discussion of the social coefficient of knowledge, we need to ask further questions with regard to theological theories. Specifically, we need to disentangle the mixture of genuine engagement with the reality of God and humanity encountered in the Scriptures and in our daily lives, on the one hand, and, on the other, thought forms that are shaped more by the contingencies of cultural and historical influence. The following questions arise at this nexus:

1. To the extent that culturally available frameworks have been used to formulate theological theories, where do they enable deeper understanding?
2. Where do they distort proper understanding of ‘the strange new world in the Bible’ (Karl Barth)?

⁵⁰ Erickson *op. cit.*, (3), p. 118.

3. Where are they simply neutral, neither particularly helpful nor unhelpful and therefore easily exchangeable for thought patterns that might do the same job in today's world?

We should be aware that many sectors of our cultural environment give higher authority to the sciences than to religious faith and theology. This poses the risk that we will give undue precedence to science and allow theological theories to be amended to fit current scientific theories. We should be equally critical of the other pole of the interface between Christian theology and modern science. We should also take note of the distance between the 'web of belief' of the contemporary scientific community (or sections of this community) and the experience of the created order as the second book through which God speaks. We will need to ask questions such as:

1. Where does modern science provide genuinely new insights that need to be taken into account when we want to develop a fuller understanding of what it means to be God's image in a fallen world?
2. Where are modern scientific understandings of what it means to be human deeply flawed because of the culturally determined thought patterns which shape how modern science looks at, and interprets, the evolution of *homo sapiens*?
3. Where do modern understandings represent relatively neutral cultural forms, possibly neither true nor false, neither very helpful nor very dangerous, to which Christian thinkers will still want to relate for apologetic reasons and in order to contextualise the Gospel for the culturally located contemporary scientific western mind.

The distinction between doctrines and theological theories finally means that we should not worry if, for the moment, we are not able to present straightforward solutions to the tensions experienced between Christian doctrine and the current scientific picture of human origins, even if for now we may not be able to detect what is wrong with our understanding of either side of this relationship. Knowing that light or love is real, that other persons exist or that human beings are uniquely created in the image of God and sinful from birth does not depend on convincing theological or scientific theories. We may have good reasons to believe these things even if we have discovered that in our efforts at understanding we are confronted with profound enigmas. In those cases the distinction proposed here provides an encouragement to remain patient and an invitation to further exploration.

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