

On method

An experiential approach to theology – A position paper

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In this short paper I try to clarify the fundamental difference in theological methodology between deduction and induction.

Deduction departs from seemingly irrefutable assumptions (axioms, concepts, Bible texts, canonised doctrines etc.) and draws out inferences from these assumptions that are then taken to be logically compelling, thus true. This method is deceptive and dangerous because (a) the assumptions may be unfounded and (b) the logic may be wrong.

Thus you can depart from the assumptions that God is (a) omnipotent, (b) omniscient and (c) eternal and then deduce from these assumptions that he must have decreed from eternity who was going to be saved and who was going to be condemned. You can arrive at a similar conclusion from selected texts in Romans 9-11, ignoring their biblical context. Such conclusions have caused incredible agonies and wayward actions in Christianity. See my book *Luther's message for us today* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2005) chapter 4.

You can also depart from the assumptions that (a) the biblical Canon is identical with the inspired Word of God, (b) that the Word of God is eternal rather than time and situation specific and (c) that God is perfect and cannot lie. You then deduce from these assumptions that the Bible must be totally without error or imperfection. Again this reasoning has led to untold agonies of conscience because it seems as if Christians have to believe something that contradicts a careful reading of the Bible itself as well as simple observations of fact, thus compromising their integrity. It has also led to inappropriate theologies, decisions and actions. See my book *Biblical Theology in Outline* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications / Pretoria: CB Powell Bible Centre, 2004) chapter 2.

Induction asks what kind of experiences, needs or problems may have motivated biblical authors to formulate certain statements under certain circumstances and what kind of experiences etc. motivate current readers to read what they read out of these texts under their own set of circumstances. In other words, induction tries to reconstruct the faith experiences in time and space that led, and still lead to theological statements.

These circumstances obviously include the kind of thought patterns and traditions in which they are embedded. One can compare, for instance, the creation narrative found in Gen 2:4ff with the creation narrative found in Gen 1:1ff and begin to realise

that they respond to different kinds of questions in different situations and at different times in history. Gen 2 is very archaic and uses a highly symbolic language, while Gen 1 seems to respond to the Babylonian mythology which confronted the Jews during the exile. See my book *Biblical Theology in Outline* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications / Pretoria: CB Powell Bible Centre, 2004) chapter 12 for detail.

One can similarly trace back the term “Son of God” to a tradition, found for instance in ancient Egypt and in Psalm 2, that considers the king to be the representative of God on earth who is adopted by God as his son during the enthronisation ritual. This title was applied to Christ because he was believed to be the messianic king promised by the prophets. Seen in this light, it would be problematic to deduce metaphysical statements about the eternal nature of Christ from the concept. It simply meant that God acted and acts authoritatively and redemptively through Christ, the messianic king.

Historical shifts

A crude sketch of historical developments in theological methodology may put things into perspective. Since the Middle Ages there were the following major shifts in methodology. Steps 1-3 I have gleaned from a philosophical text book:

1. Concepts are real and independent of things (Latin: *universalia sunt realia; universalia sunt ante res*). Plato is the father of this approach. Anselm of Canterbury was the most prominent Christian scholar in this school of thought.

2. Concepts are real but located in things (Latin: *universalia sunt realia; universalia sunt in rebus*). Aristotle is the father of this approach. Thomas Aquinas is the most prominent Christian scholar in this school of thought.

3. Concepts are mere names (Latin: *universalia sunt nomina; universalia sunt post res*). This school is called “nominalism”. Its most important representatives are William of Occam and Duns Scotus.

It is at this stage that concepts are taken to be abstractions from reality and have to be linked to the realities they refer to if they are to carry significance. Ontology (the approach that concentrates on “being” rather than events and actions) becomes suspect as a set of abstraction from actual entities and events as experienced in time and space into ostensibly timeless and universally valid propositions.

Thus the statement “God is love” is no longer taken to be a metaphysical description of God, but an abstraction from experiences in which God had acted redemptively in Christ in concrete situations of need. Ontology absolutises the historically relative by attributing to it timeless and universal validity. Of course, such abstractions may have a pastoral function: “Because God has shown himself to be a loving God in Christ, he will always be a loving God for you, whatever the circumstances.”

However, the danger seen by experientially oriented theologians is that abstractions may become “reified” (= “made real”, that is, taken to be concrete entities existing 'out there' in another sphere of reality) and then used as axioms from which further deductions are made that are not based on experienced reality.

It is in this sense that I used the term speculation in many of my works. I have come to believe that speculation in theology is unfounded in terms of the biblical witness,

deceptive in terms of the quest for truth, and counterproductive in terms of the plausibility of the Christian message in our experience oriented times.

The current usage of the word speculation suggests letting your imagination run wild, or anticipating future movements at the stock exchange in an irresponsible way. Because it tends to have negative connotations, those accused of speculation will often react defensively or aggressively. The point to be made, however, is that the deductive method is as problematic in theology as in other sciences. We need to derive theological statements from faith experiences, not from a metaphysical edifice.

4. During the Enlightenment the deductive approach changed into *rationalism* : true is what can be proved to be true by applying the laws of logical reasoning. Deductions are made from irrefutable axioms or assumptions. Philosophers in this school were Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Wolff. Many theologians followed their lead.

5. The *empiricist* wing of the Enlightenment, in contrast, declared something to be true only if it could be shown to exist by sense perception and its technological extensions. However, for many of these thinkers insight is still located in our psyche and does not necessarily reflect objective reality. Philosophers of this school are Bacon, Locke, Berkeley and Hume.

6. Kant's *transcendentalism* critiques both “pure rationalism” and “pure empiricism”: Insight comes about when the brain processes sense perceptions according to the forms and categories located in the rational faculties of our brains. Objective reality as such is not accessible, we have only 'appearances', brain pictures, of reality.

At this stage it becomes clear that, because the existence of God is neither part of sense perception nor of our reason, it cannot be made plausible. According to Kant it is a practical assumption that underpins the validity of moral norms. It did not take long before even this assumption became suspect.

At this stage it became clear that our relation to God is based, not on reason nor on demonstrated fact, but on faith, that is, on trust. God becomes real to us if we dare to get involved in his creative power, his redemptive love and his comprehensive vision for the universe and our lives as proclaimed in the “Word of God”.

Modernity

What we have observed so far is a gradual shift from deduction to induction. Modern developments in science and technology are based on induction. However, since Kant the experiential component of insight has been broadened considerably. Today even the products of imagination, obsessions, collective mindsets, traditions, internalised assumptions, convictions, values, norms, even visions are also taken to be 'real' (a) in the sense that they have consequences in the real world and (b) in the sense that they can be experimentally shown to exist in the hard wiring of our brain cells.

That does not mean, however, that their referents (the objective reality they are supposed to refer to) are also taken to be real. They are either abstractions or imaginations that are subjectively reified (= taken to have objective reality). Those who have internalised the classical Trinitarian doctrine, for instance, take it to be an 'objective' reality somewhere beyond our earthly experience.

- Those among them, for whom the Platonic or Aristotelian approaches have not lost their validity, may find it entirely plausible. -
- For those among them, whose worldview has turned from Platonic/Aristotelian frames of reference to post-Enlightenment presuppositions, the doctrine lacks rational plausibility and empirical evidence. As a result, it turns into a 'mystery' that has to be believed upon the authority of an official doctrine of the church.
- Those who believe that truth is based on biblical revelation will try to find it in the Bible.

In all these cases, 'mystery' can have a particular attraction because it seems to reflect the divine as opposed to the earthly or human. Those who follow an inductive approach, in contrast, will see no mystery. They take it to be the theological construct of a bygone age that has turned into mystery in modern times because the assumptions that have underpinned it can no longer be taken to be self-evident.

That does not mean that the inductive school rejects the Trinity. On the contrary, it will try to understand it on the basis of what the disciples and the early church may have experienced in faith: The power of the proclamation and the action of Jesus in the name of a merciful God continues to be active after the departure of the earthly Jesus. Their experience is also our experience: It is the Spirit of the risen Christ that acts redemptively in the Body of Christ, the church. Thus: God acts in Christ, and Christ acts in the Spirit.

Missionary imperatives

Among the classical theologians, Martin Luther followed an inductive approach most consistently. The reason was that his interest was pastoral rather than metaphysical. He wanted to reassure believers afflicted by pangs of conscience or pangs of fate that God was for them and with them and not against them. See my book *Luther's message for us today* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2005) chapter 2.

Personally, I have opted for an experiential approach for the following reasons:

- (a) Westerners whom we owe the gospel have generally adopted a mindset geared to the inductive approach of science and technology, but also to the pragmatism, profit orientation and hedonism prevalent in economic life. To reach them with the gospel and to transform their orientation to something socially and ecologically more responsible, one has to enter their experiential frame of reference. For me this is a case of becoming a Jew to the Jews (1 Cor 9:19-23).
- (b) African traditional thought is also inductive rather than deductive, although its worldview assumptions are radically different from those of modernity. Here we find a lot of mythology and ritual, but no metaphysical speculations. What matters is the well-being of the community on this earth.
- (c) Induction is closer to the biblical witness, which is composed of a great variety of responses to actual human needs in concrete situations of need and expressed in particular mindsets. See my book *Biblical Theology in Outline*, quoted above.
- (d) It leads to more realistic and more plausible theological propositions, thus to greater integrity among those who proclaim, believe and act out the gospel.