Religious Studies (2025), **61**, 213–220
doi:10.1017/S0034412523000197

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Would integration with religious studies improve analytic theology?

Andrew C. Dole

Department of Religion, Amherst College, Amherst, MA, USA
Email: adole@amherst.edu

(Received 18 January 2023; revised 21 January 2023; accepted 23 January 2023)

Abstract

William Wood argues that analytic theology can be included as a part of the academic study of religion. He describes two types of benefits to this inclusion: benefits accruing to the study of religion on the one hand, and benefits accruing to analytic theology on the other. I find the first type of benefit that he describes to be real, but think that within the overall compass of the interests of the academic study of religion in Christian traditions it is quite small in scope, even in a context in which doctrines are a topic of particular interest. The second type of benefit, that accruing to analytic theology, is more of a puzzle. On the one hand, I find that one species of benefit that Wood describes with some clarity is unpromising, as it seems to amount to an opportunity for yet more defensive apologetics. But on the other hand, some of what Wood says is compatible with the idea that analytic theology stands to be improved in ways that are not yet clear by engagement with the academic study of religion. I conclude with a critical glance at Wood's attempt to defend analytic theology as a method of inquiry from the charge of historical shallowness.

William Wood's *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion* is strong evidence that analytic theology is maturing. The book is neither a call for the establishment of analytic theology as a distinctive kind of academic work nor an attempt to demonstrate that analytic theology is possible or promising. Wood assumes the existence of working analytic theologians in sufficient numbers that it is possible to generalize about the kind of work they do; the actual existence of analytic theology forms the backdrop to the projects of his book. Of these projects I think two are primary: first, to defend analytic theology as a legitimate species of theology, and second, to argue for its inclusion within the academic study of religion. A third project that appears at several points throughout the book, but which receives little sustained attention, is that of recommending that analytic theologians do things differently than they have done up to now; one thing that contributes to the relatively low profile of this third project is that it mostly appears in the form of partial agreements on Wood's part with criticisms that have been levelled against the movement.

I want to preface my engagement with Wood's arguments with an observation about his overall approach. Wood does not offer an independent, programmatic account of what analytic theology is or should be; readers who want to know what analytic theology *is* will need to piece together an understanding from his various claims about what analytic theologians *do*. I find that this matters for assessing the various cases he makes for

analytic theology. Wood speaks clearly about what analytic theologians are good at doing, and also about some of the traps into which they can fall. But I find myself wanting to know what analytic theology *aims* to accomplish, what it is *for*. Reconstructing an answer to this question from Wood's descriptions of what analytic theologians do yields results that I find unsatisfying; so I hope he will address the question is his own words at some point.

The main thing I want to do here is to engage with Wood's arguments for the inclusion of analytic theology within the academic study of religion. I think he responds well to those religious studies scholars whom he terms 'exclusivists', who 'hold that theology is not a legitimate academic discipline, and who *therefore* would deny it any place in a broader field of religious studies' (Wood (2021), 6, emphasis added). But I want to focus on the positive reasons he offers for inclusion, first on his claims to the effect that analytic theology can contribute to the academic study of religion, and second on what he says about how analytic theology might benefit from being so included. I have chosen the second of these areas as my title for this reflection, largely because I think the title poses an important question that Wood's discussion invites but does not answer in a well-fleshed-out way.

So, first: Wood argues that while analytic theology and the academic study of religion are different forms of academic inquiry, there is enough overlap between the two that 'even as analytic theologians pursue [their] distinctively Christian mission, they may also contribute to the wider enterprise of the study of religions' (*ibid*., 281). In making this case, I take it that Wood utilizes the position he cites from Gregory Alles that 'the aim of the study of religions is knowledge about religions' (*ibid*., 25). The relevant claim, then, is that engagement with analytic theology increases one's knowledge of religion. Here are three passages in which Wood makes this sort of claim:

> I have said that analytic theology is centrally concerned with the normative evaluation of Christian truth claims and practices. This is a distinctively theological task, but it can also contribute to the academic study of religion more generally. First, analytic theologians can help scholars of religion understand the normative core of Christian doctrine. Second, they can also help scholars of religion understand the way theological elites reason, either directly, as a part of their own work, or indirectly, by providing contemporary examples of theological disputation. (*ibid*., 279–280)

> the best analytic theology features a wealth of useful material for scholars who simply want to understand the normative core of the Christian tradition better. (*ibid*., 280)

> Many people really do want to know whether core Christian doctrines make sense, how they could be even possibly true, and how they could be consistent with the natural sciences and other things we take ourselves to know. (*ibid*., 298)

I think that Wood is correct about all of this: I think that one does learn about Christianity, in the ways he specifies, through engaging with analytic theology.[1] Nevertheless, I think that this particular argument does not amount to much. Arguing for the inclusion of analytic theology within the academic study of religion in this way is like arguing that a particular garment should be among those that one wears on a regular basis because it does what all clothing is supposed to do, namely, cover one's nakedness. The fact that a garment does this is certainly a reason to wear it, but at best only a *prima facie* one. Aside from the question of whether there are also reasons *not* to wear that particular garment in spite of its efficacy – a question the analogue to which Wood addresses in engaging his 'exclusivists' – there is the question of *how well* it covers one's nakedness – *how much* of one's nakedness it covers, and whether it covers the bits that stand in need of covering.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Here is a bold claim: one does not learn *very much* about Christianity from analytic theology as Wood describes it – or more precisely, not very much of what there is to be learned about Christianity. Of course, just how much about Christianity one thinks there is to be learned depends on what one takes the phenomenon to be. The one who understands Christianity as just a set of doctrines would learn a great deal about it from analytic theology. Likewise, just how much of the terrain of Christianity one takes analytic theology to cover will vary with the extent to which one takes the orthodoxy of Wood's analytic theologians to be Christianity properly speaking. I raise these points not to challenge Wood's own understanding of Christianity: he affirms that Christianity is more than a set of doctrines, and he does not limit Christianity to his own or anyone else's orthodoxy. But neither he nor his sources say much about what of Christianity lies outside of these boundaries, and in fact one comes away from his book with the impression that analytic theology generally supposes that doctrine (and indeed *orthodox* doctrine, for an unspecified value of 'orthodox'[2]) is the part of Christianity that matters. But there is a great deal more to Christianity than any party's orthodox doctrines. The phenomenon also comprises – I think just about any scholar of religion could offer this sort of list – ethical convictions; political positions and alliances; institutions in multiple varieties; patterns of group organization; styles of art and architecture; music both wonderful and awful; reams of fictional, non-fictional, and hopefully fictional literature; internal subdivisions and sub-subdivisions; relations of affinity, coalition, and hostility with other religions; bank accounts large and small; greater or lesser degrees of economic power; racial affinities and disaffinities; schisms and mergers; miracle workers, entrepreneurs, backsliders, predators, enablers, grifters, boodlers, and rationalizers; revered, maligned and ignored revelators; dynasties; and rich, rich histories attached to every one of these items. A focus on doctrine would seem to leave such material more or less out of the field of view.

Now scholars of religion are specialists, at least by training: both individually and as members of sub-guilds, they have their areas of particular focus. So there are historians of Reformed traditions, medieval musicologists, feminist scholars of fundamentalism, philosophers of religion, specialists in American liberal Protestantism, and so on. *Qua* scholar of religion, the analytic theologian is such a specialist, a specialist in doctrines and practices. As such a specialist, she can rightly resist the criticism that her work does not shed much light on some features of Christianity – say, the influence of end-times fiction, the political entanglements of Russian orthodoxy, or Roman Catholic financial power. Departments of religious studies certainly may consider the doctrines and practices of Christianity to be important enough to warrant sustained attention; and Wood is entirely correct in saying that analytic theology would familiarize students and colleagues with (some) doctrines and practices in considerable detail and with considerable nuance, and would bring a rich literature and well-developed argumentative skills to bear on investigations concerning their coherence, truth, and morality. Some areas of curiosity would be would be well-served by such scholarship – curiosity regarding what the 'core doctrines of Christianity' mean and whether they are compatible with the deliverances of modern science, or regarding how Christian elites reason when it comes to doctrines.

But there are other types of curiosity about doctrines – types that in my experience arise naturally within the context of the study of religion – that would not be well served by analytic theology, as Wood describes it. Students and colleagues might want to know what different Christian groups emphasize what doctrines and how it came about that different groups embracing different doctrines exist. They might be interested in the comparative study of doctrines across different Christian groups – say, trinitarian and non-trinitarian Christian groups, or pre-, post-, and amillennialists – including questions

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of how doctrinal disagreements affect intergroup relations. They might want to know for what Christian groups the notion of doctrine in general is important, and what the differences are between the workings of more and less doctrine-focused traditions. They might want to know about the dynamics of doctrine within particular groups – whether doctrines are generally a concern of elites only, whether and how doctrines are used to defend and contest power, to enable or prevent injustice, to police or break down boundaries, to express or suppress affect. They might want to know where the idea of orthodoxy in general came from; they might want to know how it came to be the case that some Christian groups developed discourses of orthodoxy and institutionalized its enforcement, what conditions have governed the waxing and waning of the energies of enforcement over time, and what individuals and groups have championed or resisted the importance of the idea of orthodoxy. As far as I can tell, attention to these kinds of questions lies outside the sphere of analytic theology as Wood understands it.

A similar range of questions can be asked about Christian practices, but here I need to pause to ask a question of interpretation. Wood's talk of practices represents an intentional and welcome broadening of the purview of analytic theology beyond a focus on doctrines alone. But how is this category of practices to be understood? There are at least two possibilities. One is a narrow understanding to which the term 'orthopraxis' might be applied; on this understanding, the set contains, say, the singing of hymns, requesting the intercession of saints, participating in the Eucharist, genuflecting, baptizing children or adults, contemplative prayer, *lectio divina*, and so on. These would be 'official' practices that have, as it were, long-standing historical sanction. But on a broader understanding, the set of Christian practices includes any behaviours that are normed in connection with Christian ideas or communities; this set would include, for example, picketing abortion clinics, employing faith healing rather than modern medicine, gay conversion therapy, raising one's hands in prayer, donating monies with the expectation of a tenfold return, Christian-themed body art, and excluding divorced women from religious community. I take it that these are Christian practices in the sense that in some Christian communities they are regularized, praised, recommended, expected, modelled and imitated, and so on, such that people have religious reasons for engaging in them, and such engagement counts as participating in their traditions.

Inasmuch as scholars of religion are interested in religious practices, they are interested in this broader range. They are interested in normed behaviours that people engage in for religious reasons; the fact that some of these practices have the sanction of historical religious authority is interesting and important for some purposes, but such sanction does not delimit the category. If analytic theology is interested in practices understood in this way, then its potential contribution to knowledge of Christianity, and thus to the academic study of religion, is greater than if it is only interested in Christian practices in the narrower sense. It does not seem that Wood has things like purity rings or naming-and-claiming in mind when he speaks of Christian practices; and indeed, given his strong association of analytic theology with specifically *orthodox* doctrines and practices, it would be a bit surprising if he were then to commit the enterprise to an interest in practices in the broader sense. But here there is at least the possibility of a conception of analytic theology that extends further out into the territory of the study of religion than one might expect.

Still, with respect to both doctrines and practices, I incline towards one generalization. The interest that Wood's analytic theology has in these seems to be narrow and specific: it is concerned with questions of interpretation (what they mean or can mean) and evaluation (whether they are or can be supported by good reasons or are moral). But a great deal lies outside analytic theology's purview: information about what the doctrines and practices of different Christian communities are, what they take these doctrines and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

practices to mean, the reasons adherents have (or think they have) for embracing them, and the ways they integrate them into their individual and collective lives. And, of course, however much there is to be known about the Christian communities of the present day, so much more is there to be known about the family of Christian traditions across history.

In sum, my observation about analytic theology in this section is that while it does stand to make a contribution to the academic study of religion, the magnitude of that contribution does not seem to me to be particularly large in relation to what kind of contribution might be desired not only from scholarship in Christianity generally, but even from scholarship that focuses specifically on Christian doctrines and practices.

Now, Wood also argues that analytic theology stands to benefit from being included in the study of religion. In commenting on this material I want to distinguish between two threads of his approach. In one, Wood advances one clear line of argument about the potential benefit of inclusion for analytic theology. In another thread, he makes some remarks that suggest a different kind of benefit, but without saying much in detail. I want to reconstruct the first of these with the clarity that the topic deserves. And I would like to find some room within the second thread for views resembling my own on this subject.

Wood's first thread regarding the benefits of inclusion for theology mentions one aspect of the academic study of religion and one benefit. The aspect of the academic study of religion that Wood singles out is critique (and perhaps most importantly, genealogical critique[3]). And the reason why analytic theologians could benefit from greater exposure to critique is that it presents a possible source of challenges to their preferred approach to theology. Critical theory 'can invite analytic theologians to consider how their own contingent socialization has affected their philosophical work', for 'it is not unreasonable to ask whether their attachment to orthodoxy is rooted more in sociological factors like race, class, and gender than in the timeless splendor of orthodox truth' (Wood (2021), 260). Wood does not contest the charge that 'analytic theologians ignore the messy history of Christianity, along with the myriad ways that non-rational forces have shaped Christian doctrines' (*ibid.*, 15). But the reason why analytic theology is obligated to engage with this messy history is fairly specific. Analytic theology needs to consider the charge that 'the sheer fact that [Christian doctrines] have a messy history somehow vitiates them, with the result that they are not plausible or true'. This sort of thing analytic theology can do well, for the issue with history turns out to be philosophical after all: 'far from being an objection to analytic theology, this version of the objection from history becomes simply more fodder for argument, more grist for the analytic mill' (*ibid*., 15–16).

I am genuinely torn between regarding the following passage, which explores this idea further, as deeply revealing or merely puzzling:

> Of course, no orthodox Christian can agree that their most important theological concepts are socially constructed rather than revealed, or that Christian doctrine as a whole has no intrinsic orientation toward truth. But analytic theologians who understand themselves to be responsible to the general norms of academic inquiry are obliged to consider genealogical challenges, even those that threaten the foundations of orthodoxy. (*ibid*.,260)

Perhaps I misunderstand Wood here, but this passage seems to position critique as a source of arguments for conclusions that analytic theologians must reject because their religious commitments require them to do so, and to argue that they are nevertheless obligated to consider these arguments. Just what purposes are served by such consideration is not at all clear to me. And in fact it is news to me that orthodox Christians cannot accept that important theological concepts are socially constructed rather than revealed;

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the conception of orthodoxy that Wood assumes here seems to be more restrictive than one that sees it as a matter of assenting to a specific set of doctrinal claims.

In any case, the potential benefit for analytic theology of engaging with critique is that doing so presents it with opportunities to consider arguments that, if successful, would undermine a conception of Christian orthodoxy to which it is committed. Fairly clearly, Wood's position is that analytic theology has the resources to refute these arguments; in fact he regards such refutation as one of its signature tasks.[4] But precisely because this kind of defensive apologetics is something analytic theology already does, the benefit that accrues to it from this kind of engagement with critique strikes me as fairly small. And for the same reason this kind of engagement does not seem like a very good use of every analytic theologian's time. Perhaps this work can be handled by a subset of specialists.

I think more highly of a second thread of Wood's argument, which I identify in a passage from the same section that suggests a broader view, but in at best a promissory or even skeletal way.

> Critique's tools and methods can supplement those of analytic philosophy, because critique allows us to ask some interesting questions that are rarely considered by members of the analytic guild. Are Christian doctrines socially constructed in a way that matters? Should we care about the social location and background of analytic theologians? These questions are hardly at the forefront of analytic inquiry, but analogous questions are central to the rest of the humanities. A *via media* between analytic thought and critical theory seems desirable, one in which the strengths of each side can mitigate the weaknesses of the other. (*ibid*., 263–264)

The two questions Wood asks here are, perhaps, not the most useful ones: for if they can be answered in the negative, then analytic theology simply goes on as before, the wiser only for having surmounted further challenges to its preferred self-understanding. But precisely because the questions are so broad and open-ended, a different reading is possible. Perhaps analytic theologians should not think that they already know the conditions under which it would matter to find that Christian doctrines are socially constructed. Perhaps they should not think that they know antecedently what the benefits of integration into the academic study of religion will be; perhaps they should be open to the possibility that there is something for analytic theology to learn from such integration. What I want to find room for in this passage is a position that, so far as I can tell, Wood hints at nowhere else in the book. That position is that analytic theology stands to be *improved* by engagement with critique – that analytic theology that integrates critical material will be *better* analytic theology. Were I to express the point in my own terms, I would not restrict this point to critical theory only, for the field makes available a vast trove of descriptive information about the history and present condition of Christianity, cheek by jowl with comparable information about other religious traditions, and also a rich body of reflections, explanatory and otherwise, on this information.

I confess that, this one passage notwithstanding, it is difficult to find space for such a position within the compass of Wood's overall presentation. This is largely because, as I noted at the outset, the book lacks a programmatic discussion of the purpose(s) of analytic theology as a whole, with reference to which its productions to date might be critically evaluated. Earlier I cited Wood's claim that analytic theology is 'centrally concerned with the normative evaluation of Christian truth claims and practices'. It is not very clear to me that, or how, those narrowly concerned with that kind of work could make profitable use of extensive information about actual Christian traditions in all their variety and internal complexity; and so, if that were *all* analytic theology is for, it might indeed have little or nothing to gain from engagement with religious studies. But I also

note that Wood immediately describes such evaluation as *a* – not *the* – 'distinctly theological task'. This indicates that he takes there to be theological tasks other than the one that is central to analytic theology; and fairly clearly, analytic theology's central task is not its only one (it is also concerned with what doctrines mean, for example). A more complete consideration of the question of what analytic theology is for – perhaps extending as well to the question of which tasks theology in general, analytic or otherwise, properly ranges over – might yield a more satisfactory answer to the question of whether greater integration with the academic study of religion might improve it.

I want to conclude with a critical glance at one of Wood's responses to criticisms of analytic theology, which response amounts to throwing analytic theologians under the bus. I am not entirely in disagreement with him on this point, but I think that the story has a moral different from the one he presents. In considering the 'objection from history', Wood does not dispute the claim that analytic theologians 'tend to formulate Christian doctrines as abstract, timelessly true propositions', and agrees that some analytic theologians 'do not take historical sources seriously enough' and 'sometimes misunderstand premodern ways of reading and thinking'. But in such cases, he responds, 'the fault lies with the individual thinkers who make these mistakes, not with the analytic method itself' (*ibid*., 14–15). I think this is too quick.

Here is a pertinent anecdote from my field. Wilfred Cantwell Smith took the occasion of a 1974 symposium on 'Methodology and the World Religions' to express reservations about the weight of methodology in the field. He recounted the following:

> I once met a young American social scientist in India who was studying the role there of Muslims in political parties. I pointed out to him that in one of his studies, of an election, as reported in an interesting article that he had given me to read, he had omitted consideration of something that, I suggested, though subtle, was of quite central importance for an understanding of Muslim behavior, including this instance. He responded, in a quite casual and unruffled manner, that his methods were unable to handle matters of that kind, and therefore he had left them out. He said this without embarrassment, without weeping, without resigning his academic appointment. What has happened to our universities, when presumably reputable members of them will admit without blushing their work distorts – deliberately, knowingly – what it purports to describe? (Smith (1975), 7)

Now Smith did not leave this question dangling, but considered and argued against possible justifications for the position of his American interlocutor. My purposes do not require either rehearsing this material or endorsing his position that the 'procedure-oriented approach' to the study of religions is both intellectually and morally wrong (*ibid*., 11). What Smith points out is, first, that none of the various methodologies employed by scholars of religion is adequate to the full complexity of the human phenomena before them and, second, that the culture of the academy permits – perhaps perversely – the practice of limiting one's field of view to that which one's preferred methodology is well equipped to handle.

If it is in fact correct to say that, on balance, analytic theologians have not taken historical sources seriously enough and have not properly understood premodern ways of reading and thinking, then I think it is worthwhile to ask why this is the case. And the most plausible answer to this question seems to me to be a composite one: on the one hand, analytic theology as a methodology does not equip scholars to do these things, and on the other hand, analytic theology as an actually existing collective scholarly project has not held them accountable for doing them. And in fact I suspect the existence of actual disincentives in this area. The capable analytic theologian who engages with such

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

material is likely to be stepping outside their comfort zone and in fact risking the charge of amateurism; and to bring such material back into the circles of analytic theology will probably be to confront an audience with material that few will be adept in dealing with, and that may in fact be received as 'threatening the foundations of orthodoxy'. I am inclined to connect this point with an early remark of Wood's, that 'analytic Christian theology cannot become less analytic or less Christian without becoming something else altogether' (Wood (2021), 10). This is certainly the case: it is possible to cross over from analytic theology to some other territory by attenuating the analytic or 'Christian' character of one's work; and plausibly, one does so attenuate the character of one's work when one engages with the 'messy history' of Christianity in ways that do not simply amount to formulating more grist for the analytic mill, or in ways that do not comport with an orthodox triumphalism. To the extent that the gatekeepers of analytic theology are in the business of assessing potential contributions for their analyticity and Christianness because they regard these as markers of the methodology, it should surprise no-one to see the field populated by works that refrain from pushing the envelope in these areas.

Analytic theology has boundaries, it seems, and there are certain kinds of scholarship, including scholarship on Christianity, that do not obviously fall within these. Individual thinkers are not constrained by nature to respect these boundaries; they are obligated neither to attend only to those dimensions of history that feed comfortably back into familiar philosophical debates, nor to present work that is recognizably Christian. But it is not clear to me that under current conditions, scholars who choose to confine their work to the territory delimited by these boundaries – that is, who do what analytic theology asks of them – are to be criticized for letting the enterprise down.

Notes

1. Early in the book, Wood writes that '[a]nalytic theologians, in virtue of their philosophical training, can help other theologians and scholars of religion make sense of the metaphysical claims that inevitably arise when we study religious adherence' (Wood (2021), 11–12). I think that this is both correct and important, and names a potential contribution not entirely captured by the three quotes I have reproduced. But I note that what makes this contribution possible is not analytic theology specifically, but facility with the tools of analytic philosophy more generally.
2. For the most part I will use the term 'orthodox' without scare quotes. But I do so for efficiency's sake, and under some protest. It is not clear to me whether Wood holds that there is but one orthodox form of Christianity or whether orthodoxy is a localized device whereby Christian traditions distinguish themselves from each other. I suspect the former, as the only occurrences of the plural term 'orthodoxies' in the book are non-theological and pejorative; see *ibid*., 197.
3. See, for example, Wood's discussion of historically focused critique (*ibid*., 260–263, and in particular, p. 260 n. 48).
4. 'Much of the value of analytic theology, in my view, lies in the fact that it uses the modern tools and methods of analytic philosophy to show that historic Christian orthodoxy is on solid rational ground, even within the unfriendly terms established by our secular age' (*ibid*., 298).

References

Smith WC (1975) Methodology and the study of religion: some misgivings. In Baird RD (ed.), *Methodological Issues in Religious Studies*. Chico, CA: New Horizons Press, pp. 1–30.
Wood W (2021) *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cite this article: Dole AC (2025). Would integration with religious studies improve analytic theology? *Religious Studies* **61**, 213–220 https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523000197