Introduction

A Philosophical Theology of the Subaltern?

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Navigating the shared and contested space of "philosophy" and "theology" is a struggle that has existed for almost as long as these disciplines have been practised. Since the first recorded usage of "theology" in the Platonic corpus, there have been debates about its relation to philosophical practice and wisdom. In the wake of Aristotle's inclusion of "theology" within the encyclopaedia of theoretical philosophy, the Abrahamic traditions have sought to relate, distinguish, and separate the pathways of philosophy and theology. For Christian theology, these relationships became particularly fraught after the Condemnations of 1277, a watershed moment within the history of Christianity. These internal debates within religious traditions were further exacerbated by the *via moderna* of nominalism and later through the Enlightenment critique of religious authority. It is chiefly Immanuel Kant who is credited with the disposing of "natural theology" through a delimitation of finite reason, while simultaneously emphasising the primacy of practical reasoning as the appropriate domain for religious expression – even as this curtailment of speculative metaphysics did not prevent its continuation (e.g., G.W.F. Hegel and F.W.J. Schelling). Nonetheless, the post-Kantian scepticism towards "philosophical theology" continues among practitioners of philosophy of religion until the present day – both within the so-called analytic and Continental traditions. Amongst many professional philosophers of religion, "theology" is often considered suspect because of its supposed mystifying allusions to divine revelation, which transcend the ordinary processes of human inquiry. Since the humanities are supposed to study

objects that are phenomenologically and practically accessible, any reference to invisible or metaphysical objects is deemed beyond the bounds of rational inquiry – or so it is claimed. Moreover, critical theories (e.g., decolonial/postcolonial theory, feminism, critical race theory, and so on) have indeed raised penetrating questions regarding the legacy of philosophical theology, particularly in its Christian variety, as regards its purported claims to "universalism," as well as its androcentric, racial and gendered proclivities. Its relatively homogenous social grouping – one that tends to be North Atlantic, "white," and male – has been a point of critique.

It is within such a context that this volume finds itself. It stems from an invitation to discover how philosophy and theology have been, and continue to be, instituted and practiced within the South African context. The decision to focus on the *South African* context was made largely for pragmatic and circumstantial reasons. It arose out of a specific project to consider the ways in which theology and philosophy have been interrelated in South Africa within the pre- and post-1994 period – instigated through a larger initiative entitled *Doing Theology in South Africa*, spear-headed by Prof. Henco van der Westhuizen at the University of the Free State. This led to a two-day online conference hosted by Huguenot College (in Wellington, South Africa) in March 2022, with the title *Philosophical Theologies in South Africa: Texts, Traditions, and Institutions.* It has tried to gather, mostly from a pool of younger researchers and scholars, some of the work that is currently being done within the field, while also taking a look back and seeing what work had been done previously. It also arose, partly, because of the significant paucity of research on this question within the South African context, and from a desire to generate new research that would alleviate that gap somewhat. In stating this upfront, I am not disputing that a more ambitious attempt at tracing the way philosophy and theology have interacted within a broader pan-Africanist perspective is a desirable goal; it would have, however, exceeded the scope of the research parameters that stimulated the project to begin with. Opening up the scope to include an intellectual tracing of the relationships between

philosophy and theology beyond the borders of South Africa would have required a much more extensive, multi-volume treatment in order to do justice to the topic. Accordingly, the range of this volume is significantly more modest, and does not make any pretensions towards comprehensiveness, even as it does make some small contribution towards a local recounting of theoretical trajectories and traditions. In doing so, it joins recent trends to pluralise the field of the philosophy of religion from a global perspective, even as it leans extensively towards Christian traditions[1] – a fact entwined with the predominance of Christianity in Southern Africa.

As we will hopefully see in the contributions that follow, delineating a specific *South African* approach to questions of philosophy and theology is somewhat precarious. Within the postcolonial and hybrid context of stratified and entangled development, articulating anything like an essential "South African" approach is probably not sustainable. However, there might be some reasons for bringing a focus on South Africa, while simultaneously refusing untenable claims to historical "exceptionalism." For one thing, due to South Africa's late entry into democratic rule, certain philosophical and theological traditions, such as black consciousness and black theology, achieved popular reception in a distinctive way when compared to other African countries, in ways comparable to the United States during the Civil Rights movement and the era of Jim Crow laws. Even after the demise of legal apartheid, there is a sentiment – particularly among the so-called "born frees" – that the post-1994 period has not been a time of social and economic liberation, but rather a continuation of apartheid and disenfranchisement by other means. Economic precarity and poverty, by and large, continue to be disproportionately allocated along racial lines, and so – for many theologians and activists in South Africa – the tradition of black theology of liberation and decolonial theory continues to be a source of inspiration, in some distinction from other African countries that have

1 Cf. Yujin Nagasawa and Mohammad Saleh Zarepour (eds.), *Global Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion: From Religious Experience to the Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

had longer periods of postcolonial independence, and do not experience the same level of economic and social stratification along racial lines. Thus, although the focus on South Africa in this specific volume was inspired for largely contingent and pragmatic reasons, there also may be some distinctiveness in such an account that warrants this delimitation.

With these limits in mind, however, this volume in general has attempted to throw the intellectual net wide. It has not set overly-restrictive parameters as regards method or approach. Rather, it has sought to gauge previous and contemporary work that has explicitly thematised the interrelation between philosophy and theology. The broad limitations adopted have been that contributions should either be by South Africans scholars working at the interface between philosophy and theology, or scholars who work at South African institutions, or should focus on the work of South African thinkers, past or present. The result is a relatively wide array of approaches and topics, ranging from descriptive and historical studies to more explicitly constructive and speculative accounts. The majority of contributors work within the phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions, characteristic of "Continental" philosophy; this is reflective of the trajectories within South African academia historically, at least since the establishment of higher education institutions in the country. However, the volume has not excluded more "analytical" approaches – as can be seen in some of the contributions. Topics covered include traditional questions regarding faith and reason, but also move into more recent approaches to appropriate philosophical theology for the analysis of biblical texts. Other contributions, characteristic of current trends in South Africa, have sought to bring philosophical theology into dialogue with decolonial traditions and black theology. Some have focused on phenomenological analysis after the theological turn, while other authors have sought to engage explicitly the domains of metaphysics through the writings of specific thinkers. Other themes covered include the question of secularity, what kind of "secularism" we inhabit, and whether such secularity is sustainable.

It is worth remarking upon, however, that while there was not a strictly circumscribed "theme" for the original conference or volume, except for the minimal delimitations already mentioned, there does appear to have emerged something like an "organic," unplanned order to the contributions. One of the themes that has emerged is, if one may risk such language, the thematic of the *subaltern*: that is, the perspective *from below*. As we will see in several contributions, there is a focus on doing theology and philosophy from within *immanence*, out of the perspective of the *marginal*, within the *existential* or *empirical* context. We have references to doing theology from the *underground*, from our lived organicity. Even the explicitly metaphysical chapters have an emphasis on lived experience and sense-making, of the blending of the natural and supernatural, immanence and transcendence, of thinking *religion* within the symbolisations of the *secular*. While such a convergence in themes is interesting and gives something of a character to the volume, one should probably not generalise this into a kind of *South African* approach or school; while it *may* suggest a developing subaltern option within the global discourse of philosophical theology, it is too soon to know whether this is the case or not.

As regards a summary of content, the first four chapters adopt a more descriptive tone concerning the relationship between philosophy and theology, on both a global and local scale. In the first chapter, Khegan Delport attempts to briefly trace the origins of "philosophical theology." He argues that the term is complicated by the fact that there have been shifts in usage throughout history regarding "theology" and "philosophy," so that relating and distinguishing both of these practices have proved somewhat complicated. Moreover, the manner in which the term is used today is by no means univocal. However, he argues that philosophical theology can be traced to the introduction of Aristotelian and Neoplatonist currents into the Abrahamic traditions, a stream which conceived the relationship between "philosophy" and "theology" aporetically. Later, the traditions of theology and philosophy were separated into distinct disciplines, eventually creating the category of "natural theology," which would often be equated with what today is

understood by "philosophical theology." After the Enlightenment, "philosophical theology" was engaged more critically, and eventually led to a diversity of approaches to philosophical theology, some adopting a more post-Kantian approach of phenomenology and hermeneutics, while others have been deeply informed by analytic philosophy. It is the latter stream which is by far the most vocal proponent of philosophical theology within the current academic scene.

In the second chapter, Valentine Iheanacho gives an overview of the relationship between faith and reason within the Roman Catholic tradition. Here he seeks to trace this narrative from early Christianity, through the medieval period, to modern Catholicism – particularly in the post-Vatican II period. Echoing the themes of the first chapter, though in more detail, Iheanacho argues that the Roman Catholic teaching on faith and reason has been heavily influenced by Augustinian and Anselmian currents, chiefly exemplified in the figure of Thomas Aquinas. He also traces the conflicts and separations of faith and reason as they occurred after the 1277 Condemnations, as well as via the influence of nominalist traditions. The extremes of rationalism and fideism were both ultimately rejected by the Magisterium, and – particularly in the nineteenth century and thereafter – a series of official interventions by various popes and councils have attempted to ameliorate any necessary opposition between theology and philosophy.

The next chapter, by Delport, focuses specifically on the South African context. It seeks to trace something of the interactions between philosophy and theology that have existed within the context of South African academia. One problem it seeks to unpack is that since the context of analytic philosophy was largely absent from South African institutions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, any philosophical theology that has developed here – though with some notable exceptions – has largely adopted a somewhat different approach overall than is present in contemporary Anglo-American discussions. Under the sway of more "Continental" traditions, "Christian philosophy" has evidenced a much stronger leaning towards phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions – in both its

more "right-wing" and "left-wing" receptions in the pre-1994 period. Amongst the Catholic intellectual minority, one finds similar trends – though with a Thomistic flavour added to the mix. In the post-1994 period, one can find, broadly-speaking, four varieties of philosophical theology, namely: (1) Continental philosophical theology/philosophy of religion, which is the predominant stream within the South African context; (2) Reformational philosophy, which continues today even as it exhibits less of an influence in the current context than it did previously; (3) analytic theology/philosophy of religion, which was chiefly exemplified by figures like Vincent Brümmer, who echoed the approach of D.C.S Oosthuizen; and finally (4) African philosophical theology, which has attempted to bring the tools of philosophy, in both the analytic and Continental traditions, into conversation with African theology and philosophy. One could argue that most of these traditions – which the exception of Reformational philosophy – also find representation within the pages of the current volume as well.

The fourth chapter continues the descriptive thrust of the previous contributions. Jaco Gericke – who in many ways has spearheaded a niche in the interpretation of biblical texts via the traditions of philosophical theology – here attempts to gather an overview of the explicit and implicit themes of philosophical theology/philosophy of religion, particularly in relation to contemporary research on the Hebrew Bible and Semitic Languages in South Africa. Some of the themes covered within the literature that is surveyed, especially from the pages of South African academic journals, include questions of conceptual analysis, epistemology, justified true belief, concepts of divinity, divine relations, and theodicy, all of which are mainstays within philosophical theology. These are approached from the tradition of analytic philosophy of religion (APR), even as Gericke also concludes that Continental traditions tend to enjoy predominance within a South African context.

The next chapter, by Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, initiates a transition within the development of the volume, commencing a section that brings Continental philosophy of religion into dialogue with discourses prevalent among the humanities in

South Africa, namely decolonial theory and black theology. It also presents a turn towards philosophies of immanence and radical theology. Specifically, following the Marxist theorist Robert Tally, Meylahn criticises recent trends within the humanities towards "surface" reading – under the banner of "post-theory" – which he contrasts with traditions of critical theory that situate cultural production within the context of global capital. He describes tendences towards "use-value" and practical outcomes as being one way in which this post-theoretical outcome finds expression in theological faculties globally – but also within South Africa. The drive to make theology relevant for "ordinary" people is predicated on construing the proverbial "person-on-the-street" as a self-explanatory category, as if individual desires and situations were not already interpellated by a digital capitalist imaginary, already in the process of formation through technological assemblages. Rather than staying absorbed in surfaces, Meylahn argues that one needs to continue the impulse of critical theory and ask what lies behind texts and contexts. Everything appears within a specific context, a particular "light" or "clearing" – to use Meylahn's Heideggerian prose – and we need to ask how such things come to be seen and known in these ways, rather than simply accepting things at face value. This same critical attitude should be applied to both theology and theory insofar as they, intentionally or unintentionally, colonise life-worlds in the name of divine mission (in the case of theology) or anything that does cohere, for instance, with democratic materialism (in the case of theory). In this context, for Meylahn, theology and philosophy can dialectically inform one another to mitigate the totalising trends of both.

Turning to an explicit treatment of black theology, Silakhe Singata in his chapter reads black consciousness through the lens of a postmodern eschatology. Through an interpretation of the seminal writings of Steve Biko, Singata brings to the fore the dialectical permutations of black consciousness, as described by Biko himself, uncovering the theological trajectories of Biko's implicit Hegelianism, and thereafter drawing out its implicit eschatological imaginary. Finding this vision somewhat too teleological for his liking, he seeks to supplement Biko's

eschatology with the radical theology of John Caputo, here specifically focusing on the temporal overtones of Derrida's *différence*, proposing a theology of the event that critiques a carapaced eschatology, in the name of the historical singularity of blackness that opens up alternative futurities beyond the world of anti-blackness.

In a very similar vein, Obakeng Afrika in the next chapter brings black theology into conversation with radical theology. Focusing on some of the early development of black theology within the University Christian Movement (UCM), Afrika emphasises some of the tensions within nascent phases of black theology. Alluding to the importation of secular theology into the UCM – a trend chiefly associated with the earlier writings of Harvey Cox in the 1960s – Afrika shows how some figures received positively some of the emphasises of its proponents. In this light, Afrika makes an argument that some of the insights of secular theology can be continued in a different vein through radical theology, since both were concerned with the collapse of a theological metanarrative in the West, a trajectory that is continued through the tradition of black theology. Both secular and radical theology draw upon the death-of-God theology of the 1960s, even as radical theology takes this up in a very different key – something that Afrika believes could energise a rethinking of black theology within a contemporary context.

Continuing with the theme of secularity, Patrick Giddy puts forward a stimulating presentation of the different cultures of secularity we inhabit. In line with many historians and theorists of secularity, Giddy argues that the secular is predicated on theological and religious foundations, rather than implying the subtraction of religion as such. Specifically, he argues for two kinds of secularity, roughly characterised as "Protestant" and "Catholic" versions. He begins by seeking to unpack the dialectic of disenchantment and re-enchantment within the secular – in a manner not dissimilar to Karl Rahner and his teacher Augustine Shutte – focusing specifically on the way that subjectivity, existential participation, and intersubjectivity have been energised within modernity, and with it the question of self-transcendence. This is a key symbol for Giddy, something that

both kinds of secularism he will discuss struggle to enculturate. As regards the varieties of secularism, Giddy categorises Protestant, "Anglophone' secularity (Version B) as being the most predominant at present. It prioritises the individual and is characterised by principles of equality, fairness and justice. In this version, the role of public policy is, more or less, to leave people alone. The problem with this version of secularity is that it has difficulty with the question of motivation and maintenance of order when everyone is left to themselves – so to speak. Power and choice become voluntaristic, lacking an account of how we are formed into freedom and virtue. In Catholic, "Francophone" secularity (Version A), there is a stronger sense that it is the role of the state to impose a standardising order on the collective, minimising overly-disruptive forms of otherness, and thus forming subjects into citizens. The limitation with this version is that it has problems with facilitating freedom and self-transcendence, since it tends to work within a secularised vision of cosmic hierarchy that inhibits richer accounts of self-determination. Both of these secularisms, for Giddy, have problems with enculturating people into solidarity and spiritual growth, something which religious symbols of a non-finite power, community, and self-transcendence are able to ameliorate. Towards the end of the chapter, Giddy seeks to unpack these questions further in relation to Christological symbols and their connection to self-transcendence.

The chapter of Calvin Ullrich brings into focus traditions of phenomenology after the theological turn, particularly as this relates to the lived and organic body. He begins within an analysis of Edmund Husserl's emphasis on *Leib* ("lived body") as a pertinent contribution to the subsequent tradition of phenomenology. However, following the critique of Merleau-Ponty, Ullrich argues that Husserl's egological focus detaches subjectivity too much from the organic basis of embodiment. He then moves onto Merleau-Ponty himself, who brought a much stronger focus on how our lived and fleshy embodiment shapes our perceptions of the world and environment. However, Merleau-Ponty's account of fleshliness, for Ullrich, appears too unmoored from its organic placement, too abstract, and so cannot

be found in any specific body, because it is present everywhere. To supplement this limitation, he recommends the approach of Emmanuel Falque – a prominent figure within the so-called "theological turn" of phenomenology. Falque himself reads the later work of Merleau-Ponty over against some of the earlier tendencies present in *The Phenomenology of Perception.* In his later work, Merleau-Ponty attends to the lived wildness of the body in all its chaotic organicity. It is this reading of embodiment that Falque appropriates and includes within his own kenotic Christology. Hereby, Ullrich seeks to unpack the existential, elemental, and material preconditions for incarnation and the "spread" nature of Christ's body.

The chapter of Justin Sands marks another shift within the volume towards more metaphysical and speculative terrains. He brings focus to the writings of Kwasi Wiredu and particularly his empirical metaphysics. According to Sands, Wiredu engages in a critique of "faith," but he does so because of its supposed anti-rationality. This is done specifically to counter the colonialist framing of African religion and thought as being basically superstitious and anti-rational. Wiredu seeks to oppose these Eurocentric and implicitly racist sentiments. Drawing upon the Akan metaphysical approach, Wiredu resists a "top-down" model of deduction, and rather begins with a moral anthropology, building up towards a metaphysical vantage through critical reflection on experience – a metaphysics "from below," one might say. In doing so, Wiredu aims to bypass the "Western" dualisms of transcendence and immanence, nature and supernature, secularity and religiosity, and puts forward a spatialised metaphysic that is thoroughly experiential, empirical and non-speculative. Moreover, he argues that Wiredu's metaphysics, because it is thoroughly spatialised and metaphorically conceived through experiences of relational engagement, is always-already social and political.

Continuing the theme of a metaphysics from below, Ryan Haecker focuses on the Afrikaner and Catholic intellectual Marthinus ("Martin") Versfeld. Recovering a neglected work of Catholic metaphysics, namely his early work entitled *The Perennial Order*, Haecker centralises his discussion on Versfeld's

critical engagement with the ontological argument. He argues that Versfeld's "subaltern" inflection of the Anselmian tradition is grounded in his turn towards the particular, a move that is inspired by his reception of Thomistic existentialism, as found in the likes of Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. Through *a posteriori* reflection, it moves from the realms of experience and the datum of "existence," from the specialised sciences of knowledge and motion, towards the irruption of the most generalised sense of being. This Thomistic and Aristotelian conceptualisation of being through an abstraction of the particular also contextualises Versfeld's philosophical forays into the domains of haptic and sensuous experience – as seen in some of his writings on cooking, mountain climbing, and so on.

The focus on a Catholic, sensuous disclosure of being is continued in the contribution of Duncan Reyburn. A scholar of G.K. Chesterton, Reyburn tries to unpack an implicit phenomenological metaphysics through an engagement with Chesterton's novel *The Man Who Would Be Thursday.* Influenced by media studies, Reyburn draws upon the theory of Marshall and Eric McLuhan to show the centrality of "formal causation" within the writings of Chesterton, that is, how the perception and intuition of form acts as a mediation of higher realities – here echoing the metaxology of William Desmond. For Chesterton, however, the truth of being is seen though a specific dispositional vantage of joy, laughter and hilarity, which are themselves ways of taking reality seriously. It seems that we are only able to see things as they are when our perceptual grasp of the world is attuned with a divine perspective, namely God's enjoyment of creation, and mediated to us by Christ's own mirth.

In the final chapter, by Arlyn Culwick, we once more have an empirical and experiential focus – though now articulated in the idiom of semiotics and analytic theology. Culwick here attempts to push back against one of the key insights of David Hume regarding the separation of the *is* from the *ought.* Adjacent to his critique of the necessary relation between cause and effect, Hume had argued there exists no real relation between states of affairs and moral judgements, that is, between descriptive and normative statements. Culwick, through the Thomistic tradition of semiotics,

chiefly following John of St. Thomas (John Poinsot), here attempts to articulate a metaphysical picture in which relations and signs are intrinsic features of the universe, for it is a definition of the universe that it has interrelated elements, otherwise such a universe and system would not arise or exist. In such a universe of related elements, real relations may be inferred between things so that *to be* is *to be something for something else*, thus acquiring *significance* – thereby undermining the fact-value distinction upon which the Humean picture is predicated. Thereafter, he goes on, using terminology gathered from Poinsot and Charles Peirce, to reflect upon the teleological directions of signs, and – through the operations of *determination* and *representation* – how they may direct and delimit the way things may be related to each other. However, since determination is only partial and not total, there remain potential and virtual effects between things that allow for them to enter into relations that are, as yet, undetermined and not actualised, but which may have real world impact under the right conditions. Modalities of actuality, potentiality, and virtuality are for Culwick "filtered" by systems as a result of the network of relations in which things come to be. Such "filtering" suggests that normative processes are not external to signifying relations themselves, and in fact form a part of systems. Culwick then goes on to argue how love and kenosis – the stripping away of potential relations so that things may enter into real relations – may form a continuation of these determining and representing structures that constitute our sign-making universe.

Overall, this volume hopes to make some contribution to the discussion on philosophy and theology in South Africa. It does not make pretensions to being a "programmatic" or "agenda-setting" contribution to the discussion on theology and philosophy in South Africa, even as it may be one of the first – if not *the* first – attempt to gauge the interrelations between theology and philosophy within the South African context. This volume does not assume any exceptionalist status for this recounting, but rather finds itself within a much larger pan-Africanist and global context. If it manages to stimulate more explicit conversation and research on this topic, to provoke further explorations beyond the landscape of Southern Africa, and

to make some minor contribution to the body of literature, it will have served its purpose.

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