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Categorial differences between religious and scientific language: The agency of God

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In the dialogue of scientists and theologians, participants experienced differences in linguistic usage of the various disciplines, for example different concepts, grammatical rules, characteristic terminology, specific phrases, and expressions. A fascinating subject of this dialogue concerned God's agency in human history within space-time, where the concepts of 'God' and 'divine agency' were unusual. In the church tradition, believers learned to use these concepts using biblical training with narratives such as the Exodus or Babylon stories. But to handle these narratives in historical situations, we need to analyse the concepts of 'history' and its ambiguity, and the 'historical method of explanation' to answer the question: 'How does God act in history?' The central question of this article was: Is history a domain of Divine Agency?

It is imperative to pay attention to the specific grammar of religious language and to distinguish it categorically from the computational language of the natural sciences. History as such should be deconstructed into history$_1$ and history$_2$. However, religious and technical activities are of different logical types, so we cannot combine them in one conceptual scheme on the same level. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that coherence might be possible at a higher conceptual level. A qualitative method of a critical literature review across disciplines was used and a subsequent contemplative conceptualisation was proposed.

Contribution: This article illustrated the difference between religious and scientific concepts to address Divine Agency in history. If reality or the universe can be described as an information-bearing entity in process, and if this is hierarchically structured, then we can imagine God interacting with this hierarchy.

Keywords: history; history as a discipline; divine agency; structure; science and religion dialogue.

Raison d'être

Is history a domain of Divine Agency? By analysing this question, that is, its meaning and elements of the answer to it, I would like to write a contribution to this Festschrift that illustrates the difference between religious concepts and scientific ones. It also shows how category mistakes can be avoided by paying attention to the specific grammar of religious language and by distinguishing it categorically from the computational language of the natural sciences. The nature of religious language keeps the hearer's attention on worship, communion, ministry, evaluation, worldview, and moral sensitivity.

In an interdisciplinary dialogue of scientists and theologians, the participants representing various disciplines of science and of humanities have to cope with linguistic differences regarding concepts, rules, shades of meaning, ambiguity, among others.

Johan Buitendag is interested in theologians with expertise in some scientific disciplines and religious scientists with theological interests because of their faith. Their public writings or addresses expressing their religious opinions may be striking to their audience because of the extraordinary combination of different experiences.

In his article 'Epistemology, Ontology and Reciprocity: Bringing Bram van de Beek into dialogue with John Polkinghorne', Buitendag presents his construction of an imaginary dialogue between both mentioned scholars on their ideas on meaning and understanding of religious subjects (Buitendag 2012). He accepts and uses their concepts to clarify how they understand the interchange of their own scholarly and scientific backgrounds, including the fundamental differences in the

assumed presuppositions or premises of the disciplines concerned: biology, physics, and theology. Van de Beek has specialised both in biology and systematic theology, and is an ordained minister and Professor of Christian Doctrine at the University of Leiden, whereas Polkinghorne (1930–2021) was a Professor of Mathematical Physics at the University of Cambridge, and after resigning, he was trained for the Anglican ministry and was ordained priest.

John Polkinghorne clarified that in theology, the doctrine of creation does not describe a temporal beginning of the universe at which it all began but postulates an *ontological* origin. Such an ontological origin formulates that God exists 'before' the universe in a timeless way, which means that God's status has priority over the universe and its content. The premise of his thinking runs like this: 'Epistemology models Ontology'. It means that what we can know helps us to find what is the case. Polkinghorne even believes that – although partially – the knowledge of humankind can enter the 'inaccessible light' of 1 Timothy 6:16 (Buitendag 2012:792). Here, Buitendag quotes Polkinghorne as describing a *divine* property of humankind.

Various of Polkinghorne's publications focus on the subject of divine and human agency in the physical world by means of Moltmann's ideas of God's self-limitation (Zimzum) – God, withdrawing into himself, makes free room for the world and its history (Polkinghorne 1989, 1994). To my utter amazement, Polkinghorne ignores the logical impossibility of this entering the 'inaccessible'! This illustrates that, in the context of theology, we are faced with the central question of this article: Is history a domain of Divine Agency?

Introduction

In its traditional form, the Christian faith presupposes the belief that there is a God who is active in history. Traditionally, the answer to our question of whether history is the domain of divine agency is affirmative. In the Old Testament, the authors proclaim the mighty deeds of the Lord: 'What god is there in heaven or on earth who can match Thy works and mighty deeds?' (Dt 3:24). Israel's paradigm of the divine agency is the testimony of its liberation from Egypt under the dramatic circumstances of the so-called 'signs and portents'. Using that narrative, Israel learned to interpret its historical return from the Babylonian exile as an act of God. The New Testament is focused on the account of God's agency in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and its consequences for the faith and life of the early Christian believers. Nowadays, the Nicene Creed is spoken in the church's liturgy. This creed explicitly refers to the historical life of Jesus. When praying, believers usually expect guidance and help from God because it seems to have happened in the life of the first believers too. So, *prima facie,* it appears that Christians believe that God is actively engaged in human history.

When we try to understand and explain how God was engaged in human history, however, we are easily confused by a number of conceptual problems. Before answering a question like ours, we need some *a priori* clarification of the concepts used. What do we mean by 'God', 'agency' and 'history'? And what about the very context within which the question is raised? In the literature on divine agency, authors are often interested in solving the problem of whether an act of God is conceivable in the *contemporary* situation, and if so, whether the proposed solution is acceptable in a broader theological context. The outcomes of their analyses invariably involve a discussion about the specific character of physical reality and human freedom; both might operate as a kind of criterion. In such cases, the special theological issues involved are the doctrines of creation and providence. Typically, these views deal primarily with divine agency in terms of *possibilities* in the present and the (near) future (Peacocke 1986). But in talking about history, we are looking *backwards* and are interested in the past; that is in the realised or actualised part of the possibilities of that time.

History

What do we mean by 'history'? Normally, we use this term in two interrelated senses that need to be distinguished for reasons of clarity. A well-known distinction is between the activities of the historian and the subject matter for his or her research, that is the events of the past (Atkinson 1988:807–811; Stanford 1998:77–83). But the past of what? History is a temporal concept to refer to what was done or happened in the human, social, and civilised sphere of former times. Therefore, we can speak about 'history$_1$' as the whole range of past events concerning human life (the *res gestae*); and about 'history$_2$' as whatever is said, written or thought about this past [the *historia rerum gestarum*]. Of course, there is an element of vagueness and ambiguity in that concept of *history$_1$*; does it contain *all* conceivable occurrences (sub-atomic, atomic, biological etc.) or merely a selection and, if so, based on which selective criteria? Should it contain the history of preliterate peoples too? And regarding the element of ambiguity: is history a kind of independently existing space-time container in which events occur, or – on the contrary – are events like building blocks constitutive for the existence of history as such? When talking about divine agency in history, we mean history in the former sense [*res gestae*], but only in so far as it is available (and perhaps conceivable) for historians. Therefore, our question can be stated as follows: Can we make reasonable sense of the concept of divine agency in the past as it is presented by theological historians (history$_2$)?

It is in history – like in geology or evolutionary biology – that time is taken seriously as *actual*: we cannot go back in time and the past remains beyond our reach. Going back in time is physically and logically impossible. In a sense, past events are data, and as such it is logically impossible that even God can change them. And why should God? God is a perfect Agent! What is done cannot be undone: crying over spilt milk is no use. In the context of a laboratory, we may have the 'illusion' of repeating the same experiment as often as we like to test a theory, because we may ignore the temporal order of

identical tests in physics, chemistry or biology. However, this *presupposition* is useless in history$_2$, because historians cannot go back in time to, for example, Waterloo and watch the battle occurring again to test hypotheses about the thoughts of Napoleon. Being one of the last scientists in the tradition of classical physics, Einstein wrote at the end of his life (!): 'For us convinced physicists, the distinction between past, present and future is an illusion, although a persistent one' (see Vennig 2017). It is inconceivable that historians could agree with this statement as far as it concerns their own discipline. The temporal gap raises more difficulties for them than does any spatial distance: statements referring to the past cannot be falsified by direct observation! Any spatial distance in the present does not appear to be theoretically unbridgeable. Being engaged with the past as a kind of *reality*, therefore, serves as a criterion for distinguishing physics, chemistry and biology from historical research as a re-enactment of former times.

By now, it is clear why we need to take some trouble spelling out the different setting of historical research compared to physics. From a philosophical point of view, historians often apply criteria partly borrowed from natural sciences, but they use them without being able to do experiments like natural scientists do. Ironically, historians often doubt the possibility of speaking about divine agency in history, partly because of the world view of the natural sciences (Wiles 1984:121–124) while, for the same reason, believing physicists often claim that there is more to the world than meets the eye of the scientific observer. Such natural scientists describe the world view of their discipline as showing an openness on all levels, not only on the level of quantum effects, but also on the macroscopic levels where all quantum effects are completely cancelled out (Ward 1990). Historians, on the contrary, often seem to picture our world as a clockwork universe: a well-ordered framework of fixed laws of nature which form a compact web explaining every physical event.

Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) is a classic example of this attitude among historians (Troeltsch 1898). He proposed using the criteria of historical research in the field of religious traditions in order to gain as clear an idea as possible of what has happened in a *historical* event or period. Historians should assume a critical attitude towards all stories, narratives and historical accounts in a tradition. They cannot take stories for granted, but should be sceptical of them in order to determine the likelihood of the occurrences and actions described in them having really taken place. In handing down these accounts, many hidden motives, mistakes, deceptions, shifts of (e.g. political) interests, mythologisations, among others, have played a role. The tools for critical analysis are the principle of (diachronic) *analogy* and that of *correlation*. According to the latter, *all* phenomena in the historical field are interconnected as parts of a kind of mesh. This means that every change at any time or place is preceded by past and future changes in its environment. Ultimately, this results in the holistic analogy of a river: necessarily, anything is closely bound up with everything in a kind of web of causal relations (Troeltsch 1898:108–109). Keith Ward misinterprets the point of view by stating that this basic concept requires one to interpret comparable accounts from a similar period and culture similarly. In my opinion, Ward's interpretation is merely a synchronic variant of Troeltsch's principle of analogy (Ward 1990:234–235). The opposite of the critical, historical approach is baptised as the 'dogmatic' method which starts by taking certain events for granted, as above historical criticism. These events serve as an authority for a belief system. But because what was achieved by the Enlightenment was a complete revision of modern thought in every field, nothing less than a total reconstruction of theology could meet the situation, according to Troeltsch (Sykes 1984:150–153).

From the viewpoint of correlation, historical explanation locates (a set of) events in this all-encompassing pattern of causes and effects. It is meaningful in this context to distinguish between physical and historical causality. Taken together, they nevertheless comprise such a compact web of interconnections that no event can occur without such this-worldly causality. This Troeltschian type of philosophy of history excludes the possibility of a historical explanation which includes an idea of an intervening or interacting divine agency. Such an approach of historical accounts is based upon the metaphysical presupposition of the immense causal complex of the universe in which all mental, spiritual and physical activities of humanity are included, as in a continuously flowing river (Troeltsch 1898:117).

Before turning to the question of divine agency in history, we have to say something about method. We can conclude that Troeltsch's reflection on historical method is like an analytical type of philosophy of history, although with a substantive or speculative background. It radically restricts the kind of results that this approach might achieve. It is not clear whether this restriction is necessary. Is it part of every historical method or is there more to say about historical method and its relation to metaphysics?

Historical method

According to Troeltsch, the analogy is the first basic concept of the critical method of the historian. Based on analogy between the external events known to historians and their contemporary experience, scholars seek to reconstruct the past in order to understand it. For a successful reconstruction, historians need to be able to recognise similarities between the events described and the ins and outs of affairs, actions, occurrences, among others, occurring in the present. After recognising such analogies between similar happenings in the past and the present, historians are able to visualise or imagine the way things have happened: it is the procedure of backwards projection. In the light of contemporary world views and their own conceptual frameworks, historians try to judge the degree of probability and conceivability of the accounts of certain past events – as if they have been involved in them themselves.

This strategy of Troeltsch has two consequences. The first consequence is that historical research is limited by the range of experience of the scholar. Despite the suggestion of detached and unbiased standards for critical historical research, it seems unavoidable that historians are hedged in by prejudice, not like Troeltsch's notional dogmatician who uncritically takes some classical accounts of past events for granted, but by restricting themselves to the field of their own experience and imagination. The second consequence is that no historical judgment can ever be final, because no finite human being can ever know all the possible states of affairs which are conceivable in the light of the only true world view. Therefore, historical claims always remain open to emendation and rectification. Only the all-knowing God can know all the possible states of affairs of this physical world and only He can give a final description. The suggestion of using the principle of analogy to achieve honesty in historical research is valuable, because this is in fact the way in which scientific explanation takes place. In this sense, Troeltsch's principle is merely a formal one, because in scientific explanation we use analogy in order to talk about an unfamiliar phenomenon in terms of a familiar one (the analogion or the model). However, in science, that does not mean that the unfamiliar is seen as a copy of the familiar, but that the familiar provides us with conceptual tools to cope with the unusual. To the extent that this procedure is successful, critical realists such as Rom Harré should have presupposed a structural similarity between the familiar model and the unknown phenomenon without claiming a complete congruity (Harré 1978). This means that we can distinguish between a positive, a negative and a neutral element in the analogy. The positive element refers to that region where the suggested tool works; the negative element tells us in which sector the analogy does not apply; and the neutral element delimits the zone of inquiry into the applicability of the model to the unfamiliar phenomenon.

This neutral element shows that the conceptual framework applied in explanatory models, can never be a closed system or infinitely tight or compact web. It will always leave room for the possible truth of claims which cannot be justified within the framework – presupposing Gödel's incompleteness theorem. Therefore, a modest statement is more appropriate: although talking about divine agency in 'history$_2$' is not excluded as logically impossible for the secular historian, it is nevertheless not part of his conceptual framework. The question which interests us here is whether divine agency is compatible with the conceptual framework of the secular scholar. Therefore, we should look for a more material principle than the formal analogy.

Michael Stanford adopts the idea of Hayden White that a historical work (as result of an investigation) is a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing* them (Stanford 1998:223). The keyword here is 'structure'. Although history lacks a firm theoretical structure,

as Stanford acknowledges, it makes use of many structures. A structure is a complex of relations between entities in a set. It informs us about how the entities are related to each other and at the same time determines the character or nature of the set as a whole. If we can describe a structure, we can use it like a map to locate the elements and to distribute the information we have found.

We can distinguish two types of structures relevant to historical investigation: those that are intrinsic to the field under investigation and those that do not belong to the field, but are in the mind of the investigator and imposed upon the field in his reflections and descriptions. The historian is looking for possible inherent structures or the possibility of imposing structures to understand what happened. As intrinsic relationships, Stanford mentions: (1) logical and semantical structures like in logic, mathematics and language, (2) neurological and psychological structures corresponding to the brain and the mind, and (3) cosmological structures which belong to the universe as a whole. The first group belongs to how we normally reason and argue; the second set informs us about the working of the human mind; and the third group does not belong to either, but is part of the world 'out there'. Regarding this third group, Stanford remarks that 'though the universe has these fundamental structures, they may be now, and perhaps will forever remain, beyond the scope of the human intellect'. According to me, it is an open question whether these inherent structures really exist or are merely presupposed for reason of description.

The other types of structures (the extrinsic ones) are created by the human mind and imposed upon the human environment to understand and change it. They pattern our experiences by means of the language we learnt or through the theories we developed and in the light of the ideals in which we believe. As imposed structures, that is, extrinsic to the field of investigation, Stanford mentions:

• social relationships,
• strategies of reconstruction,
• historical classifications.

The first kind of imposed structures could be of a social type: we acquire them in the process of socialisation by which we learn how our society works, and we can then apply them generally to a wide variety of situations. The second type of imposed structures belongs to the historian's approach: analysis of the constituent parts of the phenomena followed by synthesis in order to achieve an idea of the historical whole. The difficult thing in these strategies is that the historian has to distinguish and to select the more important from the less important constituent parts. It is logically impossible for him to describe everything. The third category is a set of typical historical distinctions like chronological conventions, geographical divisions, nations, organisations, social groupings, among others (Stanford 1998:153 – semantics; 167–182 – mind; 32 – cosmological changes).

The question which interests us here, is whether divine agency is compatible with the conceptual framework of the secular scholar. The idea is similar to an issue in the 'science and theology' discussion. You could try to combine both science and theology or religion into one conceptual scheme, suggesting that being religious, having a scientific attitude and doing theology are activities on the same level. This view always results in conflicts at the borderline between these activities. But another approach is also possible: the work of the scientist and the theologian are a so-called second-order activity of reflecting upon the various experiences and practices of our daily life. It is 'one world' in which we live and if we are convinced of this unity, we – as reasonable beings – will endeavour to achieve unity in our basic beliefs and concepts. However, religious and technical activities are of different logical types, so we cannot combine them in one conceptual scheme on the same level. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that coherence might be possible at a higher conceptual level. To the extent that theology is not merely concerned with religious experiences, but with all human perceptions and impressions, philosophy of religion could be the branch of theological enquiry that examines the concepts used both in systematic theology and science. Relevant to our question are those structures used in history-as-a-discipline (history$_2$) to refer to history-as-events (history$_1$). Some of these structures are given as basic to the universe and make its intelligibility possible. The historian imposes others to reconstruct and understand phenomena in the past. It is possible to recognise in these historical structures a kind of hierarchy similar to the different levels of organisation we notice in the physical and biological world. Thus, we can describe a human person as an individual, a member of a local community or a political party, belonging to a nation, *etc.* Although that person is a constituent member of all these groupings, the relevance of his contribution becomes vaguer at those 'higher' (i.e. more complex) levels.

What about God as an agent?

Whether it is possible to talk about divine agency depends on our concept of God. The nature of our religious concepts might be such that divine agency is logically excluded. If God is an absolute Transcendent Being, any action for which He (or It?) is responsible is out of the question. Although this transcendent Being can 'operate' as the Ultimate Value, that operation cannot be labelled divine agency. At best, it is the regulative or normative ideal for human action and we might even experience it as the highest Value, that is, the meaning of the universe's existence.

Yet, it is rather challenging to maintain a religious relationship with a 'value', because such a relationship requires that God can be an object of worship. Therefore, even though God as an absolute Transcendent Being is a logical possibility, it is irrelevant from a religious perspective because having a personal relationship with it is impossible.

A further argument in support of a personal God emanates if we analyse the concept of action. Actions are distinguished from mere events or accidents by presupposing intention(s), goals or aims. Intention is related to decision: you decide to act to realise your intentions. Because you can choose to perform or refrain from actions, you are to be treated as a person. Therefore, talking about divine agency presupposes that God is a personal Being. By giving up this notion of divine personhood, we would exclude the concept of divine agency as well, which would be the end of this discussion. But there are a variety of arguments for the personal God-conception despite the misgivings of several theologians (Van den Brom 1990).

In the previous section, we distinguished between several levels in history (in both senses). In a sense, we could say that the intrinsic structures reflect the result of what is traditionally considered the general providential agency of God. God, the Creator of the universe, is the sustainer of the natural world, and the regularity of its natural order is a sign of his faithfulness towards his creation. In his universally sustaining activity, God makes human freedom possible and gives human beings a certain degree of autonomy to be persons other than himself. But God also allows other forms of creaturely freedom in the universe's history. Thus, the universe's development can be described as the interplay between chance and necessity. In materialist metaphysics, this interplay might be interpreted as 'absolutely free, but *blind*'. However, a religious alternative is not excluded: we may describe this interplay as the result of God's gift of freedom and his faithfulness (Polkinghorne 1988:52–54). This type of divine action is compatible with the presuppositions of the worldview of history as a discipline. In this sense we can say that history is the domain of divine agency: God as the God of love allows freedom, making the historical processes possible. This concept of sustaining and allowing God is compatible with deism and theism.

But can we defend with intellectual integrity the view that God interacted with what was happening in history [as *res gestae*]? Although Maurice Wiles, for example, does not rule out that idea as logically impossible, he sees great difficulties in integrating it into a worldview that seeks to account for recent developments in human knowledge fully. For this reason, he maintains what looks like a modified deistic standpoint (Wiles 1986:108). The presuppositions of history do not exclude the idea of the interaction of God with the processes in history as a discipline. We have noted Stanford's remark that although the universe has these fundamental structures, they may be now, and perhaps will forever remain, *beyond* the scope of the human intellect. But Wiles questions whether this notion is compatible with other Christian beliefs. According to Wiles, spelling out the doctrine of creation and the issue of radical human freedom raises difficulties.

The criterion is that divine agency must be compatible with human freedom. Thus, Calvin's notion of God as Absolute Controller seems excluded, for example. If creation is an act of God, we can ask for its purpose. It aims to make a reciprocal divine-human personal relationship possible (Van den Brom

1993). Wiles proposes to use the idea of divine action primarily in relation to the world as a *whole* rather than to particular occurrences. His argument is as follows:

> To call something an 'act' is to give a unity to what would otherwise appear only as random occurrences, and to do so by bringing them together as contributory to some overall intention. (n.p.)

His problem is that we cannot fully bring the notion of 'unifying intentionality' within the idea of an *ongoing* process. Because of this notion of unity in the definition of action, we need to say that the whole process of the bringing into being of the world, 'which is still going on, needs to be seen as one action of God'. The difficulty with this idea is that it seems incoherent (Wiles 1986:28–29). Wiles takes up Gordon Kaufman's suggestion that we should conceive as God's act in the primary sense '*the whole course* of history, from its initiation in God's creative activity to its consummation when God ultimately achieves his purposes' (Kaufman 1972:137). However, we are confronted with the problem of whether we imagine an act this way. Wiles distinguishes an act from a mere event by referring to an intention which gives events unity and order. This means that an action is at least an event, although it is more. In this way, the notion of divine agency is consequently a void concept because it should encompass *all* events ('*the whole course* of history') and, therefore, *itself* as well, which is logically impossible.

Another problem concerns human freedom. If the whole course of history is an act of God, human beings and their actions will be part of it; that looks like pantheism. Wiles tries to avoid this consequence by talking about the metaphor of God as the author of a play in which the actors are each given the basic character of a person and are then left free to determine how the drama is to develop (Wiles 1986:37). In my opinion, this raises more severe problems than those which Wiles presents at the end of his book regarding the theistic conception because God as the author of a play does not somehow perform some all-encompassing act. On the other hand, Polkinghorne and Ward suggest that the notion of divine interaction is compatible with human freedom in an open universe in which processes are developed according to chaos theory. If this is imaginable for the present world, it is equally imaginable for the past, with its hierarchy of structures. Is history the domain of divine agency? My answer is: Why not?

If reality or the universe can be described as an information-bearing entity in process, and if this is hierarchically structured, then we can imagine God interacting with this hierarchy (Van den Brom 2011). This means that the divine agency and the activities of the human creatures are not on the same level. Of course, this is speculation, but it does provide a metaphorical representation of the agency of God concerning created reality. Although this may be an issue in an open discussion about the ability of a tradition to cope with questions of the meaning of life (Polkinghorne 2000:141–143), that is not our primary concern here. Our concern is that the above confirms that divine agency in history is imaginable.

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