

# What is in a name? Does the difference between onto-theology and theo-ontology direct the way from eco-theology to *theo-ecology*? Specific Russian theological perspectives

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**Dates:**

Received: 20 Oct. 2021

Accepted: 26 Nov. 2021

Published: 13 Jan. 2022

**How to cite this article:**

Buitendag, J., 2022, 'What is in a name? Does the difference between onto-theology and theo-ontology direct the way from eco-theology to *theo-ecology*? Specific Russian theological perspectives', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43(1), a2400. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2400>

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I approach this venture of figuring out the correct terminology to understand reality through the prism of two distinctive Russian Orthodox theologians, Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) and Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944). The lens I apply mainly to their works is their respective understanding of cosmology, that is, ontology and epistemology. Therefore, I concur with Grenz to abandon the term 'onto-theology' and qualify the inverse as a *Trinitarian theo-ontology*. This honours the intimate connection between knowing and being, and prevents the bifurcation between fidelity and rationality. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same applies to 'eco-theology'. This inversion reminds one of Hans-Urs von Balthasar, who bartered the concept of an aesthetic theology for *theological aesthetics*. Turning this question around would advance our dialogue with the sciences as the common denominator of the discourse is rather nature (creation) discerned from an acknowledged a priori (as all cognition do). In other words, the term *theo-ecology* is proposed.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The purpose study is not ecological but rather an asyndetic use of the terminology about the science and religion dialogue, with reference to the nomenclature of ecology and theology. All observation terms and sentences are theory-laden. Religion can be viewed as a linguistic framework that shapes the entirety of life and thought. Truth claims should focus on the grammar (or rules of the game) and not the lexicon when expressive symbolism is employed.

**Keywords:** ontology; epistemology; ecology; 'science & religion dialogue'; 'faith seeking understanding'; ecotheology; Russian Silver Age; theo-ontology.

## Introduction

Everything we can describe at all could also be otherwise.  
*There is no order of things a priori.* (Wittgenstein, Tractatus 5.634)

The underlying question whether God is intrinsically part of nature and yet its Creator and Redeemer opens a conceptual space beyond a naïve fideism (absolute foundationalism) or rigid rationalism (relativist anti-foundationalism) (cf. Shults 2006:489, 492). One of many scholarly introductions entailing contributions of well-known systematians on coming to grips with reality is, for example, the easily accessible collection of the Templeton laureate and recently passed John Polkinghorne, *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology* (2010).

John Zizioulas, in his chapter in the above-mentioned publication, contends the following, which is the pivotal point of this paper and is highly influenced by Orthodox theology:

Relational ontology contains in its very nature a dimension of transcendence, an openness of being, pointing to a beyond the self, to seeking communion with the Other, an eschatological orientation – at all levels of otherness, from the most elementary to the absolute one. (Polkinghorne 2010: loc.<sup>1</sup> 1933–1934)

I would like to approach this venture to understand reality through the prism of two distinctive Russian Orthodox theologians, Pavel Florensky<sup>2</sup> (1882–1937) and Sergius Bulgakov<sup>3</sup> (1871–1944),

1.The location number is used where page numbers are not provided in Kindle editions.

2.For a formal biography, see Pyman (2010). A more concise version is available on the web by Palini (2017), and the outline of these few biographical lines is taken from that, viewed 21 September 2021, from [http://www.fondazionemicheletti.it/altronovecento/articolo.aspx?id\\_articolo=34&tipo\\_articolo=d\\_persona&id=145#sdfootnote19anc](http://www.fondazionemicheletti.it/altronovecento/articolo.aspx?id_articolo=34&tipo_articolo=d_persona&id=145#sdfootnote19anc).

3.For a detailed account of Bulgakov's life and work, see Evtuhov (1997).

whose research have either been missed or at least neglected in Western theologies (Heath 2021:1). Researchers such as Nicolaidis et al. (2016:542) declared categorically that ‘the main historical overviews on science and religion continue to neglect Orthodoxy’, even by some renowned scholars of this century. Both the theologians selected for engagement in this article published extensively. The lens I apply mainly to their works is their respective understanding of cosmology, that is, ontology<sup>4</sup> and epistemology.<sup>5</sup> It could shed light on the question set in the article’s title: should we theologians who engage with ecology not rather be known as *theo-ecologists* than eco-theologists?<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this study is, in the first place, not ecological but rather a linguistic clarification of the terminology about the science and religion dialogue. All observation terms and sentences are theory-laden. Religion can be viewed as a linguistic framework that shapes the entirety of life and thought, or in the words of Lindbeck (1984:34): ‘[i]nstead of deriving external features of a religion from inner experience, it is the inner experiences which are viewed as derivative’. This leads to a cultural-linguistic alternative. Truth claims should focus on the grammar (or rules of the game) and not the lexicon when expressive symbolism is employed.

Hans-Urs von Balthasar argued strongly from an aesthetic theology to theological aesthetics, echoing my plea for a *theo-ecology*. He declared the adjective application of aesthetics as derogatory, and ‘the whole tenor of the Bible will confirm our suspicion [...] that “aesthetics” [...] cannot seriously be considered as a Biblical value at all’ (Von Balthasar 1982:79). Applying aesthetics as an *a priori* is a demise of revelation brought about by the autonomy of the sciences and philosophy. We have an obligation ‘to probe the possibility of there being a genuine relationship between theological beauty and the beauty of the world [...]’ (Von Balthasar 1982:80). A proper exegesis of Scripture occurs where the image encountered becomes the manifestation of the one who has made it. ‘The “maker of images” is God and man in unity’ (Von Balthasar 1982:85). A scholarly enquiry should be contemplation, as genuinely theological exegesis is inspired

4. It is important at this early stage to take note of a working definition of ontology: ‘[o]ntology is the study of being, insofar as being is possessed by any kind of entity. Although the term *ontologia* derives from the early seventeenth century, ontology is as old as philosophy itself. While German mathematician and philosopher Christian Wolff (1679–1754) identified ontology with *metaphysica generalis* (inquiry into the general categories of being), the relationship between ontology and metaphysics has become less precise. Some believe the two synonymous; others hold that while metaphysics deals with the nature and structure of all *possible* being, ontology only concerns actually *existing* beings. Ontological questions permeate the science-religion conversation; for example, what is the ontological status of the divine, and of putative emergent properties (e.g. the mental)?’ (Bielefeldt 2003:632).

5. Murray (2003:266) explained *epistemology* in the *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion* by starting with the following introductory paragraph: ‘[t]he need for an entry on epistemology – the theory of knowledge – illustrates the important mediating role of philosophy in key aspects of the science–religion interface. More specifically, the problems occasioned for religious traditions by the rise of science have extended beyond particular disputes to a more pervasive sense that science stands as the measure of all valid knowledge. The result has been a significant questioning as to whether religious traditions can still be viewed as routes to truth. For those seeking to maintain that these traditions can be so viewed, and that the sciences might even profit by appropriating some of the practices of wisdom enshrined therein, epistemological analysis is inescapable’.

6. The word, ‘theologists’ appears odd in common parlance. I use it as a pendant of ‘ecologist’. See the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.).

by the Holy Spirit and ‘keeps Scripture’s integrity in sight leads us further than a “purely philological consideration”’ (Von Balthasar 1982:108).

## What takes preference: ontology or epistemology?

John Polkinghorne (1930–2021) was delighted with his insight that epistemology always precedes ontology, and therefore, models ontology, which often appears in his works. I found the most vivid description of it in his book, *Quarks, Chaos & Christianity*, where he described it as follows:

Scientists are realists; they believe that what we know, or what we can’t know, show us what things are really like. My wife gave me a sweatshirt with the stirring motto ‘Epistemology Models Ontology’, or in less learned language, what we can know is a reliable guide to what is the case. (Polkinghorne 2005:85)

My understanding<sup>7</sup> of this proposition by Polkinghorne is as follows: human understanding is a dependable guide to understanding reality as it *is*. Therefore, what we know corresponds to reality, although our knowledge is only partial and indirect (critical realism). Unlike Kant, Polkinghorne wants to work from the *phenomenal* reality, which, to some degree, does extend to the *noumenal* reality, as he also conceded in a personal interview (Harris 1998:5). Therefore, although limited, humankind can nevertheless enter the ‘inaccessible light’ (1 Tm 6:16).

Polkinghorne describes his approach in the debate between theology and science from the ‘bottom up’. In his opinion, the movement from epistemology to ontology can be explained by his interpretation of Heisenberg, who had presented unpredictability as an epistemological problem. Yet, scientists later interpreted it as an ontological problem (Polkinghorne 2004:80–81). Consequently, unpredictability became an ontological principle rather than the inability to know it. And so, the epistemological discovery became a claim to an ontological truth. Although Polkinghorne deals with this matter in many of his books, he does not delineate his position adequately. I interpret Polkinghorne as saying that he advocates a kind of apposition, namely, that epistemology also displays ontological traits as his following statement alludes: ‘[u]npredictabilities would have to be interpreted in an ontological sense, as signals of an underlying ontological openness’ (Polkinghorne 1998:89).

In his ground-breaking work on the same issue, Stanley Grenz in his monograph *The Named God and the Question of Being. A Trinitarian Theo-Ontology* (2005) argued that the ontological question should be approached from a self-consciously theological perspective: ‘the book seeks to engage with ontology from the vantage point that arises out of the realization that the biblical God is named’ (Grenz

7. See Buitendag (2011) for an extensive discussion of Polkinghorne’s views; these paragraphs are a concise excerpt of it.

2005:6). This means that instead of asking what the implication of theology is for ontology, the process is rather the opposite by asking what is the significance of ontology for theology. The 'self-naming God' – as Grenz refers to God based on Ex 3:14 – provides the prerequisite for the question of Being: 'God is perceived as the ultimate goal of the human quest for knowledge of the world and, as such, the fulfilment of our intellectual nature' (Grenz 2005:8). It is based on Aristotle's metaphysics and Aquinas's theology and, in a certain sense, on the Eastern Orthodox tradition. A subsequent theo-ontology seems to be a sound consequence of an intrasystematic term cohering with the total relevant context.

Why is the order of theology and ontology so important? Which determines which? We must remember that words do not have meaning, but *vice versa*, meaning has words. Meaning transpires from different levels like a word, a sentence, and a context. Wittgenstein<sup>8</sup> taught us that the syntax of a language, or rather the meaning of a sentence, depends on the meaning of composite words. There must be something in common between the structure of the sentence and the structure of the fact. This is perhaps the distinction that Wittgenstein draws between a *Tatsache* (fact that may consist of two or more facts) and a *Sachverhalte* (facts that are not compounded of other facts). Louw (1978) cited Eugene Nida in this regard:

[O]ne of the reasons as to the nature of meaning is the tendency to confuse meaning and reference. The meaning of a word consists of the set of distinctive features which makes possible certain types of reference, while reference itself is the process of designating some entity, event, etc. by a particular symbol. (pp. 57–58)

Hebrew grammar applies the rule of apposition, emphasising the second noun: '[i]nstead of an adjective qualifying a noun, the Hebrew language prefers to place two concrete nouns in the close relation of the construct state' (Barr 1961:89).<sup>9</sup>

Wittgenstein posed the following deductive argument in his Tractarian account of logical consequence (5.131):

If the truth of one proposition follows from the truth of others, this expresses itself in relations in which the forms of these propositions stand to one another, and we do not need to put

8. Bertrand Russel wrote in his Introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* the following: 'There are various problems as regards language. First, there is the problem what actually occurs in our minds when we use language with the intention of meaning something by it; this problem belongs to psychology. Secondly, there is the problem as to what is the relation subsisting between thoughts, words, or sentences, and that which they refer to or mean; this problem belongs to epistemology. Thirdly, there is the problem of using sentences so as to convey truth rather than falsehood; this belongs to the special sciences dealing with the subject-matter of the sentences in question. Fourthly, there is the question: what relation must one fact (such as a sentence) have to another in order to be capable of being a symbol for that other? This last is a logical question, and is the one with which Mr Wittgenstein is concerned' (Wittgenstein [1922] 2007: loc. 11–16).

9. In certain languages as in the case of the Afrikaans (and German) that have a sort of lay rule of 'one concept, one word' (cf. Horak 2016), the following example makes it clear that the emphasis is on the second noun in a compound expression, for example, 'I invite you to *braaivleis* (roasted meat)', *vis-à-vis* 'I invite you to a *vleisbraai* (meat is going to be roasted)'. The former refers to the way the meat is to be cooked, the latter to the activity of preparing the meat (cf. Kempen 1969:111–112 for a discussion of this example).

them in these relations first by connecting them with one another in a proposition; for these relations are internal, and exist as soon as, and by the very fact that, the propositions exist. (Wittgenstein [1922] 2007:loc. 587–590)

The first scholar to use the concept of onto-theology in publications was Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). It is legitimate to say that he established the *convention* of onto-theology as the knowing subject that encounters the world as an object; substance and causality are relegated to the constructive mind. 'Transcendental theology', he said, 'endeavours to cognize the existence of such a being, through mere conceptions, without the aid of experience, and is then termed ontotheology' (Kant 2013:400). Kant believed that the existence of God could be known without recourse to revelation, very much like the ontological arguments of Anselm (1033–1109) and Descartes (1596–1650). Faith is relegated to practical reason and excluded from pure reason.

Although in quite a different vein, evenly opposing onto-theology, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) criticised the Western metaphysical tradition of being as *onto-theo-logic* and subsequently fails to explain how God gets into philosophy:

[M]an may neither pray to this God, nor may he sacrifice to him. Confronted by *causa sui* man may neither sink onto his knees nor could he sing and dance. (Heidegger 2016:46)

The essential constitution of metaphysics lies in the unity of existence (Heidegger 2016:38). We should avoid, in the thoughts of Heidegger, conceiving being as an entity. Truth is, therefore, not absolute but relational. *Dasein* ('being there' or 'existence') is the hypostatisation of reality and not the knowing subject meeting the world as an object, as in the case of Descartes or Kant. For this reason, the sciences are for Heidegger 'ontical' rather than 'ontological' disciplines. Ontological enquiry is more primordial than the ontical enquiry of the positive sciences (Heidegger 1976:11). The existential mode is thus ontical, and *Dasein* is an ontico-ontological entity.

Polkinghorne also applies this movement of *knowing* → *being* to the doctrine of the Trinity and draws an analogy with Karl Rahner's understanding of it, which took as its point of departure the axiom that the economic Trinity is equal to the immanent Trinity of God (Rahner 1997:21–22). On this basis, Polkinghorne (1998:114) could then construe: '[w]hat is known of God through the experience of God is a sufficient guide to the divine nature'. Rahner's Rule is, to Polkinghorne, nothing else but theological realism. And so, he can even apply theology to explain nature. Trinitarianism, therefore, becomes a heuristic tool for understanding nature.

Therefore, Shults (2006:488) is correct when he refers to the methodological maxim of Anselm, 'faith seeking understanding' as 'ubiquitous' and 'notoriously polyvalent'. It serves as a banner for both foundationalists and anti-foundationalists alike.

In his doctoral dissertation, the author of this article typified Karl Barth's enterprise in his *Church Dogmatics* as 'onto-theology' and suspected him of turning Anselm's maxim to its converse: *intelligo ut credam* (I believe in order to understand). Barth switched in the ontic sphere, the *esse* with the *significare* and in the noetic sphere, the *intelligere* with the *credere* (Buitendag 1985:133, 182). This means that Barth believes where others know and knows where others believe.

In the Foreword of his *Doctrine of Creation*, Barth warned against 'dilettante entanglements' between faith and reason where the twofold boundary is transgressed:

The relevant task of dogmatics at this point has been found exclusively in repeating the 'saga', and I have found this task far finer and far more rewarding than all the dilettante entanglements in which I might otherwise have found myself. There is free scope for natural science beyond what theology describes as the work of the Creator. And theology can and must move freely where science which really is science, and not secretly a pagan *Gnosis* or religion, has its appointed limit. (Barth, Bromiley & Torrance 2004:x)

Even to post-Barthian scholars (like the author of this paper), Barth's caveat of 'entanglement' of theology and science is still a challenge to theology, especially in the theology and science discourse. Nonetheless, the importance and clarity of the 'faith seeking understanding'-debate needs robust scrutiny, especially for underscoring the Eastern Orthodox theology, in general, and the Russian theology of the Silver Age,<sup>10</sup> in particular. Orthodox theology relied much on the Cappadocian Fathers', Aristotle's and Aquinas's ontologies. The theologians of the Silver Age emphasise that truth is perichoretic, and that an intertextual theology absorbs reality within a scriptural framework.

Grenz (2005) presented a solution (third option between positivism and fideism) by offering us a 'Trinitarian' theo-ontology. The adjective allows the 'Named God' as the ontological category of being and opens space for engaging Christian theology and the (Western) philosophical tradition. It results in a mutually enriching conversation between faith and reason, theology and philosophy. God is the ground of the cosmos and the 'fulfilment of our intellectual nature' (Grenz 2005:8). The naming of God concurs with Robert Jenson's view (in following Barth) that 'recent waves of "creation spirituality" are simply apostasy and paganism' (Jenson 1999:113n).

Augustine (354–430) – and not Anselm – coined the expression 'faith seeking understanding'. In his *Tractates* on the Gospel, according to John, he used this expression several times, for example: '[I]et him first have the piety to believe, and he will then have fruit in understanding' (Augustine 1888:60). Necessary for the cue of the argument is his application of this maxim in his analysis of the last section of Isaiah 7:9 ('If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established', or 'If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall

not stand at all'). Isaiah urged King Ahaz to place his trust in YHWH about the approaching of the enemies of Judah.

Shults (2006:497) discerned a crucial aspect that has consequences today in the dialogue between theology and science. He pointed out that the Hebrew text involves a play of words. The Hebrew word for 'faith' is *'mn* (אמן) and appears in both parts of the phrase, first in the *Hiphil* (תִּצְמַחְתָּ) and second in the *Niphal* (תִּצְמַחְתָּ); the first means to 'firmly trust in' and the second 'being confirmed in trust'. The firm faith of the Judaeans determines their fate. It is not an abstract faith like the cognitive assent to a proposition. In the Hebrew Bible, faith is always based on 'fidelity in relation to God and neighbour, not simply abstract rational inquiry'. (Shults 2006:497). However, the Septuagint – the version of the Old Testament which the Greek Orthodox Church used (Nicolaidis et al. 2016:544) – rendered the lemma 'faith' (πίστις) as intellectual comprehension or understanding and is instead interpreted as 'belief' than 'faith'. It has become a cornerstone in the Greek Orthodox understanding of Augustine's (or Anselm's) maxim. The *Faithlife Study Bible* has it thus correctly when saying: '[w]hile faith is more than intellectual assent, it necessarily involves a declaration, a promise, and ultimately, a person' (Roberts 2016). Both Augustine and Anselm misinterpreted the meaning of faith and belief (despite working with the Vulgate, which has a better translation than the Septuagint), and therefore, relegated 'the intimate connection between knowing and being in faithful relation in the biblical witness, and eventually to the bifurcation between fidelity and rationality' (Shults 2006:497).

This interpretation exactly is the reason why Polkinghorne should place a bi-directional arrow between epistemology and ontology. This ought to unite an epistemology of natural science and hermeneutics of theology (Buitendag 2011:8). A unidirectional movement of this maxim of Polkinghorne leads to either foundationalism or fideism, and eventually to compartmentalisation of faith and reason. Obolevitch (2019) summarised it neatly:

Hence, the relation between theology and science is asymmetrical (theology → science), both from the side of methodology, as considering the relation between these fields is possible only from the theological perspective, as well as from the side of epistemology and ontology, because science investigates the manifestation of God in the universe and is secondary to theology concerning God Himself. (p. 166)

## Science and religion dialogue in Russia

It appears that the Orthodox understanding of this dialogue is not placed somewhere between the different interlocutors (cf. Barth's 'entanglements'), but from the vantage point of both religious *beliefs* and *faith*. Science in Orthodox theology has a dialogical character as matter ought to be construed from the divine energies. In Russian theology, the material cosmos is always regarded in its relation to God, which leads to the fact that empirical sciences are subordinated to theology. Science

10. The Silver Age of Russia's intelligentsia is generally regarded from the end of the 19th century through to the first quarter of the 20th century and hallmarks a specific period in Russian thought and focus.

has, therefore, an extra-scientific source and understands reality *sub specie aeternitatis*. True Orthodox theology is, therefore, not in the first place a doctrine but of spiritual experience. Philosophy and theology are birds of the same feather: 'Russian philosophy is always theology' (Cassedy 1990:100). Obolevitch (2019) concurred when posing that the methodological distinction between the analytical-critical and synthetic-constructive approach is artificial in Russian cognition:

*Filosofia* [...] tries to preserve the scale and shape of total wisdom, combining elements of criticism and fantasy, science and poetry, analysis and synthesis, historicism and utopia in various ways. (p. 8)

God can be known in creation through *hesychasm*,<sup>11</sup> which forms the link between theology and science. No wonder that a scholar like Cyril Hovorun (2014:125) can claim that 'theologians and scientists in Russia speak a more common language than their colleagues in the West'.

Greek Orthodox theology distinguished fundamentally between the *ousia* and the *energeia* (the *dynamis* or the *onomata*) of God. However, the bottom line of both these views is the inaccessibility of God. God created from his *will*, not from his nature. John of Damascus (1899) laid the foundation for this tenet:

For the creation, even though it originated later, is nevertheless not derived from the essence of God, but is brought into existence out of nothing by His will and power, and change does not touch God's nature. For generation means that the begetter produces out of his essence offspring similar in essence. But creation and making mean that the creator and maker produces from that which is external, and not out of his own essence, a creation of an absolutely dissimilar nature. (p. 7)

This distinction (*contra* Rahner) and even juxtaposition of God *ad intra* and God *ad extra* led to the transcendental God beyond the essence – very much like the world of forms of Plato (Florensky). God's being is beyond all categories of being, which paves the way for a mystical theology and, obviously, an apophatic approach to epistemology. Grenz (2005:322) summed it up aptly: '[b]ecause God is incomprehensible, God is beyond being named. Because God is unnameable, God is also unknowable'.

A surplus of meaning that is intrinsically part of creation stays inaccessible to reasoning alone (Nicolaidis et al. 2016:548). This approach deconstructs the hubris of reason and finds its peace in silence, which, in turn, clears the deck for a 'revelational theo-ontology' (cf. Grenz 2005:327). Alfred North Whitehead ([1925] 2021:44) is, therefore, correct when he said, 'induction presupposes metaphysics. In other words, it rests upon an antecedent rationalism'. Your metaphysics

assures you that there *is* a past, and that there *is* a future. Missing this leads to positivism.

Nesteruk (2018:276) argued that theology deals with 'event-like phenomena which cannot be presented in phenomenality of objects (what happens in science)'. It presupposes a particular ontological commitment. The 'data' of religious experience must not be a philosophical framework because philosophy transcends its metaphysical setting. It is only possible if it is acknowledged that 'the foundation of both science and theology originates in human beings, having an ambiguous position in the universe which cannot be explicated on metaphysical grounds' (Nesteruk 2018:276).

Natural scientists who deny this by making conclusions about the universe do not clarify the contingency of their epistemologies because 'the very possibility of science as a consequence of facticity of life constitutes a theological problem' (Nesteruk 2018:294).

Consciousness is epiphenomenal of the physical world as 'knowledge is limited by the conditions of corporeality (embodiment) and the limits of access to infinity' (Nesteruk 2018:278–279). It thaws the thinking that science deals with the ontic and theology, in turn, with the ontological. The common denominator is instead a *meta-ontology* because the relationship between science and theology is not symmetric, as alluded earlier. 'What was called "science" came from the external, contrary to "philosophy" from within – namely, theology' (Nicolaidis et al. 2016:545).

This is perhaps the reason Andrew Dickson White and John William Draper could write in their seminal works, respectively, in 1896 and 1874, that the Orthodox Church (contrary to the Roman Catholic Church) since the restoration of science 'has never arrayed itself in opposition to the advancement of knowledge. On the contrary, it has always met it with welcome' (Nicolaidis et al. 2016:543). The tendency since the Second Byzantine Humanism was to approach natural sciences more empirical and, in the process, advancing (Neo)platonist thinking, which resulted in a 'synthesis between biblical cosmology and pagan scientific knowledge followed by most Byzantine scholars' (Nicolaidis et al. 2016:551). The corporeal world was never seen as a burden to the soul (*contra* Plato) but rather as the soul's home, and therefore, should be taken care of and respected.

Nicolaidis et al. (2016:557) contend that during the 18th century, orthodox scholars shifted the emphasis from the meaning of science and its relation to God's creation to the content of science, which was because of Newtonian physics. Yet – Nicolaidis et al. continue – they endeavoured to support Aristotelian physics; however, in the end, secularism has prevailed. Consequently, they name four categories epitomising the relation between Greek Orthodoxy and natural sciences (Nicolaidis et al. 2016:562–563):

- para-ecclesiastical scholars
- scientists

11. 'Hesychasm was a method of spiritual exercise that aimed at achieving union with God through inner quietude and uninterrupted "prayer of the heart" but also required the participation of the body. Through prayer requiring the participation of both spirit and body, the monk – and indeed any devout Christian – could encounter the Uncreated Light witnessed by the disciples of Jesus on Mount Tabor. As a new mystical experience, it reconnected the ascetic ideal with the experiences of the Desert Fathers and hermits of the first Christian centuries, as well as the later Byzantine mystical theologians' (Nicolaidis et al. 2016:552).

- theologians
- intellectuals.

The interactions between theologians and scientists occurred haphazardly; yet, some recurring fields have appeared since the beginning of the 20th century.

Although this article is primarily shaped from the perspective of the two chosen scholars, the current debate between science and religion in Russia deserves a short paragraph. ‘Scientific atheism’ was formalised in 1954 with a decision made by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR (Hovorun 2014:123). It meant that science (and not philosophy) made up a basic framework for theology. Harmful as it might seem, it resulted in a situation where scientists and theologians have interacted much more than in the West.<sup>12</sup>

Negrov and Malov (2021) conducted an empirical survey in 2020 among Orthodox and Evangelical Christians in Ukraine and Russia about their responsible *stewardship of the earth* and its life forms. Although most interviewees acknowledged the problem of an ecological crisis, only a few admitted that they actively care for the creation. According to the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM):

[O]nly one out of five Russians (19%) views this initiative as a striving to take care of the planet; those who think so are mainly young Russians aged 18–24 (44%). (2020:n.p.)

Negrov and Malov (2021:16) concluded with a significant finding by positing that ‘religious beliefs provide the framework for their perception of theory and practice of Christian environmental leadership’.

With his new epistemological principle, Bulgakov (2000:loc. 301) informed us that the Russian word *khoziaistvo* means both ‘economy’ and ‘household’ – economy and philosophy are complementary and are mutually interdependent. This is ‘ecology’ in the real sense of the word: an *inner* relation of human and nature and a synthesis of the individual and the collective.

## Concluding remarks

Many prominent theologians from the Russian Orthodox Church are former physicists, mathematicians, chemists, etc. Both Florensky and Bulgakov were polymaths. This approach has led to the view ‘that science constitutes [now] a basic thinking framework for theology, not philosophy or proper academic theology, like in the West’ (Hovorun 2014:125). Russian culture never separated faith and reason, but was prone to diffusion and *perichoresis*. Reality – and so truth – is

12. Unfortunately, up to today, theology still struggles to be recognised as a proper academic discipline and re-introduces to the educational system in Russia (Hovorun 2017:124). Alarming is the so-called ‘Letter of Academicians’ to President Putin and signed by 10 members of the Russian Academy of Science, bemoaning the ‘increasing clericalization’ of Russian society and the influence of the Church in all spheres of social life (Hovorun 2017:125–126). Science and theology are regarded as incompatible. However, there are promising signs of hope in the ‘post-secularity’ of Russia today.

a unity; yet, it entails two contradictory but equal ontological assertions only to be solved on a meta-level of mystery that transcends human rationality:

[T]hanks to this dominant spirituality – and up until the ascendance of modernity in the nineteenth-century – science and secular knowledge were not conceived by mainstream Orthodoxy as an indispensable intermediary stage in the process of human union with God. (Nicolaidis et al. 2016:566)

There is a place for natural grace in the creation and nature that takes part creatively in its self-creation. The creaturely *Sophia* not only has her foundation in the Divine Sophia but is permeated by her (Bulgakov 2004:loc. 3224). For Bulgakov, natural grace is intrinsically part of nature and an active force within creation. It is the same Spirit that creates and that sanctifies life and matter. The Spirit is a non-hypostatic presence in creation as the comforter, from beginning to end.<sup>13</sup>

Creation manifests divine love, beauty and harmony, and is a panentheistic conception of reality inclined to a synthetic and holistic system. In this process, his goal was ‘to create a syncretic meta-language of theology, science, and art’ (Obolovitch 2019:107). Ultimate truth is essentially antinomistic and, therefore, contradiction and above the plane of rationality. Knowledge is, *per se*, contradictory. Rojek believed that most of Florensky’s antinomies ‘are merely rhetorical devices, not true logical contradictions’ (Rojek 2019:536). It is possible because there is a distinction between rational and reasonable thought, augmented by faith. Natural philosophy is transformed into supranatural thought: ‘[s]uprational thought is therefore a new consistent superset of the religious discourse closed under the operation of dogmatic consequence’ (Rojek 2019:538).

Shults (and Grenz) believed that the separation of the trinity from scientific discourse has led to the separation of faith and reason. Only a *Trinitarian* faith can seek *transformative* understanding (Shults 2006:489). Antinomianism has, therefore, both an ontological and epistemological character.

The stratification of the quest for truth prevails, and thus, the demise of an onto-theology. The Russian Silver Age theologians have shed light on the ‘sapiential horizon’ as being an integral part of creation and epitomising the ‘philosophical and ethical values’ as the ‘indelible mark of the human person’ (see §74 of the encyclical letter of 1998, *Fides et Ratio*, of Pope John Paul II). This leads to the intellectual pursuit of three crucial enquiries: ‘the exploration of the nature of existence (metaphysics), the nature of knowledge (epistemology), and the nature of values (axiology)’ (Grenz 2005:2).

Polkinghorne (1998:20) called this enterprise of both science and theology verisimilitudinous ‘knowledge’, and McGrath (2019) defined it as an:

13. Peter Harrison discerns this approach in Calvin’s work too, that is, a ‘reverse condescension’ and ‘conjunction’, which could bring traditional theology and natural sciences to a converging discourse (Harrison 2021:5).

[E]pistemological pluralism, offering us a ‘bricolage’ of unintegrated pieces of knowledge and discernments emerging from various disciplinary or social viewpoints on our reality, or scientific engagement with its multiple levels. (p. 222)

Wittgenstein (1922 [2007]) echoed it appropriately:

[I]n fact what solipsism means, is quite correct, only it cannot be said, but it shows itself. That the world is my world, shows itself in the fact that the limits of the language (the language which I understand) mean the limits of my world. (loc. 797–799)

I alluded earlier to Polkinghorne’s strapline, ‘epistemology models ontology’, and suggested a bi-directional arrow. The *knowing* → *being* cannot be linear from whichever direction. The relationship between science and theology is not symmetrical. The Orthodox theology taught us to integrate these ‘magisteria’ horizontally *and* vertically by rendering ontology in its (w)holistic meaning (cf. Theokritoff & Knight 2020:177–190). Therefore, I concur with Grenz to abandon an onto-theology and qualify a *theo-ontology* with a *Trinitarian*<sup>14</sup> supposition. This understanding honours the intimate connection between knowing and being, and prevents the bifurcation between fidelity and rationality.

The question is, therefore, not what the implication of ecology is for theology but rather the inverse, what is the significance of the named God for ecology? (see Buitendag 2021:2). It would advance our dialogue with the sciences as the common denominator is rather nature (creation) discerned from an acknowledged *a priori* (as all cognition do). In other words, a *theo-ecology* is proposed. In Wittgensteinian terminology, this sequence would be a *Tatsache*. The text absorbs the world, not the inverse where the world absorbs the text. The meaning of language is in the use.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

### Author’s contributions

J.B. is the sole author of this article.

### Ethical considerations

This study followed all ethical standards for research without any direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

This research work received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

14. Conradie (2002, 2013) has phrased the challenge of this *a priori* well in the title of one of his articles: *Only a fully trinitarian theology will do, but where can that be found?*

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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