Dr. F.E. England
Department for the Study of Religions, University of Cape Town
Rondebosch, South Africa.
E-mail: frank.england@uct.ac.za
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5903-8087

https://doi.org/10.38140/5za8y202

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2026
46(1):218-222

Date received:
14 April 2026

Date published:
30 June 2026

Published by the UFS
http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at

© Author(s)

OPEN ACCESS

BOOK REVIEW

Introducing analytic theology

Weston, P., (SCM: London, 2025), pp. 182, ISBN 978-0-33-406366-7

Usually wary of "introductory" texts because they presume too much or provide too little, Phil Weston's *Introducing analytic theology* is a rich and detailed primer, replete with many judiciously chosen quotations, to the renaissance in an area of theological research that has recovered from its 20th-century denunciation and exile. The careful choices and subtle definitions of terms for expressive clarity reach back to the inceptive period of the Christian doctrinal disputes. Nevertheless, a rejuvenated practice of analytic precision only received its *imprimatur* when Oxford University Press published *Analytic theology: New essays in the philosophy of theology*, edited by Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea, in 2009. The irony that Oxford University Press is the publisher of this inaugural text will not be missed. The domination of "Oxford Philosophy" in the Anglo-American world followed Freddie Ayer's exposure to the Vienna Circle's Logical Positivism and the publication of *Language, truth and logic* in 1936. This approach, which segued into the focused examination of language and the precise meanings of terms, influenced more than a generation of prominent philosophers including J.L. Austin, Gilbert Ryle, and Peter Strawson. Its contribution to philosophy and, in particular, to the critique of ethereal philosophical mysticism cannot be denied. But its proponents, frequently unashamedly, reserved their sneering *hauteur* for religious language, dismissing it as non-sensical and unverifiable, and as attitudinal emotivism that

lacked mental acuity.[1] However, continental philosophers, even those abjuring the Christian faith, and philosophical theologians continued to explore the enduring questions of "Being/being" and granted inquisitorial space to the human being who asks of its being.

Currently, a more holistic view of the human person has emerged. It recognises that knowledge is embedded in the whole human person, extended bodily, and enacted psycho-somatically ("4E Cognition", see Watts 2021; Williams 2018). When this is acknowledged, then a return to linguistic analysis and definitional stringency that welcomes religious doctrines and faith-commitment propositions benefits both theology and philosophy. In this respect, the extent of productive energy since that publication in 2009 has included the establishment of the *Journal of Analytic Theology* in 2013, and the remit of research has broadened to encompass Christian rituals, rites, and ascetic practices, as well as embryonic studies of race, gender, and queer theology. With this evidence of academic fertility, a statement about the purposes, range of topics, and methodological commitments of analytic theology (henceforth, AT) is certainly welcome.

Weston's book is divided into three sections. Part One "defines" and "defends" the discipline. Citing Rea, AT's "style" recurs to analytic philosophy's dictates of precision, coherent logic, and lucidity, and the avoidance of figurative and imaginative language (pp. 7-9). Although AT's "style" appropriates the dictates of analytic philosophy, it is "theology". Thus, for the impressive array of formidable scholars who are engaged in this area, commitment to the Christian faith and its evangelism is also central (pp. 11-12). Scripture is axiomatic (p. 27, *et passim*), as are the doctrinal definitions of the early ecumenical councils. However, the pledge of faith is energising rather than restrictive, resulting in innovative models and thought experiments, rather than merely sense-making of the traditional dogmatic formulations.

These endeavours are evident in Part Two, in which various received accounts of the Trinity, the incarnation, and the atonement are equipped with more rigorous argument, elaboration, and recasting. Not fearful of critique and revision, proposals receive peer revision, modulation, even abandonment. Consequently, for example, appropriating Aristotle's *hylomorphism* for a "Constitution Model" of trinitarian relations, in which matter is construed as essence and form as the individual persons, is not without merit. Analogous to sculptural artworks, matter remains when form is hewn (pp. 52-53). But such an analogy may meet with a contemporary objection. God's essence is

1 For such statements by Strawson and Bernard Williams, Ayer and John Searle, and Isaiah Berlin, respectively, see Magee (1997:65-66, 75-78, 110).

dynamic and quickening, whereas matter is more commonly conceived of as literally inanimate.

AT's dedication to definitional precision does acknowledge that human talk about God is inherently paradoxical and contradictory (p. 56), but it also recognises that this does not preclude attentive engagement with the *aporiai*. On occasions, thought experiments render assistance. In the following chapter, the problems inherent in a dual-natured Christ engender a comparison with Superman and Clark Kent (p. 65). More innovative is an imagined account of a world in which each person possesses a single bent arm. Then, an individual arrives with one bent and one straight arm, who, clearly, is also a person. The result is perplexity. What ensues is the necessary modification of the concept of human personhood (p. 75), just as the presence of a human-divine saviour requires a new definition of what it means to be a person, and, in this instance, with trinitarian consequences. In the subsequent chapter, after the familiar atonement theories have been rehearsed and critiqued (pp. 86-103), new avenues of exploration include replacing the dominant Reformation "substitution" theory with the notion of "representation" (p. 103). Thus, the one sacrifice of Christ is the impetus for the formation of Christian sacrificial communities, whereby this mission-oriented faith establishes a processive, future-oriented, and collective redemptive project (pp. 104-105).

Finally, Part Three turns to terrain previously neglected by theology's analytic approach, namely church, liturgy, and prayer. With respect to ecclesiology, the difficulties are conspicuous, because AT's practice of precision and clarity readily inclines towards appropriating secular institutions and associations as templates for comparative analyses of the church. No less problematic are the intriguing and often beguiling areas of "spirituality" and "prayer" in the next chapter. Thus, quite how to speak lucidly about a divine institution and about the purpose of Godward intentions and requests demands further investigation. In the former case, an ecclesial community is not a secular business or a state or voluntary organisation; in the latter case, God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence questions providing God with information.

Indeed, so much *is* different when thinking and speaking about God; but what is truly significant is the realisation and acknowledgement of *how great that difference is* when God is the object of human thought. To ameliorate rather than eradicate its contradictory semantics and still to speak meaningfully of God, the Trinity, the natures of Christ, the church and its attendant practices are the acknowledged vocatives to AT. And yet God-talk will always remain contentious and contested.

Even though Weston's wide-ranging book is itself a model of analytic clarity and an "introduction", perhaps it may allow four issues of concern to be addressed tentatively. First, AT's admission of its faith-based commitment may require more than an assertion, especially when Scripture is axiomatic. The biblical texts, indeed, are texts in the plural, and some of the variant readings have formidable claims. These, too, demand scrutiny. Scholars probably ought to quote from the Greek text first, before turning to translations and, in the latter case, to state which translations they are using and to justify their choices.

Secondly, summary appeal to the Holy Spirit, which occurs frequently in the final part of the book, is not an explanation, at least not without specific third-person trinitarian definitional restrictions, and also linkage to the person and the work of Jesus, which again returns to the New Testament's textual witnesses.

Thirdly, there are times – in fact, all of the time – when theological language fails. In this failure, it may need to fall silent, which is different from acknowledging its paradoxical and contradictory modes. Where language fails and falls silent, scholars may well be asked to shift into a passive and reflective mind and posture. Instead of meditation (whether in meditative attention to the meaning of a biblical text, in *lectio divina* imaging, or in scientific epistemological probing, which endeavours to provide conclusive propositions), the discarding of available "proof texts" and the inherited formulae by contemplative stilling of thought and postural patience may be practised. This ascetic is not one of passive muteness and bewilderment. Rather, it is the earnest of innovatively rethinking God, of recasting doctrine radically (John of the Cross may well be the real test, see Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book II, 1991, 2017; Williams 2014:9-10), and of ensuring that epistemic humility, which Weston reputes to AT, remains its informing virtue of inquiry.

Finally, the relationship between the longer tradition of philosophical theology (see, for example, Mezei 2016) and AT requires clarification. As the influential epistemologist, Sosa (2017:137) noted

> our main interest in philosophy is not restricted to semantic or conceptual analysis. When we wonder about personal identity, freedom and responsibility, the mind and its states and contents, justice, rightness of action, happiness, and so on, our main focus is not, or not just, the words or the concepts. There are things beyond words and concepts whose nature we wish to understand. The metaphysics ... goes ... even beyond the correlated conceptual analysis.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ayer, A.J.
1936; 1946. *Language, truth and logic*. London: Penguin.

Kavanaugh, K. (ed.)
1991, 2017. *Ascent of Mount Carmel. The Collected works of St. John of the Cross*. Third edition. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. With revisions and introductions by Kieran Kavanaugh. Washington, DC: ICS Publications.

Magee, B.
1997. *Confessions of a philosopher*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Mezei, B.M.
2016. Renewing Christian philosophy: An outline. In: K. Oakes (ed.), *Christian wisdom meets modernity* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark), pp. 203-232.

Sosa, E.
2017. *Epistemology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Watts, F.
2021. *A plea for embodied spirituality*. *The role of the body in religion*. London: SCM.

Williams, R.
2014. *The edge of words*. *God and the habits of language*. London: Bloomsbury.

2018. *Being human*. *Bodies, minds, persons*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans.