Introduction

Under the line
It was during my studies that I first became acquainted with what is known as ‘the religious scientific critique of God and theology’, a popular approach to religious studies today. The confrontation with this critical approach to theology eventually culminated in an intellectual and personal crisis. The crisis is best described in terms of a challenge. I was faced with the challenge to rethink and to reevaluate the theological assumptions that I had become accustomed to and that I had, to a certain degree, taken for granted. The research question for this dissertation emerged precisely out of this sense of crisis.

The argumentation in class went like this: on a white-board, a line was drawn; above the line the word God was posited; under the line, at the bottom of the board, a couple of matchstick figures were drawn. The line on the white board indicated the divide between the natural and the supernatural, in philosophical terms the physical and the metaphysical. God was thus part of all that is metaphysical, and humans of all that is physical. The matchstick figures symbolized the major religions in the world today: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. Above these figures, on a second row, books were drawn. These indicated that all religions have a certain ‘holy book’ that contains their teachings. Above the books, closest to the all-dividing line between humanity and God, the name was written of a key figure, from the respective religion, the one who provides access to God.

The drawing is based on certain assumptions about the reality of the religious experience and the consequent scientific analysis of it. The first assumption is that this image of religions today is the most scientifically responsible, since its analysis is objective. The one engaged in the study of religions must not be biased by any of the religions under consideration. In the scientific community the researcher of religion must take the position of methodical atheism, which guarantees scientific objectivity. The second assumption is related to the first: because religion is objectively analyzed, the scientific approach presupposes certain similarities between human religious experiences. From an objective and uninvolved perspective all religious experiences seem quite similar; after all, they all have a holy book, an exceptional figure and a God. The third assumption has to do with what is above the line: God. God is posited above the all-dividing line between the physical and the metaphysical. Above the line, God exists as an undefined, unidentified and, by consequence unhistorical entity. The fourth assumption is that the religious experience is a one-sided affair. The arrow, which indicates the dynamics of the religious experience, points only in one direction, from bottom up. This ultimately means that all that there is above the line is out of reach. All that there is under the line is what matters. On a fundamental level this means that the line cannot be crossed either way. The ultimate assumption is that the Divine is not an entity on its own, but it is intrinsically bound to the projections of the human mind.

As a Christian theologian, taking into account the above criticism, I am challenged to consider the possibility of theology as talk about God. In order to do this I have to present my view of theology, as I understand its scope and aims. By doing this, I place my work in the wider context of the theological field. What I am about to challenge in this dissertation is the religious scientific approach to theology, specifically its ‘generic conception of God’ in terms of ‘the highest divine being’. It is evident that from a Christian theological perspective there are some problems with the above-mentioned critical approach. These problems and the consequent theological engagement with these problems form the core of my thesis.
The heart of the problem is that a nonspecific conception of God, in terms of divinity, does not do justice to the Christian theological talk of God. The reason is that, from a religious-scientific (Religionswissenschaftlich) perspective, God is defined as a distant, faceless, mute being who is decorated with superlatives. It is a God with no history, no people and no places. God is a generic term, which stands for ‘a being up there’. The irony is that this divine being is on the one hand unidentified, and on the other well described by abstract definitions like all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-present etc. But ultimately this God has its home in the human consciousness and ability to project a superior higher being. It is no longer a talk about God as such, i.e. theology, but talk of the religious feelings of human beings. In post-Kantian terminology, God is a projection of the human mind. Since human consciousness is bound to all that is under the line, everything beyond that line is projection and in the final analysis non-existent. This implies the obvious conclusion: God is not an entity on its own but just another faculty of the human imagination. This is precisely the underlying principle, which is at the heart of the modern criticism of theology as a discipline. It is this criticism that this study regarding the identity of God wishes to address.

As a theologian I have been asking the following question: what about the identity of God? From a Christian theological perspective, I was familiar with the fact that theologians talk about God as a well-identified entity. God is not just a general concept, but has a Name, can be identified, can be called upon and thus, has a history. In history, God has acted at given times and in certain places to a specific group of people. So God is well identified through the stories told by his people through the ages. God is talked about in terms of appearing, meeting people, speaking to them and acting in their lives. The consequent stories, songs, laws, wisdom sayings and testimonies document God’s history with these people. God has an identity. It is this theological understanding of God that does not match the modern scientific perspective of the divine. In the discrepancy of these two perspectives lies the challenge and the sense of crisis is most apparent. In this dissertation the identity of God has to do with the biblical theological understanding of who God is and how that understanding helps us to address the problems of a religious-scientific approach to theology and God.

The study of the identity of God is rooted in theology and specifically, in my understanding of what theology is. Theology does not stand alone as an intellectual discipline, but it is rooted in the Church and in a certain theological tradition. My Christian theological perspective is shaped by the broad protestant tradition. At the same time I remain committed to a more global understanding of theology. In what follows I want to address some of the critical issues related to theology and the identity of God in the context of modern academia. The issues raised here will constitute the main lines of the study and will lead towards the concrete formulation of the main question the dissertation is raising and attempts to answer. From this point on I abandon the first person singular voice and I will move to the plural. This has to do with doing justice to the rootedness of my work. I do not study nor write theology in a vacuum. I do not stand alone in this but rather stand on the shoulders of those who came before me. My theological perspective is co-inherent with those that came before me and will come after me. This slight shift in voice also marks the move from a strictly personal towards a more formal approach. During the course of the dissertation we will be referring to the theologian. The profile we have a mind is a woman or a man who actively participate in the study and work of a theologian. We will also often refer to humanity and human beings and these terms will be used in their generic sense.
What is theology?

Beyond our personal motivation lies a certain understanding of what the discipline of theology is. The main research question is embedded in that understanding. By making explicit how we understand theology, the main theme of this dissertation, the identity of God, will also become more evident. In order to understand what Christian theology is, it is wise to first look at some well-known definitions by representative theologians through the various stages of Christian theology. We will present our definition of theology alongside these definitions, as a way of showing our specific take on the matter. Definitions often carry within them the unspoken presuppositions which lie at the heart of one’s theological work.

Anselm of Canterbury’s classic formulation, fides quaerens intellectum, “faith seeking understanding”\(^1\) is one of the most well-known definitions of theology. It is a classic definition, which is still popular and much appreciated by theologians. According to the anselmian formula, theology is a discipline by which the believers seek to express their beliefs in a reasonable and ordered way. Theology then is a process of rationalization of the believer’s faith experiences. These experiences are related to a certain tradition, to a certain community and to the individual person. Rationality, faith, experience, community and talk, are all important aspects in one’s definition of what the discipline of theology entails.

The early church fathers focused, in their theology, mainly on talking about God’s being in light of the challenges presented by the critics of the Christian faith. This faith was hallmarked by the scandalous claim that God had become a human being in the person of Jesus Christ. Most theological works were dealing with the problems related Christology, and specifically the God and human relationship. Theology during this early period was fully a church discipline that belonged to the community of faith. Theology was a multifaceted discipline that gave a rational synthesis of the Church’s Credos;\(^2\) and also elucidated the content of faith with regard to beliefs that were contrary to the Credo. In the Middle Ages a certain shift took place in the way theology was understood. With the emergence of scholasticism came also the uprooting of theology as a Church discipline. Theology became more of a system of thought, a subject taught in the academia, and by consequence, a scientific discipline. Theology moved, as it were, from the Church into the university. This break is significant for the way theology is understood today.\(^3\)

In modernity, the character of theology has been mostly shaped by its position within the gap between church and university. Questions are often raised as one inquires about modern theology: is theology a discipline restricted to the life of the Church or is it a public discipline (meaning apart from the Church), which ought to be taught in an academic setting? If theology is strictly related to the Church, then what is its public relevance? If theology is a matter of public interest, then what defines its content and aims and what is its relevance to the life of the Church? Thus far, one could talk about a separate development in modernity, with a strict demarcation between church theology and academic theology. Modern theologians often seek to bridge this gap. On the one hand, theologians try to show the relevance of theology for public matters; while on the other hand, they also have to deal with the relevance of academic theology for the life and practice of the Church.


\(^2\) By Credo we mean the theological and confessional achievements of the various Councils of the Church roughly before 400 AD.

The definitions of the modern period are marked by the struggle to precisely define theology as a discipline. The following classic definitions are reminiscent of this very ambiguity.

“Theology: is the systematic reflection on the content of the relationship, which God in Jesus Christ has established, between us and Him.”

“Basically, systematic theology is the reflection on and the ordered articulation of faith.”

“...theology is the thinking internal task of speaking the gospel, whether to humankind as message or to God in praise and petition – for of course the church speaks the gospel also to God, pleading it before him and praising him for it. The church’s specific enterprise of thought is devoted to the question, How shall we get it across, in a language, with signs other than linguistic – in the church called “sacrament” and “sacrifice” – or by other behavior of our community, that Jesus is risen and what that means?”

“Theology is reflection upon God whom Christians worship and adore.”

“Now the matter, theology, is critical and systematic reflection of the presupposition of the Church’s ministry of witness.”

“...Theology is about the knowledge of God. However it is not only about the human ideas about God or the human religious feelings of human beings, but also about God himself.”

Beyond the above-mentioned ambiguity of these definitions, there are some common features that unite them: first, theology is understood and defined as an intellectual discipline. The theologian’s task is to reflect on and to speak about the content of faith. Second, the content of faith, and, by implication, the content of theology, is God Himself in his dealings with the world and the ensuing good message of His works. Third, theology happens in relationship with a faith community. But the context in which theological reflection and speaking happens may vary. It may be in the church, in the academy or in the public square. Theology is ultimately related to the church in an essential way, for it finds its roots and ends in her. In short, theology is broadly defined in modernity as a discipline, related in its aims and tasks to the theologian who reflects on the content of his faith, i.e. God, in community with others, i.e. the Church.

The basic premise of our definition is that the task of theology is to talk about God. This is not a mere translation of the Greek rendering of theos – logos; rather, it is the classic understanding of what the exercise of theological work entails. To talk about God does not only refer to the act of utterance itself, but also to the broader meaning of what talk means, i.e. a discourse in verbal and nonverbal forms. Theology is an articulated exteriorization of the

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4 Berkhof, H., Christelijk Geloof, 8e druk (Kampen: Kok, 2002), 32.
10 The word theology is the convergence the two Greek words ‘theos’- God and ‘logos’ - word of or about God. Theology in other words is talk about God. The ancient Greek philosophers used this definition for all teachings about metaphysics. Later, in Christian thinking, it became related specifically to the sum of the teachings about God in the Christian tradition.
theologian’s experiences related to God. This is not only an individualistic endeavor, but also a communal act that takes place in the context of a certain faith community, i.e. the Church through the ages. The above definition of theology might be considered a narrow representation of what the task of theology might entail in its totality. This critical note implies that theology is more than just talk about God. It is right, because in a certain sense, theology is also talk about the world and humanity. However, in this thesis, we focus on this one aspect of theology, namely talk about God. It is our working assumption that what is said about God has consequences for all other topics and issues. Therefore the understanding that theology is talk about God is central and directive in our work.

To talk about God is to talk about the identity of God. To formulate this in a question: who is this God, about whom we as theologians talk? Initially the answer to the question might seem obvious, but the contrary is true. It implies a certain way of talking about God. To talk about the identity of God is to talk about a God who is identified by specific events in time and space. The identity of God implies the actual presence of God in history. God is not a general term for some abstract ‘high being’. The identity of God also implies that God is identified by a Name, and can also be addressed. To talk about God and the identity of God is to talk about the God who is identified in and through the Biblical narratives.

On a fundamental level, our question about the identity of God is a departure from the kind of theological prolegomena developed during the eighteen and nineteenth century. In the standard post-enlightenment theologies, the most fundamental question the theologian had to answer was an epistemological question. This can be traced to the all-defining question of the Enlightenment: how do you know what you know? Most modern theologians struggled to justify their theologies concerning this very question. What essentially happened was that the epistemological question became the fundamental question for theology. Theology in the post-enlightenment era was no longer about God as such but much more about whether or not it is possible for humans to understand anything about God. Our critical observation considering the shift is this: the kind of question one asks influences the kind of answer one receives. The question we want to ask then is this: is it possible, in theology, to replace the epistemological question how do you know? with the question who is God? Is it fundamentally possible to ask a different question and receive a different answer? In actuality this is a turn from an epistemological towards a theological foundation and understanding of theology. To ask the question who is God? is to ask about the identity of God. In a way this is a different starting point than that of the classic post-Enlightenment prolegomena marked by epistemology.

Our work regarding the identity of God carries its own presuppositions. It is only fair to make these presuppositions clear in order to make more explicit what we mean by our terms and definitions. These presuppositions are in the form of two short statements on reality, rationality and revelation. The scope of the work does not allow us to explore them in depth. They are merely meant to give an indication of the direction of our thinking.

First statement: reality is not projected but experienced. We, as human beings, are the recipients of reality. Van de Beek summarized this idea with the following aphorism: “we are the subjects of a passive sentence.”11 Reality ultimately reveals itself. But with this claim, not everything is said. Some might say that the same reality is experienced in different ways, and thus it means that reality is indeed projected and thus constructed. But the diversity of

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experiences has to do with the “symbolic universe” one receives through nurture, education and experience. The “symbolic universe” is a received pair of glasses, through which one observes and interprets reality. Therefore the experiences that shaped our lives play an important role, because through them we interpret the reality we share with all of humanity.

The second statement, which flows out of the first, has a theological spin: revelation precedes language. The act of God comes before our talk about God. This means that revelation is an act of God and not of human creativity. Language, generally speaking, is thus referent to the reality one experiences. Reality is first experienced, and after this experience comes talk and language. Our talk of God is contingent on the revealing act of God, as He revealed Himself in time and space. Therefore the material record of revelation, i.e. the Bible, is essential for our work. The broad biblical literature tells about people who have experienced God and their subsequent talk about those experiences. There is a correlation between the revelation of God and the talk about God, i.e. theology. The biblical narratives are theology, i.e. talk of God par excellence. Theology is contingent on those narratives, as we will demonstrate that in the second half of our work.

**Methodology**

The working thesis of this dissertation is the following affirmation:

*Theology is talk about God, specifically, talk about the identity of God.*

Theology defined as *talk about God* is a contested definition. In the context of various scientific and academic disciplines, talk about God is impossible. The following is one of the most commonly used critical objections to theology: God cannot be the object of theology, as our definition presupposes, because God does not meet the empirical demands of a scientific theory. Therefore, the implicit objectification of God and the lack of empirical evidence put theology in a problematic position. In the work ahead we want to address this particular challenge to theology.

In the first half of our research, we will test the viability of our thesis in two steps: firstly from a religious scientific perspective (H.J. Adriaanse) and secondly from a theological perspective (K.H. Miskotte). The focus will be on the problem of modern theology in relation to the definition of theology as talk about God. Adriaanse, in his work, concisely and precisely formulates the problem of theology in the context of the scientific developments of the last century. His work presents us with outstanding material for a thorough exploration of the religious-scientific critique of theology. After we have tested our thesis against the religious scientific approach, we will take a second step towards a theological approach to the problem of theology. Miskotte’s work is significant here, because he sought a theological way to overcome the problem of modern theology. Miskotte’s main argument is: to talk about God is to talk about the Name of God and not merely of a human conception of God rooted in the human consciousness and self. These two approaches to theology are significant for understanding the major ideological tendencies in the field of theology. Thus, the first half of the dissertation is a formal discussion on theology as talk about God.

In the second half of our research, we will focus on the content of theology, i.e. the identity of God. Our definition of theology as talk of God and the identity of God is fundamentally determined by biblical theology. It is the vast content of the biblical literature that identifies

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God for the Christian theologian. We will focus on several loci that are significant for a theological discourse on the identity of God. The key loci are: 1. the Revelation of the Name of God (Exodus 3:14); 2. the Restoration of Israel (Ezekiel 20 and 36); 3. the Hymn in Philippians 2: 5-11. The criteria by which we have identified these passages as key is that they all address in a significant way the Name of God. While working with the biblical material, methodologically, we find ourselves on the converging field of exegesis and systematic theology. The two complement each other in the construction of our systematic theological discourse. We interpret these passages in the context of a theological tradition that dates back to the fathers of the church, through the Middle Ages, up to modernity. What these theological traditions have to say about these passages is significant for our own interpretation of these passages.

Braided through this study are three recurring systematic-theological themes: 1. the theology of God, 2. the theology of revelation, and 3. theological methodology. The three themes are congruent; one can find them throughout the whole of the research. Our main interest is in the theology of God, specifically the identity of God. The theology of God covers a vast area and that is the reason why we will focus on the Name as a systematic denominator. The Name, as a systematic locus, also allows us to do biblical theology with a systematic-theological interest. We realize that the theology of God has also far-reaching implications for rationality. That is why the second theme, revelation, is just as important. Revelation is the theological locus that addresses most of the issues related to knowledge and theological rationality. In turn, revelation also has far-reaching implications for one’s theological method. From our work, it will be apparent that we are critical concerning the specializations of various theological disciplines such as exegesis, biblical studies and hermeneutics, church history etc. In an attempt to bridge this, we will engage in a theological exercise in which the various specializations converge into one fruitful systematic talk about God.

Strictly speaking the methodology of our dissertation has to do with text analysis. But there is much more than that, because the texts themselves point toward certain, realities, ideas, presuppositions and ideologies. Through text analysis we engage in critical discussions of the ideas and ideologies presented. The first part of the dissertation is a critical exercise. In it we test our own definition and conception of theology. It is a formal discussion of the issues at hand. The second part of the dissertation is more constructive, since it deals with the content and the method of theology. It is also a convergence between biblical theology and systematic theology. In conclusion we will gather our findings and develop it into a theological discourse on the identity of God.

**Going about the work**

In the first chapter the problem of Modern Theology will be analyzed in more detail, as it is presented in the work of the H.J. Adriaanse. His work provides the material backdrop for our analysis and the subsequent discussions around the theme of modern theology. First we will start by analyzing Adriaanse’s theory of rationality and scientific method in the broader context of the Enlightenment, as his proposed modus operandi for scientific theories. Second, we will show Adriaanse’s conclusions regarding the impossibility of classic theology and the impossibility of the talk of God in light of the criteria of modern scientific theory. Third, we will discuss the alternative he presents for a scientifically acceptable study of religion and its relationship to theology. Fourth, we will address a recurring theme in Adriaanse’s work, the issue of reductionism.
The second chapter is an analysis of the work of K.H. Miskotte as an example of a theological approach to the problems of modern theology. First, we will analyze Miskotte’s anthropology, because in it, he deals with the problems of modern theology. Second, we will show Miskotte’s theological approach to these problems in terms of his appreciation of the *Torah and the primacy of the Old Testament*. Third, we will analyze the all-defining centre of Miskotte’s theology, *the Name*. Fourth, we will consider the *importance and relevance of Miskotte’s theology* in the present theological climate, from a reformed perspective.

The third chapter is an analysis of the revelation of *the Name* in Exodus 3:14. Theologically, it is a foundational text because it deals with the core of this study. First, we will consider the revelation of the Name in the context of the Exodus narrative with the following focus: *the absence of God in the narrative and as a human experience*. Second, we will look at the correlation between the revelation of the Name and *the identity of God*. Third, we will focus on the impact of Exodus 3:14 on the *history of interpretation* through the works of *Athanasius, Thomas, Calvin and Barth*.

In the fourth chapter, we will focus even more on the significance of the Name in the history of Israel. Theologically, this is significant because it becomes apparent that the *identity of God* is not merely a theological construct but a historical reality. What we are dealing with is, in essence, the history of a *living God*. Central in this chapter is the book of the prophet Ezekiel and specifically the Name and Glory theologies of his prophecies, as a *biblical theological reception* of the revelation of the Name. Returning in this chapter are the themes of *the presence and absence of God*. We will discuss *the presence of God* in terms of God’s *Glory* and *Name* as it manifests in the Temple cult and in the history of Israel, marked by *judgment* and *restoration*. We will also discuss *the absence of God* as a theological understanding of the *judgment* and *exile* of Israel.

The fifth chapter is a further elaboration of the Name and the identity of God in its Christological sense. This is probably the most significant considering the identity of God. The focus in this chapter will be on the Hymn from the apostle Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. The Hymn deals with the Name’s fullest identification in the person of Jesus Christ. First, we will broadly sketch Paul’s *talk about God*, i.e. theology, as it relates to the Philippians Letter. Second, we will analyze the content of the Hymn by specifically focusing on *the identification of Jesus with the Name*. Third, we will look into the impact Philippians 2:5-11 has had on various periods of interpretation, *the patristic, the reformation and the modern period*.

The sixth and concluding chapter is a focused discussion on the various themes that have emerged from our study as they relate to the identity of God. The aim is to develop a theological discourse that underscores the significance of the identity of God for theology today and into the future.