

What is Theology?

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The notable conflict between the esteemed natural scientist Galileo Galilei and the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century culminated in the scientist's public humiliation. This encounter has often been framed as a dichotomy between science, embodied by Galileo, and religion, represented by the Church, which has led to widespread misconceptions within both academic circles and the general public.

Misconceptions Surrounding Science and Religion

A primary misconception is the perceived conflict between science and religion. Many claim that scientific findings contradict the straightforward teachings of the Bible, if such teachings can be considered straightforward at all. This misunderstanding was perpetuated by the *Accademia dei Lincei*, a scholarly society established in Rome in 1603, where Galileo became a member in 1611, and by the Royal Society of London, founded in 1660, which prohibited its members from engaging in discussions about politics or religion. Consequently, this misconception has fostered a long-standing tradition of scholarly debate regarding the relationship between these two domains.

In certain insular and dogmatic societies, particularly in the Global South, there is a prevalent religious mentality that discourages the pursuit of scientific education, especially in theological institutions. In these environments, science is depicted as a formidable adversary to religion, God, human values, and progress. As a result, many science educators, influenced by these religious views, often provide students with a shallow and distorted understanding of scientific principles. This leads to a cycle in which students carry home an inadequate representation of science, reinforcing public misconceptions.

Theology Misunderstood

A second, less frequently recognized impression concerns the association of theology with religion itself. Some Christian theologians, as well as proponents of secularization and critics of religion, have inadvertently contributed to the notion that theology serves merely as a subordinate discipline to religion. Consequently, theology is often dismissed in much the same way that religion is critiqued by scientific scholars. This view relegates theology to a narrow focus on the divine, and thus, any decline in religion is perceived as a corresponding decline in theology.

The negative connotations surrounding religion—such as being a mechanism for manipulation, exploitation, and anti-scientific sentiment—are often applied to theology as well. Consequently, theology can become confined to theological colleges and seminaries, perceived merely as a professional discipline detaching it

from societal relevance or engagement with scientific advancements. Few theologians manage to transcend these boundaries and gain respect within broader intellectual communities. This perception of theology as limited is, in my view, both misguided and reductive.

Objective of This Paper

This paper aims to critically explore and redefine theology by analyzing the traditional Christian understanding within its historical context. The objective is to disentangle theology from its current implications tied to religion and argue for its independent significance. My hypothesis posits that theology should not simply be viewed as an academic program but rather as a reflective lifestyle centered on the fundamentals of existence.

Understanding Theology

To comprehend theology, we can consider two distinct approaches: the etymological and the religious.

Etymological Approach: The term "theology" derives from two Greek words: *Theos*, meaning God, and *Logos*, meaning idea, word, or discourse. Thus, theology can be understood as a discourse about God or the gods. In English, it is often defined as the study of God. However, the interpretation of "God" varies significantly across cultural contexts, and no universally accepted definition exists. This lack of clarity suggests that this concept is susceptible to religious biases.

Religious Approach: Individuals adopting this perspective frequently view theology as an academic discipline designed to serve ecclesiastical purposes, often emphasizing skills acquisition within a limited timeframe to fulfill specific needs. Unfortunately, this pragmatic approach to theological education tends to prioritize a narrow range of topics deemed relevant by ecclesiastical authorities. Consequently, complex and intellectually challenging issues may be overlooked, as they are seen as potentially disruptive to faith.

Through this exploration, my intent is to foster a more nuanced understanding of theology that transcends the simplistic distinction between it and religion, encouraging a broader appreciation for its role in contemporary discourse.

Revisiting the Etymological and Religious Approaches to Theology

One significant challenge within the etymological approach to theology—especially as it pertains to theology as an academic discipline—is the fundamental question: Can God be studied?

If we take "study" in the conventional educational sense, we must ask ourselves how long it takes to study God: two years, three years, four years, or even nine years?

When individuals respond with a number of years, they inadvertently reduce God to an object of academic inquiry, positioning themselves as the active agents and God as the passive recipient of their scrutiny. In this framework, God is perceived merely as a concept rather than as an active participant or co-learner alongside the student and the instructor. Ultimately, God becomes defined by our descriptions and interpretations, rather than revealing Himself as a dynamic presence. Consequently, when we engage with God, we often do so through the mental constructs we've created—an occurrence that tends to be prevalent among those who view theology solely as an academic program.

Shifting to the Religious Approach

Transitioning to the religious approach, many Christian theologians have historically perceived theology as a subordinate to religion, frequently utilizing it as a tool for the defense and promotion of religious beliefs. This tendency could arguably be one of theology's most significant misfortunes. For instance, John Frame defines theology as "essentially the study of scripture," suggesting that the Bible serves as the core foundation of theological inquiry. Frame is not alone in this perspective; I recall a respected lecturer emphasizing that "you cannot do theology out of thin air," which underscores the necessity of the Bible as the bedrock for Christian theology.

The common phrase "Bible-centered theology" reflects a prevailing belief that theology is primarily tasked with defending and promoting biblical teachings, regarded by Christians as the ultimate authority on matters of faith and life. Thus, theology is often reduced to an apologetic tool intended to uphold the interests of particular religious groups, exemplified here by Christians. In this context, theology is perceived as an apologetic discipline.

However, this role as an apologist carries inherent assumptions: the claim of possessing the ultimate truth that others lack access to, which they may only discover through the apologist's efforts. This mindset positions the apologist above others, viewing themselves as uniquely chosen to disseminate divine truths. Consequently, such outlook can lead to exclusivism and foster religious conflicts, undermining human dignity and progress.

The Implications of a Superiority Complex

Additionally, both Frame and my lecturer operate under the conviction that the Bible encompasses the entirety of truth, categorizing it as a sacred text that distinguishes it from secular writings. Therefore, theology, as per Frame's definition, becomes a divine discipline focused on spiritual matters, contrasted with the secular focus of

sciences—both natural and social. This perspective elevates theology above other disciplines, reflected in the medieval assertion that it is “the Queen of Science.”

While this view of theology persisted through the Enlightenment, its relevance diminished alongside the rise of scientific inquiry and technological advancement. The latter has increasingly overshadowed religion, leading to what many perceive as the decline—or, in some cases, the death—of theology. Consequently, theology has been compartmentalized, pushed to the periphery and regarded as out of touch with the present world, often seen as inherently sinful and corrupt.

Theologians who subscribe to this perspective tend to adopt a dualistic stance that contrasts the divine with the secular, advocating that theology must remain distinct from other, worldly academic pursuits.

Millard J. Erickson demonstrates a nuanced sensitivity to the implications of defining theology as “essentially a study of scriptures,” a characterization offered by Frame. In an effort to avoid this narrow definition, Erickson focuses on delineating certain characteristics pertinent to Christian theology. He asserts that theology must be biblical in nature. For Erickson, this does not imply that theology is fundamentally a study of the Bible. Rather, he emphasizes that it should encompass biblical characteristics, contending that theology must “take as the primary source of its content the canonical scripture of the Old and New Testament.” This positioning aligns him with conservative viewpoints regarding traditional beliefs about the Bible.

However, Erickson's stance suggests that theology serves as a reference point rather than being inherently tied to the study of Scripture. This perspective facilitates the inclusion of various branches of theology—such as systematic, philosophical, and practical theology—among others.

Conversely, John Macquarrie redefines theology as “the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available.” This definition indicates a significant shift from the traditional focus on God to a broader examination of the religious studies of a faith community, encompassing their systems of beliefs, practices, and institutional structures. Macquarrie posits that only the members and active participants of a faith community are truly qualified to reflect upon and study their shared beliefs for the purpose of effective communication. Here, communication is framed as an apologetic endeavor aimed at defending and promoting the community's faith.

Regrettably, this perspective tends to diminish theology to mere religious studies conducted by both insiders and outsiders, including philosophers and sociologists. Thus, the emphasis shifts from God as the central concern to the beliefs and approaches individuals have about Him. Theology becomes a function solely aligned

with the interests of the faith community, reduced to an apologetic tool for advocating and safeguarding its beliefs, ideals, values, and practices.

In this context, the faith community assumes the role of arbiter and censor, determining what constitutes right or wrong. Consequently, any ideas or notions perceived as antagonistic are denounced as evil. This perspective overlooks the reality that such judgments often arise from a self-identity formation process. Each community curates a unique cultural or religious identity, deliberately selecting what is regarded as true or valuable from a plethora of beliefs and information. The selection criteria are invariably guided by the community's values and functional relevance.

When a community deems certain information or artifacts as harmful, it will reject them based on prevailing public opinion or majority rule. What the majority accepts as good inevitably gains an exalted status and may be misconstrued as a revelation or the will of God. For a religious community that has cultivated a distinct identity rooted in self-proclaimed revelations, altering established beliefs or welcoming differing perspectives becomes a formidable challenge.

This discussion highlights the etymological understanding of theology as both a school program and a religious practice, with an emphasis on apologetic functions employed by faith communities for defending and promoting their beliefs. The traditional understanding of theology, which still influences contemporary Christian theology, possesses significant shortcomings, making it inadequate and often irrelevant to today's context.

As previously discussed, this traditional view confines theology to abstract constructs concerning the afterlife, reducing it to a mere academic pursuit where God is treated as a concept rather than a personal entity. Consequently, theology becomes an academic exercise, often perceived as an exclusive pastime for theological experts.

The Roots of Christian Traditional Theology in Greek Philosophy

Christian traditional theology has its historical foundations not solely in the Bible but significantly in early Greek thought, which encompasses various philosophical ideas, concepts, and maxims. Among these thinkers, Plato stands out as one of the foremost Greek philosophers; he is credited with coining the term "theology." His primary philosophical focus was on the concepts of being and becoming, which ultimately led him to develop the renowned Doctrine of Forms.

The Doctrine of Forms

In Plato's Doctrine of Forms, he posits that individual entities and their characteristics in the visible or physical world are merely appearances—unrealities that are subject to change and decay. Beneath these imperfect qualities lies a realm of Forms, which represent ideals that are eternal, unchangeable, and fundamentally real. Over time,

the Form became associated with the Mind or Soul, considered the supreme ruler of the universe, and ultimately equated with God.

It is important to note that Plato's conception of God does not reference the Hebraic or Christian God. Instead, God is treated as a philosophical concept approached a priori, independent of Scriptural authority. As this philosophical inquiry developed, the Form, or the Ideal, became increasingly significant and desirable compared to the ever-changing material world, which began to be viewed as associated with evil, in contrast to the good inherent in the mind.

The Nature of Theology

For Plato, engaging with concepts such as the Form, the Mind, or the Soul, and reflecting on the imperishable and eternal is the essence of theology. This endeavor involves discourse and contemplation around the Logos, the Ideas, and the Forms. Aristotle, while he did not dispute Plato's metaphysical framework, criticized his dualism as unnecessary. Instead, Aristotle emphasized that matter itself is good, serving as an extension and expression of the Form.

Influence of Pre-Socratic Philosophers

Plato and Aristotle were undoubtedly influenced by earlier philosophers, including the pre-Socratic thinker Xenophanes. The Greeks had a profound religious inclination, as reflected in the works of their ancient poets like Homer and Hesiod. Their religion, based on this analysis, served as a cultural value and a source of happiness. However, cultural critics such as Xenophanes viewed this as an illusion and a means of human manipulation, exploitation, and enslavement.

Anthropomorphism and Alternative Conceptions of God

The gods of the Greeks, much like the deity in certain Jewish contexts, were often depicted as anthropomorphic—human-like and created in the image of humanity. Xenophanes vigorously critiqued Greek anthropomorphism for being too worldly and immanent. He proposed a new understanding of God based on intellectual transcendence, a concept that later influenced the metaphysical frameworks of Plato and Aristotle.

The Greek Conception of God

In the Greek philosophical tradition, God is represented as an abstract entity, detached from the mundane experiences of everyday life, even within Aristotle's metaphysical constructs. This God exists beyond and outside of time and space; He is devoid of form and passion, immutable yet present behind worldly changes. Therefore, theology for the Greeks transcends mere study; it is a critical lifestyle dedicated to profound reflection on the Form, the Ideal, the Mind or Soul, and the Eternal.

The Greek philosophical perspective positions God not as a person but as a concept for rigorous contemplation. This philosophical approach discourages the assumption of any visible interaction or fellowship, as practicing ritual observances is replaced by a relentless quest for understanding through critical analysis. Ultimately, this reduces God to human parameters, allowing for a categorization that simplifies the complex nature of the divine.

The Foundations of Theology and Its Relationship to Religion

The foundation of Christian theology, particularly the so-called Logos theology, has led to misconceptions, especially regarding the doctrine of Christology. According to the first article of the Church of England, God is described as being without form, parts, or emotions. This declaration was intended to reject the simplistic anthropomorphism found in the works of Homer, Hesiod, and some Jewish texts. In making this assertion, God is positioned as transcendent, moving the conversation from earthly concerns to heavenly ones. This shift illustrates the underlying assumption that separates theology from secular matters.

However, the Greek conception of God diverges significantly from the Christian understanding. Christians have often utilized Greek philosophical ideas—sometimes correctly, sometimes not—to navigate theological discussions, resulting in more complications than resolutions. Historically, theology emerged in opposition to the prevailing religion of its time, positioning itself as a critique rather than a defender of ancestral beliefs. Philosophers, who were contemporaries of their traditions, did not attempt to uphold the religions of their fathers; instead, they critically examined and challenged them. Thus, they are best understood as theologians rather than apologists.

Theology should not be misconstrued as a mere extension of religion or as an apologetic study aimed at defending a faith community. This misunderstanding, as suggested by thinkers like Frame and Macquarie, needs to be corrected. Theology, in essence, is an anti-religion discipline, distinct and separate from religious practices. One should not find it surprising that those familiar with Greek philosophy could grasp the historical context from which theology arose.

Furthermore, the decline of religion has no bearing on theology, nor should theology be perceived as a narrow-minded discipline that eschews secular matters. The real tension lies not between science and theology, but between science and religion. Theology is equally critical of religion, just as science is. The historical conflict between Galileo and the Roman Catholic Church should not lead us to conclude that theology is inherently anti-science. The opponents of Galileo were religious apologists, not theologians.

Understanding Theology

So, what is theology? I assert that theology is fundamentally anti-religion; it is neither a religious nor an apologetic endeavor. It differs from apologetics, which aims to defend and promote specific religious beliefs. Instead, theology represents a lifestyle of critical reflection on essential life concepts, including God, creation, and human experience.

In this context, theology cannot be limited to the study of God as traditionally defined, separate from creation or human experience. Rather, it encompasses the entirety of life. God should not be treated merely as an abstract concept serving ecclesiastical needs; instead, God is understood as a person with whom we engage in dialogue. The study of creation also requires ongoing reflection, as all of creation belongs to God. Understanding Him necessitates insights from both natural and social sciences, aligning science with theological inquiry.

To focus solely on science without the broader perspective of theology can lead to confusion and ignorance. True knowledge of God, oneself, and the world emerges from an understanding of life in its entirety. Life is not fragmented—it is holistic.

Finally, theology must critically and passionately engage with human experience, addressing fundamental questions of existence, language, ethics, politics, economics, education, and culture. Given its expansive scope, theology cannot be confined to a traditional academic program. This limitation risks reducing theology to a mere specialization, contrary to its true aim: understanding life in its fullness. The ultimate goal of theology is to foster profound connections with God, oneself, and the surrounding world while pursuing an authentic existence.

Such theological understanding transcends skill acquisition; it nurtures a transformative knowledge that opens one to God, truth, and reality, fostering a sense of authentic human fulfillment characterized by freedom of thought and expression. To be fully human is to live an authentic life.

Spirituality should not be seen as a separate discipline from theology. Spiritual growth—rooted in sanctification—hinges on the understanding derived from theological reflection. Thus, spirituality emerges as a natural by-product of genuine theological inquiry.

Conclusion

In summary, theology represents a lifestyle dedicated to a lifelong reflection on the entirety of existence, centered around the key elements of God, creation, and human experience.

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