

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

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1. “What is Theology?”. Is this the right question?
2. Let us start with an example: “What is geology?”
 - 2.1. Like theology it contains the Greek word λογία (-logía) 'study of, discourse'
 - 2.2. And of course the Greek word γῆ (gê) 'earth'
 - 2.3. It is a branch of natural science concerned with Earth (and other astronomical objects), the rocks of which it is composed, and the processes by which they change over time.
 - 2.4. There are reasons why it has become a science, i.e. something that people have felt compelled to think about:
 - i. It refers to a known, empirical entity (rocks!)
 - ii. It matters because we need to know about earthquakes and where to build our houses.
 - iii. It can also be attractive to people who do not become geologists but collect rocks or have to decide whether moving to California is a good idea.
3. Comparison to the question “What is theology?”
 - 3.1. Theology seems comparable to geology insofar as we have again the Greek word λογία (-logía) 'study of, discourse'
 - 3.2. But we ran immediately into the problem of ‘what it is the study of’, theos, God – because, of course, God is not an empirical reality, a reality that belongs to the realm of experience (at least in the commonly accepted meaning of this word)
 - 3.3. And yet we find that theology too has become a discipline, that people felt compelled to think about it
 - 3.4. Just as for geology we have to ask why.
4. Why theology?
 - 4.1. Had you asked this question up to (roughly) the 17th century, everyone would have thought that the answer was just as straightforward as with geology
 - i. Because there is a God.
 - ii. Because what mattered was not what is empirical, but what is relevant
 - iii. And ‘god’ was the most relevant of realities because the whole of the social, cultural, and political order was predicated upon the fact that the reality of God was considered self-evident
 - iv. Therefore there was no doubts about the relevance of this discipline – it was considered even the most relevant of sciences.
5. We know that the situation changed from especially since the 18th century, and we usually refer to the present context as secular, by which we mean that

- 5.1. While in the past belief was the default option
 - 5.2. Today the default options are non-belief and exclusive humanism (primacy of immanent human flourishing) (Charles Taylor)
6. When we ask “What is geology?” we do not really need to ask “Why geology? – it is evident.
 7. When we ask “What is theology?” we cannot avoid the question “Why theology?” because it is not evident any more that this ‘logos’
 - 7.1. still really has a real object, or
 - 7.2. what this object is.
 8. This has become a real problem especially for those who teach theology in the university. How can ‘theology’ be credible in a secular context? This explains a lot of what has happened to academic theology – which has had a tendency to assimilate itself to other disciplines
 - 8.1. Philosophy
 - 8.2. Anthropology
 - 8.3. Sociology
 - 8.4. Religious studies
 - 8.5. All these disciplines are useful for theology, but there is a real sense in which a great deal of theology has adopted language, method, and aims from these sciences to cope with a sort of ‘inferiority complex’.
 9. One of the mentors who had the deepest influence on me at Oxford, Prof. John Webster, in his inaugural lecture as Lady Margaret Professor said this:

“Christian theology began to argue for its own possibility without appeal to any specific Christian content [...] Theology left its own ground in order to debate with natural philosophy over the existence of God [...] Christianity entered into the defence of the existence of the Christian god without appeal to anything Christian! [10] It was theology’s failure to construe the concept of God in positive Christological and trinitarian terms which left it mortally exposed to failure in face of its philosophical critics”. (John Webster)
 10. For John Webster the problem was that the university is not the natural home of theology – because of some of the conventions that characterise universities, namely
 - 10.1. “An ideal of freedom from determination by situation: the practice of intellectual inquiry ought to be as unaffected by the specificities of culture, personality or political and religious conviction”.
 - 10.2. “The assumption that reason has to get hold of the world and is considered as a tool unaffected by a particular context in which I might deploy it or any convictions I may have as its user”.
 - 10.3. “Reason will produce not only progress in inquiry but also agreement among all rational persons as to what the rationally justified conclusions of such enquiry are”. (John Webster)
 11. In such a context to the question “What is theology?” the answer might be that
 - 11.1. A discipline that aspires to be a recognized and respected ‘science’
 - 11.2. For this reason it accepts the critical scrutiny of history, philosophy, psychology, and all the other sciences

- 11.3. With the aim that the 'conclusions' theology makes about God, faith, ethics can be taken seriously on the basis of the reason common to all.
12. As you can see, this is a 'defensive' position – Apologetics, from the Greek ἀπολογία, "speaking in defense", that is the religious discipline of defending religious doctrines through systematic argumentation and discourse.
13. The reality is much more nuanced of course – and there are many ways in which theology has thrived in University – and I think that it is beneficial for theology to be a university discipline.
14. But it is true that there has been a striking shift: Theology Departments and Divinity Faculties are increasingly becoming centres for Religious Studies.
15. What this example shows is that the question "What is Theology?" cannot be answered unless we also ask "Why Theology?".
- 15.1. If your purpose is the claim credibility for the study of God in a secular context than we will come up with an answer which might lead us to define theology look very much like history or philosophy.
16. The way to get a bit further in the attempt to find "what is theology?" is thinking about its 'object', namely God.
- 16.1. Many people might argue that with an object which is not empirical there can be no science (notwithstanding the fact that the very notion of 'object' with regard to reality is highly problematic in itself)
- 16.2. Much of the way in which theology has become a science is through 'tweaking' with its 'object' – no more the 'study of God' but
- i. The study of what people have meant when they said that they believed in God throughout history
 - ii. The study of why human beings feel the urge, need, to believe – what they mean by 'belief'.
- 16.3. In many ways, this kind of theology could be done by replacing the God of Jesus Christ with Jupiter – it is not God himself, but the history and the 'mechanics' of belief which are the object of the science.
17. Another way theology has been done is treat God as a hypothesis – we cannot prove its existence, but would it be 'irrational' to believe in a personal God? Many philosophers have found that by thinking about this question, they might not be able to 'prove' the existence of God, but it is possible to understand more about the way in which human beings think, desire, construct their identity – yet another way in which the 'study of God' (theology) becomes 'the study of being human' (anthropology).
18. There is another way of approaching the question "What is theology?" – by looking again at the question underlying it, namely "Why theology".
- 18.1. This should be closer to our situation here.
- 18.2. If we are asked the question: what is theology the "study", the "logos" of?, in which way would we answer?
19. Maybe in this way: theology is the study of
- 19.1. The God we worship in church every Sunday, that is the God we praise, to whom we make requests.

- 19.2. The God whose voice we try to hear through the Scriptures read in our liturgical celebrations.
- 19.3. The God in whom we think that we 'believe': we might have never seen him, but we do things because of him, we act in a certain way, we have certain convictions about the world, history, humanity, good and evil, and the purpose of our lives.
- 19.4. Finally, the God who we do not just talk about, or think about – but the God to whom we talk – not a 'it/him/her/they' but a 'thou'.
- 19.5. In other words, not an 'object' but a 'subject'.

St Augustine, Confessions I.1

- “Great are You, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Your power, and of Your wisdom there is no end. [...]
 - You move us to delight in praising You;
 - for You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.
 - Lord, teach me to know and understand which of these should be first:
 - to call on You, or to praise You;
 - and likewise to know You, or to call on You.
 - But who calls upon You without knowing You?
 - For he that knows You not may call upon You as other than You are.
 - Or perhaps we call on You that we may know You. [...]
 - Let me seek You, Lord, in calling on You, and call on You in believing in You; for You have been preached unto us.
 - O Lord, my faith calls on You — that faith which You have imparted to me, which You have breathed into me through the incarnation of Your Son, through the ministry of Your preacher.”
20. This is St Augustine’s answer to the question “Why Theology?”
- 20.1. “You have been preached unto us”
 - 20.2. “You have imparted [faith] into me”, “You have breathed [faith] into me through the incarnation of Your Son”
 - 20.3. It is this “faith” which calls God
 - 20.4. Calling God [that is worship] already is a way of “seeking God”
 - 20.5. I would not call God unless in some way I already knew him: “who calls upon You without knowing You?”
 - 20.6. Knowing God in this way is inseparable from “delight”: “You move us to delight in praising You”.
21. As a result, “what is theology?”
- 21.1. First it is an activity which has its primary location in worship (‘praise God”, “call God”).
 - 21.2. Then it depends on something which was preached to us (mediation of history and community).
 - 21.3. It oscillates between the ‘thou’ and the “him/her/they”: theology is done not just by speaking about God, but by speaking to God.

- 21.4. The “why theology” is that it is something in which we find delight – but also something on which my identity depends, since we are not just made by God, but also made for God (‘image of God’).
- 22. From this viewpoint, what is the difference between and other disciplines?
- 23. The main difference is that in theology, the ‘object’ is a ‘subject’: someone who
 - 23.1. acts freely,
 - 23.2. manifests himself to us in real but ‘mysterious’ ways,
 - 23.3. on which our existence and identity depends in the highest degree.
- 24. Strangely, understood in this way theology can help other sciences to become more ‘scientific’, that is more deeply responsive to their ‘objects’:
 - 24.1. Most of modern science is based on the a reduction of reality to the status of ‘object’, that is something which can be measured, circumscribed, analysed, verified.
 - 24.2. But this approach acts as a filter: in prevents me from seeing that what is in front of me has more than one way of making itself known to me.
- 25. Having to deal with an ‘object’ which also is a ‘subject’ theology has to develop habits of self-scrutiny, respect, holding back, self-questioning which could benefit the way other disciplines approach their own ‘objects’.