What is theology? Historical and systematic reflections

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the question of theology’s purpose and identity in relation to the Church and the modern university. Interpreting the development of theology in antiquity as a rational discipline, Zachhuber explores how, throughout Christian history, theology has served as simultaneously a stabilising and destabilising force in relation to the Church. The article ends with reflections on theology’s present condition in the university and asks how it might yet flourish in the years ahead in both its relation to the Church and to the modern university.

KEYWORDS
Theological methodology; academic theology; rationality; ecclesial theology

Introduction

The question of what theology is can be understood in more than one way. It is possible to take the term in its literal meaning and respond to the legitimate queries resulting from the claims inherent in it. What does it mean to speak of God and how could this ever be possible? Why does it matter that we try, even in the face of the apparent limitations inherent in any attempt at God-talk? These, undoubtedly, are important questions that need careful consideration. They are especially urgent, moreover, in a world for which the word ‘God’ increasingly seems to lose its meaning.

Nevertheless, here I will by and large avoid them because I think that the question of what theology is permits another interpretation as well. Theology, namely, can be understood as standing for a discipline, as taught in a university. The question what theology is, in this interpretation, refers to the specific character of this intellectual discipline. It is, of course, not detached from the set of problems I mentioned initially, and many of those who teach, or taught, theology have considered it central to their intellectual vocation to grapple with these problems. Yet I would contend that the question of theology as a discipline is clearly a distinct one.

Much work that is done today, and has been done over the centuries, in theological institutions is only indirectly connected with the metaphysical or, if you wish, strictly ‘theological’ problems I mentioned earlier. This includes in the first instance Scriptural exegesis which has always been central to the discipline of theology and is today usually conducted in a historical-critical key. However, even where it is understood more traditionally as the theological study of the word of God, exegesis is by and large textual...
study using philological and historical methods. Much the same can be said about practically all other theological subject areas including church history, ethics, and practical theology. Even systematic theology or dogmatics is not solely concerned with God but includes the treatment of a range of questions and problems on the world as a whole and humanity in particular. A student deciding to study theology in the hopes of talking about God the whole time will be greatly disappointed.

Yet if theology as a discipline includes more than God-talk strictly speaking, it is in another way also a more limited phenomenon. Any enquiry into God-talk could arguably not be restricted to Christianity but would need to consider the fact that questions about God have been asked before and beside Christian theology. Specifically, the tradition of philosophical theology, for which the Greek term *theologia* was sometimes used in antiquity, would have to be included, but consideration would also have to be given to reflections about God in other religion, notably the so-called Abrahamic ones. With theology as an intellectual discipline, by contrast, things are different. Here we encounter something that, if not unique to Christianity, is certainly an outlier in the world of religions. Its sheer strangeness can be measured by the fact that throughout the Patristic period there was no designation readily available for the particular faith-based discourse which Christianity developed. Whenever it was named, the most plausible term to suggest itself was, interestingly, philosophy.²

Of course, philosophy itself was very different in antiquity from what we today call by this name. Arthur Darby Nock and Pierre Hadot have pointed out, in different ways, that ancient philosophy was more similar to what we understand by religion than to our modern conception of philosophy.³ Yet the fact that Patristic thought seemed so similar to what philosophers did – while it did not, by contrast, elicit any analogies from the religious sphere – is nonetheless significant and underlines that we need to appreciate Christian theology as a *sui generis* discourse rather than as a species within a certain genus.

Theology in the way it has been practiced in Christendom for the better part of two millennia is thus by no means a natural by-product of religion or religious faith. Indeed, the question to which I am responding in this article is important and urgent not least because of this fact. Any answer, I believe, has to begin where, it was said, philosophy has to begin: with an act of astonishment and wonder. As much as we may want to know what theology is, we should want to know why such a thing ever came into existence, why it continued as an important aspect of the history of Christianity, and why it deserves to be practised in our own time. While I cannot attempt to answer all these questions to everyone’s satisfaction here, my attempted answer to the question posed in my title will keep them all in mind.

**Theology as rational**

Theology in the latter, specifically Christian sense is often described in words cribbed from Anselm of Canterbury as faith seeking understanding, and this is not a bad place to start.⁴ Theology is an exercise in rationality, an attempt to give reasoned underpinning as

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²Zachhuber, ‘Philosophy and Theology’, 56–60.
³Nock, *Conversion*; Hadot, *Philosophy*.
⁴*Cf. Anselm of Canterbury, Works*, 87: ‘For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand.’ (*Proslogion* 1).
well as expression to religious faith and practice. It is therefore always responding to something that is already there. It does not argue from first principles or a priori; it is not a science without presuppositions. Yet it is not uncritical either. It encompasses an investigation of claims made by individual believers as well as those uttered by the faith community and, in doing so, affirms as well as critiques; it clarifies; it deepens; and it corrects.

Nevertheless, there are at least three reasons why a definition of theology as a rational reflection on faith is not, as such, sufficient.

First, not all rational reflection on religious faith is theological in character. There is philosophy of religion, there is Christian philosophy, there are arguably various kinds of religious philosophies. While the distinctions between them all may not always be clear-cut, they do exist. If theology is a rational reflection on faith, it therefore has to be specified.

Second, we should admit right from the outset that the rationality of Christian theology is by no means a universally acknowledged fact. On the contrary, this claim has been subject to fierce debate ever since Christianity first came into existence. To the opponents of the new religion in antiquity, Christian thought was the height of irrationality, a hotchpotch of ill-conceived and straightforwardly blasphemous ideas about God and the world.\(^5\) I mention this because it could easily appear that the denial of theology’s rationality is a distinctly modern phenomenon, but this would be a mistake.

Third, conversely, the rationality of theology has also been queried from within Christianity. Reason has been suspected to be an enemy of faith, and theologians who insisted on the rational character of their work have therefore been accused of pursuing an activity that is ultimately incompatible with Christianity as a faith or a religion.

It is therefore necessary to determine more specifically in what sense theology is a rational reflection on the Christian faith. As a first observation, I would note that theology as a rational discourse rests on assumptions or presuppositions that are not themselves rational. It could probably be argued that the same is true for all or almost all other forms of rationality as well, but this is not my concern here. In the case of theology, what I have in mind is the premise that truth is found in Scripture, that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ and all that proceeds from that statement. The precise character of these premises has not been agreed on by every theologian throughout the ages, but their overall existence is, I would suggest, presupposed wherever theology is studied and practised.

The fact that these underlying assumptions are not themselves rational does not, of course, mean that they are irrational or indifferent or arbitrary. Their existence points to the fact that theology as a whole is predicated on an antecedent reality which Anselm, as we have seen, called ‘faith’. This faith, however, does not merely exist as an intra-mental condition in particular individuals; it exists as a lifeform, we might say, that has taken on practical and social reality. This social reality in which the Christian faith is concretely realised is called the Church.

In order to appreciate the specific rationality of theology, then, we must relate it to the Church. The rationality characteristic of theology as a discipline has to be faithful to this foundation on which it rests. What does this mean?

\(^{5}\)Karamanolis, Philosophy, 3–4.
The mutual relationship between theology and the church was pointed out in unusual agreement by the two leading lights of nineteenth and twentieth century German theology, F.D.E. Schleiermacher and Karl Barth. Schleiermacher spoke of theology in this sense as a ‘positive science’ and began his Christian Faith with a paragraph about the Church – this is relatively little studied unlike the slightly later section on the ‘feeling of absolute dependence’. When he defended the need for a theological Faculty in the modern University, he did so with an argument along those same lines. This Faculty was founded by the Church, he observed,

“[…] in order to preserve the wisdom of the Fathers; not to lose for the future what in the past had been achieved in discerning truth from error; to give a historical basis, a sure and certain direction and a common spirit to the further development of doctrine and Church.”

Schleiermacher, it seems, understood the relationship between theology and the Church in a rather pragmatic somewhat external manner. Theology is needed to facilitate the governance of the Church as an institution. It encompasses the knowledge the ecclesiastical ruler or leader needs to be successful in their role.

Barth certainly implied more than that when he called theology a ‘function of the church’ at the outset of his Church Dogmatics. In these programmatic words, he sought to express his conviction that theology is only done right when it inscribes itself rather narrowly into the operation of the Christian community. Here then, the relationship between the two, theology and church, is more internal, even intimate. Consequently, the control the church has over theology is less a matter of pragmatic acquiescence, as might be concluded from Schleiermacher’s account, and more an inner requirement of theology as an intellectual endeavour.

Let me therefore provisionally define theology as a rational discourse on faith that is owned by the Church. By this I do not mean that the institutional Church always exerts factual, disciplinary control over the individual theologian even though historically that has often been the case. Rather, the discourse in which the theologian partakes presupposes that its subject is not primarily the faith of the individual but the faith of the church. The theologian ultimately conducts their reflection, we might say, on behalf of the Church.

This, of course, provokes the question of why the Church needs (or ever needed) this intellectual support. Why did it require – and support – the growth and development of a theology? This question is not a trivial but points to the highly unusual character of the Christian Church as a religious institution. It speaks for itself that – to return one more time to the earliest history of Christianity – the nearest equivalent to the kind of institution into which the church evolved arguably were the philosophical schools of late antiquity with their authoritative heads tracing their diaidche back to their founder and with their specific dogmas.

In other words, as much as Christian theology found its closest parallel not in any religious discourse that would have existed in the Hellenistic world, so too the nearest analogue to the Church in the ancient Mediterranean was not a religious institution but

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6 Schleiermacher, Christian Faith, 3–5 (§2).
7 Anrich, Idee, 258. Translation by author.
8 Barth, Church Dogmatics I/1, 1.
9 Campenhausen, Kirchliches Amt, 175.
the philosophical school. There were also, admittedly, major differences: philosophical schools only consisted of philosophers, but not all Christians were theologians. Yet the parallel does suggest that from its inception Christianity organised itself in an institution for whose existence, operation, and coherence theology in the specific sense in which it came to exist in this religion was of crucial importance. By defining theology with regard to the church, then, we may have explained obscurum per obscurior. Or, at least, we find ourselves in a hermeneutical logic where we arguably need theology in order to understand the nature of the Church as much as we need the notion of the Church to understand what theology is and does.

**Theology and the church**

It is beyond the purview of this short article to pursue in any detail the question of what the Church is, but it is now clear that my overarching topic cannot be answered either without recognising the basic character of the institution in which historic Christianity took shape. Sociologists sometimes use the terminology of ‘Church’ to denote a generic concept of communal religion,¹⁰ but it is, I think, important to see that the institutional shape which Christianity developed as it evolved within the ancient world, is not at all a normal feature in the world of religions. Of course, some of its elements are rather more typical, such as the existence of priests and the prescription of feast days with specific rituals attached to them. Other features may not be universally shared but have some precedent such as the exclusivity of attachment that is expected of its adherents and the existence of a rite of initiation.

What makes the Church most unusual, however, is the unique role that belief and doctrine play for its internal coherence. In fact, the notion that faith – understood as a cognitive belief – is fundamental for religion is today so widely held that it is important to recall quite how unusual it is. Pushing against this generalised assumption, scholars in recent years have urged that the priority given to doctrinal faith as an individual assent to doctrines is something of a Protestant prejudice which ignores the relevance of non-cognitive (for example ritualist or more general affective) elements in the earlier Christian tradition. There is, inevitably, some truth to this line of argument, but it must not distract from the bigger picture, namely, that doctrinal ideas expressed through credal statements and underwritten by increasingly elaborate intellectual systems played a major role in the institutional formation of the early church. This fact represents a major exception not only in the world of Mediterranean religion but in the history of religions more generally.

This should not surprise us. In many ways, it is counterintuitive to use doctrine underpinned by theology to establish institutional identity. Institutions need stability, but theology as any such intellectual discourse is slippery, subject to an indefinite number of nuances, developments, internal contradictions, possible interpretations and so forth. History proves this point in that all attempts to unify the Church on this basis have been extremely difficult often resulting in complex schisms and divisions. By nature, it seems, theological debates do not lead to consensus as little as philosophical debates do. On the contrary, their inherent tendency is to continue indefinitely. This is indeed what they

¹⁰Cf. Durkheim, Elementary Forms, 43.
have often done, especially where political power did not curtail them – examples include the Christological debate in the latter half of the first millennium\(^{11}\) or the debate about semi-pelagianism, freedom of the will, or predestination in the Latin West.

Quite why Christianity developed in this way is not easy to say. One reason may well have been the absence of other obvious markers of communal identity: Christians never shared a single language, specific dress code, detailed dietary or generally ritual prescriptions. To an extent, doctrinal ideas seem to have filled a void substituting for the kind of shared customs and practices that symbolise belonging in other religions. More importantly, however, is something like an intellectual and indeed intelligible core to the Christian faith itself which made the emergence of a rational faith-discourse, I would assert, inevitable.

Be this as it may, however, my substantive claim that there exists a mutual and complementary relationship between two highly unusual features in Christianity: its institutional development as a Church is marked by the existence of theological ideas at its heart while the specific character of theology, I have argued, can be described as a rational (i.e. quasi-philosophical) discourse owned by the Church.

At the same time, however, a tension has begun to be manifested. As much as theology may be developed and cultivated to serve the institutional interests of the Church, it is far from evident that it has always exclusively functioned in this way. In fact, as we shall see in more detail in a moment, it is arguable that for every theological contribution towards the stability and unity of the Church there has been another one that had precisely the reverse effect. The marriage between Church and theology has therefore never been an easy one throughout the centuries. This arguably follows from the rational character of theological discourse which can never be made to align perfectly with the needs of any institution.

I shall now turn to consider these two contravening tendencies in more detail. As we shall see, theology is on the one hand stabilising the institutional Church but on the other hand, it is also destabilising it.

**Theology as stabilising the church**

Like every institution, the Church is always threatened by destabilising forces. Theology is drawn on to keep these forces at bay. This it does in normal times by adjudicating on controversial issues with an eye on the sources from which such judgements should be drawn in the view of the Church or, let’s say, their specific church. In this sense, theology works in a manner analogous to law: it offers a controlled hermeneutical framework for a reasoned response to new questions on the basis of codified and uncodified norms in line with precedent.

Unfortunately, things are not always so straightforward. Throughout their history, church and theology have undergone a number of deep, existential crises. It is in the course of these crises that their close relationship comes into particularly strong relief. Let me illustrate this by focussing on one of the most defining moments in the whole of

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\(^{11}\)The conventional view according to which the Council of Chalcedon brought this conflict to an end in 451 applies only to the West. For the protracted continuation of the conflict in the East see now Grillmeier/Hainthaler, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 2.
Church History, the so-called Arian crisis of the fourth century. After what has been said, it can hardly surprise that in Christian history, moments of ecclesiastical crisis were often also moments of theological crisis. The Arian crisis is no exception to this rule.

It occurred during one of the most dramatic transformations of the Christian Church initiated by the conversion of the Emperor Constantine and his adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. The decades following this decision saw a dramatic threat to the unity and identity of Christianity with rival groups and factions pitched against each other for control of the Church. Subsequent synods convened by increasingly desperate emperors for decades failed to heal the rift. When a solution was finally embraced, however, it followed a pattern that is familiar throughout the history of human culture. In recent decades, it has most powerfully been described by René Girard who observed how social crises are resolved through the identification of a scapegoat. The disruptive forces threatening the cohesion of a community are projected on one individual whose exclusion, therefore, restores unity and harmony.

Image: Council of Nicea, Megalo Meteoron Monastery, Greece
Source: Wikimedia Commons

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12 Girard, *The Scapegoat*; Zachhuber, ‘Rhetoric of Evil’, esp. 200–205.
One does not have to be a died-in-the-wool Girardian to recognise this structure in the present image. The kingdom of light and order, symbolised by the saintly fathers presiding over the Council of Nicaea is contrasted with a dark, but subdued underworld, a realm of negativity and chaos associated with the condemned heretic, Arius.

In Girard’s theory, the literary or intellectual device to accomplish this act of social healing through exclusion is called myth. Myths are stories told to embed the logic of the scapegoat in collective consciousness. They turn what is basically an irrational idea – that the exclusion of a single person can heal the fractures of the community – into a seemingly unassailable fact.¹³

What then does it signify that in the Arian controversy and, in fact, throughout Christian history the narrative underpinning the exclusion of scapegoats in precisely the Girardian sense was underwritten for the most part not by mythical stories but by theological argument? For this most certainly happened in the fourth century when the ultimate justification for the condemnation of Arius was given in unmistakably subtle, theological terminology as we find it in the Nicene Creed and in the writings of the fourth-century Fathers who endorsed its authority. The dividing line was drawn by prescribing language that had to be used when speaking of the Son in his relationship to the Father, and by rejecting language that was unacceptable.

This is not all, however. The Arian crisis was not only relevant for the subsequent history of the institutional Church; it was equally foundational for theology. The formulations adopted in the creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople became the cornerstone of all later Christian theology. In other words, what happened around the condemnation of Arius and others not only stabilised the Church by means of a theological exclusion of a scapegoat; the ensuing ecclesiastical settlement in its turn also served to provide a solid foundation for subsequent theology. Precisely by the intricately intertwined institutional and theological development that occurred during those decades, the fourth century became one of the most fundamental turning points in Christian history.

In providing this stabilising function to the institution of the Church, theology takes over, in part, functions previously fulfilled by mythical accounts consolidating communal identity. This observation chimes with the idea of a development from myth to reason which has often been adduced to explain the evolution of Western culture. Yet we can see now that this is not a clean transition but involves a process in which the new adopts some functions of the old in order to take its place. Theology, in other words, serves in a function for the Church that is analogous to the role myths played in earlier religions, and this function involves social stabilisation through the exclusion of scapegoats. The theological term for this is the anathema, which historically has accompanied many theological and credal statements throughout the ages.

Yet if theology retained some of the stabilising role from the mythical tradition, we must not ignore that throughout its history this function has always been counteracted by another tendency that is entirely opposed to it. Theology, we might say, did not only often fail to heal the rifts opening up in the Christian community, more often than not, it caused them. We therefore now have to look at theology as destabilising the ecclesiastical institution.

¹³Girard, Violence and the Sacred, ch. 4.
Theology as destabilising the church

Theology is expected to provide a rational account of the Christian faith that can serve as a communal basis for the shared life of the Church. Historically, however, it is equally accurate to observe that theology has often been a driving force behind tendencies that have undermined the stability of the institutional Church. This, I think, is not an accident but lies in the very nature of theology as a discursive, rational practice. As such, theology cannot easily be contained within the institutional framework of the Church. Rather, it is by its very nature open-ended. Its claims and assertions can always be queried; in fact, they have to be in order for the discipline to operate. If I compared theology in its stabilising role to legal theory, I would now say that in its open-ended, discursive character it is more like philosophy.

In the pursuit of their arguments, theologians cannot avoid entertaining views, at least hypothetically, that are at odds with traditionally accepted doctrine. This dialectical structure of theological discourse with some inevitability leads to actual dissent and the emergence of live options for Christianity that contradict the principles previously adopted by the institutional Church.

Probably the most intuitive example for this aspect of theological work is the Reformation. In its continental form at least, it was a child of university theology. In fact, many ideas which became transformative in the sixteenth century had previously been discussed and entertained by scholastic theologians as part of their dialectical exploration of difficulties inherent in received doctrine. We find, for example, almost all the later arguments against the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, specifically against the notion of transubstantiation, contained already in the writings of earlier scholastics. Yet those thinkers were willing to leave these objections as mere intellectual problems which could ultimately be settled by the observation that the Church had bindingly ruled on these matters (e.g. in the Fourth Lateran Council). The additional step taken by Luther and others was to take these theological options out of their secluded and isolated place in the university into the marketplace of public debate. They turned theological possibilities into live options for the Church.

Scholars have written extensively about the various influences that allowed the Reformation to take place. There is no doubt that political, economic, and social factors played a major role in the developments that were taking place in sixteenth-century Europe, but I find myself in agreement with those who insist that these events cannot be understood without attending to their theological core. Ultimately, as much as theology can only be understood from its relationship to the Church, the Church too is heavily dependent on theology. As I asserted before that crises in the life of the Church are usually also theological crises; this is as true for the sixteenth-century Reformation as it was for the fourth-century Arian crisis. Yet we can now see that theology is not only drawn on to solve the crisis, it is in many cases also a major factor contributing to the crisis.

How can this conflicting picture be explained? Earlier, I defined theology as a rational discourse on faith owned by the Church. I now propose an amendment as follows: theology is a rational discourse on faith owned by the Church but conducted by

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14 Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 6, 239, n. 427.
15 Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 437.
individuals. At one level, this may seem trivial while at another it could be criticised as hyperbolic and indicative of a ‘modern’ overestimation of intellectual individuality. Yet it seems to me that it is neither one nor the other. Instead, it is an expression of the fundamentally subjective dimension of all rationality. Ultimately, all theologians cannot but operate as individuals who say and write what they think is true. Whatever their commitment to the authority of the Church, they all have to take personal responsibility for their theologies. As a rational discourse, I suggest, theology always and inevitably expresses the intellectual subjectivity of the theologian. Insofar, then, as it is also specifically connected with the communal logic of the Church, theology cannot fully avoid the tension between the two poles, communal/institutional on the one hand, individual/subjective on the other.

Theology a coincidence of opposites

It is tempting to conclude from the distinction I have so far drawn that there are, as it were, two theologies: a conservative, institutional one (the theology of bishops, princely advisors and inquisitors) on the one hand, and a progressive one that is a thorn in the side of the institution challenging conceived ideologies and open for new insights.

However, such a conclusion is simplistic. In fact, there are good reasons to find the two types uneasily united throughout the history of theology and the Church, and often in the same individuals. The victorious side in the fourth-century Arian crisis was hardly simply ‘conservative’ in the above sense. Rather, Athanasius and the Cappadocians defended novel language against those who thought these formulae were incongruent with tradition. At the same time, the Reformation was not purely innovative. After all, it is called Reformation for a reason. It presented itself as uncompromisingly faithful to Scripture; moreover, many Reformation theologians insisted that their theology was also more compatible with Patristic and early medieval theology than that of their opponents.

The sense that we are dealing with two sides of the same coin gains further support from the observation that through the centuries some of the greatest theologians walked a fine line between ecclesiastical commendation and condemnation. Some of them were initially rejected before being emphatically endorsed, such as Thomas Aquinas; others were affirmed by some, rejected by others, such as Severus of Antioch, the great Father of the Syrian non-Chalcedonian Church, and Martin Luther. Yet others have variously been interpreted as stabilising and innovative, such as Augustine.

Let me add another observation. Earlier in this article, I compared the stabilising function of theology with that of the myth in earlier religions. Yet such a comparison, whatever its justification, also reveals remarkable differences between the two. As a rational discourse, theology can never exclude and stigmatise as efficiently and enduringly as mythical accounts can because any theological condemnation can only be presented in a form that makes it, in principle, open to criticism. By giving reasons

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16For this fact, incidentally, Barth’s Church Dogmatics is a good example, and his theological practice in this regard belies the simplistic programme of theology as only a function of the Church. In trinitarian terminology, the doctrine of election, the critique of infant baptism, and many other ways, Barth’s theology was often far from ‘neo-orthodox’.
and arguments, it invites, at least in principle, a response with better reasons and better arguments. Every ecclesiastical stability, therefore, that results from theological adjudication already contains within itself the seeds of the next controversy.

At the same time, and by the same token, however, ‘destabilising’ theologies are only ever influential when they offer alongside the promise of a new settlement which they serve to stabilise. Once again, the Reformation is arguably the best example for what I mean. Luther’s opposition to the Catholic system of his time could only have the effect it did because it contained the foundations of an alternative ecclesial settlement for which it would have a stabilising function.

I would suggest, therefore, that the two functions I have discussed only belong to one, single theology. As a discourse, theology is Janus-faced both stabilising and destabilising the institution to which it is aligned. It is both bound by communal rules and conducted in the responsibility of the individual thinker. Any attempt to understand what theology is, therefore, has to explain it in this tensional unity.

Likewise – and I can only mention this in parentheses here, it can be argued that the institutional interests of the Church are equally simplified if they are merely identified as ‘stability’. In reality, in order to survive the centuries, an institution also needs both, stability and innovation. The tension within theology thus mirrors a similar tension in the concept of the Church itself. All major Churches, in fact, combine in their own self-understanding the notion of faithfulness to a tradition with a readiness to innovate and change even though the vary radically in the precise way in which the two are related to each other. Whether or not they know it at a particular time, it is arguable that all churches need theology as much in its prima facie stabilising as in its destabilising role.

Theology and the university

Where does this leave us? I have so far not reflected on theology’s position in the university, but I am convinced that this particular institutionalisation of our discipline can be understood along the lines I have so far suggested. In fact, I would suggest that the institutionalisation of theology in the university has been perhaps the most successful attempt in the West to mitigate the tension between its stabilising and its destabilising tendency.

In the university, theology can operate, as it were, in a laboratory trying out ideas without immediately disruptive consequences for the churches. University theologians have therefore, over the centuries, enjoyed considerable freedom to pursue their rational enquiry of religious questions wherever those would, in principle, lead. This is illustrated by the remarkable fact that medieval universities put under their own regime of doctrinal investigation largely detached from the work of the inquisition, arguably in recognition of the fact that theological work cannot proceed without questioning orthodoxy in a way that would be considered dangerous in the public.17

At the same time, university theology as a whole was expected to have a stabilising effect on the Church and the overall religious settlement of the state. Overall it clearly fulfilled this purpose during the Middle Ages and into the modern period.

17 Jürgen Miethke, ‘Gelehrte Ketzerei’.


As a result, theology in the university during these centuries accomplished a depth of reflection on the Christian faith that is unprecedented, I would suggest, in any other historical period or in any other institutional setting. Everyone who studies or teaches theology today, still draws from the enormous treasure that has been piled up throughout this epoch. Dismissive comments that are sometimes made, regarding the sterility and barrenness of scholasticism or, conversely, the shallowness of theological liberalism, fall short, by a wide margin, of the intellectual standard achieved by these thinkers.

Yet we need to understand as well that the premise of this scholarly work was a society in which religious thought in general was subject to censorship. The plurality and open-endedness of theological enquiry was therefore a privilege granted to those studying and teaching at the university, but it was expected to end at the walls of the ivory tower. Theological faculties as such, over the centuries, supported the status quo. Where theological controversies were systematically and intentionally extended into the public, some of the most serious religious crises ensued, as for example in the Hussite movement at the turn of the fifteenth century leading to the public execution of Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague at the Council of Constance in 1415. Both were respected academics who believed they were merely exercising long-recognised academic freedom without realising the inevitably limited remit of this freedom against which the Council Fathers decided to take drastic steps.\(^\text{18}\)

In an entirely different context and with not quite as life-threatening consequences for the individuals involved, one can understand the tumultuous developments in post-Hegelian Germany along the same lines. What made the work of David Friedrich Strauß and others so intolerable was not that they said something no one had previously considered, but that they did so with the evident intention of influencing the broader public.\(^\text{19}\)

If today the potential for this kind of scandal seems greatly reduced – at least in the West, except for some religious holdouts – this initially seems a reassuring thought but also indicates that the general concern about and the care for theology have been greatly reduced. One is tempted to ask whether the major churches in the West have not become in Weber’s famous phrase ‘iron cages’, more or less functioning institutions but guided by a rationality that is largely devoid of the traditional ‘spirit’ which kept it alive? And likewise, as religious reflection and speculation has become a free-for-all in contemporary society, what role is left for theology to play in this open competition for religious relevance? How do theological institutions avoid turning into rudderless ships drifting on the open sea without a clear sense of purpose and direction?

In this short article, I cannot fully address, let alone answer, these questions. Let me conclude however, with a few thoughts along the lines of my previous argument.

First, even though the relationship between theology and the Church has always been important, it has never been easy. It is, I think important for both sides to keep this in mind when thinking about the best ways this relationship can be reinvented for the new millennium. I am sure that answers will be local and national in many ways depending on the situation on the ground.

\(^{18}\)Ibid., 405.

\(^{19}\)On Strauß and the controversy he elicited cf. Baur, *Church and Theology*, 333–350.
Second, theology, I have argued, has always oscillated between its reference to the Church and the necessary subjectivity of the theologian. Perhaps in today’s West the pendulum legitimately swings strongly towards the subjective side. By this, I do not want to endorse a purely individualist theology, but it seems to me that one of the more encouraging signs of contemporary theology is the considerable interest taken by individual, lay Christians (or indeed non-Christians) in theological education. In fact, professional theologians today are less clerical than they have ever been – as far as I can observe. Here lies a real opportunity for a pluralisation of theological debate in which more viewpoints can be heard than in the past. Theological faculties, I believe, have a task and an opportunity to contribute to this development by providing the academic and scholarly depth that is needed to make these new debates fruitful rather than purely confrontational.

Third and finally, given the close inter-relation between theology and the church, theology’s centre of gravity in the twenty-first century may well move to those parts of the world in which Christianity is thriving. In fact, some of the most fruitful impulses for theological reflection have come from outside Europe in recent decades, and I would expect this development to continue. I do not think this is bad for theology in Europe as long as we are willing to open ourselves up to a future theology that is truly global and ecumenical in character.

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