

Place of Theology in the Contemporary University: A Case for Justification¹
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Prof. Joseph Galgalo

Introduction: Where does Theology take me?

This country [the UK] is known for its quality theological education, as is the case with many other subjects. I looked up on a number of websites how theology courses are advertised by various leading Universities, your own Durham included. Your website has this to say:

Durham's Department of Theology and Religion is ranked no. 1 in the UK by all three main published league tables. In the Research Excellence Framework (2014), it was rated the leading department in its field in the United Kingdom, maintaining the no. 1 position it had achieved in previous Research Assessment Exercise. Our graduate prospects rating (88%) is not only the highest in the UK for our subject, but is also higher than that of any department of English, History, Philosophy or Classics.

I observe that, implicit in this statement, is the intention to communicate the comparative value of theological studies, of its academic quality and rigor, and that with a graduate prospect rating of 88%, studying for a degree in Theology and Religion is a worthy investment.

Oxford University equally emphasizes, "The momentous social significance of religion around the world today," and assures the learner can "become [not only] something of a historian and a philosopher, a textual and literary critic, and a linguist, [and an] effective scholar of religion but [it will also] equip [the learner] to embark on a wide range of careers." We notice again, how this advert implicitly

¹ A revised version, published with permission, of 'The Place and Significance of Theology in the Contemporary University' in Tom Greggs, Rachel Muers and Simeon Zahl (eds), [The Vocation of Theology Today: a Festschrift for David Ford](#) (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2013)

but unmistakably addresses the fears a theology graduate may have about career prospects, a matter of grave concern, so it seems, for any prospective theology student.

Cambridge University, my last of these examples, has its selling point as, “excellent career prospects,” and gives a justification for study of theology emphasizing its historical, intellectual and practical significance. Their prospectus reads in part, “Theology and Religious Studies is ever relevant in a world where religious belief is a driving force behind social and political events. Anyone operating internationally requires an understanding of the importance of religion and its cultural contexts.”

There is no doubt that these and many other Schools spend a great deal of energy to prove the relevance, value and competitiveness of theology and religious studies. There is also the deliberate effort to resist or avoid compartmentalization. Also evident is the desire to gain a broad outlook and appeal, but without losing the specific contribution that theology can make as a standalone discipline. We are in an era where academic disciplines are becoming highly specialized and distinct within their specific areas of study and research. Much is expected from each subject - each must earn its keep by the value it brings to the University, and by extension, the larger society. A high price tag, in the circumstances, is attached to subjects with high research output in the area deemed of high priority. The implicit code here is, ‘the contemporary university is a research university,’ and research must produce some tangible results with some practical output, and not just publications, which as impressive as they may be, serve at best only to add to the already long list of library collections.

In a world where premium is attached to the utility value of a subject, there is a certain expectation and a level of accountability, which demands the justification for inclusion of each discipline on the university syllabus. Funding is often prioritized solely with return on investment in mind. Subjects deemed of real value to national economy, human progress, health or medical advancement, technology, generally the Sciences, are preferred. Arguments in favor of ‘knowledge for knowledge’s sake,’ are often counted by the logic that any subject of practical value will, any way, assert its relevance and survive the competition for ranking or funding.

In my Kenyan context, funding of Public Universities is governed by government policy, which often is skewed towards STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Programs. Because of this bias, these courses are highly

competitive but also comparatively better resourced than others. Students, who end up pursuing courses in humanities or arts, know that their placement in those faculties is only because they could not secure a place in the prestigious STEM programs, which leads to lucrative careers. While they count on landing humble occupations such as teaching, administrators and social work, the real possibility of hitting a dead end in terms of career prospects is never far from their minds.

We also make the observation that, none of the Kenyan Public universities have a theology department, and their Religious Studies departments are usually very small and are typically combined with Philosophy in the Department of Religion and Philosophy. Faculties of Theology are the domain of Private Universities, which are, for good or bad (in this regard), mainly denominational. Most Private Universities are religious based and the majority are Christian. In such a context, the place and significance of Theology in the contemporary University is a pertinent question, and this is the subject I am going to address in this paper.

Theology's mixed Fortunes: A Background

I shall employ a simple conceptual framework as I attempt to build a case for the place of theology as an academic subject to be taught in its own right in the University today. Let me first draw a brief historical sketch, and at no length or depth, for time sake, of theology's mixed fortune, so to speak, as a University taught subject since it first became one. In this regard, the path is well trodden and one work I find very helpful in providing a handy guide is Keith Ward's "Why Theology Should be taught at Secular Universities," published in the *Discourse* Vol.4 no. 1, 2009 pp.22-37.²

He makes the observation that most Universities in the West were Christian in their foundation. They were set up for the purpose of ministerial formation to provide trained human resource for the Church. He also observes that the neat division of subjects into independent disciplines did not exist and that, at this stage, 'sacred doctrine' was part of an all inclusive education. Peter Abelard (1079-1142), recognized often for his great contribution to the development of Scholastic Theology, is thought to have perhaps first used the word 'Theology' in an effort to present it as an independent discipline to be distinguished and taught alongside such other disciplines as Philosophy. Such a move does not seem to have succeeded up until the 19th century when various academic disciplines, including

²See, http://www.basr.ac.uk/trs_resources/pubs_and_resources/discourse/DiscourseArticles/172.htm)

theology, began to be taught on their own. Even then, extreme caution seems to be applied in the case of theology, by among others, even the majority of its ardent defenders. Ward cites the case of Pusey of Oxford that,

When theology was proposed as a separate academic subject for a degree in Oxford in 1870, Canon Pusey opposed it on the grounds that it might mean the Bible was taught ‘like any other book’. He could see that the academy had become a place where ruthless criticism, as long as it was reasoned, was actually welcomed (ibid).

Pusey argued that, “Christian theology could only be taught by those who loved the Christian faith, who practiced it in their own lives, and who could bring others to a lively experience of faith by their example” (Keith Ward, *ibid*).

Such spirited defense notwithstanding, it was only a matter of time before theology became a standalone subject. Around the same time, other notable universities, such as in Germany, were also wrestling with the place of religious faith in a research university. This is not least because of the general misgiving that saw theology as unscientific and simply dismissed as out of step with the sensibilities of humanity come of age. Emmanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), themselves great critics of religion and although they may be seen as too liberal and out of step with orthodox Christianity, each did their bit to entrench the teaching of theology at their universities.

In our own time, theology is called to account time and again and required to justify its place on the university syllabus. The financiers of higher education are convinced that the question of theology’s perceived or real importance will naturally resolve itself when theology is finally confined to oblivion. Such fate is believed to be coming slowly as secular society progressively frees itself from the grip of religious faith. Critics of theology see theology’s inevitable drop from the list of critical subjects for among other things, the untenability of theology’s truth claims. Prof. Gerard Loughlin (one of your own here in Durham), citing a common sentiment from such critics says, “Theology has no place in the university of the twenty-first century. She is out of place in such a place, a pre-Enlightenment relic, an uncomfortable reminder of what the modern university was meant to abolish.”³

³ In Ian Ker and Terrence Merrigan, eds. *Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman*, (CUP, 2009), p.221.

There are numerous negative assumptions about the subject of theology that lends urgency to our topic.

Theology: Misunderstood or Misplaced?

What is the contention against theology, or even more generally, the academic study of religious traditions? Skepticism about religious truth and the view that theology cannot possibly meet an academic ‘standard of rationality’ is a common prejudice against theology. David Ford, in what he called “common academic prejudices and *idées fixes*,” against theology and generally the study of religions, observes that there is a commonplace

modern parochialism that cannot take the pre-modern seriously in matters of truth; an incapacity to appreciate the intellectual achievement in the area of religious thought; a failure to respect the large numbers of religious academics who are at least as intelligent, well-educated, sophisticated and critically alert as their secular colleagues; an insistence on religious and theological positions meeting standards of rationality that are by no means accepted throughout the university; or a blindness to the complexly religious and secular character of our world.⁴

There are certain *idées fixes* about theology that are at best dismissive and at worst smug, even arrogantly hostile to theology. In most contemporary universities, generally speaking, theology as an academic discipline often finds itself as a ‘marginal’ subject. It often struggles to attract students, to gain inclusion on a university syllabus, and continuously struggles to get on the priority list for funding. There are variously misplaced assumptions that contribute to theology’s struggle. These assumptions are varied and include a wide range of views. If theology gets any benefit of doubt, theology is seen as rather parochial and therefore pushed to the private sphere such as denominational seminaries. This much given, the sentiment goes that theology should not encroach onto the public arena such as the university. This view, all things considered, fails to appreciate theology’s wider public vocation. Such a rather myopic view of theology, uncritically assumes ‘certain over-simplified unity’ of theology and some singular purpose of all religious traditions, an assumption that makes no sense.

⁴ David F Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.290-291

Assumed 'subjectivity' of religious faith, and therefore untenability of any theological enterprise, is another of the prejudices or what Ford called *idées fixes*. Theology is dismissed, often casually and without proper scrutiny, as peddling unsubstantiated truth claims. Its concern with the 'spiritual' is seen as archaic and irrelevant to present concerns at whose expense it seeks to orient people to secure eternity with God. The mindset is propped by the belief that theology lacks concrete scientific grounding in terms of sound methodology and procedures that can produce and convincingly lead a theological argument to any logical conclusion. In this regard theology is dismissed as 'uncritical' or as David Ford puts it, is purported to lack critical "standards of rationality."⁵ On this argument, so is claimed, theology lacks academic rigor, an accountability to which all academic disciplines must be held, and that if none of its claims can pass the searching test of an objective verification principle, its fate then is sealed. Prof. Gerard Loughlin, if I may quote him again, notes that the criticism of theology as unscientific and therefore uncritical is nothing new. Citing the works of d'Holbach he points out that, "As long ago as 1772, Baron d'Holbach, in *Le Bon sens*, declared the science of theology to be 'a continual insult to human reason', and ... [that] theology is no science at all but a chimera of the imagination, an aberration in the place that banishes all such fantasies" (ibid).

In my view, such criticism is misguided and is often smugly ill-informed by self-assumed knowledge of what theology is all about. The folly of such argument is in its failure to appreciate the scientific and historical nature of academic theology. The importance of the knowledge of comparative religions, their distinctive theologies, and faith concerns cannot be gainsaid, even only for its historical value. Knowledge of religious traditions and their enduring power of influence on societies world over is not imagined but real. Theology's role and contribution to our understanding of religious and cultural dynamics of communities of faith, inter-faith matters, as well as its appreciation and appraisal of both secular and the religious' complex contestations and convergences in today's world, cannot be overemphasized.

Well said but still, should a subject, which is so concerned with such intimate matters as faith in God not be left to religious institutions such as denominational seminaries? Are such arguments, which are a commonplace in American Universities, for example, regarding whether or not Divinity Schools and Faculty of Religions should be separated, valid? Without addressing any of these

⁵ Ibid, 2007, p.291

exhaustively, I would say, theology, like any academic, research oriented discipline, requires academic space and freedom, which often denominational seminaries do not afford. Theology's contribution is wider and greater than such a limited space as of a denominational seminary. Theology has an 'offering,' which needs a bigger space that can facilitate the challenging interaction of diverse theological views. This exercise can best be done in a mutually shared theological space like a university faculty. A mutual interrogation of cherished practices and dogmas, a critique of the same, the continuous negotiation and renegotiation of faith claims, and the continuous stretching of boundaries of belief, including our knowledge of meaning, the whole of life and its ultimate concerns, can be a fruitful self-moderating and self-evaluating undertaking. This is very important, because such an approach logically shapes an objective criteria for doing theology, and rightly understood and appreciated, theological learning not only becomes necessary but also absolutely essential.

More popular and not manifestly academic *idées fixes* are views which see theology or any devotion to a religious belief as dangerous and delusional. Such a mindset is informed by the view that all religious traditions, without exception, are incurably oppressive, and faith claims inherently irrational, outdated, mythological and manifestly false. This may sound ironical but the best response to such popular prejudices is to expose these critics to a good dose of some good theology. I would not be surprised if, in the process of considering theology, considered with a reasonable measure of openness and honesty, such critics would not come round to appreciate theology as intellectually stimulating and as extremely resourceful in giving signposts towards wisdom for living.

A Case for Theology

Generally, theology is not at all seated comfortably in the mapping of university disciplines. In light of its precarious funding situation, criticized for failure to meet academic standards of rationality, and having to contend with biases generated by myriad *idées fixes*, what can be said in defense of theology? The best defense, I must say, is to explain the nature and task of theology, among other things, in the plainest language possible. What theology is, and what it stands for, is that by which theology will stand or fall. D.W.D Shaw, citing Douglas Young tells the story of Thomas Jackson, a onetime chair of divinity in Glasgow. On his retirement, this elderly divine, purposed to accomplish his lifetime dream: to write his greatest work of theology. When Jackson died after four years of labor, it was

only this single sentence that was found left behind: “Theology is everything, and everything is theology.”⁶

This simple thesis profoundly, although in a subtle way, makes a case for the great import of theology for the whole of life. The claim for theology’s ‘all-encompassing element’ is not a matter of opinion or subjective feeling. It is rather because theology is primarily ‘the science about truth,’ a matter that in and of its nature is of ‘ultimate significance.’ In the words of the Reformer, John Calvin, “true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves,” and that according to Calvin, “Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God, and without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self.”⁷ Calvin’s thesis expounds the significance of theology – as theology, the science or ‘knowledge of God’ is instrumental in the attainment of ‘the knowledge of self.’ Calvin’s conclusion is informed by years of deep study in the matters of God, personal experience and shaped in the context of profound engagements with those belonging to his own as well as other traditions. It makes perfect sense, such a claim should rightfully be interrogated and held up to academic scrutiny in the highest place of learning and research – for the claim of theology, goes to the very heart of who we are, as human beings.

By way of addressing how best this may be done, I will draw on the example of the nature, task and methods of contextual theologies. Theological reflection always takes place in the specificity of a context and thereby necessarily adopts a ‘conversational mode’ of engagement between received texts and traditions on the one hand, and the recipient’s context on the other. A conversational model is basic to the nature and method of any theology. The result is a whole host of contextual theologies. Each of these theologies, make specific contributions as they wrestle with contextual and situational realities of life, ethics, morality, the desire for dignity, freedom, fulfillment and relationships. For example, one could cite theologies of liberation, which are influential in engaging with and shaping public discourses on critical matters of social justice, political accountability, economic justice, the relational nature of societies, sensibilities of religious teachings and traditions, the value of theological imperatives (such as Christian discipleship) and their relevance for productive living.

⁶ “Theology in the University – A contemporary Scottish Perspective” in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol.41, (1988), p.217

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, vol. I (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.1.1-2

Theology discerningly adopts a logical criteria, and standards of engagement with questions of ultimate concern. The general public (not just specific communities of faith) is rightfully the context of such engagements. Theological discourses, evidently can influence and shape individual and by extension social choices. Theology creatively handled, raises questions of certain immediacy and particularity. Theology, through critical reflection, can guide relevant appropriation of such universal themes as responsibility, power, commitment, freedom, human dignity and empowerment, transformation and social vision for the good of humanity. University stands to benefit from theology's critical method that is keen on research or validation and intellectual accountability. Theological and interfaith engagements, for example, carry enormous potential in envisioning the possibilities of a better society. As Edward Farley observes, theology even without being concerned about "a belief in doctrine" [it] "can effect a critical posture ... and ... surely the university – the community of knowledge – is impoverished if it settles for a naiveté that excludes that possibility."⁸

We need not belabor the practicality of contextual theologies. I am persuaded, however, to share one personal example. At St Paul's University in Limuru Kenya, where I have served for many years now, we have, in the effort to attain, what I would call, in the words of Farley "a critical posture," evolved a method of reflective practice as an appropriate model for doing contextual theology. Reflective practice seeks to deliberately integrate academic research and teaching on the one hand, and professional practice on the other. It typically adopts a 'participatory' approach to the study and 'practice' of theology. Structured and sustained discourses on critical issues of theological nature and of major social concerns such as gender-based violence, interfaith dialogue and relations, economic justice, HIV-AIDS and disability studies are mainstreamed in the curriculum but also carried out in collaboration with communities. The select communities become part of 'defined' pedagogical partners and participants with the university. The objective is to map dominant understandings, interpretations, theological considerations and practices among faith communities. This is not just for the sake of achieving rigor in research but that theology may serve a practical purpose, namely, to evolve a hermeneutic that does not only 'discover' meaning or construct one, but also guides and informs discernment of a fruitful theological way of living. The engagements of partner-participants usually are extended beyond this initial boundary to the wider community.

⁸ *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1988), p.27

The approach is reflective, analytical and participatory. This methodology has proved extremely challenging but also fruitful in many ways. Often theological positions have been clarified, even wholly abandoned or revised as a result of gained and lived wisdom in learning together. Understandably some questions are more difficult than others. For example, the place and role of HIV positive persons at the communion table sharing one ‘common’ cup, believing polygamists who seek baptism, ordination of severely disabled persons, what it means to forgive a perpetrator of violence, a tribal bigot, or what it means to love a neighbor who is a refugee and professes a faith different from ours. In this regard, theology in a very practical way can challenge specific moral and ethical choices and can illuminate the understanding of such theological concerns as *imago dei* (as relating to human nature), human dignity, community and communion, individual responsibility and social orientations, inclusion and exclusion, mutuality and hospitality.

Another basic task of theology is that of the ‘retrieval of wisdom.’ By this we mean critical reading, interpretation, study of patterns of appropriation of wisdom (and the sources of such wisdom) and traditions, which over the centuries have become cherished moral compasses for varied followers of one religion or another. It is in this regard, ironically, that theology has been seen as ‘uncritical.’ Edward Farley sums the gist of the critics’ argument thus: “The University’s formal critical principle was hard won, and the battle left the conviction that knowledge can be freely pursued only if the university does not subject itself to tradition, religious or otherwise.”⁹ Unfortunately, such sentiments arise when ‘critical retrieval’ is confused with ‘critical acceptable.’ There is no doubt that, “when the tradition oriented hermeneutic is not suppressed, there can take place a retrieval of wisdom from the various ages, cultures and literatures of the past (Farley).”¹⁰ Faith aside, the significance of Christian history, wisdom and literature as an embodiment of a living tradition, should set theology on an equal standing with the study of secular history, literature, music, fine art, archeology, ancient philosophy or classics. How can we deny that, “modern students can ... be shaped by East and West, by Isaiah and Homer, by Thomas Aquinas and Sigmund Freud.”¹¹

The insight ‘theology is everything,’ makes great sense when we consider theology as a study that deals with matters of ‘ultimate concern,’ of human destinies,

⁹ *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p.27

¹⁰ Ibid, p.27

¹¹ Ibid, p.27

meaning and purpose of all things. These are ultimate questions of life, a concern of every human being regardless of their religious faith or lack of it. This is what Paul Tillich, called “the anxiety of finitude.” In his short treatise, *The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message*, Tillich writes: “Real human beings ... ask passionately and sometimes cynically the question of the meaning of life.”¹² Theology in this sense ‘is everything,’ concerns everyone, and is about all things that ultimately matter. Its dimensionality, in this regard, is elastic – encompassing physical and metaphysical, time and eternity. Theology belongs to all, and its discourse therefore naturally belongs in the ‘public’ square. Technical and professional expertise is required to guide the discourse on the questions of ultimate concern and meaning of life. As D.W.D. Shaw puts it, in answering “the big questions” theology provides proper tools and language that are required for this purpose.¹³ Theology’s task in this regard is to provide conceptual and linguistic tools needed for the articulation of theological answers to the ‘big questions’ of life, a task that warrants theology’s most valuable public vocation and justifies its role and place in the university.

Another valuable contribution of theology relates to its hermeneutical and exegetical tasks. Theology can make ‘connections’ between faith and reason, history and context, secular and the sacred, ephemeral and the eternal, past and the present, the beginning and end of things, humanity and divinity, the spiritual and the corporal, the visible and the invisible, and can hold, in a creative tension, a whole host of antithetical truths by constructing meanings in the most rational way possible. This brings out the nature of theology clearly – of its elastic dimensionality. Christian theology can provide a ‘connecting’ element in resourcing an interdisciplinary task of mutually critical engagements with a lot to offer as well as learn from the fields of psychology, sociology, philosophy, ethics, anthropology, history and such other fields. In doing this, theology must carefully negotiate our complexly pluralistic world. It must constantly renew its vocation, review its role and relevance, as well as reinvigorate its methodology and keep alive its vigor for the service of both the academy and the wider society.

Conclusion

Theology’s elastic dimensionality and particular contributions cannot be ignored. Theology’s hermeneutical, didactic, intellectual and practical value is evidence of its objectivity and can add value to the critical, academic and progressive aims of

¹² Ed. Durwood Foster, (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), p.44

¹³ Op. cit, 1988, p.224

the university. That billions of people around the world are adherents of one form of religion or another cannot be wished away. Also, some level of expertise will always be needed by billions who are ardent students of some sacred text or another. We also note that, secularism itself is a sort of ‘religiosity’ and in any case takes cognizance (however lightly) of religious phenomena of the world. All these, surely should lend urgency to the study of theology. As Keith Ward observes, “Religions are such an important and vital force in the modern world that it would be a dereliction of intellectual duty if its claims were not taken seriously, investigated carefully, and evaluated with reasoned criticism.”¹⁴ Theology is well placed to lead the way in this regard, and surely, nowhere else can this be done better than in a university.

¹⁴ “Why Theology Should be Taught at Secular Universities” in *Discourses* 4, no.1 (2011), pp.22-37, see p.26 accessed at <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/PrsDiscourseArticles/172> on 17/11/2011