

How Theology Stopped Being *Regina Scientiarum*—and How Its Story Continues

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sce**Gijsbert van den Brink**

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Abstract

The view that theology represents the highest level of academic learning and the summit of human knowledge has a long history. In this article, starting from Aristotle, the genealogy of this view is excavated. Second, it is examined how and why theology lost this special status in modernity, as this appears in Immanuel Kant's *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798). Third, it is shown in which way and for what reasons theology continued to have a place of its own in the modern university since the founding of the University of Berlin (1810). In particular, the crucial role of Friedrich Schleiermacher's proposal is highlighted. Fourth, it is suggested that, under certain conditions, theology can still be conceived as a proper university discipline in contemporary pluralistic societies.

Keywords

Theology, university, queen of the sciences, rationality, philosophy, practical sciences

Introduction

The academic discipline that is called theology has had a remarkable career: once hailed as the 'queen of the sciences', its status has been questioned ever since—and after the secularisation of the European university it has been written off and discontinued in many places. Even where theology departments have survived up to this day—important universities both in the UK and on the continent still contain theological faculties or departments in some form—they are under pressure, being more and more considered as quixotic vestiges of times gone by. In their recent 'manifesto' on the perils and prospects of theology, Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun incisively lay bare this current crisis of theology, describing its external dimensions in terms of a shrinking job market, a

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shrinking audience and a shrinking intellectual reputation. Even worse in their view is theology's internal crisis: the widespread loss of vision as to the nature of theology's proper vocation and purpose.¹ Whereas religion is all over the place, theology seems to be wandering around, still in the process of re-inventing itself.

Volf and Croasmun convincingly expose the strong correlation between theology's role as a respected voice (or reservoir of voices) in public moral discourse and its formal anchoring in academic institutions. Although the nature of these institutions may depend on cultural and historical backgrounds (in Europe many of them are public, in the US most are private), the connection is close in all cases: when theology's public voice is losing credibility, its institutional place will soon become challenged, and vice versa. Therefore, in this article I assume that the place and status attributed to theology at secular universities mirrors the public role(s) theology is supposed to play in society at large. Accordingly, if we want to know which public roles theology played in the past and how these became contested, we may trace the historical trajectories of theology as an academic discipline. Similarly, if we want to re-present theology as a public and rational quest, we should be able to explain in which form and under which conditions it deserves a proper place at contemporary universities and other academic institutions. It is this twofold ambition that forms the agenda of this article.

Regina Scientiarum?

That theology used to be seen as the queen of the sciences during the Middle Ages is less self-evident than it is usually supposed to be. We actually don't know where the metaphor of theology as a queen stems from. All references to premodern sources are vague and general, lacking precision. For example, Avihu Zakai states that 'During the Middle Ages, therefore, theology was accorded the title of the "Queen of the Sciences" (*Regina scientiarum*)', but the only source he mentions is from the work of sixteenth-century theologian Desiderius Erasmus.² The simile is often attributed to Aquinas, and if a reference is added to this attribution it is usually to the first question of the *Summa theologiae*. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas argues that theology—or, rather, 'sacred doctrine'—not only is a science, but 'from every standpoint . . . is nobler than other sciences'.³ He does not compare sacred doctrine to a queen, however. In the Prologue to his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Aquinas equates theology (*scientia divina sive theologia*), metaphysics and first philosophy, calling this science the 'ruler' or 'mistress' of all others since it examines first causes and objects that are free from matter.⁴ So here he comes

1. Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology that Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2019), pp. 35–59 (and cf. p. 7 for 'manifesto').
2. Avihu Zakai, 'The Rise of Modern Science and the Decline of Theology as the "Queen of the Sciences" in the Early Modern Era', *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 9 (2007), p. 126, with reference to Jean Leclerc (ed.), *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami opera omnia* (Leiden, 1703–1706), vol. 2, 1053F.
3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I 1, 5.
4. Thomas Aquinas, *In Duodecim Libros Metaphysicorum Expositio*, Prooemium (the Latin terms are *rectrix*, *regulatrix*, *princeps* and *domina*); cf. John P. Rowan (trans.), *Commentary on the Metaphysics by Thomas Aquinas* (Chicago, IL: H. Regnery, 1961) as edited by Joseph

close, but even here there is no *regina*.⁵ I am open to consider any proof to the contrary, but as long as that fails to appear, it seems that the idea that during the Middle Ages theology was generally known as the queen of the sciences is a remarkable example of an ‘invented tradition’.⁶

Yet, what we do know is that already in the early church (e.g. in Clement of Alexandria) human knowledge was considered to find its apex in what we would now call theological reflection. This reflection could not take place by human initiative, since it was entirely dependent on divinely granted revelation, but it did take the form of ‘true dialectic’, i.e. of rationally structured thinking.⁷ Greek philosophical influence is clearly palpable here. Plato had already used the word *theologia* to denote critical reflection on the nature of the deities that figured in the theogonies and theomachies of Homer and Hesiod.⁸ Aristotle, in turn, had used the word *theologikē* (‘theological’) to designate the climax of theoretical knowledge, i.e. the metaphysical form of knowledge (knowledge of divine, incorporeal things and of the sources of all existence) that transcends both mathematics and physics.⁹ Though it is hard to reconstruct the precise meaning that the term *theologia* had for Aristotle himself—he does not return to it when unfolding his doctrine of the unmoved mover—in the late antique Christian reception the exalted status of theology (as the ‘first philosophy’) in his writings was uncontested.¹⁰ Thus, we may cautiously conclude that the idea (not the phrase) of theology as the queen of the sciences goes back all the way down to Aristotle.

During the Middle Ages reflection on things divine retained this exalted status. From the twelfth century onwards, starting with Peter Abelard and circles around him, such reflection was named *theologia*—a label that had previously been used to denote either, as in Plato, the study of the mythical theogonies of pagan authors or, in the Eastern part of the church, the doctrine of God as distinct from the economy of salvation (*oeconomia*). The name gained wider currency in the thirteenth century, becoming ‘official’ when in 1252 the statutes of the University of Paris mentioned a *facultas theologica* as part of the university. Formerly, Christian writers had referred to the entire scheme of Christian thinking using labels such as *sacra doctrina*, *sacra pagina*, *sacrum studium*,

Kenny: <https://dhsprpriory.org/thomas/Metaphysics.htm>. Note that Aquinas is at best speaking about (what came to be called) natural theology here, not revealed theology. The female nature of the metaphors is obviously inspired by the female gender of *scientia*.

5. This is also the case in medieval allegorical images of the liberal arts and sciences; cf. [http://www.ubs.sbg.ac.at/sosa/handschriften/MIII36\(8r\).jpg](http://www.ubs.sbg.ac.at/sosa/handschriften/MIII36(8r).jpg) and <http://www.ubs.sbg.ac.at/sosa/handschriften/MIII36artes.htm>.

6. E.J. Hobsbawm and T.O. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

7. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 1.28, 176–77; cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), pp. 1–2.

8. This earliest occurrence of the word *theologia* that we know of is in Plato, *Politeia* II 379a (written ca. 375 BCE).

9. Aristotle, *Metaphysica* F 1026a, 19; K 1064b, 3.

10. Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Theology. I Terminology’, in Hans Dieter Betz et al. (eds), *Religion Past and Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2009–2013), http://dx.doi.org.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/10.1163/1877-5888_rpp_COM_025101 (accessed 21 May 2019).

and so on.¹¹ But the application of the skills of the liberal arts, especially logic, to the study of the Bible that became typical of scholastic thought cried out for a new name. Thus, it was in this context of the emerging European university that theology received its official status. Its reputation of being the ‘highest’ faculty was not due to its abstruse nature, but to what was seen as

the proper progression in the order of study, beginning with the material and mutable (natural philosophy), proceeding then to the immutable things that were associated with material objects (mathematics), before moving on to elevated divine things that were immutable and completely divorced from matter.¹²

In fact, the goal of academic study was not to specialise in some discipline, but to enhance one’s personal formation in a deeply spiritual context. Even the study of nature was directed at such spiritual formation, shaping one’s mind so as to have it contemplate the divine beauty.¹³ The study of theology enabled one to engage directly with the divine realities. Most students, however, never ended up in one of the three higher faculties. Theology was typically a smaller faculty than law and medicine, and the only one that usually required its students to first obtain an arts degree.¹⁴ Thus, the image of theology as the top of the pyramid of academic studies could easily arise.

Yet, all this is not to say that theology counted as the *regina scientiarum*. For remarkably, it did not necessarily count as a *scientia* at all. Augustine had most emphatically denied theology this status, arguing that whereas *scientia* is concerned with temporal things, it is *sapientia* that has the realm of eternal things as its object. Thus, whereas the sciences can at best have a preparatory role, theology is the true philosophy (unlike Plato, who distinguished wisdom from ‘the love of wisdom’, Augustine could equate wisdom and philosophy). Its goal was leading people to the good life rather than acquiring knowledge for its own sake.¹⁵ Due to Augustine’s influence, the idea that theological reflection should not be associated with the sciences but rather considered as a category of its own (‘wisdom’) lasted until well into the Middle Ages.¹⁶ But even when, in the wake of the emerging universities, theology gradually came to be seen as a science, this identification was not shared by everyone. To be sure, as we already touched on, Aquinas was

11. G.R. Evans, *Old Arts and New Theology: The Beginnings of Theology as an Academic Discipline* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 29.

12. Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 31.

13. Harrison, *Territories*, pp. 26–34, 67–71 and *passim*.

14. Hilde de Ridder-Symoens *et al.* (eds), *A History of the University in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), vol. I, p. 308.

15. See e.g. Augustine, *De Trinitate* XIII, 19; XIV, 1.

16. Cf. e.g. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 10–11; the ambiguity of ‘theology’ as denoting either mystical/salvific knowledge or a scholarly discipline has been clearly exposed in Edward Farley’s masterful archaeology of the concept: *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983]), pp. 29–39. Farley even speaks of ‘two fundamentally different premodern senses of the term’ (p. 31).

unambivalent that theology was the most noble of both the speculative and the practical sciences. In his view it was definitely a science, since, as Aristotle had defined a science, it contained a system of propositions derived from first principles—in this case: the articles of the faith.¹⁷

Other medieval thinkers, however, disagreed. Without contesting theology's eminent status, they countered that the principles from which a body of scientific knowledge can be deduced should be universally evident to 'natural reason', and better known than its conclusions. Since the principles of theology—i.e., the articles of the faith—can be doubted, in their view theology does not qualify as a science. Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253) had already contended that for us, mortals, mathematics confers a higher degree of certainty than theology.¹⁸ William of Ockham went much further by arguing that the articles of faith often appear 'false to all or to the majority or to the wisest' (where he took 'wisest' in particular 'for those using natural reason').¹⁹ In his view, therefore, theology could not be counted among the sciences. Others took a middle position, stipulating that, in Aristotelean terms, theology could best be seen as a practical science, not a theoretical one—i.e., as one that is directed towards action rather than truth. John Duns Scotus, for example, argued that the purpose of *sacra doctrina* was not to attain pure knowledge but to orient our lives towards God as the highest good and our final goal. The science of theology promotes the fear and love of God and stimulates us to act in line with this goal: 'The intellect perfected by the habit of theology apprehends God as one who should be loved . . . Therefore, the habit of theology is practical.'²⁰

Earlier thirteenth-century theologians such as William of Auxerre, Alexander of Hales, Richard of Middleton and Bonaventure had voiced similar sentiments. According to Bonaventure, for example, the chief end of theology is 'that we become good'.²¹ Thus, already in the Middle Ages we find a tradition that seriously qualifies the status of theology as a science in the proper, theoretical sense of the word. If theology is a science at all (which was affirmed by Duns but denied by Ockham), it is a practical one, and its goal is *ethical* rather than theoretical.²² Theology is more about human beings and their lives than it is about God *per se*. This tradition would later be picked up by Protestant theologians such as William Ames and Johannes Cocceius.²³

17. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I i, 2; cf. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 78a22–79a33.

18. Michael H. Shank, 'Myth 2: The Medieval Church's Suppression of Science', in Ronald L. Numbers (ed.), *Galileo Goes to Jail, and Other Myths about Science and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 23.

19. William of Ockham, *Summa totius logicae* (Paris 1488, Oxford 1675), III, I, cap.1; cf. Ernest A. Moody, *The Logic of William of Ockham* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), p. 211.

20. John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* prol. 5, qq. 1-2; cf. Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 9.

21. Bonaventure, *Commentaria in Quatuor Libris Sententiarum*, in *Opera omnia* (Quaracchi: Ad Claras Aquas, 1882), I, 13, as quoted by Harrison, *Territories*, pp. 18, 208. See also Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, pp. 231–32.

22. Of course, this is not to deny that, as Pannenberg (*Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, p. 233) points out with regard to Duns, in order to make something our goal and take practical steps towards it, we must have at least some knowledge of it.

23. Cf. Gijsbert van den Brink, *Philosophy of Science for Theologians* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 258–59.

Kant's *Conflict* as Mirror of the Modern Breakdown

Those medievals who considered theology to be a practical discipline could still see it in some way as the 'highest' science.²⁴ Obviously, the Aristotelian intuition that the divine reality is more fundamental than the visible mundane world survived also among those who emphasised the primary importance of our *attitude* towards the divine. Yet it is telling that debates on the question whether theology was a science—i.e., a proper academic discipline—and if so in which way, were already in place long before the modern breakdown of theology as the (alleged) queen of the sciences. Already during the Middle Ages it was generally sensed that theology was at best a rather peculiar science. What happened in modernity was not so much that new appreciations of the status of theology emerged, but that the sentiments shifted: whereas support for the notion of theology as either a theoretical or a practical science started to crumble, the view that theology was not a science at all gained popularity. How might this shift be explained? In order to find an answer to this question, we may turn to the programmatic manifesto written by Immanuel Kant on the relationships between the academic disciplines.

Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties* (published in 1798) tied in with an existing debate about how the four faculties that constituted the university—philosophy (i.e., what used to be called the liberal arts, traditionally the 'lower' faculty), law, medicine and theology—should be divided. Already in the early eighteenth century the traditional division, with philosophy as a propaedeutic faculty and the other ones as the 'higher' faculties, had been challenged. The reason why Kant turned to this subject had to do with a preceding regime change in Prussia: in 1787 Friedrich Wilhelm II had come to power, and in 1788 his minister of Justice J.C. Wöllner (1732–1800), himself a former theology student, issued a *Religionsedikt* which aimed at dismantling the tolerant religious policy of his predecessor. The edict attempted to bolster the Christian faith 'in its original purity . . . and to protect it from all falsehoods'.²⁵ In its wake, all Prussian parishes and schools, including its universities, were subject to censorship, and an inquisitorial atmosphere emerged. In particular, the theological faculty of the university of Halle, Wöllner's *alma mater*, was severely criticised for its heterodox tendencies (in German: *Neologie*) and its professors had to face repressive measures. But also others were confronted with charges of infidelity to the new conservative regime—among whom, most notably, Immanuel Kant. Kant had circumvented attempts by the Prussian censorship to prevent publication of his *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen des blossen Vernunft* (1793) by turning for help to the philosophical faculty of Jena (located outside Prussia). In response, in 1794 Kant received a letter from Wöllner, stating that the king was 'greatly displeased to observe how you misuse your philosophy to undermine and destroy many of the most important and fundamental doctrines of Holy Scripture and Christianity'; Kant was threatened with 'unpleasant measures' in case he continued to express himself in public about religious

24. E.g. Bonaventure compared the liberal arts to the floors of a building, law and medicine to its walls, and theology to its crowning roof. Cf. De Ridder-Symoens, *History I*, pp. 111–12.

25. Thomas A. Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 101–102; I am indebted to this superb study (esp. pp. 101–104, 123–29) for other details in this section as well.

issues.²⁶ He defended himself by pointing out that he had focused on the ‘philosophical’ dimensions of religion, which he was free to do as a member of the philosophical faculty—but he also gave in to Wöllner by promising ‘to refrain in the future from all public addresses on religion, both natural and revealed, either in lectures or in writings’.²⁷

Whereas Kant had written the first and most famous part of *The Conflict of the Faculties* already in 1794, after the king had died in 1797 and the subsequent dismissal of Wöllner in 1798 he felt free to break his promise.²⁸ Thus, in that same year the *Conflict* appeared. In its first section Kant basically argued three things:

1. The government should not support conservative theology (as had been the case in Prussia).
2. The Enlightenment values of rationality and freedom from external tutelage should reign in the university.
3. The faculty of philosophy is the prime guardian of these values, since, unlike confessional theology with its external authorities (such as the Bible and the Augsburg Confession), it follows reason wherever it leads.

Therefore, philosophy should no longer be regarded the handmaiden of theology but rather have a watchdog-function over the other faculties from the standpoint of rationality, critiquing them whenever they transgressed its universal canons. Philosophy had to take over final control in the university from theology. As Kant had argued already in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781):

There was a time when metaphysics [i.e., natural theology] was called the queen of all the sciences, and if the will be taken for the deed, it deserved this title of honor, on account of the preeminent importance of its subject. Now, in accordance with the fashion of the age, the queen proves despised on all sides . . .²⁹

Although Kant does not continue to use this metaphor, it is clear that in his view philosophy has now become the queen of the sciences, leading the way also in religious matters.

It is important to note that Kant did not deny ‘the preeminent importance of its [theology’s] subject’, but that his problems with this discipline were twofold. First, in his view theology falls outside the scope of what can be established by means of human rationality alone. As we have seen, this principal argument was not new, since late medieval

26. Cf. Howard, *Protestant Theology*, p. 124, and other sources mentioned there.

27. Howard, *Protestant Theology*, p. 124; Kant included his correspondence with the government over his *Religion* in the preface of his *Die Streit der Fakultäten* (Königsberg: Friedrich Nicolovius, 1798).

28. Howard, *Protestant Theology*, p. 124; *The Conflict of the Faculties* contains three parts, on the conflicts of the philosophical faculty with theology, law and medicine respectively; the three parts hang together only loosely.

29. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A.W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 99. Note that even Kant attributed the queen metaphor to unspecified others.

nominalists like Ockham had already claimed that the principles of theology cannot be supported by natural reason.³⁰ Second, what was new was Kant's political argument against the way in which theological orthodoxy was used by the state for its own interests. In fact, such (mis)use had become widespread ever since the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 with its famous maxim *cuius regio cuius religio*, which had turned religion into a means to bolster the identity of the newly emerging nation states. From now on unity of confession and doctrine often came to be enforced by the state, and it was in this context that the notion of theology as queen of the sciences got its most articulate meaning (one should note that a queen was, first of all, a *political* figure). Apparently, it was this political constellation that, quite understandably, sparked Kant's deep dissatisfaction with the academic *status quo* in general and the role of theology in particular.

Kant's criticism resonated with a more general sentiment spreading across Europe during the time of the French revolution. This critical sentiment did not only affect theological faculties, although their graduates were considered 'the most useless, intractable and dangerous subjects of the state' (Denis Diderot).³¹ The university as a whole came to be denounced by many. Along with the church and the aristocracy, many universities—considered by champions of the Enlightenment as 'antiquated hold-overs from the Middle Ages, confessionally rigid, pedagogically retrograde, socially useless'—had to face enmity and suppression in the wake of the French revolution.³² Even some of the most famous ones were forced to close down, such as Louvain (1797), Halle (1807) and Wittenberg (1813).³³ Thus, academic theology did not just have to face internal threats from its sister faculties, but also external ones from cultural developments that attacked the very institute of the university. The university's 'problems in the eighteenth century were legion and included financial mismanagement, curricular stagnation, professorial pedantry, a decline in matriculation numbers, and a notoriously coarse and unruly student subculture'.³⁴ Despite the reform agendas and proposals for educational innovation, it was not clear what kind of institutions should take the place of Europe's traditional universities.

The Berlin Settlement (1810)

It was in this situation that, apparently all of a sudden, the birth of the 'modern university' took place. The place and date of its birth can be pinned down with quite some precision:

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- 30. This lends support to the view of those scholars (e.g. John Milbank) who argue that the decisive watershed in the history of Western thinking is not to be found in the Enlightenment or the Reformation (e.g. Brad S. Gregory) but in the late Middle Ages.
 - 31. Denis Diderot, 'Plan d'une université pour le gouvernement de Russie', in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. J. Assèzat (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1875), III, p. 438 ('Ce sont les sujets de l'État les plus inutiles, les plus intractables et les plus dangereux').
 - 32. Howard, *Protestant Theology*, p. 1.
 - 33. Whereas in 1789 Europe had 143 universities, in 1815 only 83 were left; cf. De Ridder-Symoens, *History of the University in Europe* III, p. 3.
 - 34. Howard, *Protestant Theology*, p. 47. Some suggested to take the royal societies and scientific academies such as those in London, Paris and Berlin as a template for future institutions of higher education.

Berlin, October 1810. In fact, this major event had been prepared by an outpouring of smaller writings by some of Germany's most creative minds. It materialised under the leadership of the famous philosopher and educationist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). As is well-known, the new university—the label ‘university’ was deliberately retained—had two pillars: research (*Wissenschaft*) and personal formation (*Bildung*). The notion of research was connected to the incremental increase of human knowledge through painstaking empirical investigation. The insight had dawned that such scientific knowledge production was in principle a never-ending endeavour and could flourish most in close interaction with teaching.³⁵ In this constellation research groups, PhD programs etc. came to prominence and it was the natural sciences that received pride of place. The notion of personal formation, however, secured a proper place for the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) next to the sciences.³⁶ Although the university continued to be governed by the state, the state was keen not to enforce particular viewpoints (theological or otherwise) but to safeguard what came to be known as the university's ‘academic freedom’. In this way, Berlin set a shining example that became emulated throughout the continent and beyond.

In an interesting twist of history, whereas in other countries (including the United States) theology was often pushed out of the university into ecclesial seminaries, the Humboldt University—as the University of Berlin was called from the GDR period onwards—retained a theological faculty.³⁷ This mirrored the fact that theology continued to play a role in public discourse, but it was most of all due to the genius of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Whereas Johann Gottlieb Fichte had been particularly harsh on theology, arguing that it could be dismantled as a discipline of its own since its scientific parts (philology and history) could easily be subsumed to the faculty of philosophy, Schleiermacher vigorously defended its full inclusion in the newly established university. He was well aware, however, that this required a reconceptualisation of theology's nature and goals; in particular, theology had to align itself to the spirit of *Wissenschaft*. For that reason, Schleiermacher subsumed many branches of theology, including dogmatics, under the heading of historical theology (dogmatics being a kind of empirical analysis of current Christian thinking). Next to historical theology, he distinguished philosophical theology as a more systematic endeavour, using the critical methods of the philosophical faculty, and finally practical theology. It was this latter part, devoted to the inculcation of practical skills needed for the ministry within Christian communities, that offered theology its proper rationale as a university discipline. Schleiermacher therefore considered it as the ‘crown’ of theology. Just like law—another ‘positive science’—theology investigated materials that were empirically given (texts, traditions, beliefs etc.) in order to adequately prepare students for public service, either as pastors or as lawyers.³⁸

35. Cf. e.g. David Palfreyman and Paul Temple, *Universities and Colleges: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 38–39.

36. We must keep in mind that the German *Wissenschaft* (like the Dutch *wetenschap*) is a broader, more encompassing category than that of the (natural) sciences.

37. Cf. Howard, *Protestant Theology*, pp. 155–97.

38. Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, 3rd ed., trans. Terrence N. Tice (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2009); for a succinct summary, see e.g. Matthew L. Becker, *Fundamental Theology: A Protestant Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 354–60.

Although Schleiermacher tried to forge many bonds between the three main parts of theology, it was this practical goal in particular that constituted the unity and integrity of academic theology.

Thus, Schleiermacher conceded that philosophy is the Lord (*Herrin*) of the university, as Kant had stipulated; but he built a strong and eventually convincing case for theology as the *soror* (sister) of the other positive sciences. In a sense, Schleiermacher continued the tradition of those from the Middle Ages onwards who had argued that theology is a *practical* discipline, directed to action (though on the basis of knowledge) rather than truth. Even Kant, of course, had left room for a practical foundation of theology, given his moral reinterpretation of religion.³⁹ Thus there was a legitimate place for theological reason in public discourse, as long as it was translated into generally acceptable moral categories. Although Schleiermacher rooted his new account of theology as an academic discipline in contemporary idealist philosophy as well as in his own theological views, it is clear that it was also deeply pragmatic. More than he may have realised, his proposal was bound up with the political constellation of the time in which both the church and the state had a keen interest in well-educated clergy.⁴⁰ In light of ongoing secularisation processes, however, the intricate balance between the interests of the church and of the state could easily fall apart. This typically happened, for example, in the Netherlands, where the University Act of 1876 appointed ‘neutral’ religious studies as a proper discipline within the university, whilst relegating dogmatic and practical theology to denominational seminaries.⁴¹ In such ways, theology became as yet marginalised, or even banned from the university as no longer deserving a space because of its ‘irrational’ assumptions. In many places in the West, by the end of the twentieth century theology was thus located somewhere at the borders of its secularising universities.

How the Story Continues

Yet it can be argued that societal conditions in the West are changing once more in a way that may affect the status of theology as a discipline. As a result of the oft-described transition from the modern to the postmodern (or late modern) condition, the Kantian notion of a universal human rationality ‘independent of time, place, and historical circumstance’, though still very influential, has become profoundly contested.⁴² Isn’t human rationality much more flexible, dynamic and subject to cultural conditioning and historical development than Kant realised? Is philosophy—or even science—as independent and free from external authorities and traditions as he assumed? In the eyes of

39. For Kant’s personal take on theology, see Christopher J. Insole, *The Intolerable God: Kant’s Theological Journey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016).

40. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, pp. 251–52.

41. Sheila Greeve Davaney, ‘Rethinking Theology and Religious Studies’, in Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown (eds), *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2002), p. 143.

42. Alisdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Forms of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1990), p. 65; the phrase cannot literally be found in Kant but captures his notion of rationality quite well.

many, such claims have become deeply problematic, and some even argue they should be unmasked as thinly veiled claims to power. In the wake of such suspicions, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen renewed attempts at theoretical underpinnings of theology's academic stature—attempts that challenge Enlightenment claims to a monopoly on rationality.

For example, John Milbank has argued that theology can only be justified as an academic discipline when the secular consensus that 'God does not exist' can be challenged. And if it is true that all objects somehow participate in God, the secular consensus *should* be challenged. Taking up the medieval notion of theology as participation in God's self-knowledge, Milbank calls for a reinvention of 'Biblical studies, church history and so forth as also attempts, beyond scholarship, to participate in the mind of God'.⁴³ Over against the Kantian notion of neutral reason, Milbank advocates a 'traditioned reason', which can never be divorced 'from the specificity of time and place'.⁴⁴ In Milbank's view, theology should regain its status as a queen by providing the metadiscourse that assigns the various disciplines their proper place in the interpretation of reality. Milbank vigorously elaborated this view vis-à-vis social theory, showing that for example its positivist, liberal and neo-Marxist versions lack the self-evidence they claim to have; in fact, they can be redescribed as truncated forms of classical Christian thought patterns.⁴⁵

From a different ecclesial perspective John Webster has voiced Milbank's plea for a more autonomous and self-conscious role of theology. Rather than being one (insecure) discipline alongside others, theology should furnish an account of the nature and end of the intellectual life—and thus of the humanities (or 'humane studies', as he has it).⁴⁶ According to Webster, all intellectual enquiry is necessarily informed by an underlying account of the nature and goal of the intellectual life. Remarkably, however, the university does not teach us anything about why the pursuit of intellectual goals (research, teaching, learning etc.) is indeed valuable. Hence, where we should expect its heart, we are in fact left with a void by 'the flimsiness and ignobility of its understanding of what it is about'. Theology, however, should recognise 'the place of intelligence within the economy of God's life-giving and restorative love for rational creatures'.⁴⁷ In this sense, though it does not intermingle with its methods, theology is the 'queen of the arts'. Thus, in his search for a 'theology of higher education' Webster turned the question upside down, inquiring after the place of the university in theology rather than the place of theology in the university, since the latter query 'defeat[s] in advance any theologically satisfactory answer'.⁴⁸

43. John Milbank, 'The Conflict of the Faculties: Theology and the Economy of the Sciences', in Mark Thiessen Nation and Samuel Wells (eds), *Faithfulness and Fortitude: In Conversation with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), p. 53.

44. Milbank, 'Conflict of the Faculties', p. 55.

45. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

46. John Webster, 'Regina Artium: Theology and the Humanities', in Christopher Craig Brittain and Francesca Aran Murphy (eds), *Theology, University, Humanities: Initium Sapientiae Timor Domini* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), p. 40.

47. Webster, 'Regina Artium', pp. 40–41.

48. Webster, 'Regina Artium', p. 40. That the 'credibility strategy' (i.e. the attempt to adapt theology's methodology to that of the sciences in order to gain academic credibility) has failed, is

Whereas Milbank and Webster developed contemporary retrievals of the medieval notion of theology as a theoretical discipline, Volf and Croasmun have recently picked up on the tradition of theology as a practical science, aimed at the good life. After their incisive analysis of the current crisis of theology, they point a way out of this crisis by reminding theologians of what has always been and should still be their task:

Christian theology has lost its way because it has neglected its purpose. We believe the purpose of theology is to discern, articulate and commend visions of the flourishing life in light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The flourishing of human beings and of all God's creatures in the presence of God is God's foremost concern for creation and should therefore be the central purpose of theology.⁴⁹

This ties in with a central contemporary concern among many people—both secular and otherwise: where is 'the good life' to be found, and what makes life worth living? Drawing on the Gospel of John in particular, Volf and Croasmun argue that the good news of the gospel is precisely that finding true life here and now has become possible through the appearance of Jesus Christ. So this is the Christian claim on the religious market, and theology should unpack, qualify, defend and elaborate on it in all sorts of ways.

It is clear from such recent proposals that Kant did not speak the final word about the status of theology. Postmodern criticism of his concept of universal reason has opened up the existence of multiple contending rationalities, or fundamental perspectives that compete with each other in trying to make sense of the world in light of particular traditions.⁵⁰ It is unclear why theological faculties or departments at secular universities might not be perfect places for hosting such traditions and challenging them to reach out to each other in investigating and comparing each other's answers to theological questions. Unlike what is often suggested, many theological questions are questions of fact, not just of meaning. For example, this applies to questions like:

- Does human discourse about God correspond to a divine reality?
- Was the universe intended or is it the product of chance?
- Is it credible to believe in life after death?
- Can moral guilt be undone?
- Is there something special about Jesus?
- What makes human life worth living?
- Why is it that we experience so much suffering in the world?

also claimed by Josh Reeves, *Against Methodology in Science and Religion: Recent Debates about Rationality and Theology* (London: Routledge, 2019).

49. Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, p. 11.

50. Cf. Van den Brink, *Philosophy of Science for Theologians*, pp. 193–209; see also Paul A. MacDonald, Jr., *Christian Theology and the Secular University* (London: Routledge, 2017). The idea that our notions of rationality are co-determined by the particular paradigm or tradition we inhabit has become influential through the work of e.g. Thomas Kuhn and, later, Alasdair MacIntyre.

Like the study of other relevant questions of fact, the study of such issues is appropriate at contemporary universities. Of course we disagree, and most probably will continue to disagree, about how to answer them—which may be because theological questions are the most complex ones we can ask. In that sense, Aristotle was right: as the ‘first philosophy’, metaphysics or theology comes last in the order of learning because it pertains to the most difficult issues. It cannot be denied, however, that such questions are important and that their answers really matter. Traditionally, questions such as those listed here belong within the purview of the philosophy of religion, and that is still the case. But the claim that they should be studied from one neutral, rational, non-contextual and non-historical perspective has become obsolete. Ideally, they should be approached from a plurality of religious and non-religious perspectives (or ‘research programs’).⁵¹

As to Schleiermacher, his pragmatic justification of academic theology has been challenged by shrinking numbers of church members and, by extension, of students preparing for the ministry. Yet, instead of becoming more and more secular, contemporary Western societies have seen the influx of migrants from all parts of the world who are deeply religious. Both these societies and these new religious communities can gain much by having religious leaders who are well-equipped and educated in a Western academic context. Thus, Schleiermacher’s solution still stands, provided that its scope is no longer restricted to Christianity. Attempts to keep theological faculties at secular Western universities exclusively Christian are increasingly unconvincing. And since in scholarship as well in other branches of contemporary life diversity is an asset, theological faculties themselves may flourish by lending hospitality to (upcoming) theologians from a variety of traditions. As Volf and Croasmun argue, it is precisely the Christian vision of flourishing that can accommodate cultural differences and contribute to managing the relations between ‘contending particular universalisms’ (i.e. competing views of life that claim to be true-for-all).⁵² Since universities are increasingly going global, and since some 85 per cent of the world’s population is estimated to be in some way religious, this is far from a backward-looking exercise. On the contrary, in our contemporary pluralist world, theology continues to be ‘that discipline in which the deepest longings and highest hopes of the great majority of human beings find their most articulate expression’.⁵³ If that is true, thinking of theology as queen of the sciences is still not wide of the mark.⁵⁴

51. Cf. Amos Young, *The Dialogical Spirit: Christian Reason and Theological Method in the Third Millennium* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), parts III and IV.

52. Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, pp. 102, 108. Perhaps the Faculty of Religion and Theology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam to which I belong may serve as an example here: formerly part of a Reformed university, during the past decades it has changed into a multi-religious faculty that closely cooperates not only with other Christian denominations and seminaries, but also with representatives of Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist communities in order to co-organise the training of their religious leadership.

53. Nicholas Wolterstorff, ‘To Theologians: From One Who Cares about Theology but is Not One of You’, *Theological Education* 40.2 (2005), p. 85.

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