

What is the good of your discipline? Laura Solomons

Laura Solomons

When telling friends and family of my decision to study Theology and Religious Studies I was greeted with an almost universal response - 'but what will you **do** with it?' In today's society theology is seen by some solely as a route to some form of religious ministry. That is not to say that religious professions are looked down upon, simply that many see the skills offered by a Theology and Religious Studies degree as limited, being a specialised area of study. This is the first critique I wish to address, the supposed notion that it is in some way of reduced value for society and does not equip a student to get a worthwhile employment. This could be dispelled easily by looking at the statistics; the variety of jobs students enter into after theology show that it has as much value as any arts degree. However, repeated discussion of how theology prepares students for the workplace with its 'transferable skills' is boring, for it is indisputable that theology, as with any other humanities-based degree, involves critical thought and research that has value for employment purposes. What I wish to demonstrate is just how multi-disciplined and rich the content of Theology and Religious Studies is, spanning from the historical to the linguistic to the scientific. I also wish to display how relevant it is, with contemporary debates on interfaith and gender issues.

The second reaction that theology tends to receive is one of scepticism about its truth content; critics claim it is a waste of academic space because religion and theism are logically untrue. Equally widely asked of me is 'so then, does G-d exist?' A number of things are frustrating about reducing the study of theology to this question and I hope to illustrate that the validity of studying theology does not pivot on the delicate question of G-d's existence. However, such complex epistemological questions do require careful study and they open up fields of debate about language, tradition and ontology. A number of atheists and agnostics study theology for precisely this reason; to come to any sort of conclusion about religion or the debate surrounding G-d you have to first spend a good deal of time learning about its intricacies. Through looking at what studying theology can offer, using examples from my own course, I hope to convince the reader that theology offers a valuable and relevant education regardless of whether or not you want to become ordained.

The study of theology and religion is shaped by a significant academic history. It is one of the oldest scholarly pursuits, with many universities founded for the development of religious teaching. Western European academic institutes started with theology as a core subject, with all other study serving to further the exploration of theological truth. This was only truly challenged with the Enlightenment which replaced religious structures with an extolled view of independent reason. It is reckless to dismiss a subject that was developed with the beginning of formal education as we know it today. However, for such a subject to survive drastic societal change, with a new emphasis on rationality and scientific discovery, it must be flexible, with the ability to adapt. The word theology is located within the Greek, with 'theos' meaning 'G-d' and 'logos' meaning 'word', 'discourse' or 'reasoning'. There is no differentiation in the Greek between the gods of myth and Aristotle's prime-mover that is closer to the monotheism of the Judeo-Christian G-d. Further, Plato in the 'Phaedrus' and other works deifies concepts such as love and goodness - 'the

Christian says 'G-d is love', the Greek 'Love is theos' ¹. The word 'logos' indicates that there is a discussion to be had, the existence of G-d is not presupposed. A premise of Christian or other faith is therefore of no necessity to the modern-day study of theology. The term 'theos' is also much wider than at first anticipated and opens up questions of whether there is a universal ethic within nature as well as whether a Judeo-Christian G-d could exist. Whilst the Patristic Christian heritage of theology is an inherent part of it, there is a wider sense of deity that means that study of 'theos' can be as encompassing as a scholar wishes.

Many students, when asked, will say that they chose theology because it is multi-disciplinary. The bible is one of the first books on many English literature degree reading lists, for it has influenced so much that has followed it - such as Milton's epic 'Paradise Lost' or T.S Eliot's deconstruction of biblical imagery in 'The Wasteland'. Much literature has religious themes interwoven throughout or philosophical contemplations such as the nature of G-d in Dostoyevsky's 'The Karamazov Brothers'. For those wishing to understand the history of art, knowledge of religious tradition is vital to grasp some of the most admired masterpieces, for example Michelangelo's Adam adorning the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or Leonardo Da Vinci's depiction of the last supper. The Virgin Mary with baby Christ and the crucifixion have been perennial subjects for art throughout the centuries. From a historical perspective, religion is one of the defining features of radical changes in history with the reformation in Germany being founded upon a religious doctrine of sola scriptura. Religion is at the heart of many historical conflicts; to understand the nature of the thirty year war without any study of the Huguenot position is impossible. In addition to gaining a cultural and historical framework, language learning is opened up for theology students. Religious texts and scriptures are written in a variety of languages from Greek and Hebrew to Arabic. The study of ancient texts relating to religion opens up vast possibilities for discovering virtually unknown languages such as Ugarit, in which the Baal Cycle of the Canaanite religion is written. However, most surprising to those who denounce theology as non-scientific is that often students of religion can look at social sciences or psychology within their course to understand the impact religion has on a societal and individual level. Scientific thought, in its empirical and research-based format is taken into consideration across a number of topics. Recently there was an inaugural lecture by Professor Coakley² entitled 'Sacrifice Regained: Reconsidering the Rationality of Christian Belief' that discussed scientific theories of altruism as a rational form of sacrifice against the cultural norm of sacrifice being seen as violent and negative. Those taking an academic approach to theology must interact with scientific discovery regarding the creation and nature of the universe. The encompassing nature of theological discourse suggested by the Greek terms of 'theos' and 'logos' can be demonstrated through the multi-disciplined nature of studying theology.

Another strong argument for supporting theology as a degree is that it is wholly relevant. It is often argued that today's society is becoming secular and therefore religion has become redundant. There may be a pattern of secularisation in Europe but across the world there are rapidly expanding religions such as Pentecostalism in the United States. Religion is one of the most formative parts of a person's identity and within Britain there is a thriving religious population. To spend time learning about different faiths gives a student of religion knowledge of what is important to different people. Understanding different religions is therefore as vital to participating in society as knowing about different political ideologies. Furthermore, being open-minded in approaches to religion by studying them can open up mutual discourses that encourage respectfulness towards different religious cultures. Learning about each others' cultures and faith can challenge prejudices such as Islamophobia.

Theology can also include contemporary issues within academia. The emerging trend of looking at gender narratives is increasingly being included in theological studies. There is a wealth of feminist approaches to biblical criticism, drawing out the treatment of women within the bible. This is not always negative for there are a number of strong female figures within the bible and it is interesting to establish their inclusion in such an important text stemming from a patriarchal background. The role of gender within religion is a very current issue, an example being the modern-day debate in the media about whether the wearing of the burkha belittles women. It is also fascinating to reflect that although Christ has been depicted with a range of ethnicities it is still seen as shocking to portray female imagery of Christ on the cross, which has implications for concepts of salvation. In summation, theology opens up potential for interfaith debate and is able to explore contemporary issues of gender - both of these examples reveal that it is not just an open and expansive course, but also highly relevant.

Yet there are still a significant portion of academics who consider theology worthless because they consider it to be untrue. The importance of theological study does not rest solely the existence of G-d or religion being true. Of course, not all religions can be ultimately true for they hold some conflicting truth claims. Theology, as demonstrated, holds value in the insight it offers for understanding history, culture and society. However, dismissing theology as untrue also ignores the complexities which any metaphysical discussion opens up. A vast number of great thinkers have explored the existence of G-d and the validity of their religion, approaching difficulties and attempting to think through solutions. Paul Tillich claims that, 'theology moves back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundations and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received.'³ Religious believers continue to attempt to put their faith into words, even though they recognise that this format is limiting. Open critics of religions summarise arguments for the existence of G-d and then denounce them and from this further study of G-d is seen as redundant. However, a case must be made for reading the texts as a whole. The Ontological argument of Anselm in his 'Proslogion' is rarely contextualised and an interesting discussion can be had as to whether he intended a proof at all. The question of whether theology contains any truth cannot be easily dismissed and it is important to look closely at the scholarship surrounding the debate.

Bearing all of this in mind we must ask what is contained within an education that makes it valuable. On one level (a government-based ideal) it should be a preparation for the workplace and theology fulfils this. Within a richer pedagogical framework, education should be that which expands a person's outlook, allowing them to engage and interact with society in a meaningful way. Studying theology has huge educational benefits in that it develops each student's personal understanding, giving them the tools and guidance to reflect on their own metaphysical stance. Studying theology allows a person to think through their own opinions yet also requires an open-minded approach to others' faiths. It offers an analysis of the past with a philosophical contemplation of the future. Religion and the question of G-d's existence has permeated society in countless ways. A degree that offers the freedom to explore this and continues the discourse on truth: what could be more valuable?

Endnotes

- P.10, *The Greek Philosophers*, Guthrie (1967)
- Inaugural lecture as the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity, University of Cambridge, October 13 2009
- Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1951

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