

The Relevance of the Study of Christian Theology in the University and Society Today

Judith Wolfe | ORCID: 0000-0003-3933-6241
Professor of Philosophical Theology, School of Divinity,
St. Andrew's University, Scotland, UK
judith.wolfe@st-andrews.ac.uk

To ask the question of the relevance of Christian theology, we first have to ask what Christian theology is. At its simplest and widest, as Thomas Aquinas put it (or nearly), it is the study of God and all things in relation to God.¹ In particular, it is the attempt to understand, probe and build on the basic Christian confession of one God in three persons, revealed in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son.

This definition outlines a particular subject matter: theologians ask questions about the doctrine of God, the doctrine of Christ, the doctrine of salvation; they ask questions about the Scriptures in which their convictions are rooted, and other texts in which they are transmitted.

At the same time, the definition both demands and enables a particular way of asking questions, because God, of course, is not simply an object of enquiry; if he is anything, he is the source and end of all being. As Kierkegaard showed so meticulously, humans' relations with God are necessarily subjective and personal, because God defies objectification.² To assume an 'objective', disengaged standpoint from which to investigate God's existence and character therefore misses an essential part of what one seeks to understand, namely that there is no such standpoint.

And so theologians ask (always tacitly, and sometimes explicitly):

- What object or objects does our enquiry have in view?
- Who does the enquiring, and how are they related to these objects?
- What form does knowledge or understanding take within this relationship?
- How is such knowledge acquired, expressed, and transmitted?

¹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.1.7.

² See especially Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (1843), *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846).

These are questions shared with certain modes of philosophy, especially those of Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer: they are hermeneutical questions about the way we engage with what we know. Asking them in relation to God reveals God as a *transformative* subject matter which directly affects our vision not only of the world, but of ourselves, our modes of knowledge, and how we are to live, act and speak in the world.

There are some particulars of this vision that are widely shared among Christian theologians: that the very heart of reality, Being itself, is personal and trinitarian; that creation is a gift expressing the love that *is* the trinitarian life, given so that it may participate in that life; that the human pursuit of truth is therefore not merely a matter of human *eros*, but first and foremost of divine *agape*; and that this descent or overflowing of love is materialized in the Son's taking on of human flesh.

There are also some deep and fruitful disagreements, which we rightly debate: How do the first gift of creation or *exitus* from God, and the second gift of ingathering or *reditus* to God, relate to each other; how should we describe the depth of human need and sin in light of the staggering fact that the Son became man and died for us; how do we understand divine providence in relation to human will; how binding are particular philosophical terms for our confession of faith, and so forth.

But these disagreements are negotiated within broad epistemic certainties that are grounded firmly in the subject matter, and engender certain intellectual stances:

- First, that in God all things hold together, and can therefore be investigated with courage and tenacity,
- Second, that humans and all created things have dignity, and can therefore be approached with humility and empathy,
- And third, that creation is not yet finished, and can therefore be engaged with openness and creativity.

And these are directly relevant to the university. They are relevant in a fuller than usual sense. When we speak of relevance, we often have in mind a particular task or goal, and ask about the contribution of a method or set of data to that goal: the relevance of CRISPR to cancer research, or of postcode data to widening the access of socioeconomically disadvantaged students to universities. Universities themselves are often defined by such goals: by asking about their relevance to the national and international economy, or to certain government objectives. If we accept these contexts as defining, then we limit from the outset what we can admit to be relevant not just *to* universities (such as the study of Christian theology) but also *about* universities. Theology is relevant to the university because it refuses the ultimacy of any such frameworks: It

refuses to set the scope of significance any narrower than 'God and all things in relation to God'.

Theology therefore makes it possible to speak of a university as a pursuit of 'the whole, the sum of things, the universe' (OED). At its best, it does so both theoretically – by furnishing a metaphysical horizon for such pursuit –, and practically.

Practically, in two ways: first, by providing the soil in which the intellectual virtues necessary for the pursuits of a university, including courage, tenacity, humility, empathy, openness, and creativity, can take root and flourish. Second, by conducting conversations that do not happen elsewhere in the university. This is one of the things that attracts so many of us to theology. I, like many of my colleagues and students, have come to theology after an education in other subjects – in my case, literature and philosophy – because I was drawn to questions about those subjects' relation to other aspects of reality which went beyond the immediate scope of the disciplines in which they were studied.

In this sense, the place of theology in the university is as a tentpole: it is a discipline that enables and seeks open-ended conversations with other subject areas, because of a conviction that we inhabit a shared world, and that that world admits of investigation. Among theologians themselves, this is manifest in the fact that many of our questions take the form of interdisciplinary questions: what is the difference between neo-Platonic emanation and divine descent, or between theurgy and liturgy?; how do we understand Christian practice within a framework of Wittgensteinian grammar?; how does the atonement affect the dynamics of mimetic desire?; how does theology challenge modern understandings of free will?; what are the right parameters for ecological activism?; what is the relationship between deep feeling and divine inspiration?.

For theologians, this is an important reminder that the question of relevance which we're considering today is not *marginal* to theology – an annoying question which, once answered, will provide the walls within which we can safely pursue our actual work. Rather, because theology relates people and fields to each other, it must be responsive to their questions, discoveries, and challenges. If theology seeks to understand not just one narrow subject matter but a shared whole, then it is only as good as its understanding of the world which it seeks to illuminate. And such understanding can only be achieved by open, critical and constructive conversation with people from other backgrounds.

I want to give one example from my own work, and then talk about the significance of all this to the role of the university, and of theology, in society. The example is a research project I am leading, on the concept of 'imagination'. I am interested specifically in the imagination as it is defined by Kant and

Hegel, as ‘the power or capacity by which the mind integrates sensory data in the process of perception’. For Kant and Hegel, this power is operative ‘blindly’ or unconsciously in *all* perception: perception is never *simply* receptive, but always to some extent constructive. Now, however that may be in ordinary perception, my guiding assumption in this project is that *works of art deliberately* elicit imaginative gestalt-formation; indeed, that such imaginative investment by the recipient is at the heart of what it means to ‘see’ a painting or read a poem. And my horizon claim (which lies beyond the frame of this concrete project) is that learning about this participative perception of art has things to teach us about the way people of faith see the world.

But the philosophical accounts of the imagination on which I am leaning can no longer exist unchallenged: there are significant bodies of work in psychology and cognitive science that do not use the language of imagination, but nevertheless examine cognitive processes related to what the philosophers mean by that term. The project, therefore, centres on collaboration with a Senior Research Fellow in Psychology to gain a clearer understanding of the ways in which theoretical and empirical approaches challenge, correct and extend one another: where they appear incommensurable, and where new research might arise from a patient probing of this incommensurability. Such collaborations (sometimes adversarial collaborations), pursued from a position of confidence in our own methods and commitments, both strengthen theology and allow it to play its part in university and society.

I’ve indicated some of the concrete work that theology promotes within the university. I’ve also hinted (following John Henry Newman, of course) that doing so is part and parcel of what it means to *be* a university. I would now like to turn to some of what is at stake in considering this, both for the university and for society.

Unsurprisingly, I think that one thing at stake is a vision of education, and of the role of the humanities both in education and in relation to the sciences. Of course the university provides training for professionals, and has done so since its establishment in the Middle Ages; but before and above such training, it is a place of *education*. Education is the formation of a person who knows how to think and how to live. To believe that education is both possible and desirable requires a basic trust both in the value of the person and in the existence of a shared world, in which teachers seek to orient both themselves and their students, and into which they release their students to discover and inhabit and mould it. Without such trust, the university becomes just one more arena in which desires, ambitions and facts are instrumentalized to achieve aims that are much narrower than a whole person. Theology upholds a metaphysical

horizon within which the value of personhood and shared orientations towards the good are affirmed.

The university is also a place of *research*. Research and education are not separable from one another, because both aim at two dialectically related goods: let's call them discovery and dwelling. On the one hand, both learning and research have to be oriented towards discovery, towards truths, regardless of their use to us. On the other hand, as long as we are human, this *exitus* of discovery is followed by the *reditus* of dwelling – of living in the world with each other and ourselves. We cannot fully or ultimately abstract our knowledge from ourselves, because the truths which we try to discover are part of a world we have to inhabit. Learning and research *always* occur against the horizon of the double question: 'What kind of world are we dwelling in? – And *how* should we then live?'

This lived world is not simply the world of scientific discovery; it is a set of conversations and practices, determined by questions and priorities shaped over centuries. This is why reading and knowledge have to be ever-repeated: just like faith in the Christian tradition, they have to be received and appropriated anew by each person and generation. The humanities are vital to the pursuit of knowledge not so much because they discover new facts and create new data (though they sometimes do that), but because they directly address *this* aim of education and research, to dwell well in a world. They transmit the conversations, texts and artefacts that have shaped our life world, and which we need to receive, engage creatively, and sometimes overcome in order to inhabit and mould it.

This already suggests the relationship of humanities and sciences. The sciences – particularly those employed in the service of technological innovation – discover and create possibilities in the world that sometimes outstrip our ability to live with them. I'd say this is the case now, when information technologies and interventions in what we had considered immutable nature have advanced so rapidly that we no longer find ourselves in a world we recognize. The steep rise in mental health problems in the West, despite near-unprecedented prosperity, shows that we have not yet figured out whether and how we can inhabit this new world.

Although science and technology extend the parameters within which we act, they do not answer the question of dwelling for us, but only make it urgent. The humanities offer a vital counterweight here. But it is philosophy and theology where debates about the relationship between discovery and dwelling are at the heart of enquiry, rather than being either presupposed or casually shoved aside. And where philosophy addresses these debates without precommitments (and, as a result, often positions itself at the perfect midpoint

between humanity and science), theology makes a substantive claim: that how we dwell with the things we discover and make ultimately depends on how we dwell with God.

But 'dwelling with God' is not a straightforward idea in the Christian tradition: it means living faithfully in the here and now, certainly; but above all, it refers to a future which is both like and radically unlike the present. In the Scriptures, to dwell with God is a *promise* of the end times: a promise of resurrection and of a new Jerusalem. This is an aspect of Christian theology which is at once uncomfortably speculative and acutely relevant to society. I want first to say a few words about its logic within Christian thought, and then about its practical relevance. The expectation of the *eschata* – of resurrection, judgement and eternal life – is rooted in biblical and credal statements that the dead will rise, that Christ will judge them, and that he will gather his elect unto life everlasting. Within systematic theology, this life with Christ is the fulfilment of the creation of humans in God's image – that is, in Christ, the 'image of the invisible God'. Christ, as the Fathers and Scholastics have it, became man not merely to atone for our sins, but also to draw us into the divine life which our own minds and loves reflect: 'God became man so that man could become god'. As Aquinas put it, 'man by his nature is ordained to beatitude (that is, participation in the divine life) as his end', but he is ordained to attain this end 'not by his own strength, but by the help of grace'. The human being is fulfilled only by being drawn into an interpersonal life that it is beyond his or her strength to achieve: not by some failure, but by definition. One cannot manufacture, earn or demand participation in a relationship that exceeds one and constitutes one.

This vision of humans as existentially incomplete complicates what we might say about dwelling in the world, because it bespeaks a restlessness that is not contingent but constitutive of our existence in this world. In our relationship to ourselves, this should modulate our expectations; in our relationship to others and the world, it should modulate our attachments. But the theological account is carefully calibrated: The human desire for completion is one that neither rests content within the world nor stands over against it: all human relationships of love anticipate it, and all care for the world prepares for it.

What is the relevance of this mystical vision to society? It addresses the persistent intellectual, social and political drive towards impossible utopias. Again and again, we observe political systems or technological innovations that address deep-seated human desires, but (isn't this one of the curses of human existence?) cannot help but pursue them in such ways as to destroy their objects.

Historico-political eschatologies usually pursue collective fulfilment. Yet they achieve it, if at all, only at the cost of redefining out of recognition either 'fulfilment' or those who obtain it. This is most obvious in those political theologies on the left and right that tend towards totalitarianism. More complex collective eschatologies, including ascendant varieties of transhumanism, also pursue fulfilment, but acknowledge that this fulfilment is likely to bring 'the end of the world as we know it': it is not humans, but their successor AIs, who will inherit the kingdom.

This encapsulates what we might call the antinomy of secular eschatology: the irreducible tension between end as cessation and end as fulfilment. This tension is sublated in Christian eschatology, which embraces both dissolution and fulfilment, and understands each through the other – cross through resurrection, and resurrection through cross. The New Testament promises of the kingdom, in other words, are not simply utopian: they do not project the linear (or even dialectical) completion of human potentiality. Instead, they require the death of the old Adam, and renewed birth with Christ, 'the firstborn from the dead'. This rebirth or re-creation extends not just to humans, but to the whole world: 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.'

All this gives an indication why eschatology – the study of the last things – furnishes the set of questions that most animate my research. Eschatology is an exemplary nexus of existential, historical and metaphysical concerns. It is a basic dimension of the biblical record and the Christian historical imagination. And insofar as it asks about the end of life and the shape of history, eschatology also comprises questions humans always already confront, and assumptions they always already inhabit. Individuals and communities (including national communities) therefore never lack, but always hold more or less adequate eschatologies, sometimes taking highly volatile political forms. For these reasons, it is a crucial theological task to examine forms of eschatological thought in history, and to bring resources from multiple disciplines to bear on its theological articulation. Bringing this thought into the day-to-day life of the society which it addresses is, of course, crucial to this work. We must allow theological thought to situate day-to-day concerns and to illuminate terms whose day-to-day use is threatened by the loss of a theological horizon.

'Judgement' is one such term we need to recover. Not primarily in the sense of a final judgement, but in the sense of discernment and interpretation. We have talked a lot about Christian theology, but not explicitly about the *study*

of Christian theology, which is part of the question before us – ‘What is the relevance of the study of Christian theology in the modern university and in society today?’. ‘Judgement’ in that hermeneutical sense is one of the things that the study of Christian theology seeks to instil.

Theology gathers together texts, practices, artefacts and traditions in order to engage the hermeneutical challenge of reading the world against the widest horizons of being (that is, God) and of history (that is, creation and the eschaton). In theology, we educate students in that tradition of ‘reading’: a tradition of interpretation and judgement which is not simply our work, but is concerned with God’s interpretation and judgement of the world in and through the Word.

Our current academic and wider culture is either remarkably naïve or globally suspicious about this basic hermeneutical task of judgement and interpretation: it either relies overly on metrics and data, slavishly ‘following the science’; or it hurries to debunk all narratives. Both are ways of eluding the responsibility of judgement and interpretation, ways of casting about for information that is unsituated, transparent, and self-interpreting. Intellectual life in this context is too often reduced to the production of data sets.

Students trained in theology have a vastly broader hermeneutical horizon, and learn the skills to interpret a highly disparate set of ‘data’: texts, artefacts and practices from different eras, cultures, traditions, and regions which share this ultimate horizon. It is vital for any critically self-aware culture that it raise people who are trained in this way of reading the world: one which lifts our eyes from the immediate concerns of the moment and the culture, and reminds us of the human task and joy of dwelling in the world.