

What is the good of your discipline? Daniel Rey

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'Theology', etymologically 'the study of God' is far more than just abstract metaphysical reflection concerning the deity. It is a diverse arts discipline, and one that has a profound and varied influence upon other subjects, which it both informs and learns from. Without a good understanding of theology, one cannot hope to understand fields as diverse as art, literature, history, politics, music and even science. Whilst few would deny the importance of theology within the confines of the humanities, it is its influence on the latter, science, which is the most intriguing. Those who would cut university level funding from the arts in favour of the sciences forget the very origin of that form of study and its dependence on theology for its growth. Theology may not save lives, but it will enlighten and give them meaning. A demand for purpose is at the centre of everything one does and curiously for two disciplines ostensibly very distant from each other, science owes a substantial debt to theology.

The worth of studying theology is that as a discipline, its multiplicity of facets demands that one be, amongst others, a philosopher, a sociologist, a historian and a literary critic. Proficiency in it requires a range of abilities and it forms the mind in these diverse areas, equipping one to understand human life like no other subject. Given the pervasive role religion continues to play in western society, an understanding of the ideology underpinning the faiths is surely invaluable.

Nevertheless, many have branded theology a pointless and worthless exercise. Perhaps most famously, Thomas Paine remarked:

The study of theology, as it stands in the Christian churches, is the study of nothing; it is founded on nothing; it rests on no principles; it proceeds by no authority; it has no data; it can demonstrate nothing; and it admits no conclusion¹.

Yet theology is arguably an imperative undertaking for believer and atheist alike. Ironically, in repudiating theology Paine is also engaging with it. For example, how can one reject the fallacy of geocentricism without the requisite scientific study into its arguments and counter-arguments? And how can the God hypothesis be rejected if it is not discussed? Furthermore, even if one rebuts the God of Classical Theism, God might well be just the name given to a social construct? If this is the case, and a sociologist like Durkheim would argue that it is, the study of this 'god' or theology will lead us to a greater understanding of society itself. As he says in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), religion is 'not a set of beliefs and practices but a community activity'. During his study of religion when he was among Australian aborigines he concluded that the god they revered was indistinguishable from the tribe itself. This might lead one to argue, following Feuerbach, that theology is just anthropology by another name. Whatever it concerns, theology's attempt to answer the major questions of existence is fundamental to human and social development, and to ignore the discipline is to ignore these highly pertinent features and close down the scope for

fruitful debate.

Theology indubitably has a vital role in informing other humanity subjects. The pervasive role of religion in public life for millennia means that inevitably, not only history and human interaction, but other disciplines as well have been shaped to some degree by theology. From Dante, to Milton, to Dostoevsky, literary culture is hugely indebted to theology and would be much poorer without it. Or consider art, Michelangelo's majestic 'Sistine Chapel', or in the twentieth century, the work of the Russian Jew Marc Chagall. So too music; the grandeur of Handel's Messiah, the mastery of JS Bach, who directed so much of his talent towards the Lutheran Church. It is hard to imagine what could inspire these great composers if not their theology. In addition, through an appreciation of a country's literature and music one gains an invaluable understanding of its culture, tradition and heritage. Whether it's 'Carols from King's', or seeing David Tennant perform the 'gravedigger scene' from Hamlet, the influence of theology is as unmistakable as it is remarkable. Ironically, it pervades so seamlessly into everyday life that it is hardly ever acknowledged, proof indeed of its role and gravitas. Furthermore, can one understand modern politics and international relations without a good grasp of things theological? Think of the Danish cartoons of the prophet Muhammad, the US opposition to stem-cell research and even to some extent, the problems of the Middle East. The role of theology in history is astonishing for a discipline many believe long past its sell by date. The Reformation, the wars of religion with France, the English Civil War- theology has played a sizeable role in not only the development and change of our own country, but Europe and the world as well. To cease to study it is to cease to be aware of the factors that led to our current social makeup and to cease to adequately recognise human interaction and diversity.

Having given a broad outline regarding theology's use to the humanities, it is now necessary to look at its role with science in greater detail. Following Albert Einstein, it is arguable that 'Religion without science is blind. Science without religion is lame'². Theology (so inter-woven with religion) and science are often seen as irreconcilable entities, although both strive for knowledge about the world we inhabit. Though their spheres and methodologies may differ, they are no doubt united in the quest for truth and understanding. For millennia they were happy bedfellows, perhaps they still are. In the Ancient Greece of the philosophers, they were very much intertwined. Aristotle's *Metaphysics* for example, is in many ways essentially a work of theology, whilst also containing his insights in cosmology. His advocacy of the inductive, empirical method regarding knowledge of the natural world is one which modern science vindicates to this day. If the two had similar origins for the Ancients, modern science is equally indebted to the post- Renaissance theological enquiry and it is because of this that the discipline proves its worth to science. In the 16th century, theologians such as Philip Melancthon strongly believed that uncovering the order of the natural world could reveal the mind of God. As Peter Harrison expands, 'In the Middle Ages the natural world is a rich repository of theological knowledge'³ and this continued well beyond the 17th century, when it was still theology that was the discipline of gravitas and 'science has to tap into theology where it can'⁴. Harrison's persuasive central thesis in *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* is that the Reformation brought with it the 'modern approach to [biblical] texts' which, 'driven by the agenda of the reformers and disseminated through the Protestant religious practices, created the conditions which made possible the emergence of modern science'⁵. The Protestant view of 'the Priesthood of all believers', the rejection of central ecclesiastical authority and the possibility for the layman to think for himself about the divine led to a more experimental science which believed that it would uncover truths about God in nature. Concerning the fallen world, a major focus for exegetes was unsurprisingly the story of the expulsion of man from Eden in Genesis 3. It was science that was viewed as one of the tools to repair part of the damage done to mankind by what Milton was to call its 'first disobedience'. The prelapsarian man had damaged nature, and as John Donne (1572- 1631) describes in 'To Sir Edward Herbert. At Julyers': 'Our business is to rectifie nature to what she was'. Likewise his contemporary Francis Bacon (1561- 1626) no less, the eminent statesman and scientist of the same century expounds this in his *Novum Organum*:

For man by the fall fell at the same time from this state of innocency and from his dominion over creation. Both of these losses however can even in this life be in some part repaired; the former by religion and faith, the latter by the arts and sciences⁶.

In the *History of the Royal Society*, Thomas Sprat (1635- 1713) an early fellow acknowledges the roots it has with

theology, speaking of 'the agreement that is between the present design of the Royal Society, and that of our Church in its beginning'. It is hardly surprising then that in 1663, 62% of members were puritans, despite the group being a religious minority⁷. This continued belief in the restoration of man pervaded into all aspects of 'natural philosophy', and was reaffirmed by Robert Hooke (1635- 1703) who articulately surmised the endeavour, observing in the Preface to *Micrographia*:

As at first, mankind fell by tasting of the Tree of Knowledge, so we, their Posterity, may be in part restor'd by tasting those fruits of Natural Knowledge, that were never yet forbidden.

Therefore, without theology it is highly likely that modern science would not have developed at the rate it did during its formative years and it may well have been very different now. Potentially this means that theology's influence upon science has elapsed, but in any academic endeavour it is important to recognise why it was studied by many of its pioneers as this helps to understand their methods and concerns. While Hooke's law of elasticity may not itself derive deductively from theological axioms, it was theology that gave Hooke and others the possibility and impulse for their various fields of enquiry, the fruit of whose labours we see in science today.

The influence and importance theology has had and will continue to have on other academic spheres is such that it remains a key discipline to this day. More broadly, unless we are very careful, government cuts in university funding for theology and the humanities will prove highly prejudicial to the country in the years to come. Science may well be more financially profitable and thus more important in the short term for a country suffering from economic recession, but society also needs those with penetrating, analytic minds. Government requires decision makers, and the tools one learns from the arts in debating and forming a coherent argument are skills one cannot hope to learn from thousands of hours in the laboratory. This is not to suggest that the arts are more important than the sciences, but that each has a crucial and definite role to play which the other is incapable of doing. Whilst acknowledging that new forms of cancer treatment are not going to come from the study of the *filioque* dispute, can we understand European politics at the time without an appreciation of what caused the East- West schism? The past informs the future and as theology has played the title role in so much of the past, the study of it should certainly not be discontinued. Without the study of theology and other related disciplines, bright young minds with the natural impulse to study 'the queen of the sciences' will be compelled to move overseas. Instead of thousands of foreign students aspiring to learn at our great tertiary education establishments, they will turn to a country which places an emphasis on learning for its own sake, and which also recognises what the student and the wider community can gain from the study of the discipline.

The good of theology cannot be measured in the same way as a degree in medicine producing able doctors, or biochemistry in discovering cures for disease, but nonetheless it is an important and rewarding branch of learning. The influence of theology and religion on culture should not be overlooked and its ability to inform other areas of academic interest is widespread. Due to the demands of the subject, students become skilful and rounded individuals who are placed in an excellent position to make a contribution to society. The help it gives one in developing as a person and its centrality for those intrigued by life's major questions are further excellent reasons for studying theology.

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