

Gerhard Ludwig Müller

Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Catholic-Theological Faculty  
ORCID: 0000-0003-0309-6805

## Theology as a Science<sup>1</sup>

### Teologia jako nauka

**ABSTRACT:** The vantage point of the article is to show the formation process of the concept and objective of Christian theology from the historic perspective. The concept of theology itself stems from its function within the Church – it is the acceptance and execution of the Revelation. Theology is the task of the Church as a whole, as it leads to getting to know God and the ultimate objective of man. Through the establishment of the relation between reason and faith, theology becomes for one a place of searching for answers to fundamental questions concerning the reason for one's existence. As theology has its sources in the self-revelation of God in His Word, getting to know God is complete on the personal plane in the love for Him. Theology is not a science in the full extent of the concept, as it is executed by reason, and through this, it participates in the cognition of all reality. Today it seems to be a proposition of a fundamental anthropological science, in light of the distribution of specialities of special sciences at universities, as it deals with fundamental questions. On the other hand, theology has in its core the spreading of the Gospel, and this remains its task as a science in the university realm.

(summary prepared by fr. Jacek Froniewski)

**KEYWORDS:** theology as a science, theological cognition, theology and lay sciences, faith and reason, theology at the university

**ABSTRAKT:** Punktem wyjścia artykułu jest ukazanie kształtowania się pojęcia i celu chrześcijańskiej teologii w perspektywie historycznej. Natomiast sama treść teologii zdaniem autora wynika z jej funkcji w Kościele – to przyswojenie i realizacja Objawienia. W takim sensie teologia jest zadaniem Kościoła jako całości, gdyż wiedzie do poznania Boga i ostatecznego celu człowieka. Poprzez ustanowienie związku pomiędzy rozumem a wiarą teologia staje się dla człowieka miejscem poszukiwania odpowiedzi na fundamentalne pytanie o sens istnienia. Ponieważ teologia ma swoje źródło

---

<sup>1</sup> The article is based on the text of the speech delivered during the International Scientific Conference on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pontifical Faculty of Theology in post-war Poland “Theology in the world of science,” which was held at the Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Wrocław on 22–23 June, 2018.

w samoobjawieniu się Boga w Jego Słowie, poznanie Boga dopełnia się na płaszczyźnie osobowej w miłości do Niego. Pomimo całej swojej specyfiki poznawczej teologia jest w pełni nauką, gdyż realizuje się za pomocą rozumu, przez co uczestniczy w poznaniu całej rzeczywistości. Więcej jeszcze, w takim kontekście teologia dzisiaj wydaje się propozycją fundamentalnej nauki antropologicznej wobec rozdrobnienia specjalności nauk szczegółowych na uniwersytetach, gdyż zajmuje się podstawowymi pytaniami o byt i naturę istoty ludzkiej. Z drugiej strony teologia ma w swojej istocie głoszenie Ewangelii i to pozostaje jej zadaniem jako nauki w świecie uniwersyteckim – miejscu wymiany poglądów, gdzie wnosi istotne kwestie egzystencjalne ważne dla każdego.

(streszczenie przygotował ks. Jacek Froniewski)

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: teologia jako nauka, poznanie teologiczne, teologia a nauki świeckie, wiara a rozum, teologia na uniwersytecie

## The concept and the objective of Christian theology

The usage of the term “theology” to refer to the scientific collection, presentation and analysis of the entire reality of the world and man from the perspective of the revelation emerged in the Western World in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Gilbert van Poitiers, Petrus Abaelard). The Christian doctrine (*doctrina christiana, sacra scriptura, divina pagina, sacra eruditio*) was until that time frequently seen as the opposition to “theology,” this being a collective term for the false teachings of heathens about God.

In contrast, Christian teachings about God and Christ are the “true” theological philosophy (Augustine, *Civ* 8,1). Augustine describes a threefold mode of usage of the term (*Civ* 6): First as a mythical theology of writers, second – as a political theology (e.g. also as a state ideology) and third – as philosophical teachings about God. This lecture on God under the intense impact of the philosophically substantiated myth (Plato, *Polit* 379 a) forms for Aristotle, as the *Theologia*, one of the three philosophical sciences after mathematics and physics: “Without a doubt, if there would be something divine somewhere, then it would have such nature and have as its objective the most noble of sciences, the most noble form of the being” (*Metaph* E 1026a). Thus, theology is the “first philosophy” and first metaphysics. It poses the question on the universal reasons and principles of being. This metaphysically-philosophical science of God is significant for Christian theology as well, as the *theologia naturalis*.

The reception of “theology” as a professional term took place against the backdrop of an intense transformation of meanings of both components of this term. “Theos” now becomes, in opposition to the predicative usage in Greek and Roman mythology, a designation for the God from the Biblical Revelation,

in itself person and subject. “Theos” thus becomes the name of that personal reality that approaches the world as the Creator (Gen 1,1) and Originator, as well as Carrier of holy history (Ex 3,14), and which reveals itself in the New Testament as the Father, Son and the Spirit (Gal 4,4-6; Matthew 28, 19 and elsewhere). The discussion of God, hence, takes place by way of an explication of the *logos* of God (John 1,14), whereby this God that would submit itself to this thinking is expressed in themselves in the WORD and in the Spirit (Clement of Alexandria, *Strom* 1,12; 66,1; 13;57,6; Origen, *Cels* 6,18; *Comm in lo* 1,24; 2,34).

In the works of Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, one finds an important differentiation between *theologia* (= the science of *theos*, the Father as the origin of Godliness and His union with the Son and the Spirit, meaning, teachings on the immanent Trinity) and *oikonomia* (= the science of the incarnation of the Word and the sending of the Spirit, meaning, a focus on the economic Trinity, the self-discovery of God in the history of salvation). In the works of Eusebius of Caesarea, “church theology” describes the true Christian science of God, differently to paganism and to any heretic concepts (*Praep* 55,1,1-4). In the sixth century, *Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite* differentiates between mythical, symbolic theology that provides an internal connection to God and the demonstrative-argumentative theology (*Myst3; Ep* 9). The more effective and existential type of theology rather remains within the will and love of its frame of time (theologia cordis), while theology not aimed intellectually any more puts its focus on the discovery of knowledge (theologia intellectualis). This also corresponds to the question of scholastics as to whether theology is rather theoretically-speculative (according to theologians more strongly oriented on the Aristotelian ideal of knowledge, w. g. Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, conf. S.th. I q. 1., a.4), or, within the sense of the Augustine and Franciscan tradition, that it must rather be a practical science “anziskanischen” (Duns Scotus; Bonaventura, *Prooem* in IV 9,3: “ut boni fiamus”).

## Theology as a function of the Church

The material determination of “theology” stems from the reflection about its necessity as a function of the Church. The sending of the Church to preach the Gospel to people of all times (Mt 28,19) includes the order to provide the Revelation in a relevant linguistic and witness form so that it could also be accepted by people into their faiths, with their given mental, psychological and cultural conditions. As an attempt at a theoretical inclination and implementation of the revelation, it materially belongs to the universal teachings of the Church.

Both as a simple reflection on faith, as well as within its scientific-theoretical and scientific-organisational institutionalisation at higher education facilities, theology encompasses:

- a) *Historic theology*, with the task of a hermeneutic and historical analysis of the actual purpose of the expression of God in the relevant sources of faith (scripture, tradition, the life and teachings of the Church);
- b) *Theoretical or speculative theology*, with the task to encompass faith in its entirety reasonably, and to bring it to fruitful dialogue with the natural experience of reality of man, as it is reflected in philosophy, but also, in particular, in historical, social and natural sciences;
- c) *Practical theology*, with the objective of reflecting on the individual and social shape of Christian life in the Church and the church itself with respect to society.

Thus, theology does not originate from folly of reason that ventures far too far into divine secrets, and would like to remain on a solid base of available and material knowledge instead of the leap of faith that should be attempted. Theology is also not founded in the private interests of the individual researchers. Theology is a task of the Church as a whole. Its forum is the public space of spiritual and cultural life.

The First Vatican Council founded the service of reason to provide faith while protecting the secretive form of faith, and described the relationship of the positive, philosophical, theoretical and practical aspect of theology:

If, however,

- the reason illuminated by faith (*ratio fide illustrata*) would research with fire, piety and sincerity, with God's Mercy, it would arrive at intelligent insight (*intelligentia mysteriorum*), in fact, quite a fruitful one both from
- the analogy (*analogia*) to that which it recognises naturally, as well as from the relationship of mysteries, among them (*nexus mysteriorum inter se*) and
- with the ultimate objective of man (*finis hominis ultimus*) (DH 3016; 4192).

According to the Second Vatican Council, one can describe the objective of studies in theology in its individual disciplines and in relation to issues of philosophy and natural sciences in contact with the ecumenical questions and the knowledge of the history of religion so:

that younger theologians create Catholic knowledge with precision from the divine revelation, they immerse themselves deeply in it, they make it fruitful for their spiritual life and preach, interpret and defend it in their future priestly service (OT 16).

## Theology as the place of the self-understanding of man in the light of God

If it would want to do justice to its task, then theology may not limit itself to simply preaching of faith or just explaining the teachings of the church. This would suggest not in the least the threat of fundamentalism in the interpretation of scripture, which makes no hermeneutic differentiation between the content of what is spoken and its world perspective, or, alongside, the threat of a fruitful, purely positivist reference to the Revelation or to the teachings of the Church. As Faith, however, is not a purely affective attunement of the soul (according to the statement: "Everyone must respond to the question of religion with themselves alone in private"), but because faith describes a personal relation with God who reveals Himself in Word and in Act of His historic revelation as the omnipresent leading idea of the human experience of reality and search for truth, man is unconditionally referred back to reason. Through it, they react adequately to the entirety of their world experience.

A determination of the relationship between reason and faith assumes a precise material statement of the both mutually referring terms. The fundamental relationship of reality and human knowledge may not be described by the fact that reason and sanity only constitute a system of empty rules, through which amorphous content of sensual perception is formed to be some kind of complete image. And the other way around, faith cannot be defined against the backdrop of a quantitative understanding of knowledge, as an amendment or limitation of knowledge acquired from the experience of the world with reference to any subjectively constructed world beyond. Reason is rather given in its transcendental fulfilment that encompasses subjects, introducing the unit of consciousness into sensual experiences in the first place, by virtue of reality itself. In this regard, the question arises about the absolute reason for reality, *the reason of the existence of an individual as a person*. The inevitable fact of life in suffering, in love and in death are key moments of the spiritual existence of man in the world. In their spiritual self-fulfilment, one experiences themselves as reliant on the transcendental origin and the objective of all: God, as the *Whereupon* of self-fulfilment. Hence, the self-experience of man as a creature of reason includes the role of being a "listener" for any possible consolation and claim of God to them in the transmission of any human word. Only upon meeting the *Whereupon* of human spirit as revealing itself in history, does the ability of self-transcendence become complete (*potentia oboedientialis*). *This mode of realisation of reason and freedom opened up by the WORD and carried on by the SPIRIT is called, in the theological sense, "faith."* It is not a heterogeneous

addition to knowledge, but the determination of the transcendental realisation of reason by the Light from the “subject of knowledge” itself (*lumen fidei*).

## The origin of theology in the historic meeting with God

On the level of advanced reflection, this original reasonability of faith is called “theology.” The Christian faith clearly does not begin with a general experience of the Holy, but as the self-proclamation of God as a Person in His Words that He speaks to us. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Father of Jesus Christ, does not in any culturally substantiated way, constitute a personification of cosmic powers, as in polytheistic myths and in religions that perceive the divine impersonally. It also is not any variety of a game of philosophic theism that would believe that the absolute is the highest spirit.

Faith is, rather, the reaction to an initiative from the realm of the divine, when and how God would reveal Himself in His absolutely holy name – *ubi et quando visum est Deo*. God is holy because He turns out to be unavailable. However, in the revelation of His name, He also commences a relationship with us so that we can refer to Him and become a community with the holy God. God is holy and He sanctifies us. He is God and He deifies us, when we recognise Him in His WORD (*logos*) and love Him in His Spirit (*spiritus divinus*). “And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent.” (John 17, 3). To recognise God in the faith infused by the Holy Spirit and in theological reflection is not the material permeation and embracing of a subject of knowledge, but a mutual permeation of two spiritual subjects, namely, the endless Spirit of God and the limited Spirit of man, “but then shall I know even as also I am known.” (1 Corinthians 13, 12).

Theological knowledge is completed in the love for God, above all, and to one’s next as to oneself. Considering this appeal by God, we are also made aware of our own unavailability. If He speaks to me, “You,” there rises in me the ontological reason for my human existence, this is the substantiality, the indivisibility and the immortality of my soul, the meaning of my metaphysical “I.” “For God made not death, neither hath He pleasure in the destruction of the living. For He created all things that they might be: and He made the nations of the Earth for health.” (Wisdom 1, 13). We find ourselves reflexively as a person due to the divine call to existence and a life from God and onto Him: “Man (...) is the only creature on Earth which God willed for Himself.” (GS 24).

Moses sees in the desert the mysterious form of the burning thorn bush that does not burn all the way – an image for the unavailable power of the holy mystery. God Himself calls him from the burning thorn bush by name, but Moses does not react with horror and with a reflex to flee, but clearly, without pride and any sort of feeling of low self-esteem, presents himself: “Here am I.” (Exodus 3, 4). On this holy soil of revelation, God tells him His name, making Himself identifiable and addressable Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jesus says at the climax of his self-revelation of the triune God that this God of promise is not a God of the dead, but of the living (Matthew 22, 32). God is the father for Israel and the Church “I am that I am” – always and everywhere.

Hence, it is not the people of God that present the holy personified as their God. It is rather God who freely answers to the needs and complaints of an enslaved people, and addresses them actively. Their question to Moses is fully legitimate: “What is His name?” And Moses tells the people not of his mystical experiences that may not really be of general interest, but he fulfils his task and provides them with the information. “I AM hath sent me unto you” (Exodus 3, 14).

Here one sees the unique fusion of the predicate of divinity with the self-revelation of God as a person in relation to the people of His union. In terms of the history of religion, it remains unprecedented and may also not be derived from the concepts of divinity or absolute and one. To summarise the entire self-revelation of the holy God as mercy and life for everyone who is faithful, one may quote a word from the First Epistle of Peter:

Hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; (...) But as He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation. Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy. (Leviticus 19, 2) (1 Peter 1, 16).

Knowledge of God is effected as the succession of Christ and the equalisation with the crucified and resurrected Lord due to the share in the life of the holy God. The life of Christ in God is the fruit and the effect of the self-revelation of God to man, through which the faithful, by Christ, become sons and daughters of God, and by infusion of the Holy Spirit into our hearts, become friends of God.

Our knowledge of truth and the completion of man in the participation in the divinity and rule of God, based on the self-revelation of God, has decisive consequences for our human image. How do we see ourselves in this world in relation to God?

In *Gaudium et spes*, the Council says:

Man judges rightly that by his intellect he surpasses the material universe, for he shares in the light of the divine mind. By relentlessly employing his talents through the ages, he has indeed made progress in the practical sciences and in technology and the liberal arts. In our times, he has won superlative victories, especially in his probing of the material world and in subjecting it to himself. Still he has always searched for more penetrating truths, and finds them. For his intelligence is not confined to observable data alone, but can with genuine certitude attain to reality itself as knowable, though in consequence of sin that certitude is partly obscured and weakened. The intellectual nature of the human person is perfected by wisdom and needs to be, for wisdom gently attracts the mind of man to a quest and a love for what is true and good. Steeped in wisdom, man passes through visible realities to those which are unseen (GS 15).

## Theology as a specific medium of self-understanding of man about their own soul and their position in the world, in light of the revelation

For a methodically precise differentiation between the knowledge of the existence of God from the world in the natural execution of reason and the personal-dialogue appearance of reason due to meeting with God in faith, there arises an internal relation between the knowledge of God and the human world and human self-knowledge. Theological reason thus does not only serve the system-immanent interpretation of the knowledge of faith of the Church, but, at the same time, the mutual exchange between the basic orientation in the world achieved in faith and the entirety of knowledge of philosophy and the empirical sciences relevant for the question of human existence.

The scientific claim of faith thus opposes neither the internal spirit of faith nor the objective and method of science. There follows thus, that:

- a) theology, founded in the objective and subjective faith in the revealed truth in the articles of faith (the principle of unity in theology), is specifically different from the natural theology of philosophy, as well as from the formal and real sciences;
- b) as theology, however, rises thanks to reason, and thus shares in the universal reach of reason towards the entirety of reality in its natural, societal, historical and transcendental reality (and to the extent that theological reason, just as reason in general, is informed by reality), it is eminently a science.



## Problems with respect to theology and profane sciences

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Church took a stand against two deficient definitions of relation of faith and reason:

- a) against *fideism* (Bautain) and *traditionalism* (Bonald, Bonnetty, Lamennais). In order to avoid claims against the reasonability of faith (in empiricism, rationalism, criticism), the representatives of these directions traced all religious and moral knowledge of man back to some original revelation, and these are, in the authoritative and positivist sense, predetermined by that possibility of reasonable analysis and transfer (conf. DH 2751–56; 2776–2780; 2811–2813; 2841–2844);
- b) on the other hand, theological *rationalism* (in various variants) also required a critical approach. Even if it did not always and in every respect reduce truths of faith to truths of reason; however, it obfuscated the various origins and the various principles (*lumen naturale, lumen fidei*) that are the basis for natural and supernatural truth. The analogous structure of theological knowledge must have been proven in this regard. Thus, God, as its content and its principle, can never be encompassed by human reason or be in any way made available. In its incomprehensibility, He rather remains the divine secret to which man refers to in a personal act. For this reason, theological reason is, at its very core, dialogical and personal and not dispositive and subjective (conf. the condemnations of the theses of J. Frohschammer: DH 2850–54).

The determination of the relationship of faith and reason in their mutual relation, at the same time, with a differentiation, was also the topic of the dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius* about the Catholic faith, of the First Council of Vatican (DH 3000–3045).

The determination of the relationship of “faith and knowledge” experienced a further expansion in the Second Vatican Council. *Dei Verbum* understands Revelation not as the provision of information on supernatural truths, but rather as the personal message of God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in the medium of the world and history. While separate, faith and reason do not remain in a fixed relationship with each other, but refer to each other dynamically (conf. DV 2–6; GS 15).

The rising natural sciences were, since their “formation” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, always flanked and contaminated by a purely immanentist and materialistic world image. Only the material, the visible, the measurable was valid. Truth was not the knowledge of being any more with all its material and spiritual revelations, but it was limited to what was technically possible and reproducible.

The reduction of knowledge to inductive experience structures hid the rather deductive “achievements” of theology and philosophy. Its merit is not found in the improvement of quality of individual results, but in the deeper reflection on the permanent question about the existence of all that exists and its relation to God. Progress in philosophy and theology can certainly also be measured quantitatively in its historical and exegetic dimensions – if we only consider the critical text editions. At its speculative core, however, there is only one qualitative progress that must always be re-adapted individually.

## Theology as a fundamental anthropological science

In opposition to the ever increasing fragmentation of individual professional fields at higher education facilities and academies, the frequently microscopic differentiation of which, as well as their independence, theology seems to be a “fundamental science” that deals with the basic coordinates of being, of thinking and of human nature in his conditioning of the reliance on transcendence.

The rationality of faith in the revelation of Jesus Christus allows any person who is not faithful, but who searches for truth and whose existence in the world is a question to them, to seek answers. First, non-believers may see that theology contains a multitude of historic details and cultural knowledge and creative will and contains philosophical reflection characteristic for the development of human spiritual history that the removal of theology from university life would lead to a significant reduction of the entirety of knowledge. The university is nothing else than the entirety of knowledge. Theology is assigned in the university arrangement in the entirety of human knowledge, at the same time remaining at its core, because it confronts man with the reason and sense of his entire existence.

Second, man, as a being provided with reason, has always asked himself about his origins, his objectives and his purpose. The experience of one’s dependence on factors that are not bound by his own fantasy and the readiness to create, the question about his own humanity is also the question about the existence of God. In the course of the history of the spirit and of theology, great thinkers have always shown off complex systems that were carried by the question about god and the relevant consequences for man. In their density and the general validity, they belong to that scope of knowledge that must rightly claim a place within the university.

## Theology – for preaching

“The Church is concerned with proclaiming the gospel to all those, within the University, to whom it is still unknown and who are ready to receive it in freedom.” In this way, the Congregation for Catholic Education, the Pontifical Council for the Laity and the Pontifical Council for Culture had provided in the text *The Presence of the Church in the University and in University Culture* 1994 (conf. VAS 118, 9) had stated one aspect significant for theology: Theology is also the preaching of the word of God in the world. The University means in its specific level – scientific exchange, and it is a meeting place of people. Theology may not be taught without value and neutrally. Always under the protection of its own method and the requirements of time, theology may experience an increase in challenges due to the contact with other fields of knowledge, for instance, historic sciences, linguistic sciences, philosophy as well as natural sciences. The indicated sciences frequently put new questions to scientific theology that is encouraged, by university exchange, to new research.

The order to preach of those who teach and their employees must be carried by knowledge that the contents of theology always come with an existential meaning. Countless young people are provided, through the presence of theology at universities and higher education facilities, with the possibility of confronting themselves with the material questions of their existence, and, if they are not students of theology, to meet the Church, the faith in the triune God, the incarnation and the deification of man. True science, however, has its ultimate objective not in technology, but in wisdom.

In terms of the virtue of *sapientia*, the Scripture says in the Book of Wisdom, 6,16-19:

For she goeth about seeking such as are worthy of her, and she sheweth herself to them cheerfully in the ways, and meeteth them with all providence.

For the beginning of her is the most true desire of discipline, And the care of discipline is love.

And love is the keeping of her laws: and the keeping of her laws is the firm foundation of incorruption. And incorruption bringeth near to God.

GERHARD LUDWIG MÜLLER (PROF.) – studied philosophy and theology in Mainz, Munich and Freiburg. Author of several books, including *Katholische Dogmatik. Für Studium und Praxis der Theologie* (Catholic Dogmatics for the Study and Practice of Theology). A member of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith since 2007, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2012–2017, established by Benedict XVI. Created cardinal in the year 2014 by Pope Francis. Received doctor honoris causa titles from four Polish higher education facilities, among them, the Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Wrocław.