

Editorial

Future(s) of Theology. Between ecclesial demands, societal expectations and academic frameworks



Over the last decades, the position and understanding of theology as an academic discipline has seen fissures breaking open. At a time of evident, yet ambivalent, religious revival and the emergence of new spiritualities, signalling a profound need for purpose and symbols, theological discourse appears to have largely lost its intellectual and cultural relevance. The reflective and interpretive functions of theology are trivialities to socio-political minds, even at times of crises. Worse, they are superficially perceived as ideological spaces of solace rather than recognised for their predictive capabilities that can support us in navigating change, resistance and protest.

Several factors have contributed to the demotion of the position theology holds. First and foremost, these arise from changes in social and educational policies as well as a new demands for religious plurality and diverse worldviews. The question of where theology sits within academia, and particularly in relation to the humanities and cultural sciences, is gaining more and more urgency in modern secular European societies. Populist, and sometimes fundamentalist, branches of religion cause friction with rational, enlightened and reflective agents of discourse and ultimately sow seeds of suspicion that spread to all ideologies based in normative texts or traditions. Further, theology is equally affected by the deep-seated crisis all humanist disciplines face in a late capitalist society pursuing global paradigms of technology and economy, which promote instrumental rationality, positive knowledge and naturalism at the expense of humanistic discourse. What is more, the demands and expectations of academic discourse are at times also in conflict with those set by the church. Perhaps a symptom of all of the above, and perhaps the most concerning trend, is the declining number of theology students at university. This is yet another

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indicator pointing to the theology's uncertain position within society and academia.

In the face of these challenges, theology has to reflect on its own established understanding as a discipline in order to (re)think and (re)structure itself as a vital voice that resonates in today's world as well as in the future. As theology is put to the test by an increasingly secular as well as increasingly religiously diverse society undergoing economic, technological, ecological and public health transformation many contemporary theologians also emphasise the need to (re)examine the purpose and future of our discipline from within. On the one hand, theology must reflect on its unchallenged claims to truth in order to prepare the ground for a fundamental reorientation aligned with the epochal "democratic" metamorphoses of the spirit of religion, at least within a Western context. On the other hand, theology must rethink the symbolic potential of religious heritage, it must tend to the spirit enshrined within its texts and rituals in order to keep it alive and make it accessible in the future, transcending the ideological or unchallenged dispositif of power. It requires vision and action to open up new ways of (re)thinking theology that reflect current and future realities. After all, theological discourse still offers important reflexive and symbolic resources that help us to interpret and investigate the complexities of the present and its ambivalences.

Societal and cultural forces challenge theology to reflect and review. Theology is not removed from history, it is bound to it. However, the inherent cultural and intercultural nature of theologies has not yet received enough attention or has not yet been sufficiently integrated, particularly among less empirically oriented systematic theological disciplines. This constitutes a cultural and political issue that tests Christianity's claims of salvation and truth, and puts a contested, even controversial, spotlight on theology's position within academia as well as within the public discourse in a secular and pluralistic world. Reflecting on these questions will inevitably and profoundly change theology's understanding of itself. What happens when we engage with these challenges and how may they affect our understanding of theology? All these transformational processes also raise a crucial question for the understanding of theology – that of its spiritual character. Does theology necessitate spiritual grounding and what form of spirituality is suited for the future of theology?

To many people, faculties of theology are anachronistic relics in a modern scientific landscape. However, they are also reminders of the origins of academia and a holistic approach to education that strives for self-enlightened

knowledge. However, if theology is to offer value beyond historic memory, it has to re-examine its role within the shifting contexts as outlined above. What are the specific academic characteristics that distinguish it from the humanities and cultural sciences? Does the future of theology lie in its integration with these disciplines, adapting to their frameworks of research, and in its emancipation from ecclesial obligations? How would such a reinvention affect the relationship between theology and the Church? What are the intersections and delineations between (denominational) theology and (“neutral”) religious studies? Maybe theology reveals itself to be surprisingly contemporary? Can faith and science form a new alliance that offers an alternative pathway for a directionless and hopeless society lacking the language and empathy to speak to and take care of the vulnerable? Can theology retain “an awareness of what is missing” (Habermas) and offer its reflexive ability today and in future?

Our Call for Papers on this topic inspired great resonance and the volume of submissions we received allows us to publish two issues on the future(s) of theology in 2023. The first one, [LIMINA 6:1](#), presents twelve different perspectives on theology’s future potential as an academic discipline in response to changing societal, academic and ecclesial circumstances.

We launch into our first issue on the topic with *Guido Hunze*’s text “Nobody asks – theologians answer”. Hunze shines a light on the discrepancy between how theology defines itself as an academic discipline and how theology is perceived by society. He reveals that the church/churches, theology/theologies and religious figures are amalgamated into indistinguishable representative roles in the public discourse. Therefore, there is a clear call to action to bridge the division between internal and external perception.

Next, *Rainer Bucher* offers deep insights into “current constellations and perspectives” of academic Catholic theology. He focuses on constellations of power that influence how theology is situated within society, the university and the church. Following his observations, he advocates for theology to be oriented towards an “authentic teaching of the Gospel” that also has the ability to disrupt and therefore stimulate academic thought, work and structures.

Mirja Kutzer describes the positioning of (systematic) theology within the cultural sciences under the title “On the culturality of theology”. In her view, the current situation is not only the result of organisational scientific pragmatism but arises from a theology that understands Christianity as a culturally productive religion and that reflects it as such. This forms the

groundwork on which Kutzer builds a history of theology that sets itself apart from prevailing linear concepts and incorporates current – critical and productive – mediations of God.

Stephan Tautz presents “Radical theology”, an emerging project that addresses the crisis that has engulfed the church in the wake of abuse scandals. The aim is to get to the roots of theological patterns of thought that have provided fertile soil for this crisis. The starting point for this examination is the analysis of underlying ecclesial and hierarchical structures in order to open up new possibilities for alternative models of theology.

Taking a digital turn, *João Manuel Duque* investigates how digitisation affects and alters interpersonal relationships and communal dynamics. He then asks what role theology should play in moderating this tension between community and digitisation. Michel de Certeau’s anthropology of the everyday and Roberto Esposito’s philosophy of community serve as templates for reflection here.

Claudia Danzer identifies issues of diversity in Roman-Catholic theology. In her article “The potential of a diversity-sensitive theology” she demonstrates how learnings from diversity studies can inform and shape a future-oriented and diversity-sensitive theology.

Eva-Maria Spiegelhalter contemplates the confluence of theology and a non-denominational society. She reflects on the consequences this might have for theological approaches and actions and outlines possibilities for equipping future religion teachers with the professional competencies to theologically navigate an increasingly faithless society.

Isabella Bruckner draws on the spatial concepts of the French Jesuit Michel de Certeau and the idea that religion is not rooted in one place in response to Habermas’ call to translate religious meaning for a secular society without reproducing the dichotomy of the religious and the secular.

Martina Bär brings the marginalised place of urban prostitution into the centre of discussion. Based on ethnographic studies on the lives of sex workers, she reflects on how theology (and the church) have contributed to their marginalisation and how they might instead support their reintegration and resocialisation in line with the proclamation of the kingdom of God, in which Jesus also specifically included prostitutes.

Thomas Mark Németh analyses the religious dimension of the Russian war on Ukraine. He addresses the role the Patriarchate of Moscow holds, how the war affects the religious landscape in Ukraine, as well as the potential for peace work and healing after the war, hopefully, ends.

Christina Dietl explores different definitions of theology and scientificity on the example of liturgics. She compares orthodox approaches to Christian theology with Catholic perspectives and thus widens the conceptual scope for (potential) interpretations of theology.

To round off our discussions, for now, the international think tank *Rethinking Theology* distils a blueprint for new theologies facing a seemingly hopeless future: Once uprooted from its established institutional foundation, can theology still exist? The answer, according to the five authors, *Gwen Dupré*, *Emily King*, *Mac Loftin*, *Joanna Mikolajczyk Winterø* and *Thomas Sojer*, is affirmative as they rethink theology as forms of encounter and friendship. Thus, the future of theology may lie in its (re)turn to God-Talk.

We hope you find our articles in this issue on the future(s) of theology interesting and engaging, and that [LIMINA – Theological Perspectives from Graz](#) can be an enriching resource for you.

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