



Curriculum Theologiae

# The Academic Character of Theological Discipline and Education

## Some Methodological Proposals

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# The Academic Character of Theological Discipline and Education

## Some Methodological Proposals

Felix Wilfred

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### A Preliminary Remark

Often we hear the remark that standards in theological education have fallen. It is said that students of theology are not interested in reading, reflecting, researching as would be required by the canons of academic excellence. Even more, seldom the teaching faculty is also viewed critically as not measuring up to rigorous academic standards, since they, in spite of possessing high academic qualification, do not continue to pursue academic work but content themselves by imparting year after year the same materials. Is it the case of *omnes doctores non sunt docti* – not all doctors are learned!

In our casteist and hierarchical society whose values affect also the Church and its functioning, there are those who interpret the falling of standards as a result of the fact that it is now the Dalits and tribals who in increasing numbers are joining priestly and religious vocation, and hence are in the field of theological education. This is a mischievous interpretation which reveals deep caste prejudices and is ignorant about contemporary cultural developments which affect everyone independent of caste affiliation. There is also ignorance of what academic excellence is. There is a failure to recognize that every group has its own unique contribution to the construction of knowledge – including theological knowledge and education. Depriving the community of their contribution to theology would be to impoverish both theology and the community. Often it is the lethargy and lack of educational creativity to bring out the best theological potentials from the marginalized groups that masquerades as fall in academic excellence. To understand the academic character of theological discipline and education, we need to widen our discussion, and then focus on the issue of methodology, which I shall try to do.

### Background

For the past one thousand years, a major preoccupation of theology has been to prove that it is a science – an academic discipline. Theology encountered fierce resistance from the positive sciences and their empirical methodology. Even the discipline of sociology was not counted, in the positivist atmosphere, as a science, and to get the aura of science was for it a fruit of struggle, thanks also the developments that have taken place in defining what a scientific discourse is. Along with positivism, secularism also became a force challenging any scientific character to

theology, and raised questions about its utility. For socialist states, study of theology is a waste of human resources, and hence the numbers of those who enter the seminaries were restricted, for example, by the government of Vietnam.

I would also like to underline here how the conception of science itself has undergone significant change. If Moritz Schlick (1882 – 1936) and Karl Popper (1902 – 1994) upheld a positivistic view of science, we have other thinkers like Williard V.O. Quine (1908 – 2000), Arthur Fine (1932 - ), Hilary Putnam(1908 – 2000), and Thomas Kuhn (1922 – 1996) who take us to a quite different conception of science. The certainty, for example, associated invariably with science was broken by the principle of indeterminacy in connection with quantum physics. Science is no more a set of abstract truths well-demarcated and isolated from the rest, but is becoming more and more a construct and indeed located within particular historical and social contexts and within a complex of several disciplines.

The purpose of my short presentation is not to enter into a discussion with all these positions and demonstrate the scientific character of theological studies. Instead, I would like to focus on how truth-finding and interpretation are activities which require a credible methodology. This applies to theology as well. What are some of the methods which we need to follow in the study of theology, so that it is free from the danger of being viewed as pious platitudes or as a mere religious rhetoric or ideology.

Like in every science which have their hypotheses (according to Karl Popper science progresses not so much by verification as by falsification of prevalent hypotheses) which helps to explain phenomena, theology too has its premises relating to human beings, society, nature and the ultimate reality. To be counted in the academia, theology, while it starts from its premises, needs to evidence that it follows a strict methodology which will hold together, explain and interpret a complex whole in their mutual relationship of interdependence. I shall highlight some aspects of methodology which need to be followed for creativity and academic excellence in the field of theology.

### **Some Questions of Theological Epistemology – A Prelude to Methodology**

The question of methodology is a common issue that the various disciplines of humanities and sciences face. Theology could comfort itself with the thought that the methodological flux is not peculiar to it. The parting of ways among the practitioners of the same science, is characterized by the difference in methodology. In particular, I would like to point out that theology has in the past strong metaphysical moorings, at least since the middle ages. This is especially true of the Roman Catholic tradition. No wonder then, that the dissolution of metaphysics is today seen as coinciding with the “dissolution” of Christianity in the West – be it through the interpretation of secularism or through the advent of postmodernity. Be that as it may, the point I wish to underline is that theology may take a dangerous and fundamentalist turn if it wants to still be confined to the metaphysical realm. In other words, there should be an “*epistemological vigilance*” over the realm of theology. The truths of its assertions need to be sensitive to the epistemological question and process of acquiring, critically developing and organizing knowledge. If so, theology will be able to share with other sciences similar epistemological concerns.

## The Question of “Objectivity” and Validity of Theological Knowledge

Crucial to the question for all sciences in grappling with methodology is the epistemological issue of objectivity. *Objectivity* is a question which has been common to any form of knowledge, and the question is posed much more sharply with regard to humanities. Theology also shares with other organized forms of knowledge, the traditional question of the validity of its knowledge which is commonly supposed to be to the extent that it is objective. Today we realize that this classical picture is changing as the self-perception of the disciplines is undergoing a profound mutation. The developments of epistemology and sociology of knowledge have also contributed to a change in this situation. Part of the ongoing change is the progressive recognition of a role of *the subject* (individual and collective) which, however, varies. The consideration of subjective and objective is something specific to every discipline. There is no common understanding of objective and subjective which could be generalized and applied equally to all the disciplines. In the natural sciences the choices of themes for study, the individuals and institutions which do or support research, etc., would be the subjective conditioning in the production and dissemination of knowledge. Naturally, the role of the subject in humanities and social sciences is even greater.

We need to go even a step further and view the attempts to see the problem involved in the representation of reality as one of a dialectics between the subjective and the objective. Every form of knowledge bears the stamp of this dialectics, and it is important to be conscious of it when we consider theology and theological discourse. We need to particularly highlight that the subjective is not something which we need to guard ourselves against, as it may tamper with objectivity. Rather, very often the subjective is very much necessary as a means to a more complete understanding and approximation to truth. As the psychologist Eric Fromm noted way back in 1950, “objectivity does not mean detachment; it means respect; that is the ability not to distort and to falsify things, persons and oneself”.

The emotional content as an expression of the subjective, need not be an element in theology, which takes us away from truth; rather the emotionally charged thought can lead us closer to truth. How else are we to understand the important truths the Dalits, the tribal and women, for example, are telling us? Similarly, the collective agency of the subject (whether Dalits, tribals, women, or a particular group of people experiencing the same form of suffering and oppression, etc.) is indispensable in the process of theologizing and reaching theological knowledge. Time and space are inherent in any self-constitution of the individual and the collective self, and consequently in any form of relationship and creation of knowledge. To use a terminology from social sciences we may say that time and space are *variables* inherent in the subject and not merely external circumstances under which knowledge is produced and constituted. Consequently any theological theme treated in two different socio-political *contexts* (time and space) of the subject will not be the same.

What has been said leads us to the basic assertion of *stand point epistemology* which maintains that any stand-point embraces its social, cultural and political origin is less biased and hence closer to truth.

## The Components of a Possible Academic Method in Theological Pursuit

Having made the epistemological premise, let me now propose a possible theological method in its various components. Today, a good academic theological pursuit will be one in which there will be three important methodological components: a) Empirical Data b) Critical interpretation c) Production of transformative knowledge. Let me briefly present these three components.

### A) *Empirical Base*

Theology, to be academic needs to become more and more empirical. Deduction from unverified a priori premises could consign theology to an enterprise of religious conjecture without foundation in reality. When I say theology needs to be empirical, this should not be interpreted in a positivistic sense with its assumptions, like for example, truth is only when it is shown experimentally through hard facts (as once the natural sciences were thought to be), something that subsequently became also the methodological bedrock for anything to be scientific. I am distancing myself from such an assumption, and do not want to expand this point further. I also do not intend to enter into the long-debated question of whether theology is a science. These discussions flourished when the focus of discussion was centered on relationship between reason and faith. Further, the proposal of the study of empirical data is different from what was known as positive theology, meaning thereby the attempt to cull out passages and texts from Scripture and tradition with reference to any particular theme. It was mimicry of experimental sciences, in this case, the verification is on the basis of texts adduced as proofs.

What I mean by *empirical* theology is the theological investigation and pursuit that begins from socio-political facts and data. This is something very important because in this way every single issue we are treating will have a *concrete social location*. For example, in India, the Dalits and the tribals have taught us about the earthliness of our existence, and the importance to pay attention to concrete realities related to survival. We just cannot build a theological castle without taking into account the facts and figures about poverty, oppression, and the experience of negations the various segments of people undergo. A vague description or rhetoric on the same cannot furnish adequate and reasonable basis for the beginning of theology. It must be added that the selection of data needs to be done critically with a perspective. The choice of the data will naturally determine the theological orientation. Making such a choice is an act of involvement and immersion by the theologian herself in the thick of the realities.

If theology is being done in a particular community or group, the empirical data will be the ones pertaining to them and their condition, which however need to be studied and recorded in detail. If I were to join others in theologizing, my approach would be one of participant observation.

This first-stage of methodology involves that while dealing with any theological treatise or theme, we ask, what is the corresponding empirical base to that treatise or issue. The data need to be collected and studied in depth and thoroughly. This is also part and parcel of the theological process. It is a fact that most often theological discourses make too general and sweeping statements about empirical realities to be able to quickly ascend to an a-historical plane. And if there is effort to relate to these realities, theological discourses often content themselves with making impressionistic and anecdotal statements.

## ***B) Critical Interpretation***

The collection of empirical data will be followed by critical interpretation. This could happen in three stages. These three stages could be also viewed as three different streams of interpretation which meet and merge:

### *i. interpretation through the Help of Critical Sciences*

Depending on the theological question or the issue, one or the other sciences in humanities need to be drawn into the picture. In so doing, the tools and methods specific to that particular discipline need to be followed. Often, the help of more than one science maybe required to interpret the data. I want to underline that enlisting the collaboration of sciences is part and parcel of the *theologizing process itself*. We would look at the process analytically from two angles:

*In relation to sciences:* since the production, organization and distribution of various knowledge fields themselves are very much linked to external factors and motivations, it is important to be *critical* as well in employing the sciences for the interpretation of data. Often an uncritical approach goes with sciences becoming supporters of the status quo. Since within the same discipline there could be many different orientations, we need to choose the kind of orientation that is geared to change and transformation. That would tally with one of the basic presuppositions of any genuine theology, namely that all theology is directed towards change-personal, collective, social, etc.,. The theological enterprise needs to guard itself against the danger of sciences becoming new absolutes, a temptation to which theology itself has been exposed. Moreover, from an Asian perspective, the primary concern about knowledge is about its liberative and transformative potential, rather than its so called “objectivity”. Objectivity realizes itself in the act of transformation, and is not to be viewed as separated from it.

*In relation to theology:* theology itself needs to be counterchecked by social critical social theories, lest there be triumphalism – something which is not only a matter of the past, but characterizing also attitudes today. One needs to only study the views of an influential thinker like John Milbank in regard to theology, which for him is so overarching that it can, not only do away with other sciences, but even replace them. But in fact, the consciousness of the socio-economic conditions in which theological discourses are produced calls for a critique of the ideological and idolatrous elements, and the very language of these discourses themselves.

### *ii) Interpretation through the Help of the Bible and Christian Traditions*

A scientific and academically credible theology will depend upon how we employ methods of textual study and analysis to the use of the Bible. Thus historic-critical method will be very important. Bible and tradition also need to be interpreted from the perspective of the margins. To be able to do that we need to look beyond reason. The process of knowledge does not end with the operation of reason as is the case with the historic-critical method, which in any case cannot give us the truth but only function as a regulatory and ordering principle.

Thus, in interpreting the Christian Scriptures, all the tools will be employed which have been developed to study and understand the Bible, its background and its universal message.

Similarly, the Christian traditions will also be explored to study how a particular issue or theme has been treated in different contexts of history. I need not go into details of these issues. My presupposition here is that the Bible and Christian traditions are meant to serve life and its flourishing in all its expressions. Also presupposed is that these resources are oriented to effect change and transformation at all levels. Especially with reference to tradition, it should be pointed out, that regrettably, many of the theological themes are in practice identified with tracing of its history. No wonder then that we are witnessing how, for example, the kind of theology that sticks to traditional formulations is more and more being sidelined as irrelevant even within the Church, not to speak of the general public. That is why the interpretation of tradition needs to be directed towards the enlightenment of data collected and interpreted at the first stage.

Not all informatons from the past may have relevance, or may serve to illumine the question at hand. Therefore, there will take place a judicious selection from the traditions. This need not trouble us, since tradition itself is not a unified seamless garment (which we often tend to believe it to e) but is made up of different streams originating from widely different social and cultural contents and backgrounds. Further, since theology has to have constant reference to the empirical data and its analysis, it will be helpful in studying the particular traditions, also to note how particular beliefs and doctrines affected the society and with what consequences. In other words, the social effects of Christian doctrines are important to relate them to the particular theological question or issue we may be dealing with today in our contexts. For example, it would appear that some of the heresies in early Christianity were more expressions of nationalism and identity affirmation than matters of orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

### iii) *Interpretation through Religio-Cultural Resources*

The third stage or layer of interpretation will take into account the religio-cultural resources of a people or group. Since the empirical data are derived from a field with particular religio-cultural environment, these resources will be able to throw more light on the particular theme or issue. For example, the Dalit, tribal or feminist theology will go into the critical analysis of the resources regarding their genesis and their social effects.

In studying these resources, it is important also to *classify* sources in different ways. Some of them may be deriving from the so-called classical, and others from sources of the marginalized peoples and groups. The analysis will go into the sources in relation to particular forms of society, ideas and institutions they helped to sustain or the changes and transformations they were able to effect.

Speaking of cultural resources, I think, it is very important today also to take into account the developments in the literary field. In India we have an immense wealth of literary production in our different languages. Unfortunately, theology remains aloof from these literary productions reflecting various facets of life. Our data and experiences could be illumined and interpreted through the literary works in rich and variegated Indian languages.

### iii) *Inter-textual Interpretation*

More specifically in interpreting Christian Scriptures and tradition, we could do more than draw from other-religio-cultural resources. We need to enter into some kind of inter-textual interpretations. The practice of interpreting one text that originated in a particular socio-cultural context in relation to another text from another context, can throw much light in our attempt to understand both of them in a very insightful and creative way. Inter-textuality is not a matter of stating the fact that what is found in the text of one tradition is *also* found in another tradition. Nor is it simply *using* of one text for interpreting another text. It is a matter of symbiotic encounter.

An encounter at that level between the scriptures of two religious groups has the power to draw to each other much more effectively than other means. We see how Pandita Ramabai who constantly negotiated the borders of Christianity and Hinduism could draw from the scriptures of both traditions and arrive at very refreshing interpretations for her own spiritual journey, and provide an innovative appropriation of both the traditions. Her explorations should not be an isolated instance, but should become more and more a general practice in a theology which is inspired by the spirit of genuine unity and catholicity.

In the inter-textual interpretation, we need to be attentive so that it is not reduced to only classical texts of other religious traditions. There are numerous local texts – which unfortunately are not widely known – which have been produced by the subalterns like the Dalits. These texts provided them an interpretation of their identity and life-orientation. Often orally transmitted, the various forms of stories and narratives have acquired a “sacred” character and have functioned as points of reference in the lives of the subalterns. Inter-textuality applies as well to these subaltern texts, and the practice of intertextuality will be part of the methodology of various subaltern theologies.

### **Liberative Process of Knowledge**

It may sound odd to speak of “purification” – catharis – when speaking of scientific knowledge, rather than objectivity. But that is what is precisely required today if we observe the way the system of knowledge, its production and dissemination function. Such a liberating purificatory process will be all the more necessary for theology because of the greater danger of distortion to which it is exposed. The various stages are part of the movement from *adhyasa* – illusion (which is a very important concept in Indic epistemology) to ever greater approximation to truth. Like in human organism, the continuous purification of the system of knowledge is essential for the truth to be alive and flourish.

The first is at the level of senses, their perceptions and the processing of data derived from them. As I noted earlier, this maintains the empirical character of theology and ensures its rootedness in everyday life and practice. Things would be fine if only our senses were to mediate the correct knowledge of things. Experience shows that senses can easily delude us. Hence, the necessity of using instruments which can free us from such illusions. But how reliable are the instruments themselves to bring us closer to reality? In this connection it is very instructive to recall the ecstasy and the despair the use of telescope brought to Galileo. While he hoped to demonstrate the actual state of how heavens are, transcending the limits of naked eye, what actually happened



was, different people saw different things through the same telescope! They could not agree upon what they saw, some seeing stars double and others seeing several moons.

It is precisely here that the data of the senses whether through their naked powers or through instruments need to be checked, purified and to be explained. The knowledge through senses and what they pick up depends upon how they are conditioned. One may observe certain things and pass over others, depending upon the attitudes, values and options which one has. The process in social sciences and humanities could be a parallel one. Let me illustrate the point with two examples. The eyes of the disciples were on the temple and its beauty and grandeur. The eyes of Jesus, instead, saw what the disciples failed to see. A widow in the same temple dropping offerings – all that she had (Cf. Mk 12:41-44; Lk 21: 1-4). Here we note how the data of the senses go in two different directions. Modern day example would be the way media has reported on the gang-rape of a student in Delhi and a journalist-photographer, in Mumbai, which caused so much anger and protests. The Indian urban middle class identifies itself with the plight of the victims. At the same time it is a fact that in the village of India, everyday hundreds of Dalit and tribal women are raped and become object of brutal violence. The senses do not register these atrocities.

I think the training of senses is an integral part of theological education and theological methodology. One needs to open wide the eyes to read the writings on the wall of contemporary history, to touch what is hidden to the eyes of the world. The attuning of the senses requires a refining of values and attitudes. And this is part of the journey towards truth which ever remains an open-ended project.

The process of theologizing includes as well the organization of the interpreted data through theorizing. For example, if grace is explained a priori and if claims are made on that basis without relation to empirical realities, it would be in contradiction to the experience of everyday in which the reality of grace seems to be present and operative in the struggles of the poor tribals for dignity, freedom and survival. In this case, it is a theorizing which sees *grace itself as a historical reality* lived and experienced in the lives of individuals and groups, and the inappropriateness of an approach to grace which does not take into account the empirical and historical realities of life.

The empirical data needs to be sifted. The process of *vichara* – rationalizing – would follow. The processed data is placed within an ordered, sequential and logical whole.. However, it would be a gross mistake to equate logical order and system with objectivity and truth. This is what many Western forms of theologies would seem to think and presuppose. Here we need to remember that the epistemological order or the logical consistency has but a meiotic function; they are like the scaffolding or pedestal for the truth to make its manifestation, but not themselves the truth.

The rationalizing and theorizing stage needs to be also purified by moving into the stage of *prajna* or wisdom. At this level, there takes place a purification of the rationalizing process. For the latter process could also be seriously conditioned by interests, passions, and desire. The formal aspect of rational procedure does not necessarily lead us to truth. It could be so oriented as to serve particular interests, ideologies, etc. The purification and corrective takes the form of attending to those dimensions of the real which get excluded at the level of the rationalizing process. For example, the second stage of rationalizing and theorizing could conveniently leave out such crucial issues as gender, race, caste, etc. It is the stage of wisdom which will draw

attention to all those neglected elements in the theologizing process. It is a stage in which intellect and will, reason and passion, desire and restraint are reconciled and not polarized. The stage of *prajna* is able to do that precisely because it is a stage of wholeness in which various layers and dimensions of the real are held together.

In a world of knowledge that is becoming progressively specialized in every sector, the difficulty with religion and theology is that it seems to be related to everything without any one thing in particular. This is of course, a weakness, but also its strength and specific vocation. Theology has to function as the nodal point where different layers of reality meet and merge. It is difficult to find appropriate analogies.

Maybe the function of theology at this stage can be compared to that of a family. A family is an institution which has to be concerned about everything – from the most lofty experiences and ideals to the most mundane. The management of the house (economy) education, human relationships, the place of women, and many other things are all treated under one roof and in a unique way. The issue of communication, truth, sincerity, love, freedom – all converge into one. When theology brings together the wide variety of experiences and layers of reality, it surpasses the realm of thought (*vichara*) and moves towards that of *wisdom (prajna)*. It has always been said that theology is wisdom. Today we understand it better when confronted with the fragmentation of knowledge and experience which we share with everybody else. All human persons are in need of help to be able to learn the art of continuous and dynamic integration. And that is why a theology that helps to integrate the wide varieties of experiences could be addressed to all.

Now the stage of wisdom itself needs to be purified and connected. For wisdom could mean a *stasis* – a quietist state of contemplation of the whole. If as we said, all theology is oriented towards change and transformation, it is at this stage that wisdom needs to be oriented towards that goal. In one sense, more than the end result, the very theological procedure will turn out to be transformative. There will be transformation of the self (individual and collective), the other and the world at large. In terms of the concrete question or issue, theology will tend to effect transformation and change and will also provide reasons for the same.

A second corrective which this stage needs is to guard against the danger of a wisdom centred only on the *present*. The transformative role should lead on to the projection of utopias and alternatives. The various scientific disciplines not only analyze and interpret a specific reality, but also project something for the future. What is projected is often based on the analysis and interpretation made on the acquired data and its interpretation. This is true not only of natural sciences but humanities and social sciences as well. For example, a study of evolution, could project something on the future shape of a particular species, or the study of present demographic situation will lead to future projections.

The projection will depend on the nature of the particular discipline. As for theology, projection towards the future is a very central issue because the role of theology is not simply to state *what is* and to interpret what they mean (presence). It is an important task of theology to diagnose what is not (the absence) and to project *what ought to be* on the basis of faith. We are in the realm of *utopias*. Utopias are not illusions. They are imaginative and creative, but realistic possibilities for the future. They can contribute to a critique of the present and shaping of a future which may escape present calculations. In this sense, the kingdom of God is a powerful symbol in theology.

Finally the stage of wisdom which could give the impression of general and universal, needs to constantly refer back to the empirical, the concrete, the particular. It is this type of wisdom which theology needs to be. Wisdom and the particular are not opposed to each other. On the contrary, it is in relationship to the concrete that wisdom expresses itself.

It is important that the various stages I have tried to develop are not to be viewed as an ascent from the lower to the higher level, or to be placed in a chronologically sequential order. They all should be operation at the same time and continuously in interaction: Like the various organs of the body need to be active and inter-active with other organs, so also the various levels and their components need to be in communication for a healthy theology.

## Conclusion

The academic and scientific character of theology – for that matter of any discipline - is not so much in its content (which is specific to each discipline) with its premises, but in the methodology. Those who reject theology as unscientific because of what it holds, do not understand the academic character of it is in the rigour of the methodology that is followed. And this is true of all sciences. In medieval times, the scientific nature of theology consisted in its argumentative methodology, like we have, for example in the Summa of St Thomas Aquinas. Something corresponding in the Indian tradition would be *tharka*.

The understanding of science, especially, of arts and humanities has changed so much that we need to think of the academic and scientific character of theology in different terms. The indications I have made is meant only to make ourselves aware of, in an analytical way, about the various threads and strands involved in the theological methodology. Besides, not all these procedures and stages may be applied equally to all themes and issues. Further, all the steps and procedures indicated (including the study of empirical data) are to be considered as part of the theological process. Theologizing happens all through the process; theology is not, so to say, the cream we churn out. Theology is deeply embedded in the warp and woof of the reality and experience we analyze, study, interpret and relate to praxis. This does not mean that we are imposing a theological format on reality. Rather we move from the discovery of an unthematized theological stage to ever more thematized theological articulation and application with the help of methodology, in the spirit of academic enquiry. In the light of what we said, the academic aspect of theological education would first and foremost in cultivating and seen from academic perspective, is first and foremost cultivating and training in theological methodology.