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## Theology as Science

The article explores how theology functions within the scientific context. It begins by noting that Christian theology differs from the theology of other religions, as well as among its own branches, such as Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. Theology, viewed as a systematic study of Christian revelation, has a long history dating back to the 2nd century AD and was regarded as a science for many centuries. Currently, questions arise about its place in the academic environment and its adherence to scientific criteria. The article suggests that theology must justify its value both internally, in terms of research and teaching, and externally, in relation to other fields. Critics point out differences in theological methods of knowledge acquisition and challenges in adapting to scientific discoveries. Various theological approaches are discussed, ranging from Origen to contemporary thinkers who emphasize the importance of critical and systematic methodologies in theology. The concluding section reflects on the potential role of theology as a science, highlighting its potential for critical analysis of ideological and scientific narratives.

**Key words:** theology, science, doctrine, studies, method, history of theology.

The subject is complex<sup>1</sup>: talking about theology as science means knowing what theology is and what science is.

<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the problem field, cfr. *Die Wissenschaftlichkeit der Theologie*. 1. *Historische und systematische Perspektiven*, B.P. Göcke (ed.) Münster 2018; 2. *Katholische Disziplinen und ihre Wissenschaftstheorien*, B.P. Göcke, L.V. Ohler (eds), Münster 2019; 3. *Theologie und Metaphysik*, B.P. Göcke, Ch. Pelz, Münster 2019. The relationship between theology, religion and science is the focus of increasing interest, as evidenced by the wealth of new publications in this area. For a quick survey of the main questions, cfr. for ex. *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Science*, J.W. Haas, G.R. Peterson, M.L. Spezio (eds), London 2012; *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, Oh. Clayton, Z. Simpson (ed.), Oxford 2006.

As far as theology is concerned, the first thing to decide is which theology to consider<sup>2</sup>. Other religions have also developed ways of organizing and expanding religious knowledge, but these differ from Christian theology because of the different worldviews they hold. Moreover, there are fundamental differences within Christian theology itself: Catholic and Orthodox theology have a relationship to the tradition of the Church and to magisterial authority that makes them radically different from Protestant theology. We shall take as the starting point the concept and practice of academic theology as it is commonly practiced today in Catholic theological faculties, however there may be similarities with the situation in other denominations.

It is perhaps even more difficult to define what science (*scientia*, Wissenschaft) is<sup>3</sup>. Throughout the history of Western culture, the charism of “scientificity” has been ascribed to practices that vary widely in their object, method and results. Today, quantum physics is considered a form of science. Feminist literary criticism is also seen as a form of science. But it is not easy to see what these two forms of science have in common. Therefore, we shall start here with an intuitive concept of science, i.e. as a form of knowledge that differs from everyday knowledge in that it is more systematic and critically aware<sup>4</sup>.

However, the question of the scientific nature of theology is not only a theoretical one. On the contrary, in today’s academic world it is a question of academic politics and resources, and therefore of politics tout court. Does theology, as a science, have the right to be in the universities, on an equal footing with the other sciences? Does theology, if it is indeed a science, have the right to intervene in the affairs of society on an equal footing with other forms of knowledge?

Without pretending to be able to answer all these questions, I would like to share some observations from my personal experience as a

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the different understandings of theology, cfr. Ch. Schwöbel, Art. Theologie, in *Religion und Geschichte und Gegenwart. Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, vol. 8, Tübingen 2005, c. 255-306.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. S. Meier-Oser, H. Hühn, H. Pulte, Art. Wissenschaft, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, 12, Darmstadt 2019, c. 902-948. For a different approach, cfr. S.O. Hansson, Art. Science and Pseudo-Science, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), E.N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/pseudo-science>.

<sup>4</sup> The meaning of the word “science” in current ordinary English use has been restricted and is “often treated as synonymous with “Natural and Physical Science” (Art. Science, in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. XIV, J.A. Simpson, E.S.C. Weiner (eds.), Oxford, 1989, 648-649). In this paper, the term science is obviously taken in its full historical sense, which corresponds to the usage in other major European languages.

theologian and administrator of an independent theological faculty. Firstly, the awareness of theology as a science in its own right will be reaffirmed, even if this is called into question. Secondly, an attempt will be made to outline the environments and contexts in which the question of the scientific nature of theology arises. This question can be answered negatively or positively. The third part will focus on the main types of negative answers, and the fourth part will consider some models of positive answers. Finally, some provocative recent thinking on the possible future role of theology as a science should be mentioned.

## Theology is a science: a fact

It is a fact that theology is a science.

In most countries with a Christian tradition, it has been part of the university system for centuries. But even where it is not present in public universities, whether for ideological reasons, as in France or Italy, or for other historical reasons, it is cultivated in private universities and in seminaries for the training of clergy. Indeed, even in countries such as those in Eastern Europe, after the collapse of the communist system, there has been a return of theological faculties to public universities, or at least a public recognition of the institutions run by the Churches.

The need for a systematic and critical study of the content of Christian revelation is already expressed in the New Testament, where the Apostle exhorts the faithful to be ready to give an account of the hope that is in them (1 Peter 3:15-17). This did not immediately mean the establishment of theology as a science, but it is at the root of its later development. In this respect, the widespread view that theology was not fully established as a science until the 12th century, with the re-discovery in the West of all the philosophical works of Aristotle, does not do justice to historical reality.

Theology as a science has more distant roots. Already in the 2nd century *A.D.* it began to evolve from a simple reflection and testimony on the experience of faith into a more elaborate, critical and original form, inspired also by the various human sciences of the time: philosophy, philology, history, rhetoric and jurisprudence. The work of Irenaeus of Lyon, Theophilus of Antioch and the public schools of Christian philosophers, such as that of the martyr Saint Justin, can be considered as early examples. Theology reached full scientific maturity with the monumental work of Origen of Alexandria and was institutionalised in

the schools of Alexandria itself and then in the East, with Edessa and later Nisibis, the famous Persian school. The Christological debates of the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries further refined the method<sup>5</sup>, which in turn influenced the way knowledge had to be produced, even in other disciplines<sup>6</sup>. Partly at the expense of the spiritual and sapiential dimension that had characterised patristic and monastic theology, the rediscovery of the whole of Aristotle's philosophy in the West in the twelfth century enabled theology to reach a peak of formal perfection and to be considered the queen of the sciences, queen because it deals with the supreme object, God Himself, and because it is its task to establish the hierarchy among the sciences<sup>7</sup>. The Protestant Reformation, which called for a return to biblical sources, geographical and astronomical discoveries that revolutionised the perception of the world, and the challenge to the Aristotelian philosophical framework posed by the spread of Kantian thought, all contributed to changing the hierarchy of value of the various forms of knowledge and to questioning the role of theology among the sciences. Thanks to its achievements, technical-scientific knowledge became an exemplary paradigm of how true science should function, greatly reducing the prestige of theological discourse. Other factors then contributed to the further decline and loss of social prestige of theology in the contemporary world. The Protestant Reformation rejected the traditional principles of theology, absolutizing Scripture as the sole witness to the Word of God but failing to draw consensual conclusions from it. The deistic or atheistic ideology of the Enlightenment put an end to the theological dominance of worldview and society. Historical-critical research threw the primacy of theology in the interpretation of its own biblical and historical sources into crisis. Psychology did the same in the field of conscience, and the various ideologies of society excluded it from the public sphere. Today, if theology wants to regain its right to be heard, it must adapt itself to the new demands and provocations and clarify its nature as a discourse on faith carried out with scientific procedures.

In other words, what has changed since the Middle Ages is not so much the scientific nature of theology per se, but the prestige and role

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. B. Studer, *Schola Christiana. Die Theologie zwischen Nicäa und Chalcedon*, Paderborn 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. M. Letteney, *The Christianization of Knowledge in Late Antiquity. Intellectual and Material Transformations*, Cambridge 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. U.G. Leinsle, Art. Scholastik. /Neuscholastik, in *Theologische Realencyklopädie* 30, Berlin 1999, pp. 361-366.

that society attaches to this form of science, particularly its claim to answer the question of the meaning of the whole.

## The contexts of the question

### Dogmatic Theology

This situation gives rise to different tasks according to the contexts in which theology has to justify the validity of its contribution as a scientific discourse. The two spheres are the internal sphere, that is, theology as engaged in teaching and research, and the external sphere, that is, theology in the academy and, more generally, in society.

Ad intra, theology has a need for scientificity, which is first and foremost a need inherent to theology itself, and not with a view to a relationship with other sciences, be it intended as a constructive dialogue or polemic. It is therefore a need to organise the knowledge that comes from faith in a rational, argued and organic way<sup>8</sup>. Theology can also be done in other non-scientific ways. According to Seckler, scientificity would therefore depend on the mode<sup>9</sup>. This scientific form is of course useful, even necessary, for the transmission of theological knowledge itself; it can change in form, as a comparison of two 20th century theological manuals, *Sacrae Theologiae Summa*, by a group of Spanish Jesuits<sup>10</sup>, and *Mysterium salutis*, edited by the Swiss J. Feiner and M. Löhrer<sup>11</sup>, clearly shows. The need remains the same: to systematically organize theological knowledge in order to understand it better and to transmit it more effectively to others. The same methodological attention is then necessary for theological research. Indeed, it is not limited to organizing the accumulated knowledge according to changing criteria, but must also address new questions and problems that require the application of appropriate methods<sup>12</sup>.

Ad extra, theology has to defend its claim to be scientific within the academic context. It is a question of justifying the presence of theology

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. M. Seckler, *Theologie als Glaubenswissenschaft*, in *Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie 4. Traktat Theologische Erkenntnislehre mit Schlussteil Reflexion auf Fundamentaltheologie*, H.J. Pottmeyer, M. Seckler (eds.), Tübingen–Basel 2000, pp. 131–184, in part. 141–142.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Seckler, *Theologie als Glaubenswissenschaft*, pp. 158–159.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Patres Societatis Iesu facultatum theologiarum in Hispania professores, *Sacrae Theologiae Summa* (4 vols.), Madrid 1950–1952 (with many more editions).

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. M. Löhrer, J. Feiner (eds), *Mysterium Salutis: Die Grundlagen heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik* (7 vols.), Einsiedeln 1965–1976 (with many translations in other languages).

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. J. Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, New York 1997, pp. 13–19.

in the concert of academic disciplines, which can be challenged for various reasons. There is an underlying prejudice against theology in some parts of the academy, but this can become more pronounced when, for example, decisions have to be made about the use and distribution of financial resources. There are contingent considerations added to this, such as the decline in student numbers that has been seen in recent years, which further challenge the space to be given to theology.

In the public sphere, then, the scientific nature of theology is a prerequisite for its discourse to be heard in certain areas of social life. This *ad extra* aspect takes on different characteristics according to the concrete contexts of different countries. It seems to me that in the countries where theology is peacefully embedded in state universities, the problem is exacerbated by the collapse in the number of enrolled students. This fact is one dimension of the current crisis in the Church, but in the concrete context of the management of resources it becomes a reason to question the meaning of this discipline, which no longer seems to interest its own recipients. Hence the attempts to justify the importance of this discipline from a theoretical perspective, perhaps even by pointing out that the weakening and downsizing of the institutional churches does not mean the end of religion, which, on the contrary, enjoys a remarkable if varied comeback (Islam, Buddhism, new or old cults) and that its permanence is therefore in the general interest<sup>13</sup>. In the United States of America, the debate takes on very different connotations: the querelle between creationists and evolutionists is not only a debate about the scientificity of theology, but more generally about the interpretation of the role of the state in society and in the control of religion<sup>14</sup>. Elsewhere, where theology is practiced only in private faculties and seminaries, these questions may not constitute an existential issue, but remain at a theoretical level, responding to a need for inner clarity that has implications at most for one's own spiritual life or for the way one conceives apostolic work: does theology really have something to say not only about God and Jesus Christ, but also about the values that must underpin a society?

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. B.P. Göcke, *Katholische Theologie als Wissenschaft? Einwände und die Agenda der analytischen Theologie*, in *Die Wissenschaftlichkeit der Theologie 1*, B.P. Göcke (ed.), Münster 2018, pp. 145-164, in part. 145-146.

<sup>14</sup> Th. Dixon, *Science and Religion. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2008.

## Positions denying the scientific nature of theology

Some answers to the question of whether theology is scientific are negative for different reasons. For some, theology is not a science because it is a primitive form of knowledge that does not meet the criteria of science. For others, on the other hand, true theology is not a science, because true theology actually transcends the level of knowledge that can be obtained in ways that are generically regarded as scientific. Here theology is a higher form of knowledge. Finally, for others, especially theologians, working in fields such as biblical exegesis, church history, history of doctrine, canon law, pastoral care or practical theology, the question seems to be avoidable, as their method comes close to almost identifying with that of the other human sciences.

## Theology as inferior to science

The denial of the scientificity of theology as a cognitively inferior form of discourse compared to the other sciences can have several reasons<sup>15</sup>. Firstly, the very existence of God and the possibility or verifiability of revelation can be questioned. In this case, theology would have no object of its own and thus its discourse would be inherently empty of cognitive scope. On the contrary, theology has historically shown enormous difficulty in accepting scientific truths that have been peacefully demonstrated, which further proves its inconsistency. Then, as far as Catholic theology is concerned, the role of the Church's Magisterium seems to radically deny the necessary academic freedom. Finally, a large part of theology, biblical, historical practical theology, derives so many elements from related disciplines, that it could easily dissolve into them, and indeed sometimes it seems to do so.

All these objections are easily answered by noting how they actually depend on the model of science chosen as the term of comparison. Bernhard Lonergan, the famous Jesuit dogmatist, summarized this procedure in his monumental book 'Method in Theology' as follows: 'They select the science of their time that appears most successful. They study its procedures. They formulate its precepts. In the end, they propose an analogy of science. Science proper is the successful science they have analyzed. Other disciplines are scientific to the extent that they conform to its procedures, and to the extent that they do not, they are something less than scientific. (...) today, the word 'science' means natural science. One descends one or more rungs of the ladder

<sup>15</sup> For this paragraph, cfr. Ch.G. Pelz, *Vernunft-Freiheit-Gott. Mit Origenes und Kant zur Theologie als Wissenschaft*, Münster 2023, pp. 478-481.

when it comes to the human or behavioral sciences. Theologians then have to be content if his discipline is included in a list not of sciences but of academic disciplines<sup>16</sup>.

## Theology dissolved into science

Although these objections are also important from an existential point of view and require the utmost attention especially for beginners, they do not normally affect theological work directly. They can, however, influence the course of theological work to such an extent that the “theologicality” is almost reduced to a minimum in those subjects which, by their nature, are closest to the other human sciences. I am thinking here of biblical studies, where the exclusive application of historical-critical methods can lead to forget the theological reason for which the Holy Scriptures are read, that is, as the Word of God, and thus to relegate the fundamental religious content to second place. The same is true of the writings of the Church Fathers, or more generally of Church history; or even of practical theology, where sociology and psychology sometimes seem to have crowded out the presence of the Holy Spirit. The question here is whether it is really possible to understand the religious experience lived by women and men who were clearly motivated primarily by religious motives, without taking these into due account, and without questioning the truthfulness of the religious discourses that guided their actions.

Dogmatic  
Theology

## Theology as superior to science

The other denial of the scientific nature of theology comes from the opposite approach, entirely internal to the experience of the Church's faith. Evagrius Ponticus said: ‘if you are a theologian, you really pray; if you really pray, you are a theologian’<sup>17</sup>. What this position emphasises is that theology, that is, the true knowledge of God, takes place at a higher level than the kind of knowledge that can be achieved through the systematic progressive argumentative procedure typical of the

<sup>16</sup> B.J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Toronto 1971, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. Evagrius Ponticus, *De oratione*, 60. One way of taking account of the fact that God is above human science is what is known as apophatic theology, which says what God is not rather than what God is. One could argue that what is said in apophatism remains on a logical or scientific level, even though it is said in the form of negation, but it is true that the real point of apophatism is to hint at the mystery that is beyond human understanding, and in this sense apophatism implies that genuine theology is above science.



sciences in general. This form of science is also practised in theology, as we have seen in Origen. But true knowledge of God, that is, true science, would come by grace at a higher level, of dialogue with God and mystical experience. We can understand the importance of this statement in a context such as that in which the imperial Church found itself from the 4th century onwards, where theological debates on the mystery of the Trinity and the Incarnation deeply disturbed social peace and even became forms of legitimation for political opposition to central power. Evagrius' statement, however, does not in itself deny the usefulness, indeed the necessity, of scientific theology. In Maximus the Confessor we find a precise statement of the primacy of the pneumatic dimension for the true understanding of divine realities<sup>18</sup>. This, however, presupposes an intellect purified by the Spirit to such a degree of perfection that it cannot be taken for granted nor is it so easily attained. Knowledge, however elementary, acquired through the normal historical-philological argumentative systematic method remains an indispensable component of theological progress. Mystical union with God is indeed the ultimate goal, but it is not opposed to the 'scientific' approach; on the contrary, it presupposes it.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, criticisms of the scientific nature of theology seem to be due either to a different world view or to a different assessment of the cognitive capacities of man. They can therefore have a positive function for theology, forcing it to better clarify its assumptions and methodology. At the same time, however, it is the task of theology to identify the prejudices and a priori choices contained in these world-views as well as the aporias to which they lead. In this sense, theology as science should recover its critical function with regard to ideological or scientistic narratives that claim to have exclusive rights to the truth.

## Theology as science: some models

In addition to those who deny the scientific character of theology, there are those who not only support it theoretically but also practise it professionally. They believe that theological research produces a real increase in knowledge, and that this increase is subject to the laws of scientific progress: arguable, verifiable and consensually acceptable. But what is the nature of progress in theological knowledge? In other

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. Maximus Confessor, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, 65.

words, what is the purpose of scientific theology and what does it seek to achieve? Since it is impossible to give here even a simple overview of the possible typologies, we will limit ourselves to a few illustrative cases which, by their originality and impact, are representative of different approaches to theological work: Origen of Alexandria, Immanuel Kant, Karl Rahner and Josef Ratzinger.

## Origen

Origen of Alexandria (ca. 180-252 A.D.) was perhaps the first to practise theological research in a systematic way, initiating research in all areas: scriptural exegesis, history and philology, ecclesiastical tradition, and systematics from dogmatics to spirituality. He inspired the Fathers of the following centuries, even though some of his positions, not always correctly interpreted, led to doubts about his orthodoxy that lasted practically until the middle of the 20th century. What was the purpose of theological research for Origen? In philosophy, men have sought wisdom<sup>19</sup>. In Christ, who is the divine Sophia, Wisdom itself has spoken to men. This knowledge is contained in the faith of the Church transmitted by the Apostles, of which Origen, through his travels and contacts with all the great centres of Christianity of his time, is one of the main witnesses. Everything that is necessary for salvation is contained in this faith and in the knowledge it transmits. However, the Lord and his Apostles left many points open, so that the disciples, the believers, could carry out the theological search, which is also the way to become more and more similar to Christ. This search involves the whole person, his highest rational faculties, and determines his progressive conformation to the divine Logos, who is Christ. Theology, as a science, has as its aim not so much the exploration of divine mysteries in order to increase knowledge in a purely quantitative sense, as the realization of man's highest vocation. In studying the difficult points in the Holy Scriptures, it is possible to arrive at different solutions, which are nevertheless possible in so far as they are in harmony with the faith of the Church.

Origen's approach is thus characterised by great freedom and by the formulation of theoretical hypotheses, some of which would be rejected by the Church in later centuries. Nevertheless, it remains an example of a theological science whose scientificity is not simply derived from other forms of science, although the influence of the methods of philosophy and philology of the time is evident, but which

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. Origenes, *De principiis*, *Praefatio Origenis*, 1-4.

finds in itself and in the confession of faith the epistemological basis for its own approach.

## Immanuel Kant

### Dogmatic Theology

The Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) operates in a radically different perspective. It may seem surprising to include the great master of critical philosophy in a list of theologians. However, a careful reading of his written Manifesto on the Enlightenment (*Was ist Aufklärung?*) reveals how his ideas, though generally understood as *sapere aude* in all branches of knowledge, manifest their disruptive power first and foremost in theological practice<sup>20</sup>. Kant made significant contributions of a genuinely theological nature though no longer 'Christian' in the strict sense<sup>21</sup>. The results of his reflections profoundly influenced subsequent theology. In his Manifesto, Kant, like Origen, makes a clear distinction between dogmas, that is, the official teaching of the Church, and the further research by which the theologian seeks to advance knowledge. He distinguishes between two modes in the use of reason: a public use of reason, and a private use. As far as the theologian is concerned, he exercises reason privately when he is fulfilling his individual duty, essentially when, as a pastor and official of a particular church, he proclaims, teaches, and exhorts in accordance with the dogmas of the denomination to which he belongs. Here he must adhere to the doctrine for which he has been employed. But in an enlightened society, he must be able to make free use of public reason, that is, the possibility to openly criticising even the dogmas of his own church and proposing a better version of them. As a scholar, that is, as a scientist, the theologian according to Kant must be able, without prejudice to perform his official duty, to freely and publicly express his judgements and convictions, even if they differ from the adopted confession, in order to promote an improvement. It should be noted that, whereas for Origen the traditional dogma was the minimum but necessary guarantee of being in the truth, and therefore the progress of theological science is a progressive fulfilment starting from this basis, for Kant the traditional dogma is only a historical concreteness that cannot be disregarded because it constitutes the starting point and context of the theologian's work, but it has no permanent value in time: on the contrary, progress seems to imply a necessary overcoming

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. I. Kant, *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, first published in „Berlinische Monatsschrift“ 12 (1784), p. 481-494.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. G. Irrlitz, *Kant Handbuch. Leben und Werk*, Stuttgart/Weimer 2010, pp. 381-404

of the forms inherited from tradition. The Kantian approach, by not recognising the intrinsic value of the Church's witness (Kant of course lived in a Protestant country), creates a false competition between the theologian as scientist – the professor, who must advance dogma, and the theologian as pastor – the magisterium, who must adhere to the official dogma. Part of the contrasts between some university theology and the central Magisterium of the Catholic Church stems from an uncritical appropriation of this Kantian ideal of the scientific nature of theology.

Origen and Kant, while starting from different hermeneutical assumptions and with clearly divergent goals, seem to share the concept of theological progress as an effective increase in rationally argued and shared knowledge, leading to a concrete change in religious praxis, whether at personal or communal levels.

## Karl Rahner

Another master of theological thought, Karl Rahner (1904-1984), emphasised further function of theology as a science that is not included in the two ideals mentioned above. The figure of Rahner dominated the theological scene of the second half of the 20th century. For young theologians of that generation, he was a point of reference but also a challenge due to the complexity of his language and the breadth of his themes. In one of his earlier articles, on Clement of Alexandria, still written in Latin, he outlines a mode of theological work that actually seems to have become his inspirational model. In many of his writings, he seems to want to realise the ideal of theology that he believes he has traced in Clement of Alexandria in a way that is appropriate to the times<sup>22</sup>. In this short but very intense article, on the philosophical concept of *hyperkosmos* in Clement's works, he points out how at the heart of Clement's theological reflection was the effort to translate the Christian message into conceptual, philosophical and cultural categories that were comprehensible to the man of his time. This is not the place to consider whether and to what extent this interpretation is appropriate. Rather, it is important to note how clearly a specific task of theology as a science is outlined here, which is to translate the Christian message into a language understandable to the people of our time. It is easy to recognize in this aim the ideal underlying many recent products of theology. The increase of knowledge would consist

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. K. Rahner, *De termino aliquo in theologia Clementis Alexandrini, qui aequivalet nostro conceptui entis "supernaturalis"*, "Gregorianum" 18 (1937), pp. 426-431.

in the ability to isolate the fundamental core of the faith, separating it from what has been its historical mantle, and then to clothe it in a comprehensible language and conceptual framework that can be communicated in today's world. This also leads to the lack of appreciation of the theological tradition, which has a purely historical scope but no concrete relevance for the Church's current mission, as an inexorably outdated form. This approach has greatly influenced not only recent theological research in Catholic circles, but also pastoral practice, with results that await critical evaluation. If such an approach is necessary, it runs the risk of taking as its criterion of reference no longer the content of faith, but the presumed capacity of contemporary man to understand it<sup>23</sup>. Christian novelty is in danger of being curtailed and reduced to the minimum that the dominant culture can accept.

## Josef Ratzinger

Finally, I would like to refer to Josef Ratzinger (1927-2022) in a 1990 text of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum veritatis*, on the ecclesial mission of the theologian<sup>24</sup>. This is actually an official document and not a personal writing by Ratzinger, but there is no reason to believe that there is not complete agreement. Leaving aside the immediate context of this document, which was written in response to a public position taken by groups of theologians<sup>25</sup>, what is relevant is the synthesis that Ratzinger offers of the task of the theologian, and thus of theology as science. This arises from a movement in two directions: from the attraction towards its object, the Truth revealed in Christ, and from the desire to communicate to others what is known (DV 7). The particular nature of the object also determines the way, the method by which the theologian should approach it, which must therefore be in the context of a life of faith (DV 8). At the same time, historically theology, as a rational endeavour to deepen faith, has developed into a truly scientific discipline (DV 9). Critical rigour is thus part of it, but it still requires constant intellectual honesty, lest it be enslaved by ideological struggles that have little scientific value. The relationship with the other sciences then takes into account the

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. J. Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, Maryknoll N.Y. 1999.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. *Donum Veritatis. Instructio de Ecclesiali Theologi vocatione*, 24.05.1990, "Acta Apostolicae Sedis" 82 (1990), pp. 1550-1570.

<sup>25</sup> It was the so called "Kölner Erklärung", Declaration of Cologne of 1989. The complete title: *Wider die Entmündigung – für eine offene Katholizität. Kölner Erklärung katholischer Theologieprofessorinnen und Theologieprofessoren vom Dreikönigfest 6.1.1989*.

proper object of theology, which ultimately determines its method (DV 10). Finally, theology takes place *within* a believing community, and this determines how scientific theology relates to other ecclesial instances, the Magisterium and the People of God. In this perspective, integrated in a synthesis, we see the needs expressed by Origen, as personal depth, by Kant, as the public role of theological knowledge within the Church and society, by Rahner, as a commitment to communication. At the same time the relationship between theology and the other sciences is reaffirmed. This relationship is necessary, but it presupposes that theology remains true to itself and does not dissolve into other forms of knowledge.

## Conclusions

In the present context, the question of the scientific nature of theology's scientificity is usually raised in defensive terms: Theology has to prove that it is a science at the same level as the others in order to be accepted in the university context. However, this has sometimes meant that theology has had to adopt epistemological categories alien to itself and its own assumptions. In order not to lose its relevance as a science, Theology must keep at the centre of its work, with intellectual honesty but determination, the view of reality that comes to it from being a science of Faith. A young Australian researcher, Paul Tyson, who has been working on theological epistemology, has recently proposed a provocative project: instead of leaving the narrative on the nature of truth and the characteristics of true knowledge to the philosophy of science, why not develop a theology of science, capable of bringing the discourse on truth to a higher level than that of the currently dominant naturalistic sciences?<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the last word on theology as science has not yet been spoken.

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<sup>26</sup> Cfr. P. Tyson, *A Christian Theology of Science. Reimagining a Theological Vision of Natural Knowledge*, Grand Rapids 2022.

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