
0221 რელიგია და თეოლოგია Religion and Theology

Crisis in Theological Education — Ask a Question

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The article belongs to the field of theological studies:

Christian Ethics, Educational Studies.

Abstract

Theological education is currently facing a crisis marked by declining applications and school closures. This paper examines the challenges discussed in Ted A. Smith's *The End of Theological Education* (2023), highlighting how shifting societal values, economic pressures, and evolving religious contexts contribute to this issue. It explores the dynamic nature of Christian ethics and the transformation of knowledge into a commodity, arguing for a renewed focus on curiosity and critical questioning in theological study. To sustain the relevance of religious institutions, the paper calls for a dialogical approach that embraces diverse perspectives and ongoing inquiry.

Keywords: Theological Education, Christian Ethics, Knowledge Crisis, Societal Shifts, Curiosity, Dialogical Approach, Religious Institutions.

Religious schools are facing closures, and theological institutes are experiencing a decline in applications. While the situation in other fields remains uncertain, it is clear that theological education is facing significant challenges and conflicts. This crisis can be attributed to shifting priorities over the centuries, influenced by various factors including economic pressures, religious transformations, and pragmatic considerations. “*The End of Theological Education*” by Ted A. Smith discusses how changes in societal priorities and economic pressures impact theological institutions, providing a nuanced understanding of the current crisis in theological education (2023).

Christian ethics is the study of morals and practices guided by the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus. This field of study is dynamic and varied, reflecting how people in specific historical contexts understand their faith in relation to the unfolding world around them, with its scientific discoveries, cultural shifts, political movements, and ecological changes. Christian ethics is inherently a process of interaction and conflict, as it involves navigating differences in interpretation and application of Scripture, authority, and moral discernment. This dynamic process invites us to engage deeply with the complexities of faith and morality, encouraging a multiplicity of perspectives that enrich our understanding of what it means to live ethically as Christians (Marshall, 2018).

In contemporary society, knowledge has transformed from a pursuit of intellectual inquiry into a commodity that is integral to business and economic growth. As financial resources become concentrated in areas of high market demand, the value and perception of knowledge have shifted accordingly. This shift raises several critical questions: What constitutes knowledge in today's world? How do we comprehend its importance, and what steps are necessary to deepen our understanding?

To address these questions, we can consider the guiding principles found in the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus. How do we interpret and understand these teachings? This inquiry varies widely depending on individual perspectives and cultural contexts. How do I understand them? How do you? How did our great-grandparents interpret them? How might someone in Bolivia, Georgia, Baltimore, or Berlin perceive them? (Marshall, 2018).

These questions highlight the diverse approaches to Scripture and underscore the importance of context in shaping our understanding of religious teachings. Such diversity in interpretation enriches our collective comprehension and encourages dialogue across different perspectives. Engaging with these varied approaches invites us to explore and appreciate the multiplicity of ways in which knowledge, particularly theological knowledge, can be understood and applied.

My approach will focus on Christian knowledge and its role in shaping a lifestyle that reflects the unique aspects of human existence. By connecting knowledge with religion, specifically Christianity, we can explore its profound significance. Unlike any other being in the universe, humans are distinguished by their capacity to question their existence. No deity, animal, plant, or other entity questions existence; for them, it is a given, marked by a cyclical routine and repetition.

Humans, however, are dynamic beings characterized by their desire for growth and development. This drive for understanding sets us apart as discontented creatures, always seeking more. Philosopher Ilia Miniatis offers a thought-provoking perspective: when considering why God did not create humans on the first day, he humorously suggests that humans, with their inherent curiosity, began teaching God, proposing, “Let’s create it together in this way and in another way.” (2007). This reflects the uniquely inquisitive nature of humanity, highlighting our role as active participants in the ongoing creation and understanding of the world. To truly comprehend the essence of God and engage in meaningful inquiry, the Word and knowledge must be born within us. This inner awakening enables us to understand what it means to participate in creative engagement, akin to the divine. It is through the Incarnation that we gain the tools necessary to reflect deeply on the significance of being made in the image of God (McFarland, 2005).

Humans are inherently curious and restless beings, and much of human knowledge is driven by this sense of dissatisfaction. We are naturally drawn to explore the meaning of life, yet the vastness of knowledge is such that it cannot be fully exhausted. This is why Socrates famously said, “I know that I know nothing.” This perspective reflects a healthy attitude toward knowledge: an acknowledgment of our own limitations and a commitment to lifelong learning. It is not a statement of despair at never knowing enough, but rather an invitation to continually seek more. This recognition of what we do not know is something divine within humanity.

Knowledge begins with wonder, admiration, and the passion of curiosity (Cahalan, 2017). A person must be intrigued and captivated by the unknown to embark on the pursuit of understanding. In theology, this journey begins with spiritual astonishment and continues with even greater awe, highlighting that it is a never-ending process. While reading a book can provide some knowledge, the entirety of knowledge is neither exhaustive nor complete. Complacency is akin to stagnation, whereas an insatiable desire for knowledge is vital for growth.

There is a peril in becoming complacent and losing interest, akin to a form of intellectual death. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14). These words can be interpreted in many ways, but one interpretation is that to be like a child means to retain a sense of wonder and curiosity about the world, always ready to ask questions and be intrigued by the mysteries around us.

We live in a world full of surprising events – pandemics, wars, hardships, and unemployment – that should provoke our curiosity and lead us to ask difficult questions. To be like a child means to nurture this innate curiosity continuously, which can transform us throughout our lives. For children, a week can feel like an entire era because they encounter new and intriguing things every day. For adults, if this sense of wonder fades, interest in knowledge diminishes, and time seems to pass quickly without meaning. By rekindling our sense of wonder, we can relive the vitality of our childhood curiosity.

Curiosity is not something that can be purchased or obtained through special tools; it is a gift, a profound interest that places us inside the experience of discovery. The Latin root of the word “interest,” *inter esse*, means “to be within.” If our interest in religious knowledge wanes, and the desire to learn about the supernatural world fades, then pragmatic thoughts alone will fill our minds. In such a scenario, the theological seminary, the church, and even the concept of God could lose their significance. Religious rituals would lose their meaning if we no longer ask, “Who is God, and what is the importance of God’s presence in my life?”

As long as we can engage people with these essential questions, the church will continue to thrive. Sustaining this curiosity and interest in the profound mysteries of life is crucial for the enduring relevance of religious institutions.

Christian theologians and pastors are entrusted with the responsibility and privilege of pursuing religious knowledge. It is their role to inspire and assist others in cultivating their own understanding (Maguire, 2024). The Gospel of Matthew contains a profound teaching: “Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them” (Matthew 13:12). This passage highlights the importance of actively developing the knowledge inherent in each of us and striving for more. Knowledge is infinite, while we are finite beings.

When our hearts are devoted to seeking the infinite, this desire remains alive and vibrant within us. However, if we cease to be interested in learning and growth, even the knowledge we have will diminish. Without appreciation and active engagement, knowledge can fade, becoming inert within us. We may possess vast amounts of information, but if we do not care or engage with it, that knowledge becomes lifeless.

In this way, the pursuit of knowledge is a continuous journey, requiring both commitment and curiosity. As we actively engage with the world around us and with the divine, we nurture the desire for understanding and ensure that our knowledge remains dynamic and alive.

For theology to remain relevant, a culture of dialogue and an openness to challenges are essential. A dialogical culture recognizes that neither I nor you possess the entire truth, but together, we can seek the path to understanding. The pursuit of knowledge itself is a quest for truth.

To nurture this pursuit, we must break free from routine and approach learning with the curiosity of a child, asking questions and exploring new ideas. Without this engagement, we risk becoming complacent and losing interest in existential matters. The current lack of interest in studying theology may stem from our failure to raise meaningful questions and adequately motivate the next generation (Parker, 2022).

In contemporary theology, fragmentation is often perceived due to theologians presenting divergent perspectives rather than a unified front. However, the emphasis should not solely be on the differences in their ideas but rather on the scale and depth of their intellectual engagement. For instance, while Karl Barth and Marcella Althaus-Reid may hold divergent views, both have dedicated their lives to exploring and analyzing theological issues. Their commitment to cultivating thought exemplifies their *modus vivendi*, or way of life. Theology encompasses a multitude of questions, as Ian A. McFarland notes: “The category of the divine image has occupied an important place in theological anthropology from the second century and continues to serve as the framework for a good deal of contemporary Christian reflection on human being. While the content of the divine image remains a matter of debate...” (2005, 1). The evolution of opinion among theologians over time is a natural aspect of the pursuit of knowledge. For instance, Karl Barth revised his understanding of the Trinity in his later work. Initially, Barth dismissed the use of creation to describe the Trinity as a dangerous distraction that did not contribute meaningfully to the knowledge of God. This shift illustrates the importance of embracing thought, change, and adaptation. Knowledge fosters growth, dynamism, and transformation.

The evolution of theological opinions over time is a natural facet of the pursuit of knowledge. For example, Karl Barth’s later work revealed a shift in his understanding of the Trinity. Initially, Barth criticized the use of creation as a framework for understanding the Trinity, viewing it as a potential distraction that did not advance the knowledge of God. This evolution underscores the value of embracing change, intellectual flexibility, and development within theological inquiry.

We should aim to see humanity not merely as a series of situations but as a complex task involving the discovery of knowledge structures. Life is indeed worthy of immortality, and being human involves embracing the ongoing quest for understanding (Souled, 2011).

Finally, individuals should focus on what lies within their power and responsibility, rather than concerning themselves with matters beyond their control. In theological education, this perspective should serve as a guiding principle. We must strive to provide students with a platform for inquiry and free thought, acting as facilitators of their intellectual growth. By doing so, we offer a form of intellectual and spiritual therapy, empowering students to explore and engage deeply with theological questions.

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მამა ანდრია (გიორგი) სარია

რეზიუმე

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საკვანძო სიტყვები: სასულიერო განათლება, ქრისტიანული ეთიკა, ცოდნის კრიზისი, საზოგადოებრივი ძვრები, ცნობისმოყვარეობა, დიალოგური მიდგომა, რელიგიური ინსტიტუტები.