



Philosophy for Understanding Theology

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ABSTRACT

This article, "Philosophy for Understanding Theology," examines the crucial connection between philosophy and theology and claims that a greater understanding of religious ideas requires philosophical investigation. The article illustrates how ancient and contemporary philosophical ideas have influenced theological growth and tackled important issues like the nature of God, existence, and morality by charting the historical interactions between these fields. It assesses modern philosophical challenges to conventional theological concepts and looks at the contributions of major philosophical traditions, such as the Aristotelian and Platonic impacts on early Christian theology. Ultimately, the paper makes the case that philosophy is still relevant in contemporary theological debate, highlighting the need for a critical interaction between these two disciplines to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of religion. The author hopes to promote more discussion and interdisciplinary cooperation through this investigation, enhancing theological and philosophical studies.

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Introduction

A fundamental component of intellectual inquiry, the link between philosophy and theology offers a basis for comprehending important issues of existence, morality, and divine purpose (Allen, 1985; Mudimbe, 2002). To assist theologians to interact with complicated ideas and investigate divine secrets with clarity and depth, this article looks at how philosophy improves the comprehension of theological notions (Brown, 1990; Macquarrie, 1966). Theologians can tackle important questions like morality, the existence of God, and free will in an organised manner by incorporating philosophical techniques. The theological conversation is expanded beyond Western viewpoints thanks to the cross-cultural insights from African philosophical thinking, which specifically highlight many approaches to these issues (Hountondji, 1983; Wiredu, 1980). The convergence of philosophy and theology highlights the disciplines' worldwide importance by fostering discussion across many intellectual and cultural traditions and deepening religious inquiry.

We start by defining philosophy and theology and outlining their distinct contributions to this continuing discussion to provide a solid basis.

Definition of Philosophy and Theology

Fundamentally, philosophy is the study of existence, reality, and knowing. It is a field that studies the nature of the universe and human experience by applying logical analysis and critical thinking. Allen (1985) defined philosophy as a "search for truth," aiming to provide answers to issues that are outside the purview of empirical science. By examining the nature of reality and our moral responsibilities, branches of philosophy including metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology help us grasp a variety of religious notions (Brown, 1990; Macquarrie, 1966).

In contrast, the study of the divine is known as theology, and its main topics include the nature of God, the connection between humans and the supernatural, and the existential and moral ramifications of religious belief. Theology, in contrast to philosophy, is firmly anchored in religious traditions and uses holy texts, teachings, and spiritual experiences to investigate ethical and metaphysical issues (Macquarrie, 1966). According to Hountondji (1983), theology is an interpretative field that combines doctrinal and spiritual knowledge to investigate issues of supreme importance, such as human destiny and purpose (Mudimbe, 2002).

Importance of the Intersection between Philosophy and Theology

For a thorough grasp of theological issues, philosophy and theology must be integrated. Theologians may more precisely handle difficult metaphysical and ethical concerns thanks to

philosophy's crucial analytical tools, which help to explain and understand theological ideas. By anchoring philosophical investigation in particular religious beliefs, theology, on the other hand, gives it a purpose and context, converting philosophical concepts into useful frameworks that can be applied to actual spiritual and moral issues (Allen, 1985; Brown, 1990).

Indigenous beliefs and cultural viewpoints in Africa further enhance this junction by contributing distinctive views to theological debate. African philosophers like as Wiredu and Mudimbe emphasise the importance of cultural and historical settings for theological inquiry and urge for a theology that integrates African worldviews (Mudimbe, 2002; Wiredu, 1980). A more thorough grasp of theology that speaks to a variety of groups and expands the conversation beyond conventional Western frameworks is made possible by this contextual approach.

Purpose of the Article

The article aims to demonstrate how philosophy is a crucial instrument for comprehending theology, especially in situations that call for both historical and intercultural viewpoints. To show that philosophical ideas are crucial for theological growth and allow for a more thorough and in-depth understanding of religious truths, this examination will draw on both Western and African traditions (Hountondji, 1983; Mudimbe, 2002). The article seeks to provide a more comprehensive view of theology that incorporates a range of philosophical and cultural perspectives by analysing contributions from both traditions.

Historical Context

The background information required to comprehend how philosophy and religion evolved together over the ages is provided by the earlier examination of their fundamental ideas. As we go into the historical background, this part explores the origins of philosophical ideas, looking at how they influenced theological research in the early years and how theology and philosophy evolved throughout time. We can gain a clearer understanding of how philosophy and theology converged to form crucial doctrinal frameworks by following these beginnings, from Pre-Socratic concepts to the significant influence of individuals like Augustine and Aquinas. This historical tour sheds light on how philosophical reasoning developed into a crucial component of religious discourse, enhancing and broadening its use in many intellectual and cultural contexts.

Origins of Philosophical Thought

Western philosophy has its roots in the ancient Greek tradition, especially in the work of the Pre-Socratic philosophers, who looked to natural rules rather than

mythological explanations to explain the universe. By examining abstract ideas like the essence of reality and the laws regulating the cosmos, pre-Socratic thinkers like Thales, Anaximander, and Heraclitus presented ideas that contradicted preexisting narratives (Brown, 1990; Wiredu, 1980). By emphasising logical explanations and the idea of a unifying principle that governs the order of the universe, these early philosophers set the stage for later philosophical research (Allen, 1985).

A greater emphasis on ethical and epistemological issues was brought about by the shift to the Socratic age, and this would later have a significant impact on religious debate. In addition to turning philosophical thinking inward—toward ethics and self-knowledge—Socrates' emphasis on moral virtue, the investigated life, and the search for truth also created opportunities for the discussion of issues that would subsequently be covered by religious frameworks. According to Plato, Socrates' student, his teachings had a significant influence on theological musings on the nature of truth and goodness, which are crucial for theological debates of divine characteristics (Allen, 1985; Hountondji, 1983).

Later theological conversations were built on the Socratic method of analysing ethical standards. The impact of Socratic philosophy on moral and metaphysical issues became apparent in early Christian theology when theologians such as Augustine would go on to develop these concepts (Brown, 1990; Mudimbe, 2002).

Development of Theology with Philosophy

1. Early Christian Thought

To express and defend Christian concepts within the dominant Greco-Roman intellectual culture, early Christian philosophers integrated philosophical ideas into their theological thoughts, producing a complex intellectual synthesis (Macquarrie, 1966; Wiredu, 1980). By fusing Greek philosophical ideas with Christian doctrines in an intellectually demanding and understandable way, Justin Martyr and other early apologists, for example, used philosophical reasoning to explain Christian beliefs to a largely sceptic audience (Allen, 1985; Hountondji, 1983).

One of the most important theologians of the early Church, Augustine of Hippo, developed his theological arguments on the nature of God, the soul, and sin by adapting Platonic concepts. Augustine's writings demonstrate a deep synthesis between Platonic philosophy and Christian theology, particularly about the idea of everlasting forms or ideals and the immateriality of God. His writings, which showed that philosophical understanding may enhance religious convictions, would establish a standard for theological discourse for generations (Brown, 1990; Mudimbe, 2002).

2. Influential Theologians (e.g., Augustine, Aquinas)

By combining Christian teaching with Aristotelian philosophy, Thomas Aquinas improved the connection between philosophy and theology. To clarify theological ideas, Aquinas methodically used philosophical reasons in his writings, especially in the *Summa Theologica*. He demonstrated an approach that became the cornerstone of subsequent theological and philosophical endeavours by using natural reason to investigate the qualities of God and the moral law (Allen, 1985; Macquarrie, 1966).

Since both Aquinas and Augustine used philosophical reasoning to formulate, defend, and advance theological concepts, they serve as examples of the mutually reinforcing link between philosophy and theology. Their writings provide a framework for comprehending the rationality of religion, which has had a major impact on Christian thinking and continues to be an essential component of theological studies today (Brown, 1990; Macquarrie, 1966).

The influence of these thinkers is also felt in African philosophical theology, where scholars such as Kwasi Wiredu emphasise a synthesis that recognises philosophical and cultural diversity and argue for the necessity of placing philosophy and theology within African realities (Wiredu, 1980; Mudimbe, 2002). Leonard Ndzi supports this strategy, emphasising in his recent writings the value of incorporating indigenous viewpoints into theological debate, especially considering the world's rapid technological advancement (Ndzi, 2023, 2024).

Philosophical Foundations for Theological Inquiry

A thorough grasp of fundamental ideas like metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics is essential for analysing the intellectual foundations of theological investigation. These fields provide frameworks for discussing important issues that are essential to both philosophy and theology, such as the nature of God, reality, knowledge, and morality. Philosophers and theologians have long employed these frameworks to explain and defend religious convictions, justify religion, and analyse the moral implications of divine mandates (Allen, 1985; Hountondji, 1983).

Key Philosophical Concepts

1. Metaphysics: Nature of God and Reality

The study of existence and reality, or metaphysics, is fundamental to theological debates over God's character. The nature of God's existence, being, and qualities are among the philosophical concerns in this field that have been discussed from the time of ancient Greek philosophy. For example, subsequent theological conceptions of God as the "unmoved mover" were informed by Plato and Aristotle's investigation of substance and form. This thought significantly influenced early Christian philosophers such as Augustine and Aquinas (Mudimbe, 2002; Wiredu, 1980). To determine whether God exists independently or as an inherent

component of creation, contemporary metaphysical investigations frequently examine the link between God and the physical cosmos (Brown, 1990).

2. Epistemology: Understanding Knowledge and Faith

Since it studies the nature of faith and belief, epistemology—the study of knowledge—is essential to theological investigation. Questions like "What is knowledge?" and "How do we come to know about God?" are addressed by philosophical epistemology. Calvin's theology, for example, emphasises the idea of *sensus divinitatis*, or an intrinsic sense of the divine, which implies that people are born knowing God (Allen, 1985; Ndzi, 2023). Philosophers like Alvin Plantinga contend that believing in God can be "properly basic" without requiring empirical proof, which is consistent with philosophical viewpoints that support a type of "basic belief" in God's existence (Wiredu, 1980; Macquarrie, 1960).

3. Ethics: Morality and Divine Command

Discussions of divine command theory, which holds that moral standards are based on God's instructions, frequently arise from the junction of ethics and theology. Ethical concerns are often discussed in theological discourse from the perspective of divine will and the moral precepts found in holy scriptures. In contrast to secular ethics, which frequently place a higher priority on human reason and social standards, this viewpoint—which is evident in the writings of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas—argues that real morality derives from conformity to God's rule (Kafu, 1999; Allen, 1985). Furthermore, philosophical ethics is still a source of inspiration for contemporary Christian ethics, particularly when it comes to applying moral reasoning to difficult problems like social justice and societal technology breakthroughs (Ndzi, 2024; Macquarrie, 1960).

The Role of Logic and Reason in Theology

1. Use of Rational Arguments in Theology

Historically, theology has used logical justifications to back up beliefs in concepts like the presence of God and the nature of the soul. The ontological, teleological, and cosmological arguments for God's existence are all grounded in logic and reason, demonstrating how philosophical reasoning is frequently used in religious discourse. Thomas Aquinas's "Five Ways," for instance, are philosophical arguments for God's existence that combine Christian theology and Aristotelian metaphysics to offer logical justifications for faith (Brown, 1990; Macquarrie, 1960). These arguments highlight how crucial philosophical reasoning is for

supporting theological assertions and proving the validity of religious belief within a rational framework.

2. The Limits of Human Reason in Grasping Divine Mystery

Theology recognises the limitations of human comprehension, particularly regarding the divine mystery, despite the use of reason and reasoning. Many theologians contend that although philosophy contributes to theological understanding, it is unable to adequately capture God's essence since divine nature frequently defies human understanding. Apophatic theology, which emphasises how language and human notions cannot adequately explain God, is consistent with this viewpoint. These limitations were recognised by theorists like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who maintained that although reason is a useful instrument, revelation and faith are ultimately necessary for genuine knowledge of God (Allen, 1985; Brown, 1990). Because of this, theology acknowledges that some facets of the supernatural are still fundamentally unexplained and recognises the limits of human reason.

Major Philosophical Contributions to Theology

It is necessary to examine the key philosophical contributions that have greatly influenced theological discourse as we go from a study of the fundamental historical effects on Christian thinking. The significant influence of Greek philosophy on early Christian theology is where this investigation starts, providing a crucial foundation that still shapes theological viewpoints today. After that, we'll look at how contemporary philosophy has changed, especially throughout the Enlightenment and postmodern periods, which have given conventional theological frameworks both chances and problems. To appreciate the dynamic interaction between philosophy and theology throughout history, one must comprehend their intellectual contributions.

A. Influence of Greek Philosophy on Early Christian Theology

The theological underpinnings of early Christianity were greatly influenced by Greek philosophy, which offered conceptual frameworks for comprehending ideas like the character of God, the soul, and moral law. Platonic concepts had a significant impact on Christian philosophy, especially those pertaining to the immaterial and everlasting forms. Christian theologians' conception of God as the ultimate and flawless entity was made possible by Plato's idea of an ultimate "Form of the Good" (Allen, 1985). This Platonic paradigm was embraced by early Christian philosophers such as Augustine, who emphasised God's immutability, perfection, and presence outside of time. This laid the groundwork for later Christian theology (Brown, 1990).

Furthermore, Aristotle's ideas influenced Christian scholasticism in the Middle Ages, particularly

through Thomas Aquinas' writings. The concept of a teleological, or purpose-driven, universe—where everything has an ultimate purpose that leads to God, the "Unmoved Mover"—was presented by Aquinas through his synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy (Macquarie, 1966). This idea, which maintained that logical study of the universe may disclose facets of God's character, was revolutionary in the development of ideas centred on natural theology. Theological concepts were enhanced by Aristotle's emphasis on empirical observation, which made it possible for reason to support trust in the comprehension of divine truths (Wiredu, 1980; Allen, 1985).

By linking faith and reason and enabling a more methodical approach to theology, Plato's and Aristotle's theories became pillars of Christian theological discussion and dogma. Theologians in the scholastic tradition especially appreciated these contributions because they offered a framework for discussing ideas like the essence of Christ and the Holy Trinity (Brown, 1990). Because Aquinas's writings established Aristotelian logic as a fundamental element of theological research and contributed to the development of the lasting dialectic between faith and reason, Aristotle's impact became a distinguishing characteristic of mediaeval theology (Hountondji, 1983; Macquarie, 1966).

Modern Philosophical Developments

With its emphasis on reason, empiricism, and human liberty, the Enlightenment presented orthodox Christian theology with important philosophical problems. The metaphysical tenets of conventional religion were challenged by enlightened intellectuals such as Immanuel Kant, who maintained that human knowledge is restricted to phenomena and is unable to embrace the noumenal, or ultimate reality, which includes God (Cambridge Companion to Kant, 1992). Arguments concerning the relationship between faith and reason were reshaped by Kant's philosophy, especially his moral argument for God's existence, which held that although we cannot rationally prove God's existence, a moral framework requires faith in a higher moral authority (Wiredu, 1980; Brown, 1990).

Theologians were prompted to reconsider how theology ought to interact with human reason by Kant's method, which resulted in a more critical examination of the doctrinal and biblical underpinnings. Theologians also re-examined church beliefs and structures, emphasising personal spirituality and moral responsibility in response to Enlightenment scepticism towards religious authority. This change has a profound effect on contemporary theological viewpoints, promoting an emphasis on individual faith and moral conduct as opposed to doctrinal conformity (Brown, 1990; Mudimbe, 2002).

Philosophical criticisms of conventional religion developed further in the postmodern period. The idea of ultimate truth and the meta-narratives that religions

frequently espouse were contested by postmodern intellectuals such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (Cambridge Companion to Hegel, 1993). The universal claims of Christian theology, especially those pertaining to salvation and divine revelation, were called into doubt by postmodernism's focus on heterogeneity, contextuality, and the subjective character of reality. By encouraging theologians to reconsider fundamental texts and interpretative techniques, Derrida's idea of "deconstruction," for example, fostered a more dynamic and fluid approach of scripture interpretation (Hountondji, 1983; Mudimbe, 2002).

Thus, postmodern philosophy has created new avenues for religious discussion by prioritising contextuality and interpretative variety above absolute truth. This change aligns with the modern theological challenge of addressing many and intricate worldviews in a more interconnected society. Theology has been forced to change because of these criticisms, encouraging discussions that accept cultural diversity and differing viewpoints while still attempting to articulate religion in a way that is both pluralistic and cohesive (Cambridge Companion to Kant, 1992; Wiredu, 1980).

Contemporary Implications

It is clear that the conversation between these two fields is more important than ever when we go on to the modern implications of the philosophical contributions to theology. A philosophical reexamination of conventional theological frameworks is required in light of society's continuous growth, which is characterised by swift technical breakthroughs, cultural changes, and urgent ethical quandaries. This interaction, which grounds theological discourse in rigorous philosophical investigation, improves it and promotes a greater understanding of contemporary challenges. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how philosophical ideas still influence contemporary religious doctrine and practice, especially when it comes to resolving ethical issues and the complex interrelationship between religion and science. By doing this, we may see the critical role that philosophical theology plays in the continuous search for significance and relevance in the complicated reality of today.

The Relevance of Philosophy in Modern Theological Discourse

Philosophy still plays a crucial part in contemporary religious discourse in today's complicated world because it offers a framework for dealing with urgent ethical problems. Modern civilisation faces issues like social justice, climate change, and bioethics, all of which need for a careful blending of theological ideas with philosophical understanding. Theologians use philosophical ideas to clarify moral obligations and faith-based ethical frameworks as they work through these challenges (Garrison, 2021; Nelson, 2020). For example, by highlighting the relational aspects of moral

responsibilities, the philosophy of care ethics might guide religious solutions to social injustices (Held, 2006; Sele & Wanjiku, 2024). Therefore, philosophical study is essential to creating a strong ethical theology that can handle the complexities of today's problems.

Additionally, philosophy may make a substantial contribution to contemporary religious debate in the crucial topic of the interaction between religion and science. Philosophy acts as a bridge, enabling a fruitful conversation between faith and reason as scientific discoveries contradict conventional theological understandings. Alvin Plantinga and other philosophers have argued that religious belief and scientific investigation may coexist and work together to improve human comprehension of the world (Plantinga, 2011; Craig, 2018). In addition to enhancing theological thinking, this synthesis demystifies science for religious audiences, promoting a society in which religious and scientific enquiries may coexist (Vaughn, 2022; Kearney, 2021). In this sense, philosophy's value in contemporary religious debate stems from its ability to foster insightful discussions that touch on both moral issues and the scientific paradigm.

Philosophical Theology as a Field of Study

Because of its interdisciplinary methods, philosophical theology has become a unique academic discipline that emphasises the connection between philosophy and theology. To examine theological ideas and deepen their comprehension of religion, scholars in this field use a variety of fields, such as metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology (Baker, 2020; Nelson, 2019). The rich flow of ideas made possible by this interdisciplinary character not only expands the field of theological investigation but also reaffirms the applicability of philosophical frameworks in addressing theological issues (Hunt, 2021; Wainwright, 2019). Philosophical theology is therefore more than just an academic endeavour; it is an essential field in which deep questions concerning life, ethics, and the essence of God may be investigated and comprehended in a modern setting.

As the value of both disciplines in tackling social issues becomes increasingly apparent, the merger of philosophy and theology in academic settings is probably going to increase in the future. Theologians and philosophers will work together to examine how these developments affect religion and spirituality because of the rise of new technologies, societal changes, and philosophical movements (Adams, 2021; Smith, 2023). For example, philosophical criticisms of technology and its effects on community and individual identity must influence theological answers as the digital age changes human connection and understanding (Weller, 2020; Leonard, 2024). By taking a proactive stance, philosophical theology will continue to be applicable and flexible, promoting an extensive discussion that influences both scholarly research and real-world religious applications in a changing world.

Conclusion

A strong and cohesive notion of faith in modern culture is largely shaped by the interaction between philosophy and theology. This article has examined several important topics that show how philosophical understandings enhance theological discussion and enable a more sophisticated response to urgent moral problems and the intricacies of contemporary life. First, philosophy's historical contributions to theology have been crucial in helping to define core theological ideas and beliefs. Philosophical underpinnings supplied by individuals like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas still influence theological debates today (Allen, 1985; Brown, 2009). Furthermore, modern philosophers have emphasised the importance of human experience and ethical issues in theological inquiry, underscoring the need for theology to interact with contemporary philosophical ideas (Mudimbe, 2002; Hountondji, 1983).

Engaging with philosophical frameworks can enrich the depth of theological investigation, according to concluding perspectives on the importance of philosophy for theological knowledge. It provides a critical perspective that allows Christians to consider their religion, deal with current ethical issues, and create a more complete worldview. According to current research, including philosophical analysis into religious discourse promotes greater comprehension and applicability in a constantly changing social environment (Wanjiku & Sele, 2024; Ndzi, 2023). Additionally, by bridging gaps between differing philosophical viewpoints and theological principles, this integration fosters critical thinking among religious groups.

It is crucial to advocate for further discussion between philosophy and theology considering these observations. To foster understanding and cooperation, this kind of conversation should not just take place in academic settings but also in the larger religious community. Addressing the intricate problems that confront mankind today requires talking with philosophers and theologians about how science, ethics, and spirituality interact. We may develop a more comprehensive knowledge of the human situation and our connection with God by encouraging this conversation (Mudimbe, 2002; Kafu, 1999). In the end, this cooperative endeavour may result in a deeper theological conversation that speaks to the problems and realities of the present.

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Leonard has published several scholarly articles addressing critical issues in African evangelical Christianity, including technological advancement, marriage, and the role of the Holy Spirit. He also teaches theology courses at Africa International University (AIU), blending academic excellence with his dedication to spiritual development. He is a member of the Elders Scot at Karen Community Church (KCC), Nairobi Kenya. His work reflects a deep commitment to faith, leadership, and advancing the Kingdom of God.