

Theology v. Philosophy

What Does Athens Have To Do With Jerusalem?

Nearly one thousand years before Jesus Christ, a man born to His forefather's throne became Israel's first publicized "theologian", or perhaps it is better to say, the world's first philosopher King. As history has it, he supposedly studied the nature of plants and animals, the humanities, religion, government, architecture and metaphysics for an explanation of things unseen. Inasmuch his reign was globally acknowledged for his unorthodox yet profound earthly wisdom, a capacity requested for in prayer as a child. Born roughly 400 years before ancient Greek philosopher, Thales of Miletus (c.620–?540 BC), who is more often than not credited as the first of his kind, King Solomon was and still is recognized for his intelligibility and equitable judgment. As time would twist it, his wisdom 'got to his head', rejecting not only his own proverbial intents to, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and *lean* not on your own understanding..." (Proverbs 3:5), but embraced a lifestyle of over-abundance and self-indulgence where wealth, women and idolatry merely represented his own self-conscious deviancy, "...Vanity of vanities, all *is* vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Though history speaks a warning through his later theological complacency, it was not in vain. How often do we consider that perhaps Solomon's methodology, or intelligible approach, actually attracted a secular audience of gentile kings, queens and cultures of all sorts? Sure it is fair to argue in the thick of it he gave way on his beliefs, but is that not a result of his own self-made virtues, or in other words, did he not "lean" and was more so inclined to believe his own understanding? Who is to say the approach or method was wrong? Especially if used as a tool of expression for missiological and evangelical spheres. Scholarly circles have coined this debate, "*What Does Athens Have To Do With Jerusalem?*" Yet before we can efficaciously react with any sort of legitimacy, however disagreeable, we must first understand: What is the fundamental difference between theology and philosophy? Being it a blog, and not an exhaustive document, I will attempt to summarize this matter as best I can – albeit, as quickly as I can.

All modern Christian theologians, whether liberal, existential or traditional, study the nature of truth, reality, existence and essence, and subsequent topics of law, logic and morality necessarily dependent upon Biblical texts. Typically theologians utilize both Hebraic and Greek translations to better understand the humanities in relation to the nature of God, hence the Greek *theologia* (θεολογία) derivative of *Theos* (Θεός), meaning "God," and *-logia* (-λογία) from *logos* [λόγος] meaning "logic" or "to reason an account". In conservative scholarship, the Bible is more than just a book that is self-referentially coherent; it is anticipated that, 'if it is true, it must be externally verifiable'. Does God not declare his existence through what is natural? In this case, such an approach has become to mean *apologetics*, where apologists as it were, "defend" the biblical account from the standpoint of not only scriptural doctrine, but through the logic God implanted within His creature so that all could hold inescapable correspondence with His created reality and therefore Himself, who is irrefutably the highest reality. Of course it ought to be evident that logic is dependent upon reality in order for anything to be conceivably logical at all! The standardized belief seems to be by persistently striving to know the personal God of the Bible who is both rational and relational in nature, a deeper understanding of *self* and humanity will develop. To abbreviate all theological disciplines, it is simply asking, arguing

and answering life's most necessary and significant questions from the Biblical account of truth, reality, existence and essence; in one course it is organizing information and in another it is problem solving, all to understand the cohesive nature of the intrinsic Word with the extrinsic world. Interestingly enough, this same driving force for understanding reality is what ancient to present philosophers attempt to articulate – notwithstanding the modernized disbelief in even the very possibility of a relational God.

Etymologically, philosophy roots from Ancient Greek φιλοσοφία (*philo-sophía*), which literally means "love of wisdom", and has become to mean, broadly speaking, the study of the fundamental nature concerning truth, reality, existence and essence, rooting academic disciplines in aesthetics, epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, language and logic with branches in politics, history, and religion; all of which imply a psychology and sociology. In short, as with theology, philosophy too simply asks, argues and attempts to answer life's most necessary and significant questions by organizing information and problem solving such into overarching perspective of reality, a term known among analytic philosophers as *Ontology*. Unlike theology however, such a cognitive process is derivative and commonly acknowledged as only a self-referential understanding of reality, as goes the saying, "it is all a matter of interpretation". As such philosophers nowadays tend to pick-and-choose and then arrange former notions, theories, treatise and accounts of reality to bolster one's own perception of it, and however reasonable or relatable it may be is entirely dependent upon the intellectual at large. So to abbreviate the matter once again, philosophy as a unified whole is strictly an intelligible method, it is broadly speaking a process of understanding and more easily recognized as the process of ontological understanding.

One question that might come to mind is that if philosophy is the study of reality without God's Word, why even bother with it at all? For centuries, conservative theologians considered philosophy a lower form of theological corruption. Why should we enact any kind of philosophy?

It is not that you should become a philosopher *per se*, but our approach and method need to be comprehensive. It is after all our duty as Saints and ambassadors of Jesus Christ to, "... [S]anctify the Lord God in your hearts, and *always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you*, with meekness and fear..." (1 Peter 3:15), and in the very least, attempt to provide an answer, however simple or complex, the unbeliever will understand. In part, this comes with hearing the question by empathizing with the questioner, and being able to rationally respond to the question personally, relationally and Biblically, since truth is both internally and externally verifiable, "For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse..." (Romans 1:20) Take for instance, Justin Martyr (AD. 100-165), a student of ancient philosophy and later Christian convert became known as one of the first apologists of the early Church, utilized a philosophically stimulated theology to defend the Biblical account against the Roman Emperor, Antoninus Pius (AD 86-161).

Returning to the first question posed, the fundamental difference between theology and philosophy, as it is perceived today, is the authoritative source of truth. Philosophy, as an enterprise and cognitive process has become to mean, not that it is, a self-authoritative profession. Consider for a moment that theologians use a similar process to understand reality (albeit, with the Holy Spirit in some cases), because we all use the same logical mechanisms to do so, known as the *laws of logic*. And to be "without excuse" means the unbeliever must

process the reality of things similarly. Did God not design all humans to understand, or at least the propensity to want to understand, how and why things work? As paraphrased from Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics series, "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all." So let me say this as clearly as I can, the problem is not with the "love of wisdom" or philosophy as it were, it is with *sin nature*. – And who is without sin? Is it not our antediluvian weakness to "lean" on our own understanding above all else, and to presuppose "it is all a matter of interpretation"? The Biblical account of reality explicitly states the one and only authoritative source of truth is in conflict with our predispositions, which effects how we think, believe and understand things from childhood to adulthood. However it is not without resolve. We are fastened by what the early Church father's called that, "rock of offense".

With all things considered, my point is that unlike King Solomon, we are at an advantage. Through the belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ alone, being born again in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, our capacity to love and trust in the Lord with all our heart and lean not on our own understanding ought to be more intimately understood, and therefore, the true believer in this sense is less susceptible to fall away, if indeed it is possible, or be led into temptation from philosophical deviations. Once more, "If you do what is right, won't you be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." (Genesis 4:7) I do not suppose St. Paul had to face similar questions with 'what does Jerusalem have to do with Athens'. In summary: **Acts 17:16-34**

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