

November 2021

"Theology" in the Public University

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“Theology” in the Public University

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Religious Studies
Department of Religious Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
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Date of Approval:
November 10, 2021

Keywords: Essential, Peacebuilding, Conflict, Secular

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my loving and supportive parents, Joan and Jim Tripp.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the helpful guidance of my thesis committee, Dr. Adib Farhadi and Dr. Garrett Potts, and particularly my director, Dr. Michael DeJonge, who was ever patient and insightful while helping me stay the course of this challenging topic.

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have suggested the transformative potential of “theological” inquiry and discourse in religious studies, particularly, in furthering religious literacy and peace building initiatives through greater understanding of “other”. Yet, “theology” is a relatively new academic approach to peace building and conflict studies and is still marginalized to a large degree in secular universities. Vigorous inquiry into the intrinsic value and potential role of “theological” inquiry and discourse in secular academics, as well as possible pedagogical strategies, are worthwhile and necessary towards achieving the wider aims of the secular university. To those ends, this paper presents a broad survey of the problem of “theology” in the public university and seeks to affirm the fundamental permissibility and value of theological inquiry and discourse in secular academics. This study demonstrates that “theology” need not be conceptualized as a singularly Christian or sectarian endeavor. Comparative and philosophical modes of theological inquiry can be non-sectarian in their aims, are comparable to other “deep-thinking” academic disciplines, and do not necessarily violate secular academic principles or constitutional obligations. Additionally, exposure to multiple theologies in the non-sectarian setting of the public university may further afford students the opportunity to safely explore their individual understanding of global ethics. “Theology”, when thoughtfully undertaken in secular academics not only belongs in the public university, but may be indispensable for fulfilling the highest ideals of public education.

CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION — “THEOLOGY” IN THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

Though many world religions rest on distinct theological underpinnings, theological inquiry is generally limited in public university religious studies to avoid potential conflicts with first amendment mandates and secular principles. Recently however, renewed interest in the viability of "theology" in the secular university has increased alongside a growing emphasis on religious literacy across varying academic and professional fields, situating comparative theological studies as *uniquely* valuable for furthering both academic excellence and religious literacy. In that case, theological inquiry begins from a non-sectarian starting point, yet, through dialogue, debate, and coursework affords students invaluable “insider” insights into the profounder aspects of various lived faith traditions, beyond cultural and social artifacts. Exposure to multiple theologies in the non-sectarian setting of the public university may further afford students the opportunity to safely explore their individual understanding of global ethics.

As noted by several recent scholars including Heather DuBois and Janna Hunter-Bowman (2015), the transformative potential of theological discourse in religious studies deepens religious literacy through greater understanding of “other”, essential in our postmodern world of globalized communications and interactions. Further, in depth studies of theological systems and how they specifically influence adherents can be vital to multidisciplinary fields such as criminology, behavioral science, and business, for which deeper religious literacy or specialized religious-cultural insight is often called for. Recent

studies, such as those conducted by Maria Pilar Aquino (2011), Scott Appleby and Susan Hayward (2012), among others, have demonstrated the critical role of religion and “religious literacy” in successful peacebuilding and countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives.

A natural extension of these findings is for public universities to expand religious studies and multidisciplinary curriculum to offer specialized coursework aimed at better preparing students for leadership roles in the fields of CVE and community peacebuilding. Naturally, such specialized academic objectives call for specialized academic undertakings, including in depth *theological studies* to significantly expand religious literacy and awareness.

Further, thorough-going religious studies (alone or in conjunction with other academic disciplines), *apart from* the specific aims of religious literacy and peacebuilding, should strive for comprehensive curricula that sufficiently addresses *all* aspects of lived faith, including the theologies that underpin religious traditions. Theological discourse and debate in the classroom can offer a *unique* opportunity for students to better understand how religious doctrines influence social dynamics in faith communities (and thus the world), by exploring and discussing firsthand the more subjective aspects of these traditions.

Undoubtedly, the proposition of introducing theological inquiry and discourse into secular academics, no matter how non-sectarian the aims, presents a unique set of logistical and historical challenges, particularly, in terms of first amendment concerns; specifically, because over time “theology” has come to be widely (if erroneously) understood as a distinctly Christian endeavor, equated with sectarian aims and even dogma, positioning *all* forms of theological inquiry in the public university as a first line threat to secular principles and secular academics.

How or *if* to incorporate “theology” into secular academics is part of the broader question: what role (and to what degree) should the public university play in fostering religious literacy to begin with? This paper rests on the assumption that public universities

generally aim to support global peace-building efforts through religious literacy. Due to the limited scope of this paper, the following discussion will proceed on that assumption and explore only the theoretical and conceptual challenges specific to the implementation of “theological” inquiry and discourse in secular academic settings, within the broader context of that aim, and in relation to first amendment considerations.

The central problem then is two-fold— (1) how can the public university adequately answer the challenge to further religious literacy and expand religious studies curricula *without* the *unique* contribution of theological inquiry and discourse and— (2) if theological inquiry and discourse *is* introduced into secular religious studies coursework, how can secular academic neutrality be sufficiently safeguarded? Underpinning these considerations is the more subtle question—is “theological” inquiry and discourse in secular academic settings *in essence* the primary objection— when many public universities offer curricula that already blurs the line between theology and cultural religious studies (studies of “sacred texts” etc.)— or is it simply the naming it so (“theology” = Christianity); and, if so, can that underlying objection be met with a simple conceptual reframing of “theology” in secular academics, as suggested for example by Wesley Wildman in his offering of “religious philosophy” as an alternative to “philosophy of religion”?

Wildman frames “religious philosophy” as a broad term that can accommodate theology and other “big question” secular multidisciplinary aims. On the necessity for reconceptualizing and broadening this academic terminology Wesley writes:

The term religious philosophy is helpfully vague. It has been used before here and there, most notably in passing by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, but no particular usage has taken hold within scholarly circles. Under-determination of the phrase makes it well suited to tolerate the definition “multidisciplinary comparative

inquiry” —and certainly better suited to this task than other plausible candidates for naming the full range of philosophic approaches and resources I address here (2010, xiv).

Can “theology” be re-conceptualized in *essential and plural* terms that abide with secular academic standards? In an effort to better understand the various challenges associated with doing “theology” in the public university, the following discussion (divided into three sections) will explore a number of key issues associated with framing “theological” inquiry in secular academics, including: **(I)** A) can “theology” be defined in non-Christian/sectarian terms, B) the historical progression of “theology” from pre-Christian philosophical origins to its present sectarian characterization and, C) the significance of “theology” in non-Christian religions such as Islam, Hinduism and Judaism; **(II)** first amendment and other practical challenges to “theology” in secular academics and how those might be met; including brief examples from leading scholars, such as Wesley Wildman and David Cheetham and finally; **(III)** why comparative theological inquiry/discourse is *uniquely* vital, apart from “comparative religion”, towards the broader aims of secular religious studies, especially, religious literacy and peace-building.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NON-CHRISTIAN “THEOLOGY”

This section aims to re-conceptualize the commonly held notion that “theology” is *essentially* a Christian endeavor rooted in Christian systems of thought. Rather, as demonstrated in its various historical philosophical applications and distinctive character in *non-Christian* religions, “theology”, in essence and in practice, can be understood contextually. First, in non-confessional terms as a form of philosophical inquiry, integral to comprehensive religious studies and philosophy, and compatible with secular academic principles; and more narrowly, as a cross cultural religious phenomenon warranting comparative inquiry in secular academics. This is related to the broader claim of this paper, that the normative view of “theology” as a singularly Christian discipline has resulted in the marginalization of not only sectarian theology (rightly so) in secular academics, but *all* forms of philosophical and comparative theological inquiry and discourse as well.

To those ends, this section will briefly survey non-Christian dimensions of “theology”, beginning with its historical *philosophical* roots (*essential theology*), including a cursory sketch of the evolution of “theology” from pre-Christian philosophical origins to later Christian appropriations. This is followed by a broad examination of the significance and unique character of “theology” in non-Christian religions such as Islam, Judaism and Hinduism (*religious theology*), in support of the central claim that theological inquiry and discourse in secular religious studies *can* and *should* be approached from a comparative perspective that will further religious literacy and academic excellence *and* maintain secular academic principles.

The scope of the present paper does not allow for an exhaustive examination of *all* world religions or even *most* religions, but instead, will specifically address those major religions within the Abrahamic and Vedic traditions that, at their cultural intersection, most significantly (presently) impact global society. It is this ongoing impact that best illustrates why comparative theological inquiry and religious literacy are essential for peace building, as part of the overarching social science objective of the public university.

Further, the following discussion pre-supposes that “theological” language such as *god*, *divine*, *sacred* etc. is not, in and of itself, objectionable in the secular academic context, since religious language (*god*, *divine*, *sacred* etc.) is essential to secular religious studies and does not require a particular defense here. Likewise, that the common argument against the *legitimacy* of “theology” as a serious academic pursuit, based on contested inferences (the reality of *god* etc.), is comparable to arguing against the validity of any academic discipline, such as ethics, that relies on contested inferences as a starting point for building hypotheses, and is not, in and of itself, inhibitive to doing “theology” in the secular academic setting.

2.1 Defining Theology in Essential Terms

Defining “theology” in essential terms is the logical first step towards establishing its permissibility in the public university and determining if there are any *inherent* conflicts between doing “theology” (in the broad or comparative sense suggested here) and maintaining first amendment, secular principles. A brief look at the etymological meaning and origins of the word/undertaking offers some insight into its original classical philosophical aims and illustrates how “theology” has diverged significantly from its original broader implications (more suited for secular studies) to its normative signification as *Christian* thought systems.

The following basic etymological definition of “theology” as— the study of god (s)— found in the Encyclopedia Britannica, will serve as a simple working definition of “theology”

in this paper: “The term theology is derived from the Latin [word] *theologia* (“study [or understanding] of God [or the gods]”), which itself is derived from the Greek [word] *theos* (“God”) and *logos* (“reason”) (Britannica Online).

The practice of “theology” (study of god (s)) originated with pre-Christian Greek philosophers, such as Plato, who were interested in the ultimate nature of reality, the existence of higher forms (the supernatural, the “good” or god (s) etc.) and how these realities and forms interact with the mundane world:

Inspired by the cosmogonic notions of earlier poets such as Hesiod and Homer, the pre-Socratics were preoccupied with questions about the origin and ultimate nature of the universe. The first great theologian, however, was Socrates’ student Plato, who appears also to have been the first to use the term theology. (Britannica Online).

How then did *theology* become so Christian?

2.2 “Theology” Became Christian which Became a Problem in the “University”

The following historical timeline roughly illustrates the evolution of “theology” in philosophical thought and culture, moving from its origins as pre-Christian speculative philosophy (popularized during the classical and Hellenistic eras) to distinctly Christian systems of dogmatic justification from the patristic era forward— gradually rendering “theological” speculation taboo in secular studies from the enlightenment era to the present day: (1) “*theologia*” (study of god) is noted in Pre- Socratic and Platonic philosophy (470–399 BCE) with speculation on higher “Forms”; → (2) continues with Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and his theories on “first substance” and the “unmoved mover”; → (3) is popularized in the Hellenistic period (323 B.C. to 30 B.C.) and is later systematized and formalized in Christian thought in the Patristic era (100-400 CE), “speculation about the ultimate nature of reality assumed a distinctly

religious cast...these ideas very quickly found acceptance among Christian thinkers, notably the 3rd-century theologian Origen" (Helmut Thielicke, Britannica Online) → (4) later, earlier classical philosophical influence evident in Dionysius the Areopagite (6th Century C.E.), *The Mystical Theology*, "Pseudo-Dionysius borrowed the kataphatic-apophatic distinction from the great 5th-century Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus" (Helmut Thielicke); → (5) by the time of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and his major contribution *Summa Theologiae*, "theology" has become a distinctly Christian endeavor.

By the 13th century "theology" is universally synonymous with "Christianity" and Christian thought "systems", and remains so to the present day, despite the notable significance of "theology" in several non-Christian traditions such as Judaism (pre-Christian) and Islam. As noted by Helmut Thielicke regarding the evolution of theology from its pre-Christian origins, "The wide application of the term, as well as the current fragmented state of the discipline, indicate the extent to which the classical concept of theology as the highest pursuit of the intellect has been transformed over the centuries" (Britannica Online).

Writing on the challenge of establishing "theology" as a proper academic discipline in secular settings, Andrew Louth, Professor of Patristic and Byzantine Studies in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham asserts that:

The concept of theology that is applicable as a science in all religions and that is therefore neutral is difficult to distill and determine. The problem lies in the fact that, whereas theology as a concept had its origins in the tradition of the ancient Greeks, it obtained its content and method only within Christianity. (Britannica Online)

While Louth proposes that "Theology", understood in terms of Christian philosophical systems, does not apply to other faith traditions, he agrees that its conceptual *themes*, such as the nature of the divine or humankind's relationship with the "supernatural" do. This is

somewhat confusing since both the *term* for and the *doing* of “theology” (even systematically-though loosely so) existed before Patristic Christian philosophical systems. How can we say that something which preceded and influenced Christianity lacked substantial content *until Christianity*?

Setting that aside for the moment, the question arises, why should “theology”, in determining its applicability and value in secular religious studies, be conceptualized in sectarian terms *at all* beyond its original, broader philosophical aims? A clearer distinction should be made between *theology (essential)* and later versions of *religious theology* in such a case. The statement, “The problem lies in the fact that, whereas theology as a concept had its origins in the tradition of the ancient Greeks, it obtained its content and method only within Christianity” (Louth), reflects the arbitrary manner in which ‘theology’ has been framed by scholars for centuries.

The central problem of “theology” in secular academics, then, appears to lie less with doing “theology”, which *in essence* allows for wide-ranging non-sectarian theoretical and comparative speculative inquiry and discourse (language and inference itself not being necessarily inhibitive), and more with its normative conceptualization as a strictly sectarian endeavor (specifically its Christian signification). Specifically, the conflation of Christian “dogma” with “theology” in popular thought (and often the academe) has largely stifled comparative, non-sectarian theological inquiry in the public university.

Further, maintaining the terminological integrity of “theology” in secular academics matters, as speculation on “ultimacy”, god, the sacred etc., is unique to “theology” apart from other philosophic endeavors. If “theology” is re-framed to intentionally dilute its characteristic aims, the public university misses out on its full explorative potential.

We have established that “theology” can be understood in non-sectarian terms as a philosophical truth-seeking endeavor. Below, I will explore the vital interplay of theology (*religious*) in *non-Christian* religions, pointing to the value of comparative theology in religious studies, peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

2.3 “Theology” In Non-Christian Religions

This section offers several brief examples of the distinctness of “theology” (*religious*) in Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam. Because this paper is concerned mainly with the conceptual *plausibility* of “theological” inquiry and discourse in secular academic settings, against present day secular concerns, in depth analyses of individual theological traditions will not be offered here, but only a glimpse into the critical relationship between non-Christian religions and theological thought to demonstrate, if only elementarily, that “theology” need not be intellectualized in *Christian* terms. Further, that *comparative* theological inquiry and discourse has something vital to offer secular religious studies, particularly, towards furthering religious literacy, peacebuilding studies, and conflict resolution.

2.3.1 Judaism

While the notion of Jewish “theology” may be resisted by those fearing prescribed Christian overtones, several recent scholars such as Marvin Sweeney, Alon Goshen-Gottstein and David Novak recognize the distinct role of Jewish “theology” in individuating Jewish Law and religious thought from other traditions, particularly, Christian “Old Testament theology”; highlighting that it is precisely its “theology” that has historically set Jewish religious culture apart from later Christian theological appropriations.

The following commentary illustrates the varied role of Jewish theology in historical and contemporary Jewish thought, culture, and religious law, incidentally demonstrating, by

its very variety, how “theological” studies in general can afford students’ deeper insights into non-Christian faith traditions that cultural studies alone cannot.

In discussing the practical functions of Jewish “theology”, Marvin Sweeney, Professor of Hebrew Bible at the Claremont School of Theology, in his essay “Jewish Biblical Theology”, hints at its vital role in differentiating Jewish cultural identity and thought from “Old Testament theological” traditions stating:

Theology is the systematic theological interpretation of the Jewish Bible (Tanak). The reason for such qualification is that the Bible appears in multiple forms, most of which are Christian and are constructed to give expression to the concerns of the Christian Bible and Christian theology. But the Jewish Bible appears in its uniquely distinctive form as the Tanak, which enables the Jewish Bible to function as the essential and foundational work of Jewish thought and practice. Jewish Biblical Theology is part of a larger dialogue within Judaism with G-d, the Jewish people, and humankind at large concerning the experience of ancient Israel and Judah in the world and their reflection on the meaning of that world. It is part of the larger dialogue of Jewish thought as an ongoing whole. (2016, pg. 42).

This sentiment is echoed by Alon Goshen-Gottstein, founder and director of the Elijah Interfaith Institute, in his astute analysis of Jewish Theology of Religions (comparative theology) and its emerging role as a contemporary discipline aimed at framing Jewish cultural and religious particularity:

Jewish Theology of Religions is as old as Judaism itself. And yet, it is the newest of reflective disciplines, one that has barely taken hold in a Jewish context. In the most basic way, Jewish Theology of Religions is a reflection carried out from within Judaism in relation to other faiths, their beliefs, their validity, and what value, if any, Judaism finds

in them... As a result of these considerations, one may generalize that Jewish scholar who engage in a Jewish Theology of Religions do so not only because of a felt need to articulate a view of other faiths for practical purposes of coexistence but also out of deep concern for Judaism, its mission, and its ideals. Articulating a Jewish view of other faiths is more than prescribing guidelines for good neighborly relations. It goes to the heart of Judaism's continuing relevance, its enduring message on humanity's stage, expressed in how it relates to other religions. A Jewish Theology of Religions is at its core as much a statement about Judaism as it is a view of other faiths. (2019, Pg. 344)

Again, noting the integral interplay between Jewish theology and Halakha (Jewish law) and the legitimacy of Jewish "theology" in general, David Novak, Professor and J. Richard and Dorothy Shiff Chair of Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto, in his chapter entitled "What is Jewish Theology: Two Views of Jewish Theology", asserts:

...halakha needs theology for its own integrity is probably the best way to advocate for the authenticity of Jewish theology. And, as we shall also see, theology needs halakha to give its exercise normative force. (2020, pg. 22).

In later describing the *phenomenological* aspect of Jewish theology (the "2nd" type of theology) arising from religious experience and "revelation", Novak writes:

In the oldest translation of the Bible into any non-Hebraic language, the Greek Septuagint, the Hebrew *davar* or "word" is rendered *logos*. Thus, the Hebrew "the word of the Lord" (*dvar adonai*) is sometimes translated as *logos tou theou*, namely, "God's word." As such, it might be said that Jewish reflection on the meaning of "God's word" is what best denotes Jewish theology as a legitimate, indeed fruitful, Jewish intellectual enterprise. (2020, pg. 23).

These poignant examples of the relevance of Jewish theology, described by Sweeney, Goshen-Gottstein and Novak, while offering but a glimpse of the complex nature of Jewish religious thought, well illustrate the vital interplay between *theology* and the Jewish religion and culture including biblical exegesis, Halakhah (law), relationship to “other” religions (particularity), and experiences of lived faith that calls for deeper understanding.

2.3.2 *Hinduism*

Hinduism presents a complex maze of religious traditions, gods, rituals, sects and philosophies. Admittedly, Hindu theology in that respect can only be addressed in vaguest terms here. Yet, it is undeniable that Hindu “theology” exists and is relevant, if only in the broader sense in which theology can and should be defined for its use in secular academics. For Hinduism, in all its various religious configurations, is nothing if not philosophically oriented towards the “sacred”.

Francis Clooney, S.J., Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology, makes a succinct case for the significance and legitimacy of Hindu “theology”, in his chapter entitled “Restoring “Hindu Theology” as a Category in Indian Intellectual Discourse”. Here, the author addresses less conventional definitions of theology towards better understanding Hindu religious thought (s) suggesting:

if we work with a broad and nuanced notion of theology—along with a less idealized and less all-encompassing notion of philosophy—we will be able to see the virtue of reviving theology as a category for understanding Hindu thought... I suggest that denigrating or excluding “theology” is not a service to Indian thought. Rather, such a denigration reads a problem indigenous to European history into an Indian context where religious commitments have so often been deeply intertwined with the most rigorous reasoning;

even a richer sense of philosophy seems inadequate to the spiritual and religious values at stake; differences aside, “theology” remains a most viable and useful term. (2003, pg. 449).

Though aimed at defending the legitimacy and distinctness of Hindu “theology” specifically, Clooney’s following claim might just as easily be applied to the broader argument for the intrinsic value of *theological inquiry* in secular religious studies:

Today, though, the views of theology in relation to science and philosophy are more nuanced and less heated. Depending on one’s discipline and intellectual position, one can formulate a variety of pro- or antitheological stances or, often enough, simply ignore the category of “theology” altogether. Yet as we shall see below, theology persists in resurfacing as a serious intellectual discipline, and today it again commands more urgent attention. Here I will argue that it is also an appropriate and useful term in the context of the study of Indian thought. (2003, pg. 448).

Regarding more concretized examples of Hindu theology, Swami Paramatattvadas in his book, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology*, offers a detailed look at the relatively recent yet prolific religious movement, Swaminarayan Hinduism, showcasing again the unique relevance of theology, not only in the Swaminarayan movement, but towards understanding Hindu thought in general, stating:

A discussion of any classical Hindu school of thought invariably begins with an inquiry (mīmāṃsā) into, or discussion of, its basic entities or realities {tattvas}: How many metaphysical entities does it accept as real and which ones? The answer to this fundamental question more often than not reveals much about the school’s basic premises and beliefs. For example, within Śaṅkara’s absolute monism, the singular attribute-less{nirguṇa} entity of Brahman necessarily requires the visible world to be unreal and

illusory. In contrast, Rāmānuja’s acceptance of cit {sentient} and acit {non-sentient} entities in addition to Īśvara {God} allows for both the world to be real and for individual souls to be distinct from God. (2017, pg. 69)

Hindu theology, while perhaps more challenging to frame than the more analogous theological traditions of the Abrahamic religions, warrants serious consideration and investigation in secular religious studies, offering novel insights into the labyrinth of Hindu religious perspectives and systems that broader scientific inquiry alone may not.

2.3.3 *Islam*

Islam, like Christianity, has a well-documented theological tradition dating back to roughly the mid-8th century C.E., with the emergence of doctrinal debates on the proper interpretation of Islamic tenets and laws. In his chapter entitled “Dialectical Theology in the Search for Modern Islam” Abdulkader Tayob, chair in Islam, African Publics and Religious Values at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, investigates how recent studies have contextualized *modern Islam* in contemporary and often fragmentary terms, moving away from the critical religious and cultural underpinnings of Kalam (Islamic dialectical theology) and resulting in a new “sectarianism” based on binary distinctions between “traditional” and “modern” Muslims (2018).

Tayob suggests that a better understanding of *modern Islam* places it within “the framework of the much longer history of Kalam” (2018, pg. 162). Speaking directly to contemporary Islamic studies, the following commentary by Tayo illustrates the crucial role of Islamic dialectical theology in locating *modern Islam* in contemporary studies:

Together with justification, then, representation occupied a central role in the quest to identify modern Islam. Islam and Muslims had been placed in the twilight shadow of Western modernity. The shadow was lifted, but enough to mark an outline. More critically,

as the quest for representation had come under the challenge of Foucault in general, and Edward Said on the study of Islam in particular (Foucault 1980; Said 1995), representation became impossible. The meaning of Islam and Muslims became responses and engagements around activities and beliefs. From the perspective of kalām, such “representations” emptied Islam and Muslims of any clear and tangible center. (2018, pg. 180).

Similarly, in describing the impact of Islamic theology on *usul-al-fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence), the heart of Islamic ethics, Dr. Umar F. Abd-Allah in his chapter entitled “Theological dimensions of Islamic Law” writes:

The historical relationship between the sacred law and classical theology (*kalam*) must be distinguished from the law’s inherently religious nature, its immense body of positive law, and the various Sufi paths of spiritual illumination. Islamic theological speculation exercised only a limited impact on positive law, but its influence on Islamic legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*) was profound. The emergence of *kalam* and that of *usul al-fiqh* were roughly coeval. Both disciplines matured centuries after the schools of Islamic law had formulated their distinctive corpuses of positive law. (2008, pg. 237)

Regarding theology and countering violent extremism, Daniel Lav, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Department of Arabic Language and Literature, explores the critical relationship between Islamic militancy and theology in his recent book, *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology*. In his chapter entitled “Theology and the Changing Shape of Militancy”, Lav focuses on the role of “theology” in shaping the “Salafi jihadist” movement, specifically, how “theological and jurisprudential writings produced by these radicals” have influenced the intellectual evolution of the school (2012, pg. 170). On the relationship between theology and radicalism in general, Lave asserts:

In fact, I would contend that it is difficult to understand the behavior of dogmatic radicals like the salafi jihadists without understanding their underlying theology, particularly as they view jihad first and foremost as a means of championing tawhīd (as in al-Maqdis slogan al-tawhīd wa'l-jihad). (2012, pg. 170)

Lav concludes his chapter with a definitive emphasis on the role of theological concerns (theology) in the propagation and motivation of the Salafi jihadist movement:

What is clear is that in the two decades that have elapsed between the writing of Abu al-Walid's letter and the present, Salafi jihadi ideas have spread sufficiently widely in Somalia to precipitate the split within the Islamic Courts Union, and, in a kind of feedback mechanism, are now being further bolstered by al-Shabab's military strength. This underscores an important lesson: Abu al-Walid's characterization of the Salafis as pursuing the "way of the rhinoceros" was fundamentally flawed, because they do not, in fact, rely solely on military means. Their way is rather what Ibn Taymiyya characterized as that of the "Book and the Sword", and it advances as much by study and proselytization as by bombings and bloodshed. (2012, pg. 200).

The above theological sketches (scant as they are) demonstrate the crucial impact of non-Christian theological thought— not only within religious contexts— but across varying sectors in our global society, further illustrating practical and philosophical applications for theological inquiry in furthering religious literacy and peacebuilding studies in public universities.

CHAPTER THREE:
KEY CHALLENGES TO “THEOLOGY” IN THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

Theological inquiry, approached from a non-sectarian comparative perspective, presents novel opportunities for public university students to explore “religion” more substantively, while providing them with transformative learning experiences aimed at increasing religious literacy and expertise within the fields of religious studies and philosophy. However, as previously noted, incorporating theological coursework into secular religious studies presents a unique set of logistical challenges, including the “what” and “how” of overcoming historical biases and legitimate concerns regarding first amendment conflicts. Audrey Lingley, curriculum specialist of Portland State University, goes so far as to suggest that modern and post- modern educators have been indoctrinated into a culture of fear with regards to “religion” in the classroom (2014).

While “theology” is generally considered off limits in secular academics, many classes in contemporary secular religious studies may already include theological considerations in their coursework, by way of discourse on sacred texts and other similar media as they relate to “adherents”. However, professors and students engaged in such theologically oriented discourse may feel compelled to avoid certain relevant questions or remarks during classroom dialogue to avoid unintentionally opening topics that can be construed as overtly “spiritual”, thus opposing secular academic principles.

How then, can these justifiable concerns regarding the place of theological inquiry in secular academics be overcome; and more specifically, how can instructors comfortably determine what to include or leave out of theologically oriented coursework within the

framework of their constitutional obligations? The principle aim of this section is to briefly survey key historical and present-day challenges and objections to “theology” in the public university, particularly, first amendment and pedagogical concerns, and to explore how leading scholars suggest these challenges may be met.

Although this paper does not directly address *interfaith dialogue* in secular academics but rather the broader undertaking of *theological inquiry*, these two endeavors often overlap and face many of the same challenges in secular settings. The overarching considerations associated with both “interfaith” dialogue and theological inquiry are summed up succinctly by David Cheetham, Professor of Philosophical Theology at the University of Birmingham and Co-Director of the Birmingham Centre for the Philosophy of Religion (2005), in his discussion on “interfaith” dialogue in the academe entitled “The University and Interfaith Education”.

Cheetham points to several “up front” issues associated with introducing “interfaith dialogue” into secular curricula, comparable to the challenges associated with framing “theology”. Some key issues to consider are: (1) defining the term “theology” (this was addressed in chapter two) (2) what should be included in the body of “theological” coursework and material from each faith tradition? (3) how should theological curriculum be structured to avoid preferential treatment or apparent biases towards one theological tradition over another, and (4) first amendment issues- can theology be introduced without violating underlying secular principles? (2005).

While all of the above considerations are noteworthy, chapter two has previously offered a broad working definition for “theology” (study of god (s)), and our concerns here lie more generally with how “theology” interacts conceptually with constitutional obligations; therefore, the following discussion will focus on the specific challenge of reconciling “theology” with first amendment and pedagogical considerations, deemed here the most persistent challenges to ‘theological’ inquiry and discourse in secular academics today.

3.1 First Amendment Legal Considerations: *Abington School District v. Schempp*

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution states:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances (various sources).

Typically, first amendment concerns associated with “theology” in the public university are centered on keeping *sectarian religiosity* out of the classroom. As previously noted, first amendment challenges to incorporating theological inquiry and discourse in secular academics are exacerbated by the pervasive view that “theology” is synonymous with Christian thought (sectarian dogma); but putting aside that particular challenge for now, what *are* the specific constitutional issues associated with normative “theology” (as it stands today) in secular religious studies?

Of particular interest, is the landmark supreme court case, *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 1963, in which the court ruled in favor of the respondent, Edward Schempp, against the constitutionality of mandatory bible reading in the public elementary classroom. While this case is *essentially* legally unrelated to the constitutionality of *theology* in the public university, it has critically impacted how many public universities and educators view first amendment constitutional obligations (Griffin, 2000).

Legal issues associated with theology and public education are addressed thoroughly in the essay, “We Do Not Preach, We Teach.”: Religion Professors and the First Amendment”, by Leslie C. Griffin, William S. Boyd Professor of Law at the University of Nevada, warranting considerable attention here. Griffin’s central claim is that present-day legal concerns related to “theology” in public university stem from a widespread misinterpretation of the 1963 supreme court case, *Abington School District v. Schempp*. Specifically, Griffin asserts:

Scholars decided that the Court settled the constitutional question [permissibility of theological studies] in a 1963 school prayer case, *Abington School District v. Schempp*, when the Court stated (in dicta) that “teachers may teach about but not of religion in the public schools”. From *Schempp* [] scholars concluded that the First Amendment prohibits the teaching of theology but permits religious studies in state universities.(2000, pg. 6)

However, Griffin continues, “the Court has never addressed the constitutional status of theology or religious studies. In time, religious studies became the preferred academic discipline in both private and public universities as theology declined in influence. (2000, pg.6-7).

According to Griffin there was no legal precedent in *Schempp* for the impermissibility of “theological” studies in public universities, *as long as* instructors present theological material from a non-sectarian perspective without the intent to evangelize, thus teaching “*about* religion *not of* religion” (2000):

When it barred prayer from the public elementary school classroom, the Supreme Court stated (in dicta of course) that public schools may offer religion as part of their curriculum. The Court mentioned that the Establishment Clause *does not* prohibit the “study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education”. The Court noted that “one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization” (pg. 9).

Further, regarding actual legal implications for theological studies in secular university settings following the 1963 *Schempp* ruling, Griffin notes:

In the law, however, *Schempp* had not settled anything about university teaching of religion; it was a prayer and Bible reading case set in the elementary schools. Dicta.

Moreover, even at the elementary school level one must ask what constitutional standard is provided by “about” and “of” religion? Nonetheless, armed with *Schempp*, American scholars promoted the study of religion (but not theology) in public and private universities. (2000, pg. 25).

According to Griffin, the supreme court clarified its final position on the issue of theology in the public classroom, offering, once again, a distinction between teaching *about* versus *of* religion and relegating the task of discerning the nature of academic endeavors, as such, to school officials:

In practice, the Supreme Court never did compress religious studies and theology into a constitutional test. In concurrence in *Schempp*, Justice Brennan agreed that “[t]he holding of the Court today plainly does not foreclose teaching about the Holy Scriptures or about the differences between religious sects in classes in literature or history”, yet he observed that this distinction between teaching about and of religion was too difficult for courts to interpret. “To what extent, and at what points in the curriculum, religious materials should be cited are matters which the courts ought to entrust very largely to the experienced officials who superintend our Nation’s public schools”. (2000, pg. 27)

Considering Griffin’s well-articulated argument and excerpts from the 1963 case itself, the *Schempp* ruling should not deter school officials and instructors from offering *theology* in the public university classroom, rather, it should serve as a guide for navigating the legal parameters of comparative theological inquiry and discourse, when proceeding from a non-sectarian starting point.

3.2 Reconciling Secular Academics and Theology

Suggesting possible reconciliation between theology and secular pedagogical and constitutional concerns, Leslie Griffin references George Lindbeck of Yale University in his 1976 report on the scope of religious studies regarding legal parameters:

“Universities may sponsor theological education in as many religious traditions as they wish.” He concluded that “even public universities can legitimately participate in theological education without violating the principle that no religion should be given legally preferential treatment... religion may be approached either particularistically or generically: primary attention can be given either to religions in their specificity, or to features common to all religions. Second, one can pursue each of these approaches in either a theological or a religious-studies mode” (Lindbeck, 1976, as cited in Griffin, 2000, pg. 58).

Citing Lindbeck further, Griffin asserts that what Lindbeck terms “generic theology” should not present a constitutional conflict:

Lindbeck describes this third approach, a theological work in reference to religion generically considered, that is, without attachment to any “specific heritage”. “This approach involves exploring and developing new outlooks oriented toward human religiousness in general” (Lindbeck 1976, as cited in Griffin, 2000, pg. 59). Similarly, this reasoning can be applied to the notion of exploring theology within but not *from* a particular religious perspective.

Gijsbert van den Brink, Chair of Theology & Science at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in his essay entitled “The future of theology at public universities”, explores how theology might be aligned with either the sciences or the humanities to remain *ethically* viable in secular academics. Favoring the scenario of *theology* within the humanities, van der Brink cites author

Kevin Schilbrack, Professor and Head of Department of Religion and Philosophy at Western Carolina University and his claims that “theology”, when enacted through traditional modes of academic inquiry, is in keeping with other philosophical academic endeavors such as *ethics* and *political theory* situated within the humanities and should not pose a problem in the public setting:

Kevin Schilbrack distinguishes between descriptive, evaluative and constructive tasks of the theologian and argues that all of these deserve a place in the secular university (see also Schilbrack 2014). Descriptions may range from interpretive (‘what is being said and done in this ritual?’) to explanatory (‘which theory accounts best for religious phenomenon x?’). Whereas interpretations may follow an ‘emic’ approach, sticking to the religious practitioners’ own vocabulary as closely as possible, explanations usually are ‘etic’ in that they employ more general concepts and theories (that may or may not be understandable to the religious believers themselves) in order to illuminate what is going on. Both types of descriptions are non-judgmental with regard to the truth claims of the religions under scrutiny. Evaluative work, on the other hand, aims at the critical assessment of what is going on in religions. Questions that may be answered are: Are the religious social structures [in question] oppressive? Are the religious experiences veridical? Are the religious claims plausible, coherent, warranted, or true?’ (Schilbrack in press, typescript:5). Traditionally, such evaluative questions are discussed in such disciplines as the philosophy of religion and moral philosophy (or ethics). (Schilbrack as cited in van den Brink, 2020, pg.5)

Taking on the more common challenge to the legitimacy of theological studies against constructivism, van den Brink references Schilbrack again suggesting that:

Schilbrack rightly points out that if one excludes such constructive tasks from what is properly academic, many more disciplines than just theology are at risk: [T]here is no way to exclude constructive religious philosophical [= theological] thinking without simultaneously excluding a great deal of constructive thinking about ethics, metaphysics, political (theory, feminist critique, and postcolonial thought. (Schilbrack as cited in van den Brink, (2020, pg.5-7).

Addressing similar questions from a different perspective, Wesley Wildman, Professor of Philosophy, Theology and Ethics at Boston University, attempts to reconcile theology and philosophy of religion under the broad umbrella of *religious philosophy*, which Wildman claims can better accommodate “big question” philosophical inquiry (theology) in secular academics.

In his book, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion*, Wesley asks the question: “Can philosophy extend beyond analysis of the historical context and validity of arguments about religious subject matters to offer literary evocations of religious themes, constructive theories of religious objects, and evaluations of the claims religions advance about religious topics?” (2010).

Answering his own question in support of *religious philosophy* as a broad field of comparative inquiry that *can* accommodate such objectives, Wildman suggests:

From an historical and cross-cultural perspective, the achievements of big-question philosophy are plentiful, diverse, and difficult to harmonize. Thus, they may strike the onlooker as hypothetical exercises in constructive modeling, with contextual factors explaining both why some models prove more plausible than others in particular settings, and why models take on distinctive features that make consistency with competitor models problematic. Before concluding that big-question philosophy operates

in a slippery world of relativistic delusions, however, let us take seriously the possibility that hypothetical exercises in constructive modeling could be a form of inquiry [religious philosophy] (2010).

Addressing the interplay of “theological’ inquiry (in broad terms defined above-though Wildman doesn’t call it that) in all serious philosophic inquiry the author writes:

There seems to be no principled way of blocking questions about the ultimate integrating explanatory principles, those that unite everything that is into the most comprehensive and coherent interpretation. This is how the big philosophical questions of ontology yield ideas of God and creation in the West, Brahman and sarrisara (cycle of lives) and sanyata (ultimate emptiness) in South Asia, and Dao (Dao or Ta r it.; ultimate way), Tian (Tian or T’ien or heaven), and Shang Di (Shang Dz or Shang Ti or ultimate emperor or supreme God) in East Asia-in each case understood as ultimate explanatory principles for ontology. Of course, these are not necessarily religious ideas in this context; they are principles for the ontological interpretation of reality...there is no question that there has been two-way traffic between the ideas inspiring and structuring religion and the ideas prominent in philosophical explanations of reality.

Yet another perspective is offered by Dr. Patrick Giddy, University of KwaZulu-Natal, in which he challenges the secular notion that “the personal dimension of knowledge” should *not* factor into secular religious studies. Giddy bases his argument on Bernard Lonergan’s *Method in Theology* (1972), suggesting that alongside theology, several other disciplines rely upon subjective inquiry within the field of humanities, such as *literature*, in support of his larger claim that knowledge should not be “limited to what can be verified in the sciences (‘scientism’)” (2008, pg. 527).

While Giddy's thesis takes us a bit far afield from first amendment concerns, he makes some very interesting points with which to conclude this section. On *theology* serving the greater aims of higher education, Giddy writes:

Nevertheless, the full articulation of this personal reality foundational for the integrity of the pursuit of knowledge is to be found in the humanities and particularly in theology but contemporary culture to a large extent works with a model of knowledge which disinherits these intellectual traditions, which leaves the university impotent to challenge social structures which fail to enhance human flourishing.²¹ By distinguishing theological disciplines mediating the religious tradition (such as hermeneutics) from those in which the tradition is mediated by the existential stance taken by the theologian and re-articulated for the contemporary context (such as systematics), Lonergan opens the way towards seeing Islamic (for example) theology presented as one world view among others (such as Marxism), the critical element necessary for any university discipline being situated precisely in the standards set up by the demands of the existential dialectic. (2011, pg. 539)

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE UNIQUE VALUE OF THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

The impulse to seek a higher purpose, the existential meaning of human life, our creator (s) and/or the *sacred*, remains central to the human experience in the postmodern age, as evidenced by the rise of popular theologians such as William Lane Craig and Bishop Robert Barron, among many others. One does not need to look far to find “religion” in popular culture. As religion continues to critically influence our global society, public universities must continue to seek novel modes of inquiry that deepen religious literacy and further understanding. It is impossible to study religion and its social implications *in full*, without the comprehensive exploration of the theologies that drive religious faith traditions. The religiosity of others shapes our daily communal experience (if only subtly, though often not), from government mandates to social ethics (Leustean, 2005).

Most religious studies programs offer a variety of classes in comparative religion, including the survey of sacred texts and other media. How then, does non- sectarian theological inquiry differ from contemporary “comparative religion”? What sets it apart as additionally valuable and worth fighting for in secular academics?

This chapter will explore how comparative “theological inquiry” differs from traditional coursework to demonstrate that students exposed to the intricacies of multiple religious theologies stand to gain *unique* insight and understanding of other cultures and religions, necessary for the broader aims of secular religious studies at public universities and beyond.

4.1 Theology, Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution

According to Susan Hayward, Associate Director for the *Religious Literacy and the Professions Initiative* at Harvard, in “Religion and Peacebuilding: Reflections on Current Challenges and Future Prospects”, a special report by for The United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the role of religious insiders (including laypeople and clergy) from varying religions often plays an integral role in peacebuilding initiatives (2012). Quoting Scott Appelby on the value of the religious perspective, Hayward writes:

religious actors build peace when they act religiously, that is, when they draw on the deep wells of their traditions, and extract from those depths the spiritual instincts and moral imperatives for recognizing and embracing the humanity of the other; and, when they employ the distinctive ritual and symbolic and psychological resources of religion for transforming the dream of a common humanity into a tangible, felt reality” (Appelby as cited by Hayward, 2012, pg. 5).

Certainly then, an academic understanding of the theological underpinnings of individual religions should play a vital role in religious studies, religious conflict resolution and cultural-religious awareness in general, affording students greater opportunities to become acquainted with the ethical underpinnings common to most major religions and furthering inter-religious discussions on a “global ethic” (Aquino, P. 2011).

In her chapter entitled, “Religious Peacebuilding”, Maria Pilar Aquino, former Professor Emerita in the College of Arts and Sciences at SDU and renowned liberation theologian, addresses the value of theological studies in effecting change, stating, “students of religion and theology develop or enhance capacities and skills for effective intervention in situations of destructive conflict and violence” (2011, pg. 594).

It is not enough in the current age to rely on designated governmental and NGO agencies to mobilize global peacebuilding efforts; I submit that religious studies departments in public universities have an equally substantial opportunity and obligation to ignite future action through deeper awareness. We can see from the insights of Aquino and Hayward that there is a growing trend towards multidisciplinary cooperation in global efforts for religious peacebuilding; the study of religion already plays a significant role in furthering this cause but could go further.

Below, Aquino addresses the vital role of religion, religious actors, and scholars alike:

As a dynamic process that involves a multiplicity of actors, religious peacebuilding not only embraces those religious actors but also those who work as “legal advocates for religious human rights, scholars conducting research relevant to cross cultural and interreligious dialogue, and theologians and ethicists within the religious communities who are probing and strengthening their traditions of nonviolence” (Little and Appleby 2004: 5). Scholars of religion and theology contribute to the eradication of social injustice by articulating in religious terms visions, values, and the resources of religions as a common ground for justice and peace. From the setting of one’s own religious tradition, one engages in developing interpretive frameworks and practices that promote change. (2011, pg. 578)

Highlighting the vital role religious studies can play in building religious literacy through comparative studies (argued here “theology”), Wesley Wildman addresses the larger aims of peacebuilding and countering extremism in his book, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry*, writing:

Flowing out of this fundamental intellectual goal is a little discussed but pervasive practical goal: to inform people about religion so as to increase mutual understanding and global security, and to guide diplomacy and political policy decisions. Religion has always had a politically and socially explosive character and wars driven by religion have been common in human history as a result. Political tensions and cultural misunderstandings are frequently exacerbated by ignorance of the points of view of those involved, and those points of view almost always have a religious dimension. Ignorance of religion is as dangerous as religious extremism, and equally infuriating to those negatively affected by it. The academic study of religion has a crucial role to play in alleviating the problem of ignorance, just as religions themselves must tackle the problem of extremist violence (2010, pg. 15) ...This is a nontrivial problem. The growing scarcity of serious comparativists and the decentralization of the humanities within religious studies has robbed many departments of a feasible core identity. When departmental members identify more strongly with a home discipline such as sociology or anthropology or history than with religious studies as such, the basis for a department becomes questionable. This is the price of exchanging the original vision of religious studies-as a truly multidisciplinary venture embracing the humanities and the social sciences-for the coveted credibility of modeling the field after the social sciences and history alone. (2012, pg. 15)

In their contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict and Peacebuilding*, Heather DuBois, Assistant Professor at Stonehill College and Janna Hunter-Bowman, Associate Professor of Peace Studies and Christian Social Ethics at the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and specialists in the field of peace studies and theology, state:

We found, from our different vantage points, that a lack of deep appreciation for theologies—embodied as well as verbal—limits understanding of social change processes, skews interpretations of religious actors, and undermines positive outcomes of peacebuilding. Now situated at the intersection of peacebuilding and theology, we see that this gap in the practice of peacebuilding exists also in the academy. Therefore, we argue for explicit, theoretically robust, and practically grounded theological reflection”.

The authors outline an approach to academic theological engagement that includes the expansion of elements such as “cosmologies, sacred texts, stories of exemplars” to the role of eschatological beliefs in “psycho-spiritual experiences related to conditions of violence and peace. In short, peacebuilding would benefit from reflection on the processes by which people discern and ascribe language to events and ways of being that a community or tradition has not previously encountered or may still not understand” (2015, pg. 569).

Students are already exposed (very generally) to various ideologies and religions in their typical coursework and are often asked to evaluate material from a personal perspective. “Theology” (comparative) is a natural extension of this exercise. Here, the study of “theology”, in its primary form- as discourse on the nature of the “sacred” (and all that entails) according to specific faith traditions, is approached from within, not *from*, distinct religious perspectives. In this sense, theology (comparative) differs from comparative religion in that it involves direct inquiry into the various interpretations and experiences of “lived faith”, by directly engaging religious texts, other media, religious leaders and experts. The student can participate in theological dialogue as a practitioner might, with the intention of better understanding that perspective, but not necessarily subscribing to it.

Lucian Leustean, Reader in Politics and International Relations at Aston University, calls for a holistic theoretical approach to the multidisciplinary study of religion and politics,

recognizing the need for “ethnosymbolic” (insider) perspectives for better understanding the motivations of individuals within religious groups, and their subsequent effects on political structures (2005, pg. 370).

The author suggests that attention to the role of the “individual” (in terms of religiosity) has been largely neglected in modern theories of religion and politics; stating that, “an integrative theory analyzing the connection between religion and politics takes into account the role of myths and symbols from the perspectives of both individuals and ethnic communities” (Leustean, 2005, pg. 364). Myths and symbols are the core elements of “ethnosymbolic” studies and are often the foundation for or result of the sacred transmissions of religious theologies.

And finally, on the overarching benefits of overcoming logistical challenges and establishing legitimate comparative [theological] inquiry in religious studies, apart from specific peacebuilding aims, David Cheetham suggests:

the possibility of undertaking meaningful comparisons between different cultural traditions but that comparative study can be interpreted as a legitimate academic practice. That is, comparative studies can be carried out for their own sake without the presupposed agenda of finding fruitful avenues for interfaith dialogue. (2005, pg. 18).

CONCLUSION

The principal objective of the public university is the betterment of humanity through education. To that end, there is no higher ideal for public educators than the dynamic facilitation of peace building. This is what public education is presumably always working towards. "Theology" is a relatively new academic approach to peace building and therefore still marginalized to a large degree in secular universities. Vigorous inquiry into the intrinsic value of "theology" in secular academics, as well as additional research regarding pedagogical strategies, are worthwhile and necessary towards furthering excellence in religious studies in the public university.

As stated by David Cheetham, David Ford, Wesley Wildman and Maria Pilar Aquino among others, comparative inquiry into the "big questions" (including theology) must not be allowed to wither, or worse, die out in the face of scientism, if the public university aims to contribute in a meaningful way to peacebuilding and conflict resolution in our global society. Regarding the role of public education David Ford suggests:

That complex task needs to be resourced as richly as possible, able to draw on many traditions of wisdom-seeking, both religious and secular, and it is crucial that these traditions be academically mediated through relevant disciplinary and cross-disciplinary thinking, argument, teaching and research

Further, according to Leslie Griffin, it *is* entirely possible to integrate speculative "theology" into religious studies curricula towards more well-rounded and comprehensive

coursework, while honoring the secular academic values and obligations of the public university— as long as theological inquiry begins from a non-sectarian, comparative perspective— it meets the legal constitutional obligation of teaching *about* and not *of* religion.

Scholars such as Kevin Schilbrack, suggest that the study of theology can be managed pedagogically in the secular setting in similar fashion to other disciplines within the humanities that employ “constructive” modes of inquiry (ethics, political philosophy etc.), providing the notion of “theology” as a strictly Christian discipline is dispelled once and for all.

While lengthy, the following moving commentary on the potent role and great necessity of “theological” inquiry in the public University, offered by David Ford, Emeritus Regius Professor of Divinity Emeritus, University of Cambridge and Fellow of Selwyn College, cannot be overlooked, and is particularly fitting to close this paper:

Relatively few of the world’s universities have what I consider by far the best way engage academically with the religions in a university. That is to cultivate theology as a wisdom-seeking inquiry open to all. There are four key elements in this sort of theology:

- **Firstly**, it pursues questions of meaning, truth, beauty and practice raised by, about and between the religions, and it can be both critical and constructive.

- **Secondly**, theology has responsibilities towards the whole range of academic disciplines that have to do with the religions, so it best flourishes in interaction with other fields of inquiry and with what are sometimes called the areas of religious studies or study of religion. It is good that the Faculty of Theology here [Cambridge] will soon change its name to the Faculty of Theology and Religion.

- **Thirdly**, it also has responsibilities towards the living religious traditions to which billions of people belong, to help those traditions in their scriptural and historical

understanding, in their wisdom-seeking engagement with other religious and non-religious traditions and with modernity, and in their critical and constructive thinking.

...But to have members who pursue theology in a university setting is a huge resource for any tradition, and ideally that setting is one where they can engage with those who belong to many religious traditions or none, and with the full range of academic disciplines.

- **and, fourthly**, theology has responsibilities towards the common good of society – local, national and global. (2017, pg.3)

The present study offers only a broad survey of the potential role of “theology” in the public university. Ideally, a wide view such as this can help contextualize relevant problems and possible topics for future research. At a minimum, the present study seeks to affirm the plausibility and value of theological inquiry and discourse in secular academics. We have demonstrated that “theology” need not be intellectualized as an essentially Christian/sectarian endeavor. Purely philosophical modes of theological inquiry exist (ed) before and outside of Christian theology. Additionally, “theology” is vital in several non-Christian religions.

“Theology” can be nonsectarian in its aims, is comparable to other “deep-thinking” academic disciplines, and does not necessarily violate secular academic principles or constitutional obligations. Theological coursework can be an explorative, comparative “encounter” with religious texts and doctrines that fosters a deeper understanding of how “theology” moves adherents to action in the world— both individually and in communion. The ideal format for the study of “theology” (comparative, philosophical, essential) is likely textual criticism, expert testimony, dialectic, and classroom discourse. “Theology”, when thoughtfully undertaken in secular academics, not only belongs in the public university, but may be indispensable for fulfilling the highest ideals of public education.

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