

SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY: ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY DEBATES AND TASKS FOR TODAY'S CHURCH AND WORLD

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Abstract

A look into the past only reveals that the theologian's task is a never-ending one. In the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas succeeded in making the Christian message relevant to the learned world of his day which had been so greatly influenced by Aristotelianism as interpreted by Jewish and Mohammedan scholars. But this is not the day of St. Thomas Aquinas; the modern mind is not prepared to cope with the modes of Greek thought he employed. But by the same token this is not the patristic period either. It is an oversimplification of the theologian's task to imagine that we can recapture the realism of that great period simply by exchanging Aristotelian categories for biblical categories. I submit that the problem goes far deeper. Since God alone knows the whole design of redemption down to its smallest detail, in every age, until time has run its course, scripture will be replete with senses and meanings that are clearly perceived or known only by God. Science is experimental, verifiable, and supported by evidence, whereas (the claim goes) theology begins in untestable, unfalsifiable, evidence-proof belief. This article aims to give some new perspectives on the current conversation between theology and science. My opinion is that these two areas of human research are interrelated, and their connection should be marked by dialogue and cooperation rather than controversy and misunderstanding. These two institutions will contribute less to the future integration of our shared culture and more to its fragmentation if such a debate does not take place.

Keywords: Theology, Science, Dialogue, Truth, Vocation, Religion, Belief

Introduction:

In June 1988 Pope John Paul II made a remarkable statement to participants in an international conference held at the Vatican on the

contemporary dialogue between theology and science. He asserted that these two large spheres of human experience and inquiry are interdependent, and that collaborative interaction ought to characterize their present relationship rather than the misunderstandings and conflict so prevalent in their past. If such intense dialogue does not take place, he warned, then these two institutions will contribute not to the future integration of our common culture but to its fragmentation. Initiative for such dialogue, moreover, must come from the theologians, because historically they have as a group made such little effort to understand the findings of science¹. "We need each other to be what we must be," the Pope said. "Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutism. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish." He envisaged a "relational unity between science and religion," which would result not in identity or assimilation but in dynamic interchange, with each "radically open to the discoveries and insights of the other."² In spite of appeals such as this, there is general recognition today that it will not be easy to bring about this dialogue. For a number of reasons, theologians do not yet know how to deal theologically with the findings of science. On the other hand, as we shall see, scientists have been having their own problems in recent years regarding collaboration with theologians.

Modern studies of the relationship between theology and science are now nearly half a century old, and may be dated back to a seminal work by Ian Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*, first published in 1966³. Further pioneering work was done in the 1980s and 90s by people like

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¹The Pope's message to the conference is in the form of a letter to one of its organizers, George Coyne, and appears at the start of its proceedings: *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, ed. Robert J. Russell, William R. Stoeger, and George V. Coyne (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1988).

² *Ibid.*,

³ I. G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (London, S.C.M. Press, 1966).

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John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacocke and Paul Davies; and this topic has lately been something of a boom area in universities in Europe, America and lately Africa. Words like "science" and "religion" can mean a variety of different things depending on how they are used by different individuals. Particularly "religion" is famously difficult to define, to the point where almost any explanation raises more issues than it answers. Since "religion" is so difficult to define, many authors in this discipline instead employ the frequently abused term "theology."

‘Theology’, in popular parlance, has come to stand for fanciful, speculative thinking, unconnected to reality. In fact, of course, both historically and in the present day, theologians are as tenacious and rational in pursuit of their discipline as are any others who engage in intellectual discourse. So, what do we mean by ‘theology’? Again, different traditions would understand this word in different ways, but generally ‘theology’ seems to signify a way of thinking, of applying our rational selves to the asking of questions about God, and about the relationship of God with the Universe we see around us – and with ourselves, as a part of that Universe. St Anselm described theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, ‘faith seeking understanding’, a description which many have found helpful.

The word ‘science’ is similarly bandied about in a variety of ways, but probably the most helpful is that which sees it as a method, as a way of interrogating the world around us, which generates data of a particular kind. If one thinks back to the late nineteenth century, the understanding that people then had of such a scientific method – an understanding which persists in many people’s minds to the present day – would be something along the following lines. First, science is rational: it involves the exercise of reason and logic, not imagination and fantasy. Second, it is objective: if I perform an experiment, it will generate the same results, within the limits of experimental error, as you will get if you do the same experiment under the same conditions. Third, science is inductive: that is to say, it takes lots of observations and draws general conclusions from them. Fourth, it is deterministic: it assumes the universe functions in regular law-like ways, with effects following causes in predictable fashion. And fifth, science is reductionistic: that is, reality is to be sought

by probing downwards into things, finding out what they are made of, and the behaviors of complex wholes are to be understood in terms of the behaviors of their component parts. Interestingly, all these characteristics of science have been held up for questioning, by philosophers and by scientists themselves, over the last century or so.

2. How Science and Theology can Interrelate

The first way in which science and theology can interact, according to Barbour, is *conflict*, or *opposition*. Science and theology are, as it were, in competition with each other over the same theoretical territory. One must be right, and the other wrong. This, of course, is the line taken by a number of popular commentators in the media, for whom conflict of any kind is always more interesting than consonance (presumably, because it sells better). More productive approaches, however, are both possible and desirable.

The second way is *independence*. This is the view that science and theology are both important, and both have important things to say to us; but they operate in fundamentally different territories. The naturalist Stephen Jay Gould, an exponent of this view, wrote of ‘non-overlapping magisterial’: science explores how the world works, and the physical and biological processes that have led to it coming to be the way it is, whilst theology explores the domain of values, and of ultimate meaning. Another characterization of this approach is to say that science deals with ‘how’-type questions and theology deals with ‘why’-type questions. This is an attractive position in many ways; but it seems to deny that any fruitful interaction between science and theology is possible. They are exploring different domains, using different techniques. That leads to the third way in which these disciplines might interact: *dialogue*. This is the view that an understanding of the sciences can be valuable in informing the way in which we do theology; and reciprocally, an understanding of theology can inform the way in which scientists do science. More obviously, perhaps, it is clear that a sense of values (which Gould assigns to the magisterium of theology) will inform the practice of scientists, since it lies behind any ethical codes which govern their behavior. A number of commentators on the relationship between science and theology in recent decades have favored this dialogical approach.

The fourth way in which science and theology can interact, according to Barbour, is *integration*. Barbour believes that it should be possible for insights from both these disciplines to be united to generate what he calls an 'inclusive metaphysics'. Other writers have been less keen than Barbour in pursuing this path, since they fear (and experience tends to show) that it can lead rather to the assimilation of one or other of these disciplines under the categories of the other, inevitably failing to do proper justice to the discipline which is assimilated.

Despite this recognition that there can be a number of ways of viewing the relationship between science and theology, there appears to be a common perception that these disciplines are radically different, and that they must be opposed to one another. How they came to be seen this way is in itself an interesting topic, as we shall see in my next article, which will explore the origins of the 'conflict myth'. We will then conclude this short series by looking at some consonances – some positive interactions – between science and theology.

3. Science and Theology-Some Cogent Questions

First, can science get along without theology? The answer is yes insofar as science sticks to what science does—observe, investigate and explain nature and nature's laws and the things nature produces and the events within nature that are regular and repeatable. However, science cannot and should not, *as science*, ask or attempt to answer ultimate questions about the *why* of things. "Why is there something rather than nothing?" is, according to philosopher Martin Heidegger, the ultimate philosophical question. Science cannot answer that. Theology answers that. Second, can theology get along without science? The answer is yes insofar as theology sticks to what theology does—draw on divine revelation to answer life's ultimate questions such as "Why are we here?" and "What is the good life?" and "Why is there something rather than nothing." Theology does not need science to answer those questions.

Third, however, this is not to suggest a version of the dualistic model that puts science and theology in completely different, water-tight "boxes?" This is because in this third model theology claims to *explain things* that science *sometimes* also explains. But the two explanations complement

each other; they are on different planes so they don't compete with each other. An obvious example is the *beginning of the universe in which we live now*. Science tells us it began with the "big bang." Theology tells us it began with creation by God— "out of nothing." ("Out of nothing" means *not* out of God's own being or substance or out of some eternally pre-existing material over against God.) Both claims are *explanatory* and both can be *true* without competing against each other.

Fourth, there are times and instances, when science and theology actually *do* contradict each other and one is right and the other is wrong? This is the most troubling question of all. And the answer is *yes* and *no*. On the surface it appears as if the answer must be *yes*. But below the surface the answer is *no*. Here's why... Sometimes *scientists* put on a different "hat," so to speak, and speak not as scientists but as metaphysical philosophers, secular theologians (so to speak). They say things that aren't really scientific such as "We now know miracles do not happen." That is not really a statement of science. Science *qua* science cannot prove that. (Interestingly, and very mysteriously, sometimes theologians *agree* with these scientists and discard belief in miracles because they are under the entirely false impression that belief in miracles is unscientific). Sometimes *theologians* put on a different "hat," so to speak, and speak not as theologians but as scientists and say things that aren't really theological such as "We know from revelation that God created the universe in seven days of twenty-four hours each about ten thousand years ago." Actually, theology has no business saying that because the first chapters of Genesis are not supposed to be taken that literally. Even before modern science *some* Christian theologians such as Augustine (fourth and fifth centuries) knew that the "days" of Genesis were not twenty-four-hour days. So, *yes*, sometimes *scientists* say things that conflict with theology and sometimes *theologians* say things that conflict with science, but *no*, most of the time these conflicts are not real. The conflict is between scientists overstepping their boundaries and theologians overstepping theirs.

4. The Scientific and Theological Inquiry: A Necessity

Two things often cause unnecessary conflicts (or apparent conflicts) between science and theology. First, some scientists smuggle into their science *metaphysical naturalism*—the worldview that nature is all there

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is in reality. That is not scientific fact; it is unprovable by any scientific method or reasoning. Second, some theologians strongly object to science's *methodological naturalism*—the exclusion of supernatural causes from scientific explanation. But methodological naturalism is necessary for the progress of modern science. Scientists must assume, for purposes of research, that everything they are studying is either a natural cause or the result of natural causes. But *methodological naturalism* and *metaphysical naturalism* are not the same thing or even necessarily linked with each other. When they are linked by either scientists or theologians (or philosophers) conflict between science and theology is inevitable.

But one other question lurks around this “integrative model” of the relationship between science and theology. Are there times when theology must “bow” to science and adjust its claims in light of science's discoveries? Yes. When something is scientifically beyond dispute, when it is truly *factual*, theology cannot continue to dispute it. It has to return to its *interpretation* of its sources and *reinterpret them* insofar as the fact really conflicts with what theology has been claiming as true. The classic case of this was, of course, the “Galileo affair” in the seventeenth century when Galileo proved that the earth revolves around the sun. The church, theologians, should have immediately acknowledged the truth of this and reinterpreted scripture and tradition to make room for this newly discovered fact. When something is beyond reasonable doubt a material fact, whatever its source may be, theology must “make room” for it even if that means reinterpreting its sources.

But what about the other way around? Are there times when science must “bow” to theology and adjust its claims in light of theology's discoveries? Yes. But this almost never happens when science sticks to its own territory. It only happens when science makes claims that are unscientific, not about nature and nature's laws and their effects but about primary causation—the ultimate “*why*” of things. (*Sidebar*: Some scientists have encountered phenomena that they believe science *qua* science cannot explain and turn to theology for explanation. Theology is there to help *if* the scientist really believes science cannot explain the phenomena. An example is the late psychologist M. Scott

Peck who believed he observed “evil” at work in some of his patients and could not explain it scientifically. So, he turned to traditional Christian belief in *the demonic* to explain what he called—as a scientist— “malicious narcissism.” He wrote a book entitled *People of the Lie* where he integrated theology and science in explaining this phenomenon. But, of course, the scientific community did not embrace *the demonic* as a category of mental illness or personality disorder as Peck wanted. That is understandable. My only point with this example is that, from a theological point of view, there are times when a particular scientist turns to theology to help explain something he or she believes science cannot explain. But it would be wrong, disruptive to both science and theology, for supernatural explanations to become “stock and standard” within science.)

How does this “integrative model” help science and theology to *not* conflict? Examples help. Suppose a scientist says “The resurrection of Jesus Christ could not have happened.” In fact, science cannot prove that the resurrection could not have happened. The statement is not scientific; it is an expression of the scientist’s worldview which is not produced by science itself but by the scientist’s perspective on reality. It is an assumption and if there is a God who is the ultimate “author” of nature and nature’s laws there is no reason why God could not, did not, “suspend” the normal functioning of nature to produce the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here the theologian steps in to correct the scientist and point out that what he or she says is not actually science and that, within a theistic worldview, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is absolutely possible. But just as the theologian might need to correct a scientist who claims the resurrection of Jesus Christ cannot have happened, so the theologian ought to correct believers in God who say things like “Science can prove the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” It cannot. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was an event of revelation, not a natural event. It cannot be proven scientifically even if there is historical reason for believing in it.

Again, someone will wonder and ask how this “integrative model” differs from the dualistic model and the perpetual conflict model. It differs from the dualistic model because here, in the third model, theology claims to explain things. It does not yield all explanatory power

to science. It puts sciences and theology's explanations on different planes. It differs from the perpetual conflict model because the two different planes of explanation do not necessarily conflict and, indeed, should not conflict with each other. They should complement each other.

5. Doing Theology Today

It has been rightly observed that before theology can be said to have any future at all, it has to put its own house severely in order. Forays into the public arena have led to an over-exposure of theology as a discipline which has not yet learned to measure up to the sort of critical standards adopted nowadays by intelligent people. If theologians persist in remaining untouched by reasonable critical standards, they stand to be laughed off the stage altogether. Only a new grasp of what theology is can ensure a future for theology: a new self-grasp by theologians of their essentially interpretative role with regard to the Church's doctrines. Theology works at understanding the meaning of the doctrinal formulations in which the Church's faith has, in the orthodox past, found its most authentic expression. In understanding the meaning of doctrinal formulations, of the language used in the past by the Church, theology also learns to re-express its understanding in terms which convey the meaning, originally expressed in the formulations, to the minds of contemporary people: minds which work differently from those of fifth or fifteenth-century men, which in fact live in a different world, which have a different form of basic self-consciousness and different critical values, and so which require different modes of expression, different formulations, if they are to inherit the real meaning of the Christian revelation. Indeed, one might say that if God's revelation is to continue taking place at all in this changing world, it must be constantly re-expressed -- and who else has the job of working at this re-expression than the theologian? -- in contemporary human terms in face of contemporary human standards. Whatever is received, we used to say in Latin, is received according to the measure of the recipient. What the recipient makes of what is given to him necessarily conditions the fact of there being a gift given at all. God's truth and the meaning of his self-revelation must be made known. Divine truth must be made humanly intelligible and humanly known. It must take its place among all the forms of human knowing that men today are prepared to call knowledge~

Otherwise it will simply not be known. The theologian's task is not the dissemination of popularized doctrines, but the expressing of God's own truth in Christ in terms of actual, relevant, meaningful knowledge. He should make his own the Pauline preference: 'in Church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue'. He is neither popularizer nor preacher nor glossolaliac: he is the Church's re-thinker and re-visionary.

The conditions under which I think that theology has a future have emerged in the course of pointing out what I consider to be near-fatal defects in its past performance and present state. Theology must go self-critical. It must come to terms with its own nature as a human science, terms which accord with the critical standards of the day. It must be prepared to let us know what it thinks it is telling us, and in intelligible and meaningful language. It must, above all, realize its inherent limitations and cease speaking from on high in a technical tongue drawn from the linguistic deposits of the faith of past ages. It must realize, too, its own historical relativity, and make its relativity the basis for its relevance to contemporary people. It must learn to speak a new and human language in its interpretation of the doctrines of the faith, a language that will bring home to men that essential self-meaning which it has always been the purpose of the Church's doctrines, for all their dated ways, to define. For the core of the Christian faith is that man has no self-meaning without God. The Christian doctrines -- of creation, of incarnation, of redemption, of final consummation -- are so many ways of spelling out this truth, and of preserving it against error or forgetfulness. Theology's task is to interpret this truth, not by the sheer windy repetition or mere vulgarization of it, but by thinking it out in whatever ways it may become presentable, credible, graspable, knowable in the hard currency of the critically acceptable language of the day.

6. The Commitment of Science

The three very common misconceptions about the scientific enterprise are: that science starts with no presuppositions in its research, that it is based on hard and unimpeachable factual evidence, and that its findings are unalterable and will eventually explain all areas of human experience. In other words, says this stereotype, the hidden explanatory mechanisms of the world can be discovered through observation by

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scientists standing apart from the world and theorizing about it objectively. The problem with these misconceptions is not that they are totally false but that they are only partially true. They have been fostered almost unconsciously in the popular mind because all around us we see the extraordinary achievements of science's progeny, technology, achievements that provide for most of our physical needs and for much of our need for entertainment. Hence it is not surprising that scientific attitudes and methods should have become integral to the thinking of most contemporary men and women, many of whom conclude, not unreasonably, that these attitudes and methods are so all-encompassing and reliable as to constitute a sufficient foundation upon which to build their lives. It is important for us to be clear about the full implications of these ideological assumptions. In their most extreme form, they deny to the knowable cosmos all subjectivity, all qualities in any way connected with human emotions and personal experience or with which the human spirit could feel some sense of kinship. Langdon Gilkey has neatly summarized the two major suppositions of this ideology: first that science represents the sole cognitive entrance into reality, and second that scientific knowledge of nature exhaustively defines reality itself, so that what cannot be known by science is simply not there⁴. In their most extreme form these presuppositions deny to the knowable cosmos all subjectivity, all qualities in any way connected with human emotions and personal experience or with which the human spirit could feel some sense of kinship. All downward causation from the personal to the impersonal is thus eliminated, and everything is explained in terms of the most elementary physical processes. Because the human plays no role in the natural world, no role consequently exists for purposes, values, ideals or freedom. "We cannot apply the methods of science to subject matter that is assumed to move about capriciously. The hypothesis that man is not free is essential to the application of scientific method to the study of human behavior."⁵

⁴ L. Gilkey, "Nature, Reality and the Sacred: A Meditation in Science and Religion," *Zygon* 24 (1989) 285

⁵ B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Free Press, 1965) 6, 447.

The point at issue is that most scientists find it very challenging to deal with a natural event whose sources appear to be inexplicable. Today's scientists tend to be more circumspect in their assertions about the physical world's truth. Their goal is no longer certain knowledge but only verisimilitude, a slow but progressively more accurate understanding, a gradual tightening of their grip on a reality that they have come to realize will always elude them in its totality. They still seek the truth about nature, but now they are fully aware that what they seek is often selected to accord with their presuppositions and prejudices. "Recognition that science has discovered a wide range of truths is compatible with the conviction that a wide range of truths it has not discovered exists, and that its formulations of the truths it has discovered are one-sided, presenting only abstractions from the full truth⁶. This new "critical realism" is an acknowledgment by scientists that they know reality only imperfectly, and that their search for truth is always influenced by personal judgment. This search is also subject over time to continual public scrutiny; however, this is what eventually provides the true test of its capacity to cope with new data and predict new phenomena. Science is a way of thought, not merely a body of knowledge, and scientists now readily admit that the way they think has its own built-in limitation. Such contemporary modesty in truth claims has also had an unexpected result: many scientists in recent years have begun to listen with more respect to other truth claims about the real world, especially to those proposed by the insights of contemporary theology.

7. The Commitment of Theology

"Faith seeking understanding" is the classic definition of theology. Hence the presupposition of the theological enterprise is that there is an identifiable sphere of human interaction with reality which results in a sense of the Absolute that transcends sense perception. For Christians, this is the central religious experience of God's self-disclosure through the revelatory events of the Bible. This initiative of God reconciled them, they believe, to God's own self, to others and to themselves, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who lived on the Jewish periphery of the Roman Empire some two thousand years ago. In the

⁶ D. R. Griffin. *The Re-enchantment of Science* (Albany: State Univ. of New York, 1988) 9-10. See also Polkinghorne, *One World* 17-25.

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person of Jesus, they find the fullness of God and the decisive key to the meaning of human existence. This union with God in Jesus is mediated for them historically through the Christian Scriptures and through the teachings and sacramental rituals of the Christian faith community. Christian theologians thus have a threefold data base on which to rest their intellectual analysis: the biblical narratives as testimony of the earliest witnesses to God's self-revelation, the tradition and worship of the Christian churches over the centuries, and the contemporary experience and life commitment of believing Christians.

Catholic theology departments must ensure that students and faculty delve into the Christian tradition and bring this research into dialogue with contemporary methods and fields of study. Through investigation of fundamental sources and essential questions, Catholic theology must not simply transmit doctrines but interpret the tradition anew for each century. Such work requires the use of diverse methods and fields of study available in a given time. Theology thereby brings faith and reason into dialogue with one another to address the present world. According to Dr. Kaplan, integrating theology with other methods and disciplines has contributed to the loss of Catholic identity in theology departments. While Dr. Kaplan is right to be concerned about upholding Catholic theology's primary place, theology departments also have a responsibility to take seriously the methods, fields of study and questions of today⁷. Theology departments could recenter on Catholic theology by giving greater attention to more integrated intellectual, spiritual and moral formation of students and faculty. Since theological study has moved from the seminary to the university, departments of theology must find creative ways to develop intellectual scholarship within lives of prayer and service. Among other things, more robust spiritual and moral formation teaches students and scholars practices of discernment,

⁷G. Kaplan: *The crisis in Catholic theology.*; L. Ryliskyte: *The liberal/conservative divide is hurting theology departments. The way forward won't be popular.*; Christopher Mooney: *Theology will have no future if it does not remain a distinct discipline.*

enabling them to reflect more deeply on their own experience and that of others. As Father Michael Himes said in his “Last Lecture” at Boston College, “theology involves allowing experience to give new insight into the tradition and allowing the tradition to give coherence and intelligibility to our experiences.” Forming students’ and faculty’s intellectual pursuits within the presence of the mystery of God will give Catholic theology the spiritual and moral depth necessary to be lasting and vital today.

Additionally, Catholic theology departments have a responsibility to serve the global ecclesial and human communities through both scholarship and theological journalism. Dr. Kaplan claims that “without deeper engagement with the tradition, and without formation in practices that join the spiritual and the intellectual, departments of theology risk ‘producing more theological journalists than theological scholars’”. Theologians have the task of advancing scholarship and contributing to discussions with their colleagues in the theological guild; yet they also have a responsibility to bring the Christian tradition to bear on contemporary issues for a wider audience on various media platforms. In the end, theology departments can enrich the central role of Catholic theology by continually engaging with the tradition, more intentionally forming students and faculty, and serving the worldwide community through theological journalism and scholarship. By adopting these practices, departments of theology will advance their own Catholic identity and that of Catholic colleges and universities.

8. The Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian

It has been observed in some circles that, Churchmen need to stick to their area of authority, which is Divine Revelation through Scripture, Tradition, the Magisterium and the Natural Law. Scientific questions, prudential judgments concerning public policy, and the best way to evaluate and meet the practical challenges of this world are the domain of the laity. It is important, even vital, that there be dialogue between theologians and the magisterium precisely on the question of the

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relationship between them⁸. The new Code of Canon Law, in Canon 753, says that "bishops in communion with the head and members of the college, whether as individuals or gathered in conferences of bishops or in particular councils, are authentic teachers and instructors of the faith for the faithful entrusted to their care."⁹ This is a clear recognition in church law of the teaching authority which bishops exercise in episcopal conferences. The Instruction on the relationship between the theologians and the Magisterium no. 22, states:

Collaboration between the theologian and the magisterium occurs in a special way when the theologian receives the canonical mission or the mandate to teach. In a certain sense, such collaboration becomes a participation in the work of the magisterium, linked as it then is by a juridic bond. The theologian's code of conduct, which obviously has its origin in the service of the word of God, is here reinforced by the commitment the theologian assumes in accepting his office, making the profession of faith and taking the oath of fidelity.

This Instruction suggests that ultimately there is only one kind of teaching authority in the Church, the hierarchical, and that all teaching authority must necessarily be a participation in this. Another consequence of the canonical mission or mandate to teach theology is suggested in no. 37 of the Instruction, which speaks of the "commitment which the theologian freely and knowingly accepted to teach in the name of the church." The official English version of the Instruction translates *obsequium*¹⁰ with the word "submission," as do the two most commonly used versions of the documents of Vatican II. The Instruction also follows the Council in speaking of "religious submission of will and intellect." It goes on to say: "This kind of response cannot be simply exterior or disciplinary, but must be understood within the logic of faith

⁸The editors of the Tablet have already initiated such a dialogue by inviting three Catholic theologians to contribute their observations on the Instruction. See Avery Dulles, "The Question of Dissent," Tablet, August 18, 1990; 1033-34.

⁹I am using the English version of the Code published by the Canon Law Society of America.

¹⁰An authoritative interpretation of the meaning of *obsequium religiosum*, as "fundamental openness loyally to accept the teaching of the magisterium."

and under the impulse of obedience to the faith" (no. 23). The two references to "faith" here suggest the reason why this "submission" is described as "religious"; i.e., its motive is ultimately derived from faith in the divine origin of the Church and the authority of its pastors. This "willingness to submit," furthermore, is said to be "the rule"; but two important qualifications are added: (1) such "willingness to submit" does not mean that a theologian may not, according to the case, raise questions regarding the timeliness, the form or even the contents of magisterial interventions; and (2) "the theologian will need, first of all, to assess accurately the authoritativeness of the interventions, which becomes clear from the nature of the documents, the insistence with which a teaching is repeated and the very way in which it is expressed."

The Magisterium has drawn attention several times to the serious harm done to the community of the church by attitudes of general opposition to church teaching which even come to expression in organized groups. In his apostolic exhortation *Paterna cum benevolentia*, Paul VI offered a diagnosis of this problem, which is still apropos. In particular, he addresses here that public opposition to the magisterium of the church also called dissent, which must be distinguished from the situation of personal difficulties treated in (no. 32)¹¹. Today, in certain quarters, merely the whiff of being 'prophetic' curries ... untrammelled adulation, among more progressive, reformist Catholics, there is a temptation to applaud any and all criticisms leveled at church authorities, church structures or the received tradition, regardless of the objective merits of the critique itself¹².

After discussing the causes of the phenomenon of dissent, the CDF goes on to describe what it sees as various aspects of the attitude of dissent:

In its most radical form [dissent] aims at changing the church following a model of protest which takes its inspiration from political society. More frequently, it is asserted that the theologian is not bound to adhere to any

¹¹*Paterna cum benevolentia* of Paul VI, in which he confirmed the role of the Congregation as an organ of papal magisterium.

¹²R. R. Gaillardetz is the Joseph Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College. He is the author of *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism* (Liturgical Press, 2016).

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magisterial teaching unless it is infallible... Doctrines proposed without exercise of the charism of infallibility are said to have no obligatory character about them, leaving the individual completely at liberty to adhere to them or not. The theologian would accordingly be totally free to raise doubts or reject the noninfallible teaching of the magisterium, particularly in the case of specific moral norms (no. 33).

Another aspect of dissent, as described in the Instruction, is that it gives rise to what the CDF calls a kind of parallel magisterium, "in opposition to and in competition with the authentic magisterium." Further, this parallel magisterium "can cause great spiritual harm by opposing itself to the magisterium of the pastors. Indeed, when dissent succeeds in extending its influence to the point of shaping a common opinion, it tends to become the rule of conduct. This cannot but seriously trouble the people of God and lead to contempt for true authority" (no. 34).

Other aspects of dissent mentioned, were said to involve the following practices: "Polling public opinion to determine the proper thing to do, opposing the magisterium by exerting the pressure of public opinion, making the excuse of a 'consensus' among theologians, maintaining that the theologian is the prophetic spokesman of a 'base' or autonomous community which would be the source of all truth." All of this "indicates a grave loss of the sense of truth, and of the sense of the church" (no. 39). Even graver is the warning that "to succumb to the temptation of dissent is to allow the leaven of infidelity to the Holy Spirit to start to work" (no. 40).

Further light on the sense in which the Instruction is using the term "dissent" was given by Cardinal Ratzinger. He is quoted as having made the following statement:

The instruction distinguishes between healthy theological tension and true dissent, in which theology is organized according to the principle of majority rule, and the faithful are given alternative norms by a 'counter-magisterium.' Dissent thus becomes a political factor, passing from the realm of thought to that of a 'power game.' This is where a theologian's use of mass media can be dangerous¹³.

¹³ J. Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993, 101–120,