Theological Journal Kerugma
E-ISSN: 2622-1039
P-ISSN: 2621-8038

FROM THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY TO PSYCHOLOGY IN THE WEST: UNDERSTANDING THE SCHISM BETWEEN THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the Western epistemological shift over the last five hundred years: a move from Christianity to secularism. To do this, we will address key philosophical, theological and psychological developments and their respective proponents in history. We will also note the consequences of these ideas on broader human society. We will approach this topic from a Biblical epistemological foundation, allowing our faith in God to guide our interpretation of these developments. This article is divided into five key sections, each addressing the concerns of different ages in history. We discover that relativism is what binds all of these ages and developments together.

Keywords: *Aquinas, Bacon, Kant, philosophy, psychology, Locke, empiricism, humanism, relativism*

INTRODUCTION

In this study we undertake a philosophical-historical journey through the West. This story begins in the medieval times. Although human philosophical debate spans throughout history, we will focus on the gradual Western movement from a pre-enlightenment Christian worldview to a modern individualistic, subjective and secular one. Our aim is also to tell the story of how theology and humanism (through psychology) have developed an increasing schism. This is a sombre experience for students of theology and psychology, as it demonstrates just how far removed we have come from our medieval ancestors who instinctively regarded our world and human life as a product of God. We will first address ideas and thinkers from pre-enlightenment times, then enlightenment thinkers, and next thinkers from the 19th Century "subjective age". Finally, we will reflect on some of the thoughts of 20th century theologians, psychologists and philosophers such as Carl Rogers and Charles Taylor.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article is based on a study of literature relevant to the topic. Disciplines engaged include theology, philosophy and psychology, all framed within historical research methods. Within the fast-developing discipline of historiography, this

study uses the tools of general history, as pioneered by the 19th century historian Leopold Von Ranke and further developed by a range of 20th century historians, such as Geoffrey Elton. General history prioritises the use of both primary and secondary source material, as will be seen in following pages where the writings of Thomas Aquinas, Francis Bacon, Immanuel Kant, John Locke and other primary sources are supplemented by reference to a strong base of secondary scholarship.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pre-Enlightenment (Late 10th-13th Centuries)

Our initial focus on the pre-enlightenment period refers to scholarship from the medieval period. James Smith, a 20th Century philosopher-theologian, describes humans of this era as "living in an enchanted world".[1] Although there were some scientific discoveries in these centuries, this age is known for being more focused on theological understanding than scientific exploration, in part due to problems caused by the plague.[2] There were still so many mysteries to the world, and so the majority saw science as coherent with a life of faith. For this reason, European scholars and philosophers tended to rely on the popular worldview of that time: that of Christianity. Greek philosophy was still very popular although much of it had been theologized.[3] God was able to bridge the gaps between scientific fact and experience and there was no recorded suggestion of atheism, although no doubt there were doubters and sceptics, but it was much safer to be seen as a believer.

Indeed, many medieval philosophers were at first theologians, such as Scottish philosopher Duns Scotus (c. 1265/66 – 1308) and English Franciscan philosopher and theologian William of Ockham (1285-1347).[4] Medieval thinkers were also known to "approach life with a symbolic worldview", and thought "through symbols… signs functioned in the acquisition and transmission of knowledge".[5] This, in part, lines up with the Biblical example we see in verses such as Isaiah 55:8-9, involving a rejection of rational human thought.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

It is tempting to approach this period through rose-coloured lenses and marvel at the apparent unification between theology and philosophy. The Christian worldview saturated political, economic, and philosophical decisions. However, recent scholars[6] have argued that there were

fissures in the world of medieval thought, and this was often seen theologically.

From the late 10th Century onwards, we begin to see two main types of theological exploration. First, some theologians were *monastic*. These thinkers believed that understanding largely lay in introspection and meditation on Scripture and they pursued this lifestyle by distancing themselves from surrounding culture. German Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was a case in point; she left three books recording her visionary experiences "which conceive[d] of God not only as creator but also as life itself."[7] Other theologians developed the trend of *scholastic* thought. These were scholars less accepting of apparent theological contradiction (e.g. between early church theologians), who endeavoured to answer their questions with Scripture. An example of a scholastic theologian is Peter Abelard (1079-1142), who is often seen as a founding father of this line of thought. Leithart argues that the fifty years of Abelard's activity were the "most exciting fifty years in the rise of intellectualism since Rome".[8]

Scholastic theology further developed over the 12th and 13th centuries, striving to harmonize faith and the growing focus on reason. In the words of R. W. Southern, scholastic thinkers "aimed at restoring to fallen mankind, so far as possible, that perfect system of knowledge which had been in the possession or within the reach of mankind at the moment of Creation".[9]

Although Abelard developed this line of thought, real fruit in scholasticism was not seen until the late 13th century with the life and work of Italian Dominican friar, priest and philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225-74). Francis Schaeffer claims that "the origin of modern man could be traced back to several periods",[10] but the beginning was Aquinas. The ancient Greek philosophies of Aristotle (384-22BC) were previously condemned by the church; especially his theory of the "active intellect" (a single, perfect intellect from which all truths stem). However, Aquinas subscribed to Aristotle's idea.

Aquinas also explored Aristotle's double-reality theory, in which he separated understanding of the heavenly, spiritual realm from that of the earthly, physical one. Aquinas theologized this idea, building on it from Scripture and the Christian worldview around him. In his famous *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas wrote:

"Theology is a science. But it must be noted that there are two kinds of science. Some sciences take as their starting point principles that are known directly by the natural light of human reason—for

example, arithmetic, geometry, and other such sciences. But other sciences begin from premises accepted from a superior body of knowledge … Theology is a science in this second sense; for it takes as its starting point principles that are known in the light of a higher body of knowledge—namely, God's own knowledge and the knowledge of those who have the vision of God."[11]

Subsequently, "man's intellect became autonomous".[12] For instance, intellect began to be seen as existing separately from sacred revelation; Aquinas distinguished between what can be known by natural light and what can be known by an added supernatural light,[13] concluding that it was possible to know apart from grace. This challenged the apparent unity of medieval thought; philosophy was now detached from theology.

Aquinas' conclusions led to an opening for secular thought and the eventual development of onto-theology (the ontology of God and/or the theology of being). This allowed subsequent scholars to pursue philosophy "without any recourse to the Bible and revelation".[14]

Peter Leithart states that "after Thomas, there was a constant struggle to unify nature and grace."[15] However, Aquinas himself strongly argued for a Biblical worldview. Leithart argues that particularly through his argument of hylomorphism (according to which every natural body consists of two intrinsic principles, one potential, namely, primary matter, and one actual, namely, substantial form).[16] Aquinas adheres more closely to the Christian faith than some of his other Christian counterparts. He directs his understanding of humanity to the incarnation, using philosophical theology as "a tool for exploring and expounding sacred doctrine, not [as] a separate study in itself".[17] For instance, Aquinas specifically explains substances as a combination of form and matter. This affects his argument of a double-reality; he explains:

"Matter does not exist within itself, since without form it is mere potency and has no actual existence… once prime matter is 'informed' by a form, it becomes a particular substance."[18]

If we follow this line of thought, we see the need for a creator. We can see that Aquinas' arguments were deductive (top-down) but taking his line of thought outside of theology allows for inductive metaphysical thinking. Cue Francis Bacon.

The Enlightenment (16th-early 18th Centuries)

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) appeared in the time of the Enlightenment. Even the name given to this era reveals

modern Western presuppositions and Eurocentrism. The assumption is that this new period of questioning and staunch intellectualism was "enlightening", as if humans were living in darkness before. Between Aquinas and the Enlightenment there were many great thinkers (e.g. Martin Luther!), but for the purposes of this article, we have chosen to jump a few centuries, as until the Enlightenment, changes in thought were still more theologically driven, rather than scientific (as seen today).

This Enlightenment was built on the Renaissance (13^{th}-15^{th} centuries) which was characterised by a revival in the studies of mathematics and classical literature. These mediums allowed for new scientific development; classical literature, for instance, sparked a new interest in philosophical humanism.[19] The Renaissance, however, did not represent a singular worldview.

In the words of Carl Trueman, "The term Renaissance embraces various cultural responses offered by the European cultural elite to the social and economic disruption initiated at the dawn of the modern era by the rising power of the commercial classes and the consequent realignment of political power in its wake."[20]

Francis Bacon contributed to the philosophical trend of the Enlightenment but was first and foremost a man of science. Bacon challenged traditional methods of deduction which "[flew] from the senses and particulars to the most general axioms".[21] In other words, for Bacon, religion stemmed from humanistic bias, so in order to have a reasonable worldview, detachment and objectivity were necessary

Bacon was one of the foremost proponents of inductive metaphysical thought. For instance, traditional religious understanding was deductive and started with a presupposition of God, whereas Bacon was arguing proper understanding stemmed from the human. To know the difference in so-called right and wrong epistemology, Bacon claimed that there were four types of idols that humans needed to actively repudiate. These were:

1) biases stemming from human nature;
2) personal errors in thought due to individuality or incorrect introspection;
3) cultural biases, largely developing from interpersonal associations and;
4) biases from unconscious philosophical presuppositions.[22]

If we look at the consequences of this perspective today, it seems that;"Bacon's insistence that the elimination of idols will produce a new, impartial science heralds the modern preoccupation—even obsession—with finding the one true method by which thinkers can settle all disputes about matters

of fact or truth."[23]

Furthermore, Bacon devised "Five Common Notions of Religion": five criteria which allowed for the reasonability of religious belief. These were:

1) belief in a higher being;
2) worship of said higher being;
3) said worship involving the practices of virtue and pietism;
4) the possibility of repentance from sin;
5) the possibility of reward and punishment in this life and the next.[24]

Because these categories are all *a priori* (i.e. they stem from Bacon's inductive bias), they are reasonable. Due to these categories fitting into many religions, deism and the acceptance of other beliefs began to increase in popularity.[25] The absence of core Christian doctrine (e.g. the incarnation, resurrection etc.) was also unique to this time. Bacon brought into question biblical authority and traditional pietism with his argument and was one of the first thinkers of his time to do so.

Hoffecker describes John Locke (1632-1704) as "England's foremost Enlightenment thinker",[26] as he tried to unite Christianity with the growing field of intellectualism and rationalism. Building on Bacon's theorizing, Locke was one of the first proponents of empiricism in this time, arguing for the truth of experience rather than epistemological speculation or a practice of the rising trend of deism.[27] His arguments contradicted those of Bacon; the basis of his claim was that "prior to experience of the world through the senses, the mind is a mere *tabula rasa* (blank slate)".[28] While Bacon argues for the human to clear the mind of bias, Locke's answer was that this bias lent itself to true understanding (in that it affects and shapes a human's perspective).

Although Locke did argue for the importance of Scripture in metaphysical understanding, this particular claim is less than biblical (see. Ephesians 4:18[29]; Romans 1:21). Locke's dependence on reason further separated his theories from traditional pietism. Hoffecker comments that:

"For Locke, reason was not just a tool to prepare for faith (Aquinas) or to explain the faith (Augustine); it was the standard for judging revelation and the judge of truth claims… what claimed to be revelation must submit to reason's judgment."[30]

In this way, for Locke, Christianity (or religion) was almost entirely about "individual intellectual belief".[31] Locke also rejected original sin; to him, the human was born with a moral nature unaffected by sin: any leanings toward good or evil were determined by habit formation (e.g. education, individual decisions).

Here, we can see the creep of individualism taking hold in mainstream thought. Our next study of Kant's *Subjective Turn* will further demonstrate the cementing of this idea in society.

The Subjective Age (late 18th-19th Centuries)

Richard Lints comments:

"Kant effectively formalized what often has been called the "subjective turn". The individual subject (at least among those individuals teaching in prestigious universities of Europe) was seen as the preeminent authority in matters pertaining to the constituents of the real world and how that world was known."[32]

It is important to note that the philosophical changes previously mentioned began in academic circles and took around 100 years to trickle down into broader society. For this reason, when Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) came on the scene, the public were only just beginning to embrace enlightenment ideas.

The late 18th and 19th centuries were characterised by an increasing focus on individualism and subjectivity. A clear example of this shift in thought in the early nineteenth century can be demonstrated in Jacques-Louis David's 1807 painting of Napoleon's coronation, which took place in 1804.[33] The painting shows Napoleon in the process of raising the crown to his own head, breaking the usual practice in Catholic Europe where a monarch was crowned by the Pope. This was a direct challenge to traditional practice and authority. Furthermore, the role of God in sanctioning imperial leadership had been somewhat usurped by the individual leader himself.

The Subjective Age was also a period of "transformed religious belief", where creativity and expression became more valued than pietism.[34] Kant was the main proponent of this line of thought; Lints argues that "nearly every thinker of consequence in the nineteenth century believed Kant had set the agenda to which serious intellectuals must respond… [he was also] the bridge from the Enlightenment to the Nineteenth Century".[35]

This claim relies on Kant's primary focus; to ground the pursuit of science (i.e. empiricism and rationalism) within a philosophical framework. Kant had no use for the whims of religion; similarly to Locke, he believed in the importance of empirical reason over all else. However, if there were such a thing as divine providence, this was insignificant epistemologically; we divide our empirical understanding of so-called 'purpose' into categories of reason, and this is how we internally interpret the world. "Purpose [i.e. understanding] does not reside in history,

only in one's [subjective] interpretation of it. History gives us facts, nothing more".[36]

Kant died at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but his theories and those of the thinkers mentioned before him were becoming fast entrenched in broader society. David Ray Griffin argues that the Enlightenment's legacy lay in its claim that the traditional, supernatural God of the West (i.e. from Augustinian theology) had died. This challenge to God's authority, in turn, manifested itself in provocation of the overall epistemological authority of the church and monarchy. Indeed, Locke himself was one of the main proponents of the argument that a monarchy was not divinely-appointed:

"To understand political power… we must consider what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature."[37] This led to an impeachment of the traditional conditions of belief (cue Kant's theory of the *Subjective Turn*).

As this century progressed, Kant's teachings on subjectivity became more popular. A view gradually emerged that religion was invented for our own psychological needs. Scholars began to value Bacon and Kant's arguments for objectivity; the working assumption was that an unbiased scholar was a lot closer to understanding truth than any subjective religious cleric. However, in this claim, the so-called objectivity of scholars became biased against religious argumentation; religion was seen as stemming from the emotional nature of an individual.

Richard Lints comments:

"Kant's legacy effectively divided intellectual inquiry into two separate domains: the secular world of science—the realm of facts and data [and empiricism and experience] and the sacred world of religion—the world of faith and trust."[38] Scepticism took hold, and scholars became less concerned with defending secular intellectualism or investigating the claims of traditional religion; but rather questioned the necessity for the sacred in the first place.

The divide between the sacred and the secular was widening, and although many people would still have expressed a resolute belief in God, the Christianity that was practiced was becoming increasingly relativist and separate from one's intellect. As Kant's ideas were so novel at this time, there was virtually no interaction between the two domains of faith and reason. Although people didn't realise it at the time, the West began to witness the "swallowing up of the sacred by the secular".[39]

In the years after Kant's death,

Charles Darwin (1809-82) became prominent in academic circles. While not a philosopher per se, Darwin's scientific theory of evolution was the first of its time to allow for a reasonable worldview outside of traditionalist Christianity. With certain evolutionary assumptions, metaphysical explanation was in reach of the human mind. Darwin is key to secular development, because without his work, scholars argue that the philosophical musings of previous thinkers (e.g. Kant and Locke) may not have penetrated into the public sphere so readily.[40]

This brings us to our current philosophical period; the 20th and 21st centuries.

The Haunted Age (Late 19th Century – present)

We will call this age "the haunted age", a term devised by philosopher Charles Taylor (b. 1931) and his followers. Our era is haunted because we experience "imitations of transcendence and beauty", but we no longer live in the once-enchanted world of the past. "We don't believe instead of doubting; we believe *while* doubting. We're all Thomas now".[41]

Exempting Taylor's philosophical speculation, we can see clear steps as to how the Western world has followed the previous age into the early 21st century – we still have over a century to cover!

An increasing focus on subjectivity allowed for the development of humanistic academia – which specifically manifested itself in the practice of psychological understanding. Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) established psychology as an official discipline in the late 19th-early 20th century. In 1879, Wundt developed the first university lab for experimental psychology, and here, he began to separate the workings of the mind from epistemological philosophy. While his predecessors saw science through a philosophical lens, Wundt sent philosophy into the backwaters of speculative thinking. Humanity had now surpassed epistemological philosophy (no longer did humanity need to rely on philosophy for understanding); the overarching authority was becoming empirical science. As for God, well to many, the God of the gaps (in scientific thought) was dead. If people were relying on this God for faith, they no longer needed him.

Theology, psychology, and philosophy were well and truly separate. Theology relied on blind faith, philosophy relied on speculation, and psychology relied on science.[42]

Wundt's practice of psychology became known as voluntarism, which denoted the organization of the mind. Wundt gathered physiological information

about a patient's exposure to stimuli, then recorded and analysed the sensations they felt. His foundational practice was a highly organised form of introspection and reductionist self-examination; he used these methods to devise an understanding of conscious thought. By a focus on reductionism, Wundt argued that the workings of consciousness could be broken down into specific elements; the complicated nature of our minds stems from these elements, depending on our empirical experiences. Wundt's psychological method of experimentation was not practiced past the 1920s, but he unknowingly impacted society in a much broader way; psychology was established as an experimental science, and religious practice became increasingly ratified in the eyes of the public (seen as a psychological reaction to external stimuli). Psychology was fast becoming an authority over religious experience.

One other psychologist who had a major impact on the dissipation of individualism into broader Western society was Carl Rogers (1902-87), the father of psychological humanism. Rogers argued for the importance of a focus on the self; to him, life's purpose lay in self-actualisation, objectivity and relativism. Instead of looking to a God to solve problems, people should now look to themselves (and until they can get to this developmental stage, other people) to solve life's issues. While this does have some advantages (e.g. an acknowledgement of the importance of responsibility and the necessity of work for human nature), it can encourage a complete lack of dependence on anything beyond the self, namely God.

Rogers identified seven key traits of a "fully-functioning human":

1. "Openness to experience and an abandonment of defensiveness.
2. An existential lifestyle that emphasizes living in the moment without distorting it.
3. Trust in oneself.
4. The ability to freely make choices. Fully functioning people take responsibility for their own choices, and are highly self-directed.
5. A life of creativity and adaptation, including an abandonment of conformity.
6. The ability to behave reliably and make constructive choices.
7. A full, rich life that involves the full spectrum of human emotions."[43]

The implication of Rogers' seven traits is that if humans don't adhere to these conditions, they are mentally deficient. Rogers' theories on Western culture may well be a factor that has led to mental health become a more widespread challenge than

ever before.

CONCLUSION: THE CORNERSTONE OF SECULAR THOUGHT - RELATIVISM

The eroding of the centrality of Christianity has brought certain benefits. Walter Percy surmised that;

"the present age… is better than Christendom. In the old Christendom, everyone was a Christian and hardly anyone thought twice about it. But in the present age the survivor of theory and consumption becomes a wayfarer in the desert, like St. Anthony."[44]

This is a beautiful affirmation of this time, albeit idealistic. James Smith, building on Taylor's writings, muses:

"Evolutionary psychology and expressive individualism are in the water of our secular age, and only a heroic few can manage to quell their chatter to create an insulated panic room in which their faith remains solidly secure".[45]

The reason for Taylor's idealism is that his definition of secular does not relate to a lack of religious belief, but defines our age as "manifestations of contested meaning".[46] Our age popularises one idea, but also praises its opposite. Taylor focuses on the appearance of relativism to define our age.

The concept of relativism seems to have developed in agreement and in unconscious contradiction to humanistic focus. It argues that everyone has their own truth (i.e. it has a foundation of individualism and subjectivity). An individual has the right to believe what they desire to be truth. One can own "truth", even if it completely contradicts the "truth" of another. This concept is even seen in Rogers' above-mentioned criteria for a fully-functioning man (e.g. "trust in oneself"; "the ability to freely make choices"; and "abandonment of conformity"), which denote the acceptance of a personal truth. It also pervades the teachings of all the other thinkers mentioned (bar Aquinas). Without a Scriptural foundation, human thought can go in a myriad of directions, all of which are justifiable (with a presupposition of relativism). However, relativism lies in contradiction to humanism and to itself. If everything is truth, then there is no truth. Furthermore, by its dogmatic promotion in society, the concept of relativism actually becomes a dogma; an epistemological presupposition in itself.

Taylor's writings help us identify relativism as the key presupposition of our haunted age. Smith writes:

"On the one hand, we live under a brass heaven, ensconced in immanence. We live in the twilight of both gods and idols. But their ghosts have refused to depart, and every once in a while we might be surprised

to find ourselves tempted by belief, by imitations of transcendence. Faith is fraught; confession is haunted by an inescapable sense of its contestability."[47]

This is a concise expression of our melancholy. Some studies[48] suggest that the question humans most want an answer to is "Why am I here?" (i.e. What is my purpose?) If we cannot fully believe anything, we cannot have an impenetrable sense of purpose. With our foremost historians, philosophers and even theologians buying into the presupposition of relativism, we can only hope to experience "imitations of transcendence", as truth is always another theory away.

Smith suggests that "what should interest us are these fugitive expressions of doubt *and* longing, faith *and* questioning".[49] These are secular, but provide us with another epistemological alternative: the search for something constant. Hopefully this search ends in the acceptance of the only constant, empirically verifiable, non-relativist option we have: the truth of Jesus Christ.

Smith speculates that we cannot undo the secularism that has taken hold in this culture, no matter our level of devotion or pietism. We can only learn how not to live, and consequently discover how to believe, in this secular age.

GLOSSARY

Empiricism – a philosophy that states knowledge stems solely from sensory experience.

Humanism – a perspective (scientific and psychological) that attaches importance to human experience (and empiricism), rather than divine matters.

Hylomorphism – Aristotle's theory of being as consisting of matter and form. Aristotle argued that these two concepts were a compound, while Aquinas promoted the view that although dependent on one another, matter and form remained separate elements.

Individualism – a social, cultural and psychological theory promoting independence and reliance on the self, rather than reliance on the community or government.

Onto-theology – the subordination of theology to philosophy. Promotes detachment and objectivity, rather than connection with God through humanity and relationship.

Presupposition – a belief (conscious or unconscious) about a line of argument before interaction with said argument has begun. (eg. in understanding metaphysics, assuming Scriptural authority would mean the individual has a Biblical presupposition).

Rationalism – refers to reason as the sole epistemological authority.

Reason – the practice of using intellect and logical thought as a means to aid understanding.

Relativism – the epistemological argument that truth is subjective; there are no absolute truths.

Subjectivity – a quality; refers to when a concept or argument is based on human emotions, thoughts and feelings.

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