

Section Four

PHILOSOPHY AND COSMOLOGY IN PERSONS

ФИЛОСОФИЯ И КОСМОЛОГИЯ В ЛИЦАХ

The word “Theology” from the Presocratics to Peter Abelard: Philosophy and Science. Some Remarks

MAURO FERRANTE — PhD

Università degli Studi “Niccolò Cusano” — Telematica Roma
(Rome, Italy)

E-mail: mauro.ferrante@unicusano.it; maurordf@yahoo.it

The purpose of this paper is to reconstruct, through the analysis of some key moments, the evolution of the term “theology” within the Western philosophical thought. Starting with the first formulation by the Presocratics, the study takes into consideration both the first attestation of the term by Plato (in the second book of the Republic) and the role it plays in Aristotle’s works (Metaphysics). In its second part, the paper considers the importance of the term “theology” in the Latin world, through the study of the Augustine’s critic against the greek thinkers, which will lead to a further development in the Middle Ages. The point of arrival is Peter Abelard, who formulated a concept of “theology” conceived as a science. At first, the term was tied to a pagan conception of society and was devoid of any scientific connotation. With the advent of Christianity, it begins to take on an universalistic character connected with the concept of an absolute truth. It is here pointed out, through all of these antecedents, how, in the Middle Ages, when the “theology” became an autonomous science and responds to its own laws, how it is assumed and used as an instrument to manage both science and truth.

Thanks to the contributions of the ancient philosophers, developed by medieval thinkers, it was possible to subsequently use the term “theology” also in a political sense. It also allows us to extend it to other fields than its original one. Finally, this paper wants to stress that it is necessary to first study the evolution of the concepts of terminology, because it allows us to better understand the concepts that are used in science.

Key Words: Middle Ages, Theology, Presocratics, Augustine, Abelard, Western Philosophy

Introduction

Neque enim hoc opere omnes omnium philosophorum uanas opiniones refutare suscepi, sed eas tantum, quae ad theologian pertinent, quo uerbo Graeco significari intelligimus de diuinitate rationem siue sermonem [...].

In this way St. Augustin defines theology in the eighth book of the *De civitate Dei*, evidently accepting the greek meaning of this word [Augustinus, *De civitate Dei*, VIII, 1].

A complete and exhaustive reconstruction about the history and the uses of theologia, especially in a time-frame of eighteen centuries, would be surely too much for a contribution like this one is supposed to be. Therefore, my aim will be to focus only on some moments that have been extremely important for the history of western thought. For example, we will neglect the contribution of eastern religious conceptions, of which the great importance is recognized since the time of Aristotle.

The Greek World

It is known that we can find the first employment of the term in the second book of Plato's *Republic*, when the author talks about the correct type of "mythical theology" that the poets should follow. In particular, he states that it is required to give a representation of gods like they really are, instead of creating myths and similars [see Plato, *Respublica*, II, 379a].

The criticism of the mythological theology handed down by poets is comprehensible only if we consider the precedent thinkers who paved the way for an analysis of this type. Doubtlessly in the presocratic thought are contained all the essential requirements, even though the term θεολογία never occurs. So, we cannot disregard the contributions, for example, of Xenophanes and Heraclitus.

Alredy Anaximander moved towards a new conception of God, compared to the classical one, but it is thanks to Xenophanes that there was a declaration of war against the type of religion represented by the olympic *pantheon*. The first component of his criticism is the attack to Homer and Hesiod.

In a very significant fragment, the author states that their fault has been to have charged gods of the responsibilities of every kind of vituperative and scandalous acts [see Xenophanes, fragment DK 21 B 11]. To look at them like they was a simple human being is, among all of the attitudes, the most appalling: it is at least misleading, because it implicates a human conception of the deity. For example, it is thought generated, dressed, passion-stricken and similars.

Nevertheless, Xenophanes is conscious that Homer has been instrumental in the education of every greek man since the dawn of the greek culture itself: his work can be defined the first step that made possible to ascend towards the knowledge of divine things. In any case, this contribution appears to our author a primitive condition that must be surpassed, starting from the rejection of any kind of theogony. In fact, it is only due to the tendence of men to represent gods as if they were humans that any knowledge we can reach of them will be untrue.

In Xenophane's satirical work, the poem entitled *Silli*, we can find a passage that hardly could be more explicative on this point. In this fragment, the author claims that the anthropological conception of deity would be not different from those of any animal, just if it could have its own gods and the ability to represent them [see Xenophanes, fragment DK 21 B 15].

These few words make clear the polemic contained in the *Silli*, but it is in his poem *On the Nature* that Xenophanes indicates his own vision about god. In a very famous fragment he states that the "supreme God" is both something else in comparison with anything has been conceived before and a reality that transcends every dimension of knowable and conceivable [see Xenophanes, fragment DK 21 B 23]. Omitting here to talk about all the further Cristian uses of this passage in a monotheistic perspective, it is undoubtfull that we have here a totally new concept of God. This divinity has nothing in common neither with an Apollo or

a Poseidon nor with humans, with Olympic gods were indissolubly connected. This kind of God could not be more distant from all of these conjectures.

This fracture between human and divine thought flows into a radical impossibility to have any certain knowledge in this field. The boundaries of this “otherness” is explained, again, in the *Peri Physeos*. Here Xenophanes claims, against myths and pretendings, that the true knowledge belongs to God, not to humans: they can only have opinions and make conjectures. The originality consists in the passage from the field of sensations to the field of thought. At the beginning of the 20th century, Untersteiner called it “the passage from myth to *logos*”. Anyway, much more interesting for our aim is to recognize Xenophanes’ role in introducing the component of universality in the speech about God [Untersteiner, 1955: ccvi].

This universalism is one of the properties also of heraclitian λόγος. Concerning the divinity we can find, in Heraclitus’ thought, positions that can be easily compared to Xenophanes’ ones. First of all the attack to Homer and Hesiod goes on: if the first one is judged incapable to understand any evident thing in this world no better treatment is reserved to the second one, who cannot recognize the deep unity of the day and night. As it was stated by the philosopher of Colophon, this condition is due to the human impossibility to comprehend the true ruling principle of the entire world, neither before they have listened to talking about it nor after.

The being one of all things is justified, within Heraclitus’ philosophy, through the universality of this λόγος that represents nevertheless the divine law. Everything happens on the basis of it. This law and the human one are different: the first one is superior and rules upon the second.

This unitary divine principle shares with Xenophanes’ conception the distance from the contemporary religion: we could not read in a different way the statement according to which the One, that is the “only Wise”, is both glad and not glad to be called Zeus. This distance between olympic gods and the heraclitian “supreme God” implies, one more time, the same double result. If one hand this kind of conception is grounded on the radical diversity between human and divine faculties, on the other it is unavoidable to postulate the human knowledge in this field as faulty. If we want to use the very Heraclitus’ words, we must say that if it is true that man is in a condition comparable to the one of a child in front of a grown man, this is due to the disparity between his knowledge and God’s one. In other words human nature does not have any cognition [see Heraclitus, fragment DK 22 B 79].

If we disregard all of the various interpretation made possible by the style in which these fragments are written, one point comes out clearly: the admission made by human reason of the existence of a transcending order.

By reading all of these passages, it is evident that both in Xenophanes and in Heraclitus, even if in different ways, a new conception of god(s) is dominant. We can see this easily in the first, especially because of his blast directed towards Hesiod and Homer. Otherwise, in Heraclitus the *Silli*’s satire gives the way to prophetic and terse propositions. Anyway, it is certain that between these two authors there is an evident resemblance regarding the elaboration of a new speech about the divine. Surely many others pre-Socratic thinkers moved towards this new way of thinking, but if we would screen all the significant attestations that have reached us it would surely take a year-lasting effort. To work in this way we should start surely with Thales, who claimed that all is full of gods.

I hope these considerations have thrown enough light on the background related to the text of the *Republic* where Plato uses for the very first time the word θεολογία: without knowing something about Xenophanes and Heraclitus it would have been impossible understand the true sense of Plato’s speech when he use of this term.

These precedents are the key also to approach Aristotle's point of view. In his *Metaphysics* he takes in the term object of this lesson and, starting from its definition, he assigns it a specific place within the range of human fields of knowledge. In the first part of book E, once he have made clear that the aim of his work is the research about the first principle and the causes of *beings as beings*, Aristotle divides theoretical sciences into physics, mathematics and theology [see ARISTOTELES, *Metaphysica* E, 1026a, 18-20]. In threefold division, the vertex is filled by theology, which is called "primary philosophy" (φιλοσοφία πρώτη): its fields of application are motionless and separated realities. The author surely recognises the importance of all these three disciplines, but he claims that only one has to be considered the "highest" according to his subject of investigation. Theology is the highest science because it has the responsibility to investigate the highest kind of reality: this is the reason because of we can call it "univesal" (καθόλου). In this way, it is said "prior" by comparison with any other science.

In other parts of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle calls θεολόγοι some of his predecessors: it happens in book A, B, Γ and N. At first sight, it is evident that he makes a large use of this word: if on one hand he calls "theology" his primary science, on the other, every time he talks about theologians, it is in a historical context. In other words, by defining theologian's characters like Hesiod and Pherecydes of Syro he makes a clear distinction between theology and philosophy. However, it has to be stressed that this distinction is true only for the first thinkers who talked about God. If we want to say it with Werner Jaeger, we must say that, in ancient times, philosophy started where theology ended. Nevertheless, the features of their literary compositions makes these poets theologians. For example, in the same way it happens for heroes, they narrate about god's origins and deeds.

In a recent paper of his Aldo Magris believes these considerations fundamental to understand the herodotian statement according to which greek religion has been created by these ποιητής / θεολόγοι [Magris, 2008: 142]. This point of view is confirmed by the passage where Herodotus calls both Homer and Hesiod "theologians": he makes them the initiators of this kind of divine speech in the instant he calls all the others "later theologians".

About the *Metaphysics*, we have to focus our attention on one last point: if in book A Aristotle talks about the authors of theogonies it is in book B that, the second acceptation of the term is more explicit. Here the word θεολόγοι makes a match with a strong criticism that shares more than one point with Xenophanes' blast against the mythical conception of god. In a brilliant passage, it is said that since the time of Hesiod every theologian made his own free conjectures about the divinity disregarding philosophy at all. The consequence of this approach is Aristotle's refusal to keep in consideration all of these myths [see Aristoteles, *Metaphysica*, B, 1000a]. Here is clear that he consciously employees the word θεολογία in the twofold sense we have just talked about. Further evidences can be found in book A and in book Λ: here he grounds his considerations on the distinction between theologians and "physicians", the first true philosophers of which the first representative has been Thales [see Aristoteles, *Metaphysica*, A, 983b, 20-24].

Therefore, even if theologians represent the first fundamental level of knowledge, we must say that it is only with the raise of philosophy that theology becomes more "scientific". This process comes to his end with the contributions of Plato and Aristotle: thanks to them it has been possible, according to Werner Jaeger, to work out the "second Aristotelian acceptation of theology", i. e., the "philosophic theology" or the "φιλοσοφία πρώτη" [Jaeger, 1953].

The Latin World

In the very moment we want to focus on the latin world we must consider the threefold division of theology in *mythical*, *physical* and *civil* made by Marcus Terentius Varro in I century b. D.

Tertullian knew this elaboration: in his *Ad nationes* (197 a. C.) he mentions many times this author and, in his defence of Christianity, he talks about both physical and mythical theology. In book II, it is clearly said that the poets’ theological approach could never reach any kind of knowledge in this field [see Tertullianus, *Ad nationes*, II, 3, 1-3].

This attestation is surely important, but for our aim is more interesting to pay attention to what St. Augustine writes in the sixth book of the *De civitate Dei*. Here he explains the division made by Varro, but at the same time, he criticizes both him and the theology itself [see Augustinus, *De civitate Dei*, VI, 5, 1]. Without any doubt he keeps in high esteem his predecessor (he is defined the smartest and the wisest among all), but he says he did not have enough courage to reject publically (and totally) this kind of speech about god(s). Augustine claims that both mythical theology, grounded on indecent stories, and civil theology, full of unworthy pretences about gods, are unsuitable instruments to reach any knowledge about divine things. His judgement on this point is so severe that he thinks these approaches to God must be not only totally rejected, but also condemned. Nothing about them can be considered true: from the anthropomorphically conception of gods to the stories about their indecent and brutal actions. In this way the only one that could be admitted, although partially, is the *theologia naturalis*. It starts its research with the study of the world in a way that makes possible to “climb up” towards (the knowledge of) God. In other words, the natural one is the only kind of theology that makes no recourse to stories and indecencies because it is characterized by a rational part.

Augustine’s acceptance of this three-fold division becomes much more interesting in the moment we consider it not only from a historical point of view, but from also regarding the development of his thought about this theme. He surely would not have defined himself a “theologian.” This is true not only for mythical and civil theology but also for the physical, because intimately it is philosopher’s proper field of action. Moreover, theology, conceived in any of these ways, remains bounded to the idea of a philosophical investigation about God made by pagan thinkers. We can see how in this way the word *theologia* is characterized by a negative undertone every time it is used by Christians: they refer it to the pagan context in which it has been created. This circumstance is absolutely comprehensible if we bear in mind that this attitude raised up in the first centuries of Christianity, when it had to establish itself. Therefore, in a historical perspective, the presence of such a mistrust (Tertullian, Augustine) it is not extravagant.

Now we have thrown light on both the circumstances of the appearance of the term θεολογία and the philosophical workout about it, we should have the instruments to reach a better understanding of its gradual penetration into the christian language. It is already present in the lexicon of Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and, as we have just seen, of Tertullian and Augustine. Anyway, it is tanks to the contributions of Eusebius of Caesarea and the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite that this word has a noteworthy achievement as the knowledge of God, reached through faith and mystical experience. These are two fundamental aspects of Dionysius’ philosophy.

In the very moment, we handle this author to explain the process of the “christianization” of θεολογία, the problem becomes more complicated but, at the same time, we can find much more innovative points of view. As we can read in his writings, he assigns to this word

three different meanings. In a first sense, it is synonymous of “Holy Scripture” (Γραφή) and, indeed, the θεολόγος is the author of these inspired books [see Pseudo Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, I, 2]: in this way are called Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Peter, the other Apostles and the prophets like Isaiah.

We must stress that it is impossible to translate the term θεολόγος with the latin *theologus* because there is an important difference of meaning between the greek acception and the better known latin one. According to René Roques the greek acception corresponds to the global sense related to the content (either total or partial) of the Scriptures [Roques, 1962:135].

The second meaning of the term is less widely than the first and it consists in the identification of θεολογία with God’s word of which the Bible gives an account. In this case, the distance from both Γραφή and θεολόγοι’s words is evident.

The third and last use is maybe the most interesting for us: it is a technical definition that can be connected with St. Augustine’s thought and its greek background. If the bishop of Hippo believed the *theologia naturalis* (φυσική) to be the only one worthy of some kind of consideration, it is no longer true for Dionysius. Considered in a technical way, θεολογία is totally disconnected from any historical, juridical, moral or prophetic consideration in a way that transforms it the *simple* and *direct* study of God. In this way the radical opposition to φυσιολογία is a foregone consequence because of two reasons: (1) the nature of their respective objects of investigation is different: theology researches about divine nature, whereas physics looks after created things (φύσεις); (2) the study of these beings apart from distracting attention from God causes the gradual incapability of human reason to understand Him. This opposition is such radical that Dionysius openly claims the dangers of the study of sensible realities.

This technical meaning of θεολογία is the object of an intense study and maybe represents one of the most important points of his entire speculation.

We have pointed out that God, which is totally transcendent, is the proper object of the Holy Scriptures [see Pseudo Dionysius, *De mystica theologia*, I, 2]. In this way man, his intellect, his language and any other of his faculties face something absolutely distant, beyond the world and impossible to be reached. This gap, due to the difference between subject’s and object’s (of knowledge) ontological status, is the reason behind Dionysius’ choice to distinguish an affirmative theology (ἀποφατική) from a negative theology (καταφατική), for which he tries to find a scriptural justification. In this sense, he states that all of the θεολόγοι handed on us their knowledge either in a symbolic or in a philosophical way.

Even if with Dionysius’ contribution, we can see a tendency to connect the word θεολογία to an unequivocally christian context, this constant reference to the Bible remains, in his whole *corpus*, simple. In other words, it never implies any kind of rational elaboration. Moreover, when the author talks about the different kinds of theology, he never discusses them as self-sufficient theological methods: symbolic theology, affirmative theology, negative theology and mystical theology are just *four* different steps *in one* sending process towards the Knowledge.

The Middle Ages

The last remark about Pseudo-Dionysius is about his writings’ fate in the latin West. In the Middle Ages have been done many translations of the *corpus*, but the one that had the biggest long-lasting fortune was made by John Scotus Eriugena. He started to work on it approximately in 860 at the instance of king Chales the Bald. For his explicit admission, he tried to translate, thanks to his deep knowledge of the language, all the significant greek words

in latin without twisting their own meaning. For example, unlike many others, he always transliterates these words instead of giving an unfitting latin translation. And this is what happens also for *θεολογία* / *theologia*. The importance of this coiche lies in its consequences: the diffusion of this term in the western christianity.

As often happens, also about this theme Eriugena's thought is influenced by Dionysian philosophy. We can see it easily in many passages of the *Expositiones in ierarchiam coelestem* and of the *De divisione naturae*, where the Pseudo-Areopagite is called more than once "the highest theologian". Just to give an example, it is known that the Irish thinker totally accepts the twofold division of theology into affirmative and negative [see Iohannes Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, II, 30].

Anyway, eriugenian contributions cannot be downgraded to this simple repetition of Dionysius' theories. His personal and original approach to the theme we are talking about can be found primarily in his main writing, the *Periphyseon*. Here the term *theologia* and others of the same family are used more than one hundred times. Moreover, as always happens in his thought, all of the different aspects of his philosophy must be considered as an indivisible structure. In this case, his concept of theology is intimately connected with two of his most characteristic elaborations: the doctrine of theophanies and the doctrine of *reditus*.

First of all Eriugena conceives no clear distinction between philosophy and theology: on one hand philosophy is the intellectual research of the truth, on the other human reason moves from faith and, in this way, can reach the *visio beatifica*. If we want to use Professor Gregory's words we can say that "questo è l'itinerario della filosofia o semplicemente della *theoria* che culmina nella *theologica contemplatio* o *altior theoria*" [Gregory, 1963: 58-82]. Without any doubt, the starting point of spiritual research is the eriugenian concept of the world as a collection of symbols that are both a representation and a manifestation of the Truth (*theophania*). The Holy Scriptures, in virtue of the fact they are an expression of God's word, are surely to be conceived as one of those manifestations and, consequently, their reading is the way to move towards the Truth starting from symbols. In other words looking at the Bible as a symbol, we can understand the connection between history and theology.

It is easier to understand Eriugena's thought if we look at the characteristics of whom he consider the biggest Theologian of all times: St. John the Evangelist. He is described at the beginning of the *Homilia on the Prologue of St. John's Gospel*. Here he claims that the way to enter the Truth is to transcend every sensible being, everything that is, everything that is not, everything can be comprehended or expressed through human language. This is exactly how St. John acts: he flies beyond all of these things with theology's wings, with the *contemplatio theologica* [see Iohannes Scotus Eriugena, *Homilia in prologum s. Evangelii secundum Iohannem*, 1]. In other words, if on one hand we must go beyond sensible things, on the other, when we read the Bible, we must transcend its literal and historical meaning. In this way, it is possible to move ahead in the path that leads to the One. If the whole eriugenian vision of the world as a circular movement, in which the dialectic moment (the procession of creatures) is the essential counterpart of the analysis, then theology assumes a fundamental place in the dymalic of the return. In this way, the *altior theoria* assumes its deepest meaning: it becomes the instrument to catch every spiritual truth hidden behind symbols so we can say theology is the exegetical way to understand sacred history and divine secrets.

It is clear, at this point, that John Scot's elaboration is an important moment within the history of the uses of this term, now freed from that negative undertone related to the pagan context in which it has been coined but still connected with the dionysian concept of a theology unavoidably dependent on faith and mystical experience.

A strongly innovative contribution comes from Peter Abelard, surely one of the most important characters of the twelfth-century Renaissance. First of all we have to face the problem concerning the title of his controversial treatise *On the Trinity*, given to the fire in March / April 1121. Only in one of the three manuscripts that preserve the whole text we can read, at the end, “Petri Abaelardi perhipatetici theologia [sic] explicit” (Ms. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Theol. Lat. Oct. 95, ff. 1^r-64^r). The guiding lines drawn by Buytaert and Mews about this question are largely sharable: they claim that the word *theologia* entered Abelard’s lexicon just in a second moment. An important instrument to reconstruct the development of his thought is the fact that the three *Theologiae* are as many versions of a same work. Bearing this in mind we can point out that in the *Summi Boni* the author never employs neither *theologia* nor any other of its derivatives: they are introduced just in the second version, the *Theologia christiana*. Just to talk about an example connected with St. Augustine we can say that in the first version, he is called “*spiritualis doctor*” and in the second, he is said to be “*omnium theologorum auctoritas*”. The two editors of the treatise stressed that Abelard uses *theologus* to indicate a christian thinker, as opposed to what happened in the glosses on the *Isagoge*, where he reserved this form of address to those thinkers who investigate divine things exclusively in a philosophical way. I think this remark is precious to understand the development of abelardian thought, but it is not true that this is the very first time that a christian is called *theologus*. As we have seen, already John Scot did this with the *magnus theologus* Dionysius.

Anyway, these considerations are the proof that the term *theologia* is not part of Abelard’s vocabulary since the beginning and this is true both in a general and in a specific sense.

In a passage of the *Historia calamitatum* he talks about his treatise, written as a teacher, calling it *a treatise of theology*. This is the very first time in medieval West that this word is employed to entitle a riting (the only precedent is Dionysius’ *Theologia mystica*, but it is connected with the greek meaning of the word of which we have already talked about) [see Petrus Abaelardus, *Historia calamitatum*, 24]. I chose to give an extended quotation of the passage because I think it contains not only an attestation of the term, but also a “declaration of method”. Abelardian theology gains characteristics and instruments absolutely new. He never uses the word to indicate a discipline (he prefers to go on using the traditional diction of *sacra lectio*), but the way of investigation is surely different. I want to insist on this point because I think that a mere research about how many quotation of the term are present in these writings would be scarcely interesting.

Conclusions

Alberto Bartola claims that the portion of the *Historia* we have just read is one of the most important sources to comprehend the historical context and the reasons of the changes caused by the early-medieval dialectic in the perspective of its progressive penetration into the study of the *sacra pagina* [Bartola, 1996: 17-57]. Human and philosophical reasonings are surely irreplaceable in Abelard’s theological research: even if they are not able to reach God by themselves, only with their aid we can create those indispensable analogies that give us rough outline of concepts otherwise inaccessible. Though he does not use *theologia* to define the discipline itself he replaces *de facto* the traditional method of the *sacra lectio* with another one derived from philosophical tradition. In this way the meaning of theology dilates itself so much to embrace all of the christian doctrines and, we can say, both the word and its meaning are totally christianized (in a new rational way).

If we say this, surely we cannot make something different but to share Ernesto Buonaiuti's position when he says it is thank to Abelard that this term enters the official language of medieval schools to indicate a discipline independent from the exegesis of the Bible [Buonaiuti, 1945:416]. It is in this very moment of the history of western philosophy that the meaning of theology as it was known by Varro, Tertullian and St. Augustine is given up: the idea of its pagan legacy is replaced with the concept of “*scientia de Deo*.”

This is exactly what *theologia* means in 12th century and it is an essential requirement for the further elaboration of the 13th century that will see St. Thomas as one of its most important protagonists.



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