



Theology

Bishop **Alexandre B. Palma** is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Theology

Theology: a Communal Enterprise

Google Scholar, a major academic platform, operates under the motto “Stand on the shoulders of giants.” It is a compelling call for scholars to participate in a collective effort to expand common knowledge. It is striking, however, to note that such a thought-provoking sentence was first articulated (by Bernard of Chartres) many centuries ago, during the Middle Ages. Furthermore, this invitation, now extended to researchers from all scientific fields, originally stems from a very peculiar academic discipline: theology (and philosophy). Theologians, in fact, are particularly aware of the communal nature of all intellectual activity. This is partly because they recognize themselves as heirs to a rich heritage of religious wisdom, and partly because they place themselves before that reality “greater than which none can be conceived” (Anselm of Canterbury): the divine. Consequently, theologians understand that they always stand on the shoulders of giants – their predecessors – while facing the greatest “giant” humanity can encounter: God. Perhaps theologians can remind us that all other researchers, regardless of their field, are doing the same.

From and for Communities

Theology is inherently a communal enterprise. This conclusion holds true regardless of the analytical lens applied to the field. Theology both emerges from and addresses a community, whether it is defined as “faith seeking understanding” (Anselm of Canterbury) within a particular religious tradition, or as a radical interrogation of the divine impulse within human hearts and cultures. Drawing upon Josiah Royce’s conceptual framework, theology functions as a “community of interpretation”:

a collective bound by shared memories, inquires, and sources, united by a commitment to interpreting human experience against the backdrop of the divine.

Religious communities often emphasize the communal identity of theology. From this perspective, the theologian necessarily operates within a faith-based community – sharing its beliefs to better interpret that faith, to translate it into discourse, and to critically address historical or epochal deviations. The theologian serves here not only as a thinker, but also as a builder of the religious community. Thus, theology is both a communal task and a communal treasure.

In post-secular societies, this communal nature may be less obvious, but it is no less true. The declining public relevance of religious institutions, alongside the individualization of religious itineraries, tends to blur this collective inquiry into the divine. While theologians in this context may appear to work in isolation, this does not reflect the full picture. Post-secularity is characterized by the deinstitutionalization of religion, but not by its extinction – quite the opposite. Religious and theological inquiry has simply migrated to other realms of culture. Secular theology (i.e., theology done beyond religious communities) is still communal, as can be seen in secular spaces, such as universities, the arts, and the media. Even in these secular spaces, theology remains an expression of anxieties and dreams of the broader human community – a larger community, but a community, nonetheless.

Thus, regardless of how one defines it, theology remains a distinct form of reasoning that both emerges from and speaks to a community. In other words, theology is inherently a communal act. Whether it is institutional or public, sacred or secular, religious or spiritual, theology consistently functions as a common good and a communal enterprise.

Through Communication

Communication and community are intrinsically linked. They exist in a state of perpetual circularity, where communities shape languages and languages, in turn, build communities. In this sense, theology is itself a form of language. Communication lies at its very core. Indeed, it is defined as *lógos*, i.e., as word. The primary task of theology is to “give-word” to the religious experience of humanity and, more profoundly, to “give-word” to the revelation of the divine. By constructing this language, theology participates in the same circularity through which communities

are formed and expressed. Thus, it is through communication that theology fulfils its communal task.

It is noteworthy how theology developed its own methodologies by focusing on specific forms of communication. From their earliest stages, for example, Jewish and Christian theologies relied heavily on the art of commentary. This involved receiving and valuing the discourse of another, frequently a religious or spiritual authority from the past, thereby fostering a chain of commentaries and a community of interpreters. Historically, it was not uncommon for these commentaries to become so intertwined with the original text that they could no longer be clearly differentiated. What began as an authorial text evolved into a communal one. Later, in the Middle Ages, the *disputatio* (disputation) method breathed life into the newly established university. At its core, this method generated both vigorous debate and the formation of distinct schools of thought. More recently, dialogue has emerged as a primary theological method suited for a pluralistic and secular age. This approach also seeks community through communication, assuming not only that individuals can unite by sharing and listening to one another's *lógos*, but – more importantly – that they can approach the truth by journeying together through the words they exchange.

By its own nature, theological discourse is open-ended. This is not because the traditions delivered by previous generations have lost their truth or meaning, but for a more fundamental reason: in addressing God and the divine, theology grapples with the ineffable. Thus, theology finds itself in a paradoxical position, tasked with the mission of 'wording' God in human language while knowing that no human word can ever truly encompass God. To some, this might seem a sufficient reason to dismiss the theological enterprise altogether, leading to opposing 'a-theological' stances, such as atheism or fideism. However, this limitation is actually a source of strength. It ensures that theological communication remains an unfinished task; and, consequently, the commentary, the disputation, and the dialogue about God remain open to higher forms of language and, by extension, higher forms of community.

Toward Communion

However, the radical openness of theology is not chaotic. It is rather oriented toward an end. This represents what might be termed an "eschatological tension" inherent in theology. It travels through time

and space, drawn toward a horizon of communal fullness that remains unattainable in time and space, even if this envisioned future transforms the visible present. This definitive end, though impossible to determine rigorously, takes the shape of communion. Theology, therefore, aims at communion as a higher form of community.

While maybe shared by various religious traditions, the concept of communion as the ultimate end is particularly emphasized by Christian theology, where historical communities (such as the Church) serve as anticipations of this definitive state of communion. Communion is a form of deep intimacy in which individuals do not lose their distinct identities. On the contrary, it is a relationship that reconciles identity and alterity, unity and diversity, giving and taking. In this definitive resolution of relationship polarities, they no longer function as zero-sum games but instead mutually reinforce one another. Theology places itself at the service of this superior form of community by highlighting the fundamental questions that make us radically one, bridging diverse forms of human inquiring about what transcends all there is, and deepening human acquaintance with the One who is, in himself, according to Christian theology, communion and love: God.

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