

Theology & Spirituality

Theology is often seen as dry and academic, boring and of little use; Spirituality by comparison is seen as free and open, easy and comforting. These are two extreme stereotypes, but how true are they? What exactly is the relationship between the Theology & Spirituality, and was there ever a time where this division was not apparent in Church History?

DOCTRINE & PRAYER REASON & FEELING

Theology is generally defined, in a modern context, as the study of the nature of God and religious beliefs, when systematically developed (Oxford English Dictionary). Spirituality is that which relates to or affects the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things. Traditionally there is this distinction which sets-off one against the other. Theology is systematic and objective; spirituality is subjective and personal. Is this a fair judgement? Does this distinction reflect a commonly held contemporary belief?

Theology comes from two Greek words:

Theos (Θεός) = God
+

Logos (Λόγος) = a word (as embodying an idea),
a statement, a speech

In the Patristic Church and in the Middle Ages theology was regarded as the Queen of Sciences, as distinct from the Natural Sciences. Theology was therefore grounded in reason and logic, but also imagination and intuition—

Spirituality was therefore part of theology

Theology was integral to spirituality

The earliest Christian paintings (in the Catacombs under Rome) also Medieval illuminated prayer books and Bibles (The Book of Kells, the Lindisfarne Gospels) are examples of this fusion – a simple representation of Gospel truth. But also dense theological books should rely on the imagination to intimate truth from eternity as much as relying on reason.

About seven or eight years ago an article in the Church Times suggested a portrait of a typical modern Anglican: a woman who was into spirituality, New Age ideas, experimenting with personal religion and individual freedom. Sixty years ago C.S. Lewis suggested that women were not as good at reasoning as men. This may offend contemporary popular liberal sensitivities, but is it completely wrong? Perhaps it is too much of a generalization. There are plenty of women theologians who do not get lost in subjective spirituality; and there is a long and important tradition of spirituality as being integral to the study of theology in the early and Patristic (i.e. “Fathers”) Church? Perhaps this distinction is born out of a particularly indulgent Western society that thrives on stereotypes whilst labelling people in derogatory terms?

DOCTRINE & PRAYER

Theology represents something given, immovable, a basic core of belief. This is why we have the Creeds – basic statements of belief, communally held: “*We believe...*”. The Apostles’ Creed (which emerged from the ultra early Church), developed into other creeds – variations, written to reflect a developing doctrinal tradition, the most popular and enduring being the Nicene Creed (4th century) that we use in church today.

ETHICS

Neither theology nor spirituality can exist or thrive in a vacuum; there has to be an ethical dimension to what we say and believe, and how we conduct our lives before God. At the heart of this ethical dimension there must be a humility born from a realization that we are flawed and Fallen, we may not get it right, and what we say may be misinterpreted. Therefore consider the following and how this should affect us in our Bible reading and study, and our theological reading.

Ethics—

“For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.”
Romans 7:19

Humility—

“PREVENT us O Lord, in all our doings with thy most gracious favour, and further us with thy continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy Name, and finally by thy mercy obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Collect, BCP 1662, at end of communion service:



THEORY & REAL LIFE

The relationship between theology and doctrine on the one hand, and spirituality and prayer on the other was described by C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. He describes theology as ‘The Science of God’. In the Middle Ages the Church described theology as ‘The Queen of Sciences’.

I remember once when I had been giving a talk to the RAF an old, hard-bitten officer got up and said, “I’ve no use for all that stuff. But, mind you, I’m a religious man too. I know there’s a God. I’ve felt Him: out alone in the desert at night: the tremendous mystery. And that’s just why I don’t believe all your neat little dogmas and formulas about Him. To anyone who’s met the real thing they all seem so petty and pedantic and unreal!”

Now in a sense I quite agreed with that man. I think he had probably had a real experience of God in the desert. And when he turned from that experience to the Christian creeds, I think he really was turning from something real to something less real. In the same way, if a man has once looked at the Atlantic from the beach, and then goes and looks at a map of the Atlantic, he also will be turning from something real to something less real: turning from real waves to a bit of coloured paper. But here comes the point. The map is admittedly only coloured paper, but there are two things you have to remember about it. In the first place, it is based on what hundreds and thousands of people have found out by sailing the real Atlantic. In that way it has behind it masses of experience just as real as the one you could have from the beach; only, while yours would be a single glimpse, the map fits all those different experiences together. In the second place, if you want to go anywhere, the map is absolutely necessary. As long as you are content with walks on the beach, your own glimpses are far more fun than looking at a map. But the map is going to be more use than walks on the beach if you want to get to America.

Now, Theology is like the map. Merely learning and thinking about the Christian doctrines, if you stop there, is less real and less exciting than the sort of thing my friend got in the desert. Doctrines are not God: they are only a kind of map. But that map is based on the experience of hundreds of people who really were in touch with God—experiences compared with which any thrills or pious feelings you and I are likely to get on our own are very elementary and very confused. And secondly, if you want to get any further, you must use the map. You see, what happened to that man in the desert may have been real, and was certainly exciting, but nothing comes of it. It leads nowhere. There is nothing to do about it. In fact, that is just why a vague religion—all about feeling God in nature, and so on—is so attractive. It is all thrills and no work: like watching the waves from the beach. But you will not get to Newfoundland by studying the Atlantic that way, and you will not get eternal life by simply feeling the presence of God in flowers or music. Neither will you get anywhere by looking at maps without going to sea. Nor will you be very safe if you go to sea without a map.

In other words, Theology is practical.

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952),
Book 4, Chapter 1, pp. 153-155

‘FIDES QUARUM INTELLECTUM’ — ‘I BELIEVE IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND’

No single map or photograph, or experience, of the Atlantic Ocean will tell us all there is to know about the Atlantic. We cannot know completely in an instant thought what is the totality that is the Atlantic Ocean. The vast depths with unimaginable sea creatures yet to be discovered, the pressure and composition of the waters, the vast expanses on the surface with ever changing waves and currents, all this only begins to hint at what the ocean is. But what value is there to a map, as compared to an individual experience of part of the ocean? And then, if theology is a map about the science of God — what sort of map? Navigation charts are different to ocean current maps; a map of the ocean surface is different to a relief map of the ocean floor. A detailed ‘map’ of one molecule of water can be as rich and complex, indeed more enigmatic and puzzling, than as a map of the entire ocean? We can never know all there is to know about God, but theology will provide a map of what we do know, and, importantly, how God has dealt with us.

Theology then is not an idle academic pursuit, but should be pursued as part of a relationship with the Triune God.

*Theology for Augustine of Hippo, the great Patristic Theologian and Philosopher, and the Medieval Theologian and Churchman Anselm of Canterbury, was **fides quarum intellectum**—
Faith Seeking Understanding.*

*“... let my mind meditate on you,
let my tongue speak of you,
let my heart love you,
let my soul hunger for you
... until I enter into the joy of the Lord,
who is God, Three in One,
blessed for ever.”*

Anselm of Canterbury, *Prosligion*

- ◆ Read and discuss this passage (left) by C.S. Lewis. Can theology be as real as a religious experience?
- ◆ What does Lewis mean by a ‘genuine’ religious experience?
- ◆ Are all religious experiences from God?
- ◆ Is all theology/doctrine fixed? Is there a fixed core?
- ◆ Are the Creeds fixed and immovable universal statements of truth about God?
- ◆ Can universal truths be read from religious experience?
- ◆ How does society and culture change theology/doctrine? Are these changes valid?
- ◆ Since the 18th century there has been a split between faith and intellectual activities – is this valid?
- ◆ What can we learn from Augustine and Anselm on faith seeking understanding?



THE ATLANTIC OCEAN

- ◆ What do these photographs and maps tell us, individually and collectively about the Atlantic Ocean?
- ◆ To extend Lewis's analogy, can they tell us something about God?

LEFT COLUMN

1. Ice Berg, Baffin Bay
2. Bermuda
3. RMS Titanic
4. Equatorial Storm

MIDDLE COLUMN

1. Whale off Newfoundland
2. Hurricane Isabel, Central Atlantic, 2003
3. Caribbean Beach
4. Waves off Africa
5. Beach, Florida

RIGHT COLUMN

1. Topographical Map (sea-bed relief)
2. Pilotage Chart, Plymouth, UK
3. Ocean Currents Map
4. A Thermal Map (Sea-Bed Temperature Zones)

ILLUSION & REALITY

The former Bishop of Woolwich, Michael Marshall, sees this distinction between theory and real life, which can lead to theology being seen as an end in itself, as the difference between a signpost and the finishing post. Is theology and spirituality therefore a means to an end? If we see it as an end in itself then we mistake an illusion for reality.

Michael Marshall sees this mistake growing out of the Enlightenment and fed by the age of information overload we live in today.

'The theologian speaks primarily from within the environment of the library and the lecture room, or from the pages of the written word in the environment of academia. His or her information is imparted and communicated in and through books about God. Similarly with the training of the clergy. For many of our clergy, trained in the culture of theological academia, there is the real danger that the end product of Christian or ministerial formation is a brain full of Christianity!'

He then continues by comparing this situation with what the early Church and the Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe regard as a theologian and the study of theology. In this context he comments that a theologian is not somebody 'who knows about God', but simply 'someone who knows God.' Knowledge about God is not knowledge in itself but a form of knowing that grows out of a relationship. Perhaps this is similar to how two people who have been married for many, many, years know each other. This relationship with God in the Orthodox Churches is based in prayer, indeed it is defined by prayer. Is your relationship with God defined by prayer? For Orthodox churchmen a theologian is one 'who prays right'.

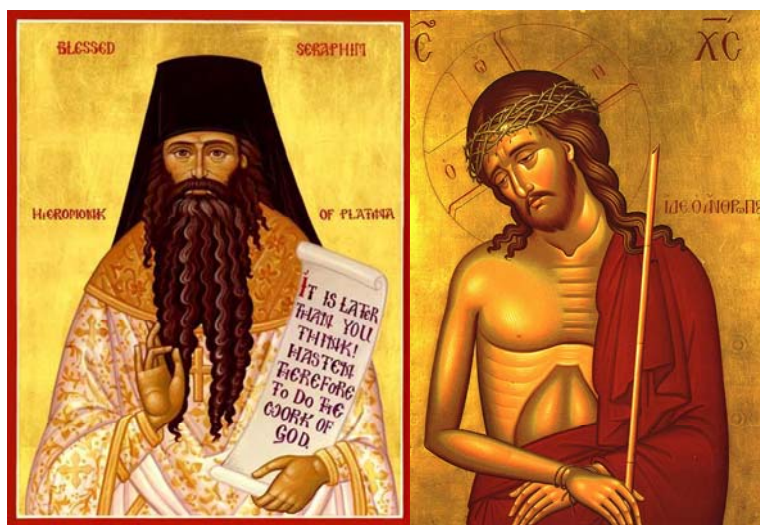
Therefore people are not judged by their knowledge of doctrine, though this does not deny the importance of doctrine (like Lewis's map of the Atlantic Ocean), this is not about what constitutes right belief — ticking all the right boxes — no, orthodoxy means **right praise** and **true worship**. So, asserts Michael Marshall, 'the theologian in that sense pursues his or her craft more in the context of the liturgy than the library and more in the context of prayer and worship (corporate as well as personal) than in the lecture room.' How is this defined—

Lex orandi-lex credendi
right belief-right prayer

Belief and prayer are but two sides of the same coin, writes Michael Marshall.

"So of course we need our theologians in the same way that we need guides when we are travelling, climbing or exploring: spiritual guides, who know the way from experience and as experienced navigators – holy men and women of prayer, who will not only quote from what others have said about the royal highway to the Kingdom, but rather those who will speak from their experience with that authority that comes only from those who 'walk the talk'. It was said of Jesus that he spoke as one 'having authority' and not as the scribes and Pharisees who relied upon the right quotations and word-for-word references from the law."

Quotations from Michael Marshall, *The Transforming Power of Prayer. From Illusion to Reality* (London & New York: Continuum, 2011), pp. 68-69



The Orthodox tradition Michael Marshall is referring to is built upon two concepts:

First, humility before the Passion of the Christ
Second, an urgency that issues from the eschaton – the end of time and the coming of the Last Judgement.

- ◆ How should the Western Church in all its wealth respond to this challenge?
- ◆ How can individual congregations/ churches within the Church of England respond?
- ◆ In the end does it come down to individual witness, which then feeds into the communal (the Church)?

DOCTRINE & PRAYER



WHY STUDY GOD'S WORD?

In his autobiographical writings, Rabbi Lionel Blue noted during his childhood in the East End of London how late at night in the candle-lit garrets many of the Jewish elders, who worked for long hours by day in clothing factories, would stay up into the night, long after their families had retired to bed, to read and study the Hebrew Bible, but also the Mishnah and the Talmud. They received no reward, and this nocturnal activity cost them. It was undertaken in prayer and out of love for God's Word.

- ◆ What was the last theology book you read?
- ◆ What motivates you to study God's Word?
- ◆ If God loves us in freedom, loves us when we are so corrupt and unlovable, should we study God's Word simply out of love and for no discernible gain?
- ◆ Why do you read the Bible?

How many of today's academic theologians worried all the time about credits with their employing university, or the status drawn from their CVs, or scouting round for grants to write this paper or that book, can say the same?

...or religious professionals in the Church of England worried about their retirement pension, and the buy-to-rent flat they're losing money on?

The Relationship between Theology and Spirituality

There has to be an ethical dimension to all decisions and beliefs:
 'Why do you say what you do?' 'What do your beliefs cost – to you or to others?'
 'How do you treat others as a result of your decisions and beliefs?'
 'Why do you believe, study or practise religion?'
 'What constraints are there on your theology and spirituality?'

Doctrine by itself is dead; the Inquisition, also Soviet Russia, was driven by a box-ticking obsession with exact and approved statements of belief. Doctrinal Statements can only be validated through Prayer. Genuine Theology can only happen in a church context.

Doctrine restrains Spirituality,
 Spirituality breathes Life into Doctrine,
 Doctrine & Spirituality are fused and validated by and through Prayer in an ethical context.

Spirituality bereft of Doctrine is ultimately meaningless; individuals will invent religion to compliment their personal feelings. Each will invent what becomes the chaos of religion for him or herself. Such belief systems are unscripted and thrive on relativism.

Are your ethical decisions based on self-centred individual needs (i.e. autonomous) or are they communal, imposed from outside of you (i.e. heteronomous)

A TALE OF TWO ...

Myshka had only just graduated from the academy with the highest honours as a theologian when the revolution struck: Christianity was outlawed. Now, forty years later he still regarded himself as a student — “*I will never know or understand all of Christ’s revelation or God’s glory,*” he would say. As an intellectual, and as a Christian, he had been required to spend his working life in a factory — at the orders of the local party committee — forced into repetitive, mind-numbing, manual labour, enforced to live in a tiny flat in a utilitarian concrete block. However, at night his mind was free. He would stay up and study by the light of a tiny candle deep into the dark hours of the night: “*It is what I live for,*” he would whisper to himself as he read the Bible, aided by commentaries, and as he studied the great theologians of the Early and Patristic Church, “*This I do for love of God’s Word.*” But this was all in secret lest the party apparatchiks found out. Books were smuggled to him, disguised as a parcel of fish (with a rotting smell so as to prevent the factory guards opening the parcel!); his own writings smuggled out and published abroad. His reputation as a theologian was known in the West — and in his home country, within a network of believers.

Charles was eighteen, bored, having emerged from school with a handful of low-grade A-levels. Within a year he would be off to university — after his obligatory year out, travelling to the Far East to find the elusive beach party culture, and live in hedonistic freedom with other Westerners imposing their particular lifestyle and culture, morality and beliefs, on indigenous peoples who felt obliged to welcome them because of their tourist pounds and dollars. Charles ultimately wanted to land a job in the city where he could earn enough to indulge his lifestyle and beliefs. He had failed to get in at Oxbridge to study Economics, but just managed to land a clearing-house place at a provincial university to study theology and philosophy. Those who interviewed him were impressed by his avowed atheism, and they needed students to fill the course!

Myshka, whilst studying the Psalms, was roused by a knock on the door; the knock at the door. He hurriedly tidied his books away behind a cupboard, ruffled his hair, and called out something about the hour of the night and needing a peaceful sleep. The knock came again — more insistently — so he stumbled towards the door, opening it. Three officers burst in and immediately started to search, to ransack, the tiny flat. They found his books and immediately arrested him. The trial was a farce, but then he was guilty — guilty of possessing and studying banned books. The revolution had decided God did not exist and the church was banned, likewise any texts purporting to discuss these old myths as if they were true.

Charles’ year out was characterized by his being rescued by mummy and daddy (‘helicoptered’) who dropped everything and flew out to Bannock to bail him out of the local police station for being drunk and disorderly in a brothel, and for possession of a tiny amount of cannabis. Charles was now at university, but was depressed. He thought it was going to be easy; but he had to learn Ancient Greek, Hebrew and Latin (which exposed paucity with his command of the English language), what’s more the lectures on doctrine and philosophy were difficult to understand. But all he had to do was soft-peddle through the course and get the degree, and then he could get a job in the city. It did not matter what the degree was in, any degree would do — the simple fact was that a university education did not qualify one for a job in the city, but it did give entry to an exclusive club. Ironically, spending six months working for a ‘Del-boy’ street trader in Peckham, or a gang of drug dealers, or an extortion racket, might have qualified and prepared him for work in the city. Whatever subject was studied knowledge and understanding was irrelevant; what was of vital importance was living the student life for three years: students would reject all values and beliefs, ethics and morals; they were expected to invent their own ethics and beliefs, but, to be able to justify their actions and principles. This, in fact, was what was essential for work in the city — Charles and his fellow students were an élité; they were above the common herd and had claimed the right to rewrite morals and ethics for their own advancement, while ordinary people had to obey laws and precepts.

As an enemy of the State, as a subversive, and as a degenerate reactionary countering the glorious revolution, Myshka was sentenced to 25 years in a labour camp. The work was brutally harsh outdoor manual labour, and the living conditions were cruel and the food inadequate. He knew it was only a matter of time before he succumbed. While the prisoners were marching back to the camp after a harsh day breaking ice and clearing a swamp, an old woman secretly smuggled an old battered copy of the New Testament to him. This gave him sustenance for his soul and he could share it with fellow prisoners — “*Like you*”, he would say to them, “*I will always be a student of God’s Word.*” These route marches to work and back to the camp were invaluable in more than one sense. The ordinary people, most of them elderly women, would manage to smuggle bread or occasionally some cooked meat to the men. Because of his clandestine reputation as a theologian and churchman Myshka received much more than other men. There were only two guards — at the front and the rear — because there was nowhere for the prisoners to escape to. Beyond the local town there was over one hundred miles of forest, tundra, snow and ice in all directions. When he got back to camp Myshka shared his gains, ensuring that over a period of



...THEOLOGY STUDENTS

weeks all received an equal portion: *"These women have given us from their own meagre rations, so we must live simply, so others may simply live."*

Charles struggled with his course, so his parents descended ('helicoptered', as was their habit) onto the course tutor, even 'hovering' over the Principal, demanding he passed the exams and threatening legal action from big-city lawyers. There were even more problems when Charles' third year thesis was rejected: his thesis was that men had evolved from bacteria from Mars, women from protoplasm from Venus; this rambling doctrine of creation then led to asserting Jesus as an ordinary human being who had eccentric religious ideas, who just wanted to be left alone to practise his own religion, therefore the Eucharist was an exercise in social bonding, a 'wine-and-pitta-bread' party, a rite of membership to a loose confederation of individuals all with their own personal explanation to life the universe and everything! Only with considerable interference from his parents was this work acceptable.

Myshka and six prisoners saved a small piece of bread, a dried crust, and used it for a 'Eucharist': at night Myshka would recount the Biblical account of the Last Supper, then the dry crust was passed round and each kissed it in turn and gave thanks to God for all that was their life, and for their salvation. The revolution had prevented Myska's ordination so this was not a consecration, a true Eucharist, but their respect for Church tradition prevented them from holding an actual Eucharist. The crust was saved, this remembrance repeated from week to week, till another prisoner earned a day off work by informing the guards.

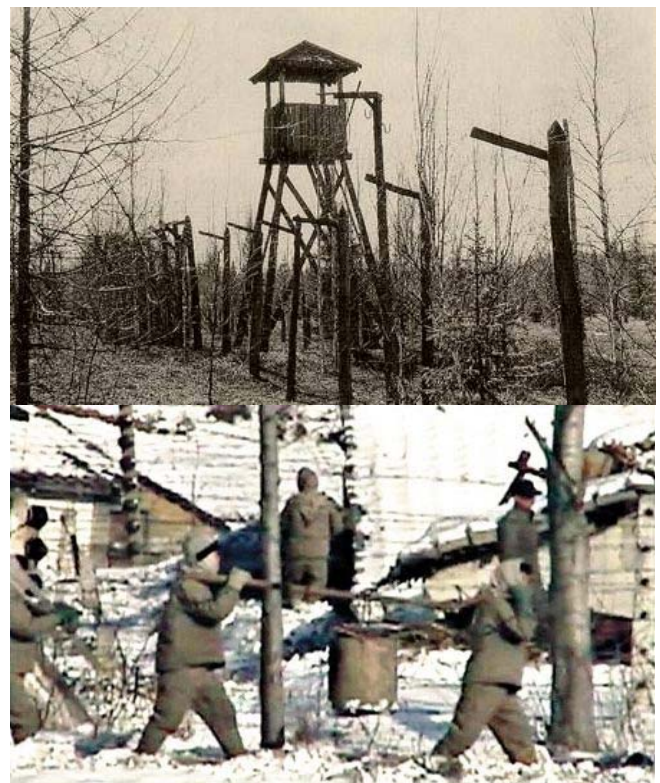
Charles meanwhile lived for the holidays, when he would fly-off to the Far East, or anywhere where he could be with like-minded young people. The third world, or developing world, existed for Charles for four reasons: **first**, for holidaying and partying, where indigenous peoples waited on him, pandered to his every need in more ways than one (Charles merely looked on as those subject to this poverty swept up, cleared up, after his indulgence); **second**, for cheap labour — millions of workers to produce low-priced electronic goods for his, and others, entertainment in the West; **third**, for those same workers in China, India, and other countries to pay taxes so that their leaders could buy into the British government debt. The traditional market for government bonds/gilts had been drying-up because of the level of UK debt and scepticism as to whether a British government could control its spending (the level owned overseas has risen sharply since 2003 — 35% was now owned by foreign governments, and by investment banks, pension and insurance companies, based in the Middle East or Far East). China provided no welfare state so people as old as 90 years had to scrape a living off the streets only to be preyed-on once a month by government tax collectors who 'assessed' their level of income and therefore their tax bill. Though a small contribution, money from these bonds, purchased from indigenous taxation from the Far East, Africa, India, South America, was given by the UK government as extra funds, grants, to the Scottish parliament so they could give free university tuition to Charles and his fellow students. Charles' education was built on their poverty. **Fourth**, people in the third world existed to off-set Charles' carbon-intensive travel diary. His parents, trying to assuage guilt over the environmental impact of his, and their, global tourism bought the right to travel from several people in Africa and the Far East from an environmental agency based in

Westminster. This worked well until they received a letter from Joseph Jacob Msunga, addressed "to my masters", and signed "sealed with the blood of the lamb, in Jesus Christ". Joseph Jacob wrote that his youngest daughter was gravely ill. He worked in the Kimberley diamond mines in South Africa, his family lived in a shanty town in Malawi (one of the poorest countries in Africa). As they owned his right to travel, please, could one of them—for love of Jesus Christ, and with the blessing of the angels and saints—travel to Lilongwe to visit, or if it was too late, to attend the funeral on his behalf. (In the Roman Empire slaves were not allowed to travel, and having purchased his right to travel, Charles' family effectively owned, enslaved, part of Joseph Jacob's life). Charles simply screwed the letter up and threw it away (his mother secretly retrieved it and put it in the recycling box).

One bright January morning as the guards trudged through fresh overnight snow, and the prisoners were herded to a bowl of thin soup which offered warmth, but no nutrition, Myshka was noted by his absence. A young guard tramped his way through the snow to the hut, yelling and screaming for Myshka to get up. There was no movement. The guard clubbed Myshka's body with the butt of his gun, ordering him to get up out of his bunk. But he did not stir. Two guards simply threw his emaciated body into a pit, threw fresh lime over it, and left him to rot. The student and scholar had died — frozen to death in the night.

Charles scraped a third class degree; then he got his job in the city, vowing never to have anything to do with theology again in his life. If ever he was asked what he had studied at university he said 'Economic Philosophy' (well, one of the modules had been in Philosophy of Economics ... !). He grew rich and powerful, successful and corporately corpulent, eventually heading a commercial investment bank. He died from decades of indulgence-triggered cancers, ulcers and obesity, in a luxury hospice anaesthetised by morphine and tranquillisers.

And Dives and Lazarus were raised up to judgement...



ENDNOTES

A fundamental basic assumption in Christianity is that the world is rational, that humanity can understand the world, further that the Gospel, and therefore the religion of Christianity is also inherently rational.

Theology is therefore—

Reasonable
Rational

and our God-talk must reflect—

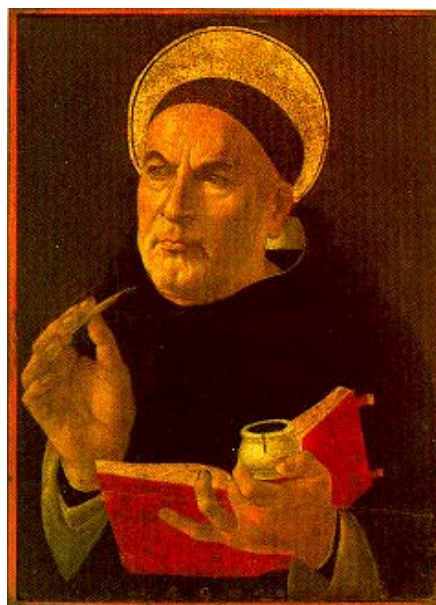
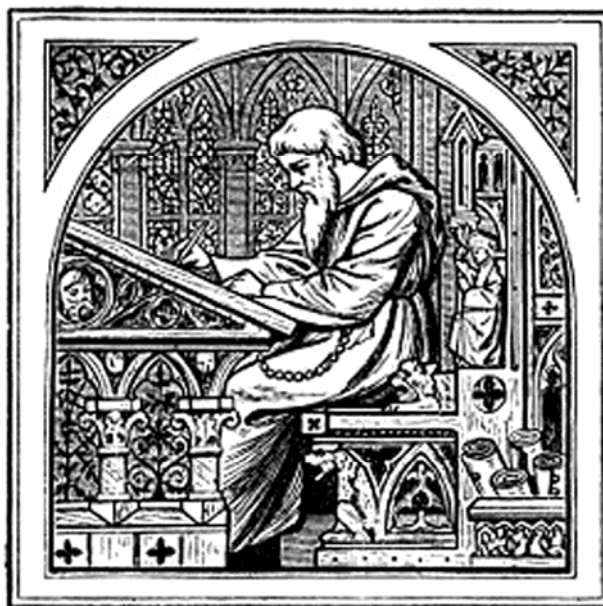
Rationality
It must make Sense!

Why?

Because Jesus did not address people as an Eastern or Oriental Shamans, Gurus and Mystics might — with confusing and often contradictory statements. There is much in Jesus's statements about judgement and the final days but he does not say, "*Lock yourselves away in a theological seminary cut-off from the world*", or, "*Lose yourself in personal spirituality*", no, there is a dominant economic/social theme related to judgement: consider the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, or the command to the rich young ruler — go sell everything and give to the poor and have treasure in heaven.

THERE ARE LIMITS

Thomas Aquinas,
the thirteenth century theologian
and Doctor of the Church, left his final
and greatest work, *Summa Theologica*,
incomplete. This was a massive work of
philosophical theology. He ceased writing
it following a religious experience, (which
may have been triggered by a mild stroke)
explaining, "*All that I have written seems*
to me like straw compared to what has now
***been revealed to me.*"**



Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)