



## Theology's Public Mandate in a Siloed World

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On the basis of its own criteria, Michael Mørch's attempt to validate systematic theology as a "rationally justified public discourse" within the modern university succeeds on the basis of its own criteria. However, I question whether the proposal is comprehensive enough to account for the reality and truth addressed by theology and the discipline's inherently public nature. Thus, I offer an alternative, more expansive understanding of public discourse drawing on three thinkers: Charles Taylor, for a richer sense of realism; Paul Tillich, for a more comprehensive view of truth; and David Tracy, for a more robust notion of publicness. I conclude by arguing that theology has a mandate, on inner theological grounds, to establish and sustain public arenas, especially in a time when public discourse of all kinds is increasingly being threatened across a range of domains, including the academy.

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As David Tracy (1981, 52) pointed out several decades ago, the very subject matter of theology, as understood, for example, by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim believers, is the “all-pervasive reality of . . . God,” and that subject matter mandates that discourse about God must be “universal and public.” Indeed, for Tracy (1981, 52), the very idea that an individual or a community could have a “private universality” is simply an “oxymoron.”

Nonetheless, in sharp contrast to the central role it played in universities in the Middle Ages, theology has increasingly found itself sidelined as an academic discipline in modern research universities. As Michael Mørch (2023, 17–20) points out in the first few pages of *Systematic Theology as Rationally Justified Public Discourse about God*, the reasons for this marginalization are complex and varied. They encompass the nominalist critique of philosophical realism in late scholasticism, which in turn influenced developments in the Enlightenment, including the historical study of scripture and the critique that theology was not sufficiently scientific given developments in the natural sciences. In spite of the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment, the natural sciences continued to be the standard for rigorous inquiry, culminating in a positivist orientation in the philosophy of science in the twentieth century, which rejected all forms of metaphysics, including theology (Mørch 2023, 17–18).

This intellectual history is not unrelated to a broader set of “external” factors Mørch (2023, 18–19) discusses, including decline in church membership, decreases in funding and student enrollment, and a general lack of public awareness of what the discipline of theology entails. But he is primarily interested in addressing what he considers the chief “internal” factor impeding theology’s status as a “science” within the university: its subject matter, God (Mørch 2023, 19). To address this impediment, he draws on criteria developed in the philosophy of science that might legitimate systematic theology as a “scientific discipline” within a “rational, secular, research-based institution” (Mørch 2023, 39). Influenced by Wolfhart Pannenberg, Mørch seeks to “update” his work on science and theology (Pannenberg 1976), by focusing “more narrowly” on “criteria from science” and on a “systematic” rather than a “historical” discussion of debates and theories (Mørch 2023, 29). He employs two philosophers, Lorenz Puntel (2008) and Nicholas Rescher (1973), to develop a “coherence” theory of truth with three components: consistency, cohesiveness, and comprehensiveness. Mørch (2023, 28–30) then uses this theory of truth to investigate whether systematic theology, as a “truth-candidate,” can be “scientific” and thus “rationally justified” as an academic discipline. As an aid in this investigation, he appropriates Niels Gregersen’s (2008, 2011) division of systematic theology into three strata: (1) religious expression in the lives of believers; (2) internally coherent theories of the Christian faith; and (3) theories external to theology for testing a theological proposal’s relative adequacy. For Mørch (2023, 67–88), only the third level, which draws on criteria external to

theology, is scientific; the other two levels only derive their scientific value from this final stratum.

Mørch does a masterful job of presenting a consistent and cohesive argument, using two of his criteria for defining conceptual coherence. He demonstrates its viability in relation to competing positions in the philosophy of science and theology and argues for systematic theology's status as a distinctive discipline within the university. However, two questions must be raised about his proposal, especially given his own definitions of "realism" ("gaining insights into the constitution of reality") and "truth" (that our investigations must be determined by the "truth of reality" and not merely "instrumental" and "pragmatic" criteria or "existential, spiritual, activistic, etc." variables) (Mørch 2023, 22–24). First, is its conception of philosophy and systematic theology comprehensive enough to account for the reality and truth these disciplines address? And second, does its coherence theory of truth do justice to the inherently public character of theology?

In what follows, I situate Mørch's proposal within the alternate frameworks of three thinkers mentioned in his book (Charles Taylor, Paul Tillich, and David Tracy). I do so not only to portray more comprehensive conceptions of three criteria central to Mørch's argument—that is, realism, truth, and publicness—but also to contend, on inner theological grounds, that theology has a mandate to establish and sustain public arenas, especially in a time when public discourse of all kinds is increasingly being threatened.

### **Taylor on Realism**

Mørch relates his coherence theory of truth to developments within the philosophy of science that seek to move beyond logical positivism to a broader understanding of how one's framework and assumptions affect one's findings (as advanced, e.g., in the work of Thomas Kuhn and W. V. Quine). However, as I have noted, in Mørch's (2023, 135) view, only the third level of systematic theology (which he defines as "ontologies understood as comprehensive systematizations of reality") meets this criterion of truth and thus serves as "rationally justified discourse about God." And it can do so precisely because it has been abstracted from or is external to the other two levels (religious expression and internal Christian theologies) (Mørch 2023, 135). I question, however, whether Mørch's (2023, 22) criterion for what constitutes a public argument is not, in fact, too narrow, especially given his own definition of "realism": that it allows for "real progress" to be made in science not just on instrumental terms but also in terms of "gaining insights into the constitution of reality."

To offer an alternative, I draw on Taylor (whom Mørch [2023, 25] considers a "communitarian" thinker whose philosophical discourse lacks a publicly accessible "theoretical apparatus") in order to depict an account of realism

that may be more comprehensive than the one Mørch provides. In *Retrieving Realism*, Taylor and his coauthor, Hubert Dreyfus, take aim at what they call a “mediational view,” that is, a picture of reality that presupposes that the ideas or schemes we use to represent it are separate from our immediate contact with it. Identifying René Descartes and logical positivists as the prime exemplars of this mediational view, Dreyfus and Taylor also claim that some of these exemplars’ most famous critics (including, e.g., Quine and even Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida in their earlier work) also appropriate—as Mørch does with his third level of systematic theology—some kind of critical apparatus that is distinct or abstracted from the reality they seek to analyze (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, 1–2; see also Taylor 1995).

As a contrast, Dreyfus and Taylor propose a “realist” account, which they identify not only with Plato, Aristotle, and pre-Enlightenment Christian theology but also twentieth-century thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Ludwig Wittgenstein (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, 1–26; Taylor 1995). In their own constructive retrieval of such a realist standpoint, Dreyfus and Taylor (2015, 44) maintain that we are always embedded in a “multi-media” encounter with the world—within bodies and encounters with others that are already culturally and linguistically mediated. The point of philosophical reflection, they argue, is not so much to abstract ourselves from such immediate encounter so that we can then create a critical apparatus for evaluating it (which paradoxically creates yet another kind of multi-media phenomenon). Rather, the point is to engage others in some kind of critical reflection in order to gain insight into the very conditions that constitute such an encounter—even as one recognizes that we are always embedded within its assumptions and prejudices. In line with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (1989) “fusion of horizons,” such critical reflection and dialogue enacts within the conversation itself (as, for example, within or between particular philosophical or religious traditions), a “robust but plural realism” enriched rather than sullied by the multi-form and complex accounts of reality these traditions have to offer (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, 168).

### **Tillich on Truth**

Tillich’s theological proposal for discerning truth has profound similarities with Taylor’s and Dreyfus’s philosophical case for retrieving realism; it also offers a more comprehensive account of the reasoning process than the one Mørch provides. To be sure, Mørch has greater appreciation for Tillich’s work than he does for Taylor’s. Specifically, he appreciates Tillich’s conception of the “question” (or “situation”) theology addresses in his “method of correlation” and his contention that theology and philosophy share a similar conception of reason. Nonetheless, he rejects Tracy’s depiction of theology’s “answers”

to these questions because they do not center on “truth” but instead have a “therapeutic” orientation (Mørch 2023, 58–59).

Tillich maintains, however, that the correlation can never divorce situation and method (or question and answer, reason and revelation, and so on), even though the two sides of the correlation can be distinguished. Thus, he rejects both a scientific philosophy that divorces itself from the commitments that inform it (in a fashion analogous to Taylor’s and Dreyfus’s critique of the “mediational view”) and a sectarian theology that presumes you can divorce theological answers from the questions they address (as Mørch presumes). As Tillich points out throughout his work, in Western thought, theology and philosophy have been so intertwined that many so-called secular or modern ideas have theological origins (including those Mørch presupposes in determining what constitutes a rationally justified public argument in the academy). This point has been reiterated in recent decades by scholars from a range of views who have analyzed the complex philosophical and theological genealogies informing much of modern thought (see, e.g., Gillespie 2009 and Taylor 2007 on Western thought in general and Harrison 2017 on science and religion). In turn, theology’s “message” (i.e., the gospel) cannot be divorced from the “situation” it addresses since, as biblical scholars have maintained, biblical texts and theological traditions have emerged out of particular historical milieus, even as their contemporary appropriation, as theologians assert, entails attunement to the specific situations they address.

Ultimately, because theology’s subject matter centers on God, who transcends and yet is immanent to all reality, theology, according to Tillich (1957, 8), points to an ecstatic encounter: “[T]he experience of the holy as transcending ordinary experience without removing it.” Thus, like Taylor and Dreyfus, he rejects a notion of reason that would restrict the full range of factors needed for discerning truth in each situation. Of course, according to Tillich (1951, 53–59), consistency does have a place for what he calls “technical reason,” which would entail, like Mørch’s notion of “coherence,” semantic, logical, methodological, and systemic reason. Yet, in theology, such technical reason cannot be divorced from what Tillich (1951, 53) calls “ecstatic reason,” since it is through the “ecstasy” of faith that “the contents of faith grasp reason.” In other words, the content of theology is “simultaneously *received* by *ecstatic reason* and *conceived* through *technical reason*” (Tillich 1951, 54). To do justice to ecstatic reason, Tillich (1951, 57) employs not only “dialectical” reasoning (as used in Plato’s dialogues and classical Trinitarian formulations) but also “paradoxical” assertions (as used in the christological affirmations of the “Word made flesh” found in John 1:18 and the Chalcedonian formula)—neither of which, in his words, “wishes to indulge in logical contradictions.”

Moreover, rather than being merely instrumental or pragmatic, Tillich's attention to theology's "therapeutic" task is driven precisely by his commitment to "truth" as it has been classically defined (in theology and philosophy) as *verum* (in Latin) or *aletheia* (in Greek). Indeed, Tillich's conception of knowing as "therapy" and "healing" draws from ancient theologians (like Augustine) who in turn drew on both a Socratic and a biblical sense of knowledge's capacity to heal and transform (John 8:32). This understanding of truth presupposes a classical understanding of reason as the "Logos," whether defined in a more "intuitive" or "critical" sense (Tillich 1951, 72). Not confined to its epistemological function, such an understanding of reason presupposes an intrinsic relationship between reality and our multiform capacities for perceiving and responding to it. In turn, it is not just limited to its cognitive use; instead, it encompasses "cognitive and aesthetic, theoretical and practical, detached and passionate," and "subjective and objective" elements (Tillich 1951, 72). In biblical and theological terms, it presupposes, on one hand, "creation through the Logos" and "the spiritual presence of God in everything real" and, on the other, humanity's being created in the "image of God" and thus charged with "the task of grasping and shaping the world" (Tillich 1951, 76).

It is true that for Tillich the task of verifying truth takes place amidst pragmatic considerations. As creatures, we do not have access to truth apart from the contingencies that define our lives. But it is only as we examine the very assumptions (and drives and unconscious biases) that orient our quest for truth in concrete situations that we can gain some distance from them. So, for Tillich, the verification of truth is more like the therapy used in ancient philosophical schools to discern truth from falsehood (Hadot 1995)—or, in more theological terms, to distinguish true versus distorted loves (Augustine), divine versus idolatrous locations of trust (Luther), and the contrast between "new being" (2 Corinthians 5:17) and the demonic and tragic structures of destruction that take hold of individual and social life. Thus, Tillich (1957, 27) rejects all "philosophies and theologies of pure consciousness" (which he identifies with "Cartesianism and Calvinism"), contending instead that theology engages and appropriates types of analysis that depict the human predicament. These include not only scripture's wide-ranging and complex depictions of human experience and the world around us (e.g., in the psalms and in Job) but also the types of analysis "found not only in existentialist philosophy but also in analytic psychology, literature, poetry, drama, art" and even in the spiritual exercises of patristic and monastic theologians "who analyzed themselves and the members of their small community so penetratingly that there are few present-day insights into the human predicament which they did not anticipate" (Tillich 1957, 27).

### **Tracy on Publicness**

Having presented alternatives to Mørch's proposal that, in my view, render more comprehensive conceptions of reality and truth than the one he provides, I

turn now to delineate a notion of publicness that goes beyond the limits Mørch sets for it. To do so, I discuss “three distinct notions of public reason, that is, publicness, from the ancient Greeks until today” that Tracy (2020, 269; 1981) considers appropriate for “modern, pluralistic, democratic, secular societies.”

The first has to do with argument and the kind of rational inquiry it entails. This type of publicness presupposes the kind of conceptual consistency and coherence Mørch assumes. However, Tracy (2020, 270) insists that the kind of coherence demanded by this type of publicness must be a “rough coherence” that is always “relatively adequate” to the subject matter under discussion. Thus, in a fashion similar to Tillich’s critique of scientific philosophy, Tracy warns against applying the criteria from one discipline to another without paying careful attention to the subject matter at hand. In addition, he avers that public argument always takes place within a community of inquiry, which in turn “must be democratic, even radically egalitarian,” demanding that all involved “are bound to produce and yield to evidence, warrants, backings” (Tracy 2020, 271). Thus, while he affirms the separation of church and state found in modern secular democracies, he rejects “any secular silencing of argued religious public claims—as when religious concerns are, in principle, repressed and ruled inappropriate to the public realm” (Tracy 2020, 271–72).

Tracy’s second candidate for publicness pertains to conversation or dialogue. In his view, “[t]he public realm is a realm of conversation before it is a realm of argument” (Tracy 2020, 273). Presupposing the features attributed to argument or conversation, according to Tracy (2020, 276), allows for another kind of publicness and truth: the kind even classics of religion and art can claim by virtue of “their very disclosive, truth-bearing power (*aletheia*).” Tracy (2020, 275; 1981) avers that “the great religious classics (texts, events, persons, rituals, symbols) have much to suggest for reflection by any serious thinkers in the public realm.” In particular, the kind of interpretive conversation they elicit makes available a more expansive notion of reason than that of the “modern, scientific, merely technical rationality” associated with an increasingly powerful “techno-economic realm” that confines argument to efficient means, rejecting arguments over ends and goals as either “impossible” (given the pluralism of modern societies) or “irrelevant” (since only technical arguments about efficient means are considered rational) (Tracy 2020, 273). Although a classic is highly particular in origin and expression, its effect is public, with a claim to truth whose disclosive and transformative possibilities are shareable and not merely a matter of personal preference (Tracy 2020, 278).

Finally, Tracy proposes a third kind of publicness that deals with resources that go beyond the limits of reason, such as contemplative, mystical, and prophetic forms of discourse. The “issue of the limits of reason” has long been dealt with in Western thought, “from Plato’s ‘Good beyond Being’ (it can happen, but is not achieved by reason) to the present” (Tracy 2020, 282). Tracy cites as example the debates in three intellectual communities in the fourth century:

pagan (Plotinus), Christian (the Cappadocians and Augustine), and Jewish (the rabbis who advanced the Babylonian Talmud) (Tracy 2020, 282). Such debates over the character of public reason and the limits of dialectic and dialogue (as developed by Greeks, Jews, Christians, and, later, Muslims) employed a range of discursive forms, drawing on metaphysics, ethics, and logic and grammar (from Greek philosophers) in addition to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinking about “revelation” as God’s own “self-manifestation” as “pure gift” beyond anything reason could achieve (Exodus 3:14 NRSV; Tracy 2020, 282–83). These debates have implications that transcend the merely cognitive and theoretical: they have profound aesthetic and practical implications for individuals and communities and the ways they perceive and respond to the political and economic goods that define the societies in which they find themselves. In due course, this third kind of publicness, with its “attentiveness to vision and an attendant way of life” has resources for uniting the first two forms “to help the battered public realm of our society” (Tracy 2020, 287).

### **Theology’s Public Mandate**

So far, I have analyzed proposals for defining realism, truth, and publicness in order to portray a broader understanding of what constitutes “rationally justifiable public discourse” than the one Mørch (2023, 23) provides. In this last section, I make the case for why it is so important that theologians take seriously the intrinsically public character of their discipline, especially in a time when public discourse in general is being increasingly threatened.

Mørch (2023, 38–39) develops his argument in relation to the “*intersection of reason*,” which he assumes is a shared premise undergirding the endeavors of a “rational, secular, research-based institution.” Yet, as he himself acknowledges, universities are “large, heterogenous, and fragile institution” (Mørch 2023, 39) that, we might add, are highly vulnerable to market forces on the one hand and ideological conflicts and competition among factions of various kinds on the other. As many have observed in recent decades, little consensus exists, if any, regarding how universities and colleges might endeavor to cultivate the kind of critical inquiry and ethical formation needed for civic engagement in open and pluralistic democratic societies (see, e.g., Grossmann and Hopkins 2024).

Ironically, theological issues and, more broadly, issues concerning our most fundamental and normative convictions are at stake in many of the debates fissuring not just the academy but other public arenas as well. As evidenced by the fact that some of the deepest rifts in American culture exist not between religious adherents and secularists, or even between those of different religions, but within religious groups, these issues do not fit easily into strict (modern) distinctions between the sectarian and the secular (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Within such a context, what is needed from theologians is not a narrow conception of reason that would exclude the very resources that might in fact

enable us to address these concerns but rather, as Tracy argues, a more robust and comprehensive notion of public reason, one that will enable us to discuss and debate in a range of genres and forms of discourse the diverse ends, goals, and aspirations that shape our collective existence within pluralistic democracies.

Christian theologians in particular have a responsibility to critically retrieve the public character of their own traditions, especially in a time when the dominant Christian voice, in the United States at least (but with an escalating global reach), is sectarian (for more recent arguments along these lines, see Hunter 2024 and Rauch 2025). With roots in the revivals and fundamentalist controversies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this form of Christianity is often considered not only a reaction to modernity but also a product of it (Noll [1994] 2022). Thus, it is precisely as a modern and sectarian movement that this form of Christianity has, like other populist movements around the world, aligned itself with a political agenda that seeks to establish control over (or reduce in size) public institutions often seen as bulwarks of a pluralist democracy (such as the press, education and research, and the law), even as it appears to disregard matters people of faith in general historically have had concern for (such as refugees and migrants, foreign countries in need of aid, and climate change)—see, e.g., Project 2025 (2023).

Proponents of this theological viewpoint would maintain that they are only correcting a liberal secularism that has long sidelined their voices in the public sphere. Their argument has merit, especially in view of the kind of secularism Mørch addresses, which defined much of what was considered public discourse in the twentieth century (Rauch 2025). But even outspoken proponents of such a worldview, like Jürgen Habermas, among others, have in their later work come to value the complex heritage of religious voices in the public sphere (see, e.g., Habermas 2008, 2014; cf. Derrida 1995). Indeed, the case can be made that the secular/sectarian dichotomy is a false one and that intellectual traditions associated with a range of stances, whether they be religious or philosophical, are often much more complicated than initially meets the eye. Christian theologies in particular have a rich legacy that could fund a public, not sectarian, role in modern democracies (again, see Hunter 2024; Rauch 2025). Tracy (2020, 287) lists conceptual resources from his own Catholic tradition as an example, but these resources can be found in other Christian traditions as well (e.g., Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, and Orthodox): an affirmation of the unity and yet distinction between reason and philosophy on the one hand and revelation and theology on the other; a conception of the relational person within community as a counter to the atomistic self in modern liberalism; some notion of the common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity; an acknowledgement of the need to discern the complex relationship between love and justice in each particular situation; and even a recognition of the privileged status of the poor and oppressed in scripture.

In sum, in Tracy's (2020, 287) words, "[t]here is no excuse for theology not to render its resources public to aid our present perilous situation." Yet to do so, theologians must not be restricted by a narrow understanding of what constitutes a rationally justified argument. Rather, they are to mine fully the rich conceptual resources of their varied traditions, in conversation with other traditions and conceptual schemes and in a fashion that truly does justice to their subject matter: the mystery and reality of God that exceeds and undergirds their very existence (whether or not they are able to rationally justify how that excess and grounding takes place).

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