

THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AS AN ALLY TO THEOLOGY: A RE-READING OF ANTHONY AKINWALE'S *SUBIECTUM THEOLOGIAE*

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Abstract

A keen inquiry into the nature, scope, meaning, branches and task of theology leads us to the awareness that theology alone does not provide all we can know about human beings. To understand the human person in her wholeness, the social sciences play a significant role and ought to be specially considered. This initial statement acknowledges an interrelationship and integration of theology and the social sciences. When well worked out, the interconnectedness between theology and the social sciences benefits both disciplines. Oftentimes this interlocking between theology and the social sciences is neglected, misunderstood, misinterpreted and misrepresented, thereby impoverishing both theology and the social sciences. This problem forms the subject of Anthony Akinwale's magisterial lecture as a Master of Sacred Theology in the Dominican Order delivered in the Dominican University, titled Subiectum Theologiae. He addresses the gap between theology and the social sciences. This article, expository, analytic and evaluative in method, considers theology and its allies and how they complement one another, thereby showing the inner unity between scientia and sapientia. It suggests that theological principles illuminate the social sciences and that theology also broadens its horizon from the findings of the social sciences.

Keywords: Theology, Social Sciences, Ally, Inculturation, Transposition

1. Introduction

When one is a beginner in theology or a theological apprentice as Joseph Ratzinger fondly describes one in the early years of theological studies,² encountering teachers and authors who possess a clear understanding of the nature and tasks of theology is of great importance. I remember the joy I felt at my first encounters with the works of some great theologians such as Gregory Nazianzen, Thomas Aquinas, Bernard Lonergan, John Newman, Karl Rahner and Anthony Akinwale among others. Reading through Akinwale's *Subiectum Theologiae: On the Task and Allies of Theology*, one finds oneself exploring the foundations of Christian theology again—that theology is reality. Akinwale leads us to reexamine what theologians are saying about God's revelation, the human person who is 'hearer of the Christian message' and how the affairs of the world come under the providence

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² Joseph Ratzinger, *The Last Testament: In His Own Words* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

of God. These topics are treated in a way that theological authors are put into dialogue with contemporary authors as well as with research within the social sciences. It is illuminating to see how Akinwale synthesizes the ruminations of ancient as well as a modern theologian, together with current research in the social sciences in a way that confirms John Paul II's teachings in *Fides et Ratio* that the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth on two wings, namely faith and reason. Akinwale's theological ingenuity and intellectual prowess shines forth in this work as he guides us to re-examine the task, methods, and limits and interconnected nature of theology with other sciences. This paper aims at a rereading of Akinwale's *Subiectum Theologiae: On the Task and Allies of Theology*.

2. Akinwale's *Subiectum Theologiae: On the Task and Allies of Theology*

Subiectum Theologiae: On the Task and Allies of Theology is the title of a magisterial lecture presented by Anthony Alaba Akinwale, OP, STL, PhD, STM on the conferment with the academic title of *Magister in Sacra Theologiae* (Master in Sacred Theology) by the Master of the Order of Preachers. An illustrious Nigerian Dominican, he was selected for this award in recognition of his outstanding contributions to theology in Africa. This conferment took place on 7th June 2023 at the Dominican University, Samonda, Ibadan. According to the Dominican Order's traditions, a new Master in *Sacra Theologiae* is obliged to prepare and deliver a public magisterial lecture (LCO 9, 7, 1.6). In the prologue, Akinwale expressed gratitude to a good number of people in his life who had helped in the formation of his mind as a theologian. After that, he proceeded to define what 'the academy' is. Drawing upon Josef Pieper, Akinwale says, the term *academy* refers to a grove of learning, a garden or community of knowledge and wisdom for all.³ The backdrop for Akinwale's understanding of the academy is John Newman's idea of a university. In his book *The Idea of a University*, Newman asserts that a university is 'a place of teaching of universal knowledge.'⁴ For Newman, a university in its essence is universal in character and as such should treat all kinds of knowledge—because when a province of knowledge is neglected or deliberately left out, the university fails in its objective and loses its nature or essential character. Akinwale, exploring Pieper's discourse on the concept of the academy, emphasizes the importance of the academy in a metaphorical sense as a grove of learning, a garden or a community of knowledge for all who are consistent in their quest to know and are open to new ideas.⁵ Theology as a subject form one

³Anthony Akinwale, *Subiectum Theologiae: On the Task and Allies of Theology* (Ibadan: Newborne Publishers/Dominican University, 2023), 1.

⁴John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1959), 3.

⁵Akinwale. *Subiectum Theologiae*, 1.

among many disciplines considered in the academy. Akinwale holds that the province of knowledge called theology properly belongs to the university and ought to enjoy academic freedom (an essential element of the academy) and equal dignity among other subjects. This is of importance, since as in the Nigerian context, only Religious Studies was approved, with no room given to theology.

After defining the academy, Akinwale puts forward his understanding of the vocation of a theologian in the academy. As a Dominican, deeply steeped in the Thomistic tradition, Akinwale makes recourse to Thomas Aquinas' theological thoughts as well as the theologies of biblical and patristic authors on the glories of theology. In dealing with the question of order within the discipline of theology itself, Akinwale pinpoints Aquinas' division of sciences, Newman's provinces of knowledge, and Lonergan's fields, subjects, and functional specialization, all considered in their uniqueness. He focuses on the importance of 'transposition' which consists of bringing to life the works of ancient authors to modern audiences in a way that preserves their authenticity. He understands that this inculturation in different cultural atmospheres requires theological skills which make for better reception and appreciation of their work.

3. Theology as a Sacred Science

Subiectum Theologiae's treatment of theology broadens one's orientation towards theology as an academic discipline. Anyone interested in knowing the answers to the questions what is the task of theology? How is theology done? would find suitable answers in Akinwale's *Subiectum Theologiae*. As one considers the connection between theology and the social sciences, theology's ability to throw more light on the social sciences becomes very obvious where this openness is acknowledged and valued. Drawing on the Thomistic tradition, Akinwale defines theology as a discourse on God and on creatures in their relatedness to God. Aquinas himself called theology sacred doctrine and noted it to be a science that explains the existence and nature of God⁶ as disclosed to us through human reason and revelation. Theology, a word derived from the two Greek words '*theos*' and '*logos*' simply means study, reason or science of God. From its etymology, theology is the study or discourse on God. In other words, theology as Nazianzen puts it, is 'philosophizing about God.'⁷ In talking about the habit of theology (a requirement for those who take theology seriously), Nazianzen states: 'philosophizing about God is not given to everyone.' Although no one is deliberately excluded from the task of theology, people exclude themselves from

⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, English translation by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1947) 1, q. 1, art. 1.

⁷Gregory Nazianzen, *Five Theological Orations* trans. by Stephen Reynolds (Toronto: Estate of Stephen Reynolds, 2011), 1-12.

theology when they treat the things of God frivolously. Nazianzen makes it clear that the habit of theology is ‘not easily acquired, nor is it for ‘earth-bound minds.’ With respect to the nature and places where theological discourses should hold, he quickly points out that ‘it is not to every audience, not done at all times, nor on all points; but on certain occasions, before certain people, and within certain limits.’⁸ For him, it is permitted only for those who have been examined (trained) and have passed as masters in contemplation, and are purified in soul and body. Nazianzen believed philosophizing about God is permitted only to those who are concerned with the subject matter of theology, and definitely not to any who make jest of it or make it a matter of pleasant gossip.⁹ Akinwale’s conception of theology and the task of the theologian aligns with Nazianzen’s teaching that only those who treasure its subject matter of theology (who is God Himself) and who equally love both Church and society should carry out the discourse on God. Citing Aquinas’ works, Akinwale notes that theology is a sacred science that is both speculative and practical science.¹⁰ It is speculative because its principal object is God—God remains the ‘Object’. On account on the loftiness of the subject of theology, medievals often referred to theology as the queen of the sciences, because its subject was the divine subject. Put differently, theology is a science which concerns itself primarily with divine things and human things in their relationship to God. Theology is practical because it deals with God’s works or all things in their relatedness to God. The reasons for the orientation of theology as more concerned with divine things than human acts is established.¹¹

4. The Task of Theology

According to Akinwale, to describe the task of theology, one first has to provide a judicious explanation or answer to the questions of what theology is and how is it to be done. Inferring from Aquinas, Akinwale is of the opinion that the most basic task of theology is to elaborate on the discourse on God. There exist multiple tasks of theology, but what unifies all aspects of theology is their aim or focus on the discourse on God. For Aquinas, as for Akinwale, theology is a science which speaks of God. Its principal task centers on naming God in an intelligible and coherent manner. Akinwale’s discourse on the task of theology shows that theology involves both a discourse on God and on the relationship between God and other created subjects in relation to him. Theology, rather than excluding other subject matters, incorporates them within its inquiry or investigation of the divine mystery.

⁸Nazianzen, *Five Theological Orations* 1-12.

⁹ Nazianzen, *Five Theological Orations* 1-12.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1, q. 1, art. 4.

¹¹ Akinwale, *Subiectum Theologiae*, 26.

Furthermore, Akinwale enunciates that 'it is essential to note that such matters for instance as anthropology, inculturation, transposition, women's issues, social science and other related ones when treated in theology, are treated with reference to God as their beginning and end.'¹² The implication is that while theology's basic task is reflection on God, it also reflects on other spheres of life in relation to God such as theological anthropology, eschatology, politics, economy, development, and the environment among others. It does this reflection under the formal aspect of God. But how do these aforementioned themes relate to theology? Should theology inquire into such themes? Akinwale's response is boldly affirmative, as he considers it necessary that theology inquire into those areas, since they are parts of reality. According to him, profound knowledge of these themes will aid the discipline of theology (discourse on God). Precisely because theology is both speculative and practical, it concerns itself with other areas of reality and also both the past, present, and future. The task of theology is 'not to provide technical solutions but rather the recovery and protection of the sapiential orientation of knowledge and existential meaningfulness in relation to God.'¹³ Theology is also apologetic, as it puts in a word for the faith. It also aims at the authentic development of the human person by preserving the integrity of education, and by undertaking and sustaining academic research for meaning.

5. Method in Theology and Openness to other Disciplines

Theology as a science, while carrying out its operations follows certain patterns or processes in order to achieve its task. Method in theology addresses the question of how theology is done. One of Akinwale's favorite theologians, Bernard Lonergan introduced what he called a transcendental *method* for theology, arts as well as all sciences.¹⁴ Lonergan's transcendental method follows the natural exigencies of the human mind. While conceived primarily for the discipline of theology, it can also be applied to other fields such as the arts and sciences. Lonergan's method, one amongst others accepted by the Church, provides common norms, foundations, systematics as well as common critical, dialectical, and heuristic procedures.¹⁵ Akinwale, inspired by Lonergan's transcendental method, admits eight functional specialties in theology, namely, research, interpretation, history, dialectics, foundations, doctrines, systematics and communications. These can be grouped into two phases; theology in *oratione*

¹²Akinwale, *Subiectum Theologiae*, 41.

¹³Akinwale, *Subiectum Theologiae*, 43.

¹⁴William Murnion, 'Method in the Arts and Sciences.' in *Lonergan Worship: Lonergan and the Human Sciences in Thanksgiving for the Gifts of the Past 1000 Years* ed. Fred Lawrence Vol. 16 (2000), 173-174.

¹⁵Murnion, 'Method in the Arts and Sciences,' 173.

obliqua and theology in *oratione recta*. Akinwale agrees with Lonergan's theory of dividing theology into these two phases.

For Akinwale, at the level of theology in *oratione obliqua*, the focus is on the achievement(s) of the theologies and theologians of the past, given that Christian theology in essence is an ongoing interaction or conversation within a Judeo-Christian tradition. Theology is an ongoing conversation that requires all those joining the conversation in our time to pay attention to the nature of the discourse as it has come down to us and equally to pay homage to theologians of the past who carried out the discourse with integrity before us. Therefore, it is proper to make recourse to the Church Fathers and luminary theologians from medieval times. Akinwale gives important mention to the distinctive characteristics of the theology of the Patristic authors. He holds that the practice of theology brought together spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral concerns in a neat way, making theology participate in the tripartite offices of Christ—the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office. In no way does Akinwale mean to say that the Church Fathers are the *terminus ad quem* of theological reflection; through their assiduous efforts, immense insight into the nature, meaning, scope, and method of theology has been gained.¹⁶

As concerns theology in *oratione recta*, the emphasis here is laid on how theology can address the questions of its own time. In this regard, theology examines the contemporary theological atmosphere and discerns areas for engagement. At the present time, the question of how to reconcile theology and the social sciences and how to really see them as allies is of great significance. With such dialogue between theology and science having started and ongoing, there are fresh challenges for theologians such as how to address the issues of inculturation and transposition in our African societies, how to address pentecostalism and neo-pentecostalism in the African theological landscape, the problem of authentic interpretation of the gospel (bearing in mind the people and culture) and finally, how to distinguish populist preaching and theology in Africa, especially in Nigeria. The task of transposition is very important for theologians. They are expected to subject contemporary Nigerian religiosity to critical examination, since it often relegates or reduces religion to emotions. Inspired by these challenges, Akinwale posits that theology be undertaken in dialogue with other academic disciplines. This is because whereas contemporary Nigerian religiosity tends to separate faith from reason, academic theology uses faith and reason in its quest for the conceptual possibility and intellectual coherence of what is believed.¹⁷ The division and

¹⁶Akinwale, *Subiectum Theologiae*, 43-45.

¹⁷Akinwale, *Subiectum Theologiae*, 46.

interdependence of scientific specialization as articulated by Aquinas, Lonergan, and Newman is of great influence to Akinwale's position here.

6. The Allies of Theology

Akinwale is of the opinion that theology has allies, and that theology should be studied in relationship with its allies and not in isolation. In his view, the social sciences, which include anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, and sociology, are essential allies of theology. While theology is a science of God, theologians and the audience of theology are human persons. Hence, it becomes imperative that theology be approached bearing in mind human experience and culture. On this point, Akinwale asserts that 'theology cannot be effective in its duty if it is ignorant of its audience, and the various academic disciplines when used with discernment, enrich theological discourse.'¹⁸ As president of the Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria, in one of his presidential addresses titled *Towards a Hermeneutics of Critical and Prayerful Vigilance in Nigerian Catholic Theology*, he affirmed that 'there can be no good theology, in fact, no theology at all, when insights from other cognitional enterprises are ignored or belittled.'¹⁹ This proposition underlines the independence and interdependence of theology and other disciplines. Theology cannot be reduced to the horizon of social sciences, nor social sciences be reduced to that of theology. Neither theology nor the social sciences are in opposition. Both inform and shape each other towards a beneficial and fruitful understanding of reality.

In his attempt to reconcile religion and science (and by extension the conflict between theologians and scientists over the nature of religion and science), John F. Haught posited four kinds of relationship between religion and science, namely, conflict, contrast, contact and confirmation.²⁰ According to Haught, the first model (conflict) deals with the conviction that science and religion are fundamentally irreconcilable—or put differently they are perpetually in conflict. The second model (contrast) deals with the claim that there is no genuine conflict between religion and science, since both are independent and respond to different questions or realities. The third model (contact) holds that there is a dialogue, interaction and possible consonance between religion and science. The fourth model (confirmation) holds that both support and nourish each other. While commenting on the fourth model (confirmation), Haught asserts that religion essentially fortifies

¹⁸Akinwale, *Subiectum Theologiae*, 62.

¹⁹Anthony, A. Akinwale, 'Towards a Hermeneutics of Critical and Prayerful Vigilance in Nigerian Catholic Theology' in *Church Leadership and the Christian Message: Proceedings of the 17th and 18th conferences of the Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria*, ed. Francis A. Adedara (Stirling-Horden Publishers (Nig.) Ltd, 2004), 143.

²⁰John F. Haught, *Science and Religion from Conflict to Conversation* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1995), 9.

the humble desire to know as well as confirms the very drive that gives rise to science.²¹ It is paramount to note that the last two models (contact and confirmation) unveil the true nature of the relationship between theology and science. Theology and social sciences dialogue, interact, support and nourish each other. Both branches of knowledge in a very special way aid each other mutually to attain its task. Hence, this realization serves as a clarion call for theologians to open up themselves to the findings of the social sciences and other disciplines in order to carry out their ecclesial and academic functions in a proper way. This openness contributes greater effectiveness and fruitfulness to their pursuits as theologians.

The discourse so far emphasizes as a central insight the interconnectedness of theology with its allies. Akinwale's lecture leads us to the understanding that theology has allies and that studying theology with these allies in mind brings us to a holistic grasp of the true nature of theology. We also learn that theology often borrows principles from its allies in its postulations. For this reason, Newman wrote *The Idea of University* in defense of theology as an academic discipline. One of his major arguments is that if the idea of the university implies universal, holistic, and all-encompassing knowledge, then a university ceases to be what it ought to be if it excludes theology as one of its parts.²² The same can be said of theology if it fails to consider its allies, as well as the cultures and the lived experiences of those involved in it. Akinwale holds that theology as an academic discipline is a science that deals with the knowledge of God and should be studied in the university. University theology seeks the unification of faith and reason as well its task of synergy. University theology benefits from the interdisciplinary conversation takes place in universities. Theology done in isolation loses its nature.

In addition, while theology as a science and an academic discipline is centered on the scripture, patristic texts, and history of doctrine, Akinwale recognizes that it needs the social sciences, cultural and religious anthropology and other disciplines to achieve its task. Put differently, theology needs human, social, and natural sciences to attain its goal. These social sciences enable theologians to understand their audience because the investigations of the social and natural sciences are very significant for understanding human nature. Of important note is the point that if theology ceases to acknowledge its audience and its allies, it becomes ineffective. The various theological allies nourish and enrich theological discourses when approached with discernment.

²¹Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Toward a Theology of Nature*, edited by Ted Peters (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 37-40.

²²John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1996), xiv-xvii.

In his theological reflection, a concern Akinwale raises involves the confusion by some people of academic theology with modern-day populist preaching, for instance, in the religious setting in Nigeria today where religiosity takes the shape of all sorts of things. He decries the fact that many persons have been misled as some have adulterated Christian values to suit their way of life rather than remaining faithful to the truth of the gospel. To escape this quagmire, academic theology is most needed, particularly to lead the faithful or believers aright. Akinwale signals the necessity for a phenomenological, comparative, and theological engagement of the present-day orientation about God especially in the church in Nigeria. Doing so, both within the church, the academia, and society will establish a faith that is at once intelligible, coherent, and relevant. This will prevent the chances of reducing religion to uncritical emotional outbursts of fanaticism and fundamentalism.²³

7. Transposition and Inculturation

Akinwale's lecture underscores the need for theological transposition and inculturation. In his view, 'every theology is done within an interpretative framework furnished by religious, cultural, social, political and economic mindset of the epoch.'²⁴ In an earlier paper presented at a Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria conference, he asserted that 'no theology is above the ground.' Here, he reasserts the same point, holding that authentic theology is such that it is down to earth but points beyond it.²⁵ Inculturation is imperative and intrinsic to theology as well as to theologians. This is because the different ways of raising and addressing theological concerns vary from culture to culture. For this reason, every theology bears the stamp of time and space. Akinwale adds that an authentic theology is theology that pays attention to indigenous culture, values, and religious affairs of its audience, not one that abandons it. It should be open to all cultures and minds. Citing Lonergan, who says theological categories should appeal to the minds and hearts of people of all cultures, races and classes,²⁶ he believes an authentic African theology (in principle and in reality) ought to focus on the culture, religion, socio-political situation, economics, and identity of the African people in relation to God. Hence, there is a need for transposition and inculturation. Since theology is an ongoing conversation, transposition and inculturation remains imperative. While the former (transposition) deals with the handing-on of the theological teachings, findings and traditions of the past to the present, the latter (inculturation) deals with the integration and understanding of theology through the cultural lens of its audience. This concern for inculturation and transposition finds support in the writing of Elochukwu Uzukwu. Uzukwu notes that inculturation is necessary towards understanding African theology, expressing this in his theological

²³Akinwale, *Subiectum Theologiae*, 45-56.

²⁴Akinwale, 'Towards a Hermeneutics of Critical and Prayerful Vigilance in Nigerian Catholic Theology,' 143.

²⁵Akinwale, 'Towards a Hermeneutics of Critical and Prayerful Vigilance in Nigerian Catholic Theology,' 143

²⁶Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 133.

thesis that ‘the retrieval and modernization of our African cultural matrix is the necessary route toward healing the political, economic, social and religious misery of African.’²⁷ This is important because Africans have been treated as a people without an authentic culture, religion, socio-economics or political values worth preserving or emulating, mostly by the West. The implication of this orientation is the rejection and abandonment of the African identity. The effect was a change of the identity of the African person or the total abandonment of indigenous African cultures, values and religious attitudes both in principle and in practice in favor of those of the West.

Akinwale, rereading Uzukwu, advocates for an African theology of inculturation which places African culture and reality at the heart of its enterprise, or a theology that takes into account the traditional African society in which human life, society and authority are considered sacred. While Uzukwu calls for ‘a theology of protest,’ Akinwale alongside other African scholars advocate for an ‘African religiosity.’²⁸ The emphasis here is that theology as done and practiced in Africa should pay attention to the reality of its audience, in this case, African culture and reality. It should be inclusive and devoid of subordination and marginalization of women as Rose Uchem envisions and advocates.²⁹

In a nutshell, transposition and inculturation demand that theologians should endeavor to understand their audiences and their lived-experiences and cultural backgrounds. They should be conversant with the different manifestations of realities which vary according to their audience. This is important because the discourse on God is and will always be shaped by its audiences.

8. Conclusion

The foregoing is the fruit of a theological reflection on Anthony Akinwale’s *Subiectum Theologiae: On the Task and Allies of Theology*. This reflection helped us to revisit the true nature, meaning, scope, method, task, and allies of theology. Akinwale’s intellectual insights have provided us with the subject of our discussion. As we explore and acknowledge his critical, systematic and analytic treatment *Subiectum Theologiae*, we become more appreciative of his effort in the work. The theological richness of Akinwale’s *Subiectum Theologiae: On the Task and Allies of Theology* calls for attention. It would be enriching if students of theology across Nigeria read the text, since it generates seriously important discussions on the nature of the theological task, especially for theologians in Africa.

²⁷Elochukwu Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 5.

²⁸Akinwale, ‘Towards a Hermeneutics of Critical and Prayerful Vigilance in Nigerian Catholic Theology,’ 148-149.

²⁹Rose Uchem, *Overcoming Women’s Subordination: An Igbo African and Christian Perspective: Envisioning an Inclusive Theology with Reference to Women* (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2001), 36.