

## Doctrine of the Mystery: Background of Mystery Cults; Search for Truth: Is Theology Science or Philosophy?: Adler's Intro to "Theology" in the *Syntopicon*

### 2. BACKGROUND OF THE MYSTERY CULTS

1. *Mustērion* comes into the New Testament Koine from the classical Greek noun **μυστήρια, mustēria**. The suffix *-τήρια -tēria* denotes a place where an action occurs. The prefix, *μυ-, mu-* means to "make an inarticulate sound with closed lips." Together they mean to "keep one's mouth shut." It refers to the content of the cultic ceremony, which is ineffable.<sup>1</sup>
2. Ancient Greek cults revealed the secrets of their religion only to initiates who were told only they could understand and were prohibited from revealing them to anyone outside the cult.
3. The mystery cults of not only Greece but also of Rome, Egypt, and, as we have just studied, Asia Minor were satanic systems of propaganda in which alleged gods and goddesses were worshipped in temples and in festivals.
4. The famous works of Greek and Roman authors span from the Greek's Classical period of the fifth century B.C. to the Roman's Silver Age of the second century A.D.
5. In many of these ancient works the search for truth is evident, but because they did not have a biblical worldview their ideas, although revered by Progressives, are observations of the laws of divine establishment at best and human viewpoint at worst.
6. When truth is rejected then a vacuum occurs in the soul into which is sucked the bilge of demonic doctrines.
7. The assumed intellectual superiority of these writers is diminished by the reality of their societies' attraction to mystical gods and goddesses, their idols and associated rites and rituals.
8. It is from many of these Classical writers and those following that the mystery of truth is debated. And among the subjects debated is the question of whether theology is a philosophy or a science.
9. I would rephrase the question to ask, "Is theology based on faith or fact?" If on faith does that make it a branch of philosophy or if on fact does that make it a branch of science?"
10. Our recent studies have emphasized recognition of truth and made the claim that truth cannot be perceived without a biblical worldview.
11. The question of whether theology is philosophy or science is discussed in the *Syntopicon* of *The Great Books of the Western World*. First we must learn about the *Syntopicon* and its author.

<sup>1</sup> Helmut Krämer, "μυστήριον," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 2:446.

***A Syntopicon: An Index to The Great Ideas (1952)*** is a two-volume index, published as volumes 2 and 3 of Encyclopaedia Britannica's collection *Great Books of the Western World*. Compiled by Mortimer Adler, an American philosopher, the volumes were billed as a collection of the 102 great ideas of the western canon. The term "syntopicon" was coined specifically for this undertaking, meaning "a collection of topics." The volumes cataloged what Adler and his team deemed to be the fundamental ideas contained in the works of the Great Books of the Western World, which stretched chronologically from Homer to Freud. The *Syntopicon* lists, under each idea, where every occurrence of the concept can be located in the collection's famous works.

### History

The *Syntopicon* was created in order to set the Great Books collection apart from previously published sets (such as Harvard Classics). With this mission, Adler undertook a project that would consume over a decade of his life: identifying and indexing the western world's Great Ideas. In the end, the *Syntopicon* would require over 400,000 man-hours of reading and cost over two million dollars.

The process of cataloging each appearance of the one of the "Great Ideas" in all 431 works by 71 different authors in the collection was so arduous that the *Syntopicon* nearly did not make it to print. Before it even came time to print, the budget had topped a million dollars and there was not even "a penny for paper" left.

Adler felt, through it all, that he was creating something completely new. The *Syntopicon*, he felt, would be revolutionary, its release on par with such events as the creation of the first dictionary. It would do for ideas what previous reference books had done for words and facts. He worked with a team of over 100 readers who met twice a week for years to discuss the readings and the ideas within them.

### Purpose

The *Syntopicon* was created to solve what Adler saw as a fundamental problem, that "different authors say the same thing in different ways, or use the same words to say quite different things." By cataloging the things the great authors were saying in a more scientific manner, Adler hoped to show the underlying unity that ultimately existed in the collected works.

### Content

The *Syntopicon* consists of 102 chapters on the 102 Great Ideas. Each chapter is broken down into five distinct sections: the introduction, an outline of topics, references, cross-references, and additional readings. Adler penned all 102 introductions himself, giving a brief essay on the idea and its connection with the western canon. The outline of topics broke each idea down further, into as many as 15 sub-ideas.<sup>2</sup>

What follows is Dr. Adler's Introduction to the idea of "Theology":

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<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syntopicon>

**Theology.** *Introduction.* It is seldom disputed that the questions with which theology deals are of critical significance for all the rest of human knowledge. Even those who deny that theology is or can be a science might be willing to concede that, if it were, it would deserve its traditional title, “queen of the sciences.”

It has been said that the great questions of theology are unanswerable. It has been said that theological dispute or controversy is futile because the issues are not resolvable by argument.

The main controversy about theology turns on the use of such words as “knowledge” and “science” for a discipline which, both in method and conclusion, seems compelled to go beyond experience and to push reason to (or even beyond) the limit of its powers.

Those who conceive science as limited by its empirical methods to the investigation of observable phenomena might not quarrel with the allocation of theology to philosophy, but whether or not they did would in turn depend on their conception of philosophy.

We find a distinction being made in the 18th century between the empirical and rational or philosophical sciences; and in our day those who regard philosophy as mere speculation or opinion contrast it to the experimental disciplines which are thought to be the *only* established bodies of knowledge, that is, sciences.

The question whether theology is a science may, therefore, embrace a number of alternatives. That it is an empirical or experimental science has seldom been proposed. It may be treated as a science, however, by those who consider it as a part of philosophy; or it may be denied that honor precisely because it belongs to philosophy. A third alternative remains—that theology is separate from philosophy, that it is a science as distinct in character from the philosophical sciences as they are from the experimental disciplines. In this third alternative, the association of theology with religion or religious faith seems to determine the character of theology.

It is this third alternative which [David] Hume seems to have in mind at the conclusion of his *Enquiry* [1758]: “Divinity or Theology, as it proves the existence of a Deity and the immortality of souls ... has a foundation in *reason*, so far as it is supported by experience. But its best and most solid foundation is *faith* or divine revelation.” (p. 882)

Theology which is entirely philosophical and independent of any religious faith is usually called “natural theology.” The name “sacred theology” is given to a body of doctrine which finds its fundamental principles in the articles of a religious faith.

The ultimate source of these articles of faith in Jewish, Christian, and Mohammedan theology is the truth revealed in a sacred scripture—the Old and New Testament or the Koran—from which, by interpretation, the articles of faith are drawn.

[Francis] Bacon defines “natural theology” as “that knowledge ... concerning God, which may be obtained by the contemplation of his creatures.” In contrast, “sacred theology” is grounded only upon the word and oracle of God, and not upon the light of nature.” (p. 883)

In pagan antiquity, there seems to be no equivalent of sacred theology. [Edward] Gibbon tells us, “The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful. ... The superstition of the people was not embittered by theological rancor; nor was it confined by the chains of any speculative system. ... the elegant mythology of Homer gave a beautiful, and almost a regular form to the polytheism of the ancient world.”<sup>3</sup> (p. 885)

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<sup>3</sup> Mortimer J. Adler, ed., “Theology,” in *The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 2:882-83, 885.