

D. Vasilis Schairer, Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology



D. Vasilis Schairer is a graduate student studying theology at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. His interests and coursework focus on the intersection of religion and politics, especially social justice issues. He took his undergraduate degree from Boston University in international relations and religion.

When young people apply to college, they dream of a great undergraduate experience. Common conceptions include big lecture halls with fascinating professors who make you think deeply, alongside diverse groups of young people to meet and interact with socially. My education at Boston University fit the bill and my religion minor was a large part of that experience. The department boasted world-famous scholars and I enrolled in classes on myriad topics. I was forced to think critically about how religions form, practice, change, and impact their worlds. I read studies, poems, novels, scriptures, and news reports and learned to see the many facets of religion as they appeared in the real world.

And now I study theology. Quite frankly, I applied to theological school as a religious youth looking to change the world. I had spent a year working for a legal aid agency on a project aimed at stopping mortgage foreclosure in cases filed against indigent clients, and what I saw revealed to me the need that exists in a broken world. So, starry-eyed, I came back to Boston University. Upon my return, one of my first memories was a speech during orientation that told the students “This is not a department of religion.” That comment has stayed with me ever since.

What is the difference between religion and theology? Are they oil and water? I struggle with these issues continually in my studies. I am and continue to be a devout Orthodox Christian who seeks to draw upon the Church to address modern issues of social justice in a hurt world.

But these lofty goals aside, my religion training seems to “haunt” me. I do not use this word in a negative sense — in fact, the haunting is more like an annoying old friend that I’ve tried to avoid, and yet this friend continues to call, e-mail, and even just swing by the house. My religion training returns to me at inopportune times when I really should just sit quietly and learn the theology of my tradition. Religion suggests that it is an innate human reaction. Religion posits that it is a culturally bound assertion. Religion avers that politics is the cause.

The difference between religion and theology is rather simple. Theology, in its purest sense, is a discipline devoted to the study of a deity and the faith that has sprung up around it. In my tradition, this means coursework in Greek, liturgics, Church history, dogmatics, Old and New Testament, ethics, patristics, and so on. The goal is to prepare and train future leaders in the Church, whether they be pastors or lay people, in order to teach, preach, and serve communities. Religion, on the other hand, is about something very different. Religion scholars approach their work from the lens of sociology, anthropology, literary criticism, the historical-critical method, and so on. Where a theologian would seek to answer an ethical question by drawing on tradition to explain why a course of action is the correct one, a religion scholar would examine that response in light of past responses, the historical circumstances surrounding the development of the ethical approach, and would likely even connect it to other faith traditions for comparison. In a way, the difference between religion and theology is the object of study: for theologians, it is God; for the religion scholar, it is groups of religious people.

So, what is one living in both worlds to do? I have at times felt defeated. Being a graduate student of any variety is exhausting in itself. Between the reading, papers, academic appointments, conferences, and social commitments, there is little sleep to be had. Add to this the confusion of a religion background while attempting to complete a theology degree, and it’s no wonder that I’ve considered trying to compartmentalize my education. It would be nice if I could package up the religion minor in a box, put it on a shelf, and return to it once I have finished with my theological studies. As appealing as this sometimes seems, I cannot do it. It would be dishonest to myself and to my past. Instead, I have realized that more than ever the world — and *all* its disciplines — needs religion.

My religion education has made me question my theological tradition indeed, but it has also bolstered it. It has nudged me to think critically about my own tradition’s past — to see the messy parts — in order to attempt to improve its future. It has made me more tolerant and ecumenical within my own tradition. I constantly remind myself that we are not the only people upon the earth, as easy as it is to fall into this trap. My religion education has taught me to read literature comparatively and to ask hard questions. It shows me that sometimes when Jesus is speaking in the New Testament, he is referring to Jewish realities and not later Christian concepts that were anachronistically applied to the texts — and usually, the original reference is more profound. But above all, my religion education has helped me to understand the people of

my Church. Theologians spend so much time studying God that we sometimes forget the body of believers attached with Him. Considering religion examines these people and their beliefs; I find that it helps me to stay socially grounded. Indeed, the coupling of my religious education and my theological education has resulted in a renewed push in my mind to examine, think about, and fight for social justice within my own tradition.

What is the relationship between religion and theology, then? Are they exclusive of each other? I can see how some would think so. For me, though, they work beautifully against each other, checking each other, and leading me to think deeply on both sides of the equation. The result is one of intellectual curiosity, social consciousness, and ever more mature faith...with more questions, of course.