5

Getting Started: Preliminaries

This chapter will survey some general points which underlie the discipline of Christian theology. Before engaging with the ideas of Christian theology, it is essential to explore the manner in which those ideas are derived. On what are they based? And how do they arise? The present chapter and that which follows aim to consider such matters, before we move on to deal with the substance of Christian theology in the third part of this work.

A Working Definition of Theology

The word “theology” is easily broken down into two Greek words: theos (God) and logos (word). “Theology” is thus discourse about God, in much the same way as “biology” is discourse about life (Greek: bioi). If there is only one God, and if that God happens to be the “God of the Christians” (to borrow a phrase from the second-century writer Tertullian), then the nature and scope of theology are relatively well defined: theology is reflection upon the God whom Christians worship and adore.

Yet Christianity came into existence in a polytheistic world, where belief in the existence of many gods was commonplace. Part of the task of the earliest Christian writers appears to have been to distinguish the Christian god from other gods in the religious marketplace. At some point, it had to be asked which god Christians were talking about, and how this god related to the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” who figures so prominently in the Old Testament. The doctrine of the Trinity...
appears to have been, in part, a response to the pressure to identify the god that Christian theologians were speaking about (see pp. 337–8).

As time passed, polytheism began to be regarded as outdated and rather primitive. The assumption that there is only one god, and that this god is identical to the Christian god, became so widespread that, by the early Middle Ages in Europe, it seemed self-evident. Thus Thomas Aquinas, in developing arguments for the existence of God, did not think it worth demonstrating that the god whose existence he had proved was the “god of the Christians”; after all, what other god was there? To prove the existence of God was, by definition, to prove the existence of the Christian god.

Theology was thus understood as systematic analysis of the nature, purposes, and activity of God. At its heart lay the belief that it was an attempt, however inadequate, to speak about a divine being, distinct from humans. Although “theology” was initially understood to mean “the doctrine of God,” the term developed a subtly new meaning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as the University of Paris began to develop. A name had to be found for the systematic study of the Christian faith at university level. Under the influence of Parisian writers such as Peter Abelard and Gilbert de la Porre, the Latin word theologia came to mean “the discipline of sacred learning,” embracing the totality of Christian doctrine, not merely the doctrine of God.

A further development is more recent. Since the time of the Enlightenment, partly in response to the development of sociology and anthropology, attention has shifted away from anything that lies beyond human investigation, such as God, to the study of the human phenomenon of religion. “Religious studies” or “the study of religions” is concerned with investigating religious matters—for example, the beliefs or religious practices of Christianity and Buddhism.

With this development has come a shift in the meaning of theology. Not all religions profess faith in one god: for example, Theravada Buddhism and Advaita Hinduism seem to be radically atheist at heart, while other forms of Hinduism are polytheistic. So where theology was once thought of as discourse about God, it now becomes analysis of religious beliefs—even if these beliefs make reference to no god at all, or to a cluster of gods, as in the Hindu pantheon. Even Oxford theologian John Macquarrie’s helpful definition of theology is slightly vulnerable at this point: “Theology may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available.” Atheist writers, particularly during the heyday of the “death of God” movement in the 1960s, coined the term “atheology” to refer to a system of belief which was based on atheist assumptions. Furthermore, the Greek word theos is masculine. As a result, the word “theology” seems to imply reference to a male god. This has caused offense to many feminist writers, some of whom have urged that the term “theology” (from the Greek word thea, “goddess”) should be used instead.

Alternative terms certainly exist. One example may be noted here: the older English word “divinity,” which designates both “God” and “a system of thought which attempts to take rational trouble to make sense of God.” Nevertheless, “theology” seems to be here to stay, despite the problems which it raises. The phrase “Christian theology” is used throughout this volume in the gender-neutral sense of the systematic study of the fundamental ideas of the Christian faith. “Theology is the science of faith. It is the conscious and methodical explanation and explication of the divine revelation received and grasped in faith” (Karl Rahner).

The Development of Theology as an Academic Discipline

As this book has stressed, Christian theology is one of the most worthwhile and exciting academic subjects it is possible to study. But how did this subject emerge? How did theology come to find its way onto the academic curriculum? What is the history of the word in the first place?

The word “theology” is not biblical, but came to be used occasionally in the early patristic period to refer to at least some aspects of Christian beliefs. Thus Clement of Alexandria, writing in the late second century, contrasted Christian theologia with the mythologia of pagan writers, clearly understanding “theology” to refer to “Christian truth claims about God,” which could be compared with the spurious stories of pagan mythology. Other writers of the patristic period, such as Eusebius of Caesarea, also used the term to refer to something like “the Christian understanding of God.” However, it seems that the word was not used to refer to the entire body of Christian thought, but only to those aspects relating directly to God.

Perhaps the most important moment in the history of theology as an academic discipline was the founding of universities in western Europe during the twelfth century. Medieval universities—such as Paris, Bologna, and Oxford—generally had four faculties: arts, medicine, law, and theology. The faculty of arts was seen as entry level, qualifying students to go on to more advanced studies in the three “higher faculties.” This general pattern continued into the sixteenth century, as can be seen from the educational backgrounds of two leading theologians of this period. Martin Luther initially studied arts at the University of Erfurt, before going on to study within the higher faculty of theology. John Calvin began his university life by studying arts at the University of Paris, before going on to study law at the University of Orléans. The result of this development was that theology became established as a significant component of advanced study at European universities. As more and more universities were established in western Europe, so the academic study of theology became more widespread.

Initially, the study of Christianity in western Europe was focused on schools attached to cathedrals and monasteries. Theology was generally understood to be concerned with practical matters, such as issues of prayer and spirituality, rather than as a theoretical subject. However, with the founding of the universities, the academic study of the Christian faith gradually moved out of monasteries and cathedrals into the public arena. The word “theology” came to be used extensively at
the University of Paris during the thirteenth century to refer to the systematic discussion of Christian beliefs in general, and not simply beliefs about God. The use of the word in this sense can be seen to a limited extent in earlier works, such as the writings of Peter Abelard. However, the work which is widely regarded as being of decisive importance in establishing the general use of the term appeared in the thirteenth century – Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. Increasingly, theology came to be seen as a theoretical rather than a practical subject, despite reservations about this development.

Many early thirteenth-century theologians, such as Bonaventure and Alexander of Hales, were concerned about the implications of neglecting the practical side of theology. However, Thomas Aquinas' argument that theology was a speculative and theoretical discipline gained increasing favor among theologians. This alarmed many medieval spiritual writers, such as Thomas à Kempis, who felt that this encouraged speculation about God rather than obedience to God. At the time of the Reformation, writers such as Martin Luther attempted to rediscover the practical aspects of theology. The Genevan Academy, founded by Calvin in 1559, was initially concerned with the theological education of pastors, orientated toward the practical needs of ministry in the church. This tradition of treating theology as concerned with the practical concerns of Christian ministry would continue in many Protestant seminaries and colleges. However, later Protestant writers operating in a university context generally returned to the medieval understanding of theology as a theoretical subject, even if they made it clear that it had certain definite practical implications in the areas of spirituality and ethics.

The rise of the Enlightenment during the eighteenth century, particularly in Germany, called the place of theology in the university into question. Enlightenment writers argued that academic inquiry should be free from any kind of external authority. Theology was regarded with suspicion, in that it was seen to be based on "articles of faith," such as those contained in the Christian creeds or in the Bible. Theology came increasingly to be seen as outdated. Kant argued that university faculties of philosophy were concerned with the pursuit of truth, while other faculties (such as theology, medicine, or law) were concerned with more practical matters, such as ethics and good health. Increasingly, philosophy came to be seen as the discipline which was concerned with issues of truth; the continuing existence of a university faculty of theology would have to be justified on other grounds.

One of the most robust justifications of the need for university faculties of theology was provided in the early nineteenth century by F. D. E. Schleiermacher, who argued that it was essential for the good of both the church and state to have a well-educated clergy. In his *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology* (1811), Schleiermacher argued that theology had three major components: philosophical theology (which identifies the "essence of Christianity"); historical theology (which deals with the history of the church, in order to understand its present situation and needs); and practical theology (which is concerned with "techniques" of church leadership and practice). This approach to theology had the result of linking its academic credentials with public agreement that it was important for society to have a well-educated clergy. This assumption was perfectly acceptable in early nineteenth-century Berlin, where Schleiermacher was based. But with the rise of secularism and pluralism in the west, its validity has come increasingly to be questioned.

In countries in which a strongly secular approach came to be adopted, Christian theology was virtually excluded from the university curriculum. The French Revolution of 1789 led to a series of measures designed to eliminate Christian theology from public education at every level. Most of the older universities in Australia (such as the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne) were founded on the basis of strongly secular assumptions, with theology being excluded as a matter of principle. These strongly secular ideologies are now being relaxed, so that undergraduate degrees in theology, or with significant theological components, are now available in Australia.

However, it is a pluralist rather than a secular approach which is now more widespread in the west, particularly in North America. Here, the distinctive position of Christian theology in public education has been called into question, in that it is held to privilege one religion over others. One result of this trend has been the formation of "faculties of religion" in state universities, in which a variety of religious positions are tolerated. Christian theology can therefore be taught in such a context, but only as one aspect of religious studies as a whole. For this reason, the most important centers of Christian theological education and research now tend to be in seminaries, in which a more committed approach to the issues can be adopted.

In the last decades, a new debate has opened up in North America and beyond over the proper function of theology. The original stimulus to this debate was a volume published by Edward Farley in 1983, entitled *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*. Farley argued that theology has changed its meaning from its classic sense of "a heartfelt knowledge of divine things" to the mastery of different and unconnected techniques. Theology has become fragmented into a collection of unrelated theoretical and practical disciplines, and lost any sense of coherence. No longer is theology a unitary discipline; it has become an aggregate of unrelated specialties. The debate now ranges more widely than this, and has raised questions about the "architecture of theology" – for example, the relationship between biblical studies and systematic theology, or systematic and pastoral theology.

With this point in mind, we may now turn to explore the architecture of theology, as we consider its various components.

### The Architecture of Theology

Etienne Gilson once likened the great systems of scholastic theology to "cathedrals of the mind." It is a powerful image, which suggests permanence, solidity, organization, and structure – qualities which were highly prized by the writers of the
period. Perhaps the image of a great medieval cathedral, evoking gasps of admiration from parties of camera-laden tourists, seems out of place today; the most that many university teachers of theology can expect these days, it seems, is patient tolerance. But the idea of theology possessing a structure remains important. For theology is a complex discipline, bringing together a number of related fields in a uneasy alliance. Some of them are noted below.

Biblical studies

The ultimate source of Christian theology is the Bible, which bears witness to the historical grounding of Christianity in both the history of Israel and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Note that the word pairs “Scripture” and “the Bible,” “scriptural” and “biblical,” are synonymous for the purposes of theology.) As is often pointed out, Christianity is about belief in a person (Jesus Christ), rather than belief in a text (the Bible). Nevertheless, the two are closely interlocked.

Historically, we know virtually nothing about Jesus Christ, other than the historical material which is embedded in the New Testament itself. In trying to wrestle with the identity and significance of Jesus Christ, Christian theology is thus obliged to wrestle with the text which transmits knowledge of him. This has the result that Christian theology is intimately linked with the science of biblical criticism and interpretation—in other words, with the attempt to appreciate the distinctive literary and historical nature of the biblical texts, and to make sense of them.

The importance of biblical studies to theology is easily demonstrated. The rise of humanist biblical scholarship in the early 1500s demonstrated a series of translation errors in existing Latin versions of the Bible. As a result, pressure grew for the revision of some existing Christian doctrines, which were grounded in biblical passages which were once held to support them, but which now turned out to say something rather different. The sixteenth-century Reformation may plausibly be argued to represent an attempt to bring theology back into line with Scripture, after a period in which it had departed considerably from it.

Systematic theology is thus dependent upon biblical scholarship, although the extent of that dependence is controversial. The reader must therefore expect to find reference to modern scholarly debates over the historical and theological role of the Bible in the present volume. To give an example, it is impossible to understand the development of modern Christologies without coming to terms with at least some of the developments in biblical scholarship over the last two centuries. Rudolf Bultmann’s kerygmatic approach to theology can be argued to bring together contemporary New Testament scholarship, systematic theology, and philosophical theology (specifically, existentialism). This illustrates a vital point: systematic theology does not operate in a watertight compartment, isolated from other intellectual developments. It responds to developments in other disciplines (especially New Testament scholarship and philosophy).

Systematic theology

The term “systematic theology” has come to be understood as “the systematic organization of theology.” But what does “systematic” mean? Two main understandings of the term have emerged: First, the term is understood to mean “organized on the basis of educational or presentialional concerns.” In other words, the prime concern is to present a clear and ordered overview of the main themes of the Christian faith, often following the pattern of the Apostles’ creed. In the second place it can mean “organized on the basis of presuppositions about method.” In other words, philosophical ideas about how knowledge is gained determine the way in which material is arranged. This approach is of particular importance in the modern period, when a concern about theological method has become more pronounced.

In the classic period of theology, the subject matter of theology was generally organized along lines suggested by the Apostles’ creed or Nicene creed, beginning with the doctrine of God and ending with eschatology. Classic models for the systematization of theology are provided by a number of writings. The first major theological textbook of western theology is Peter Lombard’s *Four Books of the Sentences*, compiled at the University of Paris during the twelfth century, probably during the years 1155–8. In essence, the work is a collection of quotations (or “sentences”), drawn from patristic writers in general, and Augustine in particular. These quotations were arranged topically. The first of the four books deals with the Trinity, the second with creation and sin, the third with incarnation and Christian life, and the fourth and final book with the sacraments and the last things. Commenting on these sentences became a standard practice for medieval theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Duns Scotus. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, dating from a century later, surveyed the totality of Christian theology in three volumes, using principles similar to those adopted by Peter Lombard, while placing greater emphasis on philosophical questions (particularly those raised by Aristotle) and the need to reconcile the different opinions of patristic writers.

Two different models were provided at the time of the Reformation. On the Lutheran side, Philip Melanchthon produced the *Loci communes* (“Commonplaces”) in 1521. This work provided a survey of the main aspects of Christian theology, arranged topically. John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is widely regarded as the most influential work of Protestant theology. The first edition of this work appeared in 1536, and its definitive edition in 1559. The work is arranged in four books, the first of which deals with the doctrine of God, the second with Christ as mediator between God and humanity, the third with the appropriation of redemption, and the final book with the life of the church. Other more recent major works of systematic theology to follow similar lines include Karl Barth’s massive *Church Dogmatics*.

In the modern period, issues of method have become of greater importance, with the result that the issue of “prolegomena” (see p. 148) has become significant.
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An example of a modern work of systematic theology which is heavily influenced by such concerns is F. D. E. Schleiermacher’s *Christian Faith*, the first edition of which appeared in 1821–2. The organization of material within this work is governed by the presupposition that theology concerns the analysis of human experience. Thus Schleiermacher famously places the doctrine of the Trinity at the end of his systematic theology, whereas Aquinas placed it toward the beginning.

Historical theology

Theology has a history. This insight is too easily overlooked, especially by those of a more philosophical inclination. Christian theology can be regarded as an attempt to make sense of the foundational resources of faith in the light of what each day and age regards as first-rate methods. This means that local circumstances have a major impact upon theological formulations. Christian theology regards itself as universal, in that it is concerned with the application of God’s saving action to every period in history. Yet it is also characterized by its particularity as an experience of God’s saving work in particular cultures, and is shaped by the insights and limitations of persons who were themselves seeking to live the gospel within a particular context. The *universality* of Christianity is thus complemented, rather than contradicted, by its particular application.

Historical theology is the branch of theology which aims to explore the historical situations within which ideas developed or were specifically formulated. It aims to lay bare the connection between context and theology. For example, it demonstrates that it was no accident that the doctrine of justification by faith first became of foundational significance in the late Renaissance. It shows how, for example, the concept of salvation found in Latin American liberation theology is closely linked with the socioeconomic situation of the region. It illustrates how secular cultural trends—such as liberalism or conservatism—find their corresponding expression in theology.

It may seem to be little more than stating a self-evident fact to say that Christianity often unconsciously absorbs ideas and values from its cultural backdrop. Yet that observation is enormously important. It points to the fact that there is a *provisional* or *conditional* element to Christian theology, which is not necessitated by or implied in its foundational resources. In other words, certain ideas which have often been regarded as Christian ideas may turn out to be ideas imported from a secular context. A classic example is the notion of the *impossibility of God*—that is, the idea that God cannot suffer. This idea was well established in Greek philosophical circles. Early Christian theologians, anxious to gain respect and credibility in such circles, did not challenge this idea. As a result, it became deeply embedded in the Christian theological tradition.

The study of the history of Christianity provides a powerful corrective to static views of theology. It allows us to see:

1. That certain ideas came into being under very definite circumstances; and that, occasionally, mistakes are made.
2. That theological development is not irreversible; the mistakes of the past may be corrected.

The study of historical theology is thus subversive, as it indicates how easily theologians are led astray by the “self-images of the age” (Alasdair MacIntyre). Nor is this something that is restricted to the past! Too often, modern trends in theology are little more than knee-jerk reactions to short-term cultural trends. The study of history makes us alert both to the mistakes of the past, and to the alarming way in which they are repeated in the present. “History repeats itself. It has to. Nobody listens the first time round” (Woody Allen).

It is for such reasons that the present volume aims to provide its readers with the maximum amount of historical background to contemporary issues. All too often, theological issues are conducted as if the debate began yesterday. An understanding of how we got to be where we are is essential to an informed debate of such issues.

Pastoral theology

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that Christianity does not occupy its present position as a global faith on account of university faculties of theology or departments of religion. There is a strongly pastoral dimension to Christianity, which is generally inadequately reflected in the academic discussion of theology. Indeed, many scholars have argued that Latin American liberation theology represents an overdue correction of the excessively academic bias of western theology, with a healthy adjustment in the direction of social applicability. Theology is here seen as offering models for transformative action, rather than purely theoretical reflection.

This academic bias is, however, a recent development. Puritanism is an excellent instance of a movement which placed theological integrity alongside pastoral applicability, believing that each was incomplete without the other. The writings of individuals such as Richard Baxter and Jonathan Edwards are saturated with the belief that theology finds its true expression in pastoral care and the nurture of souls. In more recent years, this concern to ensure that theology finds its expression in pastoral care has led to a resurgence of interest in pastoral theology. This development is reflected in the present volume, which is written on the basis of the assumption that many of its readers, like its writer, are concerned to bring the full critical resources of Christian theology to the sphere of pastoral ministry.

Philosophical theology

Theology is an intellectual discipline in its own right, concerned with many of the questions that have intrigued humanity from the dawn of history. Is there a God?
What is God like? Why are we here? Questions such as these are asked outside the Christian community, as well as within it. So how do these conversations relate to one another? How do Christian discussions of the nature of God relate to those within the western philosophical tradition? Is there a common ground? Philosophical theology is concerned with what might be called “finding the common ground” between Christian faith and other areas of intellectual activity. Thomas Aquinas’ Five Ways (that is, five arguments for the existence of God) are often cited as an example of philosophical theology, in which non-religious arguments or considerations are seen to lead to religious conclusions.

In the course of this work we shall explore some of the areas in which philosophical considerations have made a considerable impact upon Christian theology. Examples include the patristic analysis of the nature of God, which shows a marked influence from classical Greek philosophy; Thomas Aquinas’ arguments for the existence of God, which are influenced by Aristotelian physics; the Christology of nineteenth-century writers such as D. F. Strauss, which draw upon a Hegelian understanding of the historical process; and the existential approach to Christology, developed by Rudolf Bultmann. In each case, a philosophical system is treated as a resource or dialogue partner in the development of a theology. Many theologians have worked on the basis of the assumption that a philosophy provides a secure foundation on which theology may build.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that there exists a trend within Christian theology which has been severely critical of attempts to use secular philosophies in matters of theology. Tertullian raised the question in the second century: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Or the Academy with the church?” More recently, the same critical reaction may be seen in the writings of Karl Barth (see pp. 106–7), who argued that the use of philosophy in this way ultimately made God’s self-revelation dependent upon a particular philosophy, and compromised the freedom of God.

**Spirituality, or mystical theology**

The term “spirituality” has gained wide acceptance in the recent past as the preferred way of referring to aspects of the devotional practices of a religion, and especially the interior individual experiences of believers. Older terms which are still encountered in the scholarly literature to refer to this aspect of theology include “spiritual theology” and “mystical theology.” The use of the word “mystical” to refer to the spiritual (as opposed to purely academic) dimension of theology can be traced back to the treatise On mystical theology, written in the early sixth century by Dionysius the Areopagite. The modern terms “spirituality” and “mysticism” both trace their origins back to seventeenth-century France, and specifically to the rather elitist circles of salon society associated with Madame de Guyon. The French terms spiritualité and mysticisme were both used to refer to direct interior knowledge of the divine or supernatural, and were apparently treated as more or less synonymous at the time. Since then, both terms have been brought back into circulation, although changes in their associations have led to some degree of confusion over their precise meaning, with some writers suggesting that the two are just different ways of speaking about an authentic personal relationship with God, while others suggest that mysticism is to be seen as a special type of spirituality which places particular emphasis on a direct and unmediated personal experience of God. Many recent writers have avoided the use of the term “mysticism,” believing that it has become unhelpful and confusing. The term “spirituality” has thus come to be used in preference to many terms which are encountered in older writings, including “mystical theology,” “spiritual theology,” and “mysticism.”

Spirituality is often contrasted with a purely academic, objective, or detached approach to a religion, which is seen as a merely identifying and listing the key beliefs and practices of a religion, rather than dealing with the manner in which individual adherents of the religion experience and practice their faith. The term is resistant to precise definition, partly due to the variety of senses in which the term is used, and partly due to controversy within the community of scholars specializing in the field over the manner in which the term ought to be used. However, it is clear that spirituality is generally understood to mean the experiencing of God and the transformation of lives as outcomes of that experience. Spirituality thus refers to a lived experience of God, and the life of prayer and action which results from this; however, at the same time it cannot be conceived apart from the theological beliefs which undergird that life.

This point is made clearly by Thomas Merton (1915–68), a Trappist monk who had a major influence on modern western spirituality during the late twentieth century. Merton affirms that there is a close link between theology and spirituality, which must be affirmed and recognized for the mutual good of each.

Contemplation, far from being opposed to theology, is in fact the normal perfection of theology. We must not separate intellectual study of divinely revealed truth and contemplative experience of that truth as if they could never have anything to do with one another. On the contrary, they are simply two aspects of the same thing. Dogmatic and mystical theology, or theology and “spirituality,” are not to be set in mutually exclusive categories, as if mysticism were for saintly women and theological study were for practical but, alas, unsaintly men. This fallacious division perhaps explains much that is actually lacking in both theology and spirituality. But the two belong together. Unless they are united there is no favor, no life and no spiritual value in theology; no substance, no meaning and no sure orientation in the contemplative life.

Merton thus forges a link between the two disciplines, and indicates that their artificial separation is to their mutual impoverishment.

While there is agreement that spirituality is an important aspect of Christian theology, and that growing attention is being paid to teaching and research in this field within Christian seminaries, the question of exactly how theology and spirituality interact has been the subject of intense discussion in recent decades. While this debate lies beyond this introduction, it may easily be studied from any good introduction to the field of Christian spirituality.
The Question of Prolegomena

Anyone beginning the study of an unfamiliar subject faces the same problem: where should you begin? There seem to be so many ways of approaching subjects such as philosophy, the natural sciences, and theology that any kind of confusion over this question is inevitable. In theology, the debate over where theology should start has become known as the “question of prolegomena.” The Greek term prolegomena could be translated as “forewords” – in other words, things that need to be said before beginning the study of theology itself.

The question of what starting point should be adopted is of importance not merely to theology, but also to a number of related subjects. An obvious example is apologetics, the discipline which aims to make Christianity credible to those outside the faith. For example, the second-century Apologists (writers such as Justin Martyr, whose concern was to gain a serious hearing for Christianity among its educated opponents) took considerable trouble to find experiences and beliefs which Christians shared with their pagan counterparts. By beginning from this point they believed that they could show how Christianity built upon and complemented these shared experiences and ideas.

Since the time of the Enlightenment the question of prolegomena has become of especial importance. Before theology can explore the content of the Christian faith, it has to be shown how anyone can know anything about God in the first place. Talking about how we can know anything about God comes to be at least as important as discussing what we know about God. Increasing secularization in Europe and North America meant that theologians could no longer assume that their audiences would have any sympathy with the Christian faith. Accordingly, many theologians regarded it as vitally important to find some starting point which would allow those outside the faith to have access to its insights.

Among these approaches, which seek to anchor Christian theology in the basic experiences of human existence, the following are especially important:

E. D. E. Schleiermacher argued that a common feature of human experience was the feeling of absolute dependence. “Christian theology expressed and interpreted this basic human emotion as a feeling of dependence upon God,” and related it to the Christian doctrines of sin and redemption.

Paul Tillich developed a “method of correlation” (see p. 103), based on his belief that human beings ask certain “ultimate questions” about their existence. “In using the method of correlation, systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions.”

Karl Rahner drew attention to the importance of the basic human urge to transcend the limitations of human nature. Human beings are aware of a sense of being made for more than they now are, or more than they can ever hope to achieve by their own abilities. The Christian revelation supplies this “more,” to which human experience points.

Nevertheless, such approaches (especially as developed by Schleiermacher and his immediate followers) have provoked hostile reactions. The most significant of these is to be found in the neo-orthodox school (see pp. 106–8), which protest against what it believed to be a reduction of theology to human needs, or an imprisonment of theology within the confines of some philosophy of human existence.

Barth declared that Christian theology was not in any sense dependent upon human philosophy, but was autonomous and self-supporting. God was perfectly capable of revealing himself without any human assistance. The word “prolegomena” was not to be understood as “things which need to be said before theology is possible.” Rather, it was to be understood as “the things that must be said first in theology” – in other words, the doctrine of the Word of God.

There has been little agreement within Christian theology on this point. There has been a temptation to assume that philosophy is somehow capable of establishing a secure foundation upon which theology can build – particular favorites being Kant, Hegel, and Whitehead. Inevitably, this means that the credibility of such theologies is linked to the intellectual fortunes of the philosophies to which they are hitched.

Questions of method have dominated modern theology, not least on account of the challenge of the Enlightenment to establish reliable foundations for knowledge. However, as Jeffrey Stout of Princeton University observed: “Preoccupation with method is like cleaning your throat: it can go on for only so long before you lose your audience.” There has thus been a reaction against the contemporary preoccupation with method, especially within postliberalism (see pp. 118–21). Written such as Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Ronald Thiemann have argued that Christian faith is like a language: either you speak it, or you don’t. Christianity is viewed as one option in a pluralist context, with no need to appeal to universal criteria or principles of argument. To its opponents, this represents little more than a degeneration into liberalism – that is, a system which is justified by its own internal standards, which need not be shared or approved by anyone else.

Commitment and Neutrality in Theology

To what extent should theologians be “committed?” To put this question in an especially pointed way: can Christian theology be taught by someone who is not a Christian? Is commitment to the Christian faith an essential qualification for anyone who wants to teach or study Christian theology?

This question has been debated at length within the Christian tradition. The debate is usually regarded as having got fully under way in the twelfth century, with the founding of the University of Paris. Public confrontations developed between thinkers who believed that theology was about a committed defense of the Christian faith (Bernard of Clairvaux), and those who insisted that theology was an academic discipline, demanding detachment on the part of its practitioners (Peter
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Abelard). Significantly, the former tended to be based in monasteries, and the latter in universities.

The debate is unresolved, in that each view has a number of significant arguments in its favor. The following are the main points put forward by each side. First let us consider two arguments for detachment and neutrality.

1. A total detachment on the part of a scholar is necessary in the quest for truth. If a scholar is already committed to a theory (such as the truth of Christianity), this will prejudice his or her evaluation of the material to be studied. With the Enlightenment came the idea that “commitment” and “truth” were mutually incompatible. The only person who is intellectually qualified to pass judgment on the Christian faith is someone who is neutral toward it.

2. Theology must be prepared to ask hard questions about its intellectual credibility, its methods, and its ideas. The critical environment of a modern university forces theologians to ask the hard questions which otherwise might not get asked. “If theology were now forced to disappear from the universities on the grounds maintained by many people [that it is essentially tied to authority and therefore unscientific], this would be a severe setback for the Christian understanding of truth” (Wolfgang Pannenberg). David Tracy’s emphasis upon the need for Christianity to ground Christian truth claims in public, universal norms of intelligibility and justification also points firmly in this direction.

Having considered two of the arguments advocated for neutrality, we may now note three in support of commitment.

1. Latin American liberation theologians have been scathing of the notion of “academic detachment,” regarding this as a severe hindrance to the cause of social justice and political transformation. If something is true, ought one not to be committed to it? Basing their arguments partly on Marxist principles, and partly on some fairly traditional Christian ideas, liberation theologians have argued that there is no tension between truth and commitment: indeed, the former demands the latter.

2. Scholarship is in reality precommitted to certain ideas and values, whether these are explicitly identified or not. For example, the sophisticated analysis of the nature of theories in physics or psychology offered by Roy A. Clouser in The Myth of Religious Neutrality suggests that precommitments exercise a major, if hidden, role in these areas. Far from being “neutral,” such disciplines turn out to have hidden commitments. Might not the same be true of theology? In other words, even those who claim to be “neutral” are, in reality, servants of hidden precommitments and presuppositions.

3. Christian theology arises in response to the faith of a community. It is, to use the celebrated phrase of Anselm of Canterbury, fides quaerens intellectum, “faith seeking understanding” (see p. 45). Faith thus implies commitment. To study Christian theology as a purely academic subject, from a disinterested standpoint,

is to lose sight of the fact that Christianity is about proclamation, prayer, and worship. It is these activities which give rise to theology – and if a theologian does not proclaim the faith, pray to God, and worship the risen Christ, he or she cannot really be said to have understood what theology is all about.

Each of these arguments for and against neutrality has its strengths and weaknesses. For example, consider the suggestion that only someone outside the Christian faith can provide a reliable account of its ideas, i.e. that the person best qualified to write about Christian theology is someone who is not a Christian. This suggestion has its strengths. An outsider observer is more likely to ask hard questions, to make critical judgments, and to notice the strangeness of things which those inside the Christian faith take as self-evident. Yet, because the outside observer does not share the inner dynamics of the Christian faith – such as its life of prayer or worship – he or she will not be able to understand the motivation for theological development. A critical perspective is achieved at the cost of a lack of understanding.

For reasons such as these, the debate about commitment in theology has found itself at something of a stalemate. In recent decades, however, a social development has taken place which is tending to lead to Christian theology being studied in seminaries, rather than universities – and hence in a committed context. With the rise of multiculturalism in Europe, North America, and Australia, there has been increasing disquiet within secular circles over the privileged status of Christian theology in the universities. Why should Christian – and not Jewish or Islamic – thought be given this special status?

The result of this development in the United States has been the birth of “faculties of religion” or “faculties of religious studies,” which aim to study a variety of specific religions, or religion in general, rather than Christianity. As most individuals studying Christian theology do so with a view to ordination, the result of this has tended to be an exodus of students to the seminaries, where Christian theology is taught. Thus a significant number of major theologians – including major European Roman Catholic theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Yves Congar – have never held university appointments. Equally, many modern American evangelical theologians prefer to remain in seminary contexts, rather than work within the “religious studies” faculties of secular universities.

Orthodoxy and Heresy

The terms “orthodoxy” and “heresy” have now largely lost their original theological meanings. The rise of anti-authoritarian attitudes in modern times has led to “orthodoxy” (that is, literally, “right opinion”) being seen as little more than “a dogma imposed upon people by coercive authority,” with “heresy” often being viewed as the victim of suppression by intolerant church or state authorities. As we shall see, Walter Bauer (1877–1960) advanced the thesis that forms of Christianity
which later generations regarded as “heretical” were actually earlier and more influential than orthodox views; the Roman church deliberately suppressed these ideas, declaring them to be heretical, and enforced its own less popular ideas as “orthodoxy.” Recent scholarship has cast considerable doubt on this thesis, although it remains popular in more liberal circles today.

It should be noted that heresy has often been associated with marginalized social groupings: for example, the Donatists (a group of heretics in late fourth-century North Africa; see pp. 478–9) drew their support mainly from the indigenous Berber people of the region, whereas their Catholic opponents were mainly Roman settlers. While the Christian church has frequently fallen into the temptation of suppressing its opponents, inside and outside its ranks, the notion of “heresy” is and remains of genuine theological importance, and needs to be examined more closely. In what follows, we shall consider both historical and theological aspects of the ideas of heresy and orthodoxy.

Historical aspects

The ideas of “orthodoxy” and “heresy” are especially associated with the early church. So how did they develop? Are we to think of heresy as a degeneration from orthodoxy? In his study Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity (1934), Walter Bauer argued that the basic unity within the early Christian churches did not seem to be located at the level of doctrines, but at the level of relationship with the same Lord. Christian unity lay in the worship of the same Lord, rather than in the formal statement of doctrine (which is how “orthodoxy” tends to be defined).

Bauer went on to argue that a variety of views which were tolerated in the early church gradually began to be regarded with suspicion by the later church. An orthodoxy consensus began to emerge, in which opinions that had once been tolerated were discarded as inadequate. But how was this distinction between heresy and orthodoxy drawn? Bauer argued that “orthodoxy” was the result of the growing power of Rome, which increasingly came to impose its own views upon others, using the term “heresy” to refer to views it rejected. Bauer’s argument is that, to him, the difference between orthodoxy and heresy often seems arbitrary. Bauer’s hostility to the idea of doctrinal norms reflects his conviction that these were late developments within Christianity.

A more nuanced approach to the same question is taken by the Oxford parish priest scholar Henry Chadwick. In his important essay “The Circle and the Ellipse” (1959), Chadwick contrasted a patrician view of orthodoxy, which regarded only Rome as normative, and the rival view, which recognized that all Christian communities were linked by the foundational events which took place at Jerusalem and continued to be of defining importance in the process of the forming of doctrinal orthodoxy. Where Bauer focused on the single center of Rome, Chadwick suggested that the image of an ellipse, with its two foci at Rome and Jerusalem, was more appropriate. Historically, Chadwick’s account appears to be much the more plausible.

Theological aspects

The debate over the historical origins of the notions of heresy and orthodoxy might suggest that the ideas are of purely antiquarian interest. In fact, there is a continuing theological significance associated with the ideas. Heresy is important theologically. This point is perhaps best seen from one of the most important discussions of heresy, found in F. D. E. Schleiermacher’s Christian Faith (1821–2). Schleiermacher argued that heresy was that which preserved the appearance of Christianity, yet contradicted its essence:

If the distinctive essence of Christianity consists in the fact that in it all religious emotions are related to the redemption wrought by Jesus Christ, there will be two ways in which heresy can arise. That is to say: This fundamental formula will be retained in general . . . but either human nature will be so defined that redemption in the strict case cannot be accomplished, or the Redeemer will be defined in such a way that he cannot accomplish redemption.

Schleiermacher’s discussion of heresy is of such interest that we shall consider it in detail, partly because it illuminates the distinction between heresy and unbelief, and partly because it shows the continuing need for the notion of “heresy” in theology, even if the word itself has become discredited through overuse.

If, as Schleiermacher suggests, the distinctive essence of Christianity consists in the fact that God has redeemed us through Jesus Christ, and through no one else and in no other way, it must follow that the Christian understanding of God, Jesus Christ, and human nature must be consistent with this understanding of redemption. Thus the Christian understanding of God must be such that God can effect the redemption of humanity through Christ; the Christian understanding of Christ must be such that God may effect our redemption through him; the Christian understanding of humanity must be such that redemption is both possible and genuine. In other words, it is essential that the Christian understanding of God, Christ, and humanity is consistent with the principle of redemption through Christ alone.

According to Schleiermacher, the rejection or denial of the principle that God has redeemed us through Jesus Christ is nothing less than the rejection of Christianity itself. In other words, to deny that God has redeemed us through Jesus Christ is to deny the most fundamental truth claim which the Christian faith dare to make. The distinction between what is Christian and what is not lies in whether this principle is accepted. The distinction between what is orthodox and what is heretical, however, lies in how this principle, once conceded and accepted, is understood. In other words, heresy is not a form of unbelief; it is something that arises within the context of faith itself. For Schleiermacher, heresy is fundamentally an inadequate or inauthentic form of Christian faith.

Heresy arises through accepting the basic principle, but interpreting its terms in such a way that internal inconsistency results. In other words, the principle is
and be capable of accepting that redemption when it is offered. These two aspects of the question must be maintained at one and the same time, just like the humanity and divinity of Christ.

If the human need for redemption is granted, yet our impotence to redeem ourselves is denied, the conclusion follows that we could be the agents of our own redemption. Reconciliation could then be effected by at least some individuals, if not by all, to varying degrees— which immediately contradicts the principle of redemption through Jesus Christ alone. And if our ability to accept redemption, once it is offered to us, is denied, that redemption again becomes an impossibility. Broadly speaking, these two positions correspond to the Pelagian and the Manichaean heresies.

The four heresies described above may, according to Schleiermacher, be regarded as the four "natural heresies" of the Christian faith, each of which arises through an inadequate interpretation of the doctrine of redemption in Christ. It is no accident that these were by far the most important heresies to be debated in the early church.

In this chapter, we have explored a number of issues which are preparatory to engaging with the study of theology. The aim has been, in effect, to clear the ground a little, before we move on to deal with specific issues of substance relating to theology. Much the same remarks must apply to the next chapter, which aims to explore the sources upon which theology must draw.

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Questions for Chapter 5

1. Critique the following definition of theology: "Theology is talk about God."
2. What difficulties with the idea of theology as an academic discipline lie behind the growing interest in spirituality within the churches and seminaries?
3. Explain the role played by the following in the development of theology: Peter Lombard’s Sentences, John Calvin’s Institutes, F. D. E. Schleiermacher.
4. Do you have to be a Christian to be a Christian theologian?
5. Is the notion of "heresy" now an irrelevance for Christian theology?

Further Reading


The History of Theology as a Discipline

Gillian R. Evans, Alister E. McGrath and Alan D. Galloway, The Science of Theology (Grand...
The Architecture of Theology

Historical Theology

The following work is especially recommended as an introduction to the various aspects of the history of Christian theology:


1. The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)
2. The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)
3. The Growth of Medieval Theology (1000–1300)
4. Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)
5. Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (since 1700)

The following are also useful:


Pastoral Theology


Systematic Theology

The following are very useful as introductions to this general field, and are all worth exploring. The annotations indicate the kind of approach adopted by their authors:


P. Hodgson and R. King (eds.), *Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); also available in an expanded edition, with two extra essays on theological method and the sacraments respectively. Written from a generally liberal perspective; stronger on recent discussions of classic questions.

John Macquarrie, *Principle of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1966); and in a later revised edition. The existentialist approach adopted in this work seems a little dated now, but it is still useful to provoke a student’s thinking.


Philosophical Theology


Prolegomena