Christian theology, like most disciplines, draws upon a number of sources. There has been considerable discussion within the Christian tradition concerning the identity of these sources, and their relative importance for theological analysis. The present chapter aims to explore the identity of these sources, and provide an assessment of their potential for constructive theology.

Broadly speaking, four main sources have been acknowledged within the Christian tradition:

1. Scripture
2. Reason
3. Tradition
4. Experience

Each of these sources has a distinct contribution to make within the discipline of theology, and will be considered in detail in what follows.

Scripture

The term “Bible” and “Scripture,” along with the derived adjectives “biblical” and “scriptural,” are virtually interchangeable. Both designate a body of texts which are recognized as authoritative for Christian thinking (although the nature and extent of that authority is a matter of debate). It must be stressed that the Bible is not merely the object of formal academic study within Christianity; it is also read and expounded within the context of public worship, and is the subject of meditation and devotion on the part of individual Christians.
The adjective “canonical” is often used to refer to Scripture. This term, deriving from the Greek word κανών (meaning “rule,” “norm,” or “yardstick”), is used to indicate that limits have been set by the consensus of the Christian community to the texts which may be regarded as “scriptural,” and hence as authoritative for Christian theology. A long-standing debate between Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians concerns the status of a further group of texts which are often referred to as “apocryphal” or “deutero-canonical.”

A comparison of the contents of the Old Testament in the Hebrew Bible on the one hand, and the Greek and Latin versions (such as the Septuagint or Vulgate) on the other, shows that the latter contain a number of works not found in the former. Following the lead of Jerome, the sixteenth-century reformers argued that the only Old Testament writings which could be regarded as belonging to the canon of Scripture were those originally included in the Hebrew Bible.

A distinction was thus drawn between the “Old Testament” and the “Apocrypha”: the former consisted of works found in the Hebrew Bible, while the latter consisted of works found in the Greek and Latin Bibles but not in the Hebrew Bible. While some reformers allowed that the apocryphal works were edifying reading, there was general agreement that these works could not be used as the basis of Christian theology. In 1546 the Council of Trent defined the Old Testament as “those Old Testament works contained in the Greek and Latin Bibles,” thus eliminating any distinction between “Old Testament” and “Apocrypha.”

In practice this distinction is not as significant as might at first seem to be the case. An examination of the sixteenth-century debates over the matter suggests that the only theological issue of any real importance which was linked to this question was whether it was proper to pray for the dead. The (apocryphal) Books of the Maccabees encourage this practice, which Protestant theologians were not inclined to accept.

The issue which remains of real theological significance today concerns the canon of Scripture. Does the fact that the church drew up the canon imply that the church has authority over Scripture? Or did the church merely recognize and give formal assent to an authority which the canonical Scriptures already possessed? Does the process of shaping the canon of Scripture reflect the imposition of the external authority of the church upon the Bible, or the recognition by the church of the intrinsic authority of the Bible? The former position is particularly attractive to Catholic, and the latter to Protestant scholars.

In practice there has been increased recognition of late that the community of faith and Scripture, the people and the book, coexist with one another, and that attempts to draw sharp lines of distinction between them are somewhat arbitrary. The canon of Scripture may be regarded as emerging organically from a community of faith already committed to using and respecting it.

### Box 1  Abbreviations of the books of the Bible

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Testament</th>
<th>New Testament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genesis (Ge)</td>
<td>Zephaniah (Zep)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus (Ex)</td>
<td>Haggai (Hag)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leviticus (Lev)</td>
<td>Zechariah (Zec)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbers (Nu)</td>
<td>Malachi (Mal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deuteronomy (Dt)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua (Jos)</td>
<td>Matthew (Mt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judges (Jdg)</td>
<td>Mark (Mk)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth (Ru)</td>
<td>Luke (Lk)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Samuel (1 Sa)</td>
<td>John (Jn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Samuel (2 Sa)</td>
<td>Acts (Ac)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Kings (1 Ki)</td>
<td>Romans (Ro)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Kings (2 Ki)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Chronicles (1 Ch)</td>
<td>1 Corinthians (1 Co)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Chronicles (2 Ch)</td>
<td>2 Corinthians (2 Co)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra (Ezr)</td>
<td>Galatians (Gal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nehemiah (Ne)</td>
<td>Ephesians (Eph)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther (Est)</td>
<td>Philippians ( Php)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job (Job)</td>
<td>Colossians (Col)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psalms (Ps)</td>
<td>1 Thessalonians (1 Th)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proverbs (Pr)</td>
<td>2 Thessalonians (2 Th)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecclesiastes (Ecc)</td>
<td>1 Timothy (1 Ti)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song of Songs (SS)</td>
<td>2 Timothy (2 Ti)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah (Isa)</td>
<td>Titus (Tit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremiah (Jer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamentations (La)</td>
<td>Philemon (Phm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezekiel (Eze)</td>
<td>Hebrews (Heb)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel (Da)</td>
<td>James (Jas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hosea (Hos)</td>
<td>1 Peter (1 Pe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel (Joel)</td>
<td>2 Peter (2 Pe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amos (Am)</td>
<td>1 John (1 Jn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obadiah (Ob)</td>
<td>2 John (2 Jn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonah (Jah)</td>
<td>3 John (3 Jn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micah (Mic)</td>
<td>Jude (Jude)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nahum (Na)</td>
<td>Revelation (Rev)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habakkuk (Hab)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Box 2  Referring to books of the Bible

The standard method of referring to the Bible involves three elements. First, the book in question is identified (note that the term “book” is invariably used, even when the “book” in question is actually a letter). This is followed by the chapter of the book, followed by the verse(s) within that chapter.

The book may be identified in a full or abbreviated form. The chapter may be given in roman or arabic numerals. The chapter and verse numbers are usually separated by a colon or period. However, occasionally the verse numbers are printed in superscript.

The following are all commonly encountered ways of referring to one of the most familiar sayings from St Paul, which has become widely known as “the grace.”

2 Corinthians 13:14  II Corinthians xiii, 14
2 Cor. 13*  2 Co 13:14

Note the following points:
1. It is not necessary to distinguish between the Old and New Testaments in referring to biblical works.
2. It is not necessary to identify the author of a biblical book when referring to it.

Old and New Testaments

The Christian terms “Old Testament” and “New Testament” are strongly theological in nature. These Christian terms rest upon the belief that the contents of the Old Testament belong to a period of God’s dealings with the world which has in some way been superseded or relativized by the coming of Christ in the New Testament. Roughly the same collection of texts is referred to by Jewish writers as “the law, prophets, and writings” and by Christian writers as the “Old Testament.” There is thus no particular reason why someone who is not a Christian should feel obliged to refer to this collection of books as the Old Testament, apart from custom of use.

The Christian theological framework which leads to this distinction is that of “covenants” or “dispensations.” The basic Christian belief that the coming of Christ inaugurates something new expresses itself in a distinctive attitude toward the Old Testament, which could basically be summarized thus: religious principles and ideas (such as the notion of a sovereign God who is active in human history) are appropriated; religious practices (such as dietary laws and sacrificial routines) are not.

Box 3  Common terms used in relation to the Bible

Pentateuch  The first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)

Five books of the Law  The first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)

Major prophets  The first four prophetic writings of the Old Testament (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel)

Minor prophets  The twelve remaining prophetic writings of the Old Testament (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi)

Synoptic gospels  The first three gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke)

Pastoral epistles  A way of referring collectively to 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus, which takes note of their particular concern for pastoral matters and church order

(letters)  Those New Testament letters which are not explicitly addressed to individuals (James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude). In older works, sometimes referred to as “epistles general”

How, then, are the Old and New Testaments related to one another, according to Christian theology? One option was to treat the Old Testament as the writings of a religion which had nothing to do with Christianity. This approach is especially associated with the second-century writer Marcion, who was excommunicated in the year 144. According to Marcion, Christianity was a religion of love, which had no place whatsoever for law. The Old Testament relates to a different God from the New; the Old Testament God, who merely created the world, was obsessed with the idea of law. The New Testament God, however, redeemed the world and was concerned with love. According to Marcion, the purpose of Christ was to depose the Old Testament God (who bears a considerable resemblance to the Gnostic “demurges,” a semi-divine figure responsible for fashioning the world), and usher in the worship of the true God of grace.

There are faint echoes of this idea in the writings of Luther. Although Luther insists that both Old and New Testaments relate to the actions of the same God, he nevertheless insists upon the total opposition of law and grace. Judaism, according to Luther, was totally preoccupied with the idea of justification by works, believing that it was possible to merit favor in the sight of God by one’s achievements. The gospel, in contrast, emphasized that justification was completely gratuitous, resting
only on the grace of God. Although grace could be detected in the Old Testament (e.g., Isaiah 40–55), and law in the New (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5–7), Luther often seemed to suggest that the Old Testament was primarily a religion of law, contrasted with the New Testament emphasis on grace.

The majority position within Christian theology has on the one hand emphasized the continuity between the two testaments, while on the other noting the distinction between them. Calvin provides a lucid and typical discussion of their relation, to which we may turn.

Calvin argues that there exists a fundamental similarity and continuity between Old and New Testaments on the basis of three considerations. First, Calvin stresses the immutability of the divine will. God cannot do one thing in the Old Testament, and follow it by doing something totally different in the New. There must be a fundamental continuity of action and intention between the two. Second, both celebrate and proclaim the grace of God manifested in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament may only be able to witness to Jesus Christ “from a distance and darkly”; nevertheless, its witness to the coming of Christ is real. In the third place, both testaments possess the “same signs and sacraments,” bearing witness to the same grace of God.

Calvin thus argues that the two testaments are basically identical. They differ in _administratio_ but not in _substantia_. In terms of their substance and content there is no radical discontinuity between them. The Old Testament happens to occupy a different chronological position in the divine plan of salvation from the New, its content (rightly understood), however, is the same. Calvin proceeds to identify five points of difference between Old and New Testaments, relating to form rather than substance.

1 The New Testament possesses greater clarity than the Old, particularly in relation to invisible things. The Old Testament tends to be pervaded by a certain preoccupation with things visible and tangible, which might obscure the invisible goals, hopes, and values which lie behind them. Calvin illustrates this point with reference to the land of Canaan. The Old Testament tends to treat this earthly possession as an end in itself, whereas the New Testament regards it as a reflection of the future inheritance reserved for believers in heaven.

2 The Old and New Testaments adopt significantly different approaches to imagery. The Old Testament employs a mode of representation of reality which, Calvin suggests, leads to an indirect encounter with the truth, through various figures of speech and visual images; the New Testament, however, allows an immediate experience of truth. The Old Testament presents “only the image of truth, . . . the shadow instead of the substance,” giving a “foretaste of that wisdom which would one day be clearly revealed”; the New Testament presents the truth directly in all its fullness.

3 A third difference between the two testaments centers on the distinction between law and gospel, or between the letter and the spirit. The Old Testament, Calvin argues, lacks the empowering activity of the Holy Spirit, whereas the New is able to deliver this power. The law can thus command, forbid, and promise, but lacks the necessary resources to effect any fundamental change within human nature which renders such commands necessary in the first place. The gospel is able to “change or correct the perversity which naturally exists in all humans.” It is interesting to note that the radical antithesis between law and gospel so characteristic of Luther (and Marcion before him), is quite lacking. Law and gospel are continuous with each other, and do not stand in diametrical opposition.

4 Developing this previous point, Calvin argues that a fourth distinction can be discerned in the differing emotions evoked by law and the gospel. The Old Testament evokes fear and trembling, and holds the conscience in bondage, whereas the New produces a response of freedom and joy.

5 The Old Testament revelation was confined to the Jewish nation; the New Testament revelation is universal in its scope. Calvin restricts the sphere of the old covenant to Israel; with the coming of Jesus Christ, this partition was broken down, as the distinction between Jew and Greek, between those who were circumcised and those who were not, was abolished. The calling of the Gentiles thus distinguishes the New from the Old Testament.

Throughout this discussion of the distinction between the Old and New Testaments, and the superiority of the latter over the former, Calvin is careful to allow that certain individuals within the old covenant—such as, for example, the patriarchs—were able to discern hints of the new covenant. At no point do the divine purposes or nature alter; they are merely made clearer, in accordance with the limitations imposed upon human understanding. Thus, to give but one example, it was not as if God had originally determined to restrict grace to the nation of Israel alone, and then decided to make it available to everyone else as well; rather, the evolutionary thrust of the divine plan was only made clear with the coming of Jesus Christ.

Calvin summarizes this general principle with the assertion that “where the entire law is concerned, the gospel differs from it only in clarity of presentation.” Christ is shown forth and the grace of the Holy Spirit is offered in both Old and New Testaments—but more clearly and more fully in the latter.

This general understanding of the relation of the Old and New Testaments is set out in one of the few works of theology ever to have been written by a British monarch. James VI of Scotland succeeded Elizabeth I on her death in 1603, and became James I of England. One of his most important contributions to English-language theology was the commissioning of a new English translation of the Bible in 1604; this eventually appeared in 1611, and is widely known as the “King James Version.” James was, however, himself a keen student of theology, especially the variant of Calvin’s thinking which was gaining the ascendancy in Scotland in the late sixteenth century. While still king of Scotland, James wrote a work entitled _Basilikon Doron_ (“kingly gift”) which is basically a primer in the art of kingship, written for the benefit of his son, Prince Henry. The first section of the book deals with the importance of the Christian faith for
monarchs; in the course of his discussion, James sets out his understanding of the place of the Bible in general, and the relation of the Old and New Testaments in particular.

The whole Scripture is dictated by God's Spirit, whereby (as by his lively word) to instruct and rule the whole Church militant, till the end of the world. It is composed of two parts, the Old and New Testament. The ground of the former is the Law, which shows our sin and contains justice. The ground of the other is Christ, who pardoning sin, contains Grace. The sum of the Law is the ten Commandments, more largely dilated in the Law, interpreted by the Prophets: and by the histories are the examples shown of obedience or disobedience therein, and what praemium or prænas was accordingly given by God. But because no man was able to keep the Law, nor any part thereof, it pleased God of his infinite wisdom and goodness, to incarnate his only Son in our nature, for satisfaction of his justice in his suffering for us: that since we could not be saved by doing, we might (at least) be saved by believing. The ground therefore of the Law of Grace, is contained in the four histories of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Prince Henry died in 1612, unable to make use of the advice provided by his father. However, the work is of interest for our purposes in several respects, not least of which is the status of its writer in British history. However, it also represents an important statement of the “plenary inspiration” of the Bible (the word “died” means “spoken”), and a popular account of the relation of law and gospel.

The Word of God

The phrases “the Word of God” and “the Word of the Lord” are at least as deeply rooted in Christian worship as they are in Christian theology. “Word” implies action and communication. Just as a person’s character and will are expressed through the words he or she uses, so Scripture (especially the Old Testament) understands God to address the people, who are thus made aware of God’s intentions and will for them.

The term “Word of God” is complex and highly nuanced, bringing together a cluster of ideas. Three broad, and clearly related, senses of the term may be discerned, both within the Christian tradition and within Scripture itself.

1 The phrase is used to refer to Jesus Christ as the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14). This is the most highly developed use of the term in the New Testament. In speaking of Christ as the “Word of God incarnate,” Christian theology has attempted express the idea that the will, purposes, and nature of God are made known in history through the person of Jesus Christ. It is the deeds, character, and theological identity of Jesus Christ, and not merely the words that he uttered, which make known the nature and purpose of God.

2 The term is also used to refer to “the gospel of Christ” or the “message or proclamation about Jesus.” In this sense, the term refers to what God achieved and made known through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

3 The term is used in a general sense to refer to the whole Bible, which can be regarded as setting the scene for the advent of Christ, telling the story of his coming, and exploring the implications of his life, death, and resurrection for believers.

Considerations of this kind lie behind Karl Barth’s use of the phrase “the Word of God.” Barth’s doctrine of “the threefold form of the Word of God” distinguishes a threefold movement from the Word of God in Christ to the witness to this Word in Scripture, and finally to the proclamation of this Word in the preaching of the community of faith. There is thus a direct and organic connection between the preaching of the church and the person of Jesus Christ.

Narrative theology

The literary form which dominates Scripture is that of a narrative. What implications does this observation have for relating Scripture to theology? The recently developed concept of “narrative theology” has much to say on this theme.

Narrative theology is based on the observation that the Bible tells stories about God, just as much as it makes doctrinal or theological statements. For example, the Old Testament could be said to be dominated by the telling and retelling of the story of how God led Israel out of Egypt into the promised land, and all that this implies for the people of God. There are stories of battles, love affairs, betrayals, healings, the building of temples, and disastrous sieges.

In a similar way, the New Testament is also dominated by a story of God’s redeeming action in history, this time centering on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. What does this story mean for Christians? How does it affect the way in which they think and act? It is helpful to think of Paul’s letters, for example, as systematic attempts to spell out the relevance of the story of Jesus Christ for Christians.

It is insights like these which lie behind the emergence of one of the most important theological movements to develop in the last few decades – narrative theology. It has developed largely in North America, with many observers detecting especially close links with Yale Divinity School and writers based there, such as Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Ronald Thiemann. Although the term “narrative theologian” has thus far failed to gain general acceptance, narrative theology has come to have a major impact on much English-language theology since the early 1970s.

The basic feature of narrative theology is the particular attention it pays to narratives, or stories, in relation to Christian theology. As we shall see, this has proved to be of considerable interest and importance in giving a new sense of direction to theology, and especially in reforging the often neglected link between systematic theology and the study of Scripture.
The origins of this movement are complex. One of its most important sources was a writer who was neither theologian nor biblical scholar, but a specialist in secular literature. In his highly acclaimed study *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), Erich Auerbach compared scenes from classical literature, such as Homer's *Odyssey*, with a series of biblical passages, drawn from both Old and New Testaments. Time and time again, Auerbach argued, the biblical narrative had a far greater depth of history, time, and consciousness. There was a depth of realism to their accounts that was lacking in other works of the period. Auerbach thus pointed to the narrative quality of Scripture as distinctive, setting the scene for its theological exploitation. This was not long in coming.

Perhaps the more specifically theological roots of narrative theology can be traced back to Karl Barth, who gave new dignity and meaning to Scripture as "the story of God." Others suggest that a major impetus was given to the movement, especially in North America, by H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941). Niebuhr’s constant emphasis upon the revelation of God in history led him to note that narratives were an especially appropriate way of expressing that revelation. God chose to become revealed in history and historical forms (such as in the exodus from Egypt and the history of Jesus Christ). The literary form most appropriate to represent that revelation was thus a narrative — a story. (The word "story," it must be stressed, does not for one moment imply a "work of fiction" or any lack of historical character.) Both the Old and the New Testaments bear witness to this point, with their constant use of narratives to express God’s involvement and revelation in human history.

However, after the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, with its emphasis upon generally available rational truths (see pp. 89—96), these insights were widely neglected. One of the most important contributions to their recovery was made by Yale theologian Hans Frei, in his justly celebrated work *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. Frei pointed out how the Enlightenment’s drive to reduce theology to general rational concepts led to a disregard for the narrative quality of the biblical writings. Theology, according to the Enlightenment, was about general principles which could be established by reason. There was no need to make an appeal to history, except in a supportive role.

A related approach came to be associated with Rudolf Bultmann (1884—1976), who embarked on a program of "demythologization" (see pp. 563—4). At the heart of this program was the idea that it was possible to extract the timeless significance of Jesus, which Bultmann located in the proclamation about Jesus, from the scriptural narratives concerning him. Demythologization, whatever else it may have been, was basically an attempt to get to the real meaning of the scriptural narrative about Jesus, so that the narratives could be set to one side. Once the timeless significance of Jesus had been established, the original narratives concerning him would serve no further useful purpose.

It is perhaps no accident that the death of Bultmann in 1976 may be seen as marking a new interest in the narrative quality of Scripture. The radical criticism of Christianity during the 1960s, which perhaps found its most famous expression in the "death of God" movement (see pp. 279—80), had spent itself. The time seemed right to begin the reconstruction of faith. Among those writers who believed that narrative theology held the key to that reconstruction, we may note the following: Hans Frei, James Guračak, Stanley Hauerwas, George Lindbeck, and Ronald Thiemann, often loosely grouped together as "postliberal" thinkers (see pp. 118—20). It must, however, be stressed that narrative theology is by no means a well-defined movement. It is difficult (and probably not especially worthwhile) to place specific theologians firmly in this category.

What, then, are the advantages and drawbacks of such an approach? Why has it gained such a following in academic theology? The following points are important in understanding the appeal of this new approach, especially among writers concerned to reclaim the centrality of scripture in modern theology.

1 Narrative is the main literary type found in Scripture. Indeed, some recent writers have even suggested that it is the only literary form in Scripture — an obvious, though perhaps understandable, exaggeration. It can occur in various forms: the Old Testament histories, the gospel accounts of the history of Jesus, and the parables which Jesus himself told — all are examples of narratives. To approach theology from a narrative point of view is, potentially, to be much more faithful to Scripture itself than to take a more theoretical approach. Other significant Christian documents — for example, the creeds — all maintain an emphasis on narrative, especially when affirming faith in Jesus Christ. To affirm faith in Jesus is to affirm faith in the narrative of his birth, crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension — a continuous story, centering upon Jesus Christ, and casting light on his identity and his significance.

2 The approach avoids the dulling sense of abstraction which is often claimed to be a feature of much academic theological writing. The abstract, generalizing approach of theology is set to one side. Instead, narrative theology invites us to reflect upon a story — a vivid, memorable account of something that actually happened (such as the story of Jesus), or that may be treated as if it really happened (such as the parables of Jesus). There is an appeal to the imagination (a point especially stressed by writers such as C. S. Lewis), a sense of realism, of personal involvement, which is often conspicuously absent from theology.

3 Narrative theology affirms that God meets us in history, and speaks to us as one who has been involved in history. The doctrine of the incarnation affirms that the story of Jesus Christ is also the story of God. Narrative theology declares that God really became involved in our world of space and time, that God really entered into history, that God really came to meet us where we are. Often, systematic theology creates the impression that God has presented us with a set of ideas, as if revelation were some kind of data bank (see pp. 202—4). Narrative theology enables us to recover the central insight that God became involved in our history. God’s story intersects with our story. We can understand our story by relating it to the story of God, as we read it in Scripture.

This aspect of narrative theology has had a considerable impact, most strikingly
in the field of ethics. Stanley Hauerwas is perhaps the most distinguished of a group of ethical writers who have argued that the gospel narratives set out a pattern of behavior which is appropriate for Christian believers. The story of Jesus Christ, for example, is seen as establishing a pattern which is characteristic of the story of Christian believers. Ethics, approached from a narrative standpoint, becomes thoroughly grounded in real life. The gospel is not primarily about a set of ethical principles; it is about the effect of an encounter with God upon the lives of individuals and the histories of nations. By relating such stories, the biblical writers are able to declare: “This is the result of being transformed by the grace of God. That is an appropriate model for Christian behavior.”

Recognition of the narrative character of Scripture allows us to appreciate how Scripture effectively conveys the tension between the limited knowledge on the part of the human characters in the story, and the omniscience of God. In his *Art of Biblical Narrative* (1985), Robert Alter makes this point as follows: “The biblical tale might usefully be regarded as a narrative experiment in the possibilities of moral spiritual and historical knowledge, undertaken through a process of studied contrasts between the variously limited knowledge of the human characters and the divine omniscience quietly but firmly represented by the narrator.” Perhaps Job illustrates this point with especial clarity in the Old Testament. The narrative structure of Scripture allows the reader to see the story from God’s point of view, and appreciate the interplay between the human ignorance or misunderstanding of the situation and its reality, seen from God’s point of view.

Thus far, we have been considering the advantages of narrative theology. But the movement has raised difficulties. For example, is the Christian narrative the only authoritative story? Or are there other narratives which may claim to be authoritative? What has been said thus far might suggest that narrative theology is especially attractive to conservative theologians. Yet many liberal theologians find narrative theology attractive, because it does not claim to be exclusive or universal; other stories (such as those of Hinduism) could conceivably be regarded as having equal validity (see pp. 534–6). Indeed, the question of the authority of narratives is often evaded within many modern theological circles, especially those sympathetic to liberalism or postmodernism (see pp. 101–3; 112–14).

Perhaps a more important difficulty, however, centers upon the truth of the narrative. Narrative theology focuses its attention upon the literary structure of Scripture. It thus tends to ignore more historical factors. In concentrating upon the literary structure of narratives, the simple historical question – “Is this true? Did it really happen?” – tends to be ignored. How can we tell the difference between fiction and history? Both possess narrative structures, yet they have a very different historical and theological status. This point is given added weight through the recent rise of postmodernism, which argues that it is impossible to decide whether a given interpretation of a text is true or false. An appeal to the “narrative” of Scripture is inadequate to answer this crucial question.

Methods of interpretation of Scripture

Every text demands to be interpreted; Scripture is no exception. There is a sense in which the history of Christian theology can be regarded as the history of biblical interpretation. In what follows, we shall explore some of the approaches to biblical interpretation likely to be of interest to students of theology. It will, however, be clear that the vastness of the subject makes it impossible to do more than give a representative selection of approaches to the matter.

We open our discussion by dealing with the patristic period. The *Alexandrian* school of biblical interpretation drew on the methods devised by the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria (c. 30 BC–c. AD 45) and earlier Jewish traditions, which allowed the literal interpretation of Scripture to be supplemented by an appeal to allegory. But what is an allegory? The Greek philosopher Heracleitus had defined it as “saying one thing, and meaning something other than what is said.” Philo argued that it was necessary to look beneath the surface meaning of Scripture to discern a deeper meaning which lay beneath the surface of the text. These ideas were taken up by a group of theologians based in Alexandria, of which the most important are generally agreed to be Clement, Origen, and Didymus the Blind. (Indeed, Jerome playfully referred to the last-mentioned as “Didymus the Sighted,” on account of the spiritual insights which resulted from his application of the allegorical method of biblical interpretation.)

The scope of the allegorical method can be seen from Origen’s interpretation of key Old Testament images. Joshua’s conquest of the promised land, interpreted allegorically, referred to Christ’s conquest of sin upon the cross, just as the sacrificial legislation in Leviticus pointed ahead to the spiritual sacrifices of Christians. It might at first sight seem that this represents a degeneration into *cynicism*, in which the interpreter simply reads any meaning he or she likes into the text of Scripture. However, as the writings of Didymus (which were rediscovered in an ammunitions dump in Egypt during World War II) make clear, this need not be the case. It seems that a consensus developed about the images and texts of the Old Testament which were to be interpreted allegorically. For example, Jerusalem regularly came to be seen as an allegory of the church.

In contrast, the *Antiochene* school placed an emphasis upon the interpretation of Scripture in the light of its historical context. This school, especially associated with writers such as Dodore of Tarsus, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia, gave an emphasis to the historical location of Old Testament prophecies, which is quite absent from the writings of Origen and other representatives of the Alexandrian tradition. Thus Theodore, in dealing with Old Testament prophecy, stresses that the prophetic message was relevant to those to whom it was directly addressed, as well as having a developed meaning for a Christian readership. Every prophetic oracle is to be interpreted as having a single consistent historical or literal meaning. In consequence, Theodore tended to interpret relatively few Old Testament passages as referring directly to Christ, whereas the Alexandrian school regarded Christ
as the hidden content of many Old Testament passages, both prophetic and historical.

In the western church a slightly different approach can be seen to develop. In many of his writings, Ambrose of Milan developed a threefold understanding of the senses of Scripture: in addition to the natural sense, the interpreter may discern a moral sense and a rational or theological sense. Augustine chose to follow this approach, and instead argued for a twofold sense – a literal-fleshy-historical sense and an allegorical-mystical-spiritual sense, although he allowed that some passages could possess both senses. “The sayings of the prophets are found to have a threefold meaning, in that some have in mind the earthly Jerusalem, others the heavenly city, and others refer to both.” To understand the Old Testament at a purely historical level is unacceptable; the key to its understanding lies in its correct interpretation. Among the major lines of “spiritual” interpretation, the following should be noted: Adam represents Christ; Eve represents the church; Noah’s ark represents the cross; the door of Noah’s ark represents Christ’s pierced side; the city of Jerusalem represents the heavenly Jerusalem. Augustine sets out his approach as follows:

It is not the Old Testament that is abolished in Christ but the concealing veil, so that it may be understood through Christ. That which without Christ is obscure and hidden is, as it were, opened up... [Paul] does not say: “The Law or the Old Testament is abolished.” It is not the case, therefore, that by the grace of the Lord that which was covered has been abolished as useless; rather, the covering which concealed useful truth has been removed. This is what happens to those who earnestly and piously, not proudly and wickedly, seek the sense of the Scriptures. To them is carefully demonstrated the order of events, the reasons for deeds and words, and the agreement of the Old Testament with the New, so that not a single point remains where there is not complete harmony. The secret truths are conveyed in figures that are to be brought to light by interpretation.

By the use of such lines of analysis, Augustine is able to stress the unity of the Old and New Testaments. They bear witness to the same faith, even if their modes of expression may be different (an idea developed by John Calvin). Augustine expresses this idea in a text which has become of major importance to biblical interpretation, especially as it bears on the relation between Old and New Testaments: “The New Testament is hidden in the Old; the Old is made accessible by the New” (In Vetere Novum latet et in Novo Vetus pacta).

This distinction between the literal or historical sense of Scripture on the one hand, and a deeper spiritual or allegorical meaning on the other, came to be generally accepted within the church during the early Middle Ages. The standard method of biblical interpretation used during the Middle Ages is usually known as the Quadriga, or the “fourfold sense of Scripture.” The origins of this method lie specifically in the distinction between the literal and spiritual senses. Scripture possesses four different senses. In addition to the literal sense, three non-literal senses could be distinguished: the allegorical, defining what Christians are to believe; the tropological or moral, defining what Christians are to do; and the analectical, defining what Christians were to hope for. The four senses of Scripture were thus the following:

1. The literal sense of Scripture, in which the text could be taken at face value.
2. The allegorical sense, which interpreted certain passages of Scripture to produce statements of doctrine. Those passages tended either to be obscure, or to have a literal meaning which was unacceptable, for theological reasons, to their readers.
3. The tropological or moral sense, which interpreted such passages to produce ethical guidance for Christian conduct.
4. The analectical sense, which interpreted passages to indicate the grounds of Christian hope, pointing toward the future fulfillment of the divine promises in the New Jerusalem.

An excellent example of allegorical interpretation can be found in Bernard of Clairvaux’s twelfth-century exposition of the Song of Songs. Bernard here provides an allegorical interpretation of the phrase “the beams of our houses are of cedar, and our panels are of cypress,” illustrating the way in which doctrinal or spiritual meaning was “read into” otherwise unpromising passages at this time.

By “houses” we are to understand the great mass of the Christian people, who are bound together with those who possess power and dignity, rulers of the church and the state, as "beams." These hold them together by wise and firm laws; otherwise, if each of them were to operate in any way that they pleased, the walls would bend and collapse, and the whole house would fall in ruins. By the “panels,” which are firmly attached to the beams and which adorn the house in a royal manner, we are to understand the kindly and ordered lives of a properly instructed clergy, and the proper administration of the riches of the church.

A potential weakness was avoided by insisting that nothing should be believed on the basis of a non-literal sense of Scripture, unless it could first be established on the basis of the literal sense. This insistence on the priority of the literal sense of Scripture may be seen as an implied criticism of the allegorical approach adopted by Origen, which virtually allowed interpreters of Scripture to read into any passage whatever “spiritual” interpretations they liked. As Luther states this principle in 1515: “In the Scriptures no allegory, tropology, or anagogical is valid, unless that same truth is explicitly stated literally somewhere else. Otherwise, Scripture would become a laughing matter.”

Luther is fully aware of the distinctions noted above, and has no hesitation in using them to the full in his biblical exposition. In his analysis of the Psalter, he distinguishes eight senses of the Old Testament. This amazing precision (which may strike some readers as typical of scholasticism) results from combining the four senses of Scripture with the insight that each of these senses can be interpreted
historically or prophetically. Luther argues that a distinction had to be made between what he terms “the killing letter” (*lettera occidens*)—in other words, a crudely literal or historical reading of the Old Testament—and “the life-giving spirit” (*spiritus vivificans*)—in other words, a reading of the Old Testament which is sensitive to its spiritual nuances and prophetic overtones. As a worked example, we may consider Luther’s analysis of an Old Testament image using this eightfold scheme of interpretation.

The image in question is Mount Zion, which can be interpreted either in a woodenly historical and literal sense as a reference to ancient Israel or as a prophetic reference to the New Testament church. Luther explores the possibilities as follows:

1. Historically, according to “the killing letter”:
   a. literally: the land of Canaan;
   b. allegorically: the synagogue, or a prominent person within it;
   c. tropologically: the righteousness of the Pharisees and the Law;
   d. analogically: a future glory on earth.

2. Prophetically, according to “the life-giving spirit”:
   a. literally: the people of Zion;
   b. allegorically: the church, or a prominent person within it;
   c. tropologically: the righteousness of faith;
   d. analogically: the eternal glory of the heavens.

The *Quadriga* was a major component of academic study of the Bible within scholastic theological faculties of universities. But it was not the only option available to biblical interpreters in the first two decades of the sixteenth century. Indeed, Luther may be argued to be the only reformer to make significant use of this scholastic approach to biblical interpretation. By far the most influential approach to the subject within reforming and humanist circles in the early Reformation period was that associated with Erasmus of Rotterdam, to which we may now turn.

Erasmus’ *Handbook of the Christian Soldier* (see p. 48) made much of the distinction between the “letter” and the “spirit” — that is, between the words of Scripture and their real meaning. Especially in the Old Testament, the words of the text are like a shell, containing — but not identical with — the kernel of the meaning. The surface meaning of the text often conceals a deeper hidden meaning, which it is the task of the enlightened and responsible exegete to uncover. Biblical interpretation, according to Erasmus, is concerned with establishing the underlying sense, not the letter, of Scripture. There are strong affinities here with the Alexandrian school, noted earlier.

Zwingli’s basic concern echoes that of Erasmus. The interpreter of the Bible is required to establish the “natural sense of Scripture,” which is not necessarily identical with the literal sense of Scripture. Zwingli’s humanist background allows him to distinguish various figures of speech, especially allusions, cataphoresis, and synecdoche.

An example will make this difficult point clear. Take the statement of Christ at the Last Supper, in which, when breaking the bread, he spoke the words “this is my body” (Matthew 26: 26). The literal sense of these words would be “this piece of bread is my body,” but the natural sense is “this piece of bread signifies my body” (see p. 528).

Zwingli’s search for the deeper meaning of Scripture (to be contrasted with the superficial meaning) is well illustrated by the story of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22). The historical details of the story are too easily assumed to be its real meaning. In fact, Zwingli argues, the real meaning of that story can only be understood when it is seen as a prophetic anticipation of the story of Christ, in which Abraham represents God and Isaac is a figure (or, more technically, a “type”) of Christ.

With the advent of the modern period, the science of biblical interpretation has become considerably more complex, reflecting the increased acceptance within academic circles of new rational methods of interpretation, grounded in the assumptions of the Enlightenment. It is impossible to survey these developments adequately in the scope of this work. However, it will be helpful to note some broad tendencies in biblical interpretation during the last two and a half centuries. Under the influence of the Enlightenment, four main approaches can be seen in academic biblical interpretation.

1. The *rational approach*, found in the writings of H. S. Reimarus. This regards both Old and New Testaments as resting on a series of supernatural fictions. By a process of radical logical criticism, Reimarus argued that the supernatural elements of the Bible could not be taken seriously. It was therefore necessary to interpret Scripture along rational lines, as stating (although in a somewhat muddled manner) the universal truths of the religion of reason. With the general collapse in confidence in both the universality and the theological competence of reason in more recent times, the attractions of this approach have dwindled drastically.

2. The *historical approach*, which treats Scripture as an account of Christian origins. F. C. Baur, probably the most distinguished early representative of this tradition, argued that it was no longer permissible to explain the origins of the Christian faith in terms of “the only-begotten Son of God descending from the eternal throne of the Godhead to earth, and becoming a human person in the womb of the virgin.” Instead, Baur argued that it was possible to account for the origins of Christianity in rational and non-supernatural terms. Believing that Hegelianism held the key to explaining how Christianity came into being, Baur made a direct appeal to its philosophy of history as an alternative explanation to the traditional accounts of the origins of Christian faith, and interpreted the New Testament in its light. With the waning of Hegelianism, Baur’s impact also diminished.

3. The *sociological approach*. By the 1890s, many liberal Christians had lost interest in matters of Christian doctrine or theology, and began to explore the wider category of “religion” in general—a trend which undergirds the development of faculties of “religious studies” in many western universities. Yet religion is a
social phenomenon; concerned with far more than "ideas" as such, it comes under the category of "social history." The way was thus opened for a sociological approach to biblical interpretation, which treated Christianity as a specific example of a general phenomenon — religion. An example of this approach is provided by Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915), which applied comparative ethnology (the study of peoples and their traditions) to the Bible on an unprecedented scale.

4 The literary approach, which is concerned to do justice to the distinctive literary categories of Scripture. One such approach which has had major impact of late is narrative theology, which has been discussed at length earlier in this chapter (see pp. 167–70).

**Theories of the inspiration of Scripture**

The notion that the special status of Scripture within Christian theology rests upon its divine origin, however vaguely this may be stated, can be discerned both in the New Testament itself, and in subsequent reflection on it. An important element in any discussion of the manner in which Scripture is inspired, and the significance which is to be attached to this, is 2 Timothy 3:16–17, which speaks of Scripture as "God-breathed" (*theopneustion*). This idea was common in early Christian thought, and was not regarded as controversial. The Greek-speaking Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria regarded Scripture as fully inspired, and argued that God used the authors of scriptural books as passive instruments for communicating the divine will.

The issue began to surface as potentially controversial at the time of the Reformation, especially through the writings of John Calvin. Calvin was concerned to defend the authority of Scripture against two groups of people. On the one hand were those on the more Catholic wing of the church, who argued that the authority of Scripture rested in its being recognized as authoritative by the church. On the other were the more radical evangelical writers, such as the Anabaptists, who argued that every individual had the right to ignore Scripture altogether in favor of some direct personal divine revelation. Calvin declared that the Spirit worked through Scripture (not bypassing it, as the radicals held), and that the Spirit lent direct authority to Scripture by inspiring it, thus doing away with the need for any external support to its authority (such as that of the church).

This point is important, in that it indicates that the reformers did not see the issue of inspiration as linked with the absolute historical reliability or factual inerrancy of the biblical texts. Calvin's doctrine of accommodation implied that God revealed himself in forms tailored to the abilities of the communities which were to receive this revelation; thus in the case of Genesis 1, Calvin suggests that a whole series of ideas — such as the "days of creation" — are simply accommodated ways of speaking, a kind of divine "baby-talk." The development of ideas of "biblical inerrancy" or "inerrancy" within Protestantism can be traced to the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The general Christian consensus on the inspiration and authority of Scripture can be studied from a number of major confessional documents, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. For example, the definitive 1944 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly grounds the authority of Scripture in its divine inspiration.

In order to reveal himself to men, in the condescension of his goodness God speaks to them in human words indeed, the words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men. . . . God is the author of Sacred Scripture. The divine revealed realities, which are contained and presented in the text of Sacred Scripture, have been written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For Holy Mother Church, relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and the New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. God inspired the human authors of the sacred books. To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more.

With the coming of the Enlightenment, the idea of the Bible having special status was called into question, largely on account of the presuppositions of the rationalism of the period, and increased interest in the critical study of Scripture. A number of approaches to the issue of inspiration which developed around this period are of interest.

1 J. G. Herder (1744–1803), who can be argued to anticipate certain important aspects of Romanticism, argued that the idea of inspiration was to be interpreted in an artistic or aesthetic sense. In his *Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782–3), Herder suggested that the most appropriate model for biblical inspiration was provided by works of art. Just as one might speak of a great novel, poem, or painting as "inspired," so the same idea can be applied to Scripture. Inspiration is thus seen as a human achievement, rather than a gift of God.

2 The Old Princeton School, represented by Charles Hodge (1797–1878) and Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921), developed strongly supernatural theories of inspiration, in conscious opposition to the naturalist approach favored by Herder. "Inspiration is that extraordinary, supernatural influence. . . . exerted by the Holy Ghost on the writers of our Sacred Books, by which their words were rendered also the words of God, and, therefore, perfectly infallible." Although Warfield is careful to stress that the humanity and individuality of biblical writers are not abolished by inspiration, he nonetheless insists that their humanity "was so dominated that their words became at the same time the words of God, and thus, in every case and all alike, absolutely infallible."
Hearing considered some questions relating to Scripture as a source of Christian theology, we may now turn to a consideration of the role of reason.

**Reason**

The second major resource to be considered is human reason. Although the importance of reason for Christian theology has always been recognized, it assumed an especial importance at the time of the Enlightenment (see pp. 89–95). We open our discussion by considering the changing emphasis which has come to be placed upon reason within the Christian tradition.

**Reason and revelation: Three models**

In that human beings are rational, it is to be expected that reason should have a major role to play in theology. There has, however, been considerable debate within Christian theology concerning what that role might be. In our discussion of the development of patristic attitudes to secular culture, including philosophy (see pp. 16–29), we noted a variety of attitudes to develop at the time, including a rather uncritical acceptance of Platonism (e.g. Justin Martyr), a vigorous rejection of any role for philosophy in theology (e.g. Tertullian), and a willingness to appropriate at least some ideas from secular philosophy (e.g. Augustine). It will be helpful to survey attitudes since the patristic period, during which three broad categories of positions can be discerned.

1. *Theology is a rational discipline* This position, associated with writers such as Thomas Aquinas, works on the assumption that the Christian faith is fundamentally rational, and can thus be both supported and explored by reason. Aquinas’ Five Ways, considered earlier, illustrate his belief that reason is capable of lending support to the ideas of faith.

But Aquinas, and the Christian tradition which he represented, did not believe that Christianity was limited to what could be ascertained by reason. Faith goes beyond reason, having access to truths and insights of revelation, which reason could not hope to fathom or discover unaided. Reason has the role of building upon what is known by revelation, exploring what its implications might be. In this sense, theology is a *scientia* – a rational discipline, using rational methods to build upon and extend what is known by revelation.

The noted historian of medieval Christian thought Etienne Gilson made a delightful comparison between the great theological systems of the Middle Ages and the cathedrals which sprang up throughout Christian Europe at this time: The former were, he remarked, “cathedrals of the mind.” Christianity is like a cathedral which rests upon the bedrock of human reason, but whose superstructure rises beyond the realms accessible to pure reason. It rests upon rational foundations; but the building erected on that foundation went far beyond what reason could uncover. Philosophy was thus the auctilia theologiae, “the handmaid of theology.”

2. *Theology is the re-publication of the insights of reason.* By the middle of the seventeenth century, especially in England and Germany, a new attitude began to develop. Christianity, it was argued, was reasonable. But where Thomas Aquinas understood this to mean that faith rested securely upon rational foundations, the new school of thought had different ideas. If faith is rational, they argued, it must be capable of being deduced in its entirety by reason. Every aspect of faith, every item of Christian belief, must be shown to derive from human reason.

An excellent example of this approach is to be found in the writings of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, especially *De veritate religiosis,* “On the truth of religion,” which argued for a rational Christianity based upon the innate sense of God and human moral obligation. This had two major consequences. First, Christianity was in effect reduced to those ideas which could be proved by reason. If Christianity was rational, then any parts of its system which could not be proved by reason could not be counted as “rational.” They would have to be discarded. And second, reason was understood to take priority over revelation. Reason comes first, revelation comes second.

Reason thus came to be regarded as being capable of establishing what is right without needing any assistance from revelation; Christianity has to follow, being accepted where it endorses what reason has to say, and being disregarded where it goes its own way. So why bother with the idea of revelation, when reason could tell us all we could possibly wish to know about God, the world, and ourselves? This absolutely settled conviction in the total competence of human reason undermines the rationalist depreciation of the Christian doctrine of revelation in Jesus Christ and through Scripture.

3. *Theology is redundant; reason reigns supreme.* Finally, this potentially rationalist position was pushed to its logical outcome. As a matter of fact, it was argued, Christianity does include a series of major beliefs which are inconsistent with reason. Reason has the right to judge religion, in that it stands above it. This approach is usually termed “Enlightenment rationalism” and is of such importance that it will
Deism

The term “deism” (from the Latin deus, “god”) is often used in a general sense to refer to that view of God which maintains God’s creativeness, but denies a continuing divine involvement with, or special presence within, that creation. It is often contrasted with “theism” (from the Greek theos, “god”), which allows for continuing divine involvement within the world.

In its more specific sense, Deism is used to refer to the views of a group of English thinkers during the “Age of Reason,” in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In his Principal Deistic Writers (1757), Leland grouped together a number of writers — including Lord Herbert of Cherbury, Thomas Hobbes, and David Hume — under the broad term “deist.” Close examination of their religious views shows that they have relatively little in common, apart from a general skepticism of specifically Christian ideas. Yet Leland’s grouping of these writers into a single category proved irresistible. “Deism” was thus firmly established as a genuine category of belief.

John Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690) developed an idea of God which became characteristic of much later Deism. Indeed, Locke’s Essay can be said to lay much of the intellectual foundations of Deism. Locke argued that “reason leads us to the knowledge of this certain and evident truth, that there is an eternal, most powerful and most knowing Being.” The attributes of this being are those which human reason recognizes as appropriate for God. Having considered which moral and rational qualities are suited to the deity, Locke argues that “we enlarge every one of these with our idea of infinity, and so, putting them together, make our complex idea of God.” In other words, the idea of God is made up of human rational and moral qualities, projected to infinity.

Matthew Tindal’s Christianity as Old as Creation (1733) argued that Christianity was nothing other than the “republication of the religion of nature.” God is understood as the extension of accepted human ideas of justice, rationality, and wisdom. This universal religion is available at all times and in every place, whereas traditional Christianity rested upon the idea of a divine revelation which was not accessible to those who lived before Christ. Tindal’s views were propagated before the modern discipline of the sociology of knowledge created skepticism of the idea of “universal reason,” and are an excellent model of the rationalism characteristic of the movement, and which later became influential within the Enlightenment.

The ideas of English Deism percolated through to the continent of Europe (especially to Germany) through translations, and through the writings of individuals familiar with and sympathetic to them, such as Voltaire’s Philosophical Letters. Enlightenment rationalism, to which we now turn, is often considered to be the final flowering of the bud of English Deism.

Enlightenment rationalism

The basic presupposition of Enlightenment rationalism is that human reason is perfectly capable of telling us everything we need to know about the world, ourselves, and God (if there is one). One of the most graphic portrayals of this enormous confidence in reason is the frontispiece to the eighteenth-century rationalist philosopher Christian Wolff’s ambitiously titled book Reasonable Thoughts about God, the World, the Human Soul, and just about everything else (1720). The engraving in question portrays a world enveloped in shadows and gloom, representing the old ideas of superstition, tradition, and faith. But on part of the engraving, the sun has broken through, lighting up hills and valleys, and bringing smiles to the faces of what we must assume to have been a hitherto rather gloomy group of peasants. The message is clear: reason enlightens, dispelling the fog and darkness of Christian faith, and ushering in the glorious light of human rationality. Divine revelation is an irrelevancy, if it exists at all. The consequences of this approach were noted in more detail earlier, as we surveyed the general impact of the Enlightenment upon Christian theology.

At this point, we need to stress the difference between “reason” and “rationalism,” which may appear identical to some readers. Reason is the basic human faculty of thinking, based on argument and evidence. It is theologically neutral, and poses no threat to faith — unless it is regarded as the only source of knowledge about God. It then becomes rationalism, which is an exclusive reliance upon human reason alone, and a refusal to allow any weight to be given to divine revelation.

Enlightenment rationalism may be said to rest upon the belief that unaided human reason can deliver everything that humanity needs to know. There is no need to listen to other voices, having first consulted reason. By definition, the Christian cannot have anything to say that is at one and the same time distinctive and right. If it is distinctive, it departs from the path of reason — and thus must be untrue. To be different is, quite simply, to be wrong.

An excellent example of this rationalist critique of Christianity can be seen in relation to the doctrine of Christ (how could Jesus be both God and man at one and the same time?) and the doctrine of the Trinity (how can one God be three persons simultaneously, without lapsing into crude logical contradictions?). One of the early American presidents, Thomas Jefferson, who was deeply influenced by eighteenth-century French rationalism, poured reasoned scorn upon such doctrines. Jesus, he argued, was really a very simple rational teacher, who taught a very simple and reasonable gospel about a very simple and rational idea of God. And at every point, Christianity chose to make things more complicated than they need be.

A direct consequence of this was the movement in New Testament studies known as the “quest of the historical Jesus” (see pp. 386–96). This quest, which dates from the late eighteenth century, was based upon the belief that the New Testament got Jesus entirely wrong. The real Jesus — the “Jesus of history” — was a simple Galilean teacher, who taught entirely sensible ideas based upon reason. The New Testament quite erroneously presented him as the risen savior of sinful humanity.
Reason was thus held to be able to judge Christ. In his celebrated work *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Immanuel Kant argued powerfully for the priority of reason and conscience over the authority of Jesus Christ. Where Jesus endorses what reason has to say, he is to be respected; where he goes against or goes beyond reason, he is to be rejected. Iris Murdoch writes of this type of approach in *The Sovereignty of the Good*:

How recognizable, how familiar to us, is the man so beautifully portrayed in the *Groundwork*, who confronted even with Christ turns away to consider the judgement of his own conscience and to hear the voice of his own reason. Stripped of the exiguous metaphysical background which Kant was prepared to allow him, this man is still with us: free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy.

Enlightenment rationalism, then, upheld the sovereignty of reason, arguing that human reason was capable of establishing all that it was necessary to know about religion without recourse to the idea of “revelation.” Furthermore, reason possessed an ability to judge the truths of religions, such as Christianity, and eliminate vast tracts of its ideas as “irrational.” Influential though such ideas were in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they are now regarded with suspicion. The following section explores why.

**Criticisms of Enlightenment rationalism**

A series of developments, of which we may here note a few, have destroyed the credibility of the Enlightenment approach. This approach could be said to rest upon the idea of the “immediately given,” whether in reason or in experience. Knowledge rests upon a foundation, whether this is self-evident truths, immediately recognized as such by the human mind, or immediate experience, deriving directly from contact with the outside world. But these foundations do not seem to exist.

The idea that human reason was capable of basing itself upon self-evident first principles, and, by following these through logically, deducing a complete system, suffered some serious setbacks in the late eighteenth century and beyond. Most writers sympathetic to the ideas of the Enlightenment made an appeal to Euclid’s five principles of geometry. On the basis of his five principles, Euclid was able to construct an entire geometrical system, which had seemed to be an example of a universal and necessarily true system based upon reason alone. Philosophers, such as Spinoza, argued that the same method could be applied in philosophy. A secure edifice of philosophy and ethics could be erected on the basis of a secure and universal rational foundation, as in Euclid’s geometry. The discovery of non-Euclidian geometry during the nineteenth century destroyed the appeal of this analogy. It turned out that there were other ways of doing geometry, each just as internally consistent as Euclid’s. But which is right? The question cannot be answered. They are all different, each with its own special merits and problems.

Much the same observation is now made concerning rationalism itself. Where once it was argued that there was one single rational principle, it was increasingly conceded that there are—and always have been—many different “rationalities.” At the end of his analysis of rationalist approaches to truth and meaning, Alasdair MacIntyre concludes:

Both the thinkers of the Enlightenment and their successors proved unable to agree as to precisely what those principles were which would be found undeniable by all rational persons. One kind of answer was given by the authors of the *Encyclopédie*, a second by Rousseau, a third by Bentham, a fourth by Kant, a fifth by the Scottish philosophers of common sense and their French and American disciples. Nor has subsequent history diminished the extent of such disagreement. Consequently, the legacy of the Enlightenment has been the provision of an ideal of rational justification which it has proved impossible to attain.

Reason promises much, yet fails to deliver its benefits. It is for such reasons that Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote scathingly of the “Robinson Crusoe dream of the historical Enlightenment, as artificial as Crusoe himself.” The notion of “universal rationality” is today viewed by many as little more than a fiction. Postmodernism has argued that there exist a variety of “rationalities,” each of which has to be respected in its own right; there is no privileged vantage point, no universal concept of “reason,” which can pass judgment upon them.

Having considered some aspects of reason as a theological resource, we may now turn to consider the idea of tradition.

**Tradition**

If any controversy served to emphasize the importance of tradition, it was the Gnostic debates of the second century. Faced with repeated assertions from his Gnostic critics that he had misrepresented the Bible, Irenaeus argued that they had simply chosen to interpret the Bible according to their own taste. What had been handed down was not merely the biblical texts, but a certain way of reading and understanding those texts.

Everyone who wishes to perceive the truth should consider the apostolic tradition, which has been made known in every church in the entire world. We are able to number those who are bishops appointed by the apostles, and their successors in the churches to the present day, who taught and knew nothing of such things as these people imagine.

Irenaeus’ point is that a continuous stream of Christian teaching, life, and interpretation can be traced from the time of the apostles to his own period. The church is
able to point to those who have maintained the teaching of the church, and to
certain public standard creeds which set out the main lines of Christian belief. This,
he argues, contrasts with the secret and mystical teaching of the Gnostics, which is
not available for public inspection, and which cannot be traced back to the apostles
themselves. Tradition is thus the guarantor of faithfulness to the original apostolic
teaching, a safeguard against the innovations and misrepresentations of biblical texts
on the part of the Gnostics.

This point was further developed in the early fifth century by Vincent of Lérins,
who was concerned that certain doctrinal innovations were being introduced with
out adequate reason. Vincent was especially troubled by some of Augustine's views
on predestination, which he regarded as unwise and hasty improvisations. There
was a need to have public standards by which such doctrines could be judged. So
what standard was available, by which the church could be safeguarded from such
ers? For Vincent, the answer was clear—tradition.

On account of the number and variety of errors, there is a need for someone to lay down
a rule for the interpretation of the prophets and the apostles in such a way that is
directed by the rule of the catholic church. Now in the catholic church itself the greatest
care is taken that we hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all
people (quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus traditum est). This is what is truly
and properly catholic. This is clear from the force of the word and reason, which under-
stands everything universally. We shall follow “universality” in this way, if we acknowl-
edge this one faith to be true, which the entire church confesses throughout the world.
We affirm “antiquity” if we make no way depart from these understandings which it is clear
that the greater saints and our fathers proclaimed. And we follow “consensus” if in this
antiquity we follow all (or certainly nearly all) the definitions of the bishops and masters.

This threefold criterion has come to be known as the “Vincentian Canon,” and has
been of considerable importance in ecumenical discussions in recent years.

Yet this approach to tradition was vulnerable at certain points. For example, it
seemed to suggest that “tradition” was a purely static notion—the views of the past,
which the present was bound to repeat. Concern over this view became apparent
within some Roman Catholic circles during the nineteenth century. Of particular
interest are the views of Johann Adam Möhler, the founder of the Catholic Tübingen
School. In his much-read Symbolism, published in 1832, Möhler set out an under-
standing of tradition as a living voice within the church, by which the Christian
community’s interpretation of Scripture is safeguarded from error.

Tradition is the living Word, perpetuated in the hearts of believers. To this sense, as
the general sense, the interpretation of Holy Writ is entrusted. The declaration, which
it pronounces on any controverted subject, is the judgment of the Church; and, there-
fore, the Church is judge in matters of faith. Tradition, in the objective sense, is the
general faith of the Church through all ages, manifested by outward historical testi-
nomies; in this sense, tradition is usually termed the norm, the standard of Scriptural
interpretation—the rule of faith.

It will be clear that Möhler understands tradition to have both subjective and objec-
tive aspects. The objective sense corresponds roughly to Vincent’s notion of doctrinal
consensus—that is, to “the general faith of the Church through all ages, manifested
by outward historical testimonies.” Yet the subjective element prevents this from
becoming a mere process of ecclesiastical fossilization. Tradition is something living
and dynamic.

This issue remains important. In the twentieth century, a concerted effort has
been made within both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches to distinguish
“tradition” from “traditionalism.” The latter is understood as a slavish adherence to the
dogmatic or moral formulations of the past, whereas the former is understood as the living faithfulness of the Church to the faith which it expresses.

This approach may also be discerned within the 1994 Catechism of the Catholic Church,
which draws attention to the close connection between Scripture and tradition.

In keeping with the Lord’s command, the Gospel was handed on in two ways:
— orally, by the apostles who handed on, by the spoken word of their preaching, by
the example they gave, by the institutions they established, what they themselves had
received—whether from the lips of Christ, from his way of life and his works, or
whether they had learned it at the prompting of the Holy Spirit;
— in writing, by those apostles and other men associated with the apostles who,
under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to
writing.

In order that the full and living Gospel might always be preserved in the Church the
apostles left bishops as their successors. They gave them their own position of teaching
authority. Indeed, the apostolic teaching, which is expressed in a special way in the
inspired books, was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of
time. This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition,
since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely connected to it. Through Tra-
dition, the Church, in her doctrine, life, and worship perseveres and transmits to every
generation all that she herself is, all that she believes. . . . The Father’s self-communi-
cation made through his Word in the Holy Spirit remains present and active in the Church.

Note the emphasis which is placed here upon the role of the church as a living organ-
ism, which passes down the content of the faith, based in Scripture, to each genera-
tion. “Tradition” is here understood as a living and active process of passing on the
Christian faith, rather than as a static source of revelation, independent of Scripture.

A similar emphasis can be found in the writings of leading Orthodox theologians,
such as John Meyendorff. In his influential work Living Tradition, Meyendorff
stresses that tradition is not to be understood as an accumulated body of propositional
truths, which simply repeats the insights of the past:

True tradition is always a living tradition. It changes while remaining always the same.
It changes because it faces different situations, not because its essential content is
modified. This content is not an abstract proposition; it is the living Christ Himself,
who said, “I am the Truth.”
It will thus be clear that the word "tradition" implies not merely something that is handed down, but an active process of reflection by which theological or spiritual insights are valued, assessed, and transmitted from one generation to another. Three broad approaches to tradition may be detected within Christian theology, and will be considered in what follows.

A single-source theory of tradition

In response to various controversies within the early church, especially the threat from Gnosticism, a "traditional" method of understanding certain passages of Scripture began to develop. Second-century patristic theologians such as Irenaeus of Lyons began to develop the idea of an authorized way of interpreting certain texts of Scripture, which he argued went back to the time of the apostles themselves. Scripture could not be allowed to be interpreted in any arbitrary or self-serving way: it had to be interpreted within the context of the historical continuity of the Christian church. The parameters of its interpretation were historically fixed and "given." "Tradition" here means simply "a traditional way of interpreting Scripture within the community of faith." This is a single-source theory of theology: theology is based upon Scripture, and "tradition" refers to a "traditional way of interpreting Scripture."

The mainstream Reformation adopted this approach, insisting that traditional interpretations of Scripture — such as the doctrine of the Trinity or the practice of infant baptism — could be retained, provided they could be shown to be consistent with Scripture. On the basis of this observation, it will be clear that it is incorrect to suggest that the magisterial reformers elevated private judgment above the corporate judgment of the church, or that they descended into some form of individualism. This is, however, unquestionably true of the radical Reformation (see below).

A dual-source theory of tradition

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there developed a somewhat different understanding of tradition from that noted above. "Tradition" was understood to be a separate and distinct source of revelation, in addition to Scripture. Scripture, it was argued, was silent on a number of points, but God had providentially arranged for a second source of revelation to supplement this deficiency: a stream of unwritten tradition, going back to the apostles themselves. This tradition was passed down from one generation to another within the church. This is a dual-source theory of theology: theology is based upon two quite distinct sources, Scripture and unwritten tradition.

A belief which is not to be found in Scripture may thus, on the basis of this dual-source theory, be justified by an appeal to an unwritten tradition. This position was defended strongly at the Council of Trent, which was charged with stating and defending the Roman Catholic position against the threat posed by the Reformation. Trent ruled that Scripture could not be regarded as the only source of revelation. The Council therefore argued that Scripture and tradition alike were to be regarded as inspired by the same Holy Spirit, and safeguarded and handed down by the same Catholic Church:

This truth and discipline are contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions which, received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the apostles themselves, the Holy Spirit dictating, have come down to us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand, following the examples of the orthodox Fathers, [the church] receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety, and reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament — seeing that the one God is the author of both — as also the said traditions, whether these relate to faith or to morals, as having been dictated, either by Christ's own word of mouth, or by the Holy Spirit, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession.

Interestingly, however, the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) seems to move away from this approach, in favor of the "traditional interpretation of Scripture" approach, noted above.

The two approaches just discussed affirm the value of tradition. A third approach, which in effect rejected tradition, came to be influential within the radical wing of the Reformation, often known as "Anabaptism," and subsequently was developed by writers sympathetic to the Enlightenment.

The total rejection of tradition

For radical theologians of the sixteenth century, such as Thomas Münzer and Caspar Schwenckfeld, every individual had the right to interpret Scripture as he or she pleased, subject to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For the radical Sebastian Franck, the Bible "is a book sealed with seven seals which none can open unless he has the key of David, which is the illumination of the Spirit." The way was thus opened for individualism, with the private judgment of the individual raised above the corporate judgment of the church. Thus the radicals rejected the practice of infant baptism (to which the magisterial Reformation remained committed) as non-scriptural. (There is no explicit reference to the practice in the New Testament.)

Similarly, doctrines such as the Trinity and the divinity of Christ were rejected as resting upon inadequate scriptural foundations. The radicals had no place whatsoever for tradition. As Sebastian Franck wrote in 1530: "Foolish Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory, of whom not one even knew the Lord, so help me God, nor was sent by God to teach. Rather, they were all apostles of Antichrist."

This approach was developed further during the Enlightenment, which was anxious to liberate itself from the shackles of tradition. Political emancipation from the oppression of the past (a key theme of the French Revolution) meant a total abandoning of the political, social, and religious ideas of the past. One of the reasons
why Enlightenment thinkers placed such a high value upon human reason was that it relieved them of the need to appeal to tradition for ideas; any ideas worth knowing about were accessible to reason alone.

A respect for tradition was thus seen as capitulation to the authority of the past, a self-imposed bondage to outdated social, political, and religious structures. "Modern thought was born in a crisis of authority, took shape in flight from authority, and aspired from the start to autonomy from all traditional influence whatsoever" (Jeffrey Stout). Or, as Michael Polanyi puts it:

We were warned that a host of unproven beliefs were instilled in us from earliest childhood. That religious dogma, the authority of the ancients, the teaching of the schools, the maxims of the nursery, all were united to a body of tradition which we tended to accept merely because these beliefs had been previously held by others, who wanted us to embrace them in our turn.

The Enlightenment thus represented a radical rejection of tradition. Reason required no supplementation by voices from the past.

Theology and worship: The importance of liturgical tradition

One of the most important elements of the Christian tradition is fixed forms of worship, usually known as liturgy. In recent years there has been a rediscovery of the fact that Christian theologians pray and worship, and that this devotional context shapes their theological reflectors. This point has been appreciated since the first centuries of the Christian church. The term *lex orandi, lex credendi*, which could be translated roughly as "the way you pray determines what you believe," expresses the fact that theology and worship interact with each other. What Christians believe affects the manner in which they pray and worship, the manner in which Christians pray and worship affects what they believe.

Two controversies within the early church, centered on Gnosticism and Arianism, illustrate the importance of this point particularly well. On the basis of their radical dualism between the "physical" and the "spiritual," the Gnostics argued that matter was inherently evil. In refuting this position, Irenaeus pointed to the fact that bread, wine, and water were used in the Christian sacraments. How could they be evil, if they were given so prominent a position in Christian worship?

Arius argued that Christ was supreme among God's creatures. His opponents, such as Athanasius, retorted that this Christology was totally inconsistent with the way in which Christians worshipped. Athanasius stressed the theological importance of the practice of praying to Christ and worshipping him. If Arius was right, Christians were guilty of idolatry, through worshipping a creature, rather than God. Where Arius believed that theology should criticize liturgy, Athanasius believed that worship patterns and practices had to be taken into account by theologians.

In recent times, there has been renewed interest in the relation between liturgy and theology. In his *Dogmatics*, the Methodist writer Geoffrey Wainwright drew attention to the way in which theological motifs were incorporated into Christian worship from the earliest of times. The liturgy of the church includes intellectual elements, and is not purely emotive in character. As a result, the close relationship between theology and liturgy, noted above, is entirely natural, in that worship and theological reflection are linked together organically.

In his *On Liturgical Theology* (1984), the Roman Catholic theologian Aidan Kavanagh argued that worship was the primary source and stimulus of Christian theology. Kavanagh drew a sharp distinction between *primary theology* (worship) and *secondary theology* (theological reflection). This suggests that worship has the upper hand over theology. But what happens if liturgical development becomes irresponsible? Does theology have a role in limiting or criticizing liturgy? This question of the relative authority of the *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* remains to be further explored, and is likely to be the subject of lively debate for some time to come.

Religious Experience

"Experience" is an imprecise term. The origins of the word are relatively well understood; it derives from the Latin term *experientia*, which could be interpreted as "that which arises out of traveling through life." In this broad sense, it means "an accumulated body of knowledge, arising through first-hand encounter with life." When one speaks of "an experienced teacher" or "an experienced doctor," the implication is that the teacher or doctor has learned her craft through first-hand application.

Yet the term has developed an acquired meaning, which particularly concerns us here. It has come to refer to the inner life of individuals, in which those individuals become aware of their own subjective feelings and emotions. It relates to the inward and subjective world of experience, as opposed to the outward world of everyday life.

A series of writings, including William James' celebrated study *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), have stressed the importance of the subjective aspects of religion in general, and Christianity in particular. Christianity is not simply about ideas (as our discussion of Scripture, reason, and tradition might suggest); it is about the interpretation and transformation of the inner life of the individual. This concern with human experience is particularly associated with the movement generally known as *existentialism*, which we may consider briefly, before moving on.

Existentialism: A philosophy of human experience

In what way do human beings differ from other forms of life? Humans have always been aware of some basic distinction between themselves on the one hand, and all
other forms of life on the other. But what is this difference? And what does it mean to exist? Perhaps the most important thing which distinguishes human beings from other forms of life is the fact that they are aware of their own existence, and ask questions about it.

The rise of existentialist philosophy is ultimately a response to this crucial insight. We not only exist; we understand, we are aware that we exist, and we are aware that our existence will one day be terminated by death. The sheer fact of our existence is important to us, and we find it difficult, probably impossible, to adopt a totally detached attitude to it. Existentialism is basically a protest against the view that human beings are “things,” and a demand that we take the personal existence of the individual with full seriousness.

The term “existentialism” can bear two meanings. At its most basic level, it means an attitude toward human life which places special emphasis upon the immediate, real-life experience of individuals. It is concerned with the way in which individuals encounter others, and gain an understanding of their finitude. In a more developed sense, the term refers to a movement, which probably reached its zenith in the period 1938–68, the origins of which lie primarily in the writings of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55). Kierkegaard stressed the importance of individual decision and an awareness of the limits of human existence. In terms of the history of modern theology, the most important contribution to the development of existentialism was made by Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), particularly in his Being and Time (1927). This work provided Rudolf Bultmann with the basic ideas and vocabulary he required to develop a Christian existentialist account of human existence, and the manner in which this is illuminated and transformed by the gospel.

Heidegger’s work is dominated by the theme of Dasein, a German word which it is not especially easy to translate into English: the term “being” is sometimes used for this purpose, although the basic idea is probably better expressed as “being there.” Especially in his Commentary on John’s Gospel, Bultmann argued that Heidegger’s existentialist vocabulary could be adapted to express the basic ideas of the New Testament in terms that would make sense to a secular audience. Of fundamental importance is Heidegger’s distinction between “inauthentic existence” and “authentic existence,” which Bultmann creatively reinterprets in the light of the New Testament.

According to Bultmann, the New Testament recognizes two types of human existence. First, there is unbelieving, unredeemed existence, which is an inauthentic form of existence. Here, individuals refuse to recognize themselves for what they really are: creatures who are dependent upon God for their well-being and salvation. Such individuals seek to justify themselves by trying to secure existence through moral actions or material prosperity. This attempt at self-sufficiency on the part of humanity is designated by both the Old and New Testaments as “sin.”

Against this inauthentic mode of human existence, the New Testament sets the mode of believing, redeemed existence, in which we abandon all security created by ourselves, and trust in God. We recognize the illusion of our self-sufficiency, and trust instead in the sufficiency of God. Instead of denying that we are God’s creatures, we recognize and exult in this fact, and base our existence upon it. Instead of clinging to transitory things for security, we learn to abandon faith in this transitory world in order that we may place our trust in God himself. Instead of trying to justify ourselves, we learn to recognize that God offers us our justification as a free gift. Instead of denying the reality of our human finitude and the inevitability of death, we recognize that these have been faced and conquered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whose victory becomes our victory through faith.

The rise of existentialism is a reflection of the importance attached to the inner world of human experience in the modern period. Nevertheless, it must be appreciated that this concern with human experience is not something new; it can arguably be discerned in both Old and New Testaments, and it permeates the writings of Augustine of Hippo. Martin Luther declared that “experience makes a theologian,” and argued that it was impossible to be a proper theologian without an experience of the searing and terrifying judgment of God upon human sin. As we noted earlier, the literary movement known as Romanticism (see pp. 96–8) gave considerable importance to the role of “feeling,” and opened the way for a new interest in this aspect of Christian life.

Experience and theology: Two models

Two main approaches to the question of the relation of experience to theology may be discerned within Christian theology:

1. Experience provides a foundational resource for Christian theology.
2. Christian theology provides an interpretive framework within which human experience may be interpreted.

The second has been the dominant theme, and will be considered in more detail.

Experience as a foundational resource

The idea that human religious experience can act as a foundational resource for Christian theology has obvious attractions. It suggests that Christian theology is concerned with human experience — something which is common to all humanity, rather than the exclusive preserve of a small group. To those who are embarrassed by the “scandal of particularity” the approach has many merits. It suggests that all the world religions are basically human responses to the same religious experience — often referred to as “a core experience of the transcendent.” Theology is thus the Christian attempt to reflect upon this common human experience, in the knowledge that the same experience underlies the other world religions. We shall return to this point later in dealing with the question of the relation of Christianity to the other religions.
This approach also has considerable attractions for Christian apologetics, as the writings of Paul Tillich and David Tracy make clear. If humans share a common experience, whether they choose to regard it as “religious” or not, Christian theology can address that experience. The problem of agreeing upon a common starting point is thus avoided; the starting point is already provided, in human experience. Apologetics can demonstrate that the Christian gospel makes sense of common human experience. This approach is probably seen at its best in Paul Tillich’s volume of sermons The Courage to Be, which attracted considerable attention after its publication in 1952. It seemed to many observers that Tillich had succeeded in correlating the Christian proclamation with common human experience.

But there are difficulties here. The most obvious is that there is actually very little empirical evidence for a “common core experience” throughout human history and culture. The idea is easily postulated and virtually impossible to verify. This criticism has found its most mature and sophisticated expression in the “Experiential-Expressive Theory of Doctrine,” to use a term employed by the distinguished Yale theologian George Lindbeck. In his volume The Nature of Doctrine (1984), Lindbeck provides an important analysis of the nature of Christian doctrine (pp. 119–20).

Lindbeck suggests that theories of doctrine may be divided into three general types. The cognitive-propositional theory lays stress upon the cognitive aspects of religion, emphasizing the manner in which doctrines function as truth claims or informative propositions (see pp. 202–4). The experiential-expressive theory interprets doctrines as non-cognitive symbols of inner human feelings or attitudes. A third possibility, which Lindbeck himself favors, is the cultural-linguistic approach to religion. Lindbeck associates this model with a “rule” or “regulative” theory of doctrine. It is Lindbeck’s criticism of the second of these approaches which is of particular interest to us at this point.

The experiential-expressive approach, according to Lindbeck, sees religions, including Christianity, as public, culturally conditioned manifestations and affirmations of prelinguistic forms of consciousness, attitudes, and feelings. In other words, there is a common universal “religious experience,” which Christian theology attempts to express in words. The experience comes first; the theology comes later. As Lindbeck argues, the attraction of this approach to doctrine is grounded in a number of features of late eighteenth-century western thought. For example, the contemporary preoccupation with inter-religious dialogue is consideredly assisted by the suggestion that the various religions are diverse expressions of a common core experience, such as an “isolable core of encounter” or an “unmediated awareness of the transcendental.”

The principal objection to this theory, thus stated, is its resistance to verification. As Lindbeck points out, “religious experience” is a hopelessly vague idea. “It is difficult or impossible to specify its distinctive features, and yet unless this is done, the assertion of commonality becomes logically and empirically vacuous.” The assertion that the various religions are diverse symbolizations of one and the same core experience of the Ultimate is ultimately an unverifiable hypothesis, not least on account of the difficulty of locating and describing the “core experience” concerned. As Lindbeck rightly points out, this would appear to suggest that there is “at least the logical possibility that a Buddhist and a Christian might have basically the same faith, although expressed very differently.” The theory can only be credible if it is possible to isolate a common core experience from religious language and behavior, and demonstrate that the latter two are articulations of or responses to the former.

For such reasons, the second approach to the understanding of the relation between experience and theology has regained a hearing.

**Experience as something which requires to be interpreted**

According to this approach, Christian theology provides a framework within which the ambiguities of experience may be interpreted. Theology aims to interpret experience. It is like a net which we can cast over experience, in order to capture its meaning. Experience is seen as something which is to be interpreted, rather than something which we ourselves can interpret.

The classic example of this approach is usually thought to be Martin Luther’s “theology of the cross,” which is of continuing significance as a critique of the role of experience in theology. Luther’s position is that experience is of vital importance to theology; without experience, theology is impoverished and deficient, an empty shell waiting to be filled. Yet experience cannot by itself be regarded as a reliable theological resource; it must be interpreted and corrected by theology.

Luther suggests that we attempt to imagine what it was like for the disciples of Jesus on the first Good Friday. They had given up everything to follow Jesus. Their whole reason for living centered on him. He seemed to have the answers to all their questions. Then, in front of their eyes, he was taken from them and publicly executed. God was experienced as being absent. There was no way in which anyone experienced God as being present on that occasion. Even Jesus himself seems to have said a momentary sense of the absence of God—“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). This way of thinking, according to Luther, demonstrates how unreliable experience and feelings can be as guides to the presence of God.

Luther argues that those around the cross did not experience the presence of God—so they concluded that God was absent from the scene. The resurrection overturns that judgment: God was present in a hidden manner, which experience overlooked for absence. Theology interprets our feelings, even to the point of contradicting them when they are misleading. It stresses the faithfulness of God and the reality of the resurrection hope—even where experience seems to suggest otherwise. Theology thus gives us a framework for making sense of the contradictions of experience. God may be experienced as absent from the world yet theology insists that this experience is provisional and flawed, and cannot be taken at face value.

Yet theology also allows experience to be interpreted in a more positive manner. The dialectic between the Christian doctrines of creation and sin can be deployed
to provide an interpretation of a common human experience – an awareness of dissatisfaction, or a curious sense of longing for something undefined. To illustrate the relation between theology and experience, we may consider Augustine’s analysis of the implications for experience of the Christian doctrine of creation.

According to Augustine, our feeling of dissatisfaction is a consequence of the Christian doctrine of creation – that we are made in the image of God. There is thus an inbuilt capacity within human nature to relate to God. Yet, on account of the falleness of human nature, this potential is frustrated. There is now a natural tendency to try to make other things fulfill this need. Created things thus come to be substituted for God. Yet they do not satisfy. Human beings are thus left with a feeling of longing – longing for something indefinable.

This phenomenon has been recognized since the dawn of human civilization. In his dialogue Gorgias, Plato compares human beings to leaky jars. Somehow, human beings are always unfulfilled. Perhaps the greatest statement of this feeling, and its most famous theological interpretation, may be found in the famous words of Augustine: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Throughout Augustine’s reflections, especially in his autobiographical Confessions, the same theme recurs. Humanity is destined to remain incomplete in its present existence. Its hopes and deepest longings will remain nothing but hopes and longings. The themes of creation and redemption are brought together by Augustine, to provide an interpretation of the human experience of “longing.” Because humanity is created in the image of God, it desires to relate to God, even if it cannot recognize that desire for what it is. Yet on account of human sin, humanity cannot satisfy that desire unaided. And so a real sense of frustration, of dissatisfaction, develops. And that dissatisfaction – though not its theological interpretation – is part of common human experience. Augustine expresses this feeling when he states that he is “groaning with inexpressible groanings on my wanderer’s path, and remembering Jerusalem with my heart lifted up toward it – Jerusalem my home land, Jerusalem my mother.”

Augustine finds one of his finest recent apologetic interpreters in the writings of the twentieth-century Oxford literary critic and theologian C. S. Lewis. Perhaps one of the most original aspects of Lewis’s writing is his persistent and powerful appeal to the religious imagination, in developing Augustine’s maxim desiderium simus cordis (“longing makes the heart deep”). Like Augustine, Lewis was aware of certain deep human emotions which pointed to a dimension of our existence beyond time and space. There is, Lewis suggested, a deep and intense feeling of longing within human beings, which no earthly object or experience can satisfy. Lewis terms this sense “joy,” and argues that it points to God as its source and goal (hence the title of his celebrated autobiography, Surprised by Joy). Joy, according to Lewis, is “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction… anyone who has experienced it will want it again.”

Lewis addressed this question further in a sermon entitled “The Weight of Glory,” preached at the University of Oxford on June 8, 1941. Lewis spoke of “a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy,” “a desire, still wandering and uncertain of

its object and still largely unable to see that object in the direction where it really lies.” There is something self-defeating about human desire, in that what is desired, when achieved, seems to leave the desire unsatisfied. Lewis illustrates this from the age-old quest for beauty, using recognizably Augustinian imagery:

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things – the beauty, the memory of our own past – are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.

The basic point being emphasized is thoroughly Augustinian: the creation creates a sense of longing for its creator, which cannot satisfy by itself. In this way, an essentially Augustinian framework is applied to common human experience, to provide a plausible theological interpretation.

Feuerbach’s critique of experience-based theologies

As noted above, many theologians regarded experience-based theologies as providing an escape from the impasse of Enlightenment rationalism, or from difficulties relating to the alleged particularity of Christian revelation. F. D. E. Schleiermacher is an excellent instance of a theologian concerned to use human experience as a starting point for Christian theology. In particular, Schleiermacher drew attention to the importance for theology of “a feeling of absolute dependence.” By exploring the nature and origins of this feeling, it was possible to trace it back to its origins with God. This approach has enormous attractions. However, as Ludwig Feuerbach demonstrated, it is also enormously problematical.

In the foreword to the first edition of his highly influential Essence of Christianity (1841), Ludwig Feuerbach states that the “purpose of this work is to show that the supernatural mysteries of religion are based upon quite simple natural truths.” The leading idea of the work is deceptively simple: human beings have created the gods, who embody their own idealized conception of their aspirations, needs, and fears. Human “feeling” has nothing to do with God; it is of purely human origin, misunderstood by an overactive human imagination. “If feeling is the essential instrumentality or organ of religion, then God’s nature is nothing other than an expression of the nature of feeling… The divine essence, which is comprehended by feeling, is actually nothing other than the essence of feeling, enraptured and delighted with itself – nothing but self-intoxicated, self-contented feeling.”

For Schleiermacher, the nature of the religious self-consciousness was such that the existence of the redeemer could be inferred from it; for Feuerbach, this species of self-consciousness was nothing more and nothing less than human
6 Outline the teaching of the Council of Trent on the relation of Scripture and tradition.
7 Outline Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of experience-based theologies. How persuasive do you find his argument? What theologies do you think are most vulnerable to his critique?

Further Reading


Scripture

General Introductions

The Canon of Scripture

The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture
Sources and Methods


The Interpretation of Scripture


Reason


C. Steven Evans, Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982).


Keith E. Yandel, Christianity and Philosophy (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984).

See also the items noted under "Philosophical Theology."

Tradition


The Sources of Theology


Experience


Natural Theology


Charles Hartshorne, A Natural Theology for Our Time (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1967).


Frederick Robert Tennant, Philosophical Theology, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928).