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Author's Introduction to Teachers and Students

Thank you for choosing *Christian Thought and Practice: A Primer, Revised Edition* for your introduction to Christian theology. I would like to share a few words about why I wrote this book and how I think it can serve the college classroom and reader.

As a teacher, I have encountered many students over the past ten years who are undertaking the study of Christian thought for the first time. I have used many different books, some of which are excellent and are referenced in this book as suggested supplemental reading. With so many good resources out there, one might ask why we need another introduction to Christian thought. My answer derives from my teaching experience.

Today's classrooms are populated with a diverse student body. In my own classes, I find students of all ages, ethnicities, abilities, and aptitudes, as well as a range of religious backgrounds and beliefs. Although I am Roman Catholic and teach at a Catholic institution, my students include Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians, as well as Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and adherents of other non-Christian religions. I also frequently encounter students with little or no religious background, as well as students who participate in a religious tradition but have had little opportunity to study their religion formally or academically. Some students are taking theology classes because they have a genuine interest in the subject, while others are simply fulfilling an academic requirement. I have many local students from Cleveland, Ohio, as well as students from South America, Africa, Canada, and Europe. I have military veterans, industry workers looking for career changes, parents both single and married, senior citizens taking classes as lifelong learners, Catholic sisters, religious studies majors and majors from other academic disciplines, student athletes, first generation as well as legacy college students, transfer students who are just becoming acclimated to a new institution, and native students finishing out their college

careers. Some students have had twelve years of Catholic education and are concerned that a theology course will be just another catechism class like the ones they had in high school. Other students are worried because they have never taken a religious studies class before. Still others are worried because they are not Christian or Catholic or religious at all. Students also have varied facility with social media, technology in the classroom, and web-based research skills.

With so many diverse backgrounds and interests in the classroom, teachers and students face multiple challenges. Teachers need to facilitate inclusive discussions and choose proper materials that avoid assumptions about what students might think or how they might have been previously taught. Students need resources that are accessible, engaging, and informative. Teachers need to attempt to level the classroom through the cultivation of a working vocabulary of terms and ideas, so students of all backgrounds can proceed together in their work and conversation as a class. Students need texts that provide foundational tools as well as sophisticated and interesting concepts for investigation and discussion. Teachers and students must ultimately collaborate to achieve maximal learning outcomes, knowing that many students will not choose professional specializations in Christian theology or religious studies.

In teaching Christian theology, I have struggled to find materials that speak to my diverse students at an introductory level with sufficient breadth. Often books that claim to be introductions simply exceed in scope or depth the register of nonspecialist readers. This book, by contrast, was developed as a genuine introduction for all readers interested in Christian thought, whether Christian or non-Christian. It presupposes no theological background, so it is appropriate even for those who have had no prior study of Christian thought or religion. Although this book presents a thorough and broad architecture of Christian thought and practice, it does not inundate the reader with references, historical case studies, or tangential discussions. Moreover, this book endeavors to be ecumenical in tone and friendly to a broad range of Christian communions as well as other, non-Christian groups.

The reader will find in this book an orderly discussion of topics, beginning in chapter 1 with an introduction to the term *theology* and a survey of ideas that will surface in any theological investigation.

Building on the first chapter, chapters 2 and 3 then explore the classical foundations of Christian theology, equipping readers with basic information about Christian uses of the Bible, tradition, reason, and experience. Because these foundations of Christian theology are always encountered contextually, chapter 4 turns to a discussion of key periods in Christian history. Following an established sensitivity to historical context, chapter 5 discusses mainline Christian doctrines. Recognizing that doctrine may vary among Christians of different creeds, chapter 6 explores the history, variety, and differences among major Christian worship communities. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 deal topically with Christian worship and practice, Christian relationships with non-Christian religions, and Christian relationships with secular society. These chapters aim at understanding Christian belief and practice in the world at varying levels of interaction with Christians, other religions, and civil society at large. Chapter 10, on contemporary spirituality and Christian thought, deals with issues involving popular culture, diversity, environmental issues, and liberation movements. Finally, chapter 11, on global Christianity, discusses Christian missions, colonialism and postcolonialism, and Christianity in various parts of the world. The chapters may be read sequentially, individually, or in whatever order best complements the reader's needs. Each chapter concludes with discussion questions and references for additional reading and research. There is also a glossary to help readers with unfamiliar vocabulary.

I hope this book will prove useful in a number of ways. For example, this book may be used as the following:

- The principal textbook for a course on Christian thought. In a traditional 15-week course, students will benefit from reading a chapter or two from this text every other week, interspersed by reading primary source materials and exemplars for each of the chapter's themes.
- One among several principal textbooks to provide content on Christian thought in a comparative religions course
- A leveling tool, a refresher, or a reference guide in intermediate or advanced theology courses, where knowledge of basic Christian terms, beliefs, practices, varieties, and historical periods are presupposed

- A complement to any advanced study of Christian history, the Bible, ethics, ecclesiology, or philosophy

The study of Christian thought and practice is as important today as ever. For the past two millennia, Christian thinkers have contributed to the political, legal, economic, philosophical, architectural, musical, visual, and literary dimensions of Western culture. Such contributions continue today as Christian people participate in policy, advocacy, education, healthcare, and more within an ever-broadening world context. Christian thought underlies many broadly held assumptions and norms, and dialogues with questions of religious pluralism, religious conflict, politics, public policy, medical ethics, legal practice, social sciences, natural history, physics, astronomy, and more. Christianity continues to inform the faith of more than two billion people worldwide. Readers will find a solid foundational understanding of Christian thought and practice beneficial for any line of work and any discipline of study.

First Things First

Beginning Christian Theology

What to Expect

This chapter introduces theology by discussing the following key areas:

- Terms Used in the Study of Religion
- A Functional Understanding of Christian Theology
- Facets of Christian Theology
- Types of Theology
- Audiences and Practitioners of Christian Thought

Terms Used in the Study of Religion

The study of religions may be approached from a number of perspectives. As one of the world's many religions, Christianity may also be studied from many points of view. Sociologists could study Christian practice and belief as sociological phenomena. Historians could study Christianity's multimillennial development from its place of origin to its present-day expressions throughout the world. Those working in literature or the visual arts could study Christian expression, development, and practice by investigating how Christians present their beliefs in text, story, and image. All these different approaches are useful and ultimately necessary to understand any religious tradition in the fullness of its breadth and depth.

Some approaches to the study of religion take religious beliefs as the starting point. That is, they accept the teachings of a religious system as true and valid foundations for one's worldview. One could call these approaches "confessional" because here religious beliefs are assumed. Other approaches to the study of religion may be comparative, as when one places two or more traditions in dialogue with one another and searches for similarities and differences in their rituals, holidays, ideas, and so on. Yet other approaches to the study of religion may directly challenge religious belief systems with questions of philosophical and scientific plausibility, viability, and accuracy. Such approaches might be called secular or skeptical.

It is helpful to clarify some basic terms before we begin this study of Christian thought and belief: *religion*, *belief*, *faith*, and *spirituality*.

Religion refers to the collective values, experiences, practices, and beliefs of a community. Such things may be precisely articulated and defined, for example, in books of sacred writings, in ritualized behaviors, and in organizational institutions that train ministers and perform functions such as worship services, wedding ceremonies, social outreach initiatives, funerals, and so on. Collective values, experiences, practices, and beliefs, however, may be much more loosely defined. In fact, they may seem more like operating philosophies or worldviews, as is the case with many traditions of indigenous peoples, such as Native Americans, who make no distinction between the sacred and the mundane. To some extent, "religion" is a scholarly construction, but such a construction is helpful when we try to define and understand what a community thinks and believes. Common features of religions include: sacred or holy books; special places of worship; ritual behaviors that mark seasons; celebration of historical or mythical events, and momentous passages in the human life cycle; myths of origin and destiny; experiences of divine revelation; special musical or performative behaviors and traditions; and a special class of leaders such as clergy, shamans, or priests. Religions may have some, all, or other features than those noted here.

Belief denotes a mindset that something is true, especially something that can neither be confirmed nor proven false. People may believe many things that have no overt connection to religion. For example, I may believe that someone took something from my gym locker

or that I set my keys on the nightstand; these are beliefs precisely because (let's assume) I cannot confirm whether I am right or not. Religious beliefs are similar in that they are the statements, events, or revelations that people of a religious community hold to be true. A commonly held set of beliefs is one of the defining characteristics of a religious community. Religions sometimes formalize their beliefs in written documents, such as creeds, or through recited formulas and prayers.

Faith refers to a person's attitude or disposition toward a set of beliefs. If I am open to, accepting of, or committed to a belief or worldview, then I have faith in it. In common parlance, a faithful person is someone who is trusted, loyal, and steadfast. In a religious sense, a faithful person is loyal and steadfast to the tradition's belief that she or he holds true. Similarly, a whole body of believers may collectively be referred to as "the faithful." Sometimes "faith" is also used to refer to the total set of beliefs that a religion holds to be true, such as in the phrase "the Catholic faith."

Spirituality is a term that people often contrast with religion, as in the phrase, "I am spiritual but not religious." In this sense, people are describing an individualized, subjective, or independent sense of inspiration, or connection to the natural world, or awareness of holiness or divinity. However, spirituality is also part of religions, many of which teach unique theories and practices for prayer, meditation, attaining special insight, and practices meant to facilitate intimate communion with God. One aspect of the study of religion is the exploration of its spiritual traditions, which, while related, may be unique from its beliefs, ritual practices, and so on.

A Functional Understanding of Christian Theology

A simple definition of *Christian theology* might be "the systematic study of Christian beliefs." Other definitions might begin with *theology's* Greek origin: *theologia* means "God-talk," so theology may be thought of as "talk about God." One example of such God-talk is the following biblical description of how and why one ought to relate to

God: “Fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7). Saint Anselm in the eleventh century classically defined theology as “*fides quaerens intellectum*,” usually translated as “faith seeking understanding.” Anselm’s definition suggests that theological study is inherently confessional because it assumes Christian beliefs to be valid foundations for one’s worldview even while it hopes to understand and make sense of those truths.

In order to understand the function of theology—to comprehend what theology does—an analogy is helpful. A student in my class reported that she had had a bad car accident, which she survived with only a bloody nose. She said, “I am not a very religious person, but I could have died in that accident. The fact that I survived uninjured made me think there is a God. I have been much more religious ever since.” This student was theologizing about her accident as she grappled with the meaning it held for her life. She reevaluated her priorities in light of the belief that God had a purpose for her.

Many of us have had similar dramatic moments that subsequently reshaped our sense of meaning and purpose. Groups as well as individuals respond to such experiences in this way. Sometimes, when a whole community has a shared experience of great import, they take that experience as evidence of a divine hand at work in their lives. One sees this phenomenon in the literature that Christians hold sacred, namely the Bible (also called *sacred scripture*). For example, the New Testament reports that followers of Jesus experienced appearances of Christ after his death. Though it is difficult from a historical point of view to say exactly what their experience entailed, the New Testament confirms that these followers believed they had experienced post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus. Their common belief in the Risen Christ became the foundation of their shared identity as a community.

Stories about a people’s defining experiences are powerful; witness, for example, the continuing effect of stories of the American Revolution and the civil rights movement for American children today. When such stories have a theological meaning, they often become the core of religion, underlying a religion’s sacred rituals, books, calendars, holidays, and prayers. For Christians, the story of Jesus of Nazareth—a first-century Galilean Jew executed under the rule of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate—became the core of their

religious beliefs. The story of Jesus, first shared orally, later became the subject of the New Testament of the Bible and the glue that held together an array of culturally, religiously, linguistically, and ethnically diverse people of the first-century Roman Empire.

At the beginning of the Christian era, there were no Christian church buildings or administrative offices, there was not yet a Bible,¹ and there was no formal system of beliefs about who Jesus was or why his life was so important. At the time, believers had only an experience that transformed their notion of life's purpose and meaning, coupled with faith that Jesus was responsible for that transformation.

Theologians in the beginning centuries of Christian history (often called the patristic era) interpreted this experience of transformation and articulated its meaning. An early function of Christian theology was to develop clear statements of faith, called *creeds* (derived from the Latin word *credo*, meaning "I believe"), and to begin to define basic Christian doctrine. These early theologians had to look to the foundations, which were the developing books of the Bible, the experiences of the community, their own reasoning and logic, and the emerging tradition. As they sorted through these materials, they developed in councils (or church meetings) creeds that stated what Christians actually believed. Over time the work of these theologians



Yale University Art Gallery

The earliest known representation of Jesus is this fresco from the Dura-Europos church in Syria depicting Jesus healing a paralytic (see Mark 2:1–12); it dates to roughly two hundred years after his death. No reliable record of Jesus' appearance exists.

1. Jesus' first followers, who were Jews, accepted the Hebrew Bible as sacred scripture, but the distinctively Christian writings that would become the New Testament took several generations after Jesus' death to produce.

became part of the tradition of faith, which later generations would consider foundations to be interpreted and evaluated in light of their own contemporary experience.

Theology is always situated in a particular historical and geographical context. Different questions and challenges engage the community of believers in every era. As a result, theologians are continually challenged to make sense of the faith anew. Influential twentieth-century theologians have thus suggested that theology is best understood by its function as a mediator or interpreter between tradition and culture. Theology serves as the translator and interpreter of the sources of the tradition (such as the Bible or works of earlier theologians) for the broader public, ensuring that the faith is accountable and meaningful to people's present-day experience. By way of example, theologians today must address a range of bioethical issues related to new reproductive technologies that did not exist even twenty years ago. As another example, theologians who investigate "church" as an area of study are tasked with considering whether, how, or to what degree online forums may legitimately constitute church communities.

Facets of Christian Theology

If the function of theology is to interpret or mediate between the tradition and its present-day context, then one must ask what aspects of the tradition theology interprets. Christian thought deals with a range of concerns, spanning the general, fundamental, universal questions of human purpose and meaning (Why am I here? Does life have a purpose? What happens to me when I die?) to the particular questions that arise specifically out of Christian history (Who is Jesus? What is his relationship to God? How should the Church be structured?). Theology attempts to interpret, study, and integrate systematically the sources of Christian thought and belief both with the questions that arise generally out of the human condition and specifically about the human condition as it is lived in light of Christian revelation. As such, Christian thinkers (especially those who work as professional theologians, teachers, and ministers) will explore many facets of Christian belief, which may be likened to the many surfaces of a cut diamond

reflecting light in different directions. Christian thought then represents the continuous historical effort (1) to understand and make internal sense of the sources of Christian tradition while (2) understanding and applying those sources meaningfully to ongoing human situations. Specialized subdivisions of theology address Christian source material as well as its applications to living communities.

Christian Sources

In the Christian belief system, there are four traditional sources for Christian thought: the Bible, tradition, reason, and experience.

The *Bible* refers to the writings that Christians believe are holy and inspired by God. The idea that God reveals Godself is called revelation. Most Christians believe that God reveals Godself throughout the books of the Bible, but their understanding of how the Bible constitutes revelation can vary. Possible meanings include the literal word of God, the unfolding of God's actions in history, personal insight or inspiration, and the record of God's direct self-disclosure. Those who study the Bible attempt to understand many things about it, including what the text actually says, how to understand the claim that it is God's revelation, how Christians should best interpret the Bible, and how it should direct the lives of Christians today.

Tradition refers to the collected writings, practices, artifacts, and wisdom that have been handed down by Christians from one era to the next since the time of the Bible. The Bible itself may be thought of as part of the tradition. Some people will distinguish between *Tradition* and *tradition*, with the former referring to official or authoritative components that all or most hold to be binding or true (such as the belief that Jesus was the Son of God) and the latter referring to local or temporary components that are not shared by all (such as eating lamb on Easter). While all Christian denominations have their traditions, some denominations (e.g., Baptists and Pentecostals) are reluctant to assign to tradition any formal role in theology. For those denominations that do formally recognize some elements of tradition as a source of theology (e.g., the Roman Catholic Church), these major elements of Christian tradition include doctrines and church teachings.

Doctrines refer to the specific Christian beliefs or teachings that theologians study and sometimes help to develop. Examples of Christian doctrine include that Jesus is God *incarnated* (Latin for “enfleshed”) in human life, that God is three in one, and that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. Many key beliefs of Christian faith are complex. For example, Christians typically proclaim that Jesus’ death saves humanity from sin. This statement raises many questions. Why did Jesus die? Was it necessary, or did it just happen? What is sin? Why do human beings need to be saved from sin, and what does salvation look like? What is the scope of salvation: is it for everyone, or just Christians, or just very good Christians?

Church teaching in the form of documents and the written resources of the tradition (in addition to the Bible) are one way that doctrines and teachings are preserved and passed down from one generation to the next. Examples of such written documents include letters and treatises by notable Christian thinkers and leaders, papers and records of church councils and synods throughout the ages, statements of the faith called *creeds*, and biblical commentaries. Though a doctrine may not change, the way it is communicated or described may change over time due to cultural contexts. For example, while Christians had always maintained that God creates the world, the way they phrase that assertion has had to change in order to acknowledge the claims of evolutionary theory: some Christians attempt to assert God’s role as Creator by refuting evolution, while others find ways of affirming both evolution and God’s creative activity.

Reason refers to the rational thought, inquiry, and intellect that human beings use to investigate the surrounding world. In Christian thought, reason is also considered a source for understanding God, on account of the beliefs that God created humanity with rational faculties, that God created a world that can disclose things about its Creator, and that the world can be studied and understood in part if not entirely. Christians use reason in particular in science and philosophy in order to complement and expand upon the revealed truths they hold sacred. *Philosophy* refers to the ancient discipline that investigates epistemology (the study of the nature of knowledge), metaphysics (the study of the nature of the world), and morality (how

people should act). Philosophy and theology are closely related, so much so that philosophy has been called the “handmaid of theology.” Theology and philosophy are both interested in ultimate truth, but they use different foundations. Philosophy relies on human reason alone, while Christian thought uses reason (including the insights drawn from philosophy and the sciences), the Bible, and Christian doctrine to develop a coherent worldview.

Experience is the broadest source for Christian thought and practice. All knowledge is located in human “knowers”; *people* think about mathematics, perform scientific experiments, theorize about the purpose of literature, and so on. Even the most abstract ideas need human beings to think them.

Christian thought is no different in this way from science and other types of human knowing. It, too, derives from human ability and experience. Although Christians believe that God reveals, it is human beings who receive that revelation within the context of ordinary human life, contingent on personal and social contexts. Christians are interested in the same world that scientists study. For example, Christians, like environmental scientists, might be interested in the problem of pollution in urban settings, but their approach to it would be informed by assumptions specific to the theological discipline. So theologians might see the problem of pollution as a justice issue, as a violation of God’s creation, or as an issue of human dignity. In a sense, theology might be thought of as the work of ordinary people reflecting on ordinary experiences made extraordinary by the insights the experiences reveal about human beings, their world, and the meaning and purpose of life.

Because experience is inherently democratic, all Christian people can bring their experiences to the table to add to collective wisdom derived from Christian life. In past eras, Christian thought was dominated by an elite class of religious professionals, such as theologians and priests; some would say it still is. Today, however, an important corrective to this tendency is the incorporation of a broader spectrum of voices. The experiences of women and traditionally marginalized or underrepresented populations now present rich new opportunities for thinking, experiencing, revisioning, and applying Christian faith.

A Note on Theological Method

All academic disciplines use methods of inquiry, and theology is no different. Careful attention to method is key to doing theology well. Thinking about method reminds theologians that they are making choices about what to study, what to attend to, and what temporarily to set aside. An awareness of method also reminds theologians that they are not value-neutral observers making objective interpretations about the material they are studying. People in the United States in the twenty-first century, for example, largely assume that women and men should be treated equally under the law and in most or all areas of society. This assumption affects how theologians today view women in the Bible or in historical theology. By contrast, people in fifteenth-century Europe did not assume gender equality, so their readings of the Bible or doctrine would have been different. Being aware of method means understanding that one's approach to theology is itself an ethical judgment about oneself as an interpreter and about what one thinks is necessary and important about theology. Theologians may employ many methods, but every method involves a choice (even if unconscious) about how to engage the material being studied.

Types of Theology

In a sense, it is more proper to speak of Christian *theologies* than of a single Christian theology. The type of theology that one does reflects the specific function that theology serves in its role as interpreter and mediator between the traditions and the living communities of Christian people. It will also shape the method one uses for practicing theology and the foundations a theologian prioritizes. Some of the most important theologies people do today include biblical criticism, systematic theology, historical theology, moral theology, pastoral theology, liberation theology, natural theology, liturgical studies and sacramental theology, and mystical theology.

Biblical Criticism.² This deals with scholarly study and analysis of the Bible. This fundamental study involves many areas of specialization. Some scholars study the Bible at close range, considering such fine aspects as the condition and reliability of ancient manuscripts, the biblical languages of the Old and New Testaments, the literary forms used in ancient cultures, the historical context of the Bible, philosophical approaches to biblical translation and interpretation, biblical archaeology, and more. Other scholars study the Bible for its merit as a persuasive or rhetorical book, its doctrinal themes and teachings, its teachings about the nature of the church, and its teachings about Christian moral conduct. The basic assumption of biblical criticism is that the Bible must be well understood (and what we cannot understand must be acknowledged) if it is to be a useful foundation for the rest of Christian faith.

Systematic Theology. This is the study of the interconnections among theological doctrines and sources. The aim of systematic theology is twofold: to articulate the inherent reasonability of Christian theology and to present the whole system of teachings in a reasonable and clear way for educational purposes. Systematic theologians debate how best to structure the presentation of ideas. For example, some would begin with the notion of revelation in scripture, while others would begin with the doctrine of God. In any event, systematic theology aims to assemble the pieces of Christian faith into a coherent whole, as one would fit the pieces of a puzzle together to make a complete picture. Some contemporary theologians prefer the term *constructive theology* to describe the integrative study of doctrines and sources.

Historical Theology. This is the study of how historical eras and contexts affect the development and articulation of beliefs. Because theology is always done within a specific time and place for a specific community of people, theology and its context of origin are indelibly related. In the early Christian era, for example, Christians struggled to negotiate cultural differences between Jewish followers of Jesus

2. Note that “criticism” in this context means simply a detailed, disciplined study, as in the phrase “literary criticism.”

and converts to Christianity from “pagan” religions. Jewish law forbade Jews from eating with non-Jews, which raised questions over whether both groups could celebrate Christian communion (sometimes called the Eucharist, the Last Supper, or the Lord’s Supper) together. Although this particular issue matters little to modern Christians, they continue to have questions about who can celebrate communion together. The concern today is not one of pagan or Jew but rather of different Christian groups. Especially since the time of the Protestant Reformation, Christians have separated themselves into different denominations, many of which will not celebrate the ritual meal together. Theological reflection on this issue from both the early Christian era and the modern setting will reflect the concerns of their respective historical contexts. Study of historical theology is also central in sorting out how and why some ideas came to be considered orthodox (correct), while others were determined to be heresy (unorthodox, corrupt, or incorrect).

Moral Theology and Ethics. Both philosophy and theology are interested in understanding not only what is right and wrong (ethics) but also how people should act based on what they believe to be right (morality). Christian moral theology investigates the question of right action with respect to its faith-based commitments. For example, while one might bring many considerations to the question of medical ethics, many Christian moral theologians will begin with the belief that God creates all human beings with inalienable dignity and purpose. Christians who begin with this premise are guided by the moral principle of dignity of life. The study of both morality and ethics straddles many facets of society. Christian investigation of ethical questions and moral living will be guided by a faith-based understanding of the meaning, purpose, and value of human life.

Pastoral Theology. This is concerned with the social application of theological statements. This theology ensures that Christian faith is not limited to orthodoxy (i.e., thinking right thoughts) but also extends to orthopraxy (i.e., doing right things). Pastoral theology would note that it is one thing to worry over the proper form and meaning of the Lord’s Supper and another to make sure that the people in one’s local community actually have supper. Pastoral theology strives to bridge the academic and applied dimensions of Christian faith.

Liberation Theology. This refers to numerous twentieth- and twenty-first-century theologies that take a strong interest in the political implications of Christian faith as a force for social liberation. Emerging from the abject poverty of Central and South America in the 1960s, liberation theology pointed out that the Bible reveals a God who is concerned about the plight of the poor. Contemporaneous with Latin American liberation theology was the black theology movement in the United States, which brought out the religious dimension of the civil rights movement. Beginning with these expressions, today's liberation theologies evaluate the condition of all manner of poverty and oppression. These include a wide range of social, political, economic, racial, and gender oppressions. Feminist, Hispanic, African American, womanist, *mujerista* (which blends feminist, Latin American liberation, and cultural theologies), third-world, and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, and questioning) theologies are all expressions of liberation theologies seeking justice, inclusion, and voice for their constituencies.

Natural Theology. This considers how God may be found in nature, without the benefit of such special revelation as the Bible. Natural theology looks at things like beauty, design, order, and causality in the natural world and evaluates whether and how these aspects suggest a Creator. Modern cosmology and natural theology today engage in dialogue about the origin, destiny, value, and meaning of the natural world.

Liturgical Studies and Sacramental Theology. These disciplines focus on the study of Christian communal worship and prayer. They examine the structure of worship services, the effectiveness of language used in prayer and creed, the style and placement of the music and art that is incorporated in Christian worship, the preparation of children and adults for full and active participation in the Christian community, and the architectural design and layout of spaces of worship. Sacramental theology specifically studies the most sacred rituals in Christian life, for example, the key rite of entrance into the Christian community known as *baptism* (that is, the immersion or sprinkling of the initiate with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Liturgy and sacraments are studied not as ends in themselves, but because they have a reciprocal relationship with

other branches of theology. For example, the way God is addressed in prayer, sung about in hymns, and depicted in art all draw upon a particular understanding of God and, in turn, help the worshippers to form their understanding of God. This interrelationship is summed up in the Latin phrase, *lex orandi, lex credendi*: “the law of praying is the law of believing.”

Mystical Theology. This focuses on the subjective experience of encountering God, attempting to put into words experiences that transcend definition. Just as people attempt to describe the experience of falling in love, even as they realize that words cannot truly describe the experience, so also does mystical theology attempt to describe the conditions and the experience of falling in love with God, being touched by God in prayer and contemplation, or having a direct encounter with God. Mystical theology might thus be thought of as the study of Christian spirituality, prayer, and contemplative practice.

The Audiences and Practitioners of Christian Thought

One popular model suggests that there are three principal and sometimes overlapping audiences for theology: the church, the academy, and the public.³

Church refers to the collective body of Christians (as opposed to church buildings or denominations, such as Catholics or Lutherans). The church is the primary location of Christian theology because it is Christian beliefs that are being considered, usually by Christian believers, writers, theologians, and ministers. For example, non-Christians may want to know what Christian theologians are saying about the death penalty or euthanasia. It will be Christians themselves, though, who look to the Bible, church teaching, theologians, and the wisdom of their own experiences for guidance on how to apply Christian beliefs and understandings to such questions.

3. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981).



In theological terms, a church is a congregation of Christians, not the building in which they meet. In this photo, a congregation in Idaho celebrates baptism, the key rite of entrance into the Christian community, in a river.

The term *academy* refers to colleges and universities where theology is a discipline of scholarly research and teaching. Since the Middle Ages, theology has been an important part of university curricula. Theology departments of universities need to meet the same standards and requirements as other disciplines. These standards and requirements might be established through licensure boards, criteria for publishing, national organizations, or other criteria. By making standards and requirements shared and public, research, teaching, and publication are made accountable and preserve integrity of method and discourse. Students of theology must enter into intelligent and integrative dialogue with other disciplines. Theologians cannot well advance their discussions of, for example, natural theology if they are ignorant of biology, physics, or chemistry.

Public refers to the fact that Christian thinkers have a responsibility to understand the world at large and to attempt to hold a dialogue with it as much as possible—although some Christian groups attempt to remain sectarian (detached from the world). Apart from this dialogue, Christian theology would bury its head in the sand,

and this would be a failure to perform its basic function as mediator and interpreter between the religious tradition and society. In addition, if Christian thinking is not public and open, it tends to become cultlike and unaccountable, and risks exploiting the people who take direction from it. Being accountable to the public is a safeguard against untenable and detached ideas. It is also the way theology can engage and even persuade the public about its constructive and prosocial beliefs, values, and works.

Conclusion

Twentieth-century Brazilian Roman Catholic theologians Leonardo and Clodovis Boff said of theology, “All who believe want to understand something of their faith. As soon as you think about faith, you are already doing theology. So all Christians are in a sense theologians, and become more so the more they think about their faith.”⁴

All people who think about their faith and try to understand what it means for their life are doing theology on some level. Professional theologians think, speak, and write about faith all the time. Ministers and pastoral workers may use theology to help shape their workplace ethics or their client care. Clergy may use theology to help them write poignant and timely sermons. Stay-at-home moms and dads may use theology to help them get through rough days with noisy kids and piles of laundry.

Although it can be highly academic and refined, theology is ultimately the Christian endeavor to make sense of the beliefs that the faith proclaims. People do theology across all levels of personal interest and professional practice. Theology may be done by highly educated scholars, but it is also the domain of average people attempting to think meaningfully and seriously about what they believe and how those beliefs should shape their lives.

4. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 16.

Questions for Discussion and Review

1. How would you describe theology to a child?
2. Give an example of theologizing.
3. What are the poignant moments in life—joyful or tragic—that might prompt a person to think about God?
4. Describe the function of theology as mediator and interpreter. Give an example of a current event or situation that could benefit from the mediation of theology.
5. What is the relationship between faith and reason?
6. What is theological method? Is it important? Explain.
7. Give an example of how historical and geographical context can influence theology.
8. Is every religious person a theologian? Explain.
9. Describe and compare two types of theology considered in this chapter.
10. Why is it important for theology to have a public character?

Resources

Books

- Boff, Leonardo and Clodovis. *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987.
- Bultmann, Rudolph. *What Is Theology?* Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.
- Ford, David. *Theology: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Lonergan, Bernard. *Method in Theology*. 2nd ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1990.
- McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 5th ed. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Ormerod, Neil. *Introducing Contemporary Theologies: The What and the Who of Theology Today*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002.
- Tracy, David. *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Websites

The Christian Century; “Theology,” at www.christiancentury.org/theology.

The Master’s Seminary; “Theology IV, Lecture 1,” at www.theologicalresources.org/the-masters-seminary/30-theology-iv. Lectures on theological topics from an evangelical Christian perspective.

New Advent; “Dogmatic Theology,” at www.newadvent.org/cathen/14580a.htm.

N. T. Wright “How Paul Invented Christian Theology,” at www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkjFHYIugY.