

UNIT 1: WHAT IS SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?

WHAT IS DOCTRINE?

Around 395 AD, St Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD), perhaps the most influential theologian of the western tradition, wrote a short treatise entitled *De Doctrina Christiana*. This title is common among patristic and medieval theological works which reflect on Christian life and practice. Yet these theologians are not writing about Christian doctrine (*doctrina*) in the sense of a series of static beliefs or factual propositions which one might or might not accept as true. The Latin word *doctrina* is better translated as 'teaching'. Augustine's treatise is 'On Christian *Teaching*'. Likewise, St Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274), whose work you will encounter in a later unit, begins his great *Summa Theologiae* by considering the nature of *sacra doctrina*, 'holy (or sacred) teaching'. These theologians are concerned with the teaching of the Church. The study of this teaching is more than an interesting intellectual exercise, for this teaching brings what Aquinas calls *salus* – health, life and salvation. This teaching takes place within the Church and is founded upon the creeds (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed), each being understood as a précis of holy scripture.

This implies that Christian doctrine is an *activity* involving teaching and learning. It is not a merely speculative or abstract enquiry, neither is it concerned with establishing and then defending a static set of mere facts. The activity of Christian doctrine – teaching and learning – has been traditionally associated with the life and witness of the Church, namely with a body of people who 'live' the doctrine and who are taught supremely by the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16.13). It is worth bearing in mind that Augustine, and many theologians in the early and medieval Church, were not interested in 'originality' in the modern sense of innovation or the production of startling new ideas about God or the world, and they were disparaging of any intellectual exercise which was motivated by *curiositas* (self-indulgent 'curiosity'). Theologians of the pre-modern period were concerned to articulate the teaching (doctrine) of the Church and its implications for living as disciples of Jesus Christ. Even Aquinas, often cited as the most speculative of medieval theologians, is clear that Christian theology is also practical. In other words, he is concerned with how, by sustained theological reflection, men and women might live better Christian lives.¹

¹ This view of Aquinas's work is not wholly consonant with the claim by McGrath that around the time of Aquinas '...theology came to be seen as a theoretical rather than a practical subject...'. In my view, the distinction between speculative and practical theology when applied to a theologian such as Aquinas is rather anachronistic. Writing in the thirteenth century, Aquinas is evangelical in his desire to make his students and readers better disciples and preachers of the Word. In other words, his concern is always the practical issue of strengthening and invigorating the life of

The sacred teaching (*sacra doctrina*) which is the immediate subject of the beginning of Aquinas's great work the *Summa Theologiae*, is 'science' (*scientia*), that is, *knowledge*. It is received in faith and is based upon a higher 'science' or 'knowledge', namely God's very own. As Gerard Loughlin writes in Gunton (1997), p.57: 'It is this *scientia Dei et beatorum* [God's knowledge which he shares with the blessed] – given to us in the scriptural revelation through the tradition of the church – which is at one and the same time the basis and authority of doctrine, its authoring and final context. The principles of doctrine are not otherwise known; yet to know them ... is to begin to share in that life which God wills for all as their final end, and which is given through incorporation in Christ.'

However, might we draw a distinction between 'doctrine' (the teaching of the Church) and 'theology', which we might regard as a broader enterprise? As Colin Gunton points out, parts of the teaching of Origen (c.185-c.254) became doctrines of the Church, other of his teachings were rejected, yet all of his work might be regarded as 'theology' (Gunton (1997), p.4). We might wish to say that all theology, whether positively or negatively, is involved with doctrine, namely with the teaching, learning and life of the Church (however one might wish to identify 'the Church'). In other words, theology is not reflection upon a set of questions which are dreamt up as intellectual puzzles, nor is theology purely abstract and speculative. Theology is concerned with reflection upon the witness and practice of the people of God. Therefore, this module is concerned with what the Church believes it has learned about the nature of God, and what, in turn, it has taught about the nature of God. While the immediate concern of this module is the articulation and critical clarification of the doctrine of God, further reflection on the doctrine of God within a systematic theology may lead to more obviously practical questions concerning the implications of that doctrine. For example, how might the belief that God is a loving relation of persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) mould our relations as human beings?

the people of God. Aquinas's theological purpose is not central to the concerns of this module, but students who are particularly interested (perhaps after completing unit 4) may like to consult Nicholas Healy (2003), *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life* (Aldershot: Ashgate), ch. 1: 'Theology, as Thomas understands and practices it, attempts to clarify what has been revealed of divine wisdom through the incarnate Word and the operation of the Holy Spirit. Theological inquiry's main function is to serve the preaching of the Gospel.' (p.21).

Doctrine in Modernity

Whereas early Christian theologians understood doctrine to be concerned with the practice of teaching, learning and living according to the Christian community's speech about God, in the period we call 'modernity', beginning around the sixteenth century, Christian doctrine came to be understood rather differently. 'Modernity' is a very complex term which refers to a long and varied period in intellectual and cultural history, but very broadly – and with regard to the concerns of this unit – it refers to the following:

- the rise of rationalism, namely the view that rationality, rather than being formed through culture, tradition and practice, stands above the mediations of human societies and histories as a supreme, autonomous and self-evident authority in establishing all truth
- the advent of natural science and technology as supreme examples of a rational enterprise
- the growth of philosophical scepticism
- the rise of atheism

One philosopher who represents very clearly the priorities of modernity is René Descartes (1596-1650). In 1641, Descartes published his *Meditations on First Philosophy* in which he deploys the technique of 'universal doubt' to establish a sure and certain fact (something which cannot be doubted) upon which he could build the edifice of his epistemology (theory of knowledge). The result of this enterprise is the famous *cogito ergo sum*: 'I think, therefore I am'. Descartes believed that, so long as he is thinking, he cannot doubt his own existence. His own existence forms an incontrovertible fact which can then provide the foundation of an entire philosophical system. [In stark contrast, what makes human intellectual enquiry possible for a theologian such as Aquinas is not the existence of the individual human subject, but the existence of God].

The establishment of such incontestable 'matters of fact' in all areas of intellectual enquiry, from moral philosophy to natural science, becomes a major feature of the project of modernity (sometimes referred to as 'the Enlightenment project'). On this view, truth can be exhaustively and unambiguously expressed without the mediation of history or culture. One of the reasons why such unambiguous certainty becomes a key goal of human intellectual endeavour lies in the desire to avoid conflict or disagreement of any kind. This desire was in turn motivated by the traumatic experience of the European Wars of Religion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which were perceived to be based on the ambiguities, uncertainties and superstitions of religion. If everyone could agree on what counted as a matter of fact (including the techniques for establishing matters of fact), the possibility of intellectual dispute (and maybe even political

dispute) could be minimised. Two prominent figures of modernity who were also deeply concerned with matters theological, the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and the natural philosopher Isaac Newton (1647-1727), were both well known for their dislike of academic disputation: they preferred univocal, compelling and unambiguous fact. A variety of means were deployed to establish and defend 'matters of fact': empirical observation; the reference to 'reason' which is independent of all context, history, practice and culture; scepticism and doubt; scientific experiment, and so on. These techniques also have a strong social and political dimension. For example, in establishing 'facts' about nature, only certain kinds of men, usually the educated and wealthy gentry, were regarded as properly rational and trustworthy witnesses of experiments. Therefore, the membership of scientific and philosophical societies was very carefully policed. Meanwhile, the patrons of philosophy and natural science often had a significant vested interest in the kinds of questions which were asked and the outcome of the research they sponsored.²

The intellectual and cultural shifts of modernity had a profound impact upon the practice of Christian theology and the understanding of the nature of doctrine. Following the rise of incontestable and univocal 'facts' as the goal of human intellectual enterprise, Christian doctrines (such as creation or incarnation, and particularly the existence of God) came to be understood as factual claims which should be established by a supposedly independent and *non-theological* rationality. Moreover, those claims then required *defence* by intellectual practices which are independent of the practice of theology. God and his revelation in Christ are no longer the basis of Christian doctrine – the foundation must be sought elsewhere, usually in a supposedly indifferent natural reason.

Unit 2 will consider in more detail the particular relationship between reason and revelation, but for the moment it should be noted that the modern period is characterised by a shift in the understanding of reason's place in relation to Christian theology. For Thomas Aquinas, to take just one example, Christian theology must be rational in that it must be coherent and make sense to human minds. He believed that non-Christian philosophy (particularly that of Plato and Aristotle) might be appropriately deployed to clarify the meaning and implications of Christian doctrine. But the supreme authority for Aquinas

² Although well beyond the immediate purview of this module, those who are particularly interested in the cultural and intellectual changes in early modernity and the techniques for the establishment of 'facts' concerning nature might find the following of interest: Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer (1985), *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life* (US: Princeton University Press), particularly ch.2; Steven Shapin (1994), *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (US: University of Chicago Press); Mary Poovey (1998), *The History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (US: University of Chicago Press).

remains the divine *logos* or reason, revealed supremely in Christ. All philosophy and rationality is, in the end, subject to this divine reason. So Christian theology's central authority does not lie *outside* theology, but rather at its very core. Meanwhile, for Aquinas, that divine knowledge is reflected, albeit dimly and marred by human sin, within all human intellectual enterprises insofar as they participate in truth.

By contrast, within Christian theological writings of the modern period, doctrine is often subject to the authority of a reason which is non-theological and which apparently stands as an indifferent and univocal arbiter above *all* human intellectual and cultural enterprise. Moreover, rather than understanding Christian theology as a network of mutually supporting doctrines which have no single beginning or end and throughout which the revelation in Christ permeates, doctrine tends to be understood as a linear edifice (like a tower block) which must have at its foundation something utterly incontrovertible, such as unambiguous facts (for example, the existence of God, where God is understood to exist in essentially the same way as all other things) established by reason alone.

Of course, many theologians within modernity whose influence over Christian theology has been immense maintained the view that systematic Christian theology is concerned first and foremost with the divine *logos* as this is revealed in Christ. One thinks most obviously of the great Reformers, Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564). Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, whose definitive version was published in 1559, set a pattern for systematic method and style (a theology arranged in four books beginning with the doctrine of God and ending with ecclesiology) which has heavily influenced systematic theology up to the present day.

Yet much theology which appropriated the priorities of modernity took on a characteristic style. Theologians began to accept that standards of rationality and the attainment of unambiguous truth are more clearly represented in other discourses and that theology should subject itself to those standards. For example, scientific method is deployed to prove the existence of God, even though scientific method is designed primarily to investigate nature, and God is certainly not understood in the Christian tradition as a natural object or a kind of thing. Similarly, the findings of psychology or sociology are deployed to critique and revise what theologians have written about the nature of the human person, or the meaning and interpretation of society and history.

The tendency to subject theology and Christian doctrine to the priorities of other discourses is a defining characteristic of the modern movement known as 'theological liberalism' (see McGrath (2006); Ford (1997), ch.13). For liberal

theologians, it is imperative for the credibility of Christian theology that doctrines are abandoned or revised according to the findings of non-theological, modern discourses such as psychology, sociology or natural science, or the priorities of modern culture. Behind such an approach to theology lies a strong belief in the natural, almost inevitable, progress of human intellectual activity. At the extreme end of the liberal spectrum, often associated with the so-called 'non-realist' theology of Don Cupitt or Mark C. Taylor, doctrines become metaphors or mere myths which are just one in a plethora of equally valuable ways of representing or constructing truth.

It would be wrong, however, to associate theological liberalism only with doubt, scepticism or the desire to re-interpret Christian doctrine or the Bible. A number of contemporary theologians point out that, at the most general level, theological liberalism accepts the modern imperative of providing a non-theological rationale for Christian theology. In this respect, an *apparently* more conservative Christian theology which demands that the scriptures be always and incontrovertibly 'true' according to secular standards might be understood as equally rationalist (and therefore, in a sense, liberal). One particularly clear example of such an approach arose in the nineteenth century with the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859). The threat to the Book of Genesis was perceived to be obvious. Those who defended (and continue to defend) the Genesis narrative as literally true against – and on the terms established by – the account of nature given by natural history and biology essentially assume the criterion of truth and rationality laid down by Darwin and his successors. In other words, rather than maintaining that Genesis is a different genre of literature with a different, theological rationale, the modern defenders of Genesis argued that the Bible, in order to be credible and true, had to be *better natural history* than *The Origin of Species*. The key characteristic of modern theological liberalism is clearly present: the desire to make theology and the scriptures credible by accepting and applying the standards, assumptions and priorities of essentially non-theological discourses.

For many theologians, it is laudable and crucial that, in the name of interdisciplinary study, theology and Christian doctrine are subject to critique from other discourses. Yet recent work in Christian systematic and philosophical theology has pointed to the way in which theology has uncritically appropriated the priorities, stipulations and rationalities of other disciplines, particularly natural and social science. Scholars have pointed out that discourses such as sociology or psychology contain implicit and sometimes unexamined assumptions which are often *bad* theology.³ Moreover, the inherent rationality of

³ This approach is particularly associated with the work of John Milbank of the University of Nottingham and his influential book *Theology and Social Theory* (1990; 2nd ed. 2006). Milbank is

theology and the transcendence of the divine source of truth have been applied to other discourses to produce a more confident, critical and properly theological critique of other intellectual disciplines. It is argued that interdisciplinary discussion may therefore take place on ground that is more theologically coherent and constructive.

After Modernity

Has the understanding of doctrine developed beyond the assumptions and priorities of modernity? Has anything of the pre-modern, Augustinian understanding of Christian theology been recovered?

One school of theology, associated particularly with the work of Yale Divinity School in the 1980s, has sought to formulate a 'post-liberal' approach to Christian theology and doctrine. One key text is George Lindbeck (1985), *The Nature of Christian Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK). Lindbeck outlines three broad understandings of the nature of 'religion' and their doctrines.

Cognitive-propositional

On this view, religious doctrines function as cognitive and informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities. In other words, according to Lindbeck's account of this position, doctrines deliver and defend straightforward facts, and they convey substantial information about, for example, the nature of God.

In his book *The Genesis of Doctrine* (1990), Alister McGrath is very critical of Lindbeck's account of the cognitive-propositional view. McGrath claims that those who hold that doctrines provide truthful propositions often have a very nuanced view of the way in which doctrines mediate God. This, claims McGrath, is absent in Lindbeck's account. For McGrath, 'Underlying such attempts to achieve clarity of concepts and modes of discourse is the recognition that doctrinal affirmations are to be recognized as perceptions, not total descriptions, pointing beyond themselves towards the greater mystery of God himself.' (p.17).

Nevertheless, there does remain a tradition which views doctrines as 'complete' cognitive claims. Such an approach is often found in writings which fall under the banner of 'philosophy of religion'.

perhaps the most discussed and controversial contemporary Anglophone theologian. Many of the themes outlined in his work, and the work of theologians such as Nicholas Lash, Rowan Williams, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, are developed in the book series published by Routledge entitled *Radical Orthodoxy*.

Experiential-expressive

On this model, religious doctrines merely mediate a more essential 'experience'. This means that the wide variety of religious doctrines (be they Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or any other) are non-essential mediations of a more essential and common human experience. Lindbeck is particularly critical of this approach to religion and doctrine, and thinks it originated in the work of F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834). However, this criticism is based on a highly problematic interpretation of Schleiermacher's concept of 'Gefühl' (feeling, or better 'attunement') that is not consistent with the most recent philosophical research on Schleiermacher's hermeneutics and his, in many respects, groundbreaking philosophy of mind (as particularly the German philosopher Manfred Frank has demonstrated).

Be this as it may, Schleiermacher's infamous concept of 'Gefühl' (*attunement*) has been misinterpreted as a subjectivist concept of 'feeling' already in the late nineteenth century, and in this sense it might be argued that he became involuntarily the founder of a liberal 'theology of feeling'. Lindbeck's criticism of this modern tradition is based on the realisation that human experience is always highly particular and contextual, and, moreover, it is always interpreted through culture, prior beliefs and assumptions, personal history, and so on. This observation is, again, consistent with the recent re-interpretation of Schleiermacher's account of the 'Gefühl schlechthinniger Abhängigkeit' ('attunement/feeling of absolute dependence'). However, it explains why something as varied, interpreted and contingent as subjective experiences or 'feelings' (in the post-Schleiermacherian sense of this word) cannot *per se* provide the foundation for Christian doctrine and practice. After all, for Lindbeck, doctrine is particularly concerned with gathering together and identifying the community of the Church by providing the framework of that community's practice (Schleiermacher, paradoxically, shared this concern in that he considered that life of the church as essential for his concepts of 'Gefühl' and 'piety'). The sheer particularity and contingency of subjective experiences could not unify in this way. So according to post-liberal theologians, far from being the basis of doctrine, experience is interpreted by doctrinal frameworks. For example, the experience of God is interpreted, discussed and developed in prayer and liturgical life according to the framework and language of Christian doctrine. One might argue that doctrine and experience form what literary theorists call a 'hermeneutical circle' (in the sense of the German philosopher H. G. Gadamer, who built on Schleiermacher's Hermeneutic): doctrine moulds experience which in turn moulds our understanding of doctrine and so on. This view rejects the desire of modernity to find a 'foundation' (in the case of the experiential-expressive model of doctrine, the foundation is 'experience') for the 'tower' of Christian doctrine.

A most extreme form of the experiential-expressive model, seen particularly in 'non-realist' theologies, claims that God can be *equated* with human experience. This is usually expressed in terms of the experience of 'ultimate value' or 'deepest desire'. Within such theologies, doctrine is no longer required to mediate the experience of God, because God simply *is* that experience. Hence non-realist theologians express very little concern for doctrinal formulae.

Cultural-linguistic

This is the model of religious doctrine proposed by Lindbeck: 'the function of church doctrines that becomes most prominent ... is their use, not as expressive symbols or as truth-claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action' (Lindbeck (1984) pp. 16-18).

What does Lindbeck mean by this? An example will clarify the way in which the cultural-linguistic model of religion and doctrine differs from the others described above. Consider the classic doctrine which became the watchword of the Reformation: 'we are saved by faith alone' (*sola fide*). According to the cognitive-propositional view of doctrine, this statement makes a factual claim about the means of salvation. The doctrine merely transmits information. According to an experiential-expressive model, this is a symbolic expression of a more essential and basic *experience* of God's work of salvation. On Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach, this doctrine forms a rule such as 'Christians should always speak and act about salvation as a gratuitous and unmerited divine gift rather than the achievement of their own wills'.

Therefore, doctrines are not mere facts, neither are they expressions of a more basic human experience. Rather, they are what is often termed 'second order' propositions. In other words, they serve a higher 'first order' purpose of ordering the Church's speech, worship and prayer. Doctrines show us how we ought to speak about God and things in relation to God. In this regard, doctrines are likened to the grammatical rules within a language (hence Lindbeck's view is sometimes referred to as a 'rule' theory of doctrine). Grammar allows us to get on with the business of communicating by providing order and proper boundaries to our language. Likewise, Christian doctrine, which may have a cognitive content and constitute truth claims about reality, nevertheless allows us to get on with the *practical* business of worshiping, praying and communicating concerning God and ourselves. It should be clear that, without wishing to return nostalgically to the time of Augustine and Aquinas, Lindbeck's post-liberal approach tends to re-emphasise the practical nature of Christian doctrine while resisting the modern, Enlightenment tendency to subject Christian doctrine to non-theological authorities.