

Module TRDL7110: Study Skills for Biblical Interpretation, Islamic Studies, Study of Religions and Christian Theology.

Name: Kirsty Eirinn Zsofi Parratt

Student No: 1903025

Word Count: 2228

What is theology and what is its nature as a discipline? Douglas John Hall relates an encounter he had with a fellow passenger in an airplane in which he sought to explain what it is that he does as a professor of theology. The man's response was that "It must be wonderful...to think about everything all the time."¹ The vastness of theology as a discipline means that asking the question 'What is theology?' brings with it a myriad of sub-questions and related issues. Three of these questions in particular will be important for this essay. Any student learning to write is told that a good story, or a good essay, needs a beginning, a middle, and an ending. Theology, too, has a beginning, its starting point, a middle, its process, and an ending, its goal or purpose. Each of these will be considered below.

Theology is often defined according to Anselm's well-known phrase *Fides quarens intellectum* – faith seeking understanding. Applying the structure of beginning, middle and ending to Anselm's definition, this essay will consider the following: the starting point of theology, particularly the question of faith and the relationship of faith and revelation to theology; the process of theology, this seeking, particularly the question of how and where theology is studied; and the end of theology, its goal or purpose.

For now it remains important to limit the focus of this discussion of theology a little. In what follows, the term 'theology' will be used to refer specifically to Christian theology. The question then becomes, "What is *Christian* theology and what is its nature as a discipline?"

Part I: *Fides quarens intellectum*: The starting point of theology

Beginning at the beginning then, what is the starting point of theology? Daniel Migliore, who takes Anselm's phrase as the title for his introduction to theology, states that "Theology arises from the freedom and responsibility of the Christian community to inquire about its faith in God."² In other words, theology begins with faith, and in the context of the believing community. Migliore sees two primary roots to faith's pursuit of understanding: the object of the Christian faith and the particular situation of the community of faith.³ Faith in God leads to inquiry, to theology, because of the

¹ Douglas John Hall, "What is Theology?," *Cross Currents* 53 (2003):171-184.

² Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 1.

³ Ibid, 2-5.

inexhaustible mystery of God, who is the object of faith. "God is always greater than our ideas of God",⁴ or, in Anselm's words "He is greater than can be conceived."⁵ This process of enquiry into the mystery of God necessarily involves reasoning. However, for Anselm and others, faith is primary: "The fact that we cannot think of God because God lies at the limit of our understanding, except as the very thought that does lie at the limit of our understanding, means that reason detached from faith cannot achieve understanding."⁶ Similarly, Barth emphasises that knowledge of God is only possible because of God's own self-revelation: "God is thought and known when in His own freedom God makes Himself apprehensible."⁷ Thus "Theology's essential hypothesis, or axiom, is revelation, which is God's own act done in His Word and through His Spirit."⁸

Theology begins with faith, and with revelation. But it is more than just general inquiry into the mystery of God. It also begins in the particular circumstances of the community of faith: "Theology... is always 'something' theology; it is always qualified by a context, and an adjective, be it social, political, historical or anything else one cares to mention."⁹ This is related also to the nature of revelation. Migliore's response to repeated debates as to whether revelation is an objective occurrence or a subjective experience is to hold both sides together. In Paul Tillich's words, "Revelation always is a subjective and an objective event in strict interdependence."¹⁰ Just as revelation takes place to, in, and through particular contexts and individuals, so too does the process of theology, by which those who have received the revelation seek to relate it to their circumstances, take place within a particular historical and social context. With regards to the question of the nature of theology then, it is necessarily particular and therefore also pluralistic, as theologians in a myriad of different contexts seek to relate their God-talk, or theology, to the particular circumstances in which they are situated. This, according to Migliore, is the second root of faith's pursuit of understanding. Because theology is particular, there can be no 'once and for all' theology: "The changing, ambiguous, and often precarious world poses ever new questions for faith, and many answers that sufficed yesterday are

⁴ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 3.

⁵ Anselm, *Proslogion*, Chapter XV.

⁶ Jeffrey C. Pugh, "Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm as Contemporary," *Theology Today* 55 (1998): 35-45, 38.

⁷ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (trans. G.T. Thomson: London: SCM, 2001), 15.

⁸ Karl Barth, *God in Action: Theological Addresses* (trans. E.G. Homrighausen and Karl J. Ernst: Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 41.

⁹ Gareth Jones, *Christian Theology: A Brief Introduction*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 22.

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 1:111, in Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 22.

no longer compelling today.”¹¹ Douglas John Hall describes the work of theology, the process of asking “new and urgent questions” and being “permitted to hear a responsive Word that really addresses and engages its context” as something that “will always have to be heard anew.”¹² The theologian must therefore, to some extent, be part of the realm of faith. Theology cannot be done completely removed from the community of faith, even if one does not share those same beliefs.¹³ However, theology is also second-order reflection on that faith. The theologian must take a step back a little, to reflect on faith from the outside, as far as that is possible. Migliore describes the theologian as standing “always on the edge of things, on the borderlands... of faith and society.”¹⁴ There, both within and on the edge, is where theology begins, in faith, and in the particular circumstances of the community.

Part II: *Fides quarens intellectum*: The process and methodology of theology

We turn now to the ‘middle’ of theology, this seeking of which Anselm spoke and which Jones understands to be the “most important component” of Anselm’s conviction.¹⁵ The central question is one of location and methodology: where and how does this ‘seeking’ take place? Edward Farley¹⁶ traces the history of theological study from the time of the early church, dividing it into three eras with corresponding paradigms of theological education. The first era, which Farley terms the Early Christian Centuries, covers the period from the time of the early church to the early Middle Ages. The era corresponds to the monastic paradigm of theological education, where the study of theology took place within the cloister community. Then follows the era of the scholastic paradigm, from the birth of the first universities in the 12th century to the Enlightenment and the development of modern universities. The third era dates from the 17th century to the present day and has, according to Farley, produced two paradigms of theological education: the academic paradigm of modern universities and the clerical-professional

¹¹ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 3.

¹² Hall, “What is Theology,” 179.

¹³ See Jones, *Christian Theology*, 25.

¹⁴ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 24.

¹⁵ Jones, *Christian Theology*, 6.

¹⁶ See Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) and discussion of Farley’s argument in Bernhard Ott, *Understanding and Developing Theological Education* (trans. Tom Keefer: Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2016), 38ff.

paradigm of seminaries and other pastoral training institutions. Certainly the question of location was an important one during the Enlightenment and the development of modern universities. Where previously theology had been established as a faculty in the university alongside arts, medicine and law, with the Enlightenment, the place of theology in the university was called into question. Seeking to defend the place of theology as a *Wissenschaft* in the University of Berlin, in 1811 Schleiermacher produced his theological treatise, *A Brief Outline on the Study of Theology*¹⁷ in which he contends that theology has three main components: philosophical theology, historical theology and practical theology. Theology is seen as a discipline of theoretical study with the practical function of producing well-trained ministers for the church to the benefit of society. Schleiermacher is generally considered as having “launched the project of modern theology”¹⁸ with his *Brief Outline* although the place of theology in the secular university is a question which is still debated.¹⁹

Returning to Farley, his concern with the development of theological education in the second and third eras is the loss of what he terms *theologia* – a theological understanding which he sees as the heart of all theological education. He believes that “theological education is no longer the reflection of faith that leads to the understanding of God but rather has become nothing more than an intellectual exercise in fulfilling an academic curriculum. And thereby the heart of theological education has been lost.”²⁰ Farley is concerned also with the fragmentation of theological education into the various different disciplines with no concern for the development of a unified theological understanding or *theologia*. Bernhard Ott summarizes Farley’s goal as follows:

Farley is concerned about *one* thing – about *theologia* as thoughtful faith, as a habit of the soul, as wisdom... We must rediscover *theologia*. What does that

¹⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology* (trans. Terrence Tice: Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966).

¹⁸ Zachary Purvis, *Theology and the University in Nineteenth Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 141.

¹⁹ See, for example, Paul A. Macdonald Jr., “Studying Christian Theology in the Secular University,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78 No.4 (December 2010): 991–1024.

²⁰ Ott, *Understanding and Developing Theological Education*, 40.

mean? *Theologia, theology as understanding* aims to understand God and life more completely through thought and reflection in such a way that we are able to understand (love) God more deeply, and to live as Christians in this world, more wisely and more fully engaged.²¹

Part III: Fides quarens *intellectum*: The goal and purpose of theology

Of course, the location and methodology of one's theology will have a lot to do with the goal or purpose which theology is understood to have. If theology is defined as faith seeking understanding, what exactly is this understanding that is being sought? For Farley, it is an understanding of God, a deeper knowing of God which leads to different way of living in the world as Christians. Similarly for Migliore, "the understanding that is sought by faith is not speculative knowledge but the wisdom that illuminates life and practice".²² Theology has to do with real life in the particular situation of the community of faith, and to do with the practice of the Church in society. Hall similarly sees the goal of theology as having to do with forming the way the Church lives in the world:

Now what we call "theology" is nothing more nor less than the intellectual-spiritual activity that helps the church to live creatively and faithfully between its worldly situation and its own particular sources of wisdom and hope – metaphorically speaking, between context and text. That is to say, theology helps the church discover "gospel".²³

As we saw earlier, this "gospel" is particular to the context in which the Church finds itself and thus the task of theology in helping the church discover this gospel is never exhausted. For Barth, "in theology the Church seeks again and again to examine itself critically as it asks itself what it means and implies to be a Church among men."²⁴ This re-examination of the church, this critical reflection on the validity of the church's witness²⁵ is the goal of theology. Migliore lists four questions which he understands to be central to the task of systematic theology in the life and ministry of the church, relating the proclamation and practice of the church to the revelation of God in Jesus

²¹ Ott, *Understanding and Developing Theological Education*, 48.

²² Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 6.

²³ Hall, 'What is Theology,' 179.

²⁴ Barth, *God in Action*, 44.

²⁵ Schubert Ogden, "Toward Doing Theology", *The Journal of Religion* 75, No. 1 (Jan 1995): pp. 1-14 (1).

Christ and to the present context of the church.²⁶ But he cautions that “Theology never achieves more than partial success in answering them” and that they “must be asked not once but continuously.”²⁷ There can be no ‘once and for all’ theology. Shelly Rambo, considering the role of theology in the public realm after an event of trauma, sees the work of theology “not as providing or securing certain answers but, instead, positioning persons in a certain way in relationship to suffering... the kind of theologizing [that]... might be described as directionality.”²⁸ Perhaps then, this is the understanding that is sought by faith: an understanding not of certain answers and the academic mastery of fragmented parts of a whole, but understanding of a way of being in the world, of discovering the “gospel” in the particular context of the community of faith, in relation to the suffering and questions and “bad news”²⁹ of its particular socio-historical context.

²⁶ See Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 9-13.

²⁷ Ibid. 13.

²⁸ Shelly Rambo, “Introduction,” in *Post-Traumatic Public Theology* (ed. Stephanie N. Arel and Shelly Rambo: New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 12.

²⁹ Hall, “What is Theology” 179.

Bibliography

Anselm. *Proslogion*. Online: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/anselm-proslogium.asp>.

Arel, Stephanie N., and Rambo, Shelly, eds. *Post-Traumatic Public Theology*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*. Translated by G.T. Thomson. London: SCM Press, 2001.

Barth, Karl. *God in Action: Theological Addresses*. Translated by E.G. Homrighausen and Karl J. Ernst. Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2005.

Davies, D.P. "Who does Theology." *Transformation* 25 (2008): 73-79.

Dykstra, Craig. "Theological Geography." *Theology Today* 44 (1988): 419-423.

Edgar, Brian. "The Theology of Theological Education." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 29 (2005): 208-217.

Farley, Edward. *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983.

Ford, David. *Theology: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Hall, Douglas John. "What is theology?" *Cross Currents* 53 (2003): 171-184.

Jenson, Robert. *A Theology in Outline: Can These Bones Live?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Jones, Gareth. *Christian Theology: A Brief Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.

Kelsey, David. *Between Athens And Berlin: The Theological Education Debate*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

Macdonald Jr., Paul A. "Studying Christian Theology in the Secular University." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78 (2010): 991-1024.

McGrath, Alister. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 6th ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2017.

Migliore, Daniel. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991.

Ogden, Schubert. "Toward Doing Theology." *The Journal of Religion* 75 (1995): 1-14.

Ogden, Schubert. "What Is Theology?" *The Journal of Religion* 52 (1972): 22-40.

Ott, Bernhard. *Understanding and Developing Theological Education*. Translated by Tom Keefer. Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2016.

Pugh, Jeffrey. "FIDES QUAERENS INTELLECTUM: Anselm as Contemporary." *Theology Today* 55 (1998):35-45.

Purvis, Zachary. *Theology and the University in Nineteenth Century Germany*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology*. Translated by Terrence Tice. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966.