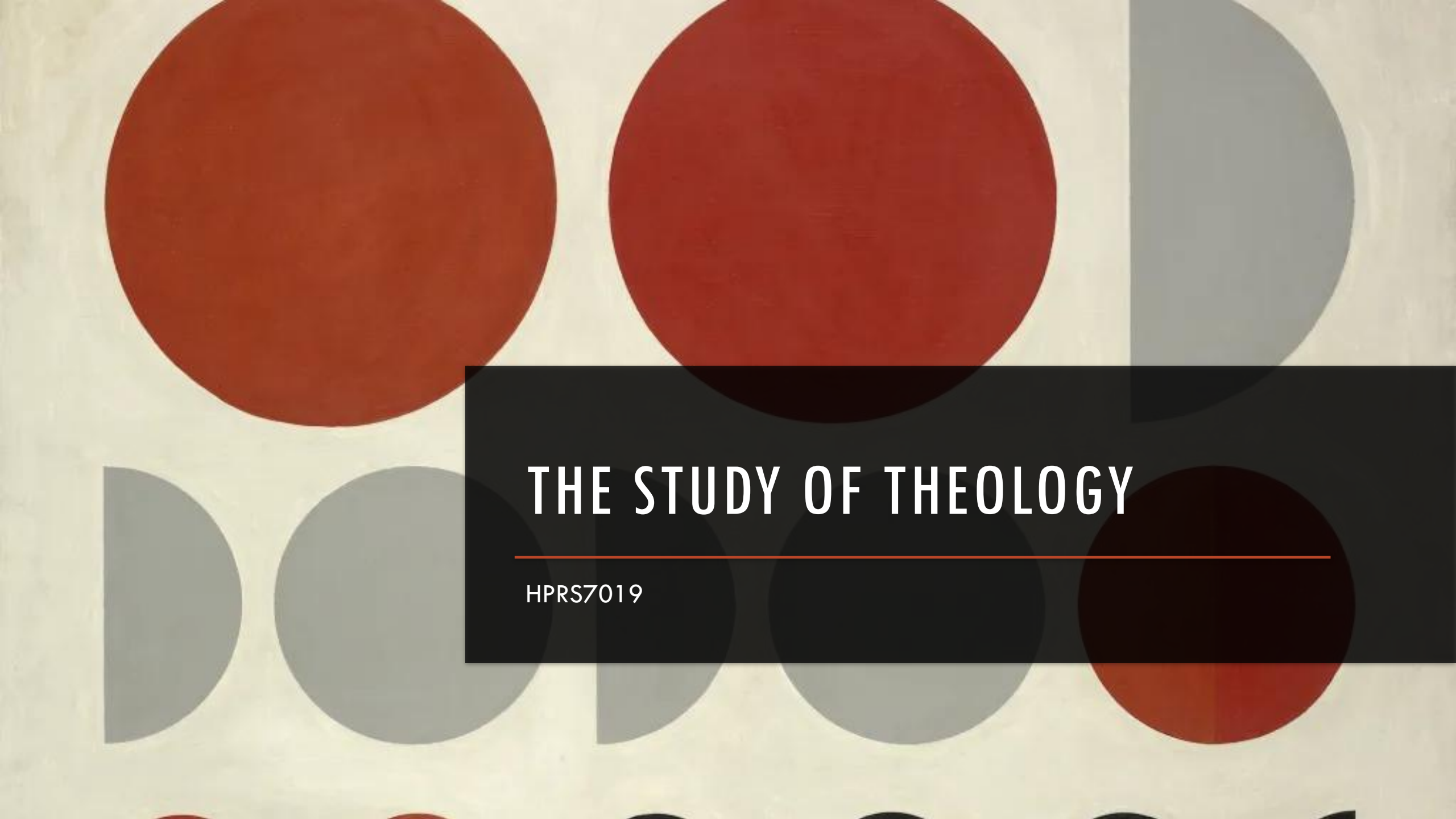
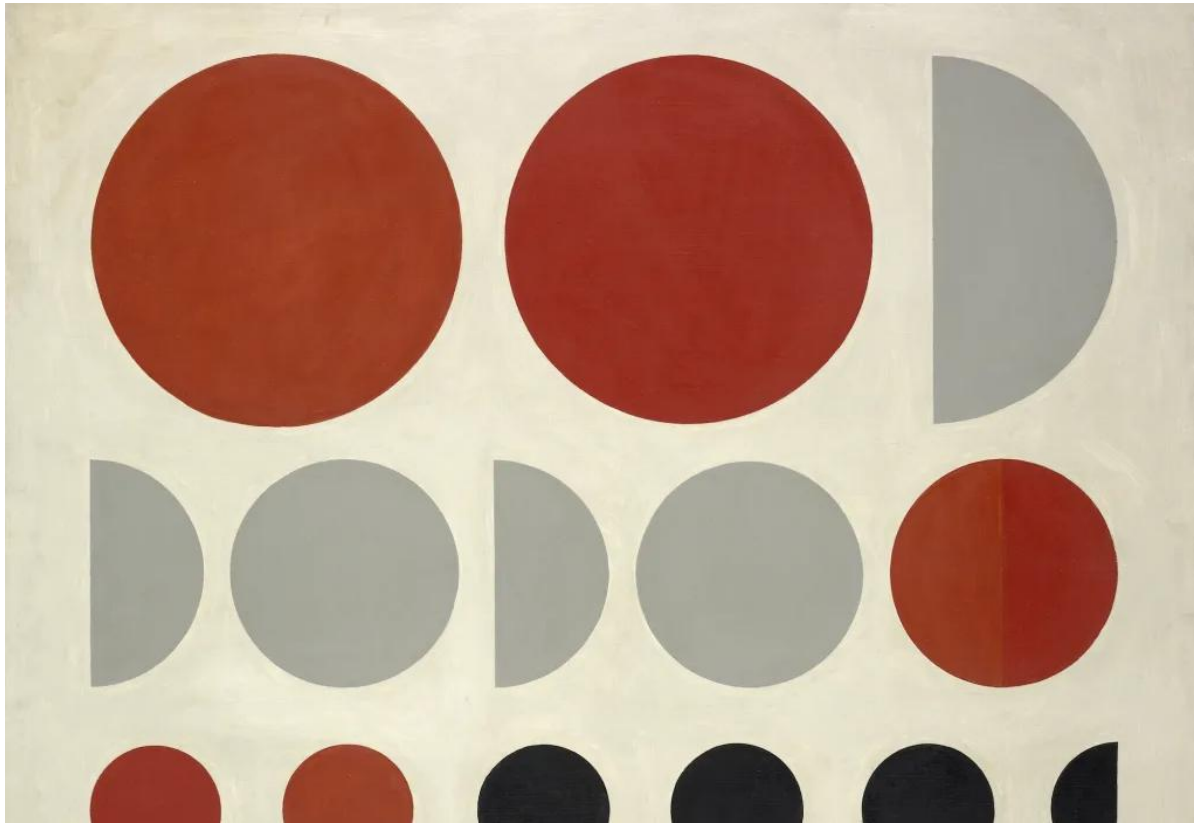




THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY

HPRS7019

THE
(IM)POSSIBILITY
OF TALKING
ABOUT GOD

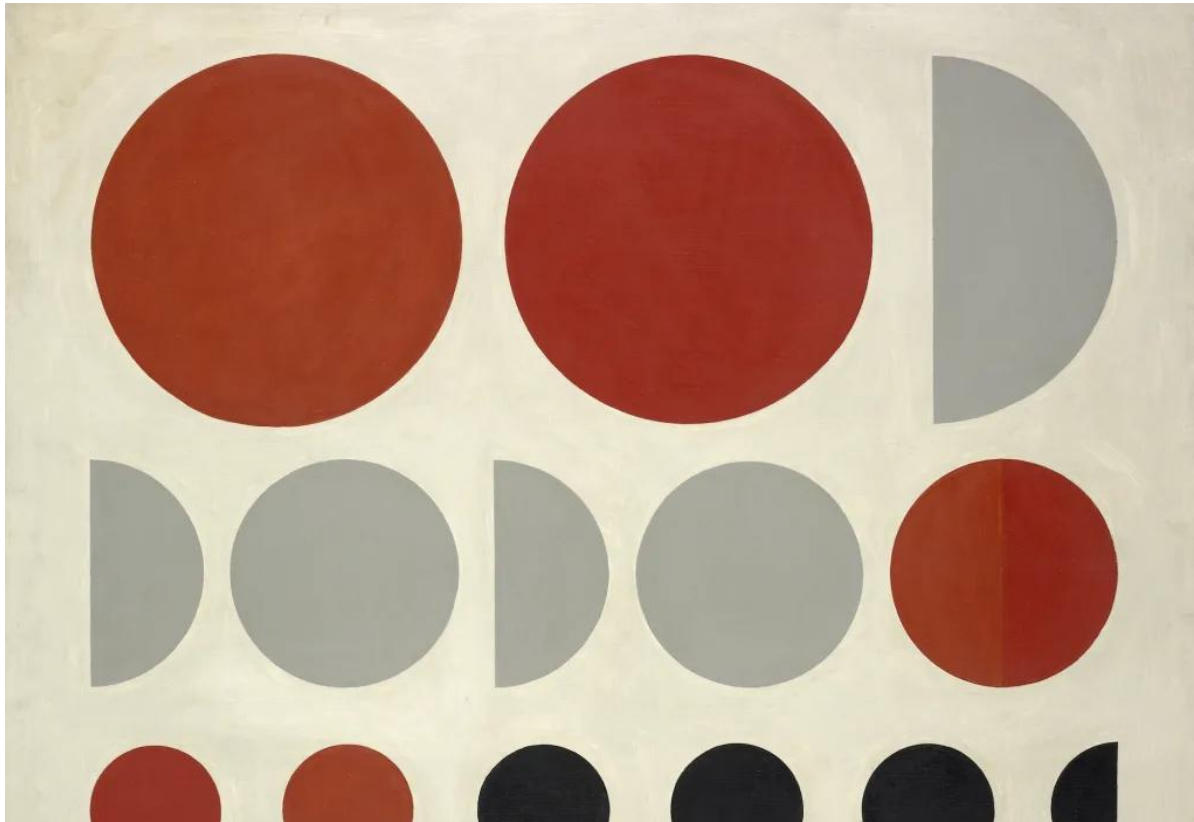


A DANGEROUS UNDERTAKING

Theology is often perceived as a very safe discipline, either because it is:

Inherently relative and therefore merely an exercise in self-expression.

Or inherently conservative and therefore an exercise in the church's self justification.

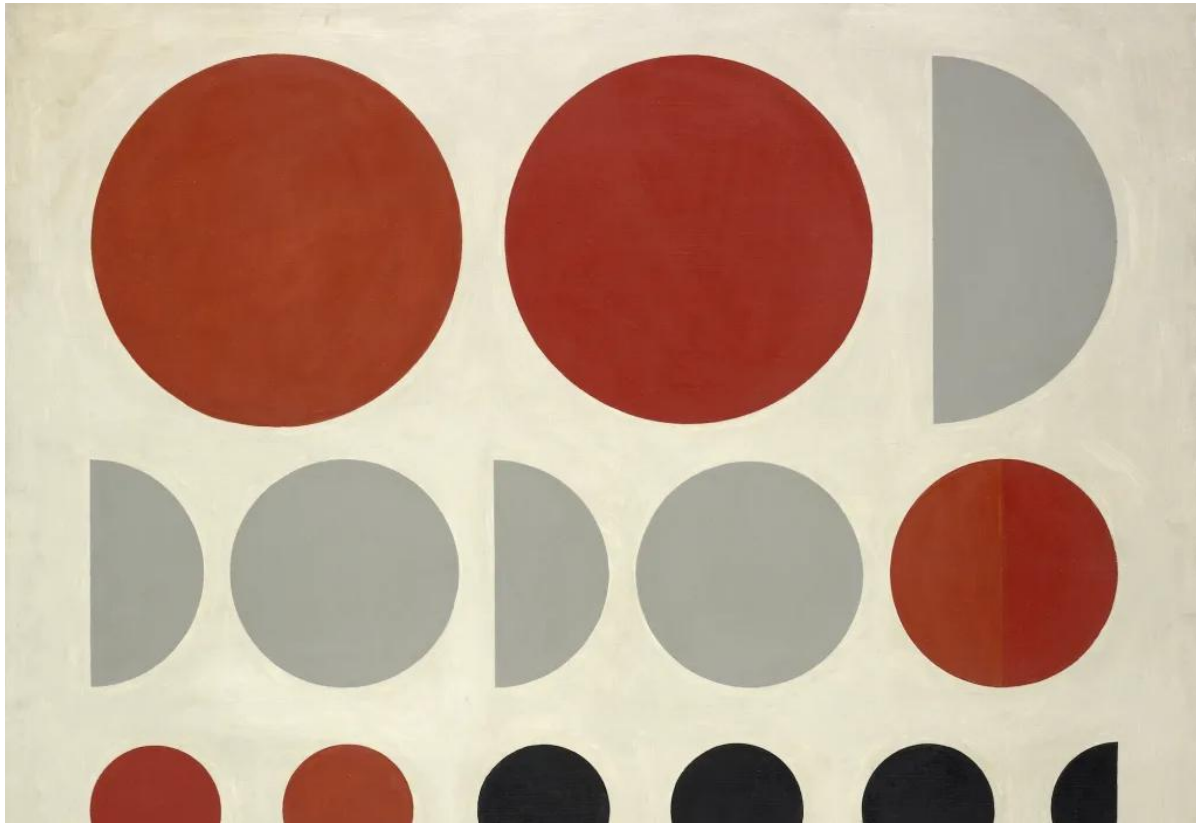


A DANGEROUS UNDERTAKING

And yet Scripture warns those who would talk about God:

“God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few” (Eccl. 5:2).

“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, because you know that we will be judged more strictly” (Ja. 3:1).



A DANGEROUS UNDERTAKING

*“To speak of God
is as dangerous as
it is necessary.”*

Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*
(1996), p. 205.

THE
EPISTEMOLOGICAL
CHALLENGE TO
THEOLOGY

KANT'S CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY

The Critique of Pure Reason (1781) wants to advance a rigorously scientific account of “knowledge”.

Drawing on the Empiricists, Kant argues that all knowledge comes from reflection upon our experiences, and their conditions of possibility.

We can have experience only of sensible phenomena – of finite objects within the natural world, subject to empirical cognition.



KANT'S CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY

These are infinitely beneath God: he transcends them all.

Even conceiving of God as a “First Cause” improperly assimilates him to the motion of the material world.

So, if our language & concepts are all drawn from our experience of things infinitely beneath God, are we really talking about **God** when we talk about God?



‘MODERN’ THEOLOGY & ‘GOD IN HIMSELF’

Kant concluded that there is no knowledge of God on the basis of reason, and we cannot know God as he is in himself, but only as he appears to us.

A great deal of Modern Protestant theology sided with Kant, arguing we can know God only by faith in his effects, and not in his nature or essence.



‘MODERN’ THEOLOGY & ‘GOD IN HIMSELF’

“There is no man ‘in himself’ just as there is no God ‘in himself’; both of these are empty abstractions.”
— Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 253.

But this is problematic — on what basis can we identify some event of history as a divine work without knowledge of God in himself?



THEOLOGY & ANALOGY

We have no immediate knowledge of God, nor methods capable of comprehending God.

But God has “accommodated” himself to our understanding, revealing himself by means of created signs: the prophets and apostles, Holy Scripture, and the incarnation.



THEOLOGY & ANALOGY

Because these are *created* mediums, they reveal God in finite or imperfect ways. But they do actually reveal *God*. Not because of what they are in themselves, but because they are instruments of *God*.

The names we use to describe God cannot therefore be applied univocally – as though they carried the exact same sense they do when applied to creatures; but by analogy to created things.



THE
PSYCHOLOGICAL
CHALLENGE TO
THEOLOGY

FEUERBACH'S CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY

The *Essence of Christianity* (1841) argued theology is impossible because religion is just a form of psychological projection.

Human self-consciousness is marked by its egoism — a love of self — but also by a deep anxiety about its vulnerability.



FEUERBACH'S CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY

Egoism and vulnerability comes to consciousness through social encounters; similarly, religion takes the form of a personal encounter — an 'I' with a 'Thou'.

Yet the God of Christianity is a strange mixture of personal and metaphysical qualities — God is intelligent, compassionate, and kind; but also infinite power, wisdom, and goodness



FEUERBACH'S CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY

These attributes appear in irreconcilable tension insofar as an abstract ideal cannot also be personal.

However, this tension makes sense if “religion” is an act of psychological projection in which the human longing for happiness is externalised, and conceived of as a being that is an idealised object of all human desire: “God”.



FEUERBACH'S CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY

When Christians worship “God”, they are really only worshipping an idealised form of their own existence.

God “is himself the realised wish of the heart, the wish exalted to the certainty of its fulfilment” (p. 82).



FEUERBACH'S CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY

Feuerbach examines individual doctrines to unearth their psychological significance:

- The Trinity is about the human desire for fellowship.
- The Law is about human moral ambition.
- Prayer is about the desire to be omnipotent.
- The Incarnation is about the infinite goodness of love for humankind.

Religion is a “dream of the human mind” and theology is a “delusion” (pp. 6, 8)—the real “secret of theology is anthropology” (p. 166)



THEOLOGY & THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

Though Christian Theology affirms God's existence, it cannot deny Feuerbach's critique of religion.

For Feuerbach, theology is always a self involving activity; we inevitably express not only what we know and believe, but what we love and what we are.



THEOLOGY & THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

And there is knowledge given in love. In the love of God (however misdirected), we come to know and love ourselves.

In the proper sense, this is true.

But it places a moral condition on theology: can the theologian ever set aside the egoism that so quickly turns faith into a means of self-fulfilment?



THEOLOGY & THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

As Luther says, the human heart is by nature curved in on itself.

And the Apostle teaches that it is the nature of idolatry to make God in our own image:

- “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” — Rom. 1:21-23

Ingratitude for God’s gifts inevitably corrupts the knowledge of God and so leads to improper representations of him



THEOLOGY AS IDOLATRY

In his book *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*, Owen argues that contemplation of God is seated in the affections.

It is in the nature of sinners that their affections “cleave to the dust” (*Works*, 7:395).

These appetites can so shape theological imagination that our very thoughts of God “cleave unto things most averse to him”:

“vain curiosity” — an “artificial accuracy”, occupied with “logical niceties” rather than holy “reverence and fear”.

“carnal boldness” — a love of worldly things, such that thoughts of God lack any “holy awfulness” (7:365-6)



THEOLOGY & DIVINE JUDGMENT

Theology can indeed become an exercise in projection and a means of spiritual evasion.

As a number of Liberation theologians have taught us, there is a necessary relation between our theology and our spiritual practice.

Theology is always undertaken by creatures — sinners — whose particular contexts and histories shape their witness.



THEOLOGY & DIVINE JUDGMENT

Unless we are infallible, we cannot exclude the possibility that our theology is a self serving projection.

We should not idealise any period of church history, nor make the “experience” of any segment of the church the final authority in matters of faith, because the knowledge of God is also the judgment of our experience.



THEOLOGY: THE REDEMPTION OF HUMAN SPEECH

Theology can advance only through humility and repentance:

“Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things” (Ps. 119:36-37).

But the church cannot fail to speak of God in view of its sin — it is called to bear witness.

THEOLOGY: THE REDEMPTION OF HUMAN SPEECH

The necessity of theology thus requires faith — that what is impossible for us is possible for God.

In particular, it requires faith in the possibility that God's grace may redeem the limitations and failings of our speech about God:

- “May your unfailing love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to your promise; then I will answer the one who taunts me, for I trust in your word” (Ps. 119:41-42)



READING

Turner's essay discusses the relevance of "apophatic" or "negative theology" for dialoguing with atheists by asking what it is that atheists deny about God that apophatic theologians do not also deny about God.

The chapter from *The Divine Names* by Pseudo-Dionysius gives you a look at one of the most influential apophatic theologies in Christian history.

Finally, in Barth's essay on Feuerbach, he develops further his theology of religion and revelation through an appreciative reading of Feuerbach.



READING

On God and Christ –
Gregory of Nazianzus

Ludwig Feuerbach, The
Essence of Christianity,
Chapters 1-4

Barth, Church Dogmatics, I/1
§7, "The Word of God,
Dogma, and Dogmatics"