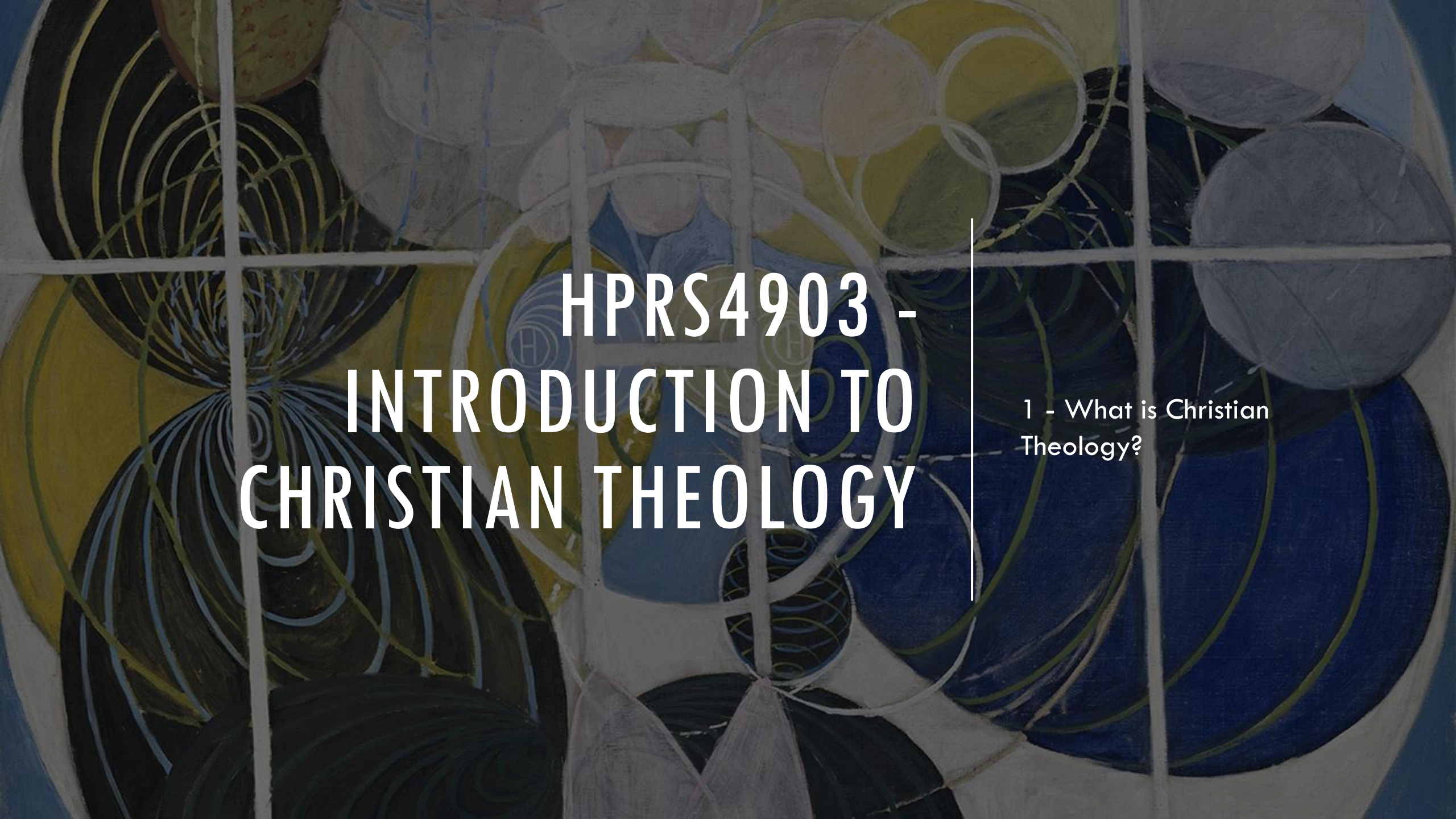
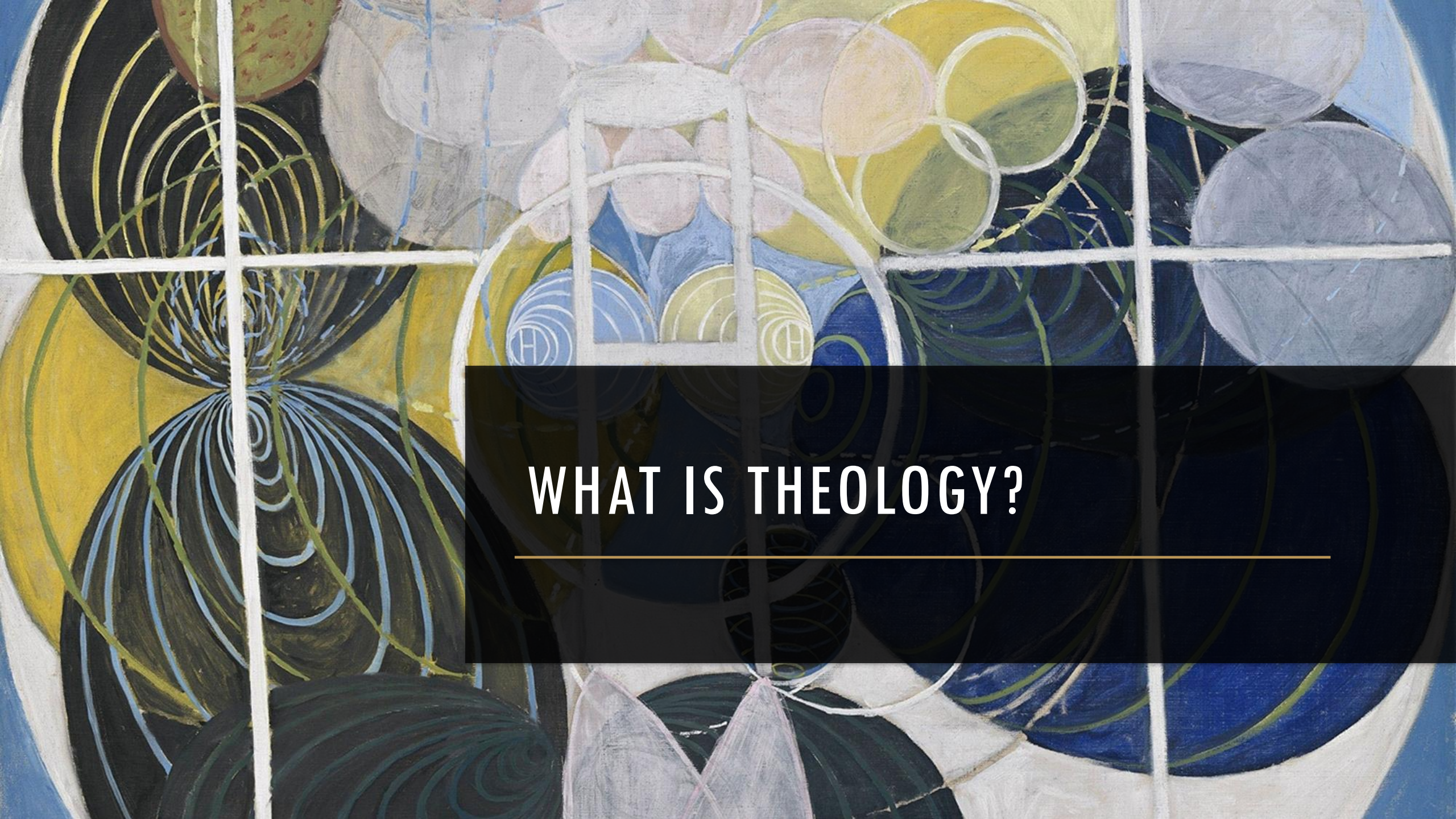




HPRS4903 - INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

1 - What is Christian
Theology?

An abstract painting featuring a grid of white lines that resemble a window pane. The background is composed of various organic, rounded shapes in shades of blue, yellow, and grey. Overlaid on these are numerous thin, curved lines in yellow, green, and blue, creating a sense of movement and depth. Some of these lines form concentric circles or spiral patterns. The overall effect is a complex, layered composition that suggests a view through a window into a vibrant, abstract world.

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY?

Christian theology begins with a simple but really important question:

What does it mean to think about God?

The word “theology” comes from two Greek terms—*theos* (God) and *logos* (word, reason, or account). Theology is therefore *logos about theos*: disciplined reflection on God.

Yet Christian theology is not merely abstract speculation. It arises from a specific faith, from the lived experience of a community that believes God has acted in history and continues to be present.

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY?

The classic definition, attributed to Anselm of Canterbury, is theology is “*fides quaerens intellectum*” or “faith seeking understanding.”

This phrase is crucial because theology does not begin from a place of neutrality or detachment, but from commitment. It presupposes faith in God and asks what that faith means, how it coheres, and how it can be articulated responsibly.

Anselm did not say “understanding seeking faith,” as though theology were an attempt to prove God’s existence from scratch. Instead, he wrote as a believer who wanted to understand more deeply what he already trusted.



WHAT IS CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY?

Christian theology is therefore neither blind belief nor cold rationalism. It is a reflective practice rooted in worship, prayer, and communal life.

At the same time, theology is genuinely intellectual. It uses argument, interpretation, and critical reasoning to generate questions like:

Who is God? What does it mean to say that Jesus is Lord?
How should Christians live?

Theology is the sustained attempt to answer such questions in a way that is faithful to Christian tradition and responsible in its historical and cultural context.



TALKING ABOUT GOD

Because theology is “talk about God,” it immediately faces a problem: God is not an object like other objects.

God is not part of the world in the way mountains or molecules are.

Classical Christian theology insists that God is the creator of all things, the source of being itself.

As a result, human language is always and necessarily inadequate when it comes to fully encapsulating the nature of God.



"It is difficult to conceive God, but to define him in words is an impossibility."

St Gregory of Nazianzus, 329-390AD

TALKING ABOUT GOD

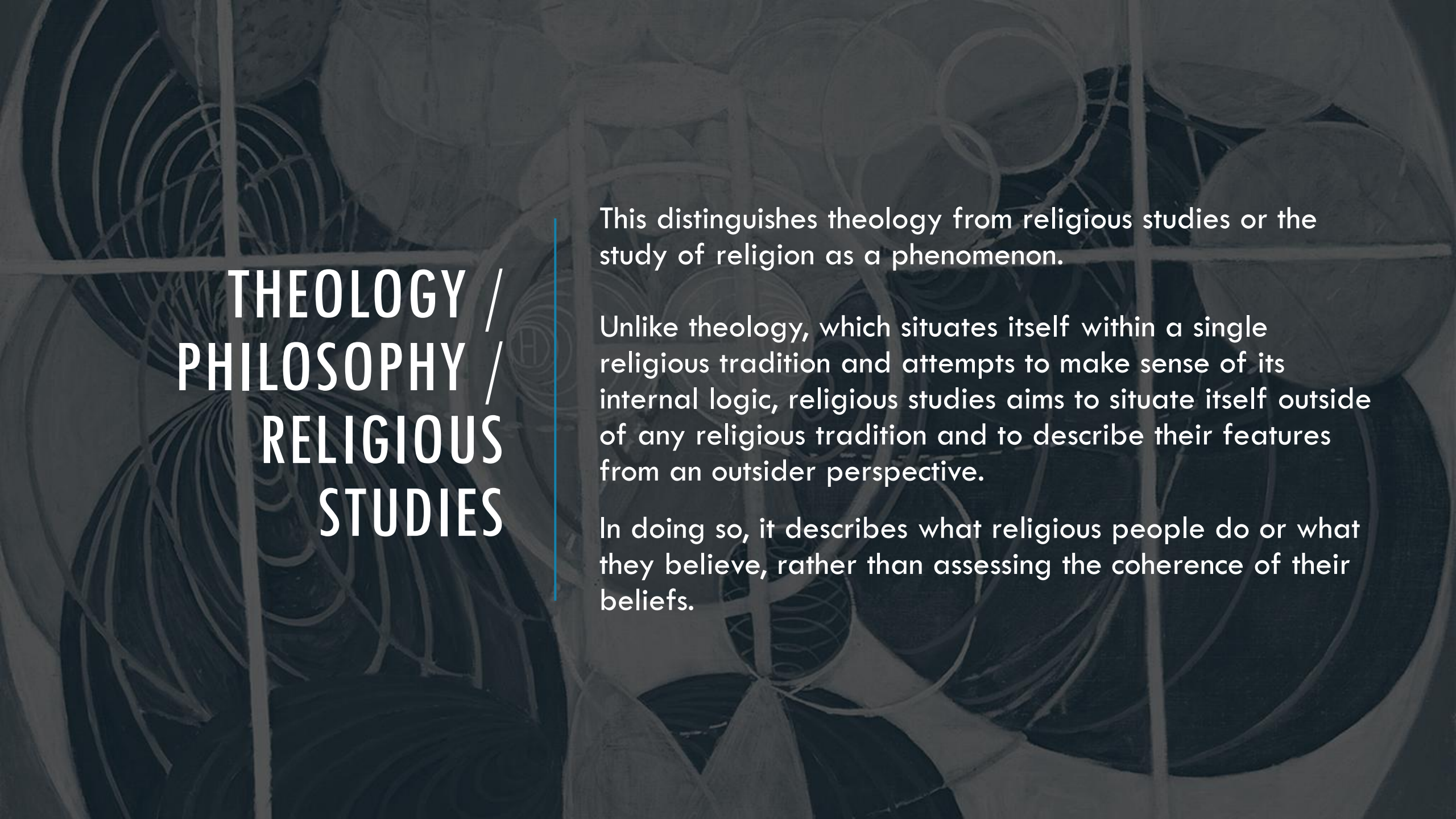
Yet Christian faith insists that God is not silent and that God chooses to be known.

Scripture speaks of God calling Abraham, liberating Israel, and becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Theology becomes possible because God has acted and spoken.

Christian theology is therefore not speculation about a completely unknown deity – it is reflection on a God who reveals himself in history.



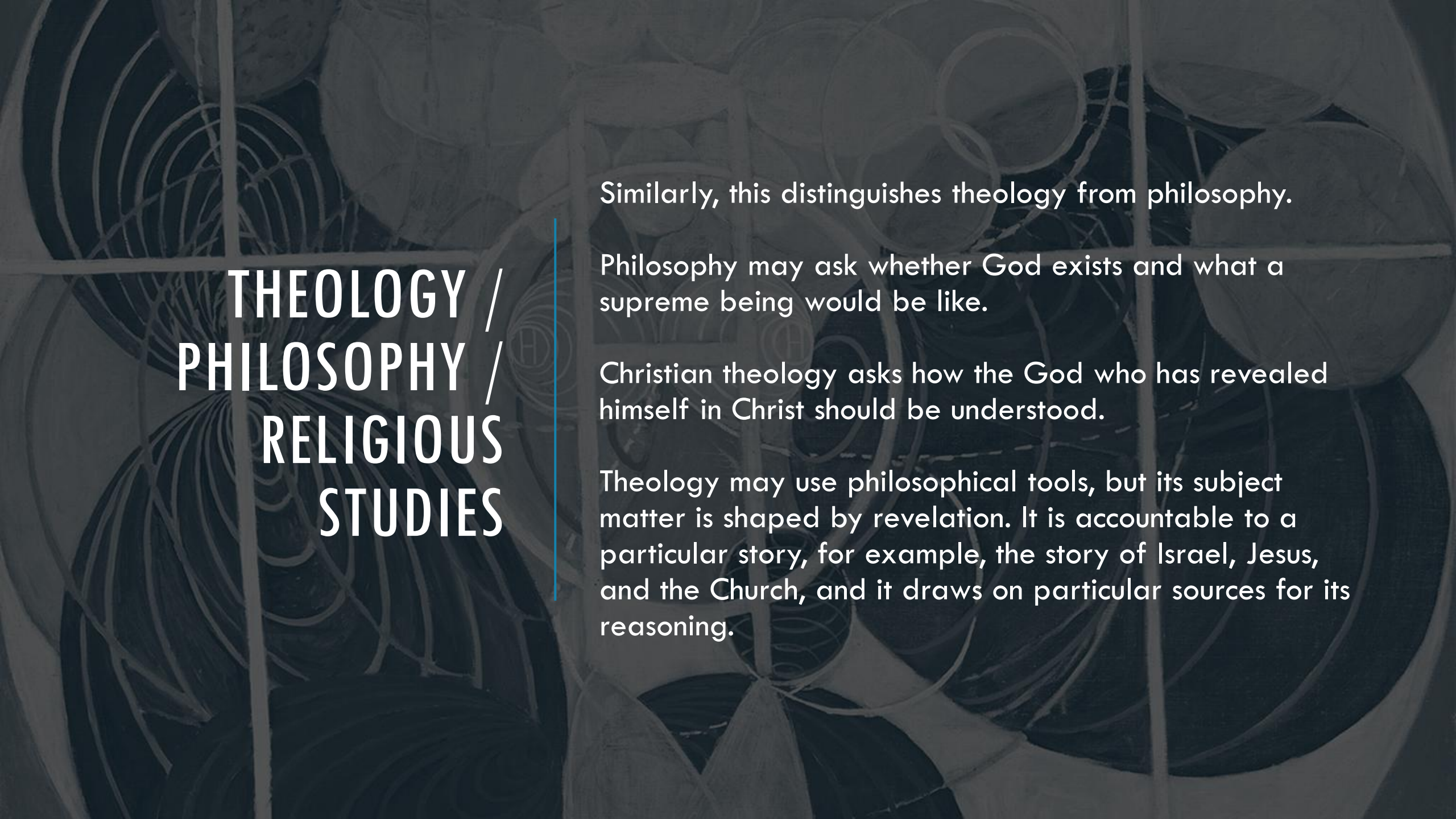


THEOLOGY / PHILOSOPHY / RELIGIOUS STUDIES

This distinguishes theology from religious studies or the study of religion as a phenomenon.

Unlike theology, which situates itself within a single religious tradition and attempts to make sense of its internal logic, religious studies aims to situate itself outside of any religious tradition and to describe their features from an outsider perspective.

In doing so, it describes what religious people do or what they believe, rather than assessing the coherence of their beliefs.



THEOLOGY / PHILOSOPHY / RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Similarly, this distinguishes theology from philosophy.

Philosophy may ask whether God exists and what a supreme being would be like.

Christian theology asks how the God who has revealed himself in Christ should be understood.

Theology may use philosophical tools, but its subject matter is shaped by revelation. It is accountable to a particular story, for example, the story of Israel, Jesus, and the Church, and it draws on particular sources for its reasoning.

An abstract painting featuring a grid of white lines that resemble a window pane. The background is composed of various organic, rounded shapes in shades of blue, yellow, and grey. Overlaid on these are numerous thin, curved lines in yellow, green, and blue, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall style is reminiscent of mid-20th-century abstract art.

THE SOURCES OF THEOLOGY

THE SOURCES OF THEOLOGY

REASON

Christian theology does not arise from a single source.

SCRIPTURE

Instead, it usually draws on several interconnected authorities, often summarised as scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

TRADITION

These are not equal in every Christian tradition, but together they form a framework for theological reflection.

EXPERIENCE

THE SOURCES OF THEOLOGY

The Bible is the primary witness to God's self-revelation and the normative source for Christian belief. Paul writes that "all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching" (2 Timothy 3:16). Theology therefore begins by interpreting these texts, in order to find out what they are trying to say to us.

Yet, Scripture is not a simple instruction manual. It is a diverse collection of texts written over centuries in different genres and contexts. Interpreting it requires historical awareness and theological judgment. Christians disagree about how literal or flexible biblical authority should be.

Theology therefore involves hermeneutics—the art of interpretation. To ask, "What does the Bible say?" is already to engage in a type of theology.



THE SOURCES OF THEOLOGY

Tradition refers to the accumulated wisdom of the Church: creeds, councils, liturgies, and the writings of theologians across centuries. The Nicene Creed, for example, represents the Church's attempt to articulate faith in God as Trinity.

Appealing to tradition reminds theologians that they do not think alone, but that they think about these questions through the thinking of theologians who have gone before.

Tradition provides continuity, preventing each generation from reinventing Christianity. At the same time, tradition itself develops. It is not a static archive but a living conversation.



THE SOURCES OF THEOLOGY

Similarly, reason plays an essential role in theology.

Christians are commanded to love God “with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). Theology uses logic, argument, and critical analysis. It asks whether beliefs cohere, whether they contradict each other, and how they can be expressed clearly.

If a theological claim implies that God is unjust or incoherent, reason presses for clarification. Thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas insisted that faith and reason ultimately cannot conflict, because both originate in God.



THE SOURCES OF THEOLOGY

Experience refers to our lived faith: prayer, worship, suffering, joy, etc. Mystics, reformers, and ordinary believers alike testify that faith is not merely intellectual, but is formed through our experience of life.

Liberation theology, for example, begins from the experience of poverty and injustice. Feminist theology begins from women's lived realities. These perspectives do not reject Scripture or tradition; they ask how these sources speak within particular contexts.



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THE NATURE OF THEOLOGY



THEOLOGY AS CONTESTED

Because theology draws on multiple sources and addresses changing contexts, it is inherently contested.

Christians do not agree on every doctrine.

They disagree about authority, interpretation, and practice.

The existence of different Christian denominations highlights this neatly - Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostal etc etc!



THEOLOGY AS CONTEXTUAL

Theology is also contextual.

Every theological statement is shaped by time and place.

Augustine wrote in a late Roman world; Aquinas in medieval Europe; Martin Luther in the Reformation; modern theologians in a global, pluralistic context.

Each addressed different questions. The core of Christian faith remains, but its articulation changes.



THEOLOGY AS CONTEXTUAL

This does not mean theology is arbitrary.

It is constrained by the limits of Scripture and the tradition of the Christian community.

Instead, it does mean that theology is always unfinished.

New circumstances provoke new questions. How should Christians think about artificial intelligence, climate change, or genetic engineering?



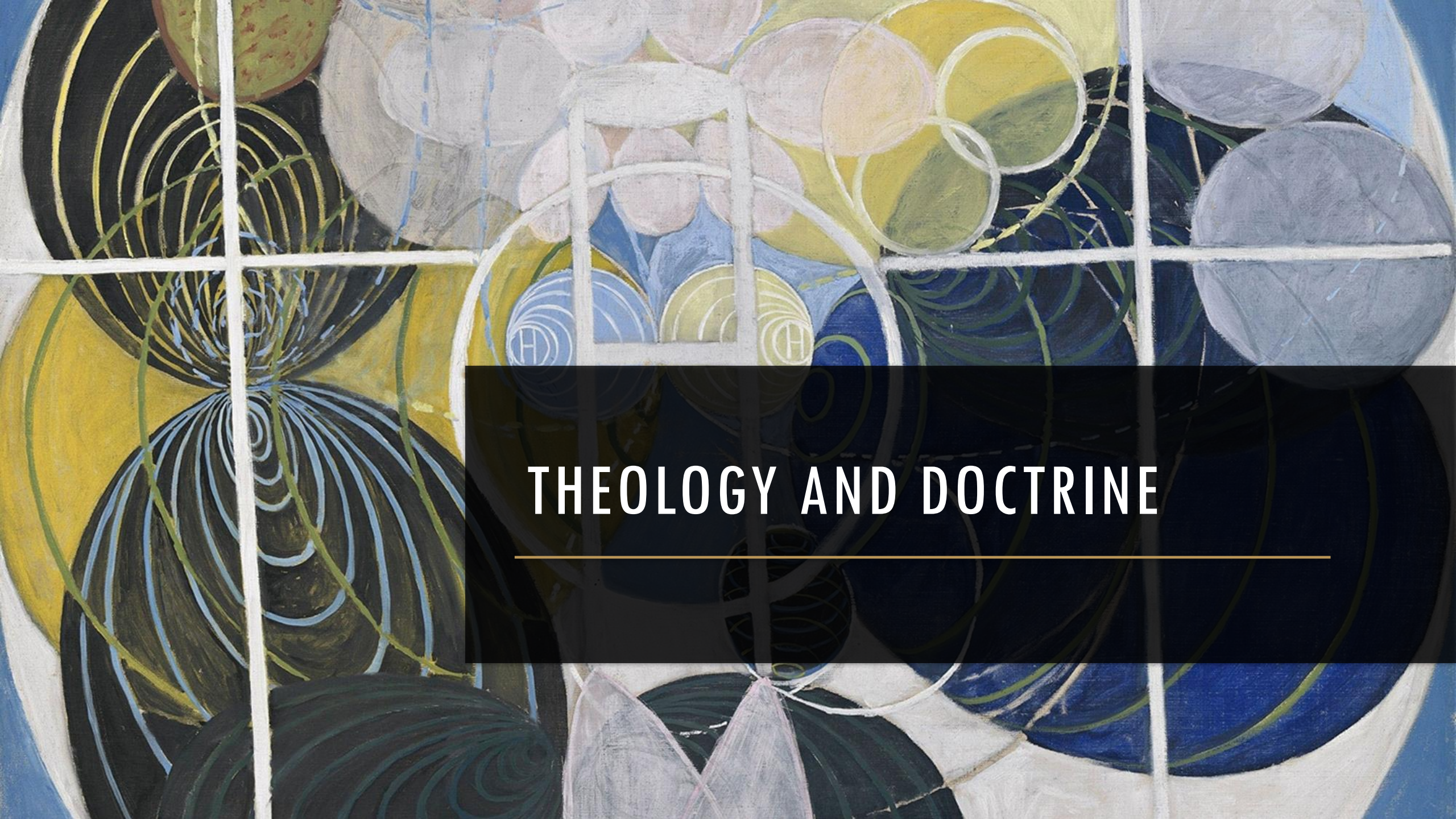
THEOLOGY AS CONTEXTUAL

This contextual character can be unsettling however.

If theology changes, is truth relative?

Christian theology answers that while God does not change, human understanding deepens.

Instead, the Church learns more and more about God over time. As John Henry Newman argued, doctrine develops in continuity, not contradiction.

An abstract painting featuring a central white frame that resembles a window or a screen. The background is composed of various organic, flowing shapes in shades of blue, green, yellow, and black. The frame is divided into four quadrants by a horizontal and a vertical line. The overall style is expressive and somewhat surreal, with a focus on naturalistic forms like leaves and flowers.

THEOLOGY AND DOCTRINE

THEOLOGY AND DOCTRINE

Another place which we have to unpick is the relationship between theology and doctrine – closely related but not identical.

Doctrine refers to the authoritative teachings of the Church – statements such as “God is Trinity,” “Christ is fully divine and fully human,” or “God is the creator of all.”

These doctrines emerge from theological reflection and become the standards for faith.

Theology is the process by which those doctrines are explored, defended, criticised, and reinterpreted – the working out of what they mean and how they work.



THEOLOGY AND DOCTRINE

Another way of thinking about this is as doctrine provides boundaries; theology works within and sometimes tests them.

A doctrine like the Trinity did not fall from heaven fully formed, instead it emerged through centuries of theological debate and argument!

Conversely, doctrine gives theology stability.

The relationship is dynamic: theology serves doctrine by clarifying it while doctrine guides theology by setting its horizons and scope.



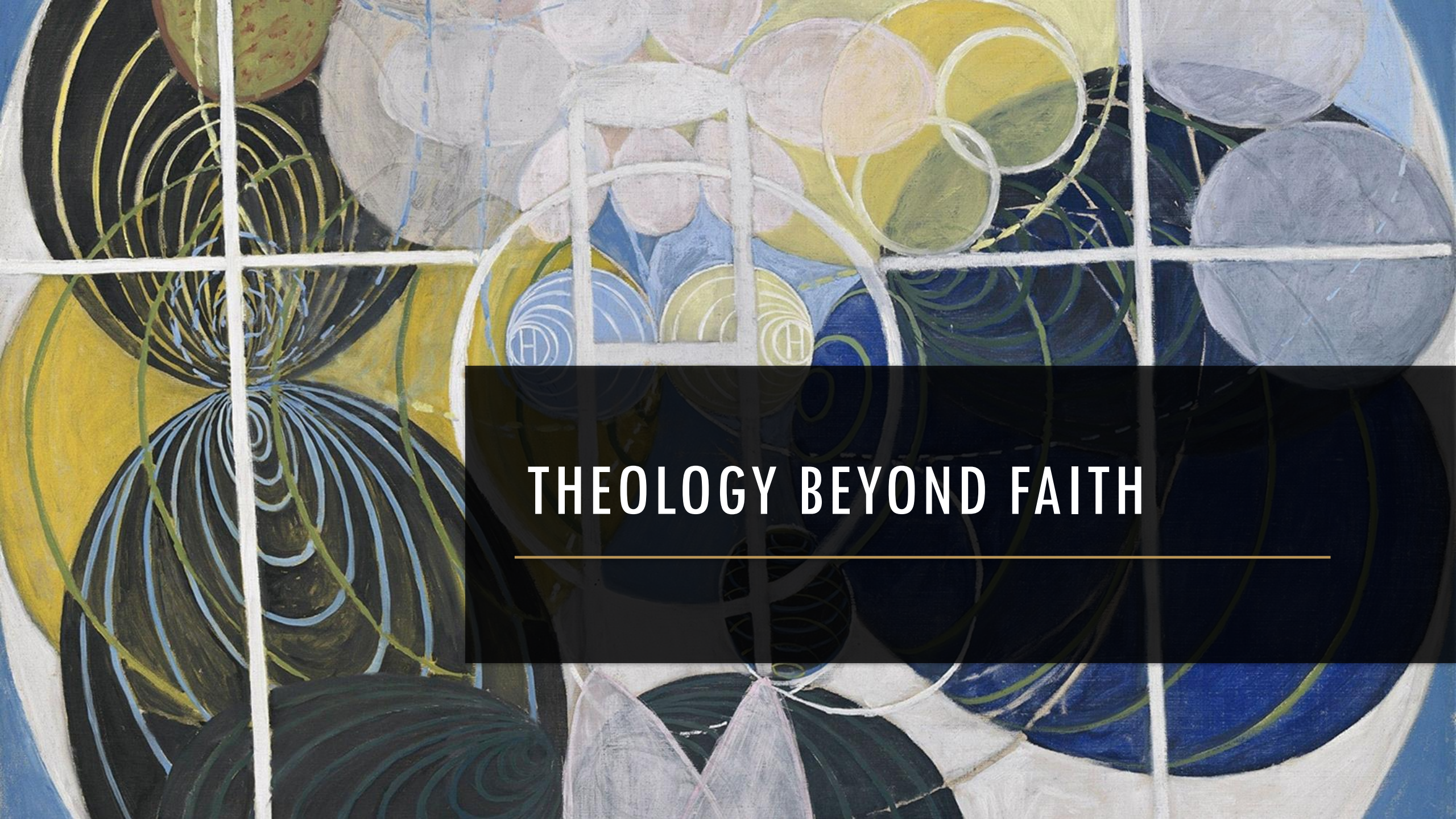
THEOLOGY AND DOCTRINE

An important point here is that this also means that theology is not only descriptive – telling us what the Bible or the Church already say.

Instead, it is **constructive** and **normative**.

It asks not only *what Christians have believed*, but *what Christians should believe*.



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THEOLOGY BEYOND FAITH

THEOLOGY BEYOND FAITH

So, what are we left with?

Many students will encounter Christianity alongside other religions, scientific explanations, and moral frameworks. Theology must therefore articulate faith in conversation with other disciplines. It must show that Christian belief is intellectually serious and morally significant.

At the same time, theology resists reduction. It is not sociology, psychology, or literary criticism, though it may use their insights. It asks a distinctive question: *Who is God, and what does that mean for human life?* That question cannot be settled by empirical methods alone.



THEOLOGY BEYOND FAITH

For students who do not identify as religious, theology remains a valuable intellectual discipline because it cultivates habits of critical reasoning that extend far beyond faith.

The study of theology trains students to analyse complex texts, evaluate competing interpretations, and assess the authority and reliability of sources – all of which are skills central to any humanities education.



THEOLOGY BEYOND FAITH

Engaging theological arguments also sharpens the ability to recognise underlying assumptions, trace how ideas develop over time, and understand how beliefs shape cultures and institutions.

Moreover, theology invites sustained reflection on moral reasoning: it asks how claims about truth, value, and responsibility are justified, and how ethical frameworks are constructed.

Even without personal belief, you will learn to interrogate how humans make meaning, justify norms, and respond to ultimate questions. In this way, theology becomes a rigorous exercise in thinking properly about some of the most enduring intellectual and moral problems in human history.





READINGS

Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, ch. 1

Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Part II – “5 Getting Started: Preliminaries” & “6 The Sources of Theology”