

UNIT 8: BEGINNING THEOLOGICAL STUDY

Defining terms: What is theology?

The word theology (or *theologia*) is embedded in ancient Greek tradition and religious philosophy. In the fifth century BCE the word was used to describe the movements of the gods (such as Zeus, Apollo, Poseidon) within the Greek pantheon. By the third century, its use had developed under the influence of **Stoicism**.

Stoicism was a movement in Greek thought which almost certainly influenced the development of Christian thinking and conceptualisation. From the Greek *stoa* meaning 'porch', the word refers to the porch in Athens in which Zeno of Citium (335-263 BC) lectured from around 312, thus inspiring a movement of followers. We know that the Stoics (disciples of Zeno) still existed in the New Testament period and possibly influenced Paul. Consider, for example, the following verse:

Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said 'What does this babblers want to say'. Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities' (Acts 17.18).

There are two particular aspects to Stoic thought which are significant for our definition of theology:

1. The logos was considered to be the 'word' or 'reason' or 'word-soul' in which everybody coming into the world participates. This gives rise to a sense of the 'divine spark' in each person. This is what connects the wise with divine Reason, which is the force which creates and sustains the universe.
2. The Stoics considered that there was a close relationship between nature and reason. Nature is reasonable. Man's highest duty is to obey his nature or his reason (the two are, in fact, synonymous) and therefore to disregard the pleasures or sufferings of the moment ('being stoical').

Stoicism taught that the highest good (virtue) is based on knowledge. The wise are those who live in harmony with the divine Reason and they alone are truly virtuous.

A three-fold distinction emerged within Greek thought. Theology could be

1. mythical - speaking about the gods of the pantheon;
2. civic - ceremonial and cultic aspects (attending worship, the temple, sacrifice), which was required of the citizens of the Greek states;
3. rational - an attempt to understand reality (the self, the universe and anything transcendent). In some senses, then, *theology* was the same as *philosophy* for the ancient Greeks.

However, the word theology does not appear in the Bible. The Old Testament was written in the period before Greek influence, but the New Testament writers must have rejected the Greek conceptualisation. The word Theos is used for God in the New Testament but it refers not to the Greek pantheon, but to the one true God revealed in the Old Testament as Yahweh and so recently revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This word is not directly related to myth, as with the Greek pantheon (where the activities of the gods were speculated upon) but to a history in which it is thought God has acted, i.e., the history of Israel and the way in which the people interacted with God.

From this tradition, theology became the attempt within the Judeo-Christian tradition to understand the transcendent and ultimate reality. In other words, to understand God, the meaning and purpose of life from the claim that God was involved in history through the people of Israel and supremely in Jesus Christ. As such, theology can be defined as 'rational talk (or discussion) about God' - Θεος λογος. This belief that God was present in the history of Israel and supremely in the man Jesus Christ that resulted in the term being used for the study of the scriptures.

Theology, then, is the rational study of the relationship between God and his (human) creation as it is perceived from the beginning (creation) to the end (consummation), a narrative which is contained in the Bible. This is the basis but it is often qualified and adapted by the addition of some other adjective;

1. theology can be defined under different ecclesiastical traditions (e.g. Catholic, Protestant)
2. theology can be defined on its basis, i.e. where you look for God (e.g. natural, credal, biblical)
3. theology can be defined in terms of its dominant theme (e.g. liberation, feminist, evangelical, etc.)

Theology as a second order discipline

It is largely agreed that theology is a 'second order discipline'. This means that it is undertaken as a response to a primary event. Something has to happen (or has to have happened) before we can begin the theological task. In other words, we have to know something about God in order to talk rationally about him. Basically, there needs to have been revelation before theology becomes possible.

When you think about it, this is a reasonable proposition. If theology is rational reflection and discussion, it requires some kind of prior knowledge or experience of the subject under discussion in order to proceed.

1. Theology proceeds largely on the basis of the revelation of God as it is witnessed to by Scripture, though it also proceeds according to how

- people (i) perceive the world around them and (ii) reflect philosophically on what the meaning of a term like God can be.
2. When perceiving the world and how it seems to be constructed, this is called natural theology. It concerns (e.g.) observing the order within the natural realm and concluding that order has been placed there by one who has ordered it.
 3. When reflecting philosophically, it is called metaphysics. It concerns (e.g.) asking the question 'If there is a God, what *must* that God be like?' It is this that defines God in terms of ultimate truth, beauty, goodness; of Being; of having attributes of omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience etc.

In all these examples, one thing has to be taken for granted: that God actually exists.

Anselm (1033-1109) was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093. In his famous work the *Proslogion* he famously defined theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* - faith seeking understanding. He wrote:

I do not seek to understand that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also that "unless I believe, I shall not understand".

Theology comes after the expression of faith or trust in God. Theology cannot take place in a vacuum and faith in God, and the God who has been revealed in a particular way (in Jesus Christ, in nature, etc.), gives the main source for all our rational discourse about God. Biblical knowledge, knowledge of the world around and philosophical categories are all important, then, in attempting to do theology.

Furthermore, theology requires decision and commitment to that notion of faith. According to Dorothee Solle, *quaerens* means willingness to die for beliefs while still maintaining an element of doubt. Thus it enables us to say that there is a clear content to theological reflection, but that there are limits to our theology because, as finite human beings, we can never know entirely what and who 'God' is.

The scope of Theology

According to the German Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, theology is a 'field encompassing field'. The idea here is that theology's agenda is sufficiently wide to encompass other fields. Whether this means that they are dialogue partners or not is unclear: does theology encompass (e.g.) science, sociology and psychology in such a way as to dictate to them, or must it also sit back and listen?

Nevertheless, Pannenberg seems to suggest that theology always works in dialogue with other fields of study.

According to Nicholas Lash, theology requires talking about everything from a particular standpoint. Again, this may infer that theology lays down rules and contributes to other discussions without having its own core challenged by other disciplines. What Lash suggests is that there is no limit to theological discourse because it requires that we look to all fields of human knowledge and then relate them to what we think (or believe) we know about God (as revealed in the theological tradition through the people of Israel and supremely in Jesus Christ).

This brings us to the question of an applied or a practical theology. According to Rebecca Chopp and Gabriel Fackre, theology requires the 'continual transformation of Christian teachings in relation to the needs of Christian praxis'. Praxis is the Greek word for action, practical ability, practice. It was used by Karl Marx, by Latin American Liberation Theologians and by the Roman Catholic Edward Schillebeeckx to denote a combination of action and reflection aimed at transforming an oppressive situation. It is the dynamic which motivates action which is aimed at recognisable change.

This definition recognises that the content of Christian theology is not fixed; and thus not fixed in a way that it can be applied to other debates and issues. The content of theology itself (its formulae about God etc.) may in fact be challenged by what it finds in other disciplines and, indeed, by what it confronts in the needs of the world.

There is, of course, a danger here when Chopp and Fackre suggest that Christian teachings are transformed by the exigencies of each and every context. Action (life, living) comes first and theology follows. In fact, the Christian life can only be so described once there is a theological understanding of what Christianity is.

Defining Parameters

The problem we face is the lack of agreement concerning the scope, claims and methods of theology.

1. On the one hand, people believe that theology concerns the handing down of timeless truths from which we can deduce what is to be believed and done now. Authority is located within the scriptures, the creeds and the interpretation of the church.
2. On the other hand, there are those who believe that theology primarily concerns the expression of experience here and now. It is the present situation and the way it affects the individual, with its challenges to knowledge, its discoveries, its doubts and its certainties, that can be analysed to discover what God is doing. This is sometimes termed existentialism.

In the first description, we have authority discovered outside ourselves in historical discussions and decisions. In the second, there is nothing beyond the realm of personal experience. It is authoritative, but not universally so. People have different experiences and interpret them differently.

The second definition is inadequate because it makes God dependent on individual apprehension. In other words, God's reality is defined by and limited to the way every individual wishes to see God. This can lead to one individual affirming God's love and grace in Jesus Christ, the next in denying that and embracing that Allah is the only God and Mohammed is his true prophet, and still another disbelieving in God completely. It raises two important problems:

1. What is the nature of truth? Can individuals really decide what is true when they come to such different conclusions? This may be easily answered (in our current climate) by those who want to affirm that Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and all other people who adhere to a religious tradition are in fact harking after the same reality. But can the theist (the believer in God) and the atheist *both* be right?
2. Is there not more than the individual? This attitude implies that there is only the individual and reality can only be perceived by individuals. What about the community?

The problem outlined here is a problem of the subject of theology, i.e. the problem which someone faces when they do theology. Our understanding of God is the issue. The ultimate concern of the theologian is not man (anthropology), not the understanding of man (psychology) nor religion (phenomenology), but God. The difficulty is that God's nature itself is elusive. God is not directly accessible and is never completely understandable or knowable.

In Exodus 33.18f, for example, Moses only glimpses God as he goes by. No-one can look at God and live. The passage emphasises the greatness and otherness of God and places him beyond our understanding. Yet the conviction from which Christianity works is that in Jesus of Nazareth God has been made known. Nevertheless, this revelation remains mysterious. Not all can see and not all can hear.

Furthermore, there is a conviction that there is more to God than we can ever fully know, otherwise he would not be God and we would not simply be creatures. This results in us making statements about what God is like (kataphatic) and what God is not like (apophatic)

The Apophatic relates to what is beyond expression in speech (from the Greek *apophasis*, 'negation' or 'denial'). God is transcendent and therefore above expression in our speech. There has to be recognised an inadequacy of all

attempts to describe absolute majesty of God. All affirmation is qualified by negation. Technically this kind of theology belongs within the Eastern Orthodox tradition and is quite sophisticated. At its simplest it can be seen in categories such as 'infinite' and 'immortal' because, strictly, these tell us something about what God is *not* rather than what God *is*. As a result, all good theology will recognise that God's nature is fundamentally elusive. That which we know through revelation (in Jesus or in the scriptures) or through intuition (in natural theology or looking at personal experience) is only 'as through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12).

But we begin here, trusting the revelation and using our God-given intellect in order to learn more about the object of theology. And we gain this from the history of the community of faith. It belongs to the community and therefore cannot be an individual interpretation. It is seen in the way in which it has lived and trusted the testimony and witness of the scriptures and apostles. Christian history, with its countless theologians (from Augustine to Anselm, Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Barth, Moltmann) and its creeds and definitions (The Apostles Creed, The Nicene Creed, the Chalcedon Definition) provides our source material, but we must continue to explore, to think rationally and to question persistently that which comes before us.

In summary

- Theology is talk about God
- God is only ever partially known
- This God must be discussed rationally

To make this possible, we need a starting point and we must define what our starting point is going to be.

Theology as *Christian* Theology

Any talk about God is theology, but mostly talk about God belongs within a particular religious tradition. Thus it is possible to have Jewish theology, Hindu theology, Islamic theology and so on. Traditionally, in western Europe, the word theology has tended to be restricted to Christian theology. This is a historical phenomenon. Because it could be assumed that the vast majority of religious people attended the Christian church, and partly because of the existence of an Established Church (still in England, not since 1920 in Wales), it was fairly reasonable to assume that theology (University Departments and Theological Colleges) were dealing with Christian theology. It is generally the case today that theology is broadly Christian based while departments of Religious Studies concentrate on the world religions.

Christian theology therefore means that we are talking about God and talking about other things from a particular standpoint, namely that of Christianity. So the question we need to ask is what constitutes Christianity?

What is Christianity?

Christianity is a historical faith

This has three important aspects

1. It centres on particular events at a particular time at a particular place and on a particular man. Christianity asserts that the man Jesus of Nazareth was in fact God incarnate, Immanuel, God with us, who taught with authority, healed the sick, was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was vindicated by God through resurrection. It is in the historical particularity of the Jesus story, as it is contained and witnessed to in the Gospels, that salvation has been made possible and God has been made known.
2. Because it is historical, that is the telling of the story also has a history (2,000 years plus of history), we cannot simply approach it anew and afresh. There are twenty centuries of theological reflection and formulation which have given form to Christian belief, the belief of the church and it is that history which has formed those who have a Christian belief and has formed the church institutions as they exist now. These two aspects are witnessed to in the Creeds.
3. Because it is historical, theology can never just be a response to personal and individual religious or spiritual experience. It comes with its own baggage accumulated over the centuries. Therefore, although it is a 'second order discipline', it is one which we already experience, and take part in if we are within a religious context because theology is going on all the time, even when we are not 'doing theology'. There is a need, then, to do theology according to your confession, faith, discovery, revelation, but to do so within the history which belongs to Christianity.

Christianity is not just a historical movement

But it is important to note that Christianity is not merely a social movement of history. It points also to the end or the fulfilment of history. Christianity is eschatological or it has an eschatological message.

The resurrection of Jesus was interpreted as an event of universal significance, the first fruits of resurrection of all people. This resurrection is to judgement when God will proclaim sentence on men and women. Christianity asserts that in Christ there is no condemnation and so offers the assurance that on the day of Judgement the verdict will be one of 'not guilty' though a 'guilty' verdict would have been deserved. The resurrection as vindication of Jesus also holds that he will have a special role in this judgement. He is to return at the end of the age to judge the living and the dead.

There is not only a return at the end of the age but there is a promise that he is present always with his followers.

‘Lo I am with you always even unto the end of the world’ (Mt. 28:20)

‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’ (Mt. 18:20)

Consequently, our attitudes towards the content of Christianity will be formed by

1. the scriptures
2. the historical and classical creeds of the church: Nicaea, Apostles etc.
3. tradition in as much as it helps to elucidate these two.
4. the conviction that God in Christ is a living presence which in turn requires theology to be a fluid discipline, responding to life and God’s presence and activity in it.

In summary

Christianity, then, asserts that God is Trinity, eternally three but also eternally one; traditionally named as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, existing in mutual love. The second person of the Trinity became flesh and dwelt on earth redeeming humankind from sin by his death and resurrection. This God is leading creation towards its fulfilment but his Kingdom is already present because of this action. What is now partial shall be complete. In the meantime there is the church as Christ’s body on earth empowered by the Holy Spirit to present a worshipping and serving witness to the world.