Introduction

Theology as Faith in Search of Understanding

It is a continual theme of Christian theology that every new generation must take up the task of "faith in search of understanding" with fresh vigor and creativity. Over the centuries, this task has been undertaken by many, sometimes in the midst of enormous social crisis, sometimes in the stayed quiet of history's rare moments of peace. It is a task that has been embarked on when Christian theology has voiced the thoughts of the powerful and also in cases when only stifled whispers of a repressed and silenced faith could be heard. It is a task as hard as it is rewarding, as fraught with tensions as it is guided by grounding wisdoms, a task both invigorating and daunting, an enterprise filled with as many surprises as familiar truths.

In the pages of this book we offer you a glimpse of what this task looks like when undertaken by a committed, diverse group of theologians who stand at the beginning of a new millennium and in the center of the world's most powerful empire and ask again: How should the Christian faith be understood today, here and now, in this place and time? No one doubts that religious beliefs have the power to tear down cities as well as build up nations, that theology has the capacity to save lives as well as to take them. Each of us thus recognizes that faith matters profoundly and therefore theology really is a life-and-death endeavor. We also acknowledge that simple answers are not easy to find and that the faith we seek to comprehend is alive in the world and yet elusive and pluralistic in its forms. Such a challenge has made the writing of this book an exercise in collaborative humility. As theologians, we are committed to speaking boldly about a faith we passionately hold; as scholars and activists, we remain aware of the complexity, multiplicity, and indeterminacy of our project and its claims. Fortunately, we find this challenge an exciting one, a fact that puts us in the good company of generations of theologians who have struggled with precisely this tension.

The writers of this book have chosen to refer to ourselves by the rather mundane name "The Workgroup on Constructive Christian Theology." This title tries to say simply what we do: each year, we gather as teachers of

Christian theology to *work* to put our creative energies together and make theology. We do so as a *group*; it is a collective endeavor from its beginning to its end. And our goal is to be *constructive*. We are not interested in merely describing what theology has been; we are trying to understand and construct it in the present, to imagine what life-giving faith can be in today's world. In doing so, as with any construction job, we are attempting to build a viable structure. In our case, that structure is an inhabitable, beautiful, and truthful *theology*. Our biggest hope in writing this book is that those who read it might be inspired to do the same: to collaborate in writing new scripts for the deep wisdoms that live in your faith and, in doing so, to engage with vigor and passion in the enterprise of *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith in search of understanding).

A Short History of the Workgroup

Like all theological endeavors that seek to understand the Christian faith, our project has a particular story behind it, one that stretches back several decades and includes within it a unique history of personalities, topics, and social challenges. The present book is the fourth in a series of textbooks produced over the past thirty-five years by consecutive generations of the Workgroup, each of which has been committed in its own distinctive way to the task of doing constructive theology in an open and engaged manner.

Critically Liberal Theology

The first two volumes, *Christian Theology* (1982) and *Readings in Christian Theology* (1985), represented the best theological thinking of a generation of scholars responding to the need for a popular theology textbook that could articulate for students a vision of faith that was theologically traditional and at the same time socially liberal and intellectually critical. For them, writing in the early eighties, this required sympathetic engagement with what many less sympathetic, conservative Christians regarded as threatening forces, such as the growing appeal of scientific and historical knowledge and the liberal social change that antiwar activism, the civil rights movement, and the women's movement had prompted in churches across North America. Like the writers of the present volume, this first generation was convinced that a strongly progressive political vision and classical theology were well-suited companions, a sense first nurtured in them by their own teachers, figures like Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr, Karl Rahner, and Karl Barth. Their texts

were far-reaching in the scope of topics they treated and in the range of their audiences, a fact attested by their continued use in many of our theology classrooms today.

Postmodern Liberation Theology

Twelve years later, the second generation of Workgroup theologians published a sequel to the first two, entitled *Reconstructing Christian Theology* (1994). While they retained a commitment to writing vital, emancipatory theology, they recognized that their audiences had changed and that they faced a new set of challenges. Their predecessors' confidence in liberalism and critical modernism had begun to crumble under the weight of a variety of political and intellectual forces that pushed this second group to take even more seriously than before the contextual character of theological reflection. On the political front, the book listened closely to the voices and concerns of womanist, *mujerista*, feminist, lesbian and gay, disabled, and environmentalist activists and theologians in North America and tried to show that rethinking our assumptions about such things as race and gender also requires rethinking our basic theological assumptions about who God is (Is God masculine, feminine, Hispanic, African American, etc.?) and who we are (Are we women, men, gay, straight, subjects, persons, creatures, human beings, etc.?).

Similarly, this second generation attended to the revolutionary claims of liberation theologians speaking from the so-called third world about the legacies of colonialism and correlative issues of economic and cultural justice, pointing out that when it comes to community formation, theology can just as easily be used to oppress people as to liberate them. On the philosophical front, the destabilizing claims of postmodernist theory in all its varieties pressed this group of theologians to think even more critically than their teachers about the fragility of truth claims and the illusory character of "principles" and "natures," such as the seeming givens of race and gender, to name just two. In response to all these challenges and possibilities, the book offered a theological vision based on a thoroughgoing marriage of faith claims and political contexts. In doing so, it both followed through and courageously challenged the claims of the text before it.

A New Constructive Theology

A decade later, the Workgroup underwent yet another reconstruction and, with many new theologians on board, began the third phase of this ongoing

conversation. This book is the product of that phase. Like our predecessors, we are determined to keep faith vitally connected to the present-day world and its pressing concerns, and, as in the previous volumes, we seek to do this in a collaborative, critical, and constructive mode. But we also face a new set of challenges. We continue to be inspired by the liberal theological agenda expressed in the first set of volumes, and we share the political and social concerns of the second volume as well, but we find ourselves living in different times and speaking to a very different generation of students.

While some of our students could benefit from liberal and liberationist critiques of an overconfident, complacent, but well-formed faith (the task that rightly marked the endeavor of the previous volumes), many who enter our classrooms today know little to nothing about Christian theology and have only a rudimentary familiarity with Christian scriptures. They have no living memory of the Vietnam War; most of their mothers work; they accept racial, ethnic, and religious pluralism as an established fact of North American life; and they have only sporadically attended church and have usually done so in at least three different denominations. They come to our classrooms because they are interested in spirituality and in exploring the deep questions of life, but they are not traditionally "churched." They also come seeking a sense of communal belonging, a connection to traditions. They have an earnest desire to be more socially involved and politically active, but they are not engaged, for the most part, in longstanding religious communities or active political organizations. Our students are thus restless and, to a large degree, theologically rootless. They are looking for bold visions of hope in an age when liberal mainline churches are struggling to survive and when possibilities for emancipatory social change shrink daily. In this context, they are asking us, their classroom professors, for help in figuring out how to build a liberating "spiritual" path to the future.

Oddly, this means that we are required to teach our students the basics of Christian theology while at the same time trying to teach them to be creative and critical with respect to its rich and conflicted heritage. This has put us in the exciting but unusual position of being both Christianity's wise conservators and its harsh critics—all the while trying to construct bold visions of hope and justice for a world in desperate need of them.

How does a group of theologians go about doing this? We had no clear answer to this question when we first began discussing the writing of this book. We were not even sure how to get started. This was in part due to the large size of the group. In previous generations of the Workgroup, the number of theologians working together had been limited to fifteen. For this

book, the group had been intentionally expanded to include over fifty teachers of theology; with this increase in size came an unprecedented level of diversity, a fact that we all realized could either energize or paralyze us. Not only are we diverse with respect to race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and region (to name only a few of the most obvious differences), but we hail from ecclesial backgrounds ranging from Southern Baptist to Roman Catholic and teach in a variety of institutions, from small church-related colleges and seminaries to big state universities and divinity schools. Moreover, our age range is wide, running from seventy-something all the way back to the mid-twenties.

How does a group this large and diverse find enough cohesion to write a collaborative textbook filled with boldly articulated theological visions? One obvious answer might have been for us to have decided from the outset on a shared *methodology* for doing theology. For most of the twentieth century, shared method—a common perspective on the proper task and form of theology—had been, in fact, the key point of agreement around which major "schools of theology" formed and out of which grew the rationale for numerous collaborative endeavors such as ours. If we had chosen this formal, conceptual route, the options before us would have been dazzling: we could have been liberals, postliberals, or liberationists; feminists, Neoorthodox dogmaticians, or process thinkers; historicists, pragmatists, cultural theorists, or postmodernists of either the Derridian or Marxist variety; and so on. Clearly, differences concerning method constituted one of the group's most unwieldy forms of diversity. It quickly became apparent that if we wanted to reach a methodological consensus about this book before we started writing it, the project might well remain just an editor's wild fantasy.

So we decided to talk about something we all held in common: teaching, that activity to which we are all deeply committed. We asked: Who are our students? What sort of issues and challenges enter our classrooms daily? What kind of pedagogical practices do we find most useful? What are the core theological insights we find ourselves actually teaching? Perhaps most important, what do our practices suggest about what we believe theology is? At the end of a hard day of work, what kind of theology have we passed on to our students—sometimes to our own surprise? What theological visions are embedded in our activities as professors, day in and day out? And how might we write a text that reflects this reality?

We soon discovered that we shared much more than we had imagined, and it was out of the soil of these conversations that this book grew. Amazingly enough, a strong shared understanding of theology also emerged, and

along with it—surprise, surprise—we even discovered a few of those collectively held methodological insights that at first seemed so elusive.

What does this understanding of theology look like? Below, we offer a rough summary of its main features, a sketch of its principal contours, and its central concerns. But before turning to that account, it is important to note that we believe the best answer to the question of "What kind of theology are we doing here?" is not to be found in these summary comments. Rather, the best answer is one that readers themselves should discover after having grappled with the text for a while. To this end, we ask that you let yourself be pulled into the worlds of reflection that lie in the pages ahead; follow along with the book's thinking process, engage its play of mind, its multiple images and arguments, its literary form, and its unfolding and unfinished but carefully considered dramas of thought. After living with the book for a time, step back and reflect on the kind of imaginative thinking it has encouraged in you. What flights of theological fancy has it provoked? What shifts in perspective has it encouraged? Which parts have irritated and disturbed you, and which sections have delighted you? What, if any, new ways of understanding the Christian faith were opened up to you? The insights that come to you in this reflection may well be your best answers to the question, What is theology? All this is to say that, finally, the best way to understand what we are doing here is for you to engage actively in our process of doing it.

What Is Constructive Theology?

A Focus on Classical Themes

There are many ways to organize a text in constructive theology that seeks to speak meaningfully to today's world. One could identify, let's say, a set of pressing social themes—U.S. imperialism, gender, the deepening of racial divisions in North America, the environmental crisis, the state of the family—and explore what difference faith makes to how we think about them. One could similarly take a number of more abstract topics, such as love, justice, forgiveness, hospitality, and peace, and flesh out what each might mean to us today when considered in the context of a comprehensive reach of faith. Likewise, one could divide up chapters according to present-day theological schools of thought—liberal, liberationist, postliberal, evangelical, and so forth—and demonstrate the difference each makes to how we

understand faith claims. Along similar lines, the focus could fall on a list of contemporary theologians whose works stand as markers of the age—a list that would no doubt include many of our authors and would highlight the fact that scholars with different backgrounds and church commitments craft theological visions that are strikingly different in tone and texture.

In addition to these possibilities, there is another, more traditional option for organizing a book in constructive theology, and that is to divide the text according to the classical doctrinal pattern, addressing subjects like God, Christ, Atonement, and Life Eternal. A brief glance at our table of contents should make it clear that this last, rather old-fashioned option is the one that won out in our deliberations on organization. In the following chapters of this book, we explore six of these classical themes: God, Human Being, Sin and Evil, Jesus Christ, Church, and Spirit. We also explore, as themes running throughout each of these chapters but not independently treated, the classical themes of creation, redemption, and the future.

Why did we choose this approach? The answer is pragmatic. Since our students know so little about the history of Christian theology and have limited training in the tradition, this pattern seemed best suited to teaching "the basics." In a primer on Christian theology, we should teach primary things, and for theologians like ourselves, that is what this list of classical themes represents. They are those primary themes that have emerged, again and again over the centuries, when Christians have attempted to organize comprehensively their thoughts about the faith they hold.

Admittedly, this list of themes has undergone significant changes over time; the content of each specific topic has been contested and renegotiated by constantly shifting communities and cultures (a subject we return to often in the book). And yet people of faith have continued to ask some basic questions: What does the word *God* mean? Who is Jesus? What makes a group of people a church? Why are there evil, sin, and suffering in the world? How do we think about the power of the Spirit in our lives? And perhaps most perplexing of all, how did we get here, and what on earth are we supposed to do with ourselves? Who are we? What awaits us in the future? Wherein lies our hope in the present? The fact that generation after generation of Christians seems to ask these or similar questions and thus engages these basic themes is what makes this list *classical*. As topics, they seem to be as enduring as they are comprehensive and as sturdy as they are malleable.

Theology and Doctrines

In the field of theology, these themes are often referred to by the more formal word *doctrines* (the doctrine of God, the doctrine of sin, and so forth), a practice we follow in this book. It is important to acknowledge from the outset, however, that we were initially reluctant to use the term. Why? Because to the postmodern ears of many of our students, it has negative associations. For some, it conjures up images of ironclad statements ("Christ's death atones for our sins") to which they must assent under the threat of heresy. Such heavy-handed statements, they further imagine, are carefully calculated, highly abstracted, and tightly regulated truth claims or propositions ("the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three consubstantial persons") that represent the timeless data of faith. Given that in our churches and popular culture many of these classical doctrines are invoked in a language that sounds old and incomprehensible to today's ears ("the church is one, holy, apostolic, and catholic"), it is not surprising that many of our students view these kinds of doctrinal claims as things to be avoided, not embraced, particularly if one wants to construct a liberating, pertinent theology for our world.

Such a view of doctrine could not be further from the understanding of the term operative in this book. For us, doctrines are something quite different. At one level, the term *doctrine* is simply another name for those compelling themes or living topics that repeatedly emerge when Christians reflect on the beliefs and the complex ways of life they embrace and try to give some ordered, comprehensive account of the theology embedded in their practices. In other words, the list of classical themes we work with in the chapters ahead is, in fact, nothing more than a list of the classical doctrines of the church.

If they are the same thing, one might ask, why invoke the language of doctrine, given its complicated associations? Why not just stick with *themes*? One reason is that the term *doctrine* has a richer history of usage by theologians, both in the past and present, and that history carries with it a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the nature of theological claims. To us, the term *theme* seems flat and monotone. *Doctrine*, on the other hand, sounds not only compellingly authoritative but also round, full, and ripe with significance. Whereas *theme* evokes images of a single idea that can be identified and traced through a body of literature, *doctrine* opens onto vaster worlds of meaning and possibilities; its referents thus seem more far-reaching.

Doctrines as Theological Geographies

A helpful metaphor we have used for this particular understanding of doctrines is that of *theological geographies*. According to this image, doctrines are like maps—they are theological geographies drawn to guide Christians as they struggle to understand their faith. To grasp this metaphor, it may help to think, first, about the complex mental world of our deeply held beliefs about God—a rather large territory, to say the least. Next, try imagining this world of beliefs as a landscape—a vast and complex terrain holding within its borders all those images, stories, concepts, practices, and feelings that make up the sum total of "what we believe in." Now, with this image in mind, try to imagine drawing maps of this landscape. Ask yourself, What would well-crafted pictures of it look like? These maps are what we call *doctrines*; they are collectively rendered maps that Christians have drawn over the years in order to help them find their way around this complex terrain of faith. When they are accurate, these sketched-out and patterned maps can be laid over our faith lives, helping us to see Christianity's content and order with a clarity we might not otherwise have.

When viewed from this cartographical perspective, the theologian-authors of this book are perhaps best understood as artful geographers or skillful mapmakers. Picking up a variety of tools—history, scripture, traditions of creeds and dogmas, cultural analysis, prayerful reflection, common-sense experience, social and linguistic theory, poetic images, and so on—we put them to work in order to draw for our students a helpful sketch of the basic lay of the land with respect to Christian convictions about God and the world. Like any good mapmaker, we do not do this just for the descriptive pleasure of charting; we do it in the hope that our maps might help individuals and communities make informed, reflective judgments about the shape of faithful Christian living. In this regard, we are mapmakers with a normative and pragmatic commitment, namely, the goal of enabling responsible faith.

This task is both constrained and open-ended. On the one hand, we are bound by the given contours of the terrain we are trying to draw. For example, just as a geographer cannot simply conjure up mountains where there are none, theologians who are mapping the terrain of Christology cannot conjure up any kind of Jesus they want. There are definite constraints on the enterprise. In this case, these constraints comprise the fact that Jesus was a first-century Jew from Palestine whose life, death, and resurrection are narrated in the New Testament, a collection of books that Christians hold as the

authoritative word about Jesus. On the other hand, as theological geographers, we also have permission to be quite creative with respect to what we choose to highlight and how we decide to render it. Even though geographers cannot make a mountain, they can decide to rename it or use different colors to mark it. Similarly, even though theologians cannot simply invent any kind of Jesus they want, they can still decide to ask new and different questions about who he is and what his message means and, in doing so, highlight different dimensions of the scriptural story and the history of its interpretation. One could depict him as a revolutionary or just a nice guy or a holy prophet or a model of transgendered masculinity, or, perhaps most strangely, the Son of God. Chances are that if these depictions are well-crafted, they all respect the constraints listed above, but each offers us a very different picture of this figure who sits at the heart of the Christian imagination.

It is also interesting to think about the pragmatic aims of mapmaking, particularly as it applies to theologian-cartographers. In the field of geography, there is usually a very practical reason for taking the time to draw a map of a given terrain, like a mountain. People might want to explore it for pleasure or for putting a pipeline through it or for determining how to build a new highway around it. Similarly, theologians engage in doctrinal mapping for pragmatic reasons, the most central one being that of helping Christians understand their faith and live it more responsibly; in short, the goal is to make us personally and collectively better Christians. In the pages ahead you will no doubt find that what being a better Christian entails is a widely debated topic, one that theologians have argued about for centuries.

Just as a geographer's drawing of a mountain has the power to influence a hiker's decision about whether to climb it or a community's decision about whether to put a highway around it, so too with theological mapmaking. The way we choose to color in the lines of a doctrine and to shape the language through which it is presented affects people's decisions not only about its truth but about the way they choose to live in light of it. In this book you will discover myriad instances of this normative dimension of mapmaking. As theologians, we are not writing from a disinterested perspective. We believe that the theology presented here really matters, and we hope that our readers will find it compelling and perhaps even life-altering.

Christian question about what awaits us at the end of time, be it at the end of our days or of history itself, is never addressed here as a topic specific unto itself. Looking at these absences, one might suppose that we considered these doctrines less important than the ones treated. This is decidedly not the case. They are absolutely crucial themes in our classroom teaching and in our broader theological contexts, and because of this, they are treated in the book, but in a rather different manner from the others. We recommend that you look for them as themes running across all the chapters; in other words, you will find them systematically integrated into the other doctrinal conversations. In particular, the chapter on Human Being includes explicit discussions of Creation and Eschatology, as does the chapter on the Spirit. The chapters on Jesus Christ, God, and Spirit have extensive sections discussing Redemption, and in the chapters on Sin and Evil and on Church the theme of hope echoes loudly. As you begin to notice how these themes crosscut the divisions of our chapter headings, you may also trace the ways *all* the doctrines cross-fertilize. God and Spirit speak to each other, as do Church and Evil and Jesus Christ and Human Being—and the list of intersections could go on.

There are other missing maps in the geography we lay out here. Although our authors admittedly represent a wide range of perspectives, we realize that our theology primarily represents Christianity as it has developed out of the Western Augustinian heritage. It is a tradition of theological reflection that our writers are deeply familiar with, one so comfortable to us, in fact, that we are often unaware of its presence and hence rarely pause to note it. We acknowledge, however, that North American theology today includes many other Christian voices. In particular, we note the absence in our text of the Eastern churches and the under-representation of historic Anabaptist fellowships and Pentecostal communities of faith. Let us hope that the next incarnation of the Workgroup will be expanded to include these and as yet unimagined voices speaking from our U.S. context.

The Relation among Doctrines, Beliefs, and Everyday Life

To draw a map, first one has to identify the terrain to be represented. In the case of theology, identifying the particular territories of beliefs and practices that doctrines are going to map is not an easy or even straightforward endeavor. Faith is a complex matter; like any form of life, it consists of beliefs, actions, attitudes, and patterns of behavior that are often hard to identify, much less distinguish from one another and then define. Thus, at times we may not know what it is we believe theologically or why we undertake the specific faith-practices that we do, but we nonetheless do them over and over again just as we are constantly reenacting particular theological habits of thought in the course of our daily lives. Furthermore, our religious beliefs can almost never be separated from other beliefs, actions, and attitudes that we hold and that also shape us, such as our culturally constructed beliefs about what it means to be a woman or a citizen or a student of theology.

It is also the case that people are often not aware that they have deeply held beliefs about such matters until their normally accepted ways of acting and thinking are challenged, perhaps by an event that exceeds their interpretive capacity or by a disagreement among friends on an issue about which they had assumed there was consensus. When such events happen, these previously commonsensical or unconscious thought patterns come to the surface of our reflective minds; we are forced to articulate these patterns and may also be prompted to change or adapt them to fit the new situation. When this occurs in the context of our religious beliefs, faith begins to "seek understanding," and the activity of self-conscious doctrinal mapping commences as a way of solving a problem or responding to a new situation.

This does not mean, however, that our beliefs only matter when we are faced with crisis or novel circumstances. Our religious beliefs, like other beliefs, are constantly exerting pressure on all that we know and do, from deciding on what to eat for dinner to thinking about U.S. foreign policy to grieving the loss of a friend. Beliefs are, in each of these instances, profoundly shaping not only how we perceive our world but also how we engage and respond to it. For this reason, the influential scope of doctrines on our daily lives is similarly comprehensive in its reach. Doctrines stretch into every corner of our lived experience. Likewise, because beliefs live deep in our imaginations, the material that doctrines map is often more the stuff of dreams, images, memories, emotions, and all the other things that

compose our daily thoughts than it is the stuff of rational concepts and philosophical arguments.

Note that according to this definition, beliefs and doctrines are not identical. They describe two different but interrelated realities. Consider the fact that because beliefs are so fluid, incoherent, and often inarticulate, they are almost impossible to pin down and then precisely map out. Coursing through the terrain of lived experience, they resist calculated, analytic form. Constructive theologies like ours, however, are quite different; our work in this text consists precisely in making a series of carefully formed maps. Their purpose is to impose calculable form upon a messy, indeterminate terrain and thereby impose enough order that we can reflect on it. Again, doctrines do this by depicting the lay of the land with respect to our faith, so that as communities of reflection we might have some sense of where we have been, where we are, and where we might be going. In the following chapters this is what we hope you will find—a series of theological geographies that suggest a way of traveling through the terrain of faith in a manner that facilitates communal conversation and proves both illuminating and liberating.

The Structure of Our Doctrinal Maps

There is, indeed, much more to be said about this activity of mapmaking and the exciting questions and possibilities it opens up for imagining what contemporary theology might be and do. We hope that as you travel through this book, some of your questions will be addressed in the substance of the chapters just as other, not previously considered queries and insights will emerge and be pressed. To usher you into the body of the book with some sense of confidence, we will first explain something about its structure. In addition to helping you understand the flow of the book, explaining our structure also gives us a chance to identify several assumptions about theology that are present in the book but not always in explicit form.

Vignettes

At the beginning of each chapter, we offer a series of short vignettes. These are pithy stories or images that we think paint interesting pictures of how the particular doctrine we are treating actually plays itself out in our everyday worlds. We have collected many of these vignettes from our students and

from news headlines; we thus hope they stir in our readers a sense of recognition or identification. However, we also throw in a few that might sound strange, surprising, or even disturbing, vignettes that capture something of the oddity, intensity, and plurality of Christian beliefs and experiences. We hope that in reading the vignettes you are provoked to respond to the chapters' beginnings with some of your own and others' stories.

One reason we choose to begin this way is that, as mentioned above, we think of doctrines not as abstracted, other-worldly statements with no pertinence to today's world but rather as connected to all dimensions of our lives. We believe that they affect and move us in ways both familiar and unexpected and often become apparent to us not through consciously articulated convictions but through reflection on some of the ordinary things we do, because of our faith, on a day-to-day basis. By starting with these stories, we start with a genre of expression that is, in many ways, better suited to grasping the detail and shape of those ordinary actions than more theoretical language.

A second, related, reason for beginning with narrative and images that evoke specific contexts is to help readers see that the meanings that doctrines take on are profoundly shaped by the local environment in which they are engaged and hence by the particular people and communities they are addressing and by whom they are addressed. Note that this claim about the highly particular character of theological meaning-making is not designed to relativize and thereby curb the authoritative reach of the faith claims Christians make. Quite to the contrary, it insists that we acknowledge the theological character of even the most idiosyncratic and endlessly particularized dimensions of our varied human lives.

The State of the Question

Having put forth these short scenes and stories, we then turn to the second section of each chapter, "The State of the Question." This section is designed to give readers a condensed version of the main issues treated in the chapter. Here we lay out what we consider to be the central questions that contemporary people are asking about doctrines such as God, Evil, and the Spirit. We then outline briefly a few answers offered by theologians both in the present and in the past, pointing out as we go that while some of our present-day concerns are unique to our age, others are rooted in debates that started centuries ago.

In contrast to the lively feel of the vignettes, this section is presented in much more analytically precise language. It introduces some of the technical

terms we are using and also identifies, at a conceptual level, the most important cartographical lines for our map of the doctrine. In other words, it provides the basic geographical grid work upon which the rest of the chapter builds.

Scriptural Geographies

With this grid work in place, the chapter now begins the process of giving form and color to the theme at hand. The first layer of mapping traces out the scriptural context of each doctrine. Why begin here? As Christian theologians, we accept the basic claim that the Bible serves a normative function in the life of faith. What we hope readers discover in this section is the complex process by which this norming is accomplished. To explain this, we do not lay out a carefully formulated theory of interpretation, however, nor do we delve into debates about such topics as inspiration, historical truth, canonical borders, and so on. If this were a book mainly on scripture and theology, these would be questions we would gladly engage. For our purposes here, it is sufficient to highlight only the most important scriptural scenes with which particular doctrines have been in conversation. For example, it is hard to talk about the topic of evil without exploring the story of Adam and Eve and the fall; so in the chapter on Sin and Evil, the Adamic myth is directly explored. As another example, we could not treat the Spirit without mentioning Acts' account of Pentecost, an account that grounds a good portion of that chapter's reflections.

As you read through these scriptural portions, we encourage you to dig more deeply than we do into passages about which you are curious, those you like as well as those you do not. As you do so, pay attention not only to how that biblical text might inform a particular doctrine but also to the interesting ways in which a doctrinal view may in turn inform the way you read a biblical story or poem. Examine, for instance, how your present-day understanding of what a church is—a view most likely shaped by the church communities you have been a part of—affects the way you read the tale of Pentecost or the story in which Jesus calls Peter a rock. Do you imagine church as a community of folks sitting around a campfire singing into the night or as lines of bowed bodies taking communion in a high-ceilinged cathedral? Chances are that your answer to this question will substantively affect how you imagine the interaction between Jesus and Peter or the babbling voices of Spirit in Acts. As another example, consider when you read of the Devil's temptation of Jesus: What images of evil come to mind? What

kind of people do you see? What historical events come to mind? And what do these images tell you about the doctrine of sin that is informing your reading of this mysterious story? By asking questions such as these, we hope you can begin to have a sense of the complicated ways in which the strange world of scripture intermingles with the world of doctrine, both of which in turn infuse our everyday imaginations with grace-filled possibilities and promise.

Historical Theological Geographies

In addition to scripture, each of our chapters offers extended discussions of how particular doctrines have been shaped throughout history. Moving from the biblical world and the early church through the Middle Ages and Reformation and into the present, we explore the varied ways communities of faith have mapped out topics such as God, Christ, and church. What is so striking about this history is not just that the enduring questions are asked but also that the answers offered can take radically different shapes in different times and places. For example, in the early church, nothing was more important to theologians than hammering out the distinctions that mark the relations between the persons of the Trinity. By the time the Reformation rolled around, however, these distinctions were commonly accepted; the hot topic was not, therefore, the Trinity but the nature of God's sovereignty and the scope of God's power. Similarly, consider that for many Christians today both the Trinity and sovereignty are a crucial part of their view of God, while the challenge of religious pluralism seems to loom even larger, raising for us questions about the relation between Christian notions of the Divine and other views of the Deity, something our Reformation forebears could have hardly imagined. These sections on the history of doctrines are also designed to illustrate not just changes that emerge across time but also the diversity of opinions that each age holds within itself and to describe why at times one view comes to dominance while others are downplayed or, in the extreme, ruled heretical.

Our hope in these sections is that you will be able to appreciate the place of history in many of your presently held beliefs. In a world in which things change rapidly and we rarely have enough time to eat breakfast, much less study documents from the fourteenth century, it is easy to feel like our experience of God is radically new. While it is true that faith must be renewed and rejuvenated every minute of our lives if it is to be relevant and alive, it is also the case that our capacity to imagine God and to engage in age-old faith practices such as praying is shaped by the beliefs and practices of the

generations of Christians who have gone before us. We hope you will find that this legacy is filled with as many eccentric ideas and strangely exciting possibilities as it is with outdated insights and problematic propositions. It is a history, we believe, full of truly unconventional conventions, a reality that makes doing constructive theology an archival adventure.

Contemporary Doctrinal Geographies

In the final and longest section of each chapter, we bring you directly into the world of contemporary theology by offering a series of present-day perspectives on a single doctrine. These are the most creative pieces in our text. In each "constructive proposal," you meet one of our authors as they present in their own distinctive voices their theological assessments of the classical themes at hand. Note that these are the only sections in the book where individual writers are identified. We inserted authorial names here to make the point that collaborative theology does not require that all of our particular voices be blended into a single one. While we do believe that collective visions are possible and collaborative scholarship is quite doable, we also want to honor the fact that there is room for an acknowledged and celebrated plurality of individual voices.

In these sections you will also find many of our political and social assumptions about theology explicitly named and addressed. As a group, we are committed to constructing theologies that are both anti-racist and anti-imperialist, both peace-seeking and gender-troubling, both globally aware and locally grounded, both economically progressive and critically engaged with the reality of global capital, and both nonhomophobic and nonheterosexist. We hold to a theology that is harshly critical of the status quo and its abuses of power and knowledge, but we also remain humbled by the dazzling complexities of the social worlds we all inhabit. In this lies our awareness that we are often implicated in the very social harms that we contest. Finally, we are compelled by a theological vision whose goal is the flourishing of all parts of this richly complex world we call "creation"—a world brought into being, sustained by, redeemed by, and ultimately consummated by the one we call "God Most Holy."

Embedded in most of these theological commitments is a series of theoretical perspectives shared by the group. We share the view that the structures of oppression and harm that shape our world not only are present in external institutional structures and economic programs but also live in the depths of our language and in the varied play of our shared cultural imaginations,

both of which are intertwined with our theology. In this regard, we maintain that words matter profoundly and that ideas are never simply innocent or passive signs but always politically interested and socially active performances. Additionally, we hold that language and the cultural imagination are places where power relations between people are negotiated and enacted. As such, in the turn of phrase or the tweaking of an image, language enacts social scenes in which some lives are thwarted while others are encouraged.

These themes at the end of each section influence how the vignettes as well as scripture and doctrinal history are brought together. Additionally, they appear again and again in the chapters in the form of dialogue boxes, one of the most innovative features of this book.

Special Questions

You will notice that popping up here and there are two-column boxes filled with a rather odd collection of writings. At times, they express a view that does not quite resonate with the one discussed on the main part of the page. They may state a contrary opinion or ask questions, or they may represent the view of a well-known personality who has a strong position on the topic at hand. We have entitled these *special questions*.

Throughout our own process of writing this book, such exchanges of a sort were always present in our conversations with one another. We were always talking back and forth with each other about God, church, Christ, and so on—to say nothing about all the other political, social, theoretical, and philosophical debates and arguments peppered throughout our writings. Rather than seeing these disagreements or simple differences as a problem, we see them as an important part of what keeps constructive theology alive and vital in today's world. We hope that as you read, you have your own pen poised to fill in the margins with dialogues of your own.

Missing Maps

As with any geographical enterprise, the map of Christian theology presented here is far from complete. Although we have tried to cover what we believe to be the most important themes, there are several topics that we missed. The most obvious of these are the classical doctrines of Creation, Redemption, and Eschatology (Last Things). There is no distinct chapter in which we discuss what it means to say that God creates and sustains the world. Similarly, there is no extended discussion of what it means to say that God redeems the world—the claim that we are saved. And the insistent