

Introduction

CHANCES ARE, YOU ARE a theologian.

If you practice your religion, live according to your Christian faith, or even take seriously the spiritual dimension of life, inescapably you think theologically.

It is a simple fact of life for Christians: their faith makes them theologians. Deliberately or not, they think—and act—out of a theological understanding of existence, and their faith calls them to become the best theologians they can be.

Not me, you may say. I believe what I've been taught, but I am not equipped for theological thinking. Maybe I'm not even very interested in it—to me theology is a subject for academics, philosophers, professors, Ph.D.s.

Such a response is understandable. Theology is widely taken to be a field for experts alone, too arcane for the day-to-day concerns of ordinary parishioners and their ministers. This impression is due in part to their off-putting encounters with the writings and speeches of theologians. “If this is theology,” they say, “it's not for me.”

Put that way, the point is so honest and so fitting that we would not argue against it even if we could. Even so, we hold to a time-honored conviction that when Christians are baptized they enter into a ministry they all share, responding to a God-given call to disclose the gospel (God's good news of Jesus Christ) through all they say and do. Their calling makes them witnesses of faith, and hence theologians as well. This is because the witness they make in the course of their daily lives sets forth their implicit understanding of the meaning of the Christian faith, and—in keeping with another time-honored conviction—because Christian theology is at its root a matter of faith seeking understanding.

Every aspect of the life of the church and its members is a theological testimony. So too are the particular ways Christians have of relating

to what is around them, their styles of interacting with others and the world. Even if they were to run off and live in some remote Canadian forest (and there are days for many of us when such a prospect sounds inviting!), that decision would itself be a theological one. Likewise, choices they make about their wilderness lifestyle—how to live among the trees, the lakes, and the animals—would signal something of their understanding of God’s creation. *To be Christian at all is to be a theologian. There are no exceptions.*

The study of theology can seem very intimidating. We have heard people over the years say such things as:

“What does it have to do with God? You just have to follow Jesus.”

“It is arcane, elitist, and not where people live.”

“I’ve heard of people who started doubting parts of the Bible after they studied theology.”

“It is merely religious navel gazing.”

“I’m not a philosopher; I don’t understand what they are talking about.”

“My spouse is afraid that I will lose my faith.”

“They use such big words, words that I don’t understand.”

“I’m not a thinker; I am a doer.”

“If you preached what you study in a theology class you would lose the people in the congregation.”

“I thought it was something that only professors do.”

“It isn’t practical enough. It doesn’t help you do your ministerial tasks.”

“It is only head level; Christianity is of the heart.”

The concerns are real; most have some ring of truth to them. In *How to Think Theologically*, we try not to fall into the trap that many of these concerns give voice to. Yet we believe that the task of theological reflection is a key component of the Christian life. To be a Christian is to be a theologian and to make judgments based on that theology. Those judgments lead to action and to how we live the Christian life.

Our faith is at once a gift of God and a human response; theology is an integral part of that human response. Theology is a seeking after

understanding—a process of thinking about life in the light of the faith that Christians engage in because of their calling. In this book we invite Christians to give some thought to the doing of this theology. Chapters 1 through 3 present a sketch of how and why Christians do theology, what is happening when they do it, and where they turn for knowledge and support. Chapters 4 through 7 discuss theological method and present three diagnostic exercises for those whose faith leads them to press on with the tasks of theology. Chapter 8 speaks of theology as a critical inquiry in community. Chapter 9 addresses spiritual disciplines that undergird our entire theological enterprise. An appendix discusses some common theological labels one is likely to encounter when exploring theological works.

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We will focus on the process of thinking theologically, calling it by one of its best-known names—*theological reflection*. We will suggest, as theologians often do, that theological reflection is a process in many respects like a craft;¹ it involves working with various materials or resources, applying certain skills that can be learned and honed over time by concentration and practice. Since we are convinced that all Christians are theologians, our aim is only to help speed them along their way.

We are hopeful that laypeople and seminarians will find here an orientation to theological reflection that can be put to use right away and built upon over time. We will point out some of the most common issues and terms of theological writing and describe a direct method for working with theology. Ordained ministers, who in all likelihood have already had some theological training, may find here a refresher course with a number of suggestions and words of encouragement for their ongoing work in theology.

Our focus on the *doing* of theology distinguishes this book from most textbook introductions to theology, or from popular accounts of theology, which are readily available. These works usually survey the basics of Christian doctrine, major figures and movements of the past, or present-day issues and trends. The approach we take does not replace such resources. There is no substitute for the study of accomplished theologians, even though the reading can be tough going. What is more, taking in the performance of a theological superstar does not necessarily enable the reader to go and do likewise. Starting off with the end result can make the process seem more intimidating and less manageable than it actually is.

That said, we admit that introducing theology in this way is not without its intimidating or unmanageable aspects. At least a few disclaimers are in order. First, we do not tell all that is to be told, or even all that we would have to tell if we were to write a longer, more detailed book on the topic. Plus, what we have to say comes with emphases and accents very much our own. Thus, for example, although theological reflection takes place in philosophy and every world religion, our references to it (and to theology and theologians) are limited to the Christian sphere unless otherwise noted. Within this sphere, we give center stage to church theology—the theological reflection where Christians consider faith, church ministry, and the Christian life. And, although we have tried to describe in very general, flexible, and nonpartisan terms how Christian theology is done, the language we use is certainly not all-encompassing or altogether neutral. We assume—as we believe theologians always should—that our remarks can be expanded, contested, corrected, and even censured by others whose backgrounds and theologies are different from our own. And no, although we speak in accord on these pages, the two of us do not agree on every point of theology.

Theological Reflection

Since theological reflection can be a demanding task, theologians often go off to work alone in peace and quiet. Scholars work in the library, pastors in their studies. Churches hold retreats where their members can contemplate and discuss their faith away from the hubbub of daily life. Christians rise early or stay up late to make times for themselves to read Scripture, pray, and meditate.

But serious thinking about the meaning of Christian faith can and does take place anywhere. It goes on while conversing, worshiping, weathering a life crisis, keeping up with the latest news, working, taking some time out for recreation. Wherever and whenever it occurs, theological reflection is not only a personal but also an interactive, dialogical, and community-related process. The voices of others are heard. Some of these voices, like those of the biblical writers, come from texts of centuries past. Others are those of our contemporaries. Still others are our own. These voices offer us food for thought, to be heeded or debated or improved upon or set aside as unhelpful.

To engage in theological reflection is to join in an ongoing conversation with others that began long before we ever came along and will continue long after we have passed away. Realizing that theology is a perpetual conversation is something of a comfort to most theologians.

It is not up to you or me or anyone else to invent Christian theology, to control it, or even to perfect it. We are called only to do the best we can, given who and where we are. This is actually the best that theologians ever manage, not only because as humans they are limited and fallible and because times change, but because the final word is God's alone. Until that final word is spoken, each and every Christian has a contribution to make to the conversation—a duty to listen, and a question to ask.

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This is not to say, however, that being conversational makes theology easy or pleasant. Conversations do not always go well. They are sometimes bitter, pointless, mean-spirited, painful, or futile. Accounts of strife within certain Christian denominations regularly make the evening news.

Nor are all those with something to contribute to the conversation given a hearing. The voices of the vast majority of Christians throughout history have had no hearing outside their immediate and very limited sphere. Their theological contributions are out of sight, out of mind, difficult if not impossible to recover, except as they have affected the spiritual lives of those people close to them, perhaps their children and their children's children through an oral tradition.

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The significance of that effect, of course, should not be underestimated. One friend of ours tells of the importance her grandmother's theology played in her own understandings of the faith. Her grandmother, recipient of an oral theological tradition from her own parents and grandparents, interpreted her own experience in light of that theology and times and passed it on to her children. The core theological interpretation of all her experience—that God always was and always would be with her, no matter what—she expressed in the words and deeds of her daily life, and confidently verbalized on her deathbed: "Underneath are the everlasting arms." That conviction of

God's abiding presence became a key feature of her children's life of faith, and of her grandchildren's. Who can predict how long it will continue to be felt?

Countless Christians find cause to believe that theology is a conversation that is closed or stacked against them. The Third World, African American, and feminist or womanist theologies of our times are foremost among those that offer exposés of this failing as well as correctives to it. To them can be added the biblical, historical, and contemporary studies that seek to uncover the life and work of people other than the famous church leaders and scholars of Christian history. No theologian can know about everyone and everything. To learn more than we already know is one good reason to enter into conversation with others. Limiting the circle of conversation partners in advance, whether due to prejudice or ignorance, is always the theologian's loss. That makes it the church's loss as well.

Viewing theological reflection as an extended conversation may help put into proper perspective the roles that individuality and commonality play in the process. A Christian's theology is, of course, very much his or her own. It witnesses to the Christian faith as the theologian has come to understand it. Yet a theology is never the theologian's—yours or mine—alone. Inasmuch as it claims to be Christian, it aspires to a status that cannot be granted by any one person's say-so. The Christian faith it purports to understand is personal but not private. It is a faith shared by others. A lively exchange of views among the varied members of the body is essential for the church's theological well-being. Christians

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carry out, in this way, their ministry of mutual concern, mutual accountability, and mutual instruction. Each member's contribution may serve to enliven and enrich the conversation as a whole.

In case this sounds like too rosy a picture, we cannot forget that disagreements over the meaning of the common Christian faith have also led to division. Some of

these divisions, in hindsight, have proven to be regrettable. Instead of bringing people together, theological reflection has at times highlighted differences.

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not, however, gloss over the difficulties of coping with divergent theologies or endorse an “anything goes” policy. At certain points Christians must set limits. There are things said and done in the name of Christianity to which we must respond—because of our understanding of the faith—with a firm no. “Here I stand,” we must say, or “This theology is a profound misunderstanding of faith and cannot be condoned.” In such cases, the model of theological reflection outlined here is still valuable. It reminds us of a crucial question to be addressed before making this (or any other) theological judgment: Have we given the point at issue careful, thorough, dialogical, deliberative consideration? When we have, then we must say yes or no and act upon it.

The work of theology is a matter of personalized conversational thinking about shared convictions. It routinely deals with common topics, grapples with common issues, visits and revisits many common themes, and draws upon a common stock of tools and materials. Such points of connection invite other Christians to identify and acknowledge the “Christianness” of the work. In sum, theological reflection is bound up with a vast and yet intimately related community of faith called the church. Its aim is less to set forth *my* understanding of my Christian faith than to develop the best possible understanding of the faith that our Christian church seeks to understand.

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Faith Seeking Understanding

Christians would surely feel more comfortable about their calling as theologians if they knew exactly what they had gotten themselves into. Unfortunately, there is no universally accepted definition of the term *theology*. It comes to us as a compound word from ancient Greek: *theologia* are *logia* (sayings, accounts, teachings, theories) concerning *theos* (the divine, gods and goddesses, God). This root meaning carries over into the most traditional use of the word: a belief, conception, or study of God. It is unusual, however, to limit theology to its strictest sense. Two extended uses of the term are commonplace.

First, *theology* is typically expanded to embrace the totality of things having to do with religious life. Not only ideas of God per se but everything associated with faith, church, and ministry, are said to be theological. This expansion comes about quite naturally, because Christian belief in God neither arose nor exists in splendid isolation. It is the

focal point of the life of faith as a whole. In keeping with its Jewish origins, early Christianity centered itself around a conviction about the arrival of a message from God. Various terms, such as the Word of God, the *kerygma* (proclamation), and the Way, were used to designate God's self-disclosure. Among the earliest and most prominent terms for the subject matter of this message was *gospel*, God's good news to the world. The gospel has to do with the salvation that God brought about through Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. Contemporary theologians refer to this core of faith in a wide variety of ways, such as divine revelation, the Christian mythos, the Christ-event, the fundamental datum of Christianity, and so forth. What do all these terms mean? Simply this: that essential to the Christian religion is a message from God concerning God's relationship to the world, to history, and to all of human life.

Theology: *theo-logia*. Sayings, accounts, teachings, and theories (*logia*) concerning God (*theos*). Theology is a belief, conception, or study of God.

Interpretations of this complex of relationships are focal points of Christian theology. The subject matter embraces the nature and will of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the activity of the Holy Spirit, creation, redemption, and hope. It also embraces everything connected with faith, church, ministry, and the Christian life. And so, by extension, various fields of study touching on these matters are swept into theology. The result is that theology as a whole divides and subdivides into various emphases. Modern theological education customarily groups these studies under the broad rubrics of biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and practical theology. These make for a sometimes bewildering array, especially considering the plethora of other common headings, such as moral theology, sacramental theology, pastoral theology, confessional theology, theology of culture, African American theology, theology of ministry, liberation theology, and on and on.

Second, *theology* is often used in an extended sense that has to do with the function of statements about God in Christianity, and in the other religions and societies of the world. That function is not merely to designate a divine being or beings, but to signal a commitment to what people value most highly. In this functional sense, the divine (*theos*) has to do with whatever individuals, communities, or cultures regard to be of ultimate significance in their lives. For Christians, this ultimate concern is God and the message of God.

Christians are aware, however, that some people's object of ultimate concern may bear little resemblance to their God, or to any deity of any religion. Money, fame, nation, or family may be treated as a god. A political or cultural movement may serve for some people as the functional alternative to the deity of historic religion. Groups devoted to great causes may turn into quasi-religions, organizing their communities under the lead of apostles, prophets, teachers, and theologians of their own.

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This phenomenon has long found its place in Christian awareness. Christians confess that they believe in God and in God's message of salvation in Jesus Christ. But the understanding of faith that they seek is by no means a matter of rote memorization or book learning, theory, or speculation. Belief as intellectual assent is only one component of a living faith. It is a knowing of the sort that exists in interpersonal relationships: more a knowing *of* God than a knowing *about* God, in that it involves emotion, valuing, and living in relationship.

Historically, emphasis on Christian *orthodoxy* (correct opinion or belief) has always been balanced by warnings against giving lip service to the faith while acting as if other concerns are more important than the God

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revealed in Jesus Christ. Faith involves believing, but it is not reducible to mere assent. Cautionary tales abound of self-professed believers whose views have no impact on the way they live: the televangelist who bilks millions from unsuspecting individuals; the Christian department head who lies to her staff rather than take responsibility for her decisions; the Christian computer software technician who professes to have grown spiritually but pads his hours, does sloppy work, and quits before the job is finished.

A frequent response to orthodoxy without active commitment is its counterpart: *orthopraxy* (correct practice) without thoughtful theological reflection. "What you do is more important than what you say" is heard from the adherents of orthopraxy. This response is often wholesome, and at times altogether necessary. A distinction between belief and

practice, however, can only be pressed so far. There is a belief component in orthopraxy, for it involves not only a belief that God wills us to act in a certain way rather than some other way but also a belief that how we act is more telling than what we say we believe. Emphasis on orthopraxy has always been modified by warnings against merely going through motions that appear truly Christian while covertly, in our heart of hearts, devoting ourselves to someone other than God and something other than God’s message.

Orthodoxy: correct opinion or belief. Orthopraxy: correct practice.

The Christian message of God calls for both beliefs and actions. It also elicits an emotional response of love, trust, and dedication. Thus the

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word *faith* is often used, as we will use it here, as a comprehensive term for all elements of the Christian life: belief, action, and heartfelt devotion to God as the object of ultimate concern in a living faith. All three need to be considered in any understanding of that faith—that is, in theology.

To say that theology is “faith seeking understanding” is to say this: that as theologians we seek to understand what we believe about the Christian message of God, and how we as individuals and as a community are to live in light of that message.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is the role of the church—to help people think for themselves as Christians or to uphold its role as authority and tell people how they are to think?
2. Why are theological issues, beliefs, and positions for some so emotional?
3. What do you think the authors mean when they use the phrase “draws upon a common stock of tools and materials”? For Christians, what would be identified as a common stock of tools and materials?
4. In defining orthodoxy and orthopraxy, which do you emphasize more highly?

NOTE

1. Once commonplace, the notion of theology as a craft has been revived in recent years: see, for instance, Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbols to System*, New Expanded Edition (New York: Herder & Herder, 1995); Charles Wood, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1985). See also Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 1994); Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James Whitehead, *Method in Ministry*, Revised Edition (Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 1995).