

1

Why Theological Foundations?

This book endeavors to develop sound foundations for undertaking theological study and research. More precisely, we seek foundations for the doctrinal, systematic, and communicative work of theology—its normative phase, wherein the theologian is seeking to hand on the tradition in all its revealed authority and depth. This phase differs from theology’s historical or positive phase, wherein the theologian is seeking to recover from the past just what it is that has been revealed within that tradition. The book’s final chapter (chapter 10) explains how these two phases fit together in a comprehensive theological method. Prior to the emergence of historical consciousness, the doctrinal and systematic work of theology would have been considered the most proper meaning of the term *theology*. Today, these tasks struggle to find their place within the vast array of positive historical theological studies; that is, the theological work of placing

the documents and events of the past in increasingly enriched social and cultural contexts often remains somewhat unconnected to sound doctrinal and systematic theologies. By focusing on the normative elements of the theological project, we are not suggesting that the positive phase is unimportant, but more seeking to reestablish some direction and purpose to the normative phase where, one might argue, considerable confusion is present. Following Bernard Lonergan then, and adopting the terminology of his theological method, “we are seeking the foundations, not of the whole of theology, but of the three last specialties, doctrines, systematics, and communications.”¹

Now, anyone with even a passing familiarity with current theological culture will know how rich and diverse theological literature is: from the theo-dramatics of Hans Urs von Balthasar² to the dense theological prose of Karl Rahner;³ from biblical theologies to those who seek to revive the work of Thomas Aquinas;⁴ from the postcolonial approaches of feminist⁵ and liberationist theologies⁶ to the postsecular

1. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1972), 267.
2. For instance, the first volume of his multivolume work on theological aesthetics, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, vol. 1, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 7 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983).
3. Perhaps his most accessible work would be Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1982).
4. For one of the better examples of neo-Scholasticism, see Gilles Emery, trans. Matthew Levering, *Trinity in Aquinas* (Ypsilanti, MI: Sapientia Press, 2003).
5. See the classical feminist study Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1994).
6. See the seminal work in liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of*

perspective of Radical Orthodoxy, which seeks to promote a return to some form of Christendom.⁷ Yet, despite this diversity, we can all recognize that these approaches are engaged in some fashion in “doing theology.” There are appeals to authoritative sources, the Scriptures, Church Fathers, officially declared teachings, and recognized theological giants from the past and present; there is a common desire to clarify, to understand, to apply reasoning to push the tradition further in certain areas, or to explore the meaning of what has been handed down in as coherent a way as possible. Further, there is a desire to communicate the results of this work, so that the Christian community as a whole might benefit from theological labors. These many tasks belong to the specialties of doctrines, systematics, and communications identified above.

However, even given this commonality among many different theologies, it might be difficult to grasp what holds this entire theological endeavor together. In particular, why do various theologians arrive at such diverse results? Could there be such diversity that different approaches no longer recognize one another as actually engaged in the same process? And how do we deal with the fact that these diverse approaches can lead to such diverse outcomes, even to outright conflict, over a range of theological issues such as the Trinity, Christology, sacramental theology, and so on?

As conceived in this present work, the two major tasks of

Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

7. For example, John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991).

foundations arise in relation to two aspects of this theological diversity. The first is the question of theological language. How should we talk theologically? Should we be restricted to words or concepts from the Bible, or can we deploy metaphysical notions, and if so which ones? Can we incorporate sociological insights and language into theology where appropriate? What roles then do philosophy, the social and natural sciences, and history have in theology? One goal of the present work is to provide well-grounded categories for undertaking the tasks of doctrines, systematics, and communications. These categories shape theological language. And the grounds for their selection are unclear unless we can systematically account for them in relation to the diverse fields of human inquiry and knowledge.

And so our second question concerns theological outcomes and the conflicts that arise when theologians have significant disagreements. What are the origins of these disagreements and how might they be resolved? Is it just a matter of being clearer, more precise, more rigorous in our thinking, or is there something more fundamental at stake, a shift in perspective that no argument alone can resolve or produce (such as religious faith)? Here the concern is not just with the categories we use but also with the horizons within which we operate. Radically different horizons lead to significantly different theological outcomes. In the terms we shall use in this work, these two matters are questions, not unrelated, of categories and of conversion.

In the first instance then, one way of approaching the question of Why foundations? is to seek to move beyond the

present diversity in theological language and outcomes and to set forth a theological horizon broad enough to encompass that diversity and resolve disagreements in a constructive and theologically responsible manner.

What Sort of Foundations?

The concept of foundations elicits different images for different people. When we build a house we set foundations in the earth that are strong enough to support the weight of the building, and stable enough to withstand the normal forces of wind and earth movement that might otherwise damage it. So theological foundations might sound like something solid and stable enough to support a theological edifice that will not be blown around by intellectual fads and passing disruptions.

For some, the concept of foundations refers to attempts in various disciplines (such as mathematics) to identify fundamental starting points, indubitable propositions or axioms, from which we can deduce all other truths. And so Euclid deployed a small number of axioms from which he could deduce the whole of geometry, or so he thought. It was later shown that one of his axioms need not be true, so that other forms of geometry—non-Euclidean geometries for example—were possible. René Descartes sought to do something similar to Euclid in philosophy by identifying the foundations of knowledge in basic truths that remain invulnerable to doubt.⁸ Later philosophers would suggest that

8. It's not clear whether the foundation for knowledge is the *cogito* ("I think therefore

Descartes's foundations were little more than assertions requiring further justification. Last century, two mathematicians, Bertrand Russell and Alfred Whitehead, sought to provide foundations for the whole of mathematics by developing a rigorous account of set theory. Their major work, *Principia Mathematica*, took nearly four hundred pages to establish that the proposition "1+1=2" is true.⁹ Unfortunately, another mathematician, Kurt Gödel, demonstrated in 1931 how futile such foundational attempts were, when in a few pages he proved that any system complex enough to provide foundations for arithmetic was either inconsistent, leading to internal contradictions, or incomplete; that is, there are true statements in arithmetic which cannot be proved by means of arithmetic alone.¹⁰

So if we talk about foundations for theology we do not mean something like an axiomatic system from which all theological truths can be deduced. This type of project is largely discredited. Still, we find traces of it when theologians think that theological issues can be resolved simply by reference to one's theological sources. Indeed, there can be a tendency to use Scripture or Church dogmas as if they provide the starting axioms for theological deductions. Whatever can be deduced from these "axioms" using the

I am") or God. See Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983), 16.

9. Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, *Principia Mathematica* (Cambridge: University Press, 1910), 379.

10. It is possible they could be proved in a more complex system, but that larger system would suffer from the same problem of either being inconsistent or incomplete. For an account of Gödel's theorem and its implications see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/goedel-incompleteness/>.

usual rules of deduction must then be true. While there are many problems with such an approach, one significant problem is its failure to attend to the historical contexts of both the Scriptures and Church dogmas, to grasp their meanings within that context, and so to be able to distinguish between what is being proposed for belief as a truth revealed by God and what is merely an unquestioned cultural assumption of the author, or a consequence of a literary form of expression. For example, Scripture might tell us that Jesus sits at the “right hand of the Father,” but we cannot deduce from this that God the Father has a left and a right hand. The authors of Scripture and various Church dogmas were not always seeking to define universal and necessary truth, but were responding to particular situations and contexts that we need to understand before we can grasp what it is they are saying.

Of course, this does not mean we should abandon logic, any more than mathematics did in light of Gödel’s work. Logic has its place and is particularly useful in clarifying issues and pushing boundaries within a particular system. But where does the system come from in the first place, and what happens when a system becomes sterile and unproductive, so that we need to consider a major expansion or shift in our system? Some would argue that the system known as neo-Scholasticism, drawn from a particular approach to the writings of Thomas Aquinas and later commentators of his work, had in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries become sterile and unproductive, no longer able to face the challenges posed by modern critical historical studies,

contemporary philosophical approaches and scientific advances. More than logic was needed to transform this system.

What then do we mean by foundations? The approach we adopt here is that the converted theologian herself is the foundation from which all sound theology emerges.¹¹ The theologian is the one who must decide when the application of logic is called for; when and how one must come to an understanding of the particular contexts of Scripture and dogmas; and the one who with creativity and fidelity must work to create new theological systems when existing systems are no longer productive or credible. The theologian must decide which authorities demand her allegiance and with whom she should collaborate and from whom to draw inspiration, because the theological task is not a solitary or individual project, but rather a culturally collaborative enterprise spanning generations, and each theologian has a contribution to make.¹²

In all these tasks, the theologian has a fundamental orientation toward diligently attending to the sources, intelligently understanding their meaning, reasonably affirming their truth, and responsibly committing to their

11. Lonergan, *Method*, 267: "Foundational reality, as distinct from its expression, is conversion: religious, moral, and intellectual. Normally it is intellectual conversion as the fruit of both religious and moral conversion; it is moral conversion as the fruit of religious conversion; and it is religious conversion as the fruit of God's gift of his grace." Following Robert Doran we shall add psychic conversion to the foundations of theology. See Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

12. At the simplest level this is evident in the theologians one chooses to read and thus influence the topics which draws one's interest, the authorities one accepts, and the style of theology one writes.

goodness. This orientation is evident in the diligent attention given to what are often viewed as theological foundations such as Scripture and tradition; the theological demand that the meaning of Scripture and Church dogmas be understood within a certain historical and cultural context; in the theological affirmation of truth as revealed by God who can neither be deceived nor deceive; and in a theological commitment to the good of the theological enterprise itself as a contribution to the life of the Christian community. Moreover, theologically we may affirm these orientations as orientations to the divine, a restlessness of the heart that can never rest until it rests with God.¹³ Still, such a statement is a theological conclusion, not a premise; it is something that we need to justify in light of other aspects of our investigation into foundations. Nonetheless, these orientations serve performatively as the starting point for theological foundations.

Simply to identify these orientations as foundational is not to grasp their full significance. We must unpack and explore their significance, and to this task we turn in Part 2 of the present work where we take up the questions of conversion and categories relevant to theology (chapters 2–5). It is through conversion that the theologian comes into a fuller self-possession of herself as oriented to beauty, meaning, truth, and goodness, and within the horizon established by conversion that categories find their proper meaning. In Part

13. Paraphrasing Augustine: “You have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.” Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 39.

3 we explore the foundational significance of these orientations and correlated conversions in relation to various theological topics often addressed in a course on fundamental theology (chapters 6–9).¹⁴ We conclude with some overall comments on the theological method underpinning our approach in chapter 10.

The Question of Theological Language

The question of what is the proper language for theology is hardly a new one. As early as the third century, Tertullian asked the question, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” implying that philosophical language has no place in the church.¹⁵ Still, this did not prevent him from introducing the categories of person/*persona* and substance/*substantia* into Trinitarian theology. Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas responded to those who said we should use only categories drawn from the Scriptures, by noting that if such were the case we should only do theology in Hebrew and Greek, the language of the Scriptures.¹⁶ More recently, Bernard Lonergan has argued that theology mediates between a religion and its cultural matrix.¹⁷ The more complex and variegated the culture, the more theology

14. See, for example, the range of topics explored in Gerald O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*.

15. Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics* 7, trans. Peter Holmes, *The Anti-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, 10 volumes (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1888) 3: 246. Tertullian also introduced “Trinitas” into Trinitarian theology, see Gerald O’Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (New York: Paulist, 1999), 105.

16. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.29.3 ad1.

17. Lonergan, *Method*, xi.

needs to draw upon a variety of resources to perform such a mediating function. In particular, the cultural expansions occasioned by critical history, together with the emergence of the natural and human sciences, have made the theological task more complex and pluralistic than for previous generations.

Of course, all theologians might accept that language drawn from Scripture is used legitimately in some respect in theological discourse. However, when we examine biblical language closely we find that many terms take on religious significance because of their reference to God and realities related strictly to God. Let us consider three words of theological importance drawn from Scripture: grace, forgiveness, and mediation. Paul uses the language of grace to speak of God's gift to us in Jesus Christ, poured out through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). However, the Greek word we translate as grace, *charis*, means simply gift. What makes it a religious term is the giver of the gift and the nature of what is given. Forgiveness, too, is central to many of the Gospel parables, and Jesus often offers people forgiveness for their sins. But forgiveness may simply be between two people, a matter of forgiving a financial debt, with no religious significance at all. What makes forgiveness a religious term is the nature of the one who forgives, and the kind of "debt" forgiven. Finally, the New Testament speaks of Jesus as the mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5). But a mediator is simply one who is a go-between for two parties. What makes this a religious term is that one of the parties involved is God.

And so much of what we take as religious language draws in its own way from more general terms that take on a religious significance in their specific context. In any religious tradition, we find a wide variety of such terms, which are constituted as religious by their referent, the reality to which they relate. Much of the language we take as religious from the Bible falls into this category. There are, however, other terms that theologians draw from sources other than the Bible, but which they use in hopes of clarifying the realities to which the Bible refers. A good example of this is the use of the category of *substance*, which Tertullian first used in Trinitarian theology to identify what is common between God the Father and God the Son. The Nicene Creed then speaks of the Father and Son as “consubstantial” or “of one substance.” The term has no profound biblical meaning (if any biblical meaning at all).¹⁸ It may take on a technical meaning in philosophy, but it might also express the commonsense meaning of “stuff.” Its use in the Creed creates a new situation. Why should we use such nonscriptural language to express our beliefs? Is this the corruption of the pure spirit of the Gospel by Greek philosophy, as suggested by Adolf von Harnack,¹⁹ or the successful inculturation of the Gospel in a more philosophically literate culture? Foundations must allow us to address such questions.

The Middle Ages witnessed a rapid expansion of the use

18. The Greek term *hypostasis* occurs once in the New Testament in Heb. 11:1. It is doubtful that it has a technical meaning there.

19. Adolf von Harnack, *Outlines of the History of Dogma*, trans. Edwin Mitchell (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1893).

of philosophical categories in theological discourse. It reached its summit in the work of Thomas Aquinas, who used and transformed Aristotle's philosophical categories to create a remarkable Christian synthesis of faith and reason. Aquinas's use of Aristotle provided a framework of systematic meaning that he could then deploy to investigate within a single view a wide variety of theological questions, such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the relationship between grace and freedom, the place of human virtues in the life of grace, and so on. Despite the power of this synthesis, it slid into decadence and was eventually rejected by the Reformers, who wanted a return to the "plain" language of the Bible.

The question of the proper use of nonreligious, or what we shall call "general," categories has become more pressing in recent centuries with the emergence of a range of new disciplines such as sociology, psychology, economics, critical history, and so on. These have greatly enriched human culture, but often those who developed these new accounts of human existence did so with an explicitly antireligious agenda.²⁰ They sought to develop a new science of human existence that would sidestep the endless controversies of the theologians and philosophers. Thus, Emile Durkheim (often referred to as the "Father of Sociology") states of the discipline: "Sociology does not need to choose between the great hypotheses which divide metaphysicians."²¹ Does this agnosticism preclude these disciplines from the possibility of

20. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, provides a genealogical account of the origins of the human sciences. While valuable to address, it does not resolve the issue of the relationship between these human sciences and theology.

21. Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, ed. George E. G. Catlin, trans.

dialogue with theologians, or exclude theologians from the fruitful use of such insights as these disciplines may contain? Some theologians reject their use as contrary to the proper task of theology; others suggest that, properly reoriented, such disciplines may fruitfully assist in the theological task of understanding faith.²²

Our purpose at this stage is not to resolve such issues, but to note that the question of theological language is complex and needs further work, some of which we shall develop in later chapters. In the meantime, two additional issues in relation to theological language require our attention: the problem of the control of meaning and the possibility of explanatory or systematic meaning in theology.

A perennial problem in theology is the question of the control of meaning. Theologians use a variety of terms, a few of which we noted above. But how can we control the meaning of our basic terms? How can we speak precisely and clearly about the realities of faith? In mathematics, this is done through a strict axiomatic system where basic terms and their relations are mutually defining. In theology, things are more difficult. We already noted the introduction of the term *substance* in theological discourse through the teaching of Nicaea on the Trinity. It has a variety of possible meanings. In common language, we speak, for example, of chemical substances, or perhaps we imagine some type of gooey “stuff”

Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Mueller, 8th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1938), 141.

22. More fully, Neil Ormerod, “A Dialectic Engagement with the Social Sciences in an Ecclesiological Context,” *Theological Studies* 66, no. 4 (2005): 815–40.

as our meaning of the term; but we use the term in other ways as well. We might say that someone is a person of substance. The meaning then is very different. Or a lawyer might say, “the substance of my argument is . . .” to indicate the key insight she is trying to convey. When we say that the Father and the Son are of one substance (consubstantial), which of these meanings are meant? Do we mean the Father and the Son are made of the same “stuff” or do we mean that to correctly understand the Father, is to correctly understand the Son? This latter meaning is certainly the meaning given in the rule of Athanasius—that “what is true of the Father is true of the Son, except the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Father.” On the other hand, a theologian who is not even aware of the need for controlling the meaning of such terms is likely to adopt a commonsense position, and fail to attend to the nuances of meaning involved. What results will not be good theology.

A problem that is related to the question of the control of meaning is the possibility of systematic meaning in theology. Many theologians claim that all religious and theological language is metaphorical.²³ If such a claim were true a strict control of theological language would be impossible and with it any possibility of systematic or explanatory meaning. Metaphor is by its nature polyvalent and evocative. It seeks to say more than can be said, while systematic, explanatory meaning seeks to exclude possibilities by bringing precise meaning to as sharp a focus as possible.

23. See, for example, Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

Of course, it is difficult to know how one might establish the claim that all religious language is metaphorical; indeed, it would be very difficult to establish such a claim unless one adopted some systematic, explanatory framework to do so. Mostly, such a claim is simply asserted. This is not to say that some, if not the majority of, religious language is metaphorical, but the theological task is to move beyond descriptive and metaphorical categories to enter into systematic and explanatory meaning.²⁴ Without this movement, theology becomes simply an exercise in rhetoric. We then become content with a satisfying flow of image and affect rather than achieving genuine understanding. In other words, metaphor and other types of analogy are useful, if not necessary, tools for theology, but they require explanatory control if they should move beyond descriptive associations and contribute to solving theological problems (for example, Aquinas's use of Augustine's psychological analogy for understanding relations within God).

One could argue, for example, that in the work of Thomas Aquinas terms like *grace* move from being descriptive, operating in a commonsense way, to becoming technical with a precise control of meaning. This precision allowed him to resolve a number of the pressing issues of his day regarding the question of grace and its relationship to free will. More recently there has been considerable debate on whether Vatican II is in strict continuity with the tradition or

24. Keeping in mind, however, that the modes of such systematic and explanatory meaning may still be thought of in traditional terms such as the ways of negation, eminence, and analogy.

whether there are elements of discontinuity. Such a problem cannot be resolved unless one knows what it is that is supposed to be continuous or discontinuous and how possible discontinuity might be measured. Unless one can achieve this, the debate will go on interminably and possibly even meaninglessly.²⁵ If one wants to make significant theological progress on a range of such matters, one needs to operate within some type of systematic framework that allows for a relatively precise control of meaning. And this goal is not the task of the individual theologian, but of a collaborative community of theologians working in concert for decades or even centuries.

Sound theological foundations need to address the issues associated with theological language and categories. However, the discussion also indicates some of the potential sources of disagreement and conflict that arise in theology. To this issue we now turn.

The Problem of Theological Conflict and Disagreement

As we can see above, there are many possible sources of disagreement and conflict in theology. People may disagree over the meanings of various theological terms. This disagreement might arise because one person uses a term metaphorically, while another seeks a systematic and explanatory meaning. Science, for example, moves from descriptive terms, like *hot* and *cold*, to explanatory terms like

25. See, for example, Neil Ormerod, "Vatican II—Continuity or Discontinuity? Toward an Ontology of Meaning," *Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2010): 609–36.