

The Nature of Theology

Challenges, Frameworks, Basic Beliefs

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Introduction

Thirty years ago I published a book on the basic components of Christian theology.¹ Although this work incorporates or presupposes much of that earlier work, the many differences between them offer insight into developments over the years and what is going on in this book.

In *Dynamics of Theology* I was concerned that the discipline of theology should have greater methodological self-consciousness within the confines of a professional school of ministry. Law schools and medical schools seemed to be more rigorous in their research and critical in their interpretation. Christian theology has a long history of being a critical academic discipline, and professional schools demand no less. But critical questioning does not have to translate into inaccessible language. That book was thus written to address a larger audience than professional theologians.

Dynamics considered faith to be a common human response to reality, but distinct from the formal statements of belief that are changeable expressions of a consistent faith commitment. Revelation too had to be sharply distinguished from communication of heavenly information. As in the case of faith, Christian ministers needed nuanced reflection on how scripture could be appropriated in a culture that asks questions about everything. *Dynamics* offered a systematic account of the symbolic structure of religious and theological language and a critical hermeneutical method for appropriating the tradition. Overall, the book was addressed to insiders, Christian ministers who had to address people who were

¹ Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990; republished Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

asking ever more sophisticated questions about the beliefs of their own churches.

Three decades have generated remarkable changes in Western intellectual culture that help account for the differences between this and that earlier work. Major political and social events on the national and world stage, not to mention behaviors mediated by technological developments, helped stimulate shifts in secular and church cultures. We can point to a few developments that help to account for significant shifts in the context of theology.

First of all, the last thirty years have witnessed a decline in church participation. Moreover, opinion polls indicate that active church members do not relate to the formal teachings of their churches in an uncritical way but are privately or publicly selective. Some have no interest at all in theological distinctions, and Christianity tends to be reduced to practice. These large social adjustments are accompanied by developments that have challenged some specific theological assumptions or beliefs. Isolating certain problems can help to frame the situation of theology today.

Four clusters of issues exercise deep influence on Christian self-understanding today. The first arises from a dialogue with science, which to many Christians appears as an enemy of theology. An implicit internalization of the disciplinary premises of some sciences, such as empiricism and materialism, subtly affects a theological imagination. The suppositions and authority of the sciences seep into consciousness and tend to weaken the status of theological claims to truth about God and God's relationship with human existence.

A second area of theological contention lies in the extensive development of liberation theologies: they have expanded consciousness to a range of oppressive behaviors. As pluralistic societies have pushed religious belonging toward a private sphere, liberation theologies have invited members of the churches toward public institutional positions on issues of the common good that not all the members are willing to embrace. This area is particularly difficult because public social rhetoric lends itself less to nuance and careful thinking and more to exaggerated impressionism. Churches have become socially polarized organizations rather than houses of reconciliation.

A third area of change has to do with public acceptance of other religious traditions as authentic and veridical. A positive appreciation

of the historical contexts of religions has begun to challenge a long tradition of Christian supremacy. People of other religious traditions are listening in on Christian discussions. This gradual awakening to religious pluralism has a wide variety of implications for different Christian groups, but no one should doubt the depth of the gradual change of worldview that is affecting more and more people.

A fourth area of Christian theology under scrutiny is Christology. A Christian imagination that is more open to religious pluralism invites questions about the meaning of the divinity of Jesus Christ. The issue is deep, and its implications are fraught.

These issues were on the table thirty years ago; they have been discussed for a long time. But they have come to the fore in a more pressing, self-conscious way. These issues do not isolate theology today from its traditional forms; many traditional distinctions are still relevant. But these problems help to explain some of the perspectives and demands on theological reasoning. New creative tensions are in the air. Students of theology are less homogeneous than ever before; church-related schools are open to a larger public. Interfaith issues are more telling and engaging than ecumenical issues. The dialogue with science represents new exigencies for authority; an imagination schooled in science offers challenges to the framework and suppositions of theology. How can theology maintain a real authority in its exchange with scientific culture and a critically informed political culture? If religious pluralism means one religious tradition can learn from other religions, how does theology justify the particular claims of its tradition? If theology arises out of a faith community, how does it retain its autonomy as an academic discipline relative to the more objective disciplines of social sciences and religious studies?

These generalizations about changes in the context and form of theology materialize in the students in today's universities and graduate schools. Many young Christians are unschooled in the religion of their birth; they know some words but have little idea of their meaning. Others have been instructed in their faith, but they have appropriated it in uncritical, anthropomorphic terms; they fiercely hold to these terms against secular forms of knowledge that seem to threaten faith. Interestingly, as well, while some people are leaving the churches, others are turning toward Christian faith as

seekers, some educated and some not, and they approach with no real knowledge of Christian beliefs. Suppose all of these people are part of the audience to whom one wants to introduce the discipline of Christian theology. How would one design such a course? Where would one begin? What conception of the discipline, in the sense of its basic design, will the course represent? These questions represent a practical attitude to the subject matter addressed in this discussion.

But the questions also carry deeper dimensions. Has Christian theology devolved into an intrinsically eclectic discipline? While theology as a discipline of undergraduate and graduate education naturally subdivides into multiple sub-disciplines or fields, the focus often falls on what is called systematic or constructive theology. But within that designation, courses vary considerably in method and subject matter. Courses that bear the same title sometimes do not resemble one another in either approach or content. What is it, then, that determines whether they represent the same discipline? Can one determine an internal structure of Christian theology today that makes it an integral humanistic discipline with relatively clear boundaries? This discussion seeks to go beyond transcendentalism, that is, a universal anthropological base, in search of a common structure that makes Christian theology a focused, practical, and humanistic academic discipline that can address the variety of people who study it in our time.

The quest for a practical rather than an intellectual organizational principle should not be read as an abandonment of the gains made in the last two centuries. One can recognize the integrating power of a transcendental definition of theology, for example, in the theologies of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Rahner, and Bernard Lonergan, as a permanent contribution to the field. The stability of the human species and of the structure of the human mind offer ways of organizing theological questions and Christian answers. Human beings can still communicate with one another across radical historical and cultural differences. Recognition of historical consciousness does not contradict transcendental thinking. But historical consciousness attends to the unique context, to the distinct situations and particular problems of our time and place. It focuses the imaginative horizon for understanding on the present

and integrates into the foundations of theology a human response to problems publicly encountered. Rather than a counterproposal, simply in distinction from transcendental theology, responding more directly to present-day situations and cultures defines the practical character of theology. It directs the attention of a critical intellect to the questions that people are actually asking.² The diversity within theology reflects a search for a common relevant structure of the discipline in a wildly fragmented human experience. This book describes the logic of Christian theology by sidestepping an abstract analysis of the discipline and its various methodologies. It begins instead with our cultural situation and the intellectual and practical problems that face us.

The book aims at outlining a relatively clear structure of the discipline of theology that is responsive to the current situation.³ It seeks to replace “reflection on God” and “faith seeking understanding” as its first definition. A more descriptive conception of theology sees it as interpretation of the world from the perspective of the symbols of the Christian faith tradition. Theology must begin by describing our situation in terms of cultural motifs that all recognize.

This account proposes that three major challenges to the Christian faith characterize a context that Christian theology must address.

² What is proposed here bears analogy to Dorothee Soelle’s early statement (*Political Theology* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974]) in response to Rudolf Bultmann’s existential theology; Johann Baptist Metz (“Transcendental-Idealistic or Narrative-Practical Christianity? Theology and Christianity’s Contemporary Identity Crisis,” in *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* [New York: Crossroad, 2007]) in response to Karl Rahner’s transcendental theology; later Edward Schillebeeckx’s response to his own earlier Neo-Thomism; and James Cone in response to his formative Barthianism. These examples do not necessarily represent competitive differences but new, practical, historically conscious approaches that include the former theologies but direct them to a more pointed and specific humanistic horizon.

³ This work reflects research done in several distinct areas of theology over decades. The point is not to introduce new theological opinion, but to open up a discussion of the distinctive character of Christian theology as an autonomous academic discipline alongside others. This is done in a constructive rather than a polemic or comparative way. It does not conclude the conversation but contributes to it.

The three problems are metaphysical skepticism, relativism, and ontic pessimism. In various ways these issues help account for the explosion of courses that pass as theology. In this book these cultural biases set formal exigencies for the discipline: responding to them gives theology a credibility it would otherwise lack, as they underlie some of the deepest human questions of our time. This move and the claim behind it depend on an axiom concerning the historical situatedness of all human understanding; namely, that the historical, social, and cultural situation constitutes an intrinsic dimension of the way anything is understood, and that it influences the content of knowing itself.

The three challenges provide the implicit logic of how the chapters unfold. Part One, which contains Chapter 1, briefly develops the three problems just mentioned that dominate the discipline and to which theology must respond in order to be credible. Part Two comprises Chapters 2, 3, and 4. They bear a formal character, meaning that they develop a framework for a holistic approach to theology by addressing each of the three problems and highlighting their significance for theology today. In other words, the contemporary form of Christian theology shows that it is aware of these problems and engages them. Finally, Part Three presents the content of Christian theology in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. They too respond to the problems that challenge Christian self-understanding with commentary on basic beliefs: God as creator; Jesus as a mediator with universal relevance; and God as Spirit. As an introduction to Christian theology rather than a systematic or constructive synthesis, these chapters on content are appropriately schematic and not extensively developed.

This threefold structure may seem overwrought. If the order of presentation seems contrived or forced, at least it serves to integrate into theology's definition newly relevant and deeply felt human problems that affect its credibility, method, and initial presentation. The issues challenging theology are both historical and metaphysical; they call into question both the possibility and the relevance of theology as a coherent academic pursuit. Ignoring them trivializes the discipline itself.