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978-0-521-69037-9 - An Introduction to Christian Theology

Richard J. Plantinga, Thomas R. Thompson and Matthew D. Lundberg

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PART I

*Introduction to theology*

The first part of this book introduces theology in general and the discipline of Christian systematic theology in particular. It then sketches out the dominant contours of our contemporary world as the critical context to which Christian theology must meaningfully speak today.

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## CHAPTER I

*What is theology?*

|   |               |
|---|---------------|
| Introduction: the quest(ions) of human existence      | <i>page</i> 3 |
| The development of the concept of theology            | 5             |
| Origin of the term “theology”                         | 5             |
| Brief history of the concept and practice of theology | 6             |
| Patristic developments                                | 6             |
| Medieval and Reformation developments                 | 8             |
| Modern and contemporary developments                  | 10            |
| The architecture and method of theology               | 12            |
| The sources/norms and branches of theology            | 12            |
| The tasks and audiences of systematic theology        | 17            |
| The criteria of systematic theology                   | 20            |
| The dynamics of systematic theology                   | 21            |
| The social location and identity of the theologian    | 24            |

INTRODUCTION: THE QUEST(IONS)  
OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

If one mentions the word “theology” to the average person on the street, one may well be met by a puzzled expression followed by a series of questions: What exactly is theology and what does it have to do with real life? Isn’t it something studied only by professionals who have an obscure interest in ancient texts? Don’t theologians make unnecessary complexity out of what could and should be simple? Is theology really relevant in our contemporary world?

These perplexed responses are understandable. But theology need not be arcane, enigmatic, or irrelevant. While there is no denying that scholars who undertake its study tend to reject simplistic answers, often use technical terminology, and engage more than two millennia of historical development, the practice of theology is actually not confined to a small class of scholars. Indeed, we would suggest that anyone who seriously inquires about the basic questions of life is a theologian of sorts. That is to say,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

*An Introduction to Christian Theology*

human beings are theologically inclined insofar as they wonder about things such as: Where did the world come from? What is the purpose of human existence? Is there any final justice in life? What is the something “other” or “more” that seems to manifest itself in human existence, whether in peak or in depth experiences? What does the “something” – or “someone” – want with us? In short, what is the meaning of life? These are the kinds of questions that theologians think about. But poets, artists, and philosophers wrestle with these very same questions as well. Similarly, we would argue that anyone who seriously grapples with the questions of human existence in search of a meaning to life beyond its mundane and prosaic surface – that is, a transcendent or metaphysical dimension – can be thought of as a theologian.

This existentially inquisitive – and therefore theological – orientation to life was wonderfully expressed in a work by the American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–86):

This World is not Conclusion.  
 A Species stands beyond –  
 Invisible, as Music –  
 But positive, as Sound –  
 It beckons, and it baffles –  
 Philosophy – don’t know –  
 And through a Riddle, at the last –  
 Sagacity, must go –  
 To guess it, puzzles scholars –  
 To gain it, Men have borne  
 Contempt of Generations  
 And Crucifixion, shown –  
 Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –  
 Blushes, if any see –  
 Plucks at a twig of Evidence –  
 And asks a Vane, the way –  
 Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –  
 Strong Hallelujahs roll –  
 Narcotics cannot still the Tooth  
 That nibbles at the soul –<sup>1</sup>

This poem’s first line (which functions as its title) asserts that “This World” – the world of our sense experience – is not all there is; it “is not Conclusion.” Rather, “A Species stands beyond.” What is this “Species”?

<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1960), 243.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*What is theology?*

5

Something? Someone? Perhaps God? Dickinson says that the “Species” is “Invisible ... but positive” – in other words, elusive but real. Such transcendence “beckons” but yet “baffles,” to the point where philosophers, those lovers of wisdom normally skilled at tackling conundrums, cannot figure “it” out. Scholars fare no better in their quest to determine what this might be. So persistent is its power of attraction, suggests Dickinson, that human beings in their search for this “Other” have suffered indignities such as contempt and even crucifixion – the latter alluding to the original Christian martyr. But the human quest for this “Species,” a quest which Dickinson characterizes as “Faith,” is a pursuit that does not rest; rather, it seeks evidence, and looks for guidance from various sources. Without coming to a definitive conclusion about God, Dickinson ends her poem by making a strong statement about the human condition: Life involves a quest for a transcendent Other; no other devices – not even drugs – can ultimately “still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul.”

Dickinson’s poem tersely illustrates our basic contention: Humanity ineluctably asks questions about its experience in the world in a quest for something more. Given that this “transcendent other” or “metaphysical more” is most typically thought of as a divine being – as God – the quest is ultimately theological, since theology in its most basic sense is an “account of God.” More specifically, the term “theology” derives from the Greek (Gk.) word *theologia*, which itself is composed of two smaller Greek words: *theos* and *logos*. *Theos* is the generic Greek term for “god.” *Logos* is a more complicated concept with several shades of meaning. It can signify word, speech, talk about, discourse, account, and even reason (our English term “logic” is derived from it). Putting *theos* and *logos* together etymologically, one gets something like “talk about God” or “a reasoned account of God.” While different religious traditions will elaborate their own theologies, Christian theology attempts to give a reasoned account of the God made known in the history of Israel and supremely revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. It is striking, however, that the term *theologia* cannot be found in the New Testament (NT), Christianity’s charter document, which was first written in Greek. Where then did the term originate?

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF THEOLOGY

*Origin of the term “theology”*

The origin of the term “theology” lies in the pre-Christian, ancient world, first appearing in the *Republic* by Plato (c. 427–347 BCE). In Book II of this

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

famous philosophical text, Plato's spokesperson Socrates criticizes the writers Homer and Hesiod (those great bards of the ancient myths) for their depictions of the Greek gods as engaged in all-too-humanlike intrigues and scurrilous behavior. Their mythical account of the gods, that is, their *theologia*, is misleading and troubling since it misrepresents the true nature of the divine.<sup>2</sup> Following Plato, other ancient Greek philosophers – including Plato's famous student Aristotle (384–322 BCE) – tended to dismiss “theology” as merely mythical speech about the gods. They considered such dubious accounts as inferior to philosophy – the disciplined quest to penetrate the nature of reality through the use of reason and intelligence, leading to a truer understanding of the divine.<sup>3</sup>

Though the term *theologia* first developed as a disparaging term, it was appropriated by Christianity in a very different sense that is captured well by its linguistic roots – *logos* about *theos*. Theology is generally understood today as “reasoned discourse about God.” Before discussing the method and dynamics of the theological enterprise more systematically, however, it will be helpful to see how the Christian tradition took up and refined the notion of theology at strategic points in its history.

### *Brief history of the concept and practice of theology*

#### *Patristic developments*

As Christianity entered its first era, the “patristic” period (c. 100–c. 500 CE) of the church “fathers” (Gk. *pateres*), it found itself a minority community in a complex, multicultural, hostile world. Given Jesus' mandate to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19), the early Christians needed spokespersons whose task it was to articulate Christian doctrine (Latin [Lat.] *doctrina* = teaching) and defend the faith in the face of persecutions and heresies. As these apologists (Lat. *apologia* = defense) pled for civil and religious tolerance and sought to make converts to the Christian cause, they were eager to characterize their faith not as something radically new or different but as something similar to what already honorably existed in the Greco-Roman world – namely, philosophy. For example, Justin Martyr

<sup>2</sup> See Plato, *The Republic*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, Bollingen Series 71 (New York: Pantheon, 1961), 575–844. For the term *theologia*, see Book II, section 379a, lines 5–6.

<sup>3</sup> Beyond the general Greek philosophical understanding of theology as mythical speech about the gods, which he criticizes, Aristotle does use the term *theologia* positively insofar as he identifies it with metaphysics – an account of the ultimate nature of reality or its first principles. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 12–13.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*What is theology?*

7

(c. 100–c. 165) in his *First Apology* avoids the term “theology” in characterizing Christianity instead as the true or highest philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

Gradually, however, the term theology was adopted and adapted by Christian thinkers. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) was one of the first to distinguish theology in the Greek sense (mythological discourse about the gods) from theology in a Christian sense (the theology of the word, the *logos*, Jesus Christ).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263–339), an early church historian, criticizes the Greek understanding of the term and conceives of theology in a distinctly Christian manner – as the church’s practice of proclaiming the biblical God, the creator made known by Jesus Christ.

As Christianity continued to spread, some thinkers sought to articulate its teachings, not so much apologetically to emperors and opponents of Christianity, but more descriptively for believers themselves. Notable in this development are church fathers such as Origen (c. 185–c. 254), whose work *De Principiis* is a topical arrangement of key Christian doctrines and therefore one of the first systematic approaches to Christian thought.<sup>6</sup> The term *theologia* at this stage most specifically referred to the doctrine of God, with which Origen begins his work. However, Origen’s approach showed that it was impossible to examine this foundational doctrine without also considering other doctrines, such as those of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and creation. One therefore sees in Origen a novel structural approach to the practice of theology that is an important milestone in the maturing of the discipline. But it was not until the fourth century that the term “theology” gained broad usage.

The fifth century brought the patristic period to a close. For western Christianity, it was Augustine (354–430) who gathered up the developments of the preceding centuries and constructively shaped them for the subsequent tradition. In his *Confessions*, this pagan-turned-Christian bishop and scholar sculpted an approach to theology that approximates a definition. At the outset of this classic work he argues that the human quest is a restless seeking of God: “our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”<sup>7</sup> Once human beings have encountered God and come to faith, however, they are

<sup>4</sup> See Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, trans. and ed. Cyril C. Richardson, in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 242–89.

<sup>5</sup> See Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), II: 313.

<sup>6</sup> See Origen, *De Principiis*, trans. Frederick Crombie, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), IV: 239–382.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 21.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

destined to continue their quest by seeking to understand what it is they have come to believe.<sup>8</sup> Faith or belief coupled with reflective inquiry toward greater understanding – this anticipates the classical description of theology developed more fully in the Middle Ages.

*Medieval and Reformation developments*

Of the various developments in the concept of theology in the Middle Ages (c. 500–c. 1400), one of the most important and enduring was authored by Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109). Following in the tradition of Augustine, Anselm articulated the genius of this approach in striking fashion:

I confess, Lord, with thanksgiving, that you have made me in your image, so that I can remember you, think of you, and love you ... Lord, I am not trying to make my way to your height, for my understanding is in no way equal to that, but I do desire to understand a little of your truth which my heart already believes and loves. I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand.<sup>9</sup>

Here Anselm portrays theology as the act of “faith seeking understanding” – *fides quaerens intellectum*. This has become the classic definition of theology, one that we gladly employ in this book.

Another medieval development with far-reaching consequences was Christianity’s encounter with the Middle Eastern world, especially with Islam during the period of the Crusades. This centuries-long struggle brought Christians into renewed contact with Greek philosophy, especially certain texts of Aristotle which the West had lost but recovered through contact with the Islamic world. A renewed interest in philosophy sparked new inquiry and aided the foundation of Europe’s first universities (e.g., Paris, Cambridge, Oxford). This highlighted the question of theology’s relationship to philosophy and led to the establishment of theology as an ordered inquiry – in other words, as a science (*scientia*). The science of theology, practiced by “schoolmen” or scholastics, would attempt to articulate the whole of Christian doctrine in a clear, orderly, comprehensive, and sophisticated fashion. During the height of this endeavor, theology was considered the queen of the sciences, with philosophy regarded as its handmaiden.

<sup>8</sup> See Augustine, “On the Profit in Believing,” trans. C. L. Cornish, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), III: 347–66. Elsewhere in his corpus, Augustine distinguishes three types of theology: natural, mythical, and civil. See Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1972), 298.

<sup>9</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, in *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm*, trans. Sister B. Ward (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 243–4.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*What is theology?*

9

The high-water mark in the scholastic development of theology as a science is found in Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–74). In his master work *Summa Theologiae* (*Summation of Theology*), Aquinas offers a breathtaking overview of theology in an ordered and rigorous fashion.<sup>10</sup> He explores theology's identity and the question of its necessity in relation to the discipline of philosophy. He concludes that theology is necessary because there are essential truths about God that are beyond the grasp of reason alone and therefore beyond the domain of philosophy. These truths are revealed in scripture, the explication of which is the task of theology. Having established the necessity of theology, Aquinas goes on to examine the Christian faith with the aid of (particularly Aristotelian) philosophy.

It was in the Middle Ages, then, that theology was established as a disciplined science practiced in universities, yet in the service of the church. These dual institutional settings would create considerable tension for theology over the centuries to come, as centered on this question: Is theology predominantly an intellectual activity (as *scientia* or knowledge) or is it more practical in nature (as *sapientia* or wisdom)?<sup>11</sup> In the period of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–64) came to regard much of medieval theology as too scholastic and rationalistic. They believed that theology should be more practical, pastoral, and carefully tied to Christian scripture (“by scripture alone” – *sola scriptura* – was one of the Reformation's central affirmations). In other words, theology is not so much concerned with God's being in abstraction as it is with God in concrete relation to humanity – a subtle but major shift. For Luther, this conviction is expressed in his critique of the medieval desire to visit the mind of God in order to describe the thoughts of God. Over against this rationalistic “theology of glory,” he proposed a “theology of the cross” that seeks God concretely in the witness of scripture to the gospel events.<sup>12</sup> In similar fashion, Calvin shows an impatience for speculation and abstraction, always insisting on the concrete relationship between God and humanity. He emphasizes this theme at the very outset of his major work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess ... consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”<sup>13</sup> For Calvin, there is no knowledge of self without

<sup>10</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1948).

<sup>11</sup> See Pannenberg, *Philosophy of Science*, 7–14, 228–35.

<sup>12</sup> See Martin Luther, “The Disputation held at Heidelberg,” in *Luther: Early Theological Works*, trans. and ed. J. Atkinson, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), these 19–24 (pp. 290–3).

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 35.



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

knowledge of God – and vice versa. To know God, Calvin argues, what is required is not conjecture about God in God's own being but piety – that is, a relationship to God and a reverence for God.

*Modern and contemporary developments*

The modern world brought new challenges to the theological enterprise, as rooted in the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment project. Sounding its keynote, the influential philosopher Immanuel Kant urged human beings not to submit to authority and tradition in their thinking but rather to boldly use their own reason. He argued that things beyond general human experience are not knowable, thereby challenging theology's traditional claim that God can be truly and readily known.<sup>14</sup> Sensing the predicament in which religion in general and Christianity in particular found themselves as a result of this Enlightenment criticism, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) sought to blaze a new path by attempting to convince skeptics and critics of religion that they had misunderstood that which they had too easily dismissed. In his work *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, Schleiermacher argued that religion was neither chiefly a matter of knowledge (i.e., doctrine) or of action (i.e., ethics) but was rather something altogether different – namely, a “feeling” or a kind of sense for the wholeness of reality.<sup>15</sup> This non-cognitive conception of religion led Schleiermacher to reconceive the nature of theology, recasting Christian doctrines as descriptions of the Christian religious consciousness, rather than as descriptions of transcendent realities in themselves.<sup>16</sup> In his efforts, Schleiermacher sought to secure a place for theology in the modern university, giving his theology an unmistakable apologetic cast: The one Christian faith must be relevant in both church and academy. Theology cannot be content with addressing the believer in the pew; it must also address the “cultured despisers of religion,” whose numbers continued to grow in the post-Enlightenment era and to whom both *theos* and *theologia* became increasingly questionable.

Schleiermacher's conception of theology inspired many nineteenth-century Protestant theologians who sought to negotiate a broad path between

<sup>14</sup> See Immanuel Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?,” in *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck, trans. Lewis White Beck *et al.*, Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 3; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's, 1965), *passim*.

<sup>15</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman (New York: Harper and Row, 1958). The second of the five speeches is particularly relevant to the discussion above.

<sup>16</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 1–128.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*What is theology?*

II

church and world, Christianity and culture, faith and science – the approach that came to be known as theological liberalism. The dominating influence of liberalism lasted until the second decade of the twentieth century, at which time a young Swiss Reformed pastor and theologian named Karl Barth (1886–1968) struck out in a new direction. Barth came to reject the approach of Schleiermacher and liberal theology, arguing that theology should not be preoccupied with human piety, consciousness, or feelings – which virtually reduces theology to anthropology – but should concern itself with God, who is “wholly other.” In his instructively titled *Church Dogmatics*, Barth argues that the task of theology is rigorous reflection on and correction of the church’s proclamation according to its primary norm: Jesus Christ, the reconciling Word of God, as witnessed in scripture. The shift is unmistakable. Barth’s chief audience is the church – those inside its walls and who profess its doctrines. His primary category, therefore, is not *religion*, which was Schleiermacher’s key category and point of departure, but *revelation*, the utterance of God to humanity.<sup>17</sup>

Since the time that Karl Barth dominated the theological scene – the so-called “neo-orthodox” era (1930s–1960s) – several developments have particularly influenced the present practice of theology as a discipline. Most notably, postmodernism as an intellectual movement has questioned the legacy of modernity and emphasized human subjectivity, historical situatedness, and relativity of perspective in scholarship. Accordingly, theology has become increasingly aware of its historical and cultural dimensions, spawning a variety of “contextual theologies.” For example, feminist theologies in the West have sought to liberate the suppressed voices and experiences of women in a male-dominated Christian history and theology.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Latin American liberation theologians have brought theology to bear on the situation of the poor and the church’s practice in their own indigent societies.<sup>19</sup> And African theologians, given the burgeoning of Christianity on their continent, have attempted to come to terms with the theological significance of African primal religion in creating a truly African theology.<sup>20</sup> This

<sup>17</sup> See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, 4 vols., various translators (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–75), I/1: xiii–xv, 3–87, 248–92. See also I/2: 797–884.

<sup>18</sup> See Rebecca S. Chopp, “Feminist and Womanist Theologies,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David Ford, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 389–404.

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, rev. edn. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Yaoundé, Cameroon: Éditions Clé, 2000).