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978-0-521-39069-9 - The Anthropological Character of Theology: Conditioning  
Theological Understanding

David A. Pailin

Excerpt

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## I

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## Introduction to a study of theology

Towards the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant claims that he has provided a much needed assessment of 'our adventurous and self-reliant reason', which should help 'to prevent errors in its use' and thereby to secure 'general order and harmony' in human thought. So far as religion is concerned, his argument shows how metaphysics acts as 'a bulwark' for faith by defining the limits of human reason.<sup>1</sup> Whatever judgements may be made on Kant's own performance of this task, it is only by a self-critical investigation of the nature of its rationality that we can appreciate properly the nature and significance of theological understanding.

While, therefore, methodological investigations into a form of understanding may sometimes seem to be a way of avoiding the task of developing that understanding, they may also be a necessary preliminary if such development is to avoid pursuing illusory objectives by specious methods. The following study arises from the conviction that theology today needs such preliminary investigations if it is to establish its credibility as a mode of understanding. In particular, it considers what follows once we recognize that since theologians are human, their conclusions are conditioned by the nature of human thought.<sup>2</sup>

### *The scope of this study*

Presupposing that theological understanding has not dropped from the skies nor been implanted in human minds by the miraculous provision of some *deus ex machina*, the following chapters investigate various ways in which theological conclusions are affected by the rationality of those who produce them. Although 'theology' is taken to be the attempt to understand the fundamental nature of reality in terms of the referent of religious faith, the investigation does not pretend to cover all forms of theological understanding. In order to keep its object within bounds, it is primarily concerned

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[More information](#)*The anthropological character of theology*

with those forms of understanding which are fundamentally theistic – that is, which attempt to understand reality in terms of a ‘God’ who is not only rationally, ontologically and valuatively ultimate, but is also most adequately understood in terms of a personal (i.e., self-aware, conscious, purposive) and agential mode of being. This personalistic view of theism and this theistic view of religion are not the only possible views of them, but they do express the dominant self-understanding of that major group of religious faiths constituted by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The limitation of this study to such theisms, however, does not imply that what follows has no relevance to the thought of other, even non-theistic faiths. It only means that those attempts to grasp the ultimate nature and purpose of reality, and hence the answers to humanity’s existential questions, are not the primary object of this study.

After some preliminary remarks in this chapter about the nature of this enquiry, chapter 2 clarifies what is meant by faith, belief, theology and reason, and how they are related to each other. The succeeding chapters identify six ways in which theological judgements are conditioned. Chapter 3 examines how the concept of God is a projection of human attributes, and chapter 4 how it is governed by our ideas of what would provide ultimate and self-explanatory completion for our search for understanding. The next two chapters consider the extent to which theological insights held to be derived from human experiences and from supposed revelations are conditioned by the culture and structure of thought of those who apprehend them. Chapter 7 investigates how our understanding of our deepest needs and of their remedy affects how we think of God, while chapter 8 examines how current thought about the world influences our understanding of God as the basis of the unity, harmony and meaning of all reality. The final chapter briefly mentions some further matters which need to be considered in determining the nature and status of theological understanding.

One major issue which this book does not attempt to investigate is that of the nature of claims to truth in theological understanding. This is not because such an investigation is either unimportant or unnecessary. Although theological understanding is conditioned by how we think, we must not forget that it purports to provide understanding of God as the ground of all reality and of the fundamental character of reality as grounded in the divine. As such it sees itself as determining what is true about God – and thereby truths which determine how everything else is finally to be correctly understood. The warrantability of its claims is a crucial and controversial matter

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[More information](#)*Introduction to a study of theology*

in the pervading secular and sceptical culture of the contemporary Western world, but it is a matter which is outside the scope of this study.<sup>3</sup>

In this book, then, we shall examine six ways in which theological understanding is fundamentally conditioned. As a result of these factors theology must be seen to be inescapably tentative and changeable, not just because it is seeking understanding in relation to a living God and a processive reality, but also because it is produced by human beings.

*Descriptive and revisionary*

Since it is about theology, this study is illustrated by various references to theological judgements. It should not, however, be judged by the acceptability of those discussions but by its success in identifying the factors which condition theological judgements and in suggesting how in future they may be more adequately constructed. It aims, that is, to be a 'revisionary' as well as a 'descriptive' study of theology.<sup>4</sup>

Some theologians may not only reject the revisionary suggestions. They may also – and primarily – condemn the preliminary attempt to describe the structure of theological understanding as it is actually presented on the grounds that 'outsiders' cannot properly appreciate its character. In this way they may defend their position by means of an appeal to privileged status, but it is at the cost of restricting acceptable criticisms of it to the private circle of fellow believers.<sup>5</sup> Those who claim such immunity for their theology sterilize their capacity to produce an understanding which may reasonably claim to be generally credible.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, those who purport to describe theological understanding must take care that their analyses deal with what is actually maintained and not with inventions of their imagination. In recent years a number of professedly Wittgensteinian treatments of religious belief have appeared, which seem to some believers to reveal that their authors' philosophical competence is not matched by an acquaintance with (or even a memory of) authentic religious faith! While, therefore, assertions that theological understanding is immune from rational investigation are to be rejected, attempts to describe such understanding must take seriously claims that theology as a mode of understanding and, even more, religion itself is *sui generis*. Such claims do not rule out rational investigations of theology and religion. They warn those who undertake them that

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[More information](#)*The anthropological character of theology*

they must ensure that the rational structures which they use are appropriate to what is being described.

Descriptions of how theologians reach their conclusions, both professedly and actually, raise questions about which of those ways is either traditionally acceptable or theologically preferable to any other. Such questions are not easy to answer. In certain respects it may be reasonable to consider that the proper answer to the question, 'What is the method of theology?', is given by describing the method or methods that respected theologians actually profess and employ. To ask of any method, however, 'But is it the correct one?', 'Is it rationally acceptable?' or even 'Is there a better way?', is to introduce questions of value, the basis of whose solution is not straightforward. In the case of theology, decisions about the 'right' way or about a 'better' way of reaching understanding have to be made by reference to what persons of sensitiveness and sense (and how they are to be identified cannot avoid begging the question to some extent) regard as providing satisfactory understanding of the relevant kind. To be satisfactory, such understanding must be credible according to generally accepted standards of rationality and appropriate to the object of theology as that which is ontologically, valuatively and rationally ultimate.

Fundamental problems arise when it becomes apparent that it is not at all clear how these criteria are to be satisfied. Attempts to find a solution by challenging the appeal to reason<sup>7</sup> are self-defeating. They demolish the possibility of any commonly agreed court of appeal and turn theological understanding into a matter of uncheckable private illumination. What is needed is, first, an elucidation of the various factors that seem to be essentially involved in theological understanding and, then, an investigation of whether they can be coherently combined and, if so, in what way. By such an approach it is to be hoped that theologians will be able to avoid the errors of the dogmatists whom Kant condemned for going beyond what was actually possible.<sup>8</sup> The resulting theological edifice may be a cottage and not a palace, but a cottage that is complete is better than a folly which never can be made habitable!

*A form of human understanding*

As has already been remarked, the basic presupposition of this study is that since theologians are human, theology is conditioned by the nature of human understanding. This may appear to be so obvious that it is trite to mention it. In practice, however, some

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theologians have apparently failed to appreciate that, while the object of their study may properly be regarded as being in certain respects absolute, their study of it is relative to their intellectual situation.

Karl Barth, for example, may seem to recognize this relativity when he says that the theologian has to speak 'from within his philosophical shell',<sup>9</sup> but it is questionable how far he accepts its implications since he goes on to hold that the true theologian must be 'ready to submit the coherence of his concepts and formulations to the coherence of the divine revelation and not conversely'.<sup>10</sup> In the first volume of *Church Dogmatics* Barth emphasizes the divine initiative in authentic theology to the point of asserting that in the event of Jesus Christ 'the proper content' of language about God becomes 'clear in a flash and in the highest perfection and certainty'. Although 'the event of human action' is needed to appropriate this knowledge, it is said to be 'frankly a second item as compared with the event proceeding from God'.<sup>11</sup> More recently this understanding of theology<sup>12</sup> has been put forward by T.F. Torrance. He states, for example, that 'Christian theology arises out of the actual knowledge of God' given by God 'in space and time'. It is 'positive knowledge' and our grasp of it does not 'begin with ourselves or our questions' but 'with the facts prescribed for us by the actuality of the object positively known'.<sup>13</sup>

These views of theological understanding challenge (and are in turn challenged by) the basic presupposition of this study. While acknowledging the 'creaturely form' of theological statements, Barth and Torrance apparently consider that theology can and must be primarily controlled by its object – 'God' – as given in divine self-revelation. In terms of the *ordo essendi* and of a desire to make concepts fit what they describe, they have the right priorities. In the *ordo cognoscendi* the situation is reversed. We cannot begin anywhere else than with ourselves<sup>14</sup> – with our questions and with our structures of understanding.<sup>15</sup> As will be argued later, even theological understanding which claims to be derived from God's self-revelation is importantly moulded by the intellectual character of those who claim to have apprehended it. The only apparent alternative to recognizing the human structuring of theological understanding is to regard theology as a miraculous activity in which God replaces the human intellect. Such a position is hardly tenable in view of the human conditioning that theological works display.<sup>16</sup>

Negatively, the recognition of the human basis of theological understanding means that theologians are always open to the criti-

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[More information](#)*The anthropological character of theology*

cism that they are only talking about themselves and about what makes sense to them, whereas the nature of ultimate reality may be quite – and unknowably – different.<sup>17</sup> The tradition of Western thought from Descartes and Locke which starts by investigating our ways of understanding may thus be held to prevent its followers from ever discerning the truth about God.<sup>18</sup> One purpose of this study is to investigate the significance of this criticism and of the counter-claim<sup>19</sup> that human self-understanding can only achieve completion if it is related to an understanding of God.<sup>20</sup>

Positively, the recognition of the human basis of theological understanding means that theologians are prevented from pretending that their utterances, if not God's own, at least have the support of God's unquestionable authority. If, as will be suggested later,<sup>21</sup> 'God' marks the limit of human understanding, they should not be surprised if their theology is troubled with loose ends, puzzles, perplexities, rough approximations and messily complex arguments. Such characteristics may indicate an honest attempt to apprehend what is intrinsically ultimate. Theologians, therefore, should proceed humbly, hoping that they are discerning truth rather than nonsense, and that what they claim to be cosmic insights are not in God's eyes hugely comical misunderstandings. If they wish to avoid being unwitting clowns, they need to follow Kant's example<sup>22</sup> in rejecting the dogmatism which refuses to determine its own competence, as well as the scepticism which refuses to entertain the possibility of theological understanding. Their primary task is to establish the conditions, limits and status of their understanding.

*The point of studying theology*

What is the point in studying theology? Once it was regarded as the queen of the sciences. Today it is haunted by the fear that it may be merely a subject for study in the history of ideas, like alchemy and astrology. Can it justify its claim to have a legitimate place in the contemporary search for understanding?

Theology is not to be regarded as simply another subject (dealing with 'God') directly comparable to physics (dealing with 'matter') or history (dealing with 'past personal activity'). This is not because its subject-matter is not directly observable (as if those of physics and history are), but because its subject-matter provides the final ground, coherence and point of all other forms of understanding. Theology is to be studied because it provides the keystone to the

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arch of understanding and, in this respect (but not in the sense of 'queening' it over others), it is properly regarded as the queen of the sciences.

It is also to be considered as a proper subject for study because it deals with people's attempts to find satisfying answers to the basic questions of human existence posed by its self-reflective, future-orientated, purpose-seeking character.<sup>23</sup> The notion of God is the notion of what is regarded in religious faith and theology as the self-explanatory foundation of all being, meaning and value. In spite of the crude ways in which 'God' has sometimes been understood, the notion thus refers to one way in which people have attempted to reach a fundamental understanding of themselves and of the reality of which they are part.

To recognize the importance of the questions which provoke theological enquiry does not, however, imply that theology is able to answer them. The study of theology may reveal that it is incapable of providing rationally satisfying answers. Whether or not this is the conclusion to be drawn from this study must wait until its investigations are completed. In the mean time, because human rationality makes us persist in asking questions about ultimate meaning and value, in spite of frequently being told that they are meaningless, pointless, confused or unanswerable questions, we cannot abandon the quest to understand the ultimate structure of reality without abandoning our basic self-understanding as reasoning persons. While, then, we may wonder about our competence to find answers to the questions of being, we cannot, without declaring the meaninglessness of life for us, abandon the search for answers to them. Theology may accordingly be held to be worth studying because, and so far as, the questions which give rise to it are basic, inescapable and important for human being.<sup>24</sup>

*The relativity of this study*

Egotism can be true humility in an author.<sup>25</sup> By continually pointing out that this and that assertion is what I think, I would make it clear that my claims express how things appear to me in my social, historical and intellectual situation. This would be tedious for the reader and might leave me with a disastrous sense of my own importance. Let me, therefore, simply state that when in future pages I discuss the relativity of thought, I do not exempt my own!



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## 2

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## Faith, belief, theology and reason

Before we consider the factors conditioning theological understanding, it is important to clarify what is meant by the basic concepts of faith, belief, theology and reason, and to outline how they are related to each other. It is not intended to present a comprehensive description of the variety of ways in which these notions are used in practice but to indicate, by reference to a set of actual usages appropriate to the theological position to be examined, how these key concepts are understood in this study.

### *The nature of faith*

'Faith' refers to the stance, understanding and disposition which constitute a person's existential commitment. It includes assent to a particular apprehension of the fundamental character of reality, the acceptance of certain values contained within that apprehension as normative, and the adoption of correspondingly appropriate forms of activity. It embraces these different factors not as distinct components but as interdependent facets of a single whole.

As a matter of commitment, faith involves risk. It is an affirmation of what can never, in its material content, be indisputably demonstrated. This does not mean that those who have faith will typically feel anxious or hesitant about it. As Tillich suggests, the 'doubt' that belongs to faith is 'not a permanent experience within the act of faith' which is expressed in a specific psychological state. It is rather to be regarded as a characteristic of the logical structure of faith, which results from the tension between the relativity of those who affirm it and 'its unconditional character'.<sup>1</sup> The 'courage' of faith is hence the readiness to affirm faith in the consciousness of this tension; the 'certainty' of faith is the certitude of conviction in action, not the impossibility of intellectual error.<sup>2</sup>

In many cases people are largely unaware of the content of their faith. Their commitment is not a matter of deliberate intellectual



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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Faith, belief, theology and reason*

assent, but a largely unconscious matter of belonging to some roughly defined group with only a vague awareness of its principal ideas. Through membership of the group, sharing its general ethos and observing its customs, its underlying faith comes to be imprinted upon them. Although, therefore, they live by that faith, they may become conscious of its elements only when its principles and practices are questioned. It is not unusual, furthermore, to find people who give allegiance to more than one group, and whose existential faith is consequently a matter of conformation to sets of ideas and practices that may not be wholly harmonious with each other.

Others manifestly live according to principles which conflict with the faith which they explicitly profess. Sometimes the distinction is due to ignorance or confusion, sometimes to weakness of the will, and sometimes to moral turpitude – ‘hypocrisy’. As a result neither what people say nor what they do are straightforward guides to their actual faith. They may misunderstand what it involves or fail to live up to what they correctly appreciate to be its demands.<sup>3</sup>

On examination a self-consistent faith is found to have a structure that is far from simple. Among the components of a faith typical of religious believers are behaviour-patterns, value-principles, moral commitments, membership (formal or informal) of a community, social activities, ritual performances, specific attitudes towards the self and others, notions of corporate and private vocation, and expectations of experiences of numinous awe and of gracious support. Fundamental, however, to the type of theistic faith to be considered here is the entertainment of certain convictions about what is the case, in particular about the character of that reality which is ultimate ontologically, rationally and valuatively. If, therefore, the notion of ‘fact’ is not restricted to contingent states but is understood to refer to any state of affairs, whether a posteriori or a priori, contingent or necessary, empirical or metaphysical, another way of putting this point is to say that a factual element is basic to faith. Nevertheless, while the words ‘fact’ and ‘factual’ are widely used to refer to what is the case, whatever its modal status, etymology (*factum* is ‘what has been made’) implies they should strictly be confined to references to what is a posteriori and contingent. Hence, since the ultimate to which faith refers is in certain respects at least a priori and necessary, it is more appropriate to put it that a reference to what is mind-independently real is basic to faith.

Because the realist reference of faith is primarily to what in certain respects is necessary and a priori – to what is sometimes

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[More information](#)*The anthropological character of theology*

described as ‘metaphysical reality’ – it is not surprising that it has certain logical peculiarities. Attempts have, therefore, been made to avoid difficulties with theistic faith by holding that its apparently factual element is a somewhat misleading expression of something else.<sup>4</sup> ‘God’ has accordingly been treated as a value-term or as a cipher for some principle of behaviour. Braithwaite, for example, has suggested that ‘God is love’ is to be interpreted as the expression of ‘an intention to follow an agapeistic way of life’,<sup>5</sup> while Cupitt asserts that ‘the doctrine of God is an encoded set of spiritual directives’.<sup>6</sup> Such views of theistic faith are fundamentally unsatisfactory. Their ‘solution’ to problems with that faith only works by converting it into something else. They either explicitly deny or merely overlook what is an essential part of the nature of theistic faith, namely, that it involves recognition of and responses to a reality that is ontologically independent of the believer’s contingent existence.<sup>7</sup>

*The nature of belief*

While ‘faith’ refers to the whole understanding of reality and values and a corresponding way of life that constitutes a religion, ‘belief’ refers to the apprehension of and assent to the judgements about what is the case in being, value and rationality which are contained, at least implicitly, in a faith. ‘Belief’ in general thus refers to the conscious, intellectual aspect of faith, while ‘a belief’ is an expression of a particular constitutive judgement of a faith.

As in the case of behaviour which shows that in reality a person’s existential commitment is not what they profess to be their faith, so in matters of belief discrepancies sometimes appear between what people declare to be their beliefs and what is implied by their actions, including other statements to which they clearly give assent. Where such discrepancies are not due to misunderstanding, weakness or hypocrisy, the expressions and perhaps the contents of their beliefs need to be revised if they are to provide an appropriate statement of what is genuinely believed to be the case.

Anselm’s *Proslogion* illustrates the way in which beliefs may be affirmed which conflict with some aspects of the believer’s practice. His statement in chapter 8 that God is impassible, for example, is strangely at odds with his passionate prayer to God for aid in chapter 1.<sup>8</sup> Either his prayer expresses a wish for which Anselm can expect no reciprocal response in God – in which case it seems to be a rather pointless expression of a feeling of inadequacy – or