

# The Nature of Theology

*Theology is the conceptualization of the assumptions and assertions about divine matters that are made, can be made, and ought to be made in order to know as much of the truth as possible.*

There are many components of this definition that require attention, here and in the chapters that follow.

## I. DIVINE MATTERS

The subject matter of theology, as evident from the name deriving from the Greek roots for “God” (*theos*) and “discourse” (*logos*), is the nature of the divine and those things that are to be understood in relation to the divine. Thus the principal topic is God or, in religions such as Buddhism that reject the appropriateness of the idea of God for divine matters, whatever is indicated by the ideas that exclude that of God. The divine bears upon many other topics in addition, that are thus also theological. These include the world insofar as it is contingent or dependent upon the divine, the nature of human life and society insofar as they receive their ground, meaning, and goal in relation to the divine, and the problems of human life that are of ultimate significance and whose resolutions are understood as salvation, personal or social perfection, or transcendent enlightenment. Both individuals and society are to be analyzed theologically insofar as they require understanding in relation to the divine. The same may be true of history, of institutions, of culture in the sense of arts and letters, all of which may be understood non-theologically on their own terms but which also require interpretation in

terms of their relation to the divine.<sup>1</sup> Most especially theology studies religious institutions such as churches, musical and liturgical traditions, and the traditions of theology itself on which the divine has special bearing.

The term “divine matters” is used in order to indicate the need for a kind of conditional neutrality with regard to the idea of God and its alternatives. No theologian from any tradition would disagree with the assertion that every category or name for the divine is finally inadequate to say all that can be said about the topic.<sup>2</sup> Theological ideas can be true and valid but still too vague, too narrow, too limited to a set of parochial assumptions, too confined to a family of metaphors, to exhaust the truth. Most theologians would agree that the root of the problem is that the divine is infinite and any system of representing the divine is finite, however appropriate the finite representations might be within the assumptions of their approach. It is better to think of theology as studying “divine matters” rather than simply “God” because there may be more differences than meet the eye between the Indian Hindu idea of Brahman, for instance, and the Christian notion of God; there may be more connections than meet the eye, on the other hand, between the Christian notion of God and the Confucian idea of Principle of Heaven. In either case, the Hindu and Confucian ideas are alternatives to the traditional Christian idea, at least upon initial reflection, and theology is interested in understanding the issues between them. If Confucian Principle is an alternative to the Christian God as a representation of divine matters, it is a theological topic. Thinkers in the Confucian and Hindu traditions who would find themselves puzzled and challenged by Christian theology are thus also theologians.<sup>3</sup>

Much of contemporary secular culture rejects the validity of the whole topic of divine matters, and thus would seem to offer nothing for theological reflection. But precisely so far as secular culture rejects the topic, it is living from assumptions or making assertions that are theological alternatives to religious traditions, even if those counter-divine elements are rather thin. Furthermore, there are elements within secular culture that are functional equivalents of theological assumptions about the world and human life. For instance, if it is thought that the world is not contingent or dependent in any way on the divine but rather on a big bang, that belief is an alternative to religious understanding and hence theological (or countertheological). Religious life for human beings has been characterized by Paul Tillich (1951, pt. I, B, 4), an important twentieth century Protestant Christian theologian, as the pursuit of an ultimate concern, the concern you would give up last when push comes to shove. A proper religion, he argued, has God as the ultimate concern; but most people are idolatrous in pursuing money, security, ego

aggrandizement, or other merely finite objects. In Tillich's view, Marxism thus registers as a religion because it defines an ultimate concern for society and organizes institutions and movements in pursuit of this concern; its commitment to progress, for example, and to the derivation of the meaning of individuals' life from participation in the movement toward progress, is a variation on Jewish, Christian, and Muslim ideas about sacred history, despite the theoretical atheism of Marxist philosophy.

The phrase "divine matters" reflects a Western theistic origin. But any other phrase seeking neutrality would also have a particular origin; no language with a level of abstraction required to transcend all historical conditioning, such as mathematics, has the richness to express theologically interesting ideas. Therefore, the best that can be done is to generalize from some rich tradition and attempt to control for the biases introduced. The context here is theology, aiming at the truth for everyone and thus in indefinitely open dialogue, as practised at least by Christians. Hence the theistic root is appropriate for a term that explicitly neutralizes itself with regard to the question of whether the divine is best represented as an individual (the usual meaning of theological theism).

## II. THEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND ASSERTIONS

Theology does not launch itself from nowhere to know about divine matters, but begins by attempting to understand how those matters are and have been represented. Sometimes representations of the divine are explicitly formulated as beliefs expressed in assertions. But more often, and historically at the motivating source of theology, those representations are contained in social practices directed to this or that end but assuming things about divine matters. Religious liturgies, to take but one example, preceded theological attempts to explain the references in the texts, songs, gestures, and ritual acts. The ancient Christian baptismal liturgy, for instance, was a ceremony to give individuals a new identity as members of the Christian community. But some of the things the individuals said and did during the ceremony represented God to be a certain way, Jesus to have a special relation both to God and to themselves, and the Holy Spirit to be performing a concomitant action with the ritual. The Apostles' Creed originated as a baptismal formula. Christians can agree or disagree with the creed insofar as they give it a theological interpretation. Regardless of theological agreement, they can recite it as part of contemporary liturgy to affirm continuity with the ancient practice of the performance of inducting members into a new identity in the Christian community. Following contemporary philosophic

usage (Searle, 1969), we can speak of the “performatory” use of theologically important representations in distinction from their “assertive” use. The performatory use assumes the appropriateness of the representation while using it in the performance of some activity.

Theology thus needs to examine the assumptions in the symbols and symbolic actions of religious and social practices (Long, 1986). Verbal symbols are the easiest to identify, and many people think that their analysis exhausts the field. But some other symbols are explicit in being symbols, such as a cross or Star of David, or gestures such as making the sign of the cross at the mention of the Trinity, or *davening*, the Jewish practice of swaying in a bow while reciting certain prayers. In addition there are symbols that might not be recognized as such, for instance looking “up” to find God, or special piety toward ancestors in excess of their particular merit. Religious institutions and practices are fraught with assumptions expressed in many ways. We can discern theologically interesting assumptions about whole ancient societies, however, by determining how they buried their dead or decorated their pots; we can discern contemporary theological assumptions by analyzing popular entertainments, or the budgeting priorities of governments.

Because there never has been a completely fresh beginning for theology, there have always been explicitly formulated religious beliefs. Often these have been framed in stories, histories, laws, and poetry, rather than descriptive propositions. But they are no less representative of divine matters for all that, and intended to be so in various critical ways. Theologians have to beware of a preoccupation with the history of highly refined theology rather than with a broad range of assertive representations; it is so easy to pick up where previous theologians left off rather than with the beliefs of multifarious communities. All assertive representations, like all assumptions about the divine, are of theological interest.

Sometimes it is thought that theology must assume that its major claims are true, and therefore should not stoop to argue for them. Such theological authoritarianism is the source of dogmatism on the part of some theologians and of derision on the part of critics. There is a confusion in this way of thinking. It is one thing to assume that this or that is true, such that when the assumption is pointed out the question can be asked as to whether it is really true. Assumptions like this run throughout all life. It is quite another thing to hold a set of beliefs and then assert their truth by claiming that they have to be assumed, or that they are supposed to be assumed if one is a Christian (or Jew, Buddhist, etc.). The latter posture implicitly calls the assumption into question at the very point where it attempts to forestall questioning and inquiry.

In fact, assumptions should be interpreted in relation to ongoing life and practice. There are representations of the world that are assumed

in any structured activity; sometimes these have been previously analyzed and approved, and sometimes the activity in fact is the analysis of them. Sometimes the assumptions are unrecognized. Sometimes they are false and misleading. The function of reflection is not usually to invent representations from whole cloth but to correct those involved in living activity; it is in its role of guide that thinking formulates assumptions in clear representations and asks whether they are worthy of assertion. There is never a position from which theology can simply rest with an assumption if someone has reason to question it, as the discussion of truth below shall argue.

### III. THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION

Perhaps the most important part of the definition of theology is that it is the disciplined intellectual work of fashioning clear concepts by virtue of which the various assumed and asserted representations can be understood, coordinated, criticized, and assessed for expression of the truth. Furthermore, theological concepts are needed to frame the large issues of theological truth, issues that are not completely addressed in the more concrete representations of most practice and religious belief.

In the Christian Bible, for instance, God is called a rock, a warrior, and the King of Israel who preceded Saul (I Samuel 8), a spirit, love itself, a father, judge, and redeemer; and creator of all the world including rocks, warriors, kings, spirits, love, parents, judges, and redeemers. How do these fit together? By what concept of God can we understand God to be all these things, in some sense or other, in the right context, and without generalizing one symbol to the point that it contradicts the others? This is not just a conceptual puzzle: many people find it practically hard to reconcile the loving creator whom Jesus said we should regard as we would our father with the God of vengeance and judgment, with the warrior and Lord. Christian theology, in contrast to non-Christian forms of Jewish theological reflection, had to explain how a creator God committed to Israel could be associated with an alleged Messiah who was crucified and then was more popular with gentiles than with Jews. Paul's letters are filled with attempts to wrestle with these issues. The dialogues of Justin Martyr, a Christian living a generation or two after Paul, were explicit in attempting to answer these questions by explaining the Christian assertions in terms of assumptions of Greek philosophy.

A theological concept is very abstract, relative to most symbols in practice and popular belief (abstractions in some of the popularly recited creeds are exceptions). Often, the root ideas or metaphors for theological concepts come from philosophy, especially from metaphysics.<sup>4</sup> The early Christians made imaginative use of Greek philosophy, and also Roman

philosophy and law, to frame their concepts. It is a mistake to exaggerate the difference between the Hebrew and Greek roots of Christianity, however, claiming that theology in its abstractions comes only from the latter. The greatest abstraction is that God is the creator of absolutely everything, such that there is no human conceptual standpoint from which we can apply rules to understand or judge creation. Isaiah and Job are the classic texts to illustrate the invention of the abstractions required to express divine creation. Greek philosophy did not move beyond far more finite conceptions of God until after the encounter with Jewish and Christian assumptions and assertions. Whereas European Christianity continued for nearly two thousand years to develop the original first- and second-century mixture of Greek, Roman, and Hebrew theological concepts, this mixture was but a way station for those forms of Christianity that early on spread to Africa, India, China, and farther, long before the sixteenth-century European missions around the globe.

Considered in itself, a theological concept is a rule for integrating other representations, including other abstractly theological representations.<sup>5</sup> By virtue of the rule, it is possible to see how those other representations relate. Particularly, it is possible to see in which context a certain representation has meaning and might be true, and how that meaning and truth are threatened if the representation is taken out of context. In historical perspective, this allows us to see how, for instance, the Hebrews would look upon God as King and Lord as they were attempting to establish themselves as a nation amongst other peoples: God appeared with political metaphors in a crucially political context. Isaiah, however, argued that God is not just King of Israel; by virtue of being creator of the whole world, God is Lord of all nations. Thus when Jesus revived the theological language of the Kingdom of God, it did not mean Israel's nationhood over against the Romans, but rather a normative way in which creatures respond to each other in light of their relation to the creator. For Jesus, the metaphors expressing divine kingship had little to do with a mighty warrior fighting the enemies of Israel (the Lord of Hosts: "host" means army), but rather with the way a loving parent judges and chastens children. For Jesus, the end of history, the eschaton, was not a matter of military and political victory or defeat for Israel, but of the end of the whole creation. A Christian theological concept of God needs to be able to represent how God could be represented properly one way in one context, another way in another. What is true of the concept of God is true of theological concepts of sin, salvation, grace, divine presence and absence in individuals and in religious communities, and a variety of other topics.

Part of theology is the exploration and elaboration of concrete representations. As such, it is like a critical extension of a metaphor. But

underlying such thematic development is a model of *how* the representation can be stretched, and that model needs to be formulated in order to know how *far* the metaphor can be stretched. The relatively abstract theological idea of God as creator of the universe is a kind of control on the extension of metaphors of God as warrior king, fecund mother, and loving father, since kings, mothers, and fathers are obviously part of the created universe. Kings and fathers are analogies for understanding God, and the abstract concept of divine creator prevents those analogies from being taken too literally. Some theologians have argued that analogies allow us to make logically binding inferences about the nature of the divine. This is a difficult case to defend, however, because we would not know that something is only an analogy unless we had some non-analogical concept to mark the limitation. Nonetheless, analogies are very important for the invention and development of new abstractions, and sometimes cease to be analogies by breaking into two clearly different concepts, for instance God as creator of everything and a potter as creator of some crockery.<sup>6</sup>

The function of theological conceptualizations is not just to manage the variety of symbolic references to divine matters but to allow divine matters to be relevant to the understanding of our own situation. We are, after all, concerned principally with the truth about divine matters, not just with the ways they have been represented. Therefore, we can observe the distinction between theological assertions that *are* made, *can be* made, and *ought to be* made.

#### IV. TRUTH AND THE MODES OF THEOLOGICAL ASSERTION

Theology emerges from the concrete activities of a society that represent divine matters, and thus is always grounded in practices and discourse to be empirically grasped. That is, theology requires erudition about the representations contained in social life, especially in the religious institutions of social life. Insofar as a particular theological program arises out of a living religion, it has that social life as its very context. Yet even a living tradition has outlived something of its past, and part of theology is a recovery of old symbols, or current symbols that once meant something different, or contexts of representing the divine that no longer obtain. Further, theology in living traditions needs to take an interest in other traditions, for they either reinforce or present an alternative to one's own representations. There is no logical limit to the alternatives to which one might pay attention. So the realm theology needs to survey includes the whole of world religions and secular rejections of them, insofar as these practically can be brought into discourse. Saint Paul coped with a variety of Jewish sects, Hellenistic religions, and

the Roman traditions of philosophy and law. Thomas Aquinas developed a theology out of the encounter of his Neo-Platonic forebears with Aristotelian and Islamic theology. The current ecumenical dialogue among world religions constitutes the survey base for contemporary theology. Furthermore, because theology cannot limit its survey only to abstractly formulated theology, but must include representations in many concrete forms, it must incorporate the discipline of history of religions into its practice. Any given theological effort or discussion, of course, will be practically limited. A Christian theologian might deal exclusively with representations that have historical significance within Christianity. But the background for that work either will include the representations of the alternatives to Christian representations or it will leave the work with nothing to say about whether its representations are true or false relative to the alternatives.

In addition to critical reflection on theologically significant representations in religious and secular life, and on the history of theology, it is incumbent on theologians to use speculative imagination to frame yet more alternative conceptions. The first and most obvious reason for this is that we are always lacking adequate theological conceptions. The great religious traditions, including Christianity, are still deeply engaged in reformulating their theological representations in light of their encounter with one another. There have been many periods in which great minds have wrestled with the implications of that encounter. Matteo Ricci, for instance, a sixteenth-century Christian missionary to China, struggled to determine whether the Confucian veneration of ancestors is compatible with the Christian exclusive ultimate devotion to God (Ricci concluded yes, the Roman Catholic church, no). Our own is a time when all the religions are brought into dialogue by an integrated world economy, and interfaith dialogue is itself a cultural institution whose discourse is creating a new set of theological representations. In addition, most world religions, not only Christianity, have become convinced that their literate theological heritage has been parochially bound to certain social classes, and to the male gender; theology is in ferment to determine how its representations are biased by those social limitations and to correct them.

A second reason for speculative theology, for imaginative construction departing from received representations, is the need to bring together the representations from various domains of theology, to see how they bear upon one another, and to determine whether they are complementary, coherent, contradictory, or essentially irrelevant. This is the need for system, and many theologies have a form that attempts to present theological topics in categories that are systematically connected. Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian*



*Religion*, Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith*, and Tillich's *Systematic Theology* are examples of systems, each with a different and yet effective form for systematizing. The chief advantage of system in theology (and philosophy), after the obvious virtue of allowing things to be seen in one view, is that it is a hedge against dogmatism (in the bad sense of that term, meaning unsupported opinion urged as unquestionable truth). System allows theologians, indeed requires them, to come at issues from as many sides as possible, minimizing the danger of the common error of taking a partial truth for more than it is worth.

The final and only serious purpose of theology is to know the truth about divine matters. That purpose is not adequately served by interpreting the major representations of divine things and systematizing them. Theologians must also ask whether they are true, in what senses, and in what contexts. There are many performatory uses of representations that assume their truth, roughly speaking, but that do not assert them. A good example is reciting a creed in order to maintain liturgical continuity with an ancient baptismal tradition, without much regard for whether the creed's assertions are true. But when someone asks whether the creed is a valid statement of Christian doctrine, theologians should be able to give a response that respects the truth of the matter. If it is important for the creed to be good doctrine as well as in historic liturgical continuity, then it is important for theology to be able to assess its truth accurately. The temptation to fudge the truth because of the liturgical continuity does a disservice to the community as well as to the truth.

The question of the nature of theological truth is a part of theology itself, comprised within the subdiscipline of philosophy of religion. In general, truth is a correspondence of our representations to that which they represent. Or, as Thomas Aquinas put it, truth is an adequation of our intellect to the object. A contemporary way of describing truth is to say that it is the carryover into the interpreter's experience of the value in the things interpreted, as qualified by the special limitations of the interpreter's physical being, culture, symbol systems, and purposes (Neville, 1989: chap. 3).

In the particular case of theological truth, the issue is complicated because the divine is not an object like any other object. It does not have a form that the mind can represent, though of course its connections with things are formed and representable. Furthermore, most religions agree with the theistic claim that the divine is infinite, and therefore finitely representable only in extremely limited ways, ways that are false to the infinite properly considered. Put in theistic terms, it is far easier to represent what God does in, to, and for the finite world than what God is apart from the world. Another way of making the same point is that we can represent God's revelation about which there is finite truth, although

perhaps not God's essence. In terms of other religions, we can represent the qualities Brahman has relative to the world, or the embodiment of Principle, but not what divinity is in itself. The higher-level point just made, about what can and cannot be represented, can itself be represented, and it is from this that we derive what we know about transcendence as such. Concerning the other divine matters, those having to do with the bearing of various dimensions of the world on divinity, the question of truth is more straightforward: the issue is to identify what the divine bearing is. These issues will be explored concretely in chapters to follow.

To ascertain the truth of a representation or system of representations is to approach the matter critically. "Critical" derives from a Greek root meaning judgment as in a law court. The critical process consists in giving arguments against the adequacy of a representation, defending the representation, amending it in light of what is learned, and in general making the best case that can be made. Often the best case is a negative one, arguing that the set of theological assertions one is defending is less limited and misleading than alternatives. Although some theologians have sought to provide absolutely clear and irrefutable arguments, most now agree to a humbler assessment of what they have shown. What constitutes a good case for a theological assertion depends on the kinds of assertion involved, the ready alternatives, the reasons for questioning, and the practical uses to which the assertion might be put. There is no rigid rule defining a good case.

**Readings in Key Texts:** (Please see "How To Use This Book" for the complete titles of the books cited here.)

1. Aquinas, *SCG*, Book 1, chaps. 1-5.
2. Aquinas, *ST*, I-I, ques. 1, arts. 1-7.
3. Augustine, *Conf.*, Book 1.
4. Barth, *Credo*, chap. 1.
5. Calvin, *Inst.*, Book 1, chaps. 1-5.
6. Cobb and Griffin, *PT*, chap. 2.
7. Ferm, *TWLT*, chap. 27 (by Balusuriya).
8. Hildegard, *Sci.*, "Declaration;" Book 1, Vision 1.
9. Luther, no reading.
10. Rahner, *Found.*, "Introduction."
11. Ruether, *Sexism*, chap. 2.
12. Schleiermacher, *CF*, pp. 3-93.
13. Tillich, *Sys.*, Vol. 1, "Introduction;" Vol. 2, "Introduction."