

Iona School for Ministry
“Introduction to Theology and Ethics”
June 13, 2020

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Introduction: The Twilight Zone or the Spiritual Dimension?

Excerpts from Theologians:

Gustavo Gonzales begins his Introduction to *The History of Theological Education* with these words:

This book is built on four basic premises. The first is that some form of theological education is part of the very essence of the church. The first great commandment calls on the church as a whole, and on every believer in particular, to love God with all our minds. This means that theological inquiry is not to be regarded as an interesting pastime for curious people but rather as an act of devotion and obedience to God. At the same time, however, the second great commandment implies that such inquiry is not to be only for our individual benefit but also for the benefit of others. The love of God is not really such with the love of neighbor. Therefore, good theology always has a communal dimension. It is developed within the context of the church as it seeks to experience and enjoy God and to proclaim God’s love in the world (ix).

Diarmaid MacCulloch writes, “The word theology means talking about God, and yet theology is a word with particularly Christian overtones; it would be difficult, for instance, to envisage a Buddhist ‘theology.’ The study of theology does not exhaust the study of religion.”

Editorial, “The Oxford Theologian,” Issue 3, Spring 2012, p. 3.

Today we'll look at excerpts from various theologians as they explore the three major subjects we'll be examining.

1. "What is theology?"
2. "How does know what one claims to know about God, humanity, and the world?"
3. What is authority?" (see the five different categories of authority on p. 41)

I. What is theology?

Karl Barth delivered three lectures on theology to the Free Protestant Theological Faculty in Paris in April, 1934.

The task of theology consists again and again reminding people in the Church, both preachers and congregations that the life and work of the Church are under the authority of the gospel and the law, that God should be heard...It has to be a watchman so as to carefully observe that constant threatening and invasive error to which the life of the Church is in danger, because it is composed of fallible erring, sinful people (McGrath, Reader 45).

Rowan Williams uses the analogy of music education and applies it to theological education. Can a person study theories of music without playing an instrument? Similarly, is it possible to study theology and not practice what one believes?

Williams writes, "A person shaping their life in a specific way, seeking discipline and consistency in relation to God, is theologizing, forming a reflectively consistent speech for God" (xii). He also suggests a threefold division for theology:

1. Theology as a *celebratory phenomenon*, an attempt to draw out and display connections of thought and image so as to exhibit the fullest possible range of significance in the language used.
2. *Communicative*: a theology experimenting with the rhetoric of its uncommitted environment
3. A *critical* theology alert to its own inner tensions or irresolutions (xiii).

Anselm writing in the period of scholasticism wrote: I believe in order to understand (*Credo et intelligam*). And *fides quarens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding). Although Anselm developed elaborate proofs for the existence of God, he began with faith. In other words, his faith informed and guided his reason.

Questions for Discussion:

Why is it important to be as clear as possible on what we believe and why we believe it? What is the relation of this understanding to the Christian life? Is it in any way dangerous, wrong, or impious to analyze what we mean by the term God, for example? (pp. 20,21)

Does the “Christian faith” refer to the faith that we believe (*fides quae creditor*) or to the faith by which we believe (*fides qua creditor*)? What is the relation between these two ideas of faith?

Reflection: how does your experience of faith influence your study, teaching and preaching?

II. Revelation

“How does one know what one claims to know about God, humanity and the world?” What is epistemology?” This question can be put quite simply as, “how do we know that (or what) we know?”

Revelation is the basis and content of Christian faith. Apart from God’s self-revelation there would be no knowledge of God and no Christian faith. What God has revealed of God’s self constitutes the content of Christian faith. Thus, the word *revelation* refers to both the act of revealing and the content of what is revealed. Confusion can be avoided if the word’s dual meaning is kept in mind (Thomas, Wondra, 22).

Christians have also wrestled with the tension between natural and revealed theology. John Macquarrie states: It is usually claimed that while natural theology can establish the reality of God, it is only the Christian revelation that can lead us on from there to the doctrine of the triune God. We have seen many evidences to suggest that “triunity” (sic) belongs to the very dynamics of deity, and that while specific details of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity arise out of the Christian revelation, the triune form of deity comes from natural theology and is common to many religions and religious philosophies.

In Search of Deity – An Essay in Dialectical Theism, p. 231

Early in the history of the church, theologians began to develop a pattern for the interpretation of Scripture. In *De Principiis* IV, Origen developed a theory of the threefold sense of Scripture which was the ancestor of the fourfold sense that became standard in the Middle Ages. The threefold division corresponded to the tripartite composition of the human person (body, soul, spirit) as this was understood by the Greek fathers.

The literal sense (body) was the historical sense.

The typological sense (soul) was the moral application to the individual.

The spiritual sense (spirit) was the foreshadowing of the new covenant in the old (McGinn 11).

Spiritual writers, especially in the mystical tradition of the church had another form of special revelation. Bernard McGinn writes about spirituality and experience as it relates to theology.

Christian spirituality is the lived experience of Christian belief in both its general and more specialized forms...it is possible to distinguish spirituality from doctrine in that it concentrates not on faith itself, but on the reaction that faith arouses in religious consciousness and practice. It can likewise be distinguished from Christian ethics in that it treats not all human actions in their relation to God, but those acts in which the relation to God is immediate and explicit.

(McGinn xii)

Julian of Norwich has written about her “Shewings” in her *Revelation of Divine Love*.

All the blessed teaching of our Lord God was shown in three ways: by physical sight, by words formed in my intellect, and by spiritual sight. With regard to the physical sight I have related what I have seen as truthfully as I can. For the words I have repeated them exactly as our Lord showed them to me. About the spiritual sight I have already said a fair amount, but I can never describe it fully. So, I am prompted to say more about it, if God will give me grace.

(Chapter 73, p. 191-2)

In Chapter 60 she has written:

We are brought back and fulfilled by the mercy and grace of our sweet, kind and ever-loving Mother Jesus; the attributes of motherhood; Jesus our Mother, feeds us not with milk but with himself, opening his side to us, and calling out our love (169).

This fine and lovely word *Mother* so sweet and so much its own that it cannot be properly be used of any but him, and of her who is his own true Mother—and ours. In essence *motherhood* means love, and kindness, wisdom, knowledge, goodness. Though in comparison with our spiritual birth our physical birth is a small, unimportant, straightforward sort of thing, it remains that is only through his working that it can be done at all by his creatures. A kind, loving mother who understands the needs of her child will look after it tenderly just because it is the nature of a mother to do so. As the child grows older she changes her methods—but not her love. Older still, she allows the child to be punished so that its faults are corrected and its virtues and graces developed. This way of doing things, with much else that is right and good, is our Lord at work in those who are doing them (170,171).

Questions:

Do we become Christians through receiving God's special revelation by faith, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit? Or do we become Christians by being drawn into the Christian fellowship, moved by Christian worship, persuaded by apologetics and convinced by the illuminative power of teaching? What is the relation between these two ways? (Q. 8, p. 40)

Reflection: What is your understanding of the tripartite: Scripture, Tradition and Reason?

III. Authority

Let us begin with the problem of authority and the questions Thomas and Wondra raise:

1. Historical authority
2. Theological authority
3. Ethical and moral authority
4. Juridical or political authority
5. Disciplinary authority

How did Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45) wrestle with authority in the context of Nazi Germany during the World War II?

David Ford summarizes Bonhoeffer's struggles:

He wrote extensively on ethics, and appreciated the importance of the Bible, or rules and principles of a God-related ethic. But, through all that, his is an ethic of responsibility. Writing in 1943, while taking part in a conspiracy against Hitler which not only cost him his life but also represented a shift from his own earlier pacifist, non-violent position, he asks, "Who stands firm?" in such overwhelming times. His answer is in terms of the "internal liberation of human beings to live the responsible life before God" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 44).

That answer goes beyond any specific ethical guidance system and it suggests the other fundamental matter at stake in theological ethics besides the conception of God: the conception of humanity (Ford, p. 63) .

The New Testament makes a distinction between two kinds of authority. There is *imperium*, an authority that is derived from political and military power. The other word is: *exousia*. This is authority arises from the integrity of one's being. Jesus uses this word when he tells the disciples, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). In the Gospel of John Jesus is speaking about this type of authority when he refers to the Kingdom of God at his trial before Pontius Pilate.

"My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not of this world." He later adds, "I came to testify to the truth." At which point Pilate asks him, "What is truth?" (Cf. The trial before Pilate John 18:33-38).

The famous author, playwright, novelist and essayist, Dorothy Sayers wrote:

If we refuse assent to reality: if we rebel against the nature of things and choose to think that what we at the moment want is the center of the universe to which everything else must accommodate itself, the first effect on us will be that the whole universe will seem to be filled with implacable and inexplicable hostility. We shall begin to feel that everything has a down on us, and that, being so badly treated, we

have a just grievance against things in general. That is the knowledge of good as evil and the fall into illusion. If we cherish and fondle that grievance and would rather wallow in it and vent our irritation in spite and malice than humbly admit we are in the wrong and try to amend our behavior so as to get back to reality, that is, while it lasts, the deliberate choice, and a foretaste of the experience, of Hell.

God in heaven—is the only unconditional reality. All other reality is derived from God, being either immediately created by Him, or engendered or evolved or manufactured by the mediation of his creatures, interacting among themselves.

(*A Matter of Eternity*, p. 48).

Questions for Discussion:

At the presentation of the ordinands the Bishop asks the one to be ordained this question,

“Will you be loyal to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of Christ as this Church has received them? And will you, in accordance with the canons of this Church, obey your bishop and other ministers who may have authority over you and your work?” (BCP, p. 538)

The ordinand responds,

“I am willing and ready to do so; and I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary for salvation; and I do solemnly engage to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.” (BCP, p. 538)

Thomas and Wondra raise these questions for discussion:

What is the relation between “all things necessary for salvation” (Article VI) and the “true Christian faith? Is there a distinction possible between essentials and nonessentials in Christian faith? What is the basis of this distinction? Can there be some elements of Christian faith that are true and valid and yet not “necessary to salvation?”

One of the maxims of Anglicanism has always been, “In essentials unity, in nonessentials tolerance, but in all things charity.”

Reflection:

How do we respond to someone who asks what Episcopalians believe?

Thomas and Wondra make the following point, “the Book of Common Prayer is often cited as a (if not the) major source of the church’s theology. This claim in part reflects the recovery of an earlier insight that praying shapes believing (*lex orandi, lex credendi*) and also the whole of life (*lex orandi, lex vivendi*). But the claim for the Prayer Book as a theological source also reiterates that the Anglican Communion has found its unity in the faith not through confessions or even structures, but through common prayer in public worship, the principle means by which Anglicans’ treasured diversity is woven into community in Christ (63).

Compare this claim with Tillich’s statement about the primacy of Scripture as the basic source of systemic theology (cf. p. 49).

Cynthia Rigby is a Professor of Theology at the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. She recently published: *Holding Faith: A Practical Introduction to Christian Doctrine*.

She concludes her chapter, “How can we speak of God?” with these words:

One way to understand the place of the Bible, in Christian faith, is that it creates for us a rich space in and through which we encounter the revelation of God. As Karl Barth reminds us—God can be seen wherever and however God chooses to self-disclose. What is the case, however, is that Christians throughout history have claimed that Scripture is a place where God is found. (29)

Concluding Thoughts:

When I was a young priest where I was serving as an associate (I was ordained when I was 26), the rector and I took turns preaching. In one of his sermons he was saying how bad theology had become and was mainly irrelevant to peoples’ life of faith. I was scheduled to preach the next Sunday. I made the following point, “We always need to be doing and preaching good theology to compete with the bad theology.” After 40 years in the ministry I’m still learning, growing and changing my point of view.

In one of the *Peanuts* comic strips Snoopy is sitting atop his doghouse, typing. Charlie Brown comes along and says, "I hear you're writing a book on theology. I hope you are have good title." "I have the perfect title," Snoopy replies, as he types: "*Has It Ever Occurred to You That You Might Be Wrong?*"