

What is Theology? Pt. 1

Theological Thinking:

Welcome to the Garden of the Real,
Or Really Thinking About Thinking

Introduction to the Course

Inevitably two questions arise in this classroom at the outset of the course year after year, and that is despite (or maybe it is because of) the fact that many of you will already have taken CT1:

- What is theology?
- Why do I have to do it?

Now I do not intend to help you definitively answer these in this lecture – instead the whole course will involve an extended elaboration on what theology is and why we should do it. In other words, learning about the nature of theology occurs within learning the practice of theology. But what I do intend to do is

- encourage us to reflect on the necessity of thinking in general, and thinking theologically in particular
- facilitate appreciation of the theo-logic of well-ordered theological thinking.

But in order for us to see what is going on in the questions we need to make a couple of distinctions for the moment in the asking ‘why should I do it?’:

- *practical response* – those of you on the BD track may receive a very practical answer – because it is a required course on the BD programme. But that is hardly a sufficient reason for undertaking a programme of theological study at Edinburgh University. We will need to provide a more theologically grounded reason.
- *Intellectually testing the question* – now no question comes out of a vacuum, and I suspect that one of the reasons for it being asked has to do with a couple of things:

- Separation of theology/practice, theology/religious experience, theology/spirituality – there will be many students who ‘just want to get out there and do it’.
- Sense of fulfilment achieved – many regard doctrine as an inviolable set of propositions that can be codified in confessions and creeds and then handed on pristinely through the generations, at most elaborately articulated in manuals of doctrine. Others regard the religious life as being fulfilled in experiences that require no further reflection.

Over the course of the next few lectures I hope to enable us to reflect on these types of assumptions and critically test them, perceiving the theo-logical problems inherent in them, and over the expanse of the semester to articulate the shape of theology in such a way that these assumptions can be subverted and transformed. I hope that we will come to see that

- Theology and practice or spirituality are integral to the health of one another, and thus can only be separated when the proper context of these is distorted;
- Neither theology nor the religious life can move on the grounds of some pure givenness, but are always provisional, mediated and still moving towards their goal. In other words, the gift is not merely a ‘givenness’ but is a ‘being given’ and a ‘to be given’.

Through this journey our understanding not only of the nature of Christian theology but also of the place of thought in the Christian life may well be transformed. I endeavour to offer this journey not in order to justify my existence as a ‘professional’ theologian, but rather as a way of articulating the necessary role of theology in a life of vitality and authenticity.

Now before we begin to learn to walk there are a couple of other matters that are worth briefly attending to. Of course, not knowing you yet, and with you being such a diverse class, I will be unable to anticipate all the worries you will have about a course such as this. From past experience, though, I suspect that there will be several of you who will be bothered by the *Christian* form and content of the course. Let me set your minds at rest somewhat by offering some reflections:

- It would be odd to take a Christian doctrine course and be concerned that it is ‘too Christian’! (Year after year, though, one or two feedback forms have this complaint on it, hence I draw your attention to it at the outset).

- You are not expected to be or become a Christian here, but rather know what it is you mean when you talk of Christianity.¹
- You are being encouraged to get ‘inside the head’, so to speak, of the Christian traditions. And there is no better way of doing this than from within these traditions.
 - Consequently, this is not an apologetics class that attempts to argue for the truth of Christian beliefs as such. Besides, you will get a sense through the course’s cumulative effect of what kind of theological problems may determine much of what is known as ‘apologetics’.²
- I have mentioned Christian traditions, yet I will be largely following the broad lead of a particular set of traditions –those Trinitarian and incarnationalist traditions associated with the Nicene Creed (A.D. 381).³
 - In this I offer little apology for particularity;
 - We will attempt to think within the multiplicity of Christian traditions as best as we can;
 - And you will be well-placed to offer some checks;
 - The Nicene Creed of A.D. 381 (not to be confused with the earlier Creed of Nicaea of A.D. 325), as I mentioned, is assented to by the majority of Christian traditions and therefore this *ecumenical* stature, and its historical *antiquity* make it a good (even if not infallible) way in to reflecting on what Christians do and should believe (Christian doctrine).

¹ Occasionally I hear students suggest (this is more often than not a complaint rather than a suggestion): ‘surely theology is an academic discipline that requires no necessary faith commitment on the part of the student!’ That is only partially true. Theology is certainly an academic discipline, and no faith commitment on the part of the students will be presupposed or expected in my classes. Students will be able to watch, listen, learn, interact, argue, and converse from whichever standpoint they presently inhabit – and *the goal of the course is certainly not to provoke, inspire, challenge anyone to a faith commitment.*

But I need to say something about where the statement above is only *partially* true, and therefore even a misleading way of putting the matter.

Theology, as understood Christianly, has, of course, a history. It has a history of debate, controversy and conflict, a history of reading certain texts and explicating their significance. In other words, in order to study what it is that makes Christianity Christian in theological terms it is necessary and appropriate for one to immerse oneself in that theological history, in its tensions and conflicts of power. Only in that way will one discover what it is that supposedly makes Christian theology something worth doing (to see what is at stake in the debates) and what makes it distinctive (why it is Christian theology and not some other kind of theology). For those within Christian traditions it will be *self-involving* in a particular kind of way to critically study and analyse Christian doctrine. For those outwith commitment to Christian traditions, there may well be a richness in seeking to understand and assess what these people have claimed about the witness of their faith.

² As Karl Barth once argued, “the best apologetics is a good dogmatics”. We will be concerned with articulating the broad shape of Christian belief, and that may well prove to be attractive – at the very least most of what we consider to be Christianity, and perhaps have a distaste for, may not be appropriate within the Christian traditions at all.

³ The fruit of the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381, the Nicene Creed was based on the Creed of Nicaea (offering an expansion at a critical point) of A.D. 325.