



What is Theology? Pt. 1 LECTURE OUTLINE

Theological Thinking:

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

Course Preface

2 main questions at the course's beginning:

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

2 possible responses to 2nd question:

- *practical response*
- *Intellectually testing the question*
 - Separation of theology/practice
 - Sense of fulfilment achieved

Main assumptions of lecture:

- Theology and practice or spirituality are integral to each other's health, and thus can only be separated when their proper context 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'.

Other introductory questions and concerns:

- Course is 'too Christian'! ??
- Christian commitment is not assumed or expected
- Yet need to get 'inside the head' the Christian traditions from within these traditions as best as we can.
- Christian traditions, yet broadly Trinitarian & incarnationalist (Nicene Creed, A.D. 381).

Lecture

It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way.
[Prov. 19:2]

Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. [1 Cor 14:20]

Lecture Aims

This lecture intends to

- 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.

Video Clips

- *V for Vendetta*
- *THX 1138*
- *Mississippi Burning*
- *Star Wars: A New Hope*
- *We Were Soldiers*

■ *The Believer*

Questions

- What kind of thinking is permitted within these environments on display?
- How does critical thinking begin and operate here?
- What need is there for critical thinking?

Suggestions

- Integration of belief and life = Belief and life are fully integrated and co-determinative.
 - beliefs shape life
 - reality as constructed
 - Process of ‘normalisation’
 - Theology as absolutising of this ‘normal’
 - Communities of believers
- Created ‘other’
- ‘Mirror of the other’
- Personal disposition

Unfortunately, it is too often the case that, as Nicholas Lash observes,

The saint’s heart is in the right place. But we cannot afford to ignore the fact that rightness of heart is quite compatible with a high degree of confusion of head.¹

Thinking About Faith Shaping Our Living

Pressures on thinking

- deliberate pressures: e.g., government propaganda in totalitarian regimes
- simple distraction: e.g., entertainment culture, consumerist desire
- Western pluralism

Thinking About *Faith* Shaping Our Living

Pressures on thinking about faith

- Propositionalist Fundamentalism
 - God’s revelation as impartation of saving truths, statements of simple fact
 - God as object – ‘object’ of theological knowing
 - Scriptures as containers of these saving facts.
- Experiential Expressivist approach
 - René Descartes – turn to the self
 - Immanuel Kant – separation of faith from ‘pure knowledge’, religion located in the sphere of practical reason (i.e., ethics).
 - Friedrich Schleiermacher – religion as *piety*, *feeling of absolute dependence*
 - Consequences of separation of faith and knowledge:
 - faith as spirituality, and not politics
 - faith as evangelistic, not social work
 - faith as personal, not social
 - faith as personal therapy (or private fantasy), not knowledge of God²

Why think about faith?

- Commanded to (Os Guinness)

¹ Nicholas Lash, *Voices of Authority*, 96.

² Lash, *The Beginning and End of Religion*, 16: “it is the role of religion as a medium of truth that has been privatised. ... What is excluded, by the dominant ideologies, is any suggestion that the business of religion is, no less than that of science, with public truth.”

It has always been a sin not to love the Lord our God with our minds as well as our hearts and souls. ... We have excused this with a degree of pietism and pretend[ing] that this is something other than what it is – that is, sin. ... Evangelicals need to repent of their refusal to think Christianly and to develop the mind of Christ.³

- But, superficial – does not indicate how and why the life of the mind is important
- Pure command can sound arbitrary – ‘because God said so...’ [CLIP – *Holy Grail*]

- The faith of all thinkers

In reality thinking always involves an act of faith.⁴ John Henry Newman:

When faith is said to be a religious principle, it is ... the things believed, not the act of believing them, which is peculiar to religion.⁵

- The theology of secularism

It is taken for granted, in sophisticated circles, that no one worships God these days except the reactionary and the simple-minded. This innocent self-satisfaction tells us little more, however, than that those exhibiting it do not name as ‘God’ the gods they worship. In fact, whatever names we give to things, we worship things (especially ourselves) as naturally and as spontaneously as we breathe and speak. We have no option but to have our hearts set somewhere, to hold something sacred. The question is not *whether* we shall worship but in what direction our hearts might be set – for destruction, or for all things’ peace and freedom, friendship and fulfilment? Some god or gods will hold our hearts, serve as the centre of our sacrifice – but what? [Lash]⁶

- Christians with unchristian presuppositions [CLIP – 1492]

Except over a very narrow field of thinking, chiefly touching questions of strictly personal conduct, we Christians in the modern world accept, for the purpose of mental activity, a frame of reference constructed by the secular mind and a set of criteria reflecting secular observations.⁷

- Pervasive sinfulness distorts our knowing of God – no *pure* thought
 - Propensity to idolatry, even among Christians (see 1 Jn. 5:21; cf. 1 Cor. 10:14)
 - Knowing only in part (1 Cor., 13: 9, 12)
 - Importance of confession of sin
 - Christians called to continual testing (1 Th. 5:21; 1 Jn. 4:1)

- The richness of God

Because of the nature of what we speak of, God’s liberty, we do not come to an end. And when doctrinal language or the language of preaching and worship has become sterile or has come to be seen as a tight and adequate scheme, we have to learn the divine freedom all over again by what silences and disorients us, by the recovery of whatever it was that on Easter morning sent the first witnesses of the resurrection away afraid to speak because, like Paul, they had heard what they had no words for that were not empty. ... When we find ourselves clinging to formulae (whether ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal’) and no longer asking whether the

³ Os Guinness, ‘Persuasion for the New World: An Interview with Dr. Os Guinness’, *Crucible* 4.2 (Summer 1992), 15.

⁴ See, e.g., C.S. Evans, *The Philosophy of Religion: Thinking About Faith* (Downers Grove and Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1985), 166. Therefore, Evans argues, “In a sense, every person has ‘faith’; everyone has deep-rooted assumptions, convictions and attitudes which color what counts as evidence for him and how that evidence is interpreted. This is the kind of faith which *brings to* the evidence.” [Evans, 178]

⁵ John Henry Newman, *Prochial and Plain Sermons* I (London, 1868), 191.

⁶ Lash, *The Beginning and End of Religion*, 49.

⁷ Henry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (London: SPCK, 1963), 4, 7, cited in Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 5. Cf. Noll, 34; Guinness, 14.

way we use them actually speaks about the transformation worked in Jesus Christ, we are desperately in need of something – in our culture, in our individual experience – that makes us inarticulate.⁸

Consequently, Rowan Williams exhorts:

beware of being sentimental about simplicity. In all kinds of ways, reality *is* complex, and it is foolish to pretend otherwise. Whether that complexity comes across as intimidating or enriching depends a lot on how and in what context it's communicated.⁹ [CLIP – *Luther* – Truth not Comfort]

There are ancient resources from Jewish-Christian wisdom from which to ask serious questions of the modern bifurcation of theology and worship, thinking and living.

Moreover, critical thinking or reflection is vital to the health of good practice.

One is not a Christian and then an interested social agent, or a social agent and then a Christian, but a Christian inevitably engaged in social action from a particular social location. In the concrete circumstances of life, actions and interests do not exist per se isolated from the beliefs one holds; nor do beliefs exist per se isolated from one's actions and interests with reference to others. Instead, one finds actions and interests that are already interpreted: actions and interests that are inevitably understood in terms of what one already believes, and the beliefs of persons who are already implicated in the politico-ethical responses that are part and parcel of a life lived with others. [Kathryn Tanner]¹⁰

Thinking About Faith *Shaping Our Living*



Is theology, as 'theory', abstruse and abstract, far removed from the affairs of ordinary life?

- Ideas/beliefs/theories shape practice [CLIP – *American History X*]
 - Education
 - Politics [CLIP – *Bonhoeffer*]
 - Everyday desire
- Christians not free from unchristian presuppositions and desires
- Who God is (a theological matter) defines Christian identity, and identity shapes practice [CLIP – *Luther*]

If his detailed, day-to-day response to his situation is not consciously sustained and influenced by the word he has received, the word made flesh which he shares in the eucharist, then one half of his life permanently denies and renders unintelligible (and therefore 'scandalous') the other. [Lash]¹¹

Alasdair MacIntyre:

Every action is the bearer and expression of more or less theory-laden beliefs and concepts; every piece of theorising and every expression of belief is a political and moral action.¹²

Theology can offer several crucial things:

- In relation to the church (1) – **Theology tests proclamation because of society's influence.**
- In relation to the church (2) – **Theology tests proclamation because of infinite richness of God.**

⁸ Rowan Williams, 'Teaching the Truth', in Jeffrey John (ed.), *Living Tradition: Affirming Catholicism in the Anglican Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), 29-43 (35).

⁹ Williams, 'Teaching the Truth', 33.

¹⁰ Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 9f.

¹¹ Lash, *His Presence in the World*, 38.

¹² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 58.

The purpose of articulating intellectually coherent truth claims is not ultimately to achieve speculative flights of fancy, but to enable better appropriation of the faith.¹³

- In relation to the wider society – **Theology can clarify what is worth valuing, why, and what to do about it.**

Douglas John Hall:

It may appear defensive and self-serving when a theologian asserts, in effect, that theology matters. But if by *theology* one means the continuous process of disciplined and prayerful *thought* through which a community of faith seeks to understand what it believes and thus to be guided in its living out of that belief (and that is what I mean), then to deny that theology matters, and matters very concretely, is tantamount to opening up the ever-ready floodgates of irrationality and mindless, boundless spiritualism. Worse still, it is to make a gift of that spiritual energy to powers and principalities that have vested interests in trying to deploy it.¹⁴

Doctrine, therefore,

- Has to do with *doxa* (praise)
- Involves critical testing of church proclamation
- Is intended to shape character, to cultivate a taste, to generate and direct a way of life

Rowan Williams: “doctrine is a set of instructions for performance.”¹⁵

Telling the truth about both God and humanity is thus, predictably, inseparable from becoming holy: enacting our doctrine, realizing that doctrine itself is simply the deposit of a transforming of relationship to God and God’s world.¹⁶

Provisionally Concluding Comments

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) – “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quarens intellectum*)

- ‘circle of faith’
- faith as rational enterprise
- faith involves the interpenetration of reason, desire and ethics
- faith as human work, and therefore fragile

Even the most able speech of the most living faith is a human work. And this means that the community can go astray in its proclamation of the Word of God, in its interpretation of biblical testimony, and finally in its own faith. Instead of being helpful, it can be obstructive to God’s cause in the world by an understanding that is partly or wholly wrong, by devious or warped thought, by silly or too subtle speech. [Karl Barth]¹⁷

¹³ Vincent Bacote, ‘Liberation from the Intellectual Ghetto: Setting Doctrine Free to Embrace and Invigorate Life’, *Christian Theological Fellowship Papers* (1998), 3, www.luthersem.edu/ctrf/Papers/1998_bacote.pdf, accessed 02-01-07.

¹⁴ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁵ Williams, ‘Teaching the Truth’, 36.

¹⁶ Williams, ‘Teaching the Truth’, 42.

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 41.