Trinity and Truth

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1

Introduction: theology and truth

Truth as a theological problem

Recall for a moment Jesus' confrontation with Pontius Pilate. As the Gospel of John depicts the scene – in striking contrast to the version shared by Matthew, Mark, and Luke – Jesus engages in an argument with Pilate on kingship and truth. The debate takes a form well known to philosophers ancient and modern; it is an exercise in conceptual clarification. Pilate begins by asking Jesus if he is "the King of the Jews" (18:33). Jesus responds by ascribing to himself a sort of kingship which, while not fully defined by him, is "not from this world" (18:36). Whatever else it involves, this sort of kingship entails that its possessor will not fight to preserve his own life (18:36). Pilate finds this puzzling: "So are you a king?" he asks Jesus (18:37). He appears not to be sure that a plausible concept of kingship can embrace such notions as unworldliness and non-violence. Jesus responds: "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice" (18:37). Talk of a sort of kingship which involves not only non-violence but a public commitment to truth only adds to Pilate's confusion. "What is truth?" he asks (18:38). There the debate ends.

Some interpreters of this exchange between Jesus and Pilate (Friedrich Nietzsche, for one) have seen Pilate as the clear winner of the debate, the hero of the story. He cuts short Jesus' talk about bearing witness to the truth by posing what seems to be the most daunting of all philosophical questions – what is truth? – and by knowing better than to venture any answer. Pilate thus speaks for skeptics of every age, not only skeptics about Jesus' claim to bear witness to the truth, but all those who question the usefulness of any human attempt to speak "the truth."

Yet the reader of John's Gospel and Letters, while perhaps daunted by Pilate's question, already knows its answer. The human being Jesus is himself "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6). Saying that truth is "personal" falls short of capturing John's logic. Truth is not simply personal; for John truth is a person. Even this is too weak: truth is not just any person, but this human being in particular: Jesus of Nazareth, and among human beings only he. Knowing what truth is and deciding about truth, so this Gospel suggests, finally depend on becoming adequately acquainted with this person. In the admirably exact phrase of Thomas Aquinas: *Ille homo esset ipsa divina veritas* – this human being is divine truth itself.[1]

Yet this human being is not "the truth" all by himself. He is "full of truth" (1:14) because and insofar as he comes from another: the Father whose "Word is truth" (17:17), and who has sent that Word to dwell in our flesh and stand trial for his life. Jesus does nothing on his own authority (5:30), but obeys the command of the one who sends him; at the same time Jesus is the truth because he is the eternal Word of the Father in our flesh, to whom the Father gives all that he has (16:15). "Truth comes through Jesus Christ" (1:17) just because, sent by the Father and (in another phrase of Aquinas) "expressing the total being of the Father,"[2] Jesus makes the Father known (1:18). He is "the truth" only in virtue of his unique relation to the Father.

Jesus is "the truth," moreover, not only on account of his bond with the one who sent him, but also on account of his bond with another whom he will send: "the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father" (15:26). In his own way this Spirit is also "the truth" (1 Jn. 5:6), because he leads the world to Jesus himself – and so into "all truth" (Jn. 16:13). As the Father in love gives himself to the world by sending into our flesh and our death the one to whom he has given all that he has, so Jesus gives himself to the world by entrusting himself – all that he has – to the promised Spirit ("he will take what is mine and declare it to you," 16:14). The Spirit leads the world into all truth, into Jesus sent from the Father, by leading the world into the apostolic community: the gathering of those for whose welfare Jesus prays on the eve of his death, together with "those who believe in me through their word" (17:20).

So as John's Gospel and Letters depict it, "truth" is an attribute of the triune God. Indeed, truth is in some deep sense identical with the persons

1. *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura* (hereafter *In Ioannem*), ed. R. Cai, O. P. (Turin: Marietti, 1952) (caput) 1, (lectio) 8 (no. 188).

2. *In Ioannem* 1, 1 (no. 29).

of the Trinity. Apparently both saying what truth is and deciding what is true depend on identifying the triune God, and on being the subject of his community-forming action.[3]

These brief Johannine reflections suggest that the Christian community cannot evade Pilate's question, and should not want to. The church claims to have true beliefs about God. More than that, this community worships and proclaims to the world a God who is himself "the truth," in whom all other truth finds its source and measure. From ancient times the church has thought it needed to give a reflectively explicit account of its belief and practice, and plausible answers to questions which its belief and practice pose. This reflective effort generally goes by the name "theology." By undertaking to speak in the name and on behalf of a God who is "the truth," this community accepts the task of saying in a reflectively explicit way what truth is, and by what right it claims to speak the truth. In this sense truth is a theological problem.

The Christian community's own belief and practice call for an account of the right by which it claims to speak the truth. But one need not be a member of this community, or share its distinctive beliefs, to see that the church is committed to giving a reflectively explicit account of the truth of its talk, or to see what the beliefs are for whose truth it chiefly has to account.

In order to exist as a coherent and identifiable community over time, a human group must, it seems, be united by adherence to certain beliefs and practices – that is, to certain doctrines – which constitute its identity and distinguish it from other communities, and from random and temporary collections of individuals. What these doctrines are can be discerned, empirically, from its practices.

The Christian church is distinguished from other religious and nonreligious communities, so this book will argue, primarily by its trinitarian identification of God: God is the Father who has raised the crucified Jew Jesus from the dead and poured out their common Spirit upon all flesh. The one God is identified as the Trinity through the unfolding of a complex narrative which links Israel, Jesus, and the church; this narrative identification of the triune God organizes a comprehensive view of all things, and especially of human nature, history, and destiny. In this sense the Trinity – not in the first place as the focus of a technical debate

3. For more on John as a theological entry into the problem of truth, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologik II: Wahrheit Gottes* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1985), pp. 13–23, and *Theologik III: Der Geist der Wahrheit* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1987), pp. 61–75.

about how to relate one *ousia* and three *hypostases* (though this debate is in its own way crucial), but as specifying the meaning and reference of "God" – may be regarded as the primary Christian doctrine. The Christian community lives by celebrating and serving the deeds, presence, promises, and commands of the God whose identification constitutes this doctrine.

In the modern world the church's claim that its chief doctrines are true has been challenged more vigorously than at any time since the first centuries of Christianity. This challenge has focused to a considerable degree on the right of the Christian community to hold beliefs which seem not to meet the epistemic standards of modernity – broadly speaking, of those views about what we have the right to believe which stem from the Enlightenment. Christian thinkers, both theologians and philosophers, have often attempted to respond to this challenge by taking over distinctively modern notions of truth and epistemic justification. Great intellectual ingenuity has gone into this effort, as we will see. But it has persistently tended to yield unsatisfying results.

Modern theology has repeatedly sought an approximate middle between giving up central Christian beliefs as false and failing to accept the epistemic demands of modernity. The basic strategy has been to offer a reinterpretation of the most central Christian claims (however these are identified) which meets modernity's epistemic standards. The resourcefulness which has gone into these efforts to find a post-Enlightenment epistemic middle for Christian belief has not entirely overcome the criticism, repeatedly voiced, that this is the worst of both worlds: that modern epistemic standards are being applied in at best a half-hearted way, and that what this half-measure succeeds (perhaps) in saving is not finally Christianity after all.

A more satisfying approach to truth as a theological problem, rather than taking the church's central beliefs to be especially in need of epistemic support, will take the church's trinitarian identification of God itself chiefly to confer epistemic right. In order plausibly to maintain that the Trinity and other distinctively Christian doctrines are true, without drastically altering the meaning the Christian community ascribes to them, these doctrines must be regarded as epistemically primary across the board, that is, as themselves the primary criteria of truth. It is not sufficient simply to say that the doctrine is central to Christian identity, and that Christians must therefore hold it true; it must be regarded as the chief test for the truth of the rest of what we want to believe. This means

that the very notions of how we decide what is true and of what truth is must be reconfigured in a trinitarian way, transformed by the church's central doctrines from the way we would otherwise expect them to look. This book will be devoted to developing these thoughts, and to addressing objections which they raise.

It might be supposed that according epistemic primacy to the church's trinitarian identification of God can only make the conflict between modernity and Christian belief worse. I will argue that the opposite is the case. Far from being too closely engaged with the modern philosophical debate about meaning, belief, and truth, Christian theology in our century has customarily ignored much of the mainstream argument over these issues, especially that which originates in different ways with Frege and Tarski, and includes Quine, Davidson, and Dummett among its important recent figures. Closer engagement with the main modern debate about truth and the justification of belief tends not to intensify the conflict between plausible epistemic standards and central Christian truth claims, but to make it go away.

That the Trinity is the primary Christian doctrine is contested by much modern theology, and in any case falls short of simply being obvious. The next chapter will therefore try to show that a trinitarian identification of God is central to any recognizably Christian belief system. Chapter 3 considers several of the chief strategies in modern theology for justifying Christian beliefs, while chapter 4 argues that these strategies, whatever the theological desirability of their results, face formidable philosophical problems. An alternative approach, so chapter 5 argues, can satisfy the legitimate aspirations embodied in these strategies without incurring the problems they pose. Coherence with the nexus of central Christian beliefs is decisive when it comes to deciding about truth; consideration of the contents of the central beliefs and of procedures for their plausible interpretation helps to explicate the community's right to make this sweeping epistemic claim. Chapter 6 replies to the objection that this epistemic strategy amounts to the arbitrary and fideistic exaltation of a provincial collection of communal convictions, and takes up a cognate issue: ascribing a decisive epistemic role to particular communal practices may seem to encourage hostility toward other communities – in the first place, but not only, hostility toward their beliefs. Theologically conceived, epistemic justification depends on the mission of the Holy Spirit as well as that of the Son; justified beliefs must not only be christologically coherent, but pneumatologically effective.

Reflection on the epistemic role of the Spirit provides the context for an account of the bearing of communal and individual virtue on deciding about the truth of beliefs (chapter 7).

Chapter 8 shifts the focus from epistemic justification to truth, by distinguishing and evaluating various historical and contemporary accounts of what truth is. In a theological account whatever idea of truth we find most persuasive needs to be subjected to trinitarian discipline. The concept of truth needs to be brought into line with the thought that each of the persons of the triune God is, in his own way, the truth. Chapter 9 suggests a way to do this, and thereby to show how truth and justified belief finally cohere in the *perichoresis*, the mutual indwelling, of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Definitions

Talk about truth, like talk about other large topics, easily flounders for lack of clarity about what is actually being discussed. So we need to be explicit, at least in a preliminary way, about two things: what is being asked, and what it is being asked about.

We are asking what it is for Christian beliefs to be true. The same question might be put by asking what it *means* to say that Christian beliefs are true, or how truth should be *defined* when ascribed to these beliefs (granted that important questions arise about whether and in what sense truth can be defined).

This way of putting the issue – what is it for Christian beliefs to be true? – obviously raises the related question, how should one go about deciding whether Christian beliefs are true? The distinction between these two questions is important, and needs to be marked clearly at the outset. In a word: saying what truth is should not be confused with saying what is true. By itself, an account of what it is for the Christian community's beliefs to be true will not necessarily enable anyone, including Christians, to decide whether those beliefs are actually true. Decisions about the truth of beliefs or utterances require not simply a characterization of truth, but criteria of truth, by appeal to which we can distinguish true beliefs and utterances from false ones, those to which our characterization of truth applies from those to which it does not. To ask what criteria should be applied in deciding whether our beliefs are true, or in testing the truth of our beliefs, is to ask concerning their justification – literally, what gives us the right to hold them.

Deciding that a belief is true is not, however, simply the same as being justified in holding that belief. As I will use the term, to "decide" that a belief is true is to be, or to become, convinced of its truth. Part of being convinced that a belief is true is being clear about what gives one the right to hold it – for example, by establishing that the belief meets relevant criteria of truth. Securing the right to hold beliefs is unavoidable in deciding about their truth; we not only should not, but cannot, simply hold at will whatever beliefs we like. At the same time, as I will argue, an element of willingness cannot always be removed from being or becoming convinced that a belief is true; deciding that a belief is true cannot always be reduced to cognizant possession of the epistemic right to hold the belief. A full account of deciding what is true includes both the notion of epistemic right and that of willingness to believe. Thus deciding about the truth of beliefs is a broader epistemic notion than being justified in holding them, though it always includes the element of justification.

The notion of "justification" is itself ambiguous. At times it gets used in a more normative fashion, at times in a more descriptive one. To call beliefs "justified" can mean that they meet tests which establish or secure their truth, and in that strong and normative sense give their holders the right to hold them. Depending on the type of test involved and the way in which it is (or is not) met, the truth of beliefs might also be regarded as probable, possible, unlikely, and so forth. Communities and individuals ordinarily take beliefs which meet their criteria of truth to be true, and not simply to be beliefs which they are entitled to *hold* true.

But communities and individuals differ about what criteria establish the truth of beliefs, and so about what criteria should be employed to decide about their truth. As a result, a belief which Jack regards as meeting relevant criteria and therefore true, Jill may well regard as false. This does not *require* Jill to regard Jack as "unjustified" in holding his false belief. She may think he is doing the best he can under the circumstances. In that case, to say that Jack's belief is "justified" means he has a right to hold it – that he is living up to his epistemic obligations, so to speak – but not that its truth is secured. This is the weaker, more purely descriptive sense of "justification." But even the descriptive sense of "justified" does not guarantee agreement between speakers about which beliefs each of them has the right to hold. In spite of what she takes to be reasonable epistemic effort on Jack's part, Jill may still regard a belief of Jack's as unjustified, perhaps because he is employing criteria of truth which she (in light, of course, of her own) thinks no one ought to employ.

Thus: a claim to be justified in believing that *p* may be interpreted as (1) adequately supported or (2) inadequately supported, and a claim the interpreter regards as adequately supported may be taken as (1a) only giving someone the right to hold a belief or (1b) also establishing its truth. The chief difference between (1a) and (1b) is whether the interpreter accepts the justificatory criteria employed in the claim. For present purposes the key point is that a theological account of truth and justification must, for reasons which will emerge in the course of the argument, give an account not only of how the justificatory criteria to which it appeals give Christians the right to hold their beliefs, but of what makes these criteria of truth – criteria which establish or secure the truth of the beliefs which meet them. We are looking, in other words, for a normative, and not only descriptive, account of the justification of beliefs.[4]

This sort of distinction between the question of truth and the question of justification has become commonplace in philosophical discussions of these topics.[5] Even where a distinction between these two issues is made explicitly, however, that distinction is not always observed in practice. Theological debates about truth in particular tend not infrequently to confuse the two matters. A theologian, for example, who argues that belief in Jesus' resurrection need not appeal to types of evidence which non-Christians are likely to find convincing may find herself assailed by other theologians for "ignoring the question of truth." But the question of what sort of evidence, if any, one needs in order to believe reasonably in Jesus' resurrection has to do with the justification of that belief, not its truth. The critic might indeed argue that failure to supply this sort of evidence for such a belief yields an inadequate account of its justification. But on some very standard conceptions of truth – which the critic may well at least covertly share – the belief that Jesus is risen might be true even if one had no evidence or justification for it at all (as realist

4. It is sometimes suggested that the notion of justification be used only descriptively: that the question of what confers the right to hold beliefs has nothing important to do with the question of how we should decide which beliefs are true. Aside from the counter-intuitiveness of this stipulation (we regularly suppose that what gives us the right to hold beliefs is that we have employed criteria which settle the matter of their truth), it would be confusing to use the terms this way in an analysis (to be undertaken in chapter 3) of epistemic justification in modern theology. Modern theological proposals about this matter commonly suggest that we only have the right to hold beliefs which have met criteria of a sort which secure their truth.

5. For a classic statement of the distinction see Alfred Tarski, "Truth and Proof," *Alfred Tarski: Collected Papers*, vol. IV, ed. Steven R. Givant and Ralph McKenzie (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1986), pp. 399–423, especially p. 414. For a more recent effort to put the matter, see Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), especially pp. 24–8, 244–50.

accounts of truth as the "correspondence" of beliefs to reality, or to the "facts," have maintained).

To broaden the point, accounts of truth and accounts of justification can and in practice do vary independently of one another. That is, one might argue that for beliefs to be true is for them (a) to correspond to reality, or (b) to cohere with other beliefs, or (c) to be among those sentences we will find ourselves warranted in asserting at the ideal end of inquiry, or (d) to be what comes out of the barrel of a gun, that is, what we can compel other people to accept, or (e) to be none of the above. All of these ways of saying what "true" means have found defenders, and there are many variants and further possibilities which have as well. But one might also argue that any one of these is the proper or primary criterion for deciding which beliefs are true, and further items may be added to the list, such as (f) to be tied with logical necessity to beliefs which are self-evidently true, which has regularly been invoked as the paradigm of justification, if not as a candidate for an adequate characterization of truth. Moreover, some accounts maintain that truth and justification need to be characterized in the same way. So idealists have often maintained that one or another version of (b) suffices for both, and some pragmatists have said the same for (c). Others seek to combine different items on the list to characterize truth and justification, respectively. Many, for example, argue that truth is a version of (a), while justification is a version of (b), or perhaps (c). Hence the importance of trying to keep the issues straight.

The formative theologians of the last several centuries have not, to be sure, generally written books, or even chapters, on "truth" (Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar are important exceptions to this generalization).[6] Even less have they devoted thematic attention to "justified belief," or to the relationship between epistemic right and truth. But the difference between the questions I am raising and the preoccupations of modern theologians is more terminological than substantive. As I will try to show, arguments about what it is for Christian beliefs to be true, and how we should give warrant for or decide about their truth, are deeply embedded in modern Christian theology, dispersed across a wide range of rubrics bearing other names: "prolegomena to theology," "theological method," "knowledge of God," "revelation," and so forth.

6. In Barth see especially his treatment of the prophetic office of Jesus Christ under the heading "Jesus Christ, the Truthful Witness," which makes up the whole of *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/3 (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1932–67 [for the complete work]); ET: *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–75); in Balthasar see the 3 volumes of his *Theologik*.

What is being asked, then, is what it means to say that Christian beliefs are "true," and by what right the Christian community and its members decide to hold these beliefs. These questions are being asked *about* "Christian beliefs." As I am using the term, a *belief* is an attitude or disposition expressible by holding a sentence true. Thus one cannot have the concept of belief without having the concept of truth (at least as applied to sentences), though for reasons to be explained later our explicit discussion of the concept of truth will be more readily comprehensible if it follows that of justified beliefs. A sentence the meaning of which has been specified by some person or group is, again as I am using the term, a *proposition*; to specify the meaning of a sentence is the same thing as offering an *interpretation* of it. Believing is thus a *propositional attitude*, that is, an attitude (in this case, holding true) toward a sentence the meaning or interpretation of which the believer understands or has specified; there are many other propositional attitudes, such as hoping, doubting, and wishing. The same proposition can be expressed by different sentences (perhaps most obviously when we give the same interpretation for two sentences in different languages), and conversely the same sentence can express different propositions (for example, when two different contexts in which it is held true require two different interpretations of it); I take the relation between concepts and words to work the same way. When a person or group speaks a sentence or proposition they have made an *utterance*; when they speak a sentence or proposition they hold true, they have made an *assertion* or *statement*.

I take these definitions to be non-controversial – not, of course, that the question of what exactly to make of these elemental notions is settled, but simply that the characterizations I have given reflect well-established philosophical usage, and so provide a reasonable place to start. In any case little gain will likely result from arguing about definitions in advance of actual inquiry; it is enough for them to be reasonably clear. Moreover, I take these definitions to entail no ontological commitments beyond the obvious ones: to ask about the truth of beliefs, sentences, and so forth assumes that there are beliefs, sentences, and so forth. In particular, I willingly remain agnostic about whether concepts and propositions are eternal objects, to which our words and sentences are variously attached. Some philosophers devote considerable labor to deciding this matter, especially those who want to ascribe such a status to propositions. But for present purposes, propositions as eternal objects are eliminable in Quine's sense; they add nothing to a consideration of the issue at hand

which cannot already be expressed simply by talking about sentences and the interpretation of sentences (and, more specifically, about the equivalence in meaning of one sentence to another).[7]

In raising the questions of truth and of what makes for justified decisions about truth I am thus asking, in the first place, about language. At least at the outset I will mostly consider language – sentences or statements – as the bearer of "true," the subject to which the predicate "true" is applied, and will ask what the Christian community and its members are doing, and by what right they do it, when they apply this predicate to sentences, and also to propositional attitudes (like belief) which include those sentences.[8]

Two other candidates for the bearer or subject of "true" obviously present themselves: the mind, and reality. An ancient tradition maintains that "falsity and truth are not in things . . . but in thought."[9] "True" is a different sort of notion from "good," in that while goodness resides in things, as that which humans and other rational beings desire in them, truth resides in the mind, when it knows things, indeed when things come in a sense to be in the mind.[10] "Truth" thus enters the world with human beings, or more broadly with successful knowers; as Donald Davidson puts the point, "Nothing in the world, no object or event, would be true or false if there were not thinking creatures."[11]

An equally ancient tradition maintains that "the true is that which is,"[12] and ascribes "true" to objects, facts, events, states of affairs, and so forth. Conceiving the bearer of "true" in this way makes "true" more or

7. On the eliminability of propositions taken as ontologically distinct from sentences, see W. V. Quine, *Philosophy of Logic*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 10; *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), pp. 205ff. Quine also argues a stronger point, viz., that we cannot individuate propositions as objects distinct from sentences, so it is futile to posit their existence; it is about this issue that I remain agnostic for present purposes.

8. Much philosophical debate has been devoted to whether, among linguistic or language-dependent items, sentences, statements, utterances, beliefs, assertions, or propositions should be regarded as the primary (and perhaps sole) bearer of truth. That debate is sometimes regarded as an argument without issue (on which see Susan Haack, *Philosophy of Logics* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978], pp. 79–85). It will be peripheral to many of our present concerns, but will play a crucial role when it comes to figuring out what truth is, since a plausible conception of truth depends at least in part on finding a non-question-begging bearer for "true" (see the discussion in chapter 8, pp. 217–23).

9. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VI, 4 (1027b, 25–7).

10. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, 5, 1; 16, 1 (*S. Thomae Aquinatis Summa Theologiae*, 4 vols., ed. P. Caramello [Turin: Marietti, 1948–52]).

11. "The Structure and Content of Truth," *The Journal of Philosophy* 87/6 (1990), pp. 279–328; here: p. 279.

12. Augustine, *Soliloquiorum Libri Duo* II, v, 8. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, series latina* (=PL), ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: 1844–55), vol. XXXII, 889.

less synonymous with "real"; this usage is not uncommon among theologians, who may also talk about "(the) truth" as roughly equivalent to "the ultimately real."[13]

Any account of truth and deciding about truth will surely have to deal with the connections between language, human beings, and reality. But attending first of all to sentences and beliefs as truth bearers will help avoid begging questions on these complex matters. Conceptions of mind and reality are various and contested, and so as a result are the senses in which "mind" and "reality" may be truth bearers. That sentences and beliefs may be true is by contrast relatively uncontroversial. Whatever else truth may be, it is surely a property or characteristic of some sentences; we regularly regard other people's sentences and our own as true and justified. Figuring out how to construe the truth and justification of sentences – in particular, but not only, of those held true in the Christian community – may then help us get some purchase on the interrelations between language, mind, and reality, and so, eventually, on the senses in which mind and reality as well as language may be truth bearers. This is a common procedure: we may hope to attain a better grasp of vexed and difficult matters by attending to matters less controversial and more accessible, when we have reason to think the matters are linked.

To some theologians, however, taking this linguistic turn irreparably trivializes the issue. A theological account of truth, after all, deals with divine truth itself, with the truth which God himself is, and so with matters of ultimate significance. Why spend a lot of time talking about words – engaged in what Quine calls "semantic ascent" – rather than talking about God?

Because, in a word, our best hope of thinking well about God lies in thinking well about our talk of God. Semantic ascent in theology is not a trivial distraction from the real issue (God), still less a confusion or equation of God with our talk about God. Rather it enables us to see the issue at hand – what God has to do with the truth and justification of our beliefs about God, and about anything else – more clearly than we otherwise could, and to handle the issue in more plausible ways than we would otherwise be able. So, at least, this book will attempt to show. Its argu-

13. So for example John Zizioulas poses the theological problem of truth like this: "How can a Christian hold to the idea that truth operates in history and creation when the ultimate character of truth, and its uniqueness, seem irreconcilable with the change and decay to which history and creation are subject?" *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), p. 70. Zizioulas also talks about truth in other senses.

ment embodies the conviction, which Michael Dummett takes to be the distinguishing mark of analytic philosophy, that "we have no account of thoughts save by reference to language" – whether the thoughts be about God or about anything else.[14]

Of course many theologians do not regard questions about language as trivial. Yet despite their readiness to learn from a wide range of other disciplines, theologians generally continue to keep their distance from analytic philosophy. The reasons for this ongoing reluctance (which, if one takes analytic philosophy to begin basically with Frege, goes back well into the last century) would make an interesting study in its own right. It may have to do with the assumption, common in the humanistic disciplines, that because analytic philosophy's formal apparatus (of quantifiers, variables, sentential operators, and the like) and explanatory concepts form to a certain extent a body of specialist knowledge, the issues it treats and the conclusions it reaches are arcane and lack theological interest. This book proposes that the mainstream analytic debate handles in a rigorous and telling fashion problems about truth and interpretation with which any discipline must deal, and so demands theological attention.

Here a different kind of theological worry comes into view. Theologians no doubt have to draw on philosophical claims and arguments in order to think and talk about God. And it may be that, contrary to the modern theological mainstream, analytic philosophy of language provides the best available conceptual tools for coming to grips with questions about meaning, belief, and truth in theology. But theologians should nonetheless be deliberately eclectic in their philosophical commitments, and correspondingly reserved about making theological claims beholden to any particular philosophical argument or approach. This best assures that theology's truth claims, and even more those of Christian belief itself, will not wind up at the mercy of transient philosophical fashion.

On this score two different issues may usefully be distinguished. When it comes to theology's epistemic priorities, if analytic philosophy (or any other discipline) makes claims which are incompatible with central Christian beliefs, then so much the worse for analytic philosophy. The Christian community and Christian theology are justified, as

14. Michael Dummett, *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 11. Not everyone, to be sure, would agree with Dummett's claim about what marks out the analytic tradition in philosophy.

subsequent chapters of this book will argue in detail, in retaining their own epistemic commitments. This is not to say, however, that the Christian community's central beliefs will normally enable theologians to decide which philosophical views have the strongest claim on their attention. Rival philosophical arguments relevant to the issue at hand may alike be compatible with Christian beliefs, and philosophical claims incompatible with Christian beliefs may be supported by better arguments than those which cohere with Christianity. A principled philosophical eclecticism will not likely be of much help in deciding between rival arguments or responding to relevant objections. Theologians, it seems, have to make on their own responsibility the philosophical arguments which bear on the issues they want to treat. I will try to do that here. This book's engagement with analytic philosophy of language aims not to provide a philosophical basis for Christian beliefs, but to make theological use of some of the best available reflection on the topic at hand. It strives to turn an important body of text and argument to specifically theological purposes – to follow, in short, the scriptural injunction to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (II Cor. 10:5).

We are inquiring, lastly, about the truth of "Christian" beliefs, and about the epistemic right to hold such beliefs. But what counts as "Christian" belief turns out to be a somewhat complicated question. Getting into a position to begin listing Christian beliefs with some reliability requires addressing issues like what identifies the Christian community, what this community's primary criteria of truth are, and how you can tell what these criteria are. It turns out that no one of these questions can be answered without answering them all, an undertaking which begins in the next chapter.

It should at least be clear from the outset, however, that "Christian belief" is not restricted to beliefs which only Christians hold. Any belief might be a "Christian" one, depending on whether and how it fits with the criteria the Christian community employs to assess the truth and falsity of beliefs. A theological account of truth and deciding about truth will not, therefore, apply only to a limited set of beliefs, namely those which are distinctively Christian; in the nature of the case it will turn out to be an account of truth and epistemic right for beliefs in general – for any possible claim which wants to count as true.

One final point needs to be noted explicitly. As the opening paragraphs of this chapter already suggest, I will here follow the New Testament in speaking of Jesus as "the Son" of God, and of this God as

"the Father" of Jesus. Since these words take masculine pronouns in English, and the reflexive character of pronouns has no adequate substitute in ordinary language, masculine pronouns will be used for God as well. Whether Christians ought to continue to talk to and about God in this way is of course now much debated. It will be evident that I think the answer to this question is yes, but I will not attempt any systematic defense of this conviction here; that would require a separate book on the Trinity, focused rather differently than this one.

How one handles this difficult problem depends in part, of course, on what one thinks is happening when the Christian community speaks to and about God as "the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." As chapter 2 will argue in more detail, the primal setting of this form of speech is the church's eucharistic liturgy, in which the Holy Spirit invites and enables a human community to join the crucified and risen Jesus in his own eternal love for and knowledge of the Father who sent him, and so to share in the innermost life of God. A straightforward empirical analysis can show, moreover, that this is what the Christian community believes is happening in its liturgy, though it cannot show that this is in fact what is happening. That the persons of the Trinity succeed in inviting us to share their life presumes that they know how to designate and address one another, and in particular that Jesus knows how to address the one who sent him, since our particular place in the life of God is to share, as Jesus' sisters and brothers, in his own loving and knowing address to that one. When Jesus designates that one as "the Father" and invites us to join him, therefore, he issues an invitation which we can of course refuse, but whose terms we cannot define: they are defined by the persons of the Trinity themselves.[15] It is basically for that reason that I think the New Testament designations of the divine persons ought be retained.

The point is a specific one, and suggests nothing about the descriptive (as distinguished from designative or individuating) uses of language about God. One could, to mention only one example, hold that "the Father" is the primary designation of the one who eternally generates the Son and who sends the Son into our flesh, and also hold that a proper

15. The idea is an ancient one: "God is to be believed when he speaks of himself, and whatever he grants us to think concerning himself is to be followed" (Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* IV, 14; *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* [= *CCL*], vol. LXII, p. 115, 14–15). Were it otherwise – did speaking truly about the triune God (and especially referring to God) not itself depend on God's own free action, including the gift to us by the divine persons of their own individuating designations for one another – we would perhaps have a much broader choice of words when it came to talking about (and especially referring to) God.

description even of the eternal relationship of "the Father" to the Son, insofar as we are capable of one, necessarily includes maternal as well as paternal aspects – a point of which the trinitarian theological tradition has long been aware.[16]

One could also, as we will see later, hold quite different views of what is going on when Christians speak of God, whether as "the Father" or in other terms. On some alternative accounts, such as those which regard Christian talk of God as chiefly the expression of an inner experience finally too deep for words, it is not at all clear that there would be any justification for retaining the traditional designations. Questions about whether traditional Christian words referring to the persons of the Trinity ought to be retained are thus bound up with much broader questions about the meaning, and the point, of Christian speech.

16. As, for example, in the text of the 11th Council of Toledo (675), often cited in contemporary feminist discussions of this point: "One must believe that the Son is begotten and born, not from nothing, nor from some other substance, but from the womb of the Father (*de Patris utero*), that is, from his substance" (DS 526; = Heinrich Denzinger and Adolf Schömetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* [36th edn, Barcelona: Herder, 1976]). Note also Thomas Aquinas's discussion of the *conceptio* of the eternal *Verbum* in *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV, 11 (nos. 3478–9); he concludes: "In the generation of the Word Holy Scripture attributes to the Father all those things which in fleshly generation belong separately to the father and to the mother: thus the Father is said both 'to give life to the Son' and 'to conceive and give birth (*concipere et parturire*)' to the Son" (ed. C. Pera et al. [Turin: Marietti, 1961]).