

Something That Matters
A Theology for Critical Believers

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AN IMPRINT OF ABC-CLIO, LLC
Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

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Faith, Religion, and Theology

This chapter raises, clarifies, and answers the question: “What is the point of doing theology, and in particular, what difference does it make to the church and to the secular world?” This question requires that we come to terms with two other more basic terms: faith and religion. Theology, then, is the conscious effort to make explicit the meaning and significance of the implicit faith of humanity that every being is “something that matters,” and it does so in the terms of a particular religion, in this case, Christianity. Several questions for my understanding of theology are raised and answered: (1) Does it undermine the faith of believers? (2) Is theology too abstract or wordy? (3) Is theology already biased? Do we not have to have faith to do theology? (4) Is theology too academic and inattentive to the needs of oppressed groups?

The general perception of the worth of “theology” is at a low ebb these days. This is so, in part, because many of its traditional doctrines are at odds with our daily experience and with ideas we take for granted. But a deeper reason is that many people simply don’t see any point to it. They regard theology as some sort of utopian speculation that is, at best, idle and, at worst, perverse. Consider, for example, the understanding of theology that is taken for granted by one very bright and influential public intellectual: In an op-ed column in the *New York Times*, Thomas Friedman speaks of the Bush administration that came into office bearing Republican theological positions on tax cuts, the environment, and missile defense—positions that were hatched in conservative think tanks and chanted with religious devotion, but were never tempered by the real world as it has evolved over the last eight years. Again, with reference to tax cuts, Friedman speaks of the Republican theology that

all problems can be solved by slashing taxes. A third time, speaking of an ideology that would press for a Star Wars missile shield irrespective of whether it is needed or can work, he says that such is realism lost in theology.¹ One need not disagree with Friedman's main point to see that he simply uses "theology" or "theological" as shorthand for doctrinaire opinions that are utterly untested and detached from real-world facts.

It is not only public intellectuals who think of theology as useless speculation. Friends and clergy alike seem to want to dismiss theology as pointless. For instance, recently my wife and I had dinner with an intelligent and devoted parishioner, a woman with a PhD in art history who kindly asked what I was up to these days. When I replied, perhaps too enthusiastically, that I was teaching an introductory course in *systematic theology*, an instant expression of pained incomprehension crossed her face. "What is *that*?" she groaned. I suppose I replied something like the following: Well, it's a "deliberate, methodical, and reasoned [examination of] the meaning and truth of the Christian witness of faith."² "What difference does that make?" put a quick end to this conversation, and we immediately switched to casual chitchat.

The next morning a popular homilist began (in feigned gravitas): "Recently, I have been studying the works of the *great theologians*. And the greatest of these is a man called . . . *Dr. Seuss!*" The relief among the congregation was palpable. I should say that the preacher's homily was not bad. As I recall he made much of *Horton Hears a Who*, saying that Horton took seriously all the little folk, and he applied this to Christ. What I gathered from the homily and from the congregation's response, however, was that theology might be disregarded as irrelevant.

The attitudes laid bare here—and the examples might be multiplied a thousand times—expose a serious problem. They tell us that theology is widely perceived to be purely academic, without any practical use. Whereas people see clearly how *being* religious makes a real difference in their lives, they fail to see how discussing ideas *about* religion can do anything more than amuse those few who relish outmoded concepts. Years ago Alfred North Whitehead warned educators of the danger of "inert ideas," ones "that are merely received into the mind without being utilised, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations."³ He observed that to traffic in such inert ideas can only produce a kind of "mental dryrot" in both teacher and learner. The same warning is clearly evident in the attitudes exhibited above and the questions put to me. They constitute a demand that the work of theology not be

undertaken in vain, and that its ideas be shown to have important consequences for how we order our lives.

The first thing we need to get straight is that ideas inevitably *do* have consequences, whether or not the connection is explicitly recognized and acknowledged. For instance, the Enlightenment idea that autonomy is fundamental to being fully human helped spawn the rise of Western democracies. And Thomas Jefferson's well-known words in the Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,"⁴ express that idea and enable us to see the connection between the idea and its practical effect.

Similarly, Marx's view that the history of the world is the "history of class struggle," and that, therefore, what is called for is the abolition of private property and the creation of a classless society—"an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all"⁵—clearly has had a tremendous impact on the lives of millions of humans, for good or ill, as the history of the twentieth century attests.

Another example that illustrates that ideas have real consequences is the ultimate reality or God that people accept and live by. To be sure, this idea is often only vaguely or loosely held, being a kind of inherited presupposition. Even so, different ideas of ultimate reality have different consequences. For instance, insofar as ultimate reality is conceived as Nirvana or Emptiness, believers are not likely to petition for help, because Nirvana is not understood to be responsive or, in any sense, personal. They are much more likely to engage in meditation. Moreover, their ethical principles lead them to try to extinguish all desires or acts that promote the individual self at the expense of fellow creatures or to sharpen definite personality traits in any way. By contrast, believers in a personal deity ask God for things and expect divine activity in the world in response to that petition. And despite the fact that, at its best, such theism requires the faithful to love their neighbors as themselves, it nonetheless promotes selfhood more than nontheistic beliefs do. It also encourages activity designed to influence other humans and to change or redesign the natural environment.

Thus the ideas of God or of ultimate reality that lie at the base of various religions insinuate themselves into the cultures influenced by these religions and help to mold the ethical perspective and the behavior of the people of that culture.

As these examples show, it is never really a matter of *whether* ideas have consequences, but only of *what* the consequences of particular

ideas are likely to be. The issue at stake, then, is how to be as clear and precise as possible about what the basic ideas are so that we can see their inevitable implications for other correlative ideas and their likely practical effect. As regards the ideas consciously entertained or presupposed by a religion, it is of the utmost importance to be clear about what they are, what they mean, and what they entail. Failing to reflect on such fundamental ideas or the meaning of the originating events of that religion is likely to make one captive to the interpretations given by a previous generation, and merely to parrot the theology of the past. And the surest way to produce *bad* theology and an inadequate religious response is to reproduce thoughtlessly the theology of a bygone day.⁶

It is just that pitfall that I hope to avoid in this work. I aim generally to demonstrate how a clear grasp of certain fundamental Christian doctrines makes a difference in the lives of believers. This entails being clear, not only about what ideas are fundamental to Christianity but also what these ideas mean for us today, and in what sense they can be taken to be true; it also entails showing the difference these ideas make in the lives of those who hold them and so in the world at large. In this way theology can justify faith and its religious expressions both rationally and practically.

More specifically, I aim to use the insights and concepts of process theology to unpack the meaning of the Christian message for us today and to show that it is not only credible but also relevant to our lives in practical ways. Process theology has the capacity to resolve or avoid the many intellectual difficulties that traditional theology notoriously falls prey to, dilemmas such as the following: What sense does it make to say, "God loves the world, but is utterly unaffected by it" (as no lover would ever be)? Or, what is the point of praying to a being who is unmoved and immutable? Why try to affect a being who cannot change? Or, what sense does it make to assert that God is both all-good and all-powerful at the same time that we acknowledge the obvious, that evil exists in the world? For, as the philosopher David Hume and others have convincingly argued, if God were all-good, God would desire that creatures suffer no evil, and if God were all-powerful, God would form creation so that no evil cropped up; yet evil persists.

This last dilemma discloses a genuinely moral dimension to be addressed: Is God thus responsible for the massive evil in the world? Or, if God is both omnipotent and omniscient, in the sense of knowing all future acts and events in their particularity, what is left to human freedom and responsibility? The theology that follows, which utilizes the insights and concepts of process philosophy, addresses these and

other issues in ways that the traditional theology seems incapable of doing; at the same time it strives always to represent adequately the heart of the Christian message.

To realize these aims we must take the first step, which is to try to be clear about what “theology” really is and just what a theologian does. To accomplish this, however, we must distinguish what we mean by “theology” from what we mean by “faith” and “religion.” Regrettably, the terms *faith*, *religion*, and *theology* are often used carelessly as if they were interchangeable or merely synonymous. Even those who ought to know better sometimes mistake the disciplined study that is “theology” for the practice of “religion.”⁷ Sometimes we speak of both religion and theology as “irrational” or “non-rational” when the point we’re struggling to make is that the prior *faith* on which both religion and theology are grounded is itself not based on rationality.

For the sake of clarity it is helpful to differentiate the three terms. To be sure, they are bound together, but they should not be confused or used as equivalents. Each stands for a distinct dimension of existence: Briefly, *faith* stands for a fundamental disposition that everyone has irrespective of how to conceptualize it; *religion* stands for a particular historical expression of the underlying faith—for example, Christianity or Judaism; and *theology* stands for the more or less reasoned effort to make sense of the claims of a religion. The clearer we are about the distinctions, the better able we will be to understand what theology is, why theologians do the things they do, and what difference it makes. The following three sections, therefore, will aim to shed light on these terms, drawing out their distinct meanings and showing their connections.

FAITH

I begin with the term that is most often misunderstood and is, perhaps, the most difficult to comprehend, namely, *faith*. It is the term we use for that attitude or orientation that lies at the base of religion and theology. One reason why it is so difficult to get the meaning of faith straight is that throughout our history the word has been used in several different ways. For instance, in the New Testament we find the apostle Paul and the author of the Letter of James apparently at loggerheads with each other over the indispensability of faith to the life of the believer. Paul declares that “a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law” (Romans 3:28). James, as if to refute Paul, insists that “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone,” so that “faith without works is also dead” (James 2:24, 26).

Taken at face value, the two assertions clearly contradict each other. Yet I suggest that each author is working with such an utterly different understanding of faith as to be making a wholly different point. According to the understanding that James apparently takes for granted, faith is a matter of giving intellectual assent to a proposition: to have faith, in this sense, is to entertain a belief *about* something, in this case about God or about some religious claim. If this is the idea of faith that James assumes, it follows that the belief must be followed by appropriate deeds; otherwise, it is “dead.” Like inert ideas, beliefs about God or religious matters that do not issue in right behavior are so much mental and spiritual dry rot.

But is this the understanding of faith that Paul has? I do not think so. For Paul, faith is an orientation of the whole person, rather than merely the mind, which has God or Jesus Christ as the center of gravity toward which we are inevitably drawn, the be-all and end-all of existence. Thus faith is not at all a belief *about* God, but it is belief *in* God in the sense of being an utter trust in God’s steadfast love no matter what may occur to us in this life. It is an orientation such that, no matter what the legitimate concerns of life may be, one’s “ultimate concern,” to use Paul Tillich’s phrase, is focused on God.⁸ And, as Tillich also saw clearly, this understanding of faith is concretely expressed in the words of the great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). We can see from this expression that faith includes an emotional component (heart), a spiritual or intellectual one (soul), and an active component (might) but is not identified with any one of them. Rather, as deeper and more inclusive, faith inevitably gives rise to a thoughtful explication of the basic orientation, and it necessarily issues in activity—“faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6)—but it is distinguished from both intellect and works.

I believe that the understanding of faith that I have attributed to the apostle Paul is sounder than the one that I suspect James held. James views faith as a species of knowledge. But, because it is regarded as no ordinary kind of knowledge, the normal warrants for supporting claims to truth are waived. Thus faith becomes a belief about matters for which either no explanation is given or else one that is strained or preposterous. In the best of cases, then, the grounds for faith are obscure. In the worst of cases faith is treated as something utterly senseless, a mindset expressed by the schoolboy who said, “Faith is when you believe something you know ain’t true.”⁹ That is, faith, as a belief *about* divine things, runs counter to everything we have good reason to believe.

Paul, too, understands that faith is not rational. But this is because, as an orientation of the entire being toward God in trust, faith lies beneath the level of reason. It is not, however, anti-rational. In fact, it is the condition for any sort of reasoning. In that sense, it is “pre-rational.” As the wellspring of every element of human personality faith gives rise to the human quest for meaning. It is, as Anselm put it, “faith seeking understanding.”¹⁰ Paul’s view is the one I believe to be the best. But before expounding its meaning further, there is one other point I wish to emphasize:

Properly speaking, the object of faith is *God* and nothing less. Whether we take faith to be a “belief about” or “belief in,” it is always directed toward God and not toward this-worldly beings. To be sure, there are attitudes or states analogous to faith that are directed toward objects much less than God. For instance, we believe that the world is round or that water is composed of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. Moreover, we trust other humans; we are dedicated to them and loyal to their cause. But, strictly speaking, faith is not given to objects or persons in this world. It is only given to the ultimate ground and end of all being—God.

Having made that point I return to consider more about the understanding of faith as an orientation of the whole person, the orientation that lies at the base of knowledge and of activity. There are two distinct senses contained within the one major understanding, and we should be clear about them.

First, there is an implicit faith that is an attitude fundamental to the act of being human. Many persons would not wish to affirm belief in God explicitly, and some would positively deny it. And yet all of us, I believe, would affirm what may be called the common faith of humanity: every act and every experience, no matter how small or unnoticed, is, in Whitehead’s telling phrase, “something that matters.”¹¹ Thus, given with human existence itself is the conviction that everything we do or undergo makes a difference somewhere in the world. It is proverbial that the stone, dropped in the pond, sends ripples across to the farther edge or that a typhoon in the western Pacific alters the weather patterns in California. What is even more important is that this same cause-effect relation lies at the heart of human life. Our most private thoughts, as well as our public acts, have their effects and make a difference in our continuing lives and those of the people we interact with.

For instance, my response to the report of a colleague’s promotion and increase in salary, whether it be jealousy, happiness at her good fortune, a lurking fear that it says something about my own inadequacy, a resolve to improve my work habits, or some combination of these, will

surely affect my subsequent behavior and thus have a ripple effect among my coworkers. Similarly, the attitude I take toward the news that I have a terminal illness, whether it be terror, anger, resignation, resolve to make the most of my remaining time and to endure the pain with grace, a sense of peace, or gratitude for the life and love I've already had, will make a difference in the quality of my remaining life and in the lives of loved ones looking after me.

Thus, no thought or occurrence is too small, private, or seemingly isolated to be of no effect; every thought, word, or deed makes a difference in ourselves and has an impact in the world around us. This being so, and being, as I believe, central to our deepest conviction, it takes only a little reflection to conclude that no act or experience, having once registered itself in the world, can vanish into sheer nothingness. Every act or experience, having occurred, has established itself as a value for all times. This means that every thought, deed, and experience makes an *abiding* difference in the universe. Put otherwise, to be is to be “something that matters,” and to be something that matters everlastingly.

This perspective is critical to the understanding of faith that is implicit in every act of living. It is, I believe, this “deeper faith” that Schubert Ogden declares to be “logically prior to every particular religious assertion,” namely, “an original confidence in the meaning and worth of life” or, alternatively, “our ineradicable confidence in the final worth of our existence.”¹² Every human shares this implicit faith. It is not reserved to the pious, nor is it an eccentric view held only by a few optimistic believers. Consider what Albert Camus, supposedly a champion of the absurd or of nihilism, writes. In making the point that “the absurd can be considered only as a point of departure,” and that “a literature of despair is a contradiction in terms,” he asks: “How can one limit oneself to the idea that nothing has sense and that we must despair of everything?” This is a serious question for one who has wrestled deeply with the issue, and his answer is revealing:

Without going to the bottom of the matter, one can at least observe that, in the same way that there is no absolute materialism, since merely in order to fashion this word it is already necessary to say that there is in the world something more than matter, there is no total nihilism. From the moment one says that all is nonsense, one expresses something which has sense.¹³

If this insight carries any force—and it seems clear to me that it does—the same logic tells us that to act in any fashion, whether creative

or destructive or even suicidal, is to act *as if* that act had meaning and value beyond itself in the universe. It is to “express something which has sense.” To exist at all is to affirm one’s abiding worth—for good or ill. As Whitehead says: “Our enjoyment of actuality is a realization of worth, good or bad. It is a value experience. Its basic expression is—Have a care, here is something that matters!”¹⁴

I recognize that to insist on our inescapable trust in the meaning and worth of all our actions and experiences is to raise the suspicion of merely ignoring the dark side of life. Such a faith may appear to be nothing but the irrepressible optimism of a Pollyanna. It is not. It well knows tragedy, sorrow, and acute suffering. Yet, in the teeth of all of life’s ills, this faith also knows that such experiences are not in vain, for it affirms that what is done cannot be undone; what happens is etched indelibly into the face of the universe. Hence, each deed, no matter how seemingly trivial or apparently wasted, is of unfading importance; each experience, no matter how drenched in suffering, is seen to matter infinitely.

My conviction, and that of generations before me, is that this common faith, when fully understood, entails explicit faith in God. Although clearly not everyone will agree, I believe that the idea of a personal God who not only creates but redeems all creation is the one that most adequately makes sense of the implicit faith of humanity.

This brings us to the other sense in which we speak of faith as an orientation of the total personality: the explicit faith in, or utter reliance on, God. To be sure, we should never confuse claims of having faith with actually living a faithful life. We all know persons (perhaps ourselves) who profess faith in God yet live as if some lesser idol (e.g., money, power, intelligence, youth) held sway. The genuinely faithful person may confess that faith explicitly, but the confession itself does not guarantee the genuine article. As Jesus says: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

In fact, there is no human way to measure the degree of faith in the strictest sense, because, as an inner orientation of the whole person, faith is invisible to all but God. As Paul says to the people of Corinth: “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. . . . It is the Lord who judges me” (I Corinthians 4:3–4).

Even so, although we can never measure the genuineness of faith in others or in ourselves, we can specify the distinguishing features of such a radical trust in God, and we can see what such trust comes to.

To the extent that we actually live faithfully, we place our ultimate confidence in God's steadfast love rather than relying on our own resources and those of our fellow creatures. Such explicit faith does not force us to withdraw from this-worldly endeavors; the world is, after all, God's. But it allows us to place all our efforts in the proper perspective. By relying on God's love as the final justification for our worth, we are enabled to dismiss certain kinds of fear. We are released from the anxiety that our activities are meaningless, that no one cares, that we are utterly alone in the world, and that our efforts do not make any difference. Also, we are released from the poisonous attitude that insists that for something to be of worth it must be *mine*. It is a great boon to be free enough to rejoice when others have talents, possessions, or good fortune that we do not, and perhaps cannot, have. Being thus *freed from* the stultifying preoccupation with self or from idolatrous reliance on merely temporal goods, relations, or structures as the ultimate object of our trust, we are actually *freed for* responsible and productive living, for loving service to this world—to this world as itself the object of God's love.

RELIGION

Let us now pass on to a brief explanation of the second, historically conditioned dimension of existence, religion. By *religion* I mean a particular cultural expression of a group's underlying faith that gives order to the members' lives according to the precepts of the faith as thus formulated. Religion is a complex cultural phenomenon comprising many elements, among which are ritual, myth, emotion, belief, a code of behavior, and an organizational structure. All of these elements are bound together by a rich set of symbols. I know of no better short, comprehensive definition of religion than that of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz: "A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations . . . by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."¹⁵

This anthropological definition may seem unduly abstruse because it is compact and uses terms in an unfamiliar way. But its point is that any religion must be seen as a complex cultural expression of a fundamental worldview. It expresses this worldview concretely in terms of symbols, rites, stories, dogmas, and the like. And it is these concrete expressions that lend to each religion its particular ethos—its ethical norms and aesthetic preferences.

Seen in this light, religion is both a product of culture and a producer of culture. One example will suffice to illustrate the claim that it is a product. The language in which the stories of a religion are told and its beliefs expressed is culturally rooted. This language clearly shapes the ideas and forms of the particular religion. To understand this is to see that all religions are, in part, products of the culture in which they arise and that they represent and serve. Most of us easily recognize this truth with respect to other religions. It is the beginning of wisdom, however, to acknowledge the truth with respect to our own. To admit the cultural relativity of our own religion, to see it as simply a special expression of the “one, true faith,” and at the same time to recognize that there is a common faith at the base of all religions is to eschew the idolatry of equating our religion with God and to take a step toward trusting the one God who creates and redeems all.

But this is not the whole story. Although any religion is built up out of many cultural expressions, it is not merely one more cultural institution alongside others such as family, work, government, schools, or the military. Nor is it *only* a product of culture. Religion occupies a unique and indispensable place in the life of any culture. It is the most comprehensive of all the cultural institutions because it touches every aspect of human life. For this reason it is the treasure house of that culture’s living symbols and the agency for celebrating its deepest values. But more than this, religion raises and addresses the primary human question, the question of the meaning and worth of life, which is the issue of faith. Therefore, a religion is the chief instrument for expressing and promulgating that culture’s fundamental worldview, and in doing so it creates new cultural expressions.

Finally, each religion articulates the principles that coordinate the basic elements of the worldview with the practical lives—public as well as private—of the members of its culture; it fuses worldview and ethos by grounding our “ought” in a fundamental “is.” For example, if God not only is, but is the loving creator and redeemer of all, it follows that our response to God should be to love as much of God’s creation as we can: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength [and] . . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30–31, summarizing the Law and citing Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18). Thus religion brings together and synthesizes the various disparate elements of a living people, and so stamps their history as a particular culture. It is a producer as well as a product.

If the foregoing links religion and culture, whether as product or producer, we need also to see that living religions transcend their

cultures. For, even as a religion gathers together the diverse elements into one unified cultural expression, it also seeks to give expression to that invariant faith that lies beneath all cultures. As Whitehead says:

Religion is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realized; something which is a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of present facts; something that gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes apprehension; something whose possession is the final good, and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal, and the hopeless quest. . . . Apart from [the religious vision] human life is a flash of occasional enjoyments, lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience.¹⁶

As expressive of that which utterly transcends all culture, religion is bound to come into conflict with culture. There is always an element of judgment when the universal touches the particular. So religion contains the prophetic as well as the priestly; it convicts as well as completes. But whether religion celebrates or challenges, it is the one fundamental sacrament, since it is the “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace” given by God to humanity.

THEOLOGY

Let us now turn to the task of theology. Religion has many dimensions, but one of them is the inherent demand to examine, clarify, codify, and communicate the faith as expressed by the stories, symbols, preaching, and practice of that religion. Just as religion is a particular way of incarnating the more elemental faith, so one of the demands of that same faith is that it be made intelligible. As Anselm saw clearly, faith must seek understanding. Theology is that part of religion with the special task of making the underlying faith understandable. In doing so, it also makes it more accessible.

Strictly speaking, “theology” is *logos* about *theos*, or rational discourse about God. But such discourse never occurs in a cultural vacuum. There are no statements about God wholly detached from their historical moorings. Therefore, theology undertakes its task by examining, appraising, and interpreting the witness of faith as passed down to us in the writings, worship, and practice of a specific religion, and doing so critically.

This means, in the first place, that theology is always the theology of a particular religion (e.g., “Christian theology,” “Jewish theology,”

“Muslim theology”). There is no non-historical or absolute theology. But to affirm this does not, at all, license theology to become an ideology. The task of theology is not merely to rationalize and defend a position already taken. This is the point of insisting that it be critical. Although theology takes as its point of departure the culturally relativized *witness* of faith, it seeks to unpack the meaning of that faith itself, and to do so in ways that are fully public, fully accessible to impartial scrutiny. Theology should never make its appeal to some special authority that is unavailable to other intelligent and interested seekers after truth. Insofar as it has done so, and regrettably it sometimes has, theology has failed.

But it need not fail. We may define theology as the deliberate, critical, and systematic reflection on the underlying faith, the basic claims, and the full range of activities of a particular religion. To be adequate it must critically examine the religion’s tradition, especially its earliest witness where the tradition is closest to the originating genius of that religion. Also, and just as important, theology must try to establish the meaning and truth of that religion’s claims as measured against the best available sources for expressing human understanding.

These sources will inevitably include philosophy, the time-honored discipline for evaluating the meaning and truth of various claims. They should also include the humanities and the social sciences, because these help us to understand the many ways of being human. Where relevant they should include the natural sciences, which also help us to understand what it means to be human. No one can hope to have mastered several—much less all—of these fields. But all theologians must be attentive to what they teach us about the world and about methods for evaluating claims.

The point is that theology must never simply assume that the claims of its religion are true, so that all it has to do is uncover their meaning and communicate that meaning effectively. It must test the meaning and truth of this witness of faith against the best available criteria of meaning and truth. Thus theology is the intellectual or rational arm of religion, which itself re-presents (presents again) in a culturally conditioned way the common faith of humanity.

SOME ISSUES FOR THIS VIEW OF THEOLOGY ADDRESSED

Having put the matter this way, it remains for me to address a few issues raised by some who disagree with my understanding of theology. I am aware of four related, but distinct, criticisms. In responding to

these I shall try to show that theology, as I understand it, is of immense practical significance.

The first criticism is that the study of theology often undermines the faith of the college student or seminarian. This criticism betrays the fact that, for some, the problem is not that theology makes *no* difference; rather, it is believed to make *too much* difference, but of a pernicious sort. More than once I have heard the complaint that a young person went off to college or seminary on fire with zeal for the Lord's work only to encounter nonbelieving teachers. Under their spell, the complaint goes, the student either turned away from theology or, worse, fell into their snare and lost his or her faith.

This is a serious charge, and it must be answered. I suspect that the first response should be to paraphrase Socrates and say, "An unexamined faith is not worth having." Any so-called faith incapable of withstanding careful scrutiny is not as strong or deep as was supposed. Genuine faith is always prepared to be examined in the clear light of day and discussed objectively free from the emotional supports of a strictly religious context.

What sometimes is paraded before us as faith, however, may be closer to idolatry: an emotional attachment to, and reliance on, certain forms of religious expression that at one time had the power to convey the deeper faith. But faith in *God*, utter reliance on God's creative and redemptive love, should never be equated with belief in the literal veracity of particular expressions of that faith. For example, the Gospels are replete with miraculous stories about Jesus. The purpose of these stories is to proclaim that the loving God, who is always energizing our lives by urging us toward our highest potentiality and receiving us into God's own life, is dramatically and decisively re-presented in Jesus. The claim, also, is that this has made all the difference in the lives of those testifying.

Whether the stories are literally true or not is beside the point, except insofar as the demand to accept them literally is made the test of faith. When that occurs, idolatry has triumphed. Faith in God must never be reduced to a literal acceptance of that which can be verified empirically, because "God"—whatever we may decide about the full meaning of that term—can never denote an object of empirical investigation. This concern lays bare one of the pitfalls of the intellectualist approach to the meaning of faith.

More than this, if my earlier discussion of faith is to the point, we cannot literally "lose our faith," since at its deepest level faith is ineradicable. Those who are said to have lost their faith more than likely have either broken down the barriers to a more genuine faith

or have shifted their allegiance from a religious set of idols to a more secular set. The move away from religion may, in fact, be an important step in a person's development in faith. The psychiatrist Scott Peck has shown that in certain cases it is actually necessary to help patients cast off a religion that has shackled them to promote spiritual growth even when the prospects for replacing the old with a new, more helpful, religion are dim. "It is indeed possible," he claims, "for us to mature out of a belief in God." To be sure, Peck's deeper conviction is that neither atheism nor agnosticism attains the highest level of human wisdom as does the best sort of theism. "There is reason to believe," he continues, "that behind spurious notions and false concepts of God there lies a reality that is God. This is what Paul Tillich meant when he referred to the 'god beyond God.'"¹⁷

In Peck's mind, therefore, as well as my own, the rejection of an inadequate and often harmful religious view does not entail the rejection of God. In fact, as I understand it, no one can wholly escape an encounter with God, the One who is re-presented by the Christ proclaimed by the Christian witness. This God is experienced by all as their creative ground and their redemptive end whether or not they see Christ as the decisive revelation of God or even whether or not they believe that God exists. Critical theology makes this clear, and so plays a vital role in the life of faith and the lives of those who witness to it.

A second criticism is that theology is too abstract, too wordy, or doesn't make any sense and so is irrelevant to my life. I am sympathetic with this criticism, but it is not one that is unique to theology. Every academic discipline that I know of, once it enters deeply into its subject matter, is forced to develop precise and technical language. There is good reason for this. Things are never as simple as they seem at first blush. What reason is there to suppose that rational discourse about the author and finisher of all creation, together with an analysis of the entire range of religious symbols and activities, would be any less complex than, say, physics? To treat this complex topic with care and integrity requires the ability to make distinctions and to use precise and technical language with some subtlety.

I am aware of the criticism that systems restrict and technical language deadens thought. But clear, consistent, and systematic language does not necessarily handcuff thought or imprison the imagination. On the contrary, the use of precise language can set our minds free to examine our assumptions and discover what the effects of modifying those assumptions might be. It enables us to make clear the meaning of our basic assertions and to see clearly what their consequences are or

what conclusions we should draw from them. What is more, language that is too colloquial does not wear well from generation to generation; frankly, the more abstract and systematic language does. Therefore, if a particular theological offering is to be more than a passing fad, it is bound to use precise and technical—but, one hopes, clear—language.

Because theology is felt to be of vital importance to many who are not professional theologians, there is a demand to transpose the technical language into one that is intelligible to laypeople. This task, too, requires special skills. It requires a mastery of a large, complex, and growing field, together with an understanding of the mind of the people at a particular time, and the literary craft to bridge the two. This is no small task. Some of us are trying, but I beg the reader to be patient if we do not measure up to the standards set by the great masters of the past.

A third criticism stems from the view that we cannot do theology at all unless we “have faith” or “stand within the circle of faith.” What this usually means is that the theologian must acknowledge his or her prior commitment to the content of the witness of faith. Therefore, the theologian need never even address the truth claims of the witness of faith. According to this view theology has a prior commitment to the truth of that witness, and so only has to unfold its meaning. I repeat the position taken earlier in this chapter: the task of the theologian is not merely to rationalize and defend a position already taken. The theologian who is not free to *assess* the truth of the community’s claims is unable to *assert* them as true.

Those who would require a theologian to profess a particular expression of faith confuse “religion” with “faith.” To be sure, one cannot theologize apart from faith; as I have understood the matter, we cannot even live as humans apart from faith. But this does not mean that a particular, culturally relativized expression of the underlying faith—one religion—is inevitably true in all of its claims. The claims of a religion remain to be argued for, tested, reasoned about. It is the business of theology to do just that, making use of the best available criteria for evaluating those claims.

If theology undertakes its work by uncritically assuming the truth of all the religious declarations, it inevitably sinks into the pit of dogmatic assurance and complacency that have been the bane of all healthy religions. If, on the other hand, theology deliberately, critically, and systematically reflects on the fundamental assumptions and assertions of a particular religion, it enables that religion to tap the power of its originating event and to gain access to truth, beauty, and goodness in

its contemporary setting. Nor should we be misled by the demand to be systematic. Systems do not have to be “closed systems.” They can be open to modification or even to their own demise. The point about being systematic is that rationality requires that basic principles be coordinated so that they are not at odds with one another.

Finally, it should be said forthrightly that even the truth of the central or fundamental doctrine (e.g., for theistic religions, the belief that “God” is the object and ground of faith) must be subject to critical testing. Any theology worth its salt will insist that the criteria for testing truth claims about God are never empirical, but are properly metaphysical. What I mean is that, since God is never properly conceived as one object among others in the natural world but is, rather, to be understood as the ground of all things that come to be, the method of observing by noting differences (the empirical method) is wholly beside the point. We must seek to establish what is unavoidably present when anything exists and then show that only God, properly understood, makes sense of this. Thus theology, conceived along the lines I have suggested, is far more valuable to religion than theology narrowly conceived.

The fourth, and last, criticism to respond to is that voiced by theologians who ground their theology in the experience of oppressed people. Seeing the task of theology as working for the liberation of such groups as the poor of Latin America and other Third World countries, blacks in the United States, and women in America and Europe, these “liberation theologians” sometimes claim that academic theology is irrelevant to the real work of God’s people. That work is the liberation of all oppressed people. Theology, they say, must serve the real life of the church, and any theology (academic theology by implication) that does not do this ought to be disregarded or thrown out.

I am in sympathy with much that this important recent work has taught us, and I hope I have learned that the church and theology can never retreat from the issues that liberation theology has raised for us. But the issue here is, “What is the role of theology?” The liberation theologians are right that theology exists to serve the church. That is never in doubt, although it is also true that it exists to serve all humanity as well. The only issue is *how* theology can best serve the church or the work of God’s people in the world.

As I said in responding to the previous point, theology can never sufficiently perform its task by assuming without question the truth of a religion’s claim and then merely trying to render the expressions of a former age in meaningful language for the present. Many theologians often seem not to have considered this point. Moreover,

I suggest that theology will never fulfill its promise by simply identifying particular demands for political, economic, or social liberation with the liberation that the Bible proclaims as intrinsic to salvation. I hasten to add that I am convinced that the freedom proclaimed in scripture as arising from faith in God does, in fact, translate into political, economic, and social liberation. But the point is that theology cannot perform its service to religion either by uncritically accepting that religion's claims or by equating present-day concerns with the fundamental witness of faith. Either of these moves inevitably turns theology into the servant of special-interest groups.

My conviction, then, is that if theology did not undertake the difficult task of examining, evaluating, systematizing, and articulating the beliefs of a religion, that religion would never survive from one generation to another; it would dissipate into hazy emotional attachments. The systematic and critical work of theology forms, as Whitehead says, "the ark within which the Church floats safely down the flood-tide of history." But as Whitehead also warns, "the Church will perish unless it opens its windows and lets out the dove to search for an olive branch."¹⁸ That olive branch, which signals sure footing, is the critical, dispassionate, objective quest for truth.