

“I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You.” (Job 42:5)

‡ Lecture I: Theological Preliminaries ‡

Theology is one of the most rewarding, fulfilling, and fascinating subjects anyone can hope to study. The word “theology” is easily broken down into two Greek words: *Theos* (God) and *logos* (word). Thus “theology” is a discourse about God, in much the same way as “biology” is a discourse about life (Greek: *bios*).

Theology was understood as a systematic analysis of the nature, purpose, and activity of God. At its heart lay the belief that it was an attempt, however inadequate, to speak about a Divine Being, distinct from humans. Although “theology” was initially understood to mean “the doctrine of God,” the term developed a subtly new meaning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries embracing the totality of Christian doctrine, not merely the doctrine of God.

Recently, the term theology, which was once thought of as a discourse about God, has become an analysis of various religious beliefs even if these beliefs make reference to no god at all!

‡ The Nature of Theological Language:

Theology is “talk about God.” But how can God ever be described or discussed using human language? If human words are incapable of describing the distinctive aroma of coffee or the sweetness of honey, how can they cope with describing God?

‡ Analogy ‡

The most basic idea that underlies the theological reply to such questions is usually referred to as “the principle of analogy.” The fact that God created the world points to a fundamental “analogy of being” between God and the world. There is a continuity between God and the world on account of the expression of the being of God in the being of the world. For this reason, it is legitimate to use entities within the created order as analogies for God. In doing this, theology does not reduce God to the level of a created object or being; it merely affirms that there is a likeness or correspondence between God and that being, which allows the latter to act as a signpost to God. A created entity can be *like* God, without being *identical to* God.

Consider for example the statement “God is our Father.” This should be understood to mean that God is *like* a human father. In other words, God is analogous to a father. In some ways God is like a human father, and in others not. There are genuine points of similarity:

- God cares for us, as human fathers care for their children (**Mt 7:9-11**)
- God is the ultimate source of our existence, just as our fathers brought us into being.
- God exercises authority over us, as do human fathers (**Heb 12:9**)

Equally, there are genuine points of dissimilarity:

- God is not a human being.
- The necessity of a human mother does not point to the need for a divine mother.
- God is not to be thought of as male.

The point is that Divine Self-revelation makes use of images and ideas, which tie in with our world of everyday existence yet which do not reduce God to that everyday world. They are analogies. Like all analogies they break down at points. However, they are still extremely useful and vivid ways of thinking about God, which allows us to use the vocabulary and images of our own world to describe something that ultimately lies beyond it.

Q: Now how do we know when analogies breakdown? At what point they cannot be pressed further?

A: Holy Scripture does not give us one single analogy for God, but uses a range of analogies. Each of these analogies or models illuminates certain aspects of our understanding of God. However, these analogies also interact with each other. They modify each other. They help us understand the limits of other analogies. No analogy or parable is exhaustive in itself; taken together, however, the range of analogies and parables builds up to give a comprehensive and consistent understanding of God.

→ Take for instance the analogies of King, Father, and Shepherd. Each of these three analogies conveys the idea of authority, suggesting that this is of fundamental importance to our understanding of God. Kings, however, often behave in arbitrary way and not always in the best interest of their subjects. The analogy of God as a King might thus be misunderstood to suggest that God is some sort of tyrant. However, the tender compassion of a father toward his children commended by Holy Scripture (**Ps 103:13-18**), and the total dedication of a good shepherd to the welfare of his flock (**Jn 10:11**) show that this is not the intended meaning. Authority is to be exercised tenderly and wisely.

✧ Metaphor ✧

The precise nature of the differences between analogies and metaphors remains disputed. Perhaps a working solution to the problem could be stated as follows: Analogies seem to be *appropriate*, where metaphors involve a sense of surprise or initial incredulity. For example, consider the two statements that follow:

- God is wise.
- God is like a thief (**Rev 3:3; 16:15**)

In the first case, it is being affirmed that there is an analogical connection between the nature of God and the human notion of “wisdom.” Here human wisdom serves as an analogy of Divine wisdom. The comparison does not cause us any surprise. In the second case, the comparison can cause a slight degree of consternation. It does not seem to be appropriate to compare God to a thief. Therefore, a metaphor mingles similarity and dissimilarity, stressing that there are both parallels and divergences between the two objects being compared.

✧ The Sources of Theology:

Christian theology, like most disciplines, draws upon a number of sources. Broadly speaking, four main sources have been acknowledged:

1. Holy Tradition. (*Discussed in first section of these lectures*)
2. Holy Scripture. (*Discussed in second section of these lectures*)
3. Reason.
4. Experience.

✧ Reason ✧

Since human beings are rational, it is to be expected that reason should have a major role to play in theology. We do not believe that Christianity is limited to what could be ascertained by reason for faith goes beyond reason, having access to truths of revelation, which reason could not hope to discover unaided. Therefore, faith does not contradict reason but compliments and enriches it. Reason has the role of building upon what is known by revelation, exploring what its implications might be. In this sense, theology is a rational discipline, using rational methods to build upon what is known by revelation.

Christian theology is like a cathedral which rests upon the bedrock of human reason, but whose superstructure rises beyond the realms accessible to pure reason. It rests upon rational foundations; but the building erected on that foundation goes far beyond what reason alone could uncover.

✠ Experience ✠

One can easily talk about the existence of God for example by referring to Holy Scripture, Tradition, and reason (**Rom 1:20**) but will eventually say with Job The Righteous, “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (**Job 42:3**). Nevertheless, once the speaker about God (theologian) experiences the existence of God in his life, his words will have a different dimension and will say to God, “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear [Tradition] but now my eye sees You [experience]” (**Job 42:5**).

The Fathers of the Church who spoke to us about God and delivered to us the Orthodox Faith had a strong personal relation with Him and their theology (words about God) were supported by a personal experience, this is why they were able to stand firmly against any false teaching.

✠ Why Speak about God?

We speak about God because we love Him and speaking about Him gives joy to our souls (Saturday Psali). We also love our Christian Orthodox Faith and therefore defend it and explain it to the people. We love the people around us and want to convey to them the sound doctrine about God so that they can eventually experience Him in their lives and enjoy Him as well. Finally, we hate the false teachings and heresies (**Rev 2:6,15**) and therefore speak the correct words about God and all Christian doctrines to expose the deception of the devil who is the author of all heresies.

✠ Orthodoxy & Heresy:

The term “Orthodoxy” literally means “correct opinion” (Gr. *orthos*, correct + *doxa*, opinion) while “heresy” (Gr. *hairesis*, selection, sect) is defined as, “a religious belief opposed to the orthodox doctrines of a church” (Webster’s New World Dictionary)

Since “theology” is “speaking about God” it should be noted that God does not tolerate false theology (heresy). God said to Job’s friend, “My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, **for you have not spoken of Me what is right**” (**Job 42:7**). St. Paul affirms that those who believe heresies **will not be saved**, “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, **heresies**, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that **those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.**” (**Gal 6:19-21**)

✠ The Architecture of Christian Theology:

- Biblical Studies.
- Systematic Theology.
- Historical Theology.
- Pastoral Theology.
- Philosophical Theology.
- Liturgical Theology.
- Dogmatic Theology.

*This lecture is adapted from “*Christian Theology: An Introduction*” by Alister E. McGrath.