

Chapter 1

Foundations I: Experience, Culture and World Religions

Given that the chief aim of this work is to adumbrate a systematic theological method for the twenty-first century, it is proper first to ask the question, in what does Christian theology consist?

In broad terms, theology designates in its Greek verbal form a presentation or exposition of God's nature.¹ Christian theology designates the study of the Christian God, its substance being the biblical teaching on God's purposes for humanity and the world. There are different dimensions to the study of Christian theology, organised as it may be around an ecclesiastical heritage, its format or the nature of its approach, its didactic conceptualisation of the Bible, core emphasis or target readership.

Systematic theology refers to the establishment of the internal and external coherence of the study of what the Bible affirms about God's nature and purposes for humanity and the world. There are a number of elements in the systematic study of theology, which can be differentiated according to whether they have to do with the presupposition or coherence of Christian theology.

In relation to the presupposition of Christian theology which precedes all other norms and sources of theology, this refers to the principle of human experience. Centred on the universal law of human nature revolving around sensitive empathy, the norm of human experience channels theological discussion in a manner that resonates with what the human

1. Augustine, *Civ.*, VIII.1.

conscience judges to be good, true, fair and just, and is intensely interested in issues of proper human concern. It comprehends elements as disparate as the relationship between Christian theology and culture – concerned that the meaning of Scripture is interpreted in a mode proper to a culture – and the intersection between Christian theology and non-Christian world religions, keen to relativise and chasten absolutist modes of theology.

Concerning the coherence of theology, there is: Christian Scripture, the Bible, as the substantive source of theology; the Christian tradition, that is, authoritative interpretation by theologians and councils of the theological meaning of Scripture, serving as a guide to the work of theology; and the use of human reason, which has at least two different meanings.

First, reason in the context of theology refers to the human ability to analyse and theorise using the content of Scripture in a logically consistent manner. Second, reason designates the ability to arrive at sensible and moderate conclusions, rather than extremist or fanatical ones, with the aid of advancements in the understanding of the sciences and humanities as a locus for the refinement, reconfiguration and validation of theology vis-à-vis these disciplines.²

The subject of theology is God's acts in the world to create, restore and perfect humanity and, through humanity, the rest of creation, comprehending various dimensions of these interrelationships and aspects of the parties involved.³

Experience

An essential medium through which human existence is lived, the experience of the individual person and communities encompasses emotions, desires or natural inclinations, the will or volition, goals or objectives to which commitment is attached, the means, processes, methods or instruments used to reach those goals or objectives, and the actual actions taken as a result of rational calculation or visceral instinct. A thoughtful consideration of this pattern of feeling, desiring, willing, using and acting – in short, human disposing – is central to the activity of the theological enterprise.

It may be surprising to some and felt questionable that a Christian theological project should begin on an experiential footing, particularly

2. Cf. Augustine's allusion to temperance as a Christian virtue to be emulated, *Civ.*, XI.22.

3. *NDT*, s.v. 'Theology' (D.F. Wright, pp. 680-81).

among those who believe that any Christian theology deserving of its name can only resort as a first and final court of appeal to the Christian Scriptures. Yet, to begin from human experience is simply to acknowledge the debt each theologian already owes, notably, to the cultural matrix from which they hail. Ignoring this setting or acting as though it does not really exist, as if, for instance, the Bible and the Bible alone determines the shape of the Christian theology in which a specific group engages, is to be, at worst, mendacious with oneself or, at best, unselfconscious. Even the very theologians who assert some form of fundamental independence of their biblical interpretation from sources external to the Scriptures operate out of some set of culturally conditioned presuppositions.⁴

Experience as a source, norm, measure or standard of Christian theology is conscious of the factual principle that each individual human person is a unique repository of experiences accumulated through their life-history. It is predicated on the observation and inference that the feelings, desires, decisions, methods and actions of a person are generally stable over a sustained period and can to a significant extent be understood in a coherent and self-consistent fashion.

This is not to suggest that people are automata or complete products of their circumstances of life, since such a theory allows for breaches in consistency and regularity, because a person may be assessed to have acted out of his own character, in the case of a shaping towards virtue, and to have overcome his personal inhibitions, in that of a shaping towards a defect of personality, character, or morality.

In spite of their often predictive or ostensibly determinative life-histories, humans remain very much in control of their actions and personal destinies. Self-transcendence is part and parcel of being human, a capacity to struggle against the negative instincts one may have inherited or come to develop through unfortunate instances of trauma or abuse, to emerge victorious in some way over one's proclivities and propensities.

Such self-transcendence is par for the course in relation to any moral question, and any purported moulding of an individual towards some form of immorality can never be brooked as an excuse for acting against the conscience. Because humanity has been created in the undestroyed divine image which, in an Irenaean framework, incorporates a free will which has been given to pursue moral good, this logic of self-transcendence does not hold for the opposite case of a shaping away from virtue. Moral self-transcendence is normative, and the question could

4. For more on this, see *infra*.

well be asked why a person does not act in accordance with conscience for all the positive and formative psychological-emotional impartation they might have received as a child.⁵

With respect, however, to amoral matters, such as core aspects of human identity including culture and religious profession, a settled pattern of human disposition may be regarded as normative. There is no cause for a church or theological school to attempt to alter such settled cultural or religious patterns. As a matter of fact, to do so would amount to nothing less than a deliberate effort to bring about an erasure of cultural or religious identity.

No Christian theology should permit itself, secretly as much as openly, to espouse an ideal of eradicating these personal and communal identity markers. By all means, the Church should not forbid enquiries into the substance of the Christian faith and the ways of the Christian community on the part of non-Christians keen to learn more about the faith out of their own free will. It is rather a different matter to mount a systematic campaign to reach a certain goal of a number of converts to the Christian faith, or for individual adherents to be aggressive in their approach to sharing an evangelistic message.

An important principle which the norm of experience establishes and validates is that of the fairness and integrity of an approach to human interactions. In all circumstances, the Christian believer ought always to ask himself, first, in what the unique repository of experiences accumulated through the life-history of the other person in question consists, second, how his actions towards this person might be perceived by the latter in the context of this unique repository of experiences accumulated through his life-history, and, third, whether this psychological-emotional effect on the person, if conceived and experienced as unpleasant or even offensive, is that which the Christian wishes to be visited on himself.⁶

Having established, to the greatest possible extent, the nature of the counterpart's unique repository of experiences and the likely emotional effect of an action on the counterpart on the basis of the understanding of his life experiences, if the Christian should conclude that that same

5. St Irenaeus also includes human reason, speech and authority over the animal realm within the conception of the image of God. A.B. Collver III, "Who Is Man?: Image and Likeness in Irenaeus," *CSJ* 22, no. 1 (Epiphany 1999), p. 32.

6. This, of course, as one would quickly appreciate, is an application of the golden rule.

effect of his action is not something he would wish to experience through a person with whom he may deal or interact, he should forbear that action. This experiential paradigm is eminently applicable in the case of an interaction with a member of a marginalised group or other cases of proper human concern, including the need to preserve a sustainable state of the earth for posterity.

Yet another principle that experience as a norm of Christian theology validates and establishes concerns the theological conception of the divine-human relationship. It should be clear that, to the measure that we wish to espouse the belief in God as love, God should not be excepted from an expectation of others that arises from an experiential paradigm. In other words, any theological conception of God's character should not neglect the possibility and theological necessity that God considers the emotional effect on human persons of God's actions, and behaves with due sensitivity towards human persons and proper regard for their dignity.

This is not tantamount to a humanisation of God, which *eo ipso* is an inappropriate theological procedure, given that, especially in a Western theological tradition, as well as an Eastern one, the line between the divine and the human has to be maintained at all times. On the contrary, such an experiential-oriented theological procedure is enjoined by the moral correspondence between God and humankind, made as the latter is in the divine image, not just in terms of human rationality and intellect, as Augustine of Hippo thinks, but in emotionality as well.⁷ To require of God to be sensitive and empathetic towards human persons in their distinct stations and situations is not an unauthorised predication of God. In and of itself, emotional vulnerability, the capacity for a person to be impacted psychologically by the actions of another person, whether it be via speech, conduct or a confession of inner thought, is no defect.

A person is not called to erect a psychological barrier, shield or armour by which to protect himself against possible emotional hurt. Granted there will be situations where it may be necessary to be on one's guard against a deceptive, manipulative and callous person, yet, by and large, the human person is not consigned to a lifetime of relational self-isolation. Similarly, God is sensitively empathetic, within the divine community that is the Trinity, towards human beings both individually and collectively, and summons each human individual and community to practise the same attitude towards God and other individuals and communities respectively.

7. Augustine, *Civ.*, XII.23, XIII.24.

As against the viewpoint that God exploits human beings as a means by which to magnify God's own glory predominantly through their personal humiliation, extreme and unrelenting anguish, and even destruction, an experiential doctrine of the conception of God in relation to human persons and communities, hand in glove with a moral definition of the divine image in humankind, entails a conception of God as sensitively empathetic.

An engagement with the emotional repercussions of an action arises from reflection upon the meaning of the golden rule for the present time, this rule being, as Jesus elaborated it, for a person to do to others that which he or she would like for others to do to him or her. An approach which takes account of individual affectivity constitutes for Kant a universal law of human nature, in a maxim which may be expressed as follows, 'I will to demonstrate sensitive empathy toward others in a situation of a personal struggle so as to be dignified, valued, appreciated, understood, and treated as a human being myself in my own struggles'; this can, first of all, be expressed as a universal law in which every person pursues the same course.⁸

How conceivable is this as a universal law? It is a viable rule of thumb. To what extent will the individual in question and all other individuals be able to commit themselves to this line of action? Is it possible that some individuals might simply not be interested in exploring this avenue of activity? The idea of a personal struggle is sufficiently broad that people in general would be able to resonate with the concern expressed in the maxim. However, just because most people have personal struggles, does it follow then that they are to show sensitive empathy towards others who might be facing struggles of a similar nature if they expect to be treated in the same empathetic way? Yes, for the principle of reciprocity is operative in human relationships. Why should a person set themselves apart from other people as worthy of a treatment which they are not willing to extend to others? Sensitive empathy is clearly a legitimate concern for any person in any community who is keen on promoting his own happiness, given that it is a fundamental human expectation to be accorded understanding and treated with sensitivity *in extremis*.

As a matter of fact, personal abuse, with its long-standing psychological effects, is precipitated by a negligence in some way of the universal principle of sensitive empathy. In childhood abuse, typically an older person acts riskily towards the individual in question without sufficient

8. R. Johnson and A. Cureton, 'Kant's Moral Philosophy', *SEP* (Spring 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/kant-moral/>.

and fair consideration of the impact of that action on the child's wellbeing. Having thus had its own personal space and dignity violated, the child experiences a warping and perversion of its very humanity and a corruption of its human disposition.

In a bid to cope with such a harrowing experience and prevent future occurrences of the same, the now tortured affectivity bends around the soul of the individual, in one instance forming an aggressive-protective mechanism by which the person mounts a continual protest against the injustice already suffered by reacting excessively or aggressively against provocative or reminiscent events or persons. This is no more than an attempt to find emotional release and achieve a sort of twisted reciprocity in a new world order in which gross injustice is subconsciously judged to be the norm.

In this context, anger legitimately felt towards a victimiser is projected upon any other thing, person, or feeling linked in some way with the experience. Incessant reprisal is directly or indirectly perpetrated against others.⁹ Consequently, an individual might be especially heightened to the experience of injustice, personally undergone or second-hand, because of a remembered feeling of having been unfairly treated or abused as a child, or having witnessed such maltreatment.

In addition, the individual may feel that he as well as those he hurts both deserve the abusive treatment they experience. In this regard, studies have borne out a pattern through which adults, particularly women, exposed to childhood abuse or neglect, whether as direct objects of aggression or domestic onlookers, are postulated as being more likely to experience violent behaviour than their well-treated counterparts due quite possibly to the uncritically accepted belief that violence is an acceptable solution to conflict.¹⁰ Furthermore, adverse childhood experiences have been demonstrated to be 'robustly' correlated with aggressive conduct in subsequent years.¹¹ Another possible outcome of

9. A. Cuncic, 'What Does It Mean to Be "Triggered": Types of Triggering Events and Coping Strategies', *Verywell Mind*, Dotdash Meredith, updated 10 March 2022, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-does-it-mean-to-be-triggered-4175432>.

10. Child Family Community Australia, 'Effects of Child Abuse and Neglect for Adult Survivors', The Australian Institute of Family Studies, January 2014, <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/policy-and-practice-papers/effects-child-abuse-and-neglect-adult-survivors>.

11. J.W. Madole, S.L. Johnson and C.S. Carver, 'A Model of Aggressive Behavior: Early Adversity, Impulsivity, and Response Inhibition', *Journal*

trauma involves a person being lastingly petrified with fear and incapable of trust.

While the wounded emotionality eventually becomes twisted in its understanding of what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, it begins with an outrage, which though gradually repressed is never really fully absent, and returns in full force when recovery transpires. The emotionality is an extremely delicate and sensitive faculty, reeling greatly from any perceived or experienced injustice, especially that transpiring during the formative years of human existence. It is imperative for the individual to undergo a process of psychological healing and restoration in which, first, on an intellectual and, finally, emotional level, the person begins to appreciate the immoral nature of the traumatising and abusive treatment he has experienced at the hands of others, so as eventually to take a stand against such treatment of himself and others.

Before this affective clarity arrives, the person depends for his continued peaceful existence on a voice of conscience and reason ceaselessly and restlessly attempting to sound through the thick cacophony of a dark and disturbed affectivity. Such people are never to yield to their sinister impulses, however compulsively they may seem to demand an immediate or imminent release and actualisation. This is because in any world or world order, the harm of another person is never acceptable. Understanding and empathy may by all means be shown towards the suffering a person has experienced, but under no circumstances should a person's misery mitigate the gravity of any action which harms another individual.

With this doctrine of sensitive empathy as a defining characteristic of God's nature, we find ourselves in a position to closely examine, successively, the relationship between Christian theology and culture, and that between Christian theology and non-Christian world religions, including atheism-humanism.

Culture

What is the relationship between Christian theology and culture?¹² Some Christians are of the view that the Christian faith is completely determined by the content of the Christian Scriptures, which have their

of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma 29, no. 5 (2020), pp. 594-610, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2019.1591561>.

12. For the purposes of this work, culture is defined as the beliefs, mores and social conduct associated with a distinct grouping of individuals

origin in God, and Christian religious texts alone, and that human culture has little if any contribution towards the substance of the content of the Christian faith. Such a transcultural conception of the nature of the biblical canon pervades systems of thought, including Helmut Richard Niebuhr's analysis of the different approaches of the Christian faith to a culture at large.

Niebuhr speaks of a Christian message that is set against a cultural framework of ideas, beliefs and practices, that affirms this cultural framework, draws from this cultural framework, exists in a state of uneasiness in relation to this cultural framework, or is capable of renovating this cultural framework.¹³ The impression hereby given is that Christian theology is formally distinct from culture, with which it may form some kind of a more or less salutary relationship.

A transcultural understanding of the Christian message has engendered an imperialist approach to missional engagement, in which Christianity, as it has been apprehended in the Western and Middle Eastern world, is simply propagated to and imposed upon a foreign cultural group, in intact form, all in the widespread belief that Western theologies represent a restrictively correct conception of the Christian faith, being worked out rigorously from Scripture alone or Scripture and the Christian tradition – or so it is thought.¹⁴

The truth of the matter, however, is that there is no escaping the effects of culture in the theological enterprise. Culture operates already at the most primary and primal level, that of scriptural interpretation. Even before we become aware of it, our most deeply held convictions about the nature of reality shape the theological conclusions we reach about what the Bible teaches about God's purposes for humanity and the world.

Not even the great thinkers of the Christian faith, who attempted to articulate a correct theology free from non-biblical influences, were spared the impact of pre-existing presuppositions of a human community. Therefore, theologians such as Martin Luther, John Calvin and Karl Barth were at pains to distinguish their brand of theological teaching and argumentation from that of other theologians, whom they

brought together on the basis of shared social, moral or philosophical values and ethnic self- and group-identity and belonging. Cf. Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 77.

13. T. Wax, "Christ and Culture": An Overview of a Christian Classic', TGC, 25 February 2015, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/christ-and-culture-an-overview-of-a-christian-classic>.

14. W.A. Dyrness and V.-M. Kärkkäinen, Introduction to *GDT*, pp. vii-x.