

Introduction:

Experience, Culture and Religion in Systematic Theology

This book and its distinctive methodology arise from an intensely personal concern. During the last decade of his life, I recall a question my father posed me, 'If we need to accept Jesus in order to go to heaven, where is my father now?' When I heard the question, my heart broke, because I knew how dear my grandfather was to my father, as dear as my own father was to me. I couldn't bring myself to utter that, based on my convictions then, my grandfather was probably somewhere in hell because he failed to become a Christian during his lifetime.¹

-
1. Writers such as John Piper and R.C. Sproul hold the view that all who have not heard and received the gospel of Jesus Christ, whatever the circumstances for not hearing or receiving it, are righteously condemned to hell because it is only through personal faith in Christ that anyone can be saved and even those who have not had occasion to receive or reject Christ are held to the condition of belief in God, since sufficient witness to the existence of the God proclaimed in the Bible has been given in nature as a portrait of God's glory. Other thinkers, among them, Gavin D'Costa, consider that the lack of explicit biblical statement concerning those who were not aware of the gospel through no fault of their own does not preclude the possibility that a merciful God, who seeks to save all who are lost, might extend a personal invitation through some special means, post mortem, to such individuals to receive salvation. R. Chia, 'Question 11: What about Those Who Have Never Heard about Jesus? Are They Going to Hell?', in R. Chen (ed.), *Honest Questions; Honest Answers: 20 Tough Questions on Issues of Life & Eternity* (Singapore: St Andrew's

Since then, I have found myself wondering about the extent to which it is helpful to say that God discriminates on the basis of religion. Is God inactive in non-Christian parts of society and the world? The question of conversion seems to involve much logical difficulty. If a person has had no real opportunity to accept Christianity, will God judge the person for not having become a believer? If a person refuses to become Christian due to misunderstanding, will God punish him by consigning him to hell? If a person does not wish to embrace the Christian faith because he is already committed to a religion or philosophy of his own choosing or belonging, is this sufficient ground for divine judgement?

The idea that God will judge anyone who fails to become a Christian appears to fly in the face of the nature of religious conversion. The decision to become a Christian believer is a deeply personal one often coupled with communal implications. Furthermore, as with any other personal relationship, conversion entails voluntarily embracing a mutually respectful and loving orientation towards another person; in the case of Christianity, a divine entity, in fact, three, each with personal qualities. If so, any suggestion that this God, who desires a relationship of affection with human persons, is willing to punish any individual who fails to enter into such a bond with God rings very odd indeed. Perhaps a better alternative to such a religious philosophy exists in a Christian theology which seeks to be faithful to all that the Christian Scriptures record of God's nature and purposes for humanity and the world. My firm belief is that the Bible proposes an inclusive trinitarian monotheism that has

Cathedral, 2011), pp. 52-55; J.J. Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity*, Comparative Theology: Thinking Across Traditions (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), pp. 51-55. The idea here seems to be that each person has an implicit and insuperable awareness of God's existence through the majestic orderliness of creation, and yet many choose, for no reason other than a sinful nature, not to nurture that knowledge but instead reject that knowledge and live as though there were no God. However, this is neither a realistic nor historically engaged interpretation of such a passage as Romans 1:19-20, in that few would reject God without sufficient reason and all individuals believe in some ultimate principle; and, insofar as this scripture were resorted to, the writer's meaning is not that some people reject an inherent knowledge of God out of sheer wilfulness, but rather that, in face of the patent inaccuracies and dishonourable nature of extant conceptions of the divine as immoral and indecent deities (see Augustine, *Civ.*, I-X), people failed to challenge those ideas in order to attain to a more palatable and acceptable understanding of God.

by and large not been unearthed until the present time and that is not only capable of promoting a willingness to peacefully coexist with the myriad world cultures and religious traditions, but ready and delighted to enter into dialogue with and learn from them, and even integrate all that is good and valuable from them as the sources of greater theological specificity they have always been.²

Accordingly, this book formulates a modern, culturally, religiously and scientifically integrative and religiously pluriform Christian systematic theological method grounded in the Christian Scriptures, Christian tradition and reason, on the foundation of a human experiential context involving psychology, cultural diversity and religious pluralism.

This is a theological exercise which is, in its nature and orientation, culturally, religiously and scientifically integrative in recognising the inspirational role of culture and religion, and the benefits of empirical studies. It is also religiously pluriform, in viewing all religions as presenting distinctive hierarchies of emphasis as well as content which, though differing between religious traditions, is unified via a common pivoting on some sense of a universal moral responsibility and capable of being metaphorically harmonised within each religious tradition.³ Not a complete work of systematic theology, this book functions instead as a prolegomenon to a more developed, integrated and pluriform Christian systematic theology.

2. As a case in point, in a concession made in light of the undeniable fact of religious pluralism in the world, the *Nostra Aetate* of the Roman Catholic Church, a declaration on the relationship between the Church and other religious faiths by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), pronounces of non-Christian faiths that, while they might be capable of diffusing a single beam of a universal light of truth, Christ remains the whole truth, the consummation of religious existence. Such a declaration implicitly validates an ecclesial mission to turn, as much as possible, non-Christians to the Christian persuasion. *Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, The Holy See, 28 October 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

3. This is not to be conflated with a pluralist view which may preclude the possibility of human knowledge of the divine. Consider, for instance, the pluralist theology of religions developed by John Hick. See Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, p. 246; S.M. Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 129-30.

In the following sections, I shall discuss the essence of each chapter of this book.

Foundations: Experience, Culture and World Religions

Traditionally, the Christian Scriptures form a primary and fundamental basis for a systematic Christian theology. In placing a discussion of the experiential, cultural and religious underpinnings of a systematic theology prior to that of the Scriptures, this book makes no attempt to contest that viewpoint. Rather, it seeks only to draw attention to the oft-neglected role of the human experience and cultural and religious worldviews or frameworks in the theological interpretation of the Christian Scriptures, all too frequently regarded as they are, in some circles, as a timeless collection of dogmatic teachings and ethical injunctions.

Before embarking on that discussion, this chapter considers the possibility of reformulating the biblical teaching of monotheism and salvation through Christ in non-religiously exclusive terms as a historically and communally conditioned presentation of divine truth. This is achieved through a theology of world religions based on a theory of a perichoretic constitution of the Christian Trinity in which the single divine being exists in three personal presentations. In such a theology, the Trinity constitutes the source of religious knowledge for every religious community by disclosing historically and communally adapted truth about God, the gods and ultimate things. This is followed by an appreciative survey of key tenets of various world religious and philosophical traditions and ideologies such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, the Bahá'í Faith and atheism. The theology of God proposed in this monograph is an inclusive monotheistic one based on a trinitarian framework.

Method: Towards a Christian Global Systematic Theology

If the Bible itself provides the raw material from which theology formulates ideas, notions and concepts pertaining to the biblical teaching about God's nature, character, and purposes for humanity and the world, this material does not always settle theological inquiries to the desired level of specificity. Supporting greater lucidity on these issues are ways of thinking about metaphysical questions and ways of perceiving truths of ultimate concern and significance afforded by cultural and religious modalities; that is, the most deeply held philosophical sensibilities of a culture or religious tradition.

Case Study: A Classical Theology of God and Its Philosophical Debt

With the classical and historical Western conception of God as simple, immutable and impassible as a case study, this chapter discusses the probable and potential impact of culture and religion on Christian theology in the form of cultural and religious-guided theological modalities, suggests a method for Christian theologians to engage in such an enterprise, and anticipates systematic theological efforts on the part of non-Christian religions and philosophies.

The cultural and religious-contingent relativity of a systematic Christian theology desacralises the core affirmations of a dominant Western-centric theological system and legitimises the venture to achieve a more reasonable and moderate understanding of Christian theology, one which is concretised and enacted in the doctrinal engagements of the book.

Systematic theological work on the part of the various world religions is given a basis in the manner in which different religions or philosophies tend to emphasise or understate certain facets of divinity or ultimacy, and a purpose in that it is critical for each group to endeavour to arrive at a more holistic formulation through learning from each other and being willing to prune less effective aspects or adopt more profitable dimensions.⁴

Foundations: Faith, Scripture, Tradition and Reason

No work of systematic theology is complete without a discussion of the foci of Christianity, not just as an academic discipline or theological system but as an institution which invites individual persons into a distinctive manner of believing shaped by the testimony of the Christian Scriptures.

Subsequently, the subject of these Scriptures is brought in at this relatively late stage because the actual content of the Scriptures is not primarily in view, but rather the doctrine or conception of the biblical writings espoused in the theological system proposed by this work.

The purport of a following engagement with the Christian tradition is to outline some of the ways in which the theological interpretation of the canonical biblical writings evolved in response to major historical

4. P. Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, *Controversies in Contextual Theology* (London: SCM, 2010), pp. 250-51.

factors throughout the timeline of the Christian Church. Reason as a source of a systematic Christian theology addressed in this chapter is understood in a twofold sense of an intellectual conceptualisation and the moderating effect of a rational human contemplation which reins in possible excesses on the part of the theological enterprise.

Doctrines: The Trinity

The discussion of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity inaugurates a new section in the book characterised by a concern to expound, in an integrative and pluriform manner, a number of pre-eminent dogmatic theories maintained by the universal Christian Church. Each of the chapters on doctrine will discuss a definition of a theologically relevant subject matter, lay out its place in a systematic theology, survey the strengths and weaknesses of existing conceptions, and propose a way forward with a consideration of its advantages and prolepses.

The lineaments of trinitarian doctrine as thrown into stark relief by historical controversies and more recent engagements are adumbrated in this chapter, which is dedicated to an exposition of the unity of the Godhead in keeping with the triple personhood of God in a Christian theological conception. Importantly, a theory of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity known as perichoretic constitution, which draws attention to an ontological interdependence on the part of the divine persons, is delineated and explained as a conceptual cornerstone undergirding a solidly Christian theological endeavour to study and appreciate non-Christian religious and philosophical systems, and integrate insights from them.

Doctrines: Christology

A chapter on the doctrine of Christ places a premium on attempts, both ancient and modern, to elaborate on and explicate the nature of his divinity and humanity in relation to each other. Building on the theory of a perichoretic constitution of the Trinity, the Christological doctrine introduced by this work articulates a way of thinking about the divine humanity of the incarnate Son of God as revolving around the idea of an embodied identity. God being defined as essence without body is capable of assuming a human nature through becoming incarnate without ontological dilution in either direction so long as God's authority, role, character and identity are preserved.

A middle road is taken between natural and supernatural theology in relation to the question of the possibility of knowledge concerning the divine in postulating a pre-earthly existence of human beings in angelic forms characterised by a beholding of the divine splendour which moulds an emotional predisposition to the truth. In this way, human thought is oriented towards the divine, ultimate or truly significant; in aid of this process, intrinsic norms and intuition are provided for determining truth and morality, along with the recognition that there is no higher court of appeal beyond an internal and innate human moral sensibility.

Doctrines: Theodicy

Front and centre at this point in the book is the internally varied Christian understanding of what it means to say that God is powerful and yet to continue to experience and see violations of goodness and betrayals of humanity. The moral dilemma is averted by deploying an angelological doctrine of divine providence which posits God as devoid of all direct power and compulsive force, relying instead on angelic representatives to execute the divine will in a comprehensive scope beginning with the creation and development of the material principles of the universe.

Furthermore, God is reconceived as assuming a dual mode as, on the one hand, a functional framework which can be designated a Divine Nature underlying all aspects of reality, promoting its moral, emotional, intellectual and physical wellbeing, and positing the existence of such things as the Trinity and all sentient souls capable of being embodied in angelic, human and animal frames, and, on the other, the Trinity itself. God's relation to the created order is, therefore, reformulated as a relation of pre-temporal origin to existence, obviating the need to explain divine acts pre-Creation.

Doctrines: Sin and Salvation

Christian theological notions of the inherent imperfection of human nature after the fall of humankind and God's concerted attempts to bring God's human creatures to restoration rise to prominence in this chapter. Because of their noteworthiness, entrenched ideas of divine freedom and human unfreedom, as eminently formulated by St Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther and Reformed and Puritan theologians after him on the basis, *inter alia*, of what may well be the self-discoveries of St Paul, are dealt with at some length.

Such observations enable the articulation of a theology which asserts the fundamental non-validity of biological aetiologies of sin. In moving away from such theories, an alternative is offered which incorporates the findings of psychological therapeutic science in its proposals regarding the ramifications, for the internal mental life and wellbeing of an individual person, of what has become known as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the usefulness, consequently, of accessing professional therapeutic support where available and possible.

Original sin is reconceived in psycho-dynamic terms where the roots of sinful disposition are situated in the presence of a compulsive evil, ushered into the life of an individual through that individual's failure to challenge and reject thought and emotional patterns suggested by parental neglect, abuse by various actors during childhood, or negative influence.

It is necessary to affirm the real benefits of a spiritual, intellectual and emotional act of renunciation of feelings, thoughts, desires and attitudes wrongfully adopted in the course of situations of neglect and abuse, particularly during one's formative years. Reflections on human sinfulness in the biblical testimony suggest a constant need to attend to introspection to mitigate the likely subtle and invisible influence of socio-economic and political factors on the spiritual and psychological wellness of the individual.