

Theological Foundations

Alternate Edition

REVISED AND EXPANDED

J. J. Mueller, SJ, editor



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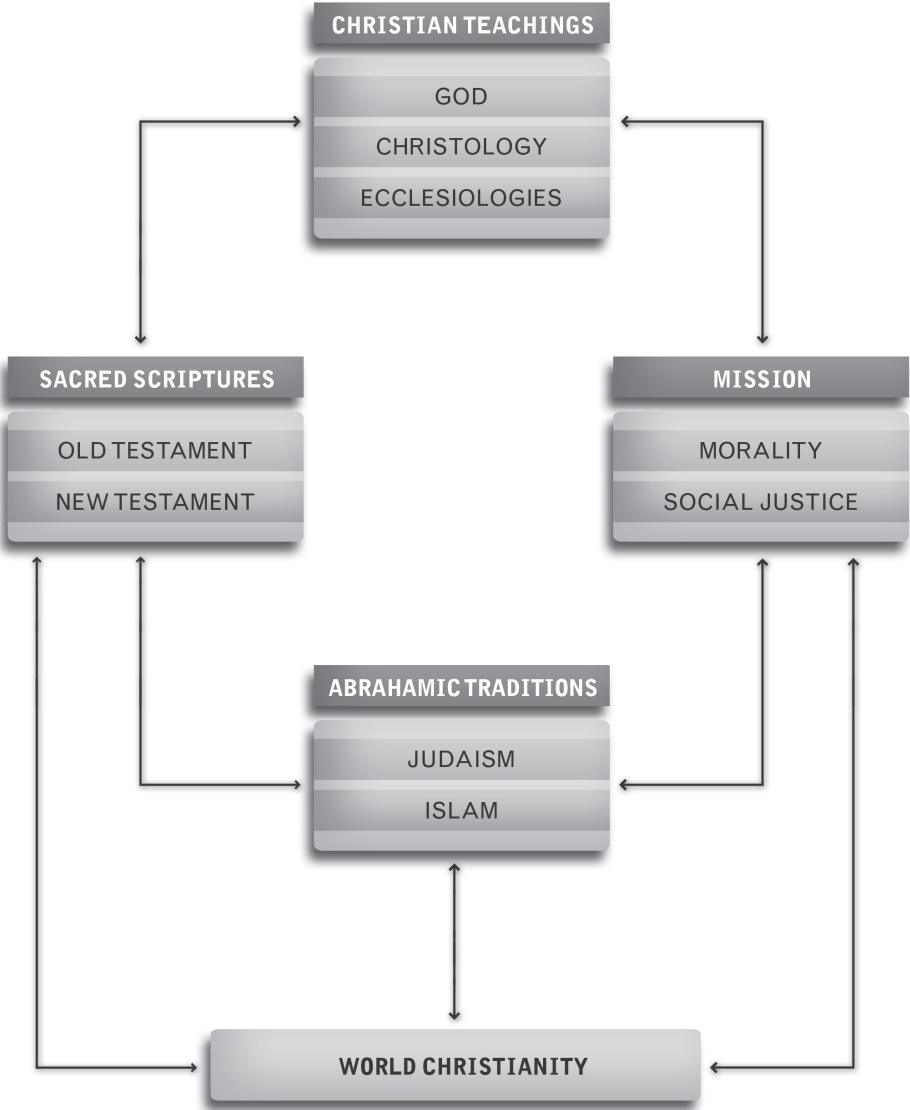
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THE STRUCTURE OF THE CONTENT AND ITS RELATIONSHIP





from the EDITOR

J. J. Mueller, SJ

PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book is about how to successfully study theology. Nothing is foreign to the domain of theology and, because theology pursues the deepest questions of being authentically human in God, why should there be any limit? Absolutely everything is grist for the theological mill. As an academic discipline, theology is not insular, exclusive, or a foreigner in the academy; it is in conversation with the best results, discoveries, and methods of every academic discipline's pursuit of truth. Theology takes up the most important questions for every human being: who we are and who we want to be, the meaning and purpose of life, good and evil, death, suffering, love, family, humanity, society, our human differences, the role of governments and authorities, poverty and wealth, the marginalized and the vulnerable. Theology takes up cosmic questions as well: Why am I here? What is worth living for? Why is there a blue planet spinning in this galaxy among billions of other galaxies? What is it all about?

Theology above all addresses what it is to live in God's mystery, and that even though one cannot adequately answer all these questions there is purpose to being in this universe. The Christian believes what Jesus said and did and in what he asked of his followers: to love God above all things and one's neighbor as oneself.

Christian theology teaches, to put it bluntly: God is love.

AUDIENCE

This book is intended primarily for college students; however, it is also for people of the Catholic faith and other Christian denominations in general; for people of other religious traditions; and for people of no particular tradition but who are seekers. All are welcome to sit at the theological table.

This book provides a solid foundation for this theological discussion. The text is designed both for people with little or no background in theology and those with quite a bit of background but who seek a solid explanation of the subdisciplines involved. *Theological Foundations* is designed as a "first book," to be read all at once or by individual chapters, selected to introduce theological material pertinent to a particular course. In reading each chapter, students will receive an overview of the subdisciplines of theology. They will come to understand terms, concepts, vocabulary, and the development of the tradition through the ages and across cultures. Students will build a basic understanding of the whole of theology through its parts. They will be capable of building upon this base

immediately, as well as be able to relate new material to this foundation.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK AND REVISIONS

This expanded edition of *Theological Foundations* has been revised to better reflect the diversity of the college classroom, whether that classroom is at a Catholic college or university, or one sponsored by another religious denomination, or one without a specific faith orientation. This text also is written with awareness that many schools have a diverse student body that is global and that includes many religious beliefs and practices (e.g. Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, and so on). This revision respects the religious plurality of the college audience, regardless of where it is found. Our hope is to encourage religious dialogue.

The book begins with an important new introduction by Daniel Finucane, entitled “Religion, Spirituality, and the Question of God.” The reader will want to read and respond to this introduction first in order to discover his or her inner questions, to engage the text, and to invest in the pursuit of answers. Christianity professes that God works in and through each person’s humanness, and that belief is a presupposition and important starting point to engage the topics in this book.

Two new chapters have been added to this new edition, giving the book twelve chapters representing subdisciplines of theology. The first of these, chapter 1 by Brian D. Robinette and titled “Discerning the Mystery of God,” places the “God Question” front and center as the ground of theology and necessary for talk about God. Because God is woven through the entire book and, Christian theology would argue, life itself, this chapter is key to all the other ones, and thereby a good way for students and teachers to begin the book. In fact, it might be eminently

worthwhile for students to read this chapter at the beginning of the course and again at the end, noting how one has developed over the course of reading the text.

Also new in this edition is chapter 6, “Protestantism, Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism—Changing Contours of Christianity in the Modern Era.” In this chapter, Michael J. McClymond explores these three historic paths of Christian belief and practice, and how and why they developed. His presentation is a necessary inclusion for a fuller consideration of churches and individuals that call themselves “Christian” and who participate in the Christian tradition. Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal: all stem from the Judeo-Christian scriptures and belong to the Christian tradition.

Note: In further consideration of this broad understanding of the Christian tradition, this revised text has adjusted its approach to capitalizing the word *church*. In this text, *church* is used to mean a number of things: a local congregation or all Christians everywhere (e.g. the “universal church”), or a specific Christian denomination (e.g., “the Roman Catholic Church,” “the Methodist Church”). Only in the last use is *church* capitalized in current accepted practice and in this text. In quotations, however, this book retains the use of capitals in quoted sources. We hope that by observing this convention we can avoid confusion between statements that refer to beliefs or practices common to the universal church and those that apply specifically to Roman Catholicism, for example, but not necessarily Christians of other denominations.

ARRANGEMENT OF EACH CHAPTER

Each chapter is set up the same way. It begins with an introduction from the editor, then the area specialty, or subdiscipline, in theology is pre-

sented, followed by questions about the text and also questions for discussion.

In an enhanced version of this text, the chapters conclude with an integrated research component, “From the Research Librarian.” The research skills provided in this section are progressive and programmatic, so they are best done in order from chapters 1–12. These skills are summarized at the end of the text. In the course of these sections, the student will learn electronic research skills both for libraries and internet. Most importantly, this research component will build understandings regarding what the skills are, why they work, and how one might adjust when using a particular approach does not yield the desired results. The skills learned can be applied across other academic disciplines and will transfer to life situations during and after college as well.

Library Revision

Finding reputable and reliable electronic data is the difference between information and scholarship. Research librarian author Ron Crown has pioneered the integrated library skill component provided with each chapter in this text. A number of schools using this text have remarked on the effectiveness of this approach. With today’s fast-paced reliance on electronic sources (and research at libraries today is primarily electronic, as few libraries use card catalogs), the methods provided in the library component are key to college research. Throughout this revised edition, Crown has further streamlined the research sections for easier use of resources, targeting needed skills to help students become “library literate for a lifetime.”

Now the opponent has a question. *Who are you?* Does Jacob know? He answers correctly, doesn't he? *Jacob*. Not anymore, Jacob. "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (Gen 32:28). Now he is someone new; this new name says who he really is. The people who will come from him will carry this new name, this new identity. They will struggle too, and limp as Jacob did.

Have you ever wrestled in the middle of the night? A decision has to be made. Which job? What direction of study? Am I headed for a breakup in this relationship? What am I supposed to do with my life? The hardest part can sometimes be forming the right question, let alone answering it. The image of wrestling is a powerful metaphor here. "Wrestling" well describes our down-to-earth, "hands-on" questioning. We struggle to *come to grips* with the next steps that face us. We understand what Jacob is dealing with. We wrestle too, to connect, to tie things together.

Jacob is returning to his home after decades away from his father, whom he has deceived, and his brother, who wanted to kill him. Jacob has returned to face his past, to face his decisions, to face the need to move ahead; he must return to be whole. He must sort things out. This one night it all comes to a head. He wrestles with the One who gives him life. He will not let go.

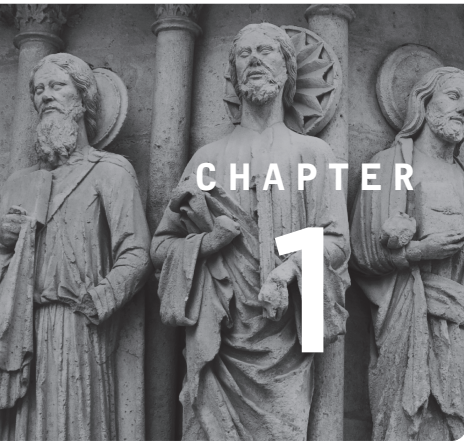
Is Jacob having a religious experience?

Religio has its own roots in another Latin word: *ligare*. From this we get the word "ligament." With his hip put out of joint, Jacob knows the pain of torn tissue, of destroyed connections. Is Jacob having a *religious* experience? He is being torn limb from limb. Is the opponent cruel or ironic? Why does Jacob become someone new? Even with a past torn by distrust and fear—he stole his brother's birthright, and his *blessing*—he comes back. He wrestles. And he will not stop unless he is blessed.

Who can give Jacob the thing that he could not steal? Who can give Jacob a new self? At the crisis point of the story, as light starts to seep into the scene, Jacob/Israel asks his opponent, "Please tell me your name" (Gen 32:29). And he doesn't get an answer. Everything in the story gets named. Jacob calls the place "Penuel," because there he struggled with God, face to face, and lived. He limps past Penuel. He has been to the Jabbok as Jacob and leaves as Israel. But he never gets the name of the one who *blesses* him.

So what is Jacob doing? Theology?

We cannot control the Other. But when we struggle to come to grips with ourselves and the One who meets us in our greatest depths, even in our darkest nights, we become someone new. We are blessed.



Discerning the Mystery of God

Brian D. Robinette

from the EDITOR

Imagine a student wants to attend your university and asks you to explain how it works. You might say, “A president runs the school, teachers provide training and knowledge in different disciplines, and administrators help with course advising, counseling, that sort of thing.”

The newcomer nods; he now understands in a generic way how your school functions, but as yet knows nothing of the people themselves, who will be crucial for one’s education. You might further explain, “I like and know the president and the goals we have set as a school and how we are treated.” Or, “You have to take Dr. Smith, she is so great and has taught me so much. I am going to major in her subject area now.” Or, “You should consider this fraternity and its moderator. They do service for others, are involved in school activities, and have a great spirit. I’ve made good friends there.” Now the potential student knows something about the personal side, the heart and soul of your university. As a result, the student gets more enthused about this school as a good place to grow and to attain life’s goals.

The word *God* is a generic statement of a divine deity, a word used by most anyone who believes in a higher power or transcendence in life. In this sense God can seem abstract, even generic, revealing little more than the above organizational summary describes a school. What matters about God is God’s involvement in life, heart, and spirit, as well as how one can experience this God. The introduction by Daniel Finucane showed many examples of how God may encounter one’s life.

In the Christian tradition, a long history of God’s revelation connects with Judaism, beginning with Abraham (about 1500 BCE), and culminates in a new revelation in Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection for the salvation of all people. Jesus’ revelation discloses a new way of knowing God in personal terms. God as “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” shows God’s love, truthfulness, forgiveness, goodness, graciousness, and compassion for all people. This revelation is “personal” because through it God enters the deepest self and the world surrounding the self. For Christians, Jesus’ words in sacred scripture reflect the obligation such relational love entails: “Love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself.”

Just as Christian tradition believes that God begins and ends humanity itself, so it is appropriate that this text begin with Brian Robinette’s chapter exploring this “God of Love and Love of God,” breaking into and sustaining one’s life and one’s world.



WONDERMENT AND PERPLEXITY: WAYS TO GOD, WAYS TO THEOLOGY

Chances are you are already a theologian—yes, a theologian. Here is why: you are capable of wonderment and perplexity, of surprise and doubt, of astonishment and anxiety, and no less importantly, of reflecting upon and giving expression to the ultimate significance of these things.

The fourth-century Egyptian monk Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399) famously described the theologian as “one who truly prays.” Such a definition might seem a bit quaint today, perhaps too pious. If so, it might be that we have a deficient appreciation of what prayer is. If we imagine prayer as “talking” to God, whether out loud or quietly “in our heads,” we will not be wrong, but our understanding will be limited. Prayer, on Evagrius’s account, is much more attitudinal than verbal, far more an orientation of the heart and mind than recitation of words, however helpful formal prayers may at times be. At its most distilled, prayer is the opening of the whole human person in simple and sustained attention to that which most astonishes and perplexes, namely, the unfathomable mystery of God.

This mystery is not unfathomable because God cannot be thought or talked about. Theology is, after all, “God-talk,” from the Greek *theos* (“God”) and *logia* (“discussion”). More formally, theology is “faith seeking understanding,” as the twelfth-century Anselm of Canterbury put it. As we begin to reflect upon and speak about the unfathomable mystery that we name “God”—even if we dispute that any such God exists!—we are engaged in a more deliberative (i.e., theoretical or interpretive) act of theology. This is obviously very important to the present text, since, whether we are attempting to understand the

sacred scriptures (chapters 2 and 3) the meaning of Jesus Christ (chapter 4), the role of the church, Christian traditions, and the sacraments (chapters 5, 6, and 7), Christian morality and social justice (chapters 8 and 9), the relationship between world religions (chapters 11 and 10), or the mission of the church in our global context (chapter 12), we are using our intellectual capacities to interpret, analyze, and form judgments, however tentatively and open to revision, in ways that exhibit all the rigors of any academic discipline. And like any academic discipline, doing theology means imparting knowledge and a variety of skills to those who would interact with its major sources, figures, and themes. And yet what is most distinctive about the discipline of theology is that, in the midst of this often heady enterprise of “faith seeking understanding,” one can never finally comprehend the reality from which theology gets its name. That is, precisely in one’s effort to achieve a basic mastery over the concepts and methods of theology, God’s infinite mystery remains elusive, which therefore makes it impossible for theology to reach definitive, final conclusions. Rather, theology remains a continuous process of inquiry and discovery. Because the reality of God is inexhaustible, the work of theology is in principle never done. Indeed, the work of theology is always beginning anew.

The realization that we might not finally be able to comprehend the ultimate “object” of theology may be a disconcerting one, at least initially. Perhaps it will be disheartening (and not a little shocking) to learn that a theologian no less learned than Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) could make this statement towards the beginning of his *Summa Theologica*: “Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not.” This is an astounding admission of ignorance, not least because it comes so early in a text whose length and scope is virtually without parallel

in the history of Christian theology. How is it that theology intends to be a legitimate area of human inquiry if its chief object is in fact no “object” at all, i.e., not a discrete “thing” among other things, not a “part” of the world, not even its best or highest part? And why (we might want to ask Thomas) does it take so many words to say as much? Wouldn’t it be better to say, along with the twentieth century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, that “what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence”? If we can only say how God is not, why say anything at all?

Such questions highlight the central paradox of all theological inquiry, namely, that it seeks to say something intelligible, meaningful, and even practical about a reality whose depth and breadth is infinite, and therefore beyond our capacities finally to comprehend. We can even deepen this paradox by saying that all theological inquiry springs from and abides in God’s inexhaustible mystery. Even when at its most lucid and technical, theology is a form of discourse that, if done well, points language beyond itself to the infinite Silence from whom all words spring, and in whom they have their rest.

Wonderment as Way to God

With all this talk about paradox and mystery, theology might begin to seem too remote, too abstract, perhaps too otherworldly to have much grip on ordinary life. Such a concern is understandable, though nothing could be further from the truth. To paraphrase Saint Augustine (d. 430), the chief difficulty here is not that God is so remote; it is that *we* are remote. It is *we* who are so often inattentive to the awe-inspiring mystery that lies just beneath our noses. It is *we* who, as a result of our many distractions, preoccupations with routine and excessive self-consciousness, remain dulled to the inner vitality of things, and thus closed off from the secret wellspring of our

lives. Perhaps there are moments, though, when the scales seem to fall off our eyes so that we can perceive the world in a fresh light, and with a spontaneous and renewed sense of gratitude. A quiet exhilaration may overtake us as we become awakened to the simple *thereness* of things, the fact that there is anything at all rather than nothing. Though we might not often formulate it in quite this way—“Why is there something rather than nothing?”—it is likely we all sense from time to time how wonderfully strange this world is, how awesome it is to be alive, to be sensing, feeling, thinking flesh, to be a part (albeit, a very small part) of a universe whose vastness, age, and complexity strains the imagination. It is no mere wordplay to say that what is most extraordinary is the ordinary. We only have to be sufficiently awake to perceive it.

If we find ourselves astonished by the immensity of the universe we inhabit, no less astonishing are the most simple and delicate of things that fill it. The English poet William Blake famously captured something of the enchantment of the particular in his poem “Auguries of Innocence”:

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

No religion, no philosophy, no culture has a monopoly on this childlike sense of wonderment. It is no one’s to possess; for surely the moment one tries to possess it, the spontaneity of gratitude it inspires vanishes. In fact, we may lose something of its immediacy and freshness as we grow older, as we slip into deeply engrained patterns of activity and thought, as we become absorbed in our projects and self-estimations, or as we suffer experiences in life that make us barricade ourselves for protection from hurt, perhaps to the point of despair. Even so, we might

think of our capacity for wonderment as something constantly to renew and cultivate, even a fundamental spiritual practice to accompany all that we do, think, and say. Not to undertake this practice is to risk premature death, or a kind of living death. Albert Einstein spoke of this very risk when he wrote that “the most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed.” Einstein further spoke of this “mystery” as forming the basis of “true religiosity,” which for him meant a basic reverence for all life.

To be attentive to the extra-ordinary in this way is, I suggested earlier, nothing less than the heart of prayer, even if we might be unaccustomed to naming it as such. To open oneself to the world as though for the very first time is to become a person of wonder. Long before we have uttered a “religious” word, if somehow we have said “yes” to our very existence in gratitude and responsibility, we have already made the first and most primitive gestures towards prayer. Wonderment thus lies at the basis of all theology, even as theology will go on to inquire further about this wonderment, about its source and fullest realization, about its meaning and implications for how we are to live in its midst.

Perplexity as Way to God

If one of the fundamental characteristics of being human is the capacity for wonderment, surely another is the capacity for asking questions—big questions. Of course, we can ask questions of a factual or practical sort to assist in getting on with the business of life. The ability to do so, to be “problem solvers,” makes humans especially clever animals. But these are not the questions I mean. We can grow perplexed by things in a more comprehensive sense, in a way that sets us

on a quest to discover the meaning of life itself. We can ask questions of an *existential* sort, by which I mean those that lead one to explore the possibilities and significance of human existence. “What does it *mean* to be a human person?” we might ask. Given that there *is* something rather than nothing—a truly astonishing fact too easily taken for granted—is there a purpose to this something? Why is it all here, and why are *we* here as its witnesses, as self-aware and self-directing participants? Is there a transcendent origin and goal to this universe of which we are a part, and which might allow us to speak of a shared destiny with all things; or is the expansion of this bewildering universe, along with its ever-emergent properties and myriad forms, without any intrinsic and enduring worth? Is there a direction and aim to life, perhaps even a final fulfillment to its dramatic unfolding; or is the universe simply here in magnificent indifference to the hopes and sufferings of its creatures, leaving us with no more meaning, no more purpose than what we choose to create for ourselves?

The very fact that we can ask questions like these highlights just how peculiar human beings are. Though we obviously share the common lot of finite creatures, insofar as we are subject to the natural laws and evolutionary processes that give it shape, we human beings are unique in our capacity and constant need for asking questions of the most varied and expansive sort, including those about life’s ultimate significance. “Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature,” wrote the seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal, “but he is a thinking reed.” By “thinking,” Pascal does not mean the ability to solve problems. He means the ability and felt urgency for reaching out towards things beyond our ability to presently imagine or grasp, for inquiring about life and death as a whole—in a word, for reaching out towards infinity. We are finite creatures who have a taste for transcendence, a yearning for limitless reality; and it is just the propulsive force

of asking questions, of casting our very existence in the form of open-ended inquiry, that manifests such infinite thirst.

This paradoxical unity of smallness and greatness, of finitude and boundless desire, of being a tiny creature in a vast universe that we nevertheless seek to comprehend and transcend: this paradoxical unity is what makes us human. It is a paradox memorably expressed in the Hebrew Bible:

When I look at your heavens [God], the
work of your fingers,
the moon and stars that you have estab-
lished;
what are human beings that you are mindful
of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than
God,
and crowned them with glory and honor

(Ps 8:3–6)

Compared to the immensity of creation, and, in the psalmist's view, the everlastingness of the creator God, we are as nothing, mere creatures of dust whose days are like grass, as Psalm 103 starkly puts it. And yet our nature as human creatures is to reach out for what surpasses us, to become open to the limitless mystery that forms the milieu of our lives. A theologian might express the matter along these lines: we are made *by* God, and made in a way that exhibits a capacity *for* God. We are creatures who are utterly dependent *upon* God for our very being, yet we bear in our finitude a fundamental openness *toward* the infinite reality of God, in whose “image and likeness” we are made (Gen 1:26).

There are at least three main points we can take away from this preliminary exploration of divine mystery and the theological work of its discernment. The first concerns the *intimate*

relationship between God and humanity in all theological activity. Although it is crucial to stress the fundamental difference between God and creation—a point whose further significance we shall explore momentarily—it is no less crucial to appreciate that inquiring after God is also (and necessarily) inquiring into the meaning of the human condition. If it is true that we are made by and for God, as Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions all affirm, then it is also true that any further discovery into the reality of God entails a deeper discovery of ourselves, since God is the ultimate fulfillment of human desire. The human being is structured, so to speak, in such a way as to be open to the inexhaustibly rich reality of God. This insight can help us appreciate why theology is, as the twentieth-century theologian Karl Rahner characterizes it, a process of “awakening and interpreting the innermost things in [human] existence.” Theology should not be thought of as acquiring information that is alien or extraneous to human life, but a further plunging into the “ultimate depths” of that life.

Second, we should also understand that *when we are asking questions of ultimate significance, even when (and perhaps especially when) we are not sure of the answer, just then we are asking questions about God,* at least indirectly. When we grow perplexed about our lives and our worlds, perplexed about what constitutes the good life, perplexed about whether ultimate truth and justice exist, perplexed about why our world is filled with so much beauty and creativity as well as evil and decay, perplexed about the worth of human life in the face of suffering and death—when we find ourselves moved by such questions, even if sometimes we work to ignore or suppress them, we are, in fact, being moved by theological questions. This is why earlier I wagered that you are a theologian.

Third, one of the best ways to understand *the nature of the theological enterprise,* at least in the more formal terms that animate the pres-

ent text, is to see it as *an activity that makes these questions more explicit and rigorous*. To join in the work of theology is to engage a conversation that has already been taking place, a conversation with a tradition (or traditions) filled with sacred texts, historical events, rituals, legal codes, ethical practices, and peoples who have contributed diversely to discerning the shared mystery of our lives. Though engaging the work of academic theology will entail the acquisition of basic skills and a basic familiarity with major texts and concepts, to participate in such an effort is to take up a simple invitation to help you make what you already do, as a person of wonder and questioning, more reflective and articulate.

DISCERNING THE MYSTERY: THE GOD OF ISRAEL

Perhaps we are now better able to appreciate how wonderment and perplexity are ways to God, and thus points of entry into the diverse tasks of theological inquiry. One reason why this is important to highlight is that it reminds us that as we engage the richly diverse traditions of the Judeo-Christian heritage, we are engaging peoples who have been similarly moved. This is too easily forgotten. With the accumulation of history, texts, and doctrines over many centuries, we might be led to believe that when these traditions speak of God, what “God” refers to remains a fairly settled matter. So when, for example, the Nicene Creed (325 CE) of the Christian faith declares, “We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen,” we might assume that the reality of which this confession speaks is made fully comprehensible to those who confess it. This is hardly the case.

Recall the quote from Thomas Aquinas above: “Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means

for considering how God is, but rather how He is not.” What this statement means to emphasize is that in all our efforts to imagine or speak of God, whether we say God is “one,” a “father,” “almighty,” or a “creator,” we will fundamentally distort that reality if we do not simultaneously insist on the limitations of our imaginations. Every affirmative statement about God (“God is ‘x’”), Thomas asserts, no matter how subtle or sublime, no matter how long revered in our theological traditions, will lead to serious distortions and false confidences if not accompanied by a robust negation (“God is *not* ‘x’, at least not in any way we can finally grasp”). Lest we reduce God to a mere object of comprehension, in which case God would not truly be God, we must learn to un-say all that we say; or better, we must deny that our images and ideas fully coincide with what they signify. The reason for such intellectual humility is not because God is *unintelligible*. Theology is not a brand of anti-intellectualism. Rather, it is because God is *inexhaustibly* intelligible, an infinite and dynamic reality who, while inviting the utmost capacities of our hearts and minds, nevertheless exceeds and saturates those capacities. Like a light whose intensity is perceived as darkness by unadjusted eyes, so is the infinite actuality of divine presence perceived as a kind of absence to finite minds. Thomas puts the matter this way: “Since everything is knowable according as it is actual, God, Who is pure act without any admixture of potentiality, is in Himself supremely knowable. But what is supremely knowable in itself may not be knowable to a particular intellect [such as a human being], because of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect; as, for example, the sun, which is supremely visible, cannot be seen by the bat by reason of its excess of light.”

If Thomas’s manner of expression adopts some technical language with which you may be unfamiliar (“pure act” and “potentiality,” for example), we need not look very far in the Jew-

ish and Christian Scriptures to find the same basic sentiment.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? THE TRANSCENDENCE AND NEARNESS OF YHWH

Consider the example of Moses. In one of the most important and frequently cited passages in the Old Testament (Exod 3), Moses, whose personality as prophetic leader and lawgiver looms large in Israel's history, encounters the sight of a burning bush (a symbol of divine presence) while tending a flock of sheep at Mount Horeb (also known as Mount Sinai) in the Sinai desert. What made the sight so arresting was that the bush was ablaze yet unconsumed. Drawn towards the spectacle out of curiosity, and perhaps some trepidation, Moses hears a voice calling, "Moses, Moses!" "Here I am," the future leader of Israel responds (v. 4). Told to come no further, Moses is instructed to remove his sandals out of reverence for the holy ground he has unexpectedly approached. Filled with a sense of astonishment—the "holiness" of God is described here as inspiring unspeakable awe—Moses covers his face as the voice self-identifies as the God of the Hebrew people. Such divine self-manifestation, of which there are numerous instances in the Old Testament (though none more significant than this), is called a *theophany*, which literally means a "showing" of God (from the Greek *phainein*, "to show").

While this "blinding light" does not grant Moses immediate comprehension, something crucial about God's character is nonetheless communicated in the encounter. What we discover in the narrative's unfolding is that, so far from being a remote and indifferent deity, this God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a compassionate presence who seeks to liberate the Hebrew people from their captivity. In a dramatic exchange between God and Moses, God

first acknowledges the unjust treatment of the Hebrew people by the Egyptians, under whose dominion they were currently serving as slaves. "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings" (v. 7). This link between divine mystery and compassion, or between God's transcendent freedom and loving regard for humanity, makes clear that any affirmation of God as "almighty" in scripture, as with the later Nicene Creed, has nothing to do with the brute force of a capricious cosmic tyrant; it has to do with God's will and ability to redeem human beings from bondage and non-identity, to restore humanity to its original dignity and blessedness.

Evidently perplexed about this God now summoning him to lead the Hebrew people out of Pharaoh's Egypt, Moses inquires further: "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" (v. 13). With a response that only deepens the mystery, yet in a way emphasizing faithful presence, God declares, "I am who I am." And again: "This is what you shall tell the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'" And yet again: "Thus you shall say to the Israelites: The Lord (Yahweh), the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever; and this my title for all generations" (vv. 14–15).

The name "Yahweh" is in fact a form of the verb "to be" in Hebrew, thus the variations "I AM" and "I am who am." While the name Yahweh (written YHWH, and thus also known as the *tetragrammaton*, or "four letters") has given rise to much philosophical and theological speculation throughout history, we can modestly underscore two interrelated aspects for its continuing significance in Jewish and Christian theology.

The first is that the name highlights divine *transcendence*. That God is "I AM" (or "I am who

am”) means, at the very least, that divine reality is not determined by anything other than God. In contrast to creatures whose existence is finite and dependent, divine reality is not dependent on anything but itself. Later in Latin theological tradition this will be described as God’s *aseity*, which means that God exists from God’s own self (from *a*, “of,” and *se*, “self”). God does not depend on the world in order to be God, though the world depends entirely upon God for its very being. Divine aseity is another way of affirming God’s radical otherness. God is wholly other than the world, not something “alongside” or a “part” of the world of finite creatures. To speak of God this way—which is hard to do consistently—requires us to deny that any of our images or concepts, or even the sum of them, manages to grasp the reality of God. Though we may affirm many things about God, and indeed theological speech can at times be a riot of words, we will also need to say that God is *not* this and *not* that; God is not a creature, not something we can add up among the items in the universe, not anything we can fully imagine or comprehend. Divine aseity is therefore closely related to divine *ineffability*, which means that God is “inexpressible.” The transcendent reality of God draws human language to itself while remaining beyond all expression. Like a bush aflame yet unconsumed, the holy mystery of God resists all domesticating thought and speech.

Secondly, the name Yahweh signifies that God is present and active in history. While “I am who am” may suggest something abstract and static, as though divine transcendence implies airy indifference to the world, on the contrary, the Hebrew verb “to be” (which here strongly suggests “being *for*”) signifies God’s faithfulness to Israel, a faithfulness materialized through Yahweh’s deliverance of the Hebrew people from their captivity. Yahweh is the one who calls new things into existence, the one who makes the impossible possible, the one who “brings out” (through the event of “exodus”) those enslaved

and left for dead. If “I am who am” highlights divine transcendence, then this transcendence is also a drawing near in profound intimacy, a compassionate being-with and being-for, a faithful presence working within history for its redemption. Indeed, this is the central point of the narrative as it continues to tell the story of Moses’ return to Egypt and his confrontation with the imperial power of Pharaoh. As the Hebrew people flee their captors in the dead of the night, they pass through the waters of the Red Sea, escape into the Sinai desert, and eventually arrive at the mountain where Moses first encountered Yahweh. Through the further mediation of Moses, Yahweh establishes a covenant (a formal bond of mutual commitment) with the Hebrew people requiring of them a pattern of life uniting right conduct with right worship, as decreed by Yahweh’s commandments (the Law). And so, through the transcendent agency of God the Israelites are freed *from* bondage and non-identity (exodus) and freed *for* new identity and responsibility in relationship to each other and to their God (covenant). From within this bond of relationship the Israelites will embark upon a long journey through the desert and enter the land of Canaan, or the “Holy Land,” where they will begin to settle and prosper as a nation. Exodus, covenant, Law, and land: these are the concrete means by which Israel will discern and inhabit the divine mystery, a mystery whose transcendence and compassionate nearness is expressed by the name “Yahweh.”

CREATION AND THE ONE GOD: FROM NARRATIVE TO CONFESSION

With the story of exodus and covenant we have the most central of Israel’s narratives. This narrative, as well as the lived experience it enshrines,

shapes imagination and discourse in the biblical traditions, and from it the later confessional and doctrinal statements about God in Jewish and Christian theology will emerge. We might call the story of exodus and covenant the “primary narrative” of Israel. That is not to say that the events to which it refers are prior to all other events in Israel’s history—though, to be sure, the events associated with the exodus and covenant are quite early (approximately mid-thirteenth century BCE). Rather, this narrative is primary in the sense that it, and its ongoing retelling through a variety of oral and textual traditions coalescing in the Old Testament, provides a grounding sense of identity and meaning, a narrative focus for understanding who God is and who the people of Israel are in relationship to God. From inside this narrative world, so to speak, the Jewish people will constantly interpret former and subsequent events in their history, its triumphs as well as its disasters. As they grow perplexed about events, as they look gratefully to God during times of prosperity and stability, as they question God’s faithfulness during periods of trial and even catastrophe, as they consider the origin and final purpose of creation as a whole—through such theological stirrings, which by no means are irrelevant to us many centuries later, the people of Israel will look through the lens of their primary narrative to discern patterns of meaning, purpose, and promise. Such a process tells us a great deal about the nature of theological inquiry more generally, namely, that it entails a constant interweaving of present experience, historical remembrance, narration, and critical reflection.

We see this interweaving at work in the biblical understanding of God as creator. Consider the way the creation stories in Genesis take shape. Although it is quite natural to assume that these stories were composed first, in fact they were not composed until fairly deep into Israel’s history. For example, what scholars call the “Priestly narrative” (Gen 1:1–2:4) was not

composed until some six centuries after the time of Moses, during or after the Babylonian Exile (586 –539 BCE). (For more on the history and authorship of Genesis, as well as the rest of the Pentateuch, see chapter 2.) What this means, among other things, is that although the Bible opens with “In the beginning, God made the heavens and the earth,” such words already reflect many centuries of Jewish history and experience. No wonder, then, that we can hear echoes of the exodus and covenant in the creation stories. For example, as God is described as drawing forth dry land from a watery chaos on the third day of creation, we might be reminded of the Israelites being freed from their Egyptian captors and delivered through the waters of the Red Sea into a land of their own. Similarly, the creation account depicts God’s creative act as a word of command (“Let there be . . .”), for not only does this highlight God’s sovereignty over the chaos of the pre-creational void, but it is this very word that called Israel to covenantal relationship and provided commandments for its corporate life. Just as God “speaks forth” the being and identity of the Hebrew people through exodus and covenant, so does God speak all creation into being from non-being. Creation and covenant are, within the Hebrew imagination, internally linked.

This link helps to explain why the creation story in Genesis 1 exhibits important differences amid similarities with parallel creation stories of its time, particularly the *Enuma Elish*, a Babylonian creation story dating from the late third millennium BCE. Like the *Enuma Elish*, the order of creation is said to emerge from the formless void of the waters. Unlike its Babylonian counterpart, however, which characterizes the act of creation as the result of a violent rivalry among the gods (reflecting the polytheism of the broader Mesopotamian culture), the Priestly narrative emphasizes the transcendence and unity of God, as well as the primordial goodness of creation. God is not simply a god among other gods, but *the* creator God who

brings all things into existence. Moreover, God's creative activity has nothing to do with rivalry, either with other gods or with creatures. Rather, God creates freely, without compulsion, without external necessity, without calculated motive, and endows creation with an original blessing: "God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good" (v. 31). "To be" is to be blessed. Scripture would tell us that creation is, at its very root, a free gift of the one God, who takes delight in it. Such gratuitous creation, such unexpected and felicitous excess, is the wellspring of all astonishment. None of this has to be, not a single thing; and yet here it all is, a free gift of the creator God who artfully brings into existence that which had not previously existed.

Here, then, we have some appreciation of how the particular historical experience of God as Yahweh—as the one who liberates, the one who makes impossible things possible, the one who brings forth identity from non-identity and establishes relationship out of alienation—opens up a rich perception about God as creator. From the encounter with God as the one who redeems, the Israelites gain a distinctive understanding of the God who creates, and vice versa. This mutuality between creation and redemption is therefore key for understanding the significance of Jewish monotheism.

Although, to be sure, the emergence of monotheism in Jewish tradition reflects a long and ambiguous history—the numerous temptations to idolatry recounted in the Old Testament attest to this—the story of creation, as we find in Genesis 1, provides unambiguous (if poetic and hymnic) affirmation of God's sovereign unity. Such insistence, which obviously lies at the heart of all three "Abrahamic faiths" (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), finds another memorable and frequently referenced formulation in the Book of Deuteronomy. Composed to represent Moses' final discourses to the people of Israel before his death, this condensed statement, known as the

Shema of Israel, functioned like a primitive creed, i.e., a formal confession of the people's faith. It is a confession that the Christian Nicene Creed will later echo ("We believe in one God"): "Hear [*Shema*], O Israel: The Lord (YHWH) is our God, the Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart" (Deut 6:4–6). Notice here that the affirmation of God's oneness is not merely a reasoned philosophical position, however philosophically significant such an affirmation might be; it is a testimony of personal and corporate commitment to the God who liberates and creates. It is *this* God, and not any other, who delivers the captives and reestablishes relationship; and it is *this* God, and not any other, that the ancient Israelites (and modern heirs of their faith) confess as the creator and Lord of all things. The monotheism this confession represents, then, is trustful and loving, not merely a speculative proposition. It is a confession that was to be "lived into," to be deepened through a pattern of life, as the rest of the passage makes clear: "Recite [these words] to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (6:7–9). In other words, in all one's departures and arrivals, in one's rest and activity, in one's relationships and times alone, the mind and heart ought to be orientated to the living mystery of the one God. Such is the life of prayer.

LIVING THE TRIUNE MYSTERY: THE GOD OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

Thus far we have been unpacking, gradually and through appeal to scripture, the meaning of the first lines of the Nicene Creed: "We believe

in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen.” As is hopefully clear by now, to say “we believe” is a confession of faith. (The word “creed” comes from the Latin *credo*, which means, “I believe.”) Though a formal doctrine (or official teaching) of the Christian church, this creedal statement, like the *Shema* of Israel, is a corporate testimony rooted in historical experience and articulated through narrative and conceptual reflection that concisely expresses devotion to the one God who brings all things into being, and whose creative and regenerative capacities are without limit (“almighty”). The Creed asserts that God is not *a* creature among other creatures—God is neither this nor that—but the infinite, transcendent Source of all things (“maker of heaven and earth”). It is from this mystery that all things flow, and it is in this mystery that all things live, move, and have their being (Acts 17:28).

One aspect of the above creedal statement we have yet to examine is the affirmation of God as “Father.” Doing so requires that we make more explicit the Trinitarian character of Christian discourse. As we shall see, Christian discourse about the one God takes on a three-fold pattern as a result of the historical encounter with Jesus Christ—his life, death, and Resurrection—and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who draws creation into the dynamic life of the self-giving God. Trinitarian language about God is not concerned with a logical puzzle about how “one” can also be “three,” but a framework for making sense of and speaking competently about God’s self-communicating reality in history. As with our sketch above, in which the character of the transcendent God is revealed in and through the particulars of history and interpersonal relationships, so too will we see how the doctrine of the Trinity emerges from lived experience and narrative reflection to articulate in conceptual terms the relational and dynamic nature of the one God. Importantly,

the significance of this doctrine is not to issue abstract statements about God that have little relation to concrete human existence. It is, rather, a language that articulates in a rich and vibrant way our conscious and active participation in divine life. In short, the doctrine of the Trinity is concerned with *theōsis*, or what the ancient church called the “divinization” of creation.

PARTICIPATION IN DIVINE LIFE: SCRIPTURAL WITNESS AND CREEDAL FORMULATION

Irenaeus of Lyons, who is widely regarded as the most important theologian of the second century, summarized the Christian theology of the Incarnation by saying that “God became what we are in order to make us what He is.” Echoing Saint Paul’s affirmation that through Christ we are “adopted” as sons and daughters of God (Eph 1:5), Irenaeus’s simple formulation finds frequent and various reformulation throughout succeeding generations of early church theologians, including the well-known instance of fourth-century theologian Athanasius of Alexandria, whose work on the divinity of Christ was important to the First Council of Nicea (325). (It was the Council of Nicea that ultimately led to the Nicene Creed under consideration.) As Athanasius puts it in his *On the Incarnation*, the eternal Word (or *Logos*) of God “was made man so that we might be made God.” It is a radical statement to make, though it should be properly understood. To be “made God” (the Greek term for this is *theopoiēsis*) is not to be taken in the sense that human beings become God as such, for only God is God by nature. Rather, the idea is that human beings might, through invitation and cooperation with grace, “participate” in God’s nature, i.e., might become more and more like God, in whose image and likeness

God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear” (Acts 2:32–33). Notice again the imagery of the risen Christ’s ascent, as well as the threefold pattern in characterizing divine activity: God raises Jesus from the dead, and from this “exaltation” the Holy Spirit is “poured out” within the community—that is, the church—which it then animates. The Spirit of God is therefore described as extending Christ’s historical mission in the world through the work of the church. In the conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel, this work of “sending” is crystallized in the Great Commission, as the risen Christ proclaims, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (28:19–20). Now given a new identity, and incorporated into the body of the risen Christ through the regenerating waters of baptism—baptism, within Christian practice, is a sacramental sign of participation in Christ (see chapter 7)—the members of the church are bonded together to share in and extend new life to others.

Credal Formulation

Looking, finally, at the overall structure of the Nicene Creed, one sees just this descent-ascent movement at work. This is significant to observe, for although the creed bears within it doctrinal content that specifies what the church confesses and believes, it exhibits a narrative shape that characterizes the creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity of God in a threefold way, as the work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed tells a compact drama, one whose confessants are thoroughly self-implicated as subjects of and respondents to God’s triune activity.

In the first section, already detailed in this chapter, God is affirmed as one, as Father, as almighty, and as creator. In the second section, the creed affirms that this one God, through the eternal Word (or *Logos*), enters into human history by becoming human. Jesus Christ is, for Christians, the definitive revelation of God in the world, showing precisely in the warp and woof of creation the infinite compassion of God. There is no limit to God’s self-emptying love, not even the horror of death through crucifixion. (“For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate” highlights the historical specificity of the divine gesture.) God’s creativity cannot be squelched by death, but overcomes even that which would separate people from God and each other through the gift of Jesus’ Resurrection, the “new creation,” as Saint Paul often puts it. The risen Christ is “ascended into heaven”—that is, he opens up the whole of creation to new and eternal life in God—and is now the definitive standard by which all human life is judged. Jesus Christ is therefore not only the fullest revelation of God’s love for humankind (this is the “kenotic” movement of God towards us by assuming our humanity) but is also the fullest realization of human existence as made in the image and likeness of God (this is the “transcendent” movement of humanity towards God). And so, the self-giving of God to humanity and the self-giving of humanity to God utterly converge in the person of Jesus Christ. This convergence is what makes possible redemptive “participation” in divine life, namely, *theōsis*.

The third section of the creed speaks of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing life of the church in the world. By saying that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son, with whom [the Spirit] is worshipped and glorified,” the creed affirms that it is truly God who indwells and animates the church in its worldly mission. The Spirit who hovered over the waters at the

dawn of creation (“the author and giver of life”); the Spirit who stirred the holy prophets of Israel; the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead to renew all of creation from sin and death: this same Spirit draws the diverse members of the church into reconciliation with each other so that together they may become agents of transformation in the world. The “indwelling” of the Holy Spirit therefore does not imply a self-enclosed or exclusionary form of life, but opens up human belonging to an “outward” and self-giving mission of connectivity and embrace.

The entire drift of the creed affirms that Christian life, to the extent it is energized and shaped by divine life, is dynamic, relational, and self-giving. And as will become clearer in later chapters, such a life, insofar as it is lived well, has little to do with withdrawing into the backwaters of an elite club; it is a challenging, even risky way of life that entails two movements at once: ongoing spiritual formation with others in community, and a commitment to fostering reconciliation and justice in a world that desperately needs it.

CONCLUSION: TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY TODAY

This chapter has traced a path of discovery that began with a consideration of divine mystery in terms of wonderment and perplexity. To follow wonderment and perplexity is a process of discernment, or what is called “theology.” Divine mystery is never exhausted by human discernment, which therefore makes us always beginners in its undertaking. Theological reflection is at its best when it continually rediscovers the original impulses of wonderment and perplexity that stimulate it. It is also at its best when it engages rich traditions of those who have lived and discerned the mystery throughout history. Theology can therefore be thought of as an ongoing

conversation, extending over many centuries and always broaching new experiences, questions, and insights, so as to assist its practitioner in the task of living the mystery in the present and towards the future.

As has been shown, the Old Testament gives distinctive shape to that task through, among other things, the elaboration of its primary narrative, which emphasizes the historical dialogue between God and the people of Israel through the themes of creation, exodus, and covenant. The Christian Scriptures are thoroughly steeped in this primary narrative, though they reframe its central features in response to the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom Christians affirm as God’s definitive self-manifestation to human beings. The church understands such self-emptying on the part of God as simultaneously the fulfillment of human existence, whose transformative (or “divinizing”) effects are extended in the church and the world through the work of the Holy Spirit. Christians therefore discern and live according to the infinite mystery of God in a triune way, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This language takes on a narrative shape, as both the New Testament and Nicene Creed show, though it is possible also to specify aspects of that language in more conceptually explicit ways. This close relationship between story and doctrine is crucial to remember, since too often doctrines can become detached or even isolated from the lived experience that first nourished them.

Significantly, this insistence on the close relationship between experience and concept, history and doctrine, narrative and theory, is a central feature of many contemporary theologians of the Trinity. Numerous theologians today continue to argue for the need to reconnect our sometimes abstract formulations of doctrine with lived experience and narrative reflection. This chapter concludes, then, by briefly

indicating four ways contemporary theology commonly seeks to make this connection more explicit and thorough.

1. The unity of transcendence and immanence in talk about God.

This chapter has stressed two seemingly contrary things at once, but which are not contrary at all when properly understood. On the one hand, it has spoken of God's otherness, or transcendence, and consequently the limits of human images and concepts in the attempt to apprehend divine mystery. Insofar as humans are creatures, we cannot grasp God like we might some common object of experience. Returning to the quote from Thomas Aquinas, the infinite actuality of God cannot be absorbed or comprehended by finite minds, and so in some sense God's excessive "light" appears to humans as a kind of "darkness." The influential, fifth-century mystical theologian Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite spoke of God's "dazzling darkness" to emphasize just this paradox. On the other hand, such insistence on transcendence in no way denies that God might be able and willing to enter into dialogue and relationship with creatures. On the contrary, many theologians would assert, it is just God's transcendence that makes it possible for God to be intimately near or involved with creation, which is what we mean by "immanence." This is one of the crucial implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. It affirms at once God's transcendence and immanence, God's otherness and nearness, God's infinity and loving compassion in becoming finite "for us and for our salvation." Trinitarian discourse means to keep these (apparent) opposites in creative tension. The transcendent God *becomes* human to share divine life *with* humans, to draw all creation more profoundly into God's infinite mystery. Such "outpouring" and "returning" is the rhythm of life in God, which the Holy Spirit continuously makes possible. Only by keeping transcendence

and immanence in closest unity is one able to avoid thinking of God as a remote and indifferent deity, or, conversely, as indistinguishable from creation. As presented in the creed, God is infinitely "more than" creation, yet this "more than" keeps creation in its triune embrace.

2. The relational reality of God, and the communal character of Christian life.

Another key point of emphasis in contemporary theology is the relational character of God. Christians most certainly affirm God as one ("We believe in one God"). However, Christians should not think of divine unity as somehow opposed to relationship. Here too Trinitarian discourse means to keep apparent opposites in creative tension. In God perfect relationship *is* perfect unity. God is not an isolated, static, and supremely self-satisfied "ego" that surveys all things from an unapproachable perch; rather, the Christian tradition understands God as a relational, dynamic, and self-giving reality who freely wills to create out of superabundance. As Pseudo-Dionysius is also famous for asserting, "The Good is self-diffusive," meaning that God is an infinite fullness of relationship that is most itself when it gives itself away. God the Father eternally expresses the Word in the unity of the Holy Spirit, and so is an eternally dynamic flow of relationship. This is truly profound in its implications. If people are made in the "image and likeness of God," this means that humans are most truly themselves when they are self-giving with and for others. Concretely this means that the Christian lives more richly into his or her vocation insofar as it is lived in community. As many contemporary theologians argue, such an insight cuts at the heart of modern individualism. The human person is a thoroughly porous creature, one born out of and for participation in a broad array of interpersonal and social relationships. Though living in relationship makes Christians vulnerable to one another, the voca-

tion of the Christian is to heal damaged relationships, to bring reconciliation where there is hurt, and to bring justice and wholeness where there is suffering and alienation. To be so engaged is, in fact, to draw creation more richly into the heart of the triune God. By stressing this point, contemporary theology seeks to recover the practical, social, and even political implications of Trinitarian theology.

3. The awareness of metaphor in gendered language about God.

Recent decades have witnessed significant reflection and debate among theologians regarding gender-specificity in language about God. For many centuries masculine-based metaphors and pronouns were dominant, even “normative” when speaking of God, as is obviously true for the use of Father and Son in Trinitarian discourse, although the Holy Spirit has sometimes been thought of as gender-neutral or even feminine. But since the latter half of the twentieth century, increasing numbers of men and women have questioned the normativity of masculine God-language since it seems to imply that men are more “representative” of God than women. Citing the social inequality this allocation of language seems to reflect and underwrite, a growing number of Christian theologians argue that God language must become more “inclusive,” either by supplementation with feminine imagery and pronouns or, alternatively, through avoidance of gender-specification when possible. There are, as one might suspect, many possible stances to take on this highly complex and sensitive issue, which goes to show just how important social and cultural change is in how we imagine and talk about God. No doubt the question has arisen, and even become urgent, as a result of rapid and profound changes in gender relations over the last century or so. The issue is particularly challenging for Christians since Jesus himself, obviously a man living in a patriarchal society, used the term *Abba*

(“Father”) to address God—though, as is also pointed out by numerous feminist theologians, Jesus challenged many patriarchal sensibilities in his day, not least through his close association with women in his ministry. In any case, no matter where one finally stands on this issue of ongoing debate, the problems it raises require discernment about the limits of human imagination and language when it comes to the mystery of God. If, on the one hand, the ultimate vocation of language is to speak out of and to the reality of God, on the other hand, one must always do so knowing that no language, whether masculine, feminine, or gender neutral, manages to capture the transcendence of God.

4. The importance of engaging other views of God creatively and dialogically.

Finally, and related to the above point, contemporary theologians are intensely engaged in reflection over the unique challenges that arise when encountering persons from other religious and cultural traditions, and therefore when encountering differing (and sometimes radically alternative) views of divine mystery, including those who are indifferent or even hostile to notions of God. What makes our pluralist age unique is not that people now have so many differing views of God—such has always been the case—but that today we live in such close proximity with such differences due to the massive mobilization of populations made possible by advances in communication and transportation. More now than ever, we are aware of how distinctive histories and cultures shape the ways humans imagine their place in the world, and thus how context-sensitive one’s view of ultimate reality is. Faced with such ambiguity, people may buckle down and cling to their cultural and religious heritage; we might think of fundamentalism as one kind of response to growing pluralism. On the other hand a sense of futility or even cynicism regarding the search for truth can set in, making the

very notion of discussing “ultimate reality” seem hopeless or arbitrary. Relativism can be another kind of response to pluralism. Between rigid fundamentalism and ephemeral relativism, however, is the more challenging (though creative) path of seeking unity *in* difference. Without reducing all religions to an abstract unity in a way that ignores or falsifies legitimate differences, it is possible to be committed to a particular religious tradition while also remaining open to the truth, goodness, and beauty of other religious traditions. (See chapters 10 and 11 for more on Christianity’s relationship to other religions of the world.) If, for example, a Christian is convinced that Jesus Christ is the definitive self-disclosure of God in history, this will not mean therefore

that the mystery of God cannot be found richly and compellingly in other religious traditions. Indeed, to remain hospitable to the mystery of God no matter where it is found is essential to any truly theological undertaking. For the Christian, the understanding of God as Trinitarian actually inspires and informs this openness to otherness, since the God it affirms is relational and dialogical. The idea of the infinite mystery of God has a corollary: people will always be able to discover more about God. For the Christian, the triune character of that mystery means that one will discover more about God in the context of relationship, even when (and perhaps especially when) one encounters persons very different from oneself.

Questions about the Text

1. What is the central paradox of all Christian theology?
2. What three major points characterize the discernment of divine mystery in theological activity?
3. What is a *theophany*, and what two aspects are closely associated with its instance in Exodus 3?
4. What is Israel’s “primary narrative” in brief, and how does it shape Israel’s understanding of God as liberator and creator?
5. What is the meaning of *theōsis*, and how is it central to the doctrine of the Trinity? Explain your answer by referring to the “ascent-descent” pattern in key passages from scripture, as well as the structure of the Nicene Creed.
6. What implications follow from the Christian understanding of God as “relational” and “self-giving,” especially in terms of the church’s role in the world?

Questions for Discussion

1. Have you ever thought of the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” What sort of feelings or thoughts does such a question elicit from you?
2. Do you think theological reflection is compatible with doubt? Why or why not?
3. What are some other examples of a theophany in scripture, or perhaps in other religious contexts? How do people today typically speak of encounters with the divine, and are such accounts similar or different from celebrated instances in the past?

4. Do you think it important to maintain a balance between transcendence and immanence in one's understanding of God? In what ways do you think the doctrine of the Trinity might assist in this? Do you agree with the author that the doctrine of the Trinity, by its emphasis on relationship and self-giving, presents a strong challenge to the individualism of much modern life? Explain. Might such a doctrine promote a more open and dialogical attitude toward people of other religions? Again, explain your thinking in this regard.
5. Is gender-specific language inevitable or appropriate in theological discourse? Why? Christians debate whether they should maintain or change language about God in light of gender equality in society and the church. What are your thoughts on this issue?

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Renaissance sought to recover the wisdom of the ancients, both sacred and secular. *Ad fontes* (“to the sources”) was the slogan of these scholars, who devoted their lives to uncovering and studying ancient texts. While Italian humanists promoted a more human-centered and secular version of the Renaissance, Northern European humanists offered a “devout humanism” that sought to combine the best of ancient pagan wisdom (Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, Seneca, etc.) with the wisdom of the Bible and the Christian tradition. Martin Luther’s compulsion to re-read and re-interpret the Bible during the 1510s should be seen against the backdrop of the Renaissance.

The Eventful Life of Martin Luther

The early history of Protestantism mirrors the story of one man—Martin Luther. The origin of the Protestant movement is traced to a date and an event in Luther’s life—October 31, 1517, when Luther nailed the “Ninety-Five Theses” to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral. This act was an overture to a formal academic disputation regarding indulgences (i.e., statements of remission of penalties for sin) that the Catholic Church was then selling to raise money for St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Neither Luther nor anyone else could have anticipated the wide-ranging theological, political, and social issues that were to emerge in the course of the indulgence dispute. At the Heidelberg Disputation (1518) and ensuing theological debates, Luther’s adversaries successfully pressed him to acknowledge that he was not only questioning the Church’s sale of indulgences but the pope’s authority as well. This was a damaging and dangerous admission on Luther’s part, since it aligned Luther with Jan Hus, who had died as a heretic.

1521 was a pivotal year, during which Luther wrote three major treatises: *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *The Freedom of a Christian*, and *Appeal to the Nobility of the German Nation*.



IMAGE © FOTO MARBURG / ART RESOURCE

Luther posts his “Ninety-Five Theses.”

The first text argued against the Catholic system of seven sacraments, and marked Luther’s final rupture with his inherited tradition. Only rituals that were directly taught in the New Testament—baptism and Eucharist (and perhaps the confession of sins)—were authentic, Luther argued. For Luther, the Church had no intrinsic power to institute new sacraments (e.g., confirmation, last rites) or other practices (e.g., monastic vows) that were not mandated in the New Testament. In the second text, Luther presented the Christian life as characterized by freedom rather than rule-keeping, a major theme for later Protestants. In the third text, Luther called on the German nobles to assist the emerging Protestant movement. In Luther’s doctrine of the “two kingdoms,”

the church exists as an inward, spiritual kingdom, distinct from the political sphere, while the outward, physical reign of the kings and nobility exists alongside it. The church's task is the right preaching of God's word, while the Christian prince's task is to enable the church to fulfill its calling of preaching the word.

Luther debated the most famous humanist scholar in Europe: Desiderius Erasmus. The core issue was Luther's idea of human depravity. Since Adam's fall, Luther argued, all human beings were born into the world as slaves of sin and their darkened minds were unable to perceive spiritual truth. Only God's gracious initiative toward sinners could break the "bondage of the will" and bring spiritual understanding, so that faith in God and repentance from sin became possible. Erasmus asserted that, while salvation is entirely a matter of God's grace, individuals have free will and may respond to or reject God's grace. Luther told the humanist that "your thoughts of God are too human," and defended the idea that God has predestined some to be saved while leaving others in their sinful, condemned condition. It is not the part of mere mortals to question why God predestines some to one fate and some to another, argued Luther.

The term "Protestant" first arose after the Diet of Speyer in 1529, which upheld an earlier decision to condemn Luther and his teaching. The German princes who supported Luther wrote a letter of "protestation," and the term "protestant" has been with us ever since.

"Magisterial" and "Radical" Protestantism

Early Protestantism was a vast simplification of Catholicism, a kind of housecleaning wherein everything deemed unnecessary was thrown out. Four slogans—*sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *solus Christus*—summarized core elements of Protestant theology. While Catholicism based

itself on scripture *and* tradition, Protestantism appealed to "scripture alone" (*sola scriptura*). Protestants held that the Bible was a sufficient guide to resolve all major questions of Christian faith and practice. While Catholicism taught that human beings are saved by faith *with* works, or by grace *with* merit, Protestants held to salvation by "faith alone" (*sola fide*) and by "grace alone" (*sola gratia*). While Catholicism insisted on the intercession of Mary and the saints, Protestants looked to "Christ alone" (*solus Christus*) as the mediator between God and humanity.

As the Protestant message spread to cities throughout Europe from the 1520s onward, it took different forms in different places. In Zurich (in present-day Switzerland), Ulrich Zwingli preached a more extreme form of Protestantism than Luther did. Rejecting almost all traditions that had emerged in the course of church history, Zwingli wanted to base every element of Christian faith and practice on explicit statements of the Bible. He took down statues and other forms of visual art from church buildings, calling them idolatrous. Zwingli's attitude contrasted with that of Luther, who felt that it was acceptable to retain Catholic practices and beliefs, so long as they did not directly conflict with the Bible. Compared with Zwingli, Luther was a conservative reformer. The two men clashed at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529. They divided in their understanding of the Eucharist, with Luther insisting that Christ's body and blood were truly present in the consecrated bread and wine (the view later known as "consubstantiation") and Zwingli viewing the bread and wine of the Eucharist as mere outward symbols that reminded the faithful of Christ and his atoning death. The falling out between Luther and Zwingli was a major disappointment for the early Protestants, since it meant that their movement would not remain internally unified.

Yet Zwingli's views were still not extreme enough for an emerging group during the 1520s

that became known as the Anabaptists (meaning literally “re-baptizers”), and more recently as Radical Reformers. Not finding any undeniable evidence for infant baptism in New Testament times, the Anabaptists rejected the practice and insisted that, since only adults are capable of making a profession of faith, only adults may be baptized. The Anabaptists believed that the true church should have no link to governmental systems or the political order. Believers were to meet at home, in face-to-face gatherings where they might put the Bible into practice and hold one another accountable for living as true disciples. Since the Sermon on the Mount forbade Jesus’ followers from retaliating against their enemies, the Anabaptists held that Christians should not bear arms—a position known as pacifism. Menno Simons—once a Roman Catholic priest—was among the Anabaptists’ most influential leaders. Surprising as it seems today, the Roman Catholic authorities and most Protestant leaders during the 1500s held that Anabaptists were not only theologically mistaken but were social and political subversives who deserved to die. In the year 1527, the civil authorities of Zurich tied up Anabaptist leader Felix Manz with stones and drowned him in the frigid waters of the Limmat River—in cruel mockery of the Anabaptist practice of baptism by immersion. Fierce persecution scattered the Anabaptists throughout Europe, where many more suffered ostracism or death for their beliefs.

The Anabaptists risked martyrdom for their convictions, and were among the first Europeans to argue for freedom of religion and complete separation of church and state. In this they represented a distinct minority, as Protestant and Catholic states squared off against each other, plunging Europe into a full century of religious warfare (ca. 1550–ca. 1650). Afterward, the thinkers of the emerging Enlightenment movement began to find themselves in agreement with what Anabaptists had argued long before. True

religion, the Anabaptists had said, was a voluntary matter. It could not be coerced by government regulations or by threats of persecution. Eventually the principle of religious freedom became enshrined in the First Amendment to the *Constitution of the United States* (1789) and later political documents. Yet during the 1500s this idea was not self-evident to most Europeans.

The Second Great Figure: John Calvin

Luther was immensely creative and yet also sometimes erratic. His followers, he had said, sought to make him a “fixed star” though he was a “wandering planet.” His humanness was often on display, as when he declared that “he who loves not wine, women, and song, remains a fool his whole life long.” Succeeding Luther, the most influential figure of the second Protestant generation was John Calvin. In fact both Luther and Calvin gave their names to divergent branches of Protestantism: the Lutheran and the Calvinist (or Reformed) traditions.

Calvin, who was trained both in law and in the best humanist traditions, showed a more systematic style than Luther. He wrote commentaries on nearly all the books of the Bible and summed up a lifetime of research in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), to this day among the most influential Protestant works ever written. While Luther stressed God’s grace to the undeserving and the good news of God’s love for sinners, Calvin highlighted God’s sovereign power and inscrutable will. A doctrine that aroused debate was predestination, the teaching (based on various biblical passages) that God from eternity chose some, and passed over others, for eternal salvation. Christians had been wrestling with this idea for centuries—we have already seen that Luther, too, embraced it—but predestination would come to be one of the hallmarks of Calvinist thought.

For better or for worse, “Calvinism,” as it spread in England, Scotland, New England, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, was strongly associated with the doctrines of divine sovereignty and eternal predestination. A controversy among Calvinists in the Netherlands during the 1600s resulted in the decision of the Synod of Dort (1618–1619), which defined Calvinist orthodoxy in terms of “five points”: humanity’s *total* depravity in sin, the *unconditional* choice or election of some to salvation, the *limited* atonement of Christ (i.e., Christ died only for the “elect”), the *irresistible* grace of God that achieved its effect for those who were predestined, and the *perseverance* in grace of those who were en route to salvation. (Want to remember these five points? Note the first letter of each; combined they spell “tulip,” a flower associated with Holland.) Though there was much more to Calvinism than this, the five points summarized certain distinctive features of the Calvinist teaching on salvation. Later thinkers followed the broad contours of Calvin’s theology, including Theodore Beza, the Puritans of England and New England (later 1500s–later 1600s), Jonathan Edwards, the American Presbyterian Charles Hodge, and the Swiss authors Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Emil Brunner (1889–1966).

Turmoil in Europe and in Britain

The Protestant movement did not equally affect all nations and regions of Europe. The French Protestants—inspired by events in nearby Geneva under Calvin—were growing in numbers and influence in the mid-1500s. Yet a series of bloody killings around St. Bartholomew’s Day in 1572 dealt a blow from which the Huguenots (French Protestants) never recovered. Thereafter, the Protestant movement was greatly diminished in France. Lutheranism found its heartland in Germany and Scandinavia: Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland.

The Scandinavian nations, to this day, are all at least nominally Lutheran. Lutheranism later made its way to the United States through German and Scandinavian emigration.

Calvinism migrated further than Lutheranism, taking root in Scotland, England, New England, the Netherlands, Bohemia (today’s Czech Republic), and Hungary. Later there were Dutch Calvinist migrations to South Africa as well as the East Indies (Indonesia). Generally speaking, Protestantism was strongest in northern Europe, while southern and southwestern Europe (Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal) remained largely Roman Catholic, and southeastern Europe (Austria, Serbia, Croatia, and the Balkans) was divided between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Germany after 1648 was a patchwork of small principalities, some of them Protestant and some Catholic, according to the preference of the local rulers. *Cuius regio, huius religio* (“whose is the region, his is the religion”)—so ran the slogan that summarized this policy of allowing local rulers in central Europe to determine the religion of their subjects.

Nowhere did the Protestant Reformation follow a more complex or circuitous route than it did in the British Isles. In 1534, King Henry VIII declared himself to be the head of the English Church. Thereafter, except for a brief return to Catholicism under Henry’s daughter, (“Bloody”) Mary, the national faith of England was Protestant—at least in the sense that it no longer recognized the authority of the pope. Yet for nearly a century and a half the question remained as to how much of the Catholic tradition the English Church would retain in its beliefs and practices, and how much of a moderate or radical Protestantism it would embrace. Later spokespersons for the Church of England would claim that it was a *via media* (“middle way”) embracing the best of both Protestantism and Catholicism. Over time a spectrum of

viewpoints emerged. *The Book of Common Prayer* (1549, with later revisions) was one of the few things that held together all the faithful in the Church of England. A few holdouts in England (especially among the nobility) remained Catholic and refused to acknowledge the English monarch as the legitimate head of the national church. Yet it was dangerous to be an English Catholic at the time. In 1605, the Catholic Guy Fawkes tried to explode the Parliament building in the so-called Gunpowder Plot. Popes in this period had sanctioned the idea that the English rulers—as religious imposters—might be killed with impunity. There were Spanish attempts to conquer England and make it Catholic again. As a result of these developments, most of the English were deeply alienated from Roman Catholicism and from the Papacy.

The Anglican Settlement in England

The majority of English Christians—or “Anglicans”—went along with the idea of a state church independent of the pope. Yet among them there were some who had gone to Geneva to escape persecution under Queen Mary in the 1550s (“the Marian exiles”) and had returned more ardently Protestant and Calvinistic than ever. They were the foundation of a “Puritan” movement that sought to purify the English Church from within, embracing the Reformation more fully, and doing away with retained “Catholic” practices. The more extreme English Reformers broke with the Puritans and became “Separatists” or “Independents”; impatient with what they took to be the slow pace of reform, they thought it advisable to withdraw from the official Church of England to found separate fellowships. Their “conventicles” were declared illegal under Queen Elizabeth (reigned 1558–1603), and the persecution experienced by the stricter Protestant groups provoked some to emigrate to New England between 1620 and 1640. These

emigrants laid a religious foundation for the later United States of America. Among the Puritans and Separatist there were intricate theological debates over simplicity in worship style (e.g., the wearing of church vestments by ministers) and the proper form of church government. While the Anglican Church was governed by bishops, Presbyterians favored a kind of religious parliament (or “general assembly”) to make binding decisions for all local congregations, and Congregationalists wanted every congregation to be able to govern its own affairs without any interference from a bishop or general assembly. Not surprisingly, the Presbyterians and Congregationalists generally favored an imposition of strict limits on the power of the king. At the culmination of the English Civil War of the 1640s, Parliament, largely under the influence of Puritan radicals, put King Charles I on trial as the people’s enemy; he was publicly put to death in 1649.

This shocking execution of the monarch—regarded by some as a sacrilegious slaying of “God’s anointed”—was the first event of its kind in modern times and it foreshadowed later ideas regarding limited government. Protestant propagandists and pamphleteers challenged the idea of *Rex lex* (“the king is law”) with an assertion of *Lex rex* (“the law is king”). Basing their faith on the text of the Bible, Protestants had a natural affinity for a notion of human government based on a written constitution rather than the will of the ruler. John Locke’s *Two Treatises on Government* (1689) promoted limited government and popular sovereignty, arguing that all just governments ruled with the consent of the governed. These ideas were later integral to the American Revolution, as well as the *Declaration of Independence* (1776) and the *Constitution of the United States* (1789).

Scholars have argued that Protestantism was associated not only with modern representative government, but with the rise of a capitalistic economy in Europe (Max Weber),

with the scientific revolution of the 1600s and 1700s (Robert Merton), and with a trans-Atlantic tradition of literacy especially strong in Protestant nations. Protestantism was thus not only a religious but a cultural phenomenon, and it inculcated such values as personal freedom, capitalistic and entrepreneurial activity, a disciplined and productive life (the so-called Protestant work ethic), the importance of reading and education, and scientific and technological inquiry. These cultural values were especially associated with Britain and the United States from the 1700s through the 1900s.

The Confessional Era

During the late 1500s and early 1600s, Protestant Christianity had entered into a “confessional” or creed-writing phase. On the Catholic side, the Council of Trent (1542–1565) brought a far-reaching reorganization and centralization to the Church. It also solidified Catholic opposition to Protestantism, condemning the idea of justification by faith, recognizing the Old Testament Apocrypha as authoritative, mandating the Latin Vulgate for reading and study (rather than the Hebrew and Greek originals), and sanctioning the reception of the Mass in one kind only (i.e., consecrated bread but not wine), indulgences, prayers to Mary and the saints, prayers for the dead, and teaching on purgatory. As the 1500s progressed, Roman Catholics and Protestants who had been hoping for agreement between the two sides found little to encourage them. Lutheranism formulated its confessional statements, including the Augsburg *Confession* (1530) and *Formula of Concord* (1577), Reformed or Calvinist Christians composed the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) and *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), and Anglicanism drew up its *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1563). These documents were widely used in instructing generations of Protestants in the distinctive tenets of their particular group.

During this era, leading Protestants engaged in extensive theological debates with Roman Catholic authors, like the redoubtable Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621). Representative of these works is Martin Chemnitz’s *Examination of the Council of Trent* (1574). Though little read today, these polemical writings occupy impressive volumes of Latin prose. The writing, reading, and study of such works occupied the lifetimes of countless pastors and professors during the era of Protestant scholasticism.

Yet the strong focus on correct doctrine and theological orthodoxy brought dangers to the Protestant churches. Some leaders, perhaps more than the laity, had come to identify true Christianity with a precise set of doctrinal beliefs, while neglecting the *experiential* and *practical* aspects of Christianity. Moreover, the Protestant-Catholic theological arguments—and intra-Protestant debates that pitted Lutherans against the Reformed—slighted the common beliefs shared by rival confessional groups. Only the differences were highlighted in the midst of argumentation. The Lutheran scholastic Abraham Calovius is said to have prayed every morning, “O Lord, fill me with hatred of heretics”! In Continental Europe, theologically technical sermons sometimes lasted for two or three hours and included long quotations in Latin—though most congregants did not even know any Latin.

New Stirrings: The Pietist Movement

A slender book, under the title *Pia Desideria* [“Pious Desires”] (1677), signaled a turn toward a more practical, experiential form of Christianity. The book’s author, Philip Spener, promoted a movement known as Pietism. The Pietists offered a program for church-based renewal that centered on small groups within the larger church, termed *collegia pietatis* (“fellowships of the godly”) or *ecclesiola in ecclesia* (“little churches within the larger church”). Such groups emphasized personal Bible