

– Victor I. Ezigbo –

Introducing Christian Theologies



Voices from Global Christian Communities

– VOLUME 1 –



Introducing Christian Theologies

VOLUME 1

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Introducing Christian Theologies

*Voices from Global
Christian Communities*

VOLUME 1

Victor I. Ezigbo



The Lutterworth Press

*To my parents,
Rev. Alfred Chukwuemeka Ezigbo and Mrs. Bridget Elewechi Ezigbo,
who were my first informal theology teachers.*

*And to my great friends
Jon Semke and Debbie Cornett,
whose love and generosity made it possible for me to complete my
PhD degree in theology at the University of Edinburgh.*

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Abbreviations

| | |
|---------------|--|
| <i>ANF</i> | The Ante-Nicene Fathers |
| <i>ESV</i> | English Standard Version |
| <i>IVP</i> | InterVarsity Press |
| <i>NASB</i> | New American Standard Bible |
| <i>NIV</i> | New International Version |
| <i>NIDOTE</i> | New International Dictionary of Old Testament Exegesis |
| <i>NPNF</i> | Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers |

Introduction

Many Christians would prefer to skip the study of theology and get on with sharing their personal beliefs about God. Some of them think that the study of theology is unnecessary for the proclamation of the Christian message. Others believe that theology leads to doubts, which can destroy a person's faith or belief. Studying theology, however, has several benefits. It has an effect on every aspect of a Christian's life. For example, theology can help Christians to deepen their knowledge of Christian doctrines, which are necessary for personal edification (e.g., dealing with doubts) and the proclamation of the Christian message.

The vibrant expansion of Christianity in places outside of Europe and North America, namely in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, raises a question about the "theological face" of Christianity. Should Christianity's theological face remain largely European and North American in the twenty-first century? Like all important questions, the question about the "theological face" of Christianity cannot be ignored. For too long, African, Asian, and Latin American theologians have been left out of mainstream theological discussions. Few standard textbooks on Christian theology acknowledge the unique contributions theologians from these continents have made to global Christianity.

Introducing Christian Theologies: Voices from Global Christian Communities is a two-volume textbook that alters the predominantly European and North American "theological face" of Christianity by interacting with the voices of Christian communities from around the globe. *Introducing Christian Theologies* explores the works of key theologians from these communities, highlighting their unique contributions to global Christianity. This first volume covers the following topics: preliminary issues in Christian theology, God's revelation, Christian Scripture, Trinity, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, and divine providence. The second volume will cover the topics of

Introduction

theological anthropology, Christian hope, salvation, church, the Christian life and social problems, and theology of religions.

Intended Audience

Introducing Christian Theologies is primarily designed for undergraduates taking an introductory course in Christian theology. However, the depth of the content also makes it a useful text for seminary students and graduate theology students.

Features of the Book

Accessibility: I taught Christian theology at the undergraduate level in Nigeria and in the United Kingdom. I currently teach theology at the same level in the United States. In my experience, very few introductory textbooks on Christian theology are written in a manner that is accessible to undergraduate students who have no previous knowledge of how to interpret and integrate Christian doctrines. This is a serious problem that *Introducing Christian Theologies* addresses.

Contextualization: This is one of the unique features of this book. Every theology is contextual and ought to be so. Although many theologians, especially in the West, have ignored the contextual nature of theology in their theological discussions, theologians should *intentionally* construct their theologies to befit the contexts of the intended recipients. Theologies must reflect a rigorous and constructive engagement with the social location, religious aspiration, culture, experience, and sociopolitical condition of the communities for which they are intended. The contexts of the theologians whose works are explored here will be highlighted. This will help students to appreciate the contributions of these theologians and also to rethink how to appropriate such theologies in their own contexts.

Diversity of Viewpoints: The textbook presents and discusses several positions on the major Christian doctrines. These positions are described in a manner that highlights their differences, similarities, and unique contributions.

Global and Multidenominational: Unlike the majority of the existing introductory textbooks on Christian theology, *Introducing Christian Theologies* covers a vast range of theological positions written by theologians from Africa, Asia, Latin America, North America, and Europe. The theologians

whose works are discussed in this book are Protestant, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Coptic, or Pentecostal.

Key Terms: The textbook has definitions of theological terms at the end of each chapter.

Charts and Tables: Charts and tables are used to buttress key points or to compare similarities and differences of theological positions.

Primary Sources: Excerpts from primary sources that are keyed to the discussion of the major topics are included at the end of each chapter with the exception of chapter 1.

Exercises: A few assignable exercises have been included in some chapters to help students evaluate their knowledge of the topics discussed.

Review Questions: Several questions have been included at the end of each chapter to help students review the major themes and position discussed.

Texts for Further Reading: A list of important texts on the topics covered is provided at the end of each chapter.

1

Preliminary Issues in Christian Theology

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Defining Christian Theology
 Theology and Faith
 Tasks of Theology
 Theology and God
 Theology's Nature
Theology and the Theologian
 Theology and Method
 Theology and Orthodoxy
 Disciplines of Theology
Diversity, Unity, and Theology
 Concluding Reflections
 Key Terms
 Review Questions
 Suggestions for Further Reading

Christian theology can be a daunting subject for students because of the large volume of material to be learned. This chapter discusses the introductory issues that relate to the construction of Christian theology. The knowledge of these issues will be helpful for grasping the idea, tasks, nature, sources, and forms of Christian theology.

Defining Christian Theology

The word *theology* is a combination of two words—God (*theos* in Greek) and reason (*logos* in Greek). Theology can be defined as the “discourse about God,” or the “study of God,” or the “thought about God.” However, defining theology in this way is too broad and fails to account for the

FOCUS QUESTION:
What is Christian theology?

uniqueness of the theologies of different religions of the world. For example, it does not account for the differences between Christian theology and Islamic theology. While both Christianity and Islam hold a monotheistic view of God, they understand monotheism differently. Christianity’s view of monotheism allows for a plurality of divine persons (the Trinity), whereas the Islamic view of monotheism does not. In fact, the doctrine of the Trinity is appalling to many Muslims. Since this textbook focuses on Christianity, we must describe Christian theology.

Ideas of Christian Theology

Christian theology is concerned with the imagination and interpretation of God from the perspective of the life and teaching Jesus of Christ. Christian theologians have pursued these Christ-centered acts of imagination and interpretation of God in diverse ways. This diversity of theological views within Christianity exists because theologians do theology with disparate agendas. To illustrate these agendas, I will describe the understandings of Christian theology of four theologians whose works continue to shape Christian theological discourse globally.

Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033–1109 CE)

Anselm, the former archbishop of Canterbury (England), was a theologian and philosopher. His view of theology can be summarized as “faith seeking understanding.”¹ He emphasized the priority of faith or belief in God-talk. Anselm’s goal was to demonstrate to his contemporaries, especially Christians, that belief in God’s existence was rational. He drew inspiration from St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE), who summarized his view of the relationship between *faith* and *reason* on the basis of his reading of Isaiah 7:9: “Unless I believe, I shall not understand.” Daniel Migliore’s comments on

1. Anselm, “An Address (*Proslogion*),” 70.

Augustine's view of faith and reason are helpful for understanding Anselm's definition of theology. He writes that the "Christian faith prompts inquiry, searches for deeper understanding, dares to raise questions."² Again he states, "Theology arises from the freedom and responsibility of the Christian community to inquire about its faith in God." Theology is "a continuing search for the fullness of the truth of God made known in Jesus Christ."³

For Anselm, theology must begin with faith and confidence in the existence of God. This act of faith is the beginning point of a theological inquiry. A Christian should, however, take the next step, namely, to explore logical and coherent ways to explain the mystery of God's existence and actions in the world. Anselm sets an example by developing the *ontological argument* for the existence of God. His argument can be summarized in this way: (a) God is that which none greater can be conceived (that is, the greatest possible being); (b) since human beings can imagine God, it is possible that God exists; and (c) since something that exists is greater than that which does not exist, it follows that God exists. Theology is a field of study that deals with faith in the existence of God. This faith, for Anselm, does not oppose the use of reason to explain or demonstrate God's existence.

Karl Barth (1886–1968)

Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian, was arguably the most prominent twentieth-century Christian theologian. Like Anselm, Barth saw Christian theology as faith seeking understanding. For Barth, human beings come to know God when God gives them the gift of faith and enables them to encounter and experience God's self-revelation. Human beings can talk about God because God has given them God's own knowledge of God's self. Unlike Anselm, Barth was Christocentric (Christ-centered) in his theology. One of the unique contributions of Barth to Christian theology is his presentation of Jesus Christ as the *primary test* of adequate interpretations of God's self-revelation. For him, any theologies that conflict with God's revelation in and through Jesus Christ are inadequate for the Christian church. Barth's description of Christian theology emphasizes the priority of God's revelation (Jesus Christ) in the construction of theology. Barth also perceived Christian theology as "a function of the church" and the "scientific test which the Christian Church puts [itself] regarding the language about God which is peculiar to [it]."⁴ He saw theology as the task of the church. Christians must

2. Migilore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 2.

3. *Ibid.*, 1.

4. Barth, *CD 1/1*, 3–4.

Introducing Christian Theologies

continue to test their views of God in light of Jesus Christ, the revelation of God.

Rosemary Radford Ruether (b. 1936)

The American theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether unearths the mystified patriarchal assumption that has permeated the structures of Christian theology. Prior to the rise of feminist theology, many Christian theologians either assumed or affirmed the inferiority of women. Like the majority of feminist theologians, Ruether aims to deconstruct and expose both classical and contemporary Christian theologies that diminish and distort the full humanity of women. “Theologically speaking,” writes Ruether, “whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption.”⁵ Christian theologies, in the minds of some feminist theologians, must be presumed guilty of patriarchy and androcentricism until proven innocent.

Theologies do not arise in a vacuum. Those theologies that ignore human experiences are in danger of being irrelevant to humanity. One of the main contributions that Ruether’s writings and the works of other feminist theologians have made to Christian theology is the discovery of human experience, particularly the experience of women, as an important source of theology. In the words of Ruether, “The uniqueness of feminist theology lies not in its use of the criterion of experience but rather in its use of *women’s* experience, which has been almost entirely shut out of theological reflection in the past.”⁶ Within the broad context of women’s experience, feminist theologians have found the courage to upset the status quo by reflecting upon the diversified experiences of women in different cultures and societies. For example, the experience of a white American woman must necessarily differ from the experience of an African American woman, although they live in the same country. Feminist theologians, therefore, explore the experience of women in their theological works in ways that engage gender, class, social location, and race. Ruether places emphasis on the experience of women, which for her must be used to rethink the classical Christian doctrines of God and humanity.

5. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 19.

6. *Ibid.*, 13.

Gustavo Gutiérrez (b. 1928)

Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian theologian, describes theology as the reflection that “arises spontaneously and inevitably in the believer, in all those who have accepted the gift of the Word of God. Theology is intrinsic to a life of faith seeking to be authentic and complete and is, therefore, essential to the common consideration of this faith in the ecclesial community.”⁷ In his theology, the experience of the poor reigns supreme. Like Karl Barth, Gutiérrez construes theology as the task of the church. Gutiérrez, however, makes two noteworthy contributions. First, he argues that all Christians ought to become involved in theological reflection. He writes, “There is present in *all believers*—and more so in every Christian community—a rough outline of theology. There is present an effort to understand the faith, something like a pre-understanding of that faith which is manifested in life, action, and concrete attitude.”⁸ Theology should not be construed as an ivory-tower enterprise and a discrete academic field for highly trained scholars and analysts. All Christians ought to be preoccupied with the question of theology: how are we to live intellectually and practically in a way that reflects the life of Christ?

Second, he contends that theology must be imagined in a way that engages both the needs of the church and the world at large. In his own words, “Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology, a theology of the liberating transformation of the history of humankind and also therefore that part of humankind—gathered into *ecclesia*—which openly confesses Christ. This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed.”⁹

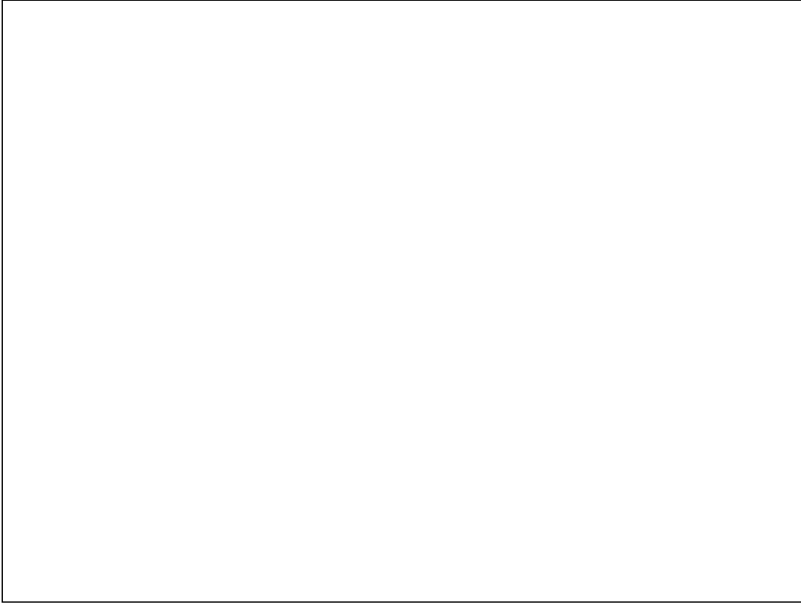
EXERCISE 1.1

Using the box below, identify and state the implications of the preceding four definitions of Christian theology. State what is helpful and striking to you in these definitions. Highlight their similarities and differences.

7. Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 3.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 12.



Theology and Faith

In Christian theology faith refers to the human act of trust or commitment. To have faith is to trust in or commit to something or someone. The Christian notion of faith may be described as the trust in God that arises out of people's encounter with the person and work of God in Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Faith has two integral dimensions: intellect and volition. The volitional dimension of faith refers to the commitment of the human will to God. It is to trust God completely as the creator, savior, and provider of the world. This submission of the human will to God arises from people's encounter with God. They trust that God has their best interest in mind. Faith in this sense is antithetical to the mistrust of God. The intellectual dimension of faith deals with the role of the human intellect in attaining and articulating faith. It concerns itself with the intellectual inquiry about the nature and content of Christianity's beliefs about God. To have faith is not to trust blindly or to have beliefs that cannot be proved. The human intellect does not operate in isolation from a volitional commitment to God. On the one hand, having faith in God should not depend upon one's ability to prove God's existence with certainty. On the other hand, to say that one's faith

in God is not contingent on one's ability to prove God's existence is not to suggest that the suspension of the human intellect is a precondition of faith. Faith welcomes rigorous inquiry. The theologian's task is to reflect on and express the nature and content of Christian faith commitments and beliefs. Faith (both in the intellectual and volitional dimensions) is dynamic: it grows and can be stretched and developed.

Faith is an important component of theology. This is because human beings do not have direct or immediate access to God. Our knowledge of God is mediated—it is dependent on God's self-disclosure. This knowledge of God is faith-based: it arises from the belief in God's existence and also in God's self-revelation. Doing theology from a Christian perspective requires having confidence in God. To believe or have confidence in God is to trust God as “where I find anchorage of my life, where I find a solid ground, home.”¹⁰ Christian theological discussions should be conducted in a manner that enables people to see the relationship between Christian life and theology.

How are we to understand the role of faith in Christian theology? Theologians understand faith in several ways. Broadly speaking, Christian theologians use “faith” in ways that correspond to one of the following two usages.

Faith as a Form of Reason and Inquiry

“Reason” here refers to the act of reasoning that involves drawing conclusions from already established data. The view that sees faith and reason as compatible components of theology also construes faith as launching an individual into a rigorous inquiry concerning the mystery of God. Faith, therefore, does not obstruct or hinder theological inquiry. Faith welcomes theological tensions and paradoxes. Anselm of Canterbury construed faith in this way when, as previously mentioned, he defined theology as “faith seeking understanding.”

Theologians, however, disagree on the functions of reason and faith in gaining knowledge about God. Some see faith as *perfecting* the knowledge of God that is acquired through reason alone (Thomas Aquinas). For others, faith *precedes* and also *critiques* the knowledge of God gained through reason (Anselm).

10. Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 6.

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Faith as an Antithesis of Reason

People who see faith as an antithesis of reason argue that reason has no relevant place in knowing and experiencing God. In fact, some see reason as an intellectual virus that destroys the knowledge of God gained through faith in God's self-revelation. Faith, for them, is the antidote for theological tensions—it helps the believer grope in the unknown territories of the spiritual world. This understanding of faith's relationship to theology is misleading. A person's faith or belief in the existence of God should not undermine his or her desire to explain how he or she came to such belief. This view of faith is sometimes called *fideism*, the act of accepting "religious beliefs in defiance of or contrary to reason."¹¹

The Tasks of Theology

What are the tasks of Christian theology? Theologians have answered this question in different ways. The question about the tasks of theology is ultimately the question about what theology does for humanity. Theology is not just about acquiring knowledge but also concerns practice.

Doxological

Our knowledge of God should lead us to doxology: the act of praising God. Doxology is one of the criteria of adequate theology. A theology that fails the test of doxology is useless for living a Christlike life. Theology must also become an act of worship to God. Glorifying God, and not merely gaining intellectual knowledge about God, is the ultimate goal of theology. In the context of fellowshiping with and worshipping God, theology's function is preparatory. It ought to prepare each believing person and community to grow in relationship with God through obedience to Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. A theology that does not aim to lead people to worship God is wanting. Sadly, many theologies today hardly kindle in people's hearts a passionate and sincere love for God. Christian theology should invoke the search for a response and language to express the mystery of God's love for God's creation.

Our theology, when properly done, should inspire us to revel in God, and this should lead us to exalt God and to glorify God. Theology is an important aspect of Christians' response to a loving God who has given God's

11. Clark, *Return to Reason*, 154.

self ultimately in Jesus Christ “to restore and fulfill all creation.” It should not lead only to praise but must in itself become an act of praise to God. In praise, we express our appreciation for something or someone important to us. This involves recognizing the worth of the recipient of our praise. Part of the task of theology, then, is to express the worthiness of God, who is the ultimate recipient of theological praise.

Didactical

Another task of theology is to provide a comprehensive exposition of Christian beliefs and truth-claims. Theologians in this sense are the teachers of the church. In his letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, “What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 1:13, NIV). In the same letter, Paul instructs Timothy to present himself “to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15, NIV). Christian theologians by definition should become involved in the teaching ministry of the church. Their knowledge and study of God’s acts in human history should be motivated by the desire to become good servants of God who correctly explain and communicate the Christian message. A good theologian does not drive people away from God. On the contrary, the theologian inspires people to explore and experience God.

Apologetical

Apologetics focuses on the defense of Christian doctrines against false teachings and against external opposition (competing religions). All Christians should be ready to defend and explain the Christian message. The Apostle Peter instructs Christians to be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks for a reason” for their faith and hope in Christ (1 Pet 3:15, ESV). In doing apologetics, we must distinguish the act of defending God and the act of defending our understanding of God. The Scriptures call us to defend our understanding of God and not to defend God. The Christian God defends God’s self. Our apologetics should be contextual. For example, if you live in a context that considers rationality as the primary measuring standard, you will need to find ways to logically express the Christian message.

There are, broadly speaking, two interrelated ways of ways of doing apologetics; these are negative apologetics and positive apologetics. *Negative apologetics* seeks to provide responses to the challenges to the truth-claims of a competing religion, and also to remove the potential or actual

Introducing Christian Theologies

obstacles to believing the truth-claims. A negative apologist is defensive in his or her tactics. Conversely, *positive apologetics* seeks to provide reasons for supporting the truth-claims of Christianity. A positive apologist plays offense in his or her tactics. Maintaining a balance between positive and negative apologetics is needed for the spiritual and intellectual life of the church.

Praxis

Some theologians see the task of theology as providing ethical guidance for the Christian life. Theologians in this sense are the ethicists of the church. A theology that does not lead people to conform to the life of Christ will risk being irrelevant. Historically, a good number of theologians have pursued theological issues that merely satisfy their intellectual curiosity but fail to strengthen the faith of the majority of Christians who do not have theological training. Such theologians answer the questions their peers ask but ignore the questions lay Christians are asking about how to live and please God in their daily lives. This is one of the reasons many Christians rarely read the works of professional theologians.

Theology and God

God is the main subject matter of theology. In Christian theology, God's identity, modes of existence, and actions are the primary focus. Other topics are considered in relation to the doctrine of God. How can human beings come to know God? Is it possible to speak adequately about God's character, actions, and relationship with the world? Two factors in particular inhibit human beings from having a direct access. First, the truth about God is hidden from us because God's nature is different from human nature. We cannot study finite human beings with the intention to gain reliable and exhaustive knowledge about the infinite God. Second, sin immensely distorts our understanding of God, making it impossible for us to speak effectively and correctly about God's existence without God's help and self-disclosure. One of the greatest effects of sin on human perception, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger), is to see ourselves as the "center of things, around which the world and everyone else have to turn." We see "other things and people solely in relation to our own selves, regarding them as satellites, as it were, revolving around the hub of our own self."¹²

12. Ratzinger, *Credo for Today*, 10.

How can these two dilemmas be addressed? The answer is God's self-disclosure. Apart from God's revelation we can only guess or speculate about who God is and what God does. The best theologians can do is interpret and appropriate God's self-disclosure and manifestations in the world. What this means is that theologians cannot be God's custodians, because they have limited knowledge of God. On the contrary, like all people who desire to know and experience God, theologians are to see themselves as God-seekers. They should be willing to learn and to revise their theologies, since theologies are prone to distortions. It is a theological mistake, therefore, to assume that God can be completely known and mastered or that human beings can always explain God's actions in a neat and tidy way. Since God is radically different from us, our knowledge of God is partial. Doing theology can be likened to making a cognitive and experiential journey in which one sometimes encounters what may be unknowable. As finite creatures, there are certain things human beings may never fully know about themselves, about the world, and about God. We may be unable to explain exhaustively some of the things we will come to know about God and God's relationship with the world. We may never know with certainty, for example, the fate of some classes of people who lived and died without hearing the Christian message about Jesus Christ.

EXERCISE 1.2

Which of the following may be knowable, and which may be unknowable? Among those you believe to be knowable, which ones do you think can be explained exhaustively? (a) The existence of God; (b) the doctrine of the Incarnation; (c) the doctrine of the Trinity; (d) God's involvement in human affairs; and (e) the inspiration of the Scriptures.

Theology's Nature

Theology Is a Human Endeavor

Whereas God, the principal subject matter of theology, is divine, theologians and theologies are human. Some implications of this are noteworthy.

FOCUS QUESTION:

What are the features of Christian theology?

First, our theologies can be (and often are) inadequate. Theology is fallible because human beings construct them. Since this is the case, theologians should be ready

Introducing Christian Theologies

and willing to correct or revise their theologies when necessary. Second, theology cannot encapsulate the mystery of God. Daniel Migliore has rightly noted that “theology is not mere repetitions of traditional doctrines but a persistent search for truth to which they point and which they only partially and brokenly express.”¹³ Theology should be done in a way that gives room for a fresh encounter with God. Third, our theologies, in the end, will remain approximate and provisional interpretations and appropriations of the mystery of God. They will always fall short of the mystery and glory of God. They should be dynamic and ongoing reflections on God’s self-disclosure.

Theology Is Contextual

The word *context* (from which the word *contextual* is derived) is defined broadly to include the experience, history, social location, religious aspiration, language, and culture of an individual or a community. Although not readily acknowledged by many theologians, every theology is contextual insofar as it arises from a specific community and also is designed to address the needs of that community. This is always the case, whether a theologian consciously imagines his or her theology in this way or not. By nature, then, theology has a *context* comprising several other contexts, such as the context of the theologian, the context of the intended recipients of his or her theology, the contexts of the communities that produced the Scriptures, and the contexts of contemporary global Christian communities. These contexts raise questions about theological judgments. How should Christians make theological judgments? Two tests are helpful: the *test of Christian identity* and the *test of relevance*.

The Test of Christian Identity

Where a theology bears the name “Christian,” such a theology is obliged to demonstrate its *Christianness* or its Christian identity. Although theologians disagree on the criteria for Christian identity, they tend to focus on three.

The first criterion is *faithfulness to Scripture*. Christian theologians also do not agree on the extent of the authority of the Scriptures and the books that should be included in the Scriptures. But they normally agree that an adequate Christian theology must demonstrate faithfulness to the Scriptures. Of course, what faithfulness to the Scriptures really means is a matter of intense debate. For some, the Scriptures determine whether a specific

13. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 1–2.

theology is authentically Christian. Any theology that contradicts or opposes the teaching of the Christian Scriptures is judged to be non-Christian.

The second criterion is *faithfulness to Christian traditions*. Christian theology should also demonstrate its continuity with the earliest Christian theological confessions about God's actions in the world, particularly in the life, teaching, and experience of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that theologians cannot question or revise church traditions. The theologies of the classical ecumenical councils (such as the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE) function as theological guides. They can help theologians today in the quest to construct theologies that are faithful to the Scriptures. It should be recognized, however, that all classical Christian doctrine, which constitutes the tradition of Christianity, was framed with the language and thought forms of specific cultural contexts to answer the questions of Christians of that era.

The third criterion is *Christ-centeredness*. Christian theology should also be Christ-centered. It ought to learn from Jesus Christ's teaching on God's identity and relationship with the world. If "theology is a witness to the gospel,"¹⁴ as the Japanese theologian Kazō Kitamori has reminded us, Christians, as Christ-followers, should construct theologies that learn from and are faithful to Jesus Christ. Any theology that conflicts with or contradicts the life and teaching of Jesus Christ has failed the test of Christian identity. Christian theology ought to be Christ-centered insofar as it seeks to understand God from Jesus' perspectives. Jesus Christ ought to be understood as the *revealer and interpreter* of divinity and humanity—the one who critiques and reshapes our preconceived understandings of God and human beings.

The Test of Relevance

A theology can pass the test of Christian identity and still become irrelevant to a Christian community. Therefore, Christian theology should pass both the test of Christian identity and the test of relevance. Theologians are to explain the Scriptures' testimony about God's actions in the world in a way that engages constructively with the questions arising from the lives of people in their own communities. Here is the summary of the test of relevance. First, we are to become suspicious of any attempt by a theologian to universalize his or her theology or to superimpose the theology on all contexts without subjecting it to a critical evaluation. Second, we should be willing to revise our already constructed theologies when they fail to address the ever-shifting issues that concern our communities. Our

14. Kitamori, *Theology and the Pain of God*, 19.

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theologies should improve human conditions by providing both intellectual and practical suggestions on how to deal with the structures and theologies that perpetuate evils in the world. Our theologies should not ignore human misery and suffering. They should contribute to intellectual conversation and offer practical ways to tackle human trafficking, genocide, and dehumanizing economic structures. Third, Christian theology should be an ongoing endeavor that explains and defends Christianity's claims about God's existence and actions.

Theology and the Theologian

Jürgen Moltmann once wrote, "Like the terms *biologists*, *sociologists*, and so forth, the word *theologian* immediately suggests an educated, academically trained and competent expert."¹⁵ In a sense, this understanding of a theologian is true. Professional theologians spend many years in universities or seminaries studying to obtain a theology degree. However, one must not be led to assume that only those with theology degrees actually do or ought to do theology. This is because, in the words of Moltmann, "Theology is the business of all God's people. It is not just the affair of the theological faculties. . . . The faith of the whole body of Christians on earth seeks to know and understand. If it doesn't, it isn't Christian faith."¹⁶ All Christians are called to seek, experience, converse with, and interpret God's actions in a way that befits their immediate contexts. The function of professional theologians is to guide their communities in this endeavor. They can provide helpful guidance for people in their communities to reflect on the mystery of God and their encounter with God.

Theology and Method

A theological method is a procedure a theologian adopts to accomplish certain theological tasks. Method is incredibly difficult to conceptualize because of its abstract nature. A theological method is an abstract device employed by theologians to interpret and express the mystery and revelation of God. Method relates to the issues of

FOCUS QUESTION:

From which sources should a theologian draw insights to construct a theology?

15. Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 10.

16. *Ibid.*, 11.

procedure, selection of sources, and use of sources in the process of theological reflection. In theological discourse, theological method deals with procedure and sources. It asks and answers the following questions: How should a theologian proceed in his or her theological inquiry? Where should the theologian begin? Where should a theologian draw insights for his or her theology? How are the sources to be used?

A theological *method* and the *actual contents* of a given theology should mutually interact when theology is being done. This is important because of the nature of the primary subject matter of Christian theology, namely, God. Since we cannot *master* God, we must allow our theological knowledge to inform our theological method, and vice versa. We must be suspicious of the fallacious assumption that a *right method* guarantees a *right theological knowledge*. Also, we should not necessarily see the various methods as mutually exclusive. Theologians sometimes borrow ideas from different methods when they construct their theologies.

“Theology not only asks questions but must be self-conscious about the way it does so. This is, in brief, the problem of theological method. While much has been written about theological method in recent years, we are far from any clear consensus. No doubt differences in theological method reflect fundamental differences in understandings of revelation and the mode of God’s presence in the world. They also show the limitations of any single method to do all the tasks of theology.”

—Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*

Broadly, Christian theology walks three paths: *theocentric* (God-centered), *cosmocentric* (cosmos- or world-centered), and *Christocentric* (Christ-centered). The theocentric pathway (or pathway from “above”) views God as the first principle both in the order of being and in the order of knowing.¹⁷ Theologians who follow this pathway begin their theological inquiry from the particularity of Christianity and (generally) move to common human experience. They believe that God inspired the Scriptures and also revealed God’s self ultimately in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. Tertullian, Augustine, Anselm, and Kwame Bediako are among the numerous prominent theologians who have adopted the theocentric pathway.

The cosmocentric pathway (or pathway from “below”) construes the world as the first principle in knowing. Theologians who follow this pathway begin their theological inquiry from a common human experience and (generally) move to the particularity of Christianity. The majority of the theologians who follow this pathway to theology believe God has revealed

17. Braaten, “Scripture, Church, and Dogma,” 145.