Chapter 1

How God Makes Theologians

Astonishment and Theological Virtue

Just about the worst thing that could happen to Christian theologians is for them to be taken too seriously. I don't mean to imply that I and my colleagues are all farcical figures, of course. Perhaps we could be compared to children wading in the sea: studiously cautious, not intending to get wet, but magnificently upended by the vast, joyful rolling of the tide. The tide pulling at theologians is God, trying to get us to float, even swim, or at least admit we have no business floundering along on two feet in such a current.

I picture theologians this way (myself included) because we are essentially hapless folk, ever prone to manage and clarify what remains, mercifully, beyond our grasp. The divine currents we paddle about in – grace, for example, or forgiveness, or resurrection – are, right down to their last filaments of eternal glory, entirely unaccountable to us, unexpected, and undeserved. The ordinary cycles of everyday life, by contrast, are conveniently predictable; they amble amiably along into the sleek charts and scholarly monographs in which we render them as subjects of study. Most of us contemporary theologians, soberly trained in the best scholarly methods, try our hardest to analyze the divine realities by dutifully herding them into the approved pens of dialectical arguments and critical studies. Yet when we open our mouths to discourse of deity, out come skirling parables, hopelessly impossible histories, and such reckless extravagances as the idea of a God who refuses to stay exclusively divine, and a savior who's such a miserable failure he cannot even save himself. As the Apostle Paul said, the whole thing seems comically weak and foolish by any human standard you like (1 Corinthians 1: 18–31).

Who can blame us if we theologians try to remain inconspicuous? The danger is that we will attempt to blend in all too well; we will master the academic and ecclesiastical arts so proficiently that people will not notice how outrageous is the

subject of our work. We may even manage, perhaps without realizing it, to substitute for the outlandishness of Christian faith, a gray orderliness in which nothing unexpected ever happens or ever could. But every once in a great while, theologians of such good humor and humility come along that they are content to teach the truth about God precisely by *letting* the ludicrous inadequacies of their art appear in broad daylight. They let the divine truth shimmer gracefully in the soaking garments of their patiently constructed arguments, having walked through yet another doorway with grace like a pail of water perched comically above. That is my warning and my confession. We theologians cannot show you the *reality* of grace in a proper argument. We cannot explain it according to rational necessities. We can only gesture in what we believe is the right direction and hope our hand waving will entice you close enough to get splashed, indeed immersed, yourself.

This does not mean that the study of theology is a fruitless task. Like the study of poetry or music in a university setting, academic theology can accomplish any number of useful purposes. It should shed light on the history and forms of theologizing, on the ideas and imagery we try to compose with, on the nature and interrelationship of the thoughts of vast swathes of humankind. But at the end of the day these chores ought to leave one more sensitive to the truth and beauty that beckons ungraspably from within poetry or music or theology, not earnestly confident that one has wrestled reality to the ground. While writing one of the most voluminous efforts in theology in human history, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) paused to remark:

> If anyone should *not* find himself astonished and filled with wonder when he becomes involved in one way or another with theology, he would be well advised to consider once more, from a certain remoteness and without prejudice, what is involved in this undertaking. The same holds true for any who should have accomplished the feat of *no longer* being astonished, instead of becoming continually *more* astonished all the time that he concerns himself with this subject. When he reconsiders the subject, however, such a man might find that astonishment wells up within him anew, or perhaps even for the first time. And this time such wonder might not desert him but might rather become increasingly powerful in him. That astonishment should remain or become wholly foreign to him is scarcely conceivable. But should that happen, both he and theology would fare better if he would devote his time to some other occupation. . . . If such astonishment is lacking, the whole enterprise of even the best theologian would canker at the roots. On the other hand, as long as even a poor theologian is capable of astonishment, he is not lost to the fulfillment of his task.[1]

As I have been suggesting, this recurring astonishment that theologians suffer has everything to do with the reality they seek to understand.

By now you may be sufficiently alarmed to suffer at least some mild wonderment yourself. You wanted an introduction to Christian theology, but so far you've been hearing about the peculiar fate of theologians. Indeed, as you probably noticed, I titled this crucial gateway chapter, "How God *Makes* Theologians." Why? What

is it about theology that requires such attention to the impact its subject matter has upon its students? After all, studying the properties of chemical compounds doesn't turn you into the chemicals you are studying, nor do we imagine that such a metamorphosis would greatly assist the process of understanding. The trouble and astonishment of theology is that something like this does (or at least, potentially, can) happen in its case. A mysterious affinity kindles between theology's object and theologians. As this happens, theologians start to catch glimpses of reality, shimmering and beckoning far beyond the proper frames and disciplines of theology itself. Like children playing at the water's edge, theologians find themselves tugged by the tide and tumbled by waves that delight and lure them deeper. Of course, scholars in many disciplines find themselves enraptured by their objects of study. This certainly happens (or should happen!) in theology also, but I'm afraid there is something yet more unsettling going on.

Consider, by analogy, the difference between studying the chemical composition of a rock and studying the psychology of a human person. It's true that in both cases good scholars will grow fascinated by their objects of study, and devoted to the truth about them that they are seeking to discover and understand. Really great scholars might even speak about trying to learn from the rock or the human person, about letting the object of study become, in a sense, their teacher. But this is clearly going to be quite different in the two cases. The rock will speak only by means of an enigmatic silence, benign but undeniably stony. But the human person will be a much more active participant in the work: not simply filling out forms corresponding to the scholar's research template, but perhaps interrupting, correcting, transforming through conversation everything the scholar may have thought were the real data.

And what if the person you were studying had especially peculiar habits, like severe sleepwalking or refusing to talk with you except over gargantuan meals of fresh mussels in which you were required to partake? Pretty soon, if you really wanted to understand, you might begin to develop new habits yourself – allowing you to study your sleepwalking mussel-eater more adroitly and naturally. At first, you would tell yourself, I'm not really a nocturnal person and I don't really like mollusks of any kind whatsoever. Yet there you are, every evening, gorging with your research subject on mussels and trailing along a few hours later through the darkness on the nightly ramble. What has happened? You have become, at least for study purposes, a learner, an apprentice to the object of your study – who has in fact become your teacher. And for a while at least, you have acquired something of a new way of being, new habits of existence that fit you for your study encounters. We could call these new habits your sleepwalking mussel-eater research virtues; they are the dispositions that allow you a certain flourishing and even excellence as a student of sleepwalking mussel-eaters.

But now suppose that your research subject were even more peculiar still. Suppose that as you drew near, this person, astonishingly, told you the truth about *yourself*: both the truth you had been afraid to admit and a yet deeper truth you had never known but always longed to hear. Suppose this person was so available

for you, so vulnerably honest and self-disclosing, and showed such fidelity towards your own work, that you began to develop a high degree of faith in the person's essential goodness and reliability. Over time, such a research subject might engender a fair portion of both humility and hope within you, a sense that your study would indeed take you somewhere wonderful and real. And suppose that over time you began to catch glimpses of your research subject helping others with such generosity and breathtaking selflessness that you began to be inspired yourself, feeling a kindred sort of love for people, and gradually finding yourself able to converse with your subject more freely, to understand more deeply, as you yourself began to sense something of this passion your subject had for others. In such a case, you would indeed be studying by a kind of apprenticeship, with your subject as your true teacher. Moreover, the research virtues that would have begun to grow in you – those habits equipping you to succeed in just being around and understanding this person – these virtues would have truly begun to transform you. *Faith, and hope, and love* taking root in you would point to a remarkable subject of study.

Thomas Aquinas (*c.*1225–74) calls such habits the "theological virtues," for they turn out to equip one to participate in a theological life, a life of *theo-logia*, of speech and meaning and truth about God and, astonishingly, *with* God (see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, question 62).These dispositions are the making of theologians; for they are the impact this subject (God) has upon those who draw near. As Thomas puts it, these theological virtues are the way God's life re-creates a human life as that human life partakes in God's life: "as kindled wood partakes of the nature of fire."[2]

So this is why it's worth talking a bit about what makes a theologian – because it offers us a glimpse of the "research subject" who makes such an impression on the theologian (indeed, a subject who is in the researcher like fire is in wood, according to Thomas Aquinas). We notice that, unlike having a rock or a sleep-walking mussel-eater as a research subject, the theologian is trying to engage with someone who seems to be supremely free, whose mystery is only available to the researcher by an act of free self-disclosure that is most likely to be visible in the peculiar influence it has upon the researcher. This subject is not like a lab specimen or even someone you can coax into the research program with the promise of a free meal. That's probably what makes theologians seem so hapless sometimes. The deepest truth of the one they seek to understand is only expressible, sometimes, in the transformations of their own lives.

Where do we get this idea that trying to understand God is going to have such a strange impact on people? From the same Paul the Apostle who said the truth of God seems foolish by human standards. Paul considers the variety of ways that early followers of Jesus express their common life, and he wonders about the leading impulses and gifts they each manifest. He thinks this gifted, transforming, communal life is in fact an ongoing organic expression of *Jesus*' continuing life in the world, constantly being brought to life by what Paul calls the Spirit. This means that the habits and virtues and gifts of the Christian community are in some

mysterious way animated by the same Spirit who animated and directed Jesus. And guess what, in Paul's view, are the three most important of these communal habits of reflecting-Jesus-by-the-Spirit: the same three that Thomas calls the theological virtues. "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13: 13). What am I saying here?

I'm suggesting that (if we take Paul into account) we can be a good bit more precise about what happens to theologians, and why, and *how theologians are formed by their encounter with God*. For what Paul seems to be saying is that when you see these characteristics (faith, hope, and love) showing up in anybody – even a theologian – what you have going on is not just a little of the divine way of life impressing itself within the life of a human being. More than that, you have someone whose life has begun to partake of Christ's way of being in the world; what you have is someone whose way of thinking, and acting, and desiring is being inspired by the same Spirit who led Jesus towards the truth of himself and his relationship with one he called Abba. It is these three – the Spirit, Jesus, Abba – who seem to be the continually flowing source of Christian theology, and are the real teachers of theologians. In fact, we could even say that theology is constantly in danger of getting carried away – from a respectable discipline managed by theologians to a mysterious sharing in God's way of life, God's talk (*theo-logia*), God's knowing and loving of Godself. This would be theology in the most absolute and perfect sense.

Why do Christians think this?

Resurrection to Pentecost: Where Christian Theology Begins

Perhaps the simplest way to answer that question is to look at how early followers of Jesus tried to think about what had happened to them. We're looking for clues about what it's like to encounter God, and how that encounter might shape the way you think and feel about things (in analogy to how hanging around a sleep-walker mussel-eater might shape you). The New Testament portrays the disciples as not only routinely failing to understand Jesus but as frightened and disappointed to the point of abandoning him at the time of his crucifixion. Something which they came to describe as Jesus' resurrection began to change this, and began to form the disciples in a new way.

Let me introduce a brief primary source and commentary here, in order to reflect very directly on this transformation. Please believe me when I say that the most important thing I can offer you in this book is likely to be some exposure to these primary sources and some assistance in thinking through them. So don't skip this bit!

Roughly thirty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul wrote a letter directed to the Jesus-following community in Rome. It gives an indispensable early

glimpse of how the events surrounding Jesus were coming to inform the life of the community of his followers throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. My elucidation of the text is keyed by verse numbers to the original source. Most of what follows in this chapter will depend upon what we can notice here in thinking about these passages from the Letter to the Romans.

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, 6: 3–11

3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

3–4 The early followers of Jesus adapted the ritual washing of baptism to become a sign of initiation into Jesus' own death and new life. Jesus' death is already understood as somehow *sharable*, an event or state of existence that remains open and available for those seeking it.

4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into his death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

4 Paul understands Jesus to have been "raised" into a new state of aliveness, intense presence, and sheer vivacity by the Father; and he understands this to be an act of the Father's "glory," the shining forth of divine power in a manifest way. We might say that this power of the Father, when it appears *within* history, takes the form of the resurrection. In other words, the creative and giving life of the Father, shining forth within our world, looks like and indeed *is* a human being alive again entirely beyond the power of death. In other texts (e.g., 2 Cor. 5: 17) Paul describes this form of the Father's giving within our world as an event of new creation.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. **6** We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.

5–6 Sharing in Jesus' death makes possible a sharing in this raising into a new life by the power of the Father. The crucial feature to note here is the way Paul envisions the death and resurrection of Christ as reaching into the lives of believers. Paul speaks of the "old self" as an identity we are forced into over time by sin (we might think of the ways in which we are sometimes forced into false positions by other people's expectations or peer pressure or our own poor judgments). This "old self" is for Paul not really the truth about us but rather a kind of lie we have been forced into accepting as the truth. Think, for example, of how the victims of racism are often forced to conceive of themselves in the demeaning and derogatory frame of mind used by the dominant groups. Paul believes that in accepting crucifixion, Jesus is able to enter these false or old selves, these sinful constructions of personal life, and let them be "destroyed."

Because of this, believers who "have been united with him in a death like his," that is, who have surrendered their old false selves completely, "will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

7 For whoever has died is freed from sin.

7 In other words, a new identity, a new sense of self comes to be formed, and in Paul's view this is the beginning of a person's new life flowing no longer from the dominating and enslaving patterns of sin but from the liberating power of God.

8 But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

8 Just as Jesus' dying is the power that puts the self enslaved by sin to death, so also Jesus' rising into new life is the power that generates a new self for believers.

9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

10 The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

9–10 Paul conceives of what has happened to Jesus as an irreversible breakthrough into freedom ("death no longer has dominion over him"), and a transfer into a new and infinitely abundant source of life that is not in any way dominated by sin or death or fear or any of the things that control people. For Paul this new source of identity or personal existence is God; Jesus now "lives to God," meaning that Jesus' whole being now springs directly from God's infinite life and freedom as compared with the limited biological life (further weakened by sin) that normally sources one's existence.

11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

11 Paul is convinced that this transfer of the source of one's existence from the dominating slavery of sin to the liberating freedom of God is now also happening to believers in Christ. This dying and rising is the impact that Jesus has on those who live in fidelity and companionship with him.

In this foundational passage, we have a preliminary sense of how early Christians understood their life to be shaped and formed, in a continually renewing way, by the events of Jesus' death and resurrection. Most of what would later come to be regarded as Christian theology springs from this ongoing transformation of the community. This is true in two senses: first, because the basic *beliefs* of the Christian community (which theology explores, seeking deeper understanding and coherence) all arise in various ways from this interaction of the community with Christ; and second, because the very *character* of the community in search of theological understanding is also continually shaped by the community's ongoing encounter with Christ. In fact it is this latter feature that gives rise to those chief characteristics or gifts (faith, hope, and love) that Paul highlights in his First Letter to the Corinthians and that Thomas Aquinas discusses as the "theological virtues."

I can give you a little better picture of this integrity between the community's beliefs and its character, and how they both spring from the community's encounter with God, by looking at another passage from the same Letter of Paul to the Romans.

Letter to the Romans 8: 9–11, 14–17

9 But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.
10 But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.
11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

9–10 To live "in the flesh" for Paul is to live according to the sources of the old self, namely, a ceaseless necessity and domination by the powers holding influence over one's life. To be affiliated with Christ, by contrast, means to be animated and enlivened by the same Spirit who animated him. Living as the followers of Christ comes to mean living from and with and for Christ, who dwells hiddenly (or mystically) within the patterns of the community's life together. In this sense the "body" may be passing away, living within the structures of the broken and sinful world, but the Spirit who enlivens Christ is now also the Spirit of Christ's community of followers.

11 Paul now refers also to "him to who raised Jesus from the dead." This is a crucial moment, for we have here (1) the One who by means of this Spirit raises Jesus from the dead, (2) Jesus who has died and is raised to new life, and (3) the Spirit who is the agent of this new life and freedom. In other words we have the Three who in later Christian reflection would be named the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Paul's point for the moment is simply that the very same one who raised Jesus will also pour out this life-giving Spirit within the community of Jesus. This is doubly remarkable, for it means not only that in some sense the community lives as Jesus lives – directly from the Spirit – within it and as its very head and heart; but it also means that the community stands in the same relationship to the Father as Jesus does. Both are raised by the very same Spirit from death to a new kind of life that reflects the glory of divine life within the world of time.

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

14 Those who follow Jesus, who are "led by the Spirit of God," even as Jesus was so led in his earthly life, are also with Jesus "children of God." Note again the three-fold influence of God upon the community:

Jesus becomes the pattern and form of its life, the Spirit becomes the guiding inspiration and enlivening power, and in this way the community together discovers a new identity as "children of God."

15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" **16** it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

15–16 This new relationship with the One who raised Jesus from the dead is underlined by Paul, precisely in terms of its formative impact upon the community. For the community's new identity, the new spirit that animates it is not "a spirit of slavery" leading "back into fear," but on the contrary "a spirit of adoption." In other words, the transformation from an old self driven by fear and necessity to a new self set free is a transformation bestowed through relationship with the very same One whom Jesus called "Abba." This new relationship seems to be opened up and made available to the community through Jesus; he cries out "Abba!" within and on behalf of the community, and so recovers for it this lost or broken relationship with the Creator and giver of all life.

17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

17 The ability of the community to pray in and through Christ to the Father by the inward working of the Spirit is, says Paul, the witness to the community's new relationship to the Father. Sharing in Christ's suffering, as we saw above, sets believers free from their old selves controlled by sin and fear; and this opens up for them Jesus' own trusting relationship with the Father, so that they may come to be raised into that eternal life and thus "be glorified with him."

This passage from Romans 8 shows how utterly the ongoing life of the Christian community is (in Paul's view) a kind of living icon of divine activity in the world. The Church comes into being as that bit of the world within which God makes a finite, historical sign of what God is doing all the time and everywhere: forming the community into a new pattern of life (Christ-like), filling it with the Spirit of that life of new freedom and trust, and so drawing it into a new identity given through its new relationship with God as the outpouring Source or Father of all life.

Why is all this important for figuring out how theologians do their job? Because it shows how, exactly, we might notice God's teaching presence as the source of theology. And this for two reasons. First, because God is the acting agent who re-creates the new community and brings it to life with a new identity as God's beloved child; in other words, God is the acting agent continually evoking and provoking that new identity and *character*, that new way of being

in the world. Second, God is equally the acting agent who inspires and incites the Church into some *teaching* about what is happening to it. And as Christians reflect on what happens to them – from the resurrection of Jesus to the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost – they notice a trinitarian pattern to their reflective life.

Let me put it this way:

1 Jesus' followers are shaped by him into a new form of life that shares his form of life; so also are their beliefs about what God is doing shaped and given a form in thought and word and eventually creed. Following Jesus, as opposed to following someone else, gives a very definite form to life and thought.
2 Jesus' followers are led by the Spirit into an ever deepening sense of new identity; this happens as they discover, through the Spirit, the meaning of Christ's relationship with the Father and their share in that relationship. So also are they led ever deeper into the truth and meaning of their beliefs about what God is doing.
3 Jesus' followers, formed in Christ and led by the Spirit, are continually faring into the presence of the Father who in Christ and through the Spirit raises them from death to life. So also they are journeying into that state of blessed intimacy with God when their faith and *beliefs* will come to an end, being consummated in the vision of God and perfect beatitude (faith will be superseded by sight, and belief by knowing).

What I have been suggesting here is that the character of Christian life and the beliefs of Christian faith are really two expressions of the same activity, namely, God's way of re-creating the world. One expression takes the form of practices of compassion and worship, and the other takes the form of beliefs, teachings, and a ceaseless quest of faith towards understanding. But both the practices of Christian life and the theory of Christian faith are human expressions of God acting within the lives and minds of the believing community. And both expressions have a markedly three-fold or trinitarian pattern. This means that theology itself, as the quest of faith for understanding, is really an expression of divine life at work re-creating the world in the little laboratory of the Church. We could think of this trinitarian life of God as the hidden spring of theology:

1 At the still center of every theological formulation, even the most cumbersome and abstruse, is really the formative and expressive power of Christ the *Word* provoking the church into reflective teaching.
2 At the yearning core of every theologian's search for understanding is the ceaseless striving of the *Spirit*, pulling the church into an ever deeper sharing in its new identity in Christ.
3 And at the unseen end of all theological endeavor is the ineffable reality of the *Father*, calling all things into the perfect fullness of their truth.

For many Christians across the centuries, this has meant that theology is really a form of prayer or communion with God, in which, ultimately, the thinking of the theologian about God comes to life as *God's presence* within the life of the theologian.

But Can You Study Theology without Having to Believe?

Does all this mean that everyone who studies theology needs to be a believer or lead a mystical life? The short answer is simply, "No" (though, if that should happen, you need not be alarmed). One can study the coherence and interrelationship of Christian ideas and even work out for oneself something of how they might shed light on many other topics, all without necessarily being a believer oneself. It would, on the other hand, be a most peculiar study of Christian theology which was quite unaware of what Christians themselves understood to be its hidden source of life.

By the time of early modernity, however, precisely this mystery of divine life had become a disputed question rather than a foundational axiom. So whereas earlier eras of theology had assumed the living priority of divine agency and teaching, this was very far from being a comfortable starting place for modern theology. This has led, I fear, to an unfortunate stiltedness and awkwardness when the subject of theology comes up in the academy, because the living spring of theology – in encounter with God – has had to be soberly left out of the discussion.[3] But we can, I think, make a useful and legitimate distinction between needing to believe in God in order to study theology (which I agree is not always necessary), and needing to understand that Christian communities themselves believe that *theology comes to birth because of their ongoing encounter with God*. The latter point is quite crucial, because without it our picture of theology would be gravely distorted.

One needs, in other words, to entertain the idea (which Christians believe) that Christian theology is an expression of an ongoing transformation of the world in encounter with God; otherwise one will not be studying Christian theology at all but only a boringly lifeless taxidermy of it in which nothing unexpected, gloriously unnecessary, or unbelievable can ever happen or be considered. And it is, Christians believe, precisely these sorts of wonder and astonishment that characterize the authentic impact of God on the world, and so on theology.

This is not such an odd assumption with which to engage in academic study. Many of us have accepted that we did not necessarily have to believe in this or that concept or theory in order to try to study its features and coherence, to understand its origins and its meaning for those who interpret the world by means of it. I do not necessarily have to believe in the truth of Marxism or even in the existence of quarks and gluons in order to study political philosophy or quantum physics. But I do have to be sufficiently attuned to what Marxists and quantum physicists think and say so that I can begin to understand their theories from the

inside. The alternative would be simply to translate everything they say into my own terms and my own way of thinking about everything. But suppose it is precisely my own terms and my own way of thinking about everything that is incapable of conceiving the essential ideas of Marxists or quantum physicists? Nothing new or astonishing could ever really "get in."

I would be like a person who tries to understand Spanish by translating everything into English; I would never learn to think in Spanish or perceive reality in terms of Hispanic culture. I would have a kind of pale, insipid, Anglo version of what is in reality vibrant and vivacious. Furthermore, I would never have access to the particularly deft instrument that Hispanic culture could give me for exploring certain features of life. By analogy, theology (along with many other disciplines) serves as a particular kind of instrument, an apt conceptuality, for exploring various dimensions of life. And, clearly, assimilating theology's own mode of reflection to those of, say, cultural anthropology or philosophy or psychology, will only short-circuit theology's unique aptness for getting at truth in certain ways that other disciplines do not.

Perhaps I am needlessly belaboring this point. You may be perfectly happy exploring theology as an exotic realm of thought without feeling the least need to believe everything it has to say. If so, bravo for you; you are already going to find far more of interest than the sort of students who begin by asking theology not to talk about anything which they don't already know.

Perhaps you are wondering, on the other hand, whether I really mean to suggest that Christian theology is not in fact actually true or that having Christian faith makes very little difference to the theological endeavor. Let me try to take each of these concerns in turn. First, of course I think Christian theology is really true, indeed (speaking personally) I believe it bears within it a truth more truthful than anything else I can think of. But as I've been opining all along, this truth is not something I can just prove to you as an act of logical prestidigitation; it is a truth more like the truth you discover in getting to know someone with whom you've begun falling in love. Old marriage rites had the happy pair promising themselves to each other by saying, "I plight thee my troth," troth being the word (emerging from Old English) that meant truth precisely as pledged fidelity and loyalty.

The truth theology bears within itself is this kind of truth that discovers itself to people in a relationship with someone (God) who is faithful to them. This is a good example of how reducing Christian theology exclusively to the terms and concepts and logic of everything we already know is a disaster. Because if I try to translate theology this way into a series of truths that I can somehow prove to you according to all the things you already know, then theology's real truth – its truth as discovered through relationship with God – will become pristinely eclipsed by the smaller, tidier, and much more manageable kinds of truth that I can demonstrate. But of course, once again, we'd have arrived not at real Christian theology but a chilly simulacrum with not even a hint of the poignant depths and heart-stopping heights of the real thing. So somehow, good academic study of theology

has to suggest the intelligibility and the truthfulness of Christian theology without constricting the full scope of those to an academician's ivory tower.

In an interesting lecture entitled "Theology in the university," the physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne remarks:

> Theology has a natural role in an age of science just because it shares with modern science this quest for intelligibility. A theological faculty is a necessary presence in a true university because the search for knowledge is incomplete if it does not include in its aim gaining knowledge of the Creator as well as gaining knowledge of creatures. The unity of knowledge is fractured if theology is excluded.[4]

So the common quest for the truth and intelligibility of existence, which academic disciplines are privileged to pursue, is not somehow politely put aside whenever theologians happen to swan into a classroom. Polkinghorne's point is that theology is deft at pursuing an aspect of reality that some other disciplines may not be; my point is congruent but slightly different, namely that theologians not only pursue a different aspect of reality, but that their exposure to this reality may, in important and useful ways, shape their personal capacities for knowing this dimension of reality. By contrast, as one theologian famously observed, one doesn't expect necessarily to become personally warmer by studying the laws of thermodynamics; whereas studying the object of theology may, if the theologian is honest and open, improve the level of communication and interaction with theology's object of study.

As to the question of faith and theology, I have to make a little confession: my personal hope is that everyone who studies Christian theology will in fact be given (should this be desired) the gift of faith. But, in the view of all this that I've been proposing, the gift of faith is entirely up to God anyway, and so neither here nor there for academic purposes. You may escape your study of theology perfectly unscathed by faith. In any case, for the purposes of *studying* Christian theology, it is adequate simply to notice and ponder the mysterious role that Christians believe God plays in shaping their life and thought. So, without insisting in the least that you, gentle readers, must all become theologians yourselves, let me sketch very briefly some turning points in a theological life. This should give us a final, further, sense of what Christians think happens to those whom God lures into encounter and how that gives rise to all the various ideas that Christians have.