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Christian Theology

Judith Wolfe

This article introduces Christian theology in its substantial, structural, biblical, historical, and contextual dimensions. Section 1 lays out the substance of theology: after an introductory discussion of the term 'theology' and its developing meaning within Christianity, the section introduces theology's central subjects, outlining their basic claims, their key questions, and the main challenges they face. Section 2 lays out the structure within which this substance takes shape: the principles on whose basis theology treats its subjects, the extent of its capacities to do so, and the settings in which it functions. This section also outlines the organization of theology as an academic discipline. Section 3 discusses the sources of theological content, practice, and imagination in the Bible: the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Bible as a unified canon. This section also briefly discusses the relationship between theology and modern biblical studies. Section 4 offers a brief overview of the history of theology, enumerating the challenges and achievements, as well as the institutions, forms, and people that enabled them, of the five large periods of Christian history in the West: the Patristic era, the Middle Ages, Reformation and post-Reformation, the Enlightenment, and late modernity. This section also outlines Eastern Orthodox periodizations after the Great Schism of East and West, and the volatile history of Jewish Christianity. Section 5 presents theology as a practice shaped by traditions: denominational traditions, spiritual traditions, and contextual traditions. Section 6 concludes the article with a brief consideration of theology as science and as art, also discussing its critical and constructive relationships to the natural, applied, and social sciences and to the visual, literary, and musical arts.

Keywords: Christianity, Christian theology, Christian doctrine, Christian denominations, Church history, Theological methods and approaches

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1 The substance of theology

1.1 Terminology and scope

The Christian use of the term ‘theology’ (from Greek *theologia*, speech or thought concerning God) has its roots in the tension between the mythic, philosophical, and cultic meanings of the term in Graeco-Roman antiquity: theology as mythic stories about the gods (*theologia fabulosa*), theology as reasoning about the nature of the divine (*theologia naturalis*), and theology as proficiency in civic religion (*theologia civilis*) (Varro, *Antiquities of Human and Divine Things*; cited in Augustine, *City of God* 6.5). In their classical context, these three senses were at odds with one another: Plato addressed the difficulty of reconciling the stories of gods told by the poets with rational criteria for defining divinity, including immutability and goodness (*Republic* 2.379). Similarly, Varro discussed the contrast between this kind of divinity and the gods of whom images might be made in civic religion (*Antiquities of Human and Divine Things* 2.1, cited in Augustine, *City of God* 4.27 and 4.31). When they confessed Jesus as the incarnate Logos and therefore as the true face of divinity, some early Christian authors consciously adopted the verb *theologeîn* in the specific sense of ‘to speak of someone as God’; that is, ‘to attribute deity to Christ’ (e.g. Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 2.1). *Theologia* as the true doctrine of God understood through his Word made flesh came to be seen as reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable aspects of pagan theology – myth, reason, and cult – in new and previously unimagined ways (Eusebius, *The History of the Church* 2.1.1).

In uniting the seemingly conflicting domains of myth, reason, and cult, the adoption of the term ‘theology’ by the early church signals the fact that Christian thought about God moves within enduring fields of tension: within the spaces created by truths that stand in tension with each other, but must nevertheless be held together in order to remain true to the breadth of divine revelation and human experience. These tensions include not only the basic Christian confessions of one God in three persons and one Saviour with two ‘natures’ (divine and human), but also other tensions, including the following: a belief in God as both utterly transcendent and intimately present; the need, but also acknowledged inability, to express divine truth in human language; the confession that universal truth has been revealed in unique historical events; a trust in ancient texts alongside an expectation of the creative agency of the Holy Spirit; an aspiration to universal community within a commitment to clearly delineated statements of faith; a detailed diagnosis of evils within a basic trust in the goodness of the world; an engagement with death as both natural and unnatural; a reliance on critical reason, tempered by a commitment to faith, hope, and love; and an orientation towards the realization and maintenance of social goods delimited by an expectation that their fulfilment awaits the return of Christ and the eternal reign of God.

The character of particular theological periods or movements is often shaped by the ways in which they endeavour to hold or resolve these tensions, including their relative failures to consider both poles or to resist premature resolutions. In the present, one dominant concern is the tension between a trust in divine revelation and ecclesial tradition on the one hand, and, on the other, awareness of the deep potential of claims to revelation and of traditional hierarchies and forces to be oppressive, manipulative, and marginalizing. This tension is being tested in a wide range of ways in feminist, liberation, Black, queer, and other emerging theologies that resist systematization and impel non-traditional forms of expression and action. Questions of power, justice, inclusion, freedom, and newness are also tested in different ways by spiritual movements, including charismatic and new monastic movements. To these and other communities, it is patent that the breadth of divine revelation and human experience can only be sustained in their promise and challenge through spiritual discipline. To many, therefore, theology is above all a way of life or a practice of prayer and devotion.

In more general modern usage, Christian theology is the systematic and critical representation, explication, examination, and elaboration of the content and form of Christian faith. It seeks to represent Christianity's statements of belief coherently, to explicate them by reference to their foundations and contexts, to examine their significance and resilience, and to elaborate them in relation to new questions and discoveries. The substance of theology is usually divided into two groups: God, and God's relation to the world. Within the first, theology asks questions about the character of God as triune (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and as described by traditional perfections such as eternity, simplicity, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and omnibenevolence (1.2). Within the second, its subjects include the creation of the world (1.3), the nature of human beings (1.4), the incarnation of the Son (1.5), the achievement of salvation (1.6), the activity of the Holy Spirit (1.7), the constitution of the church (1.8), and the 'last things' or end of the created order (1.9).

1.2 Doctrine of God

The doctrine of God describes God as he is understood through revelation and reason.

Key claims are that God is the creator, redeemer, and perfecter of the world, and that he has revealed himself as triune, that is, as three persons in one essence. The doctrine of God therefore reasons about the perfections that belong necessarily to a God who creates and guides the world, often thought to include necessary existence, eternity, simplicity, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and omnibenevolence. More distinctively, it explicates the doctrine of the Trinity, reasoning about the relationship of the three divine persons – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit – to one another and to the divine essence, as witnessed to in the Bible and defined in the early creeds.

Key questions for theologians concern adequate accounts of God's nature and persons; of God as he is in himself (the immanent Trinity) and as he is 'for us' (the economic Trinity); the ascription of 'God' to the Father and to the triune Godhead; and the most appropriate sources and forms of discourse about God.

Key challenges include the relationship between God as portrayed in the Bible (especially the Old Testament) and God as conceptually describable; the apparent hiddenness of God; and the perceived tensions between the Christian doctrine of God as triune and ordinary logic.

1.3 Creation

The study of creation concerns the act and purposes of creation, and the created world as a whole.

A key claim is that the world is created from nothing by the triune God. In creation, God communicates his goodness and love, and establishes material and spiritual order to his glory and to the delight of his creatures.

Key theological questions about creation concern its ends or purposes (teleology), the relationship between material and non-material aspects of creation, as well as between time and eternity; and the forms its relations with its creator take.

Key challenges include the presence of evil in a good creation, and the relationship between theology and scientific representations of the world. (See [Creation](#).)

1.4 Theological anthropology

Theological anthropology is the theological study of human beings (Greek: *anthropoi*).

Key claims are that humans are created in God's image (Gen 1:27) and called to communion with him, but that their correspondence to this image and their response to this calling are marred by sin.

Key theological questions concern the forms of human relationship with God; the relationship of their freedom to their calling; their historical condition as sinful; their rights and duties; and the relationship between their material and their non-material reality.

Key challenges include how, if at all, to define human 'nature'; how to understand human life in relation to illness, decay, and death; how to understand human evil and its consequences (either natural or divinely imposed); and how to interpret the relationship between humanity and non-human creatures.

1.5 Christology

Christology is the study of Jesus Christ (Greek: *Christos*, meaning 'anointed' or 'Messiah').

Key claims are that God the Son is the second person of the triune God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, and one with him in essence; and that Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, is God the Son, born in human flesh to restore humans' broken relationship to God, and to be raised to new life with him.

Key theological questions concern adequate descriptions of the relationship between Jesus' humanity and divinity; his humanity and ours; as well as between Jesus Christ, God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit.

Key challenges include the relationship between divine providence, humanity's fall, and Christ's incarnation; the possibility and relevance of reconstructing the historical Jesus; the significance of his ministry and teachings; and the apparent tensions between the Christian doctrine of a God-man and ordinary reasoning.

1.6 Soteriology

Soteriology is the study of salvation (Greek: *soteria*).

Key claims are that humans, created in and for free communion with God, broke this communion by disdaining the divine law, and entangled themselves in evil from which they cannot now free themselves; and that God the Son became a human being to restore and raise humans into new communion with God by dying on their behalf on a cross, and rising from the dead.

Key theological questions concern adequate description of the problem and its solution; the contexts within which salvation is to be understood; the means by which it is achieved and appropriated; its scope (within and beyond humanity); and its ultimate outcome.

Key challenges include the question whether all humans or only some are saved; how Jesus' defeat of death in the resurrection is to be understood in the face of continuing experiences of death's triumph; and how a series of events in history can have universal efficacy.

1.7 Pneumatology

Pneumatology is the study of the Holy Spirit (Greek: *to Hagion Pneuma*; see [The Spirit in the Christian Bible](#)).

A key claim is that the Holy Spirit of whom the Bible speaks is the third person of the triune God, proceeding eternally from the Father (through the Son), active in creation and incarnation, and sent into the world to guide and sanctify his people.

Key theological questions concern the relationship of the Spirit to the Father and the Son, especially the question whether he proceeds from the Father only (as the Eastern churches affirm) or also from the Son (as the Western churches claim); and his sphere of action in the world, including the question of the continued presence of the 'gifts of the Spirit' which were characteristic of the New Testament church.

Key challenges include the difficulty of discerning the work of the Holy Spirit amid the subjective experience and interpretation of an individual or community; and the tendency to identify the Holy Spirit with the prevailing 'spirit of the age'.

1.8 Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology is the study of the church (Greek: *ekklesia*).

A key claim is that after Jesus' ascension into heaven, a church was established and quickened by the Holy Spirit. The church is the body of Christ in the world, sustaining his followers and extending his good news of salvation to the world.

Key theological questions concern the claims and tasks of the church both internally and externally; the right understanding and practice of the sacraments or ordinances, especially baptism and the Eucharist; the church's governance, organization and boundaries; and its relationship to wider society.

Key challenges include the relationship of the church to the Jewish people, both of whom may be called the 'people of God'; the relationship between the empirical reality of the historical church and the spiritual reality of the church affirmed by faith; the tension between the credal affirmation of the church as 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic' and the reality of church division; the tension between church membership constituted by 'tribal' descent and by personal belief; and the far-reaching differences between denominational accounts of the key questions of ecclesiology.

1.9 Eschatology

Eschatology is the study of the last things (Greek: *eschata*) – that is, the consummation of God's purposes for individual lives and for creation at large. Traditionally, this study centres on the four *eschata* or 'last things': death, judgment, heaven, and hell.

Key claims are that God created and redeemed the world so that at least some of his creatures might live joyfully with him forever; that the resurrection of Jesus announces the resurrection of all flesh; and that life and history therefore do not simply dissipate, but await judgement and fulfilment at Christ's return in glory.

Key theological questions concern appropriate interpretation of the eschatological imagery of the Bible; adequate understandings of eternal life or beatitude (as resurrected bodies, a peaceable kingdom, and/or the beatific vision); the nature and duration of punishment for evil; intermediary states of the dead awaiting judgement; the historical claims involved in the credal affirmations of the church that 'Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead'; and the nature and place of death.

Key challenges include the tension of eschatological claims with biological and cosmological laws of decay and entropy; repeatedly falsified predictions of an imminent return of Christ; the tension of biblical images of hell with the perceived injustice of eternal punishment for finite wrongdoing; and the epistemological and logical opaqueness of much eschatological material.

2 The structure of theology

How communities and theologians approach these doctrinal subjects depends on their orientation within theology as an intellectual and practical structure. This section describes theology from this structural perspective. Abstracting from concrete theological traditions, it describes the dimensions which structure any theological work, and examines the variety of ways in which these dimensions can be realized and interrelated. There are three main such dimensions:

- The *principles* of theology (2.1), that is, the sources and norms of theological inquiries. The four most widely recognized principles are revelation (2.1.1), reason (2.1.2), tradition (2.1.3), and experience (2.1.4). The relation of these principles to each other is itself an important theological question.
- The *capacities* of theology (2.2), that is, the aims that theology is capable of achieving through its choice of language (2.2.1), method (2.2.2), and style (2.2.3).
- The *settings and tasks* of theology (2.3), that is, the contexts within which it is practised to certain ends. These settings with their respective tasks include the community of worship (2.3.1), the life of faith (2.3.2), the academy (2.3.3), and the public sphere (2.3.4).

The section also describes the specific organization of theology as an academic discipline (2.4).

2.1 The principles of theology

Theology, especially in the Western traditions, treats its subject matter on the basis of four main principles: revelation, reason, tradition, and experience. 'Principles', in this sense, function in one or both of two ways: as *sources* or as *norms* of theology. Principles function as *sources* when they provide the substance which theologians interpret, order, and build

on. They function as *norms* when they provide criteria for the interpretation, organization, and elaboration of theology's substance, and for evaluating its claims.

Most theological traditions recognize all four principles, but differ in their understanding and weighting of each, and in their uses of each as source and/or norm. These differences often account for contrasts not only in the claims of different theological traditions, but also in their ways of arguing for these claims, developing them in changing circumstances, and evaluating new data. Critical problems and challenges in theology often arise from perceived conflicts between two principles, such as revelation and tradition (as paradigmatically in the Reformation), tradition and reason (as paradigmatically in the Enlightenment), or revelation and experience (as paradigmatically in modernity). Attempted solutions sometimes involve the repurposing of one principle from a source to a norm.

Subsections [2.1.1](#) to [2.1.4](#) define each of the principles, give examples of their use as source and as norm, and outline central challenges relating to their definition and use.

2.1.1 Revelation

Revelation, in its most basic sense, is the self-revelation of God to his people. In other words, it is (within Christian theology) not primarily the disclosure of facts or propositions, but personal self-communication. The origin and the principal content of revelation are thus both God as self-revelatory, as a God who opens himself to relationship with his people. As an offer of relationship, such revelation can only be received in an attitude of faith: a trusting, receptive disposition on the part of the addressee. Thus, faith is the human counterpart of revelation. God's self-revelation is mediated primarily through his history with his people Israel and, above all, the incarnation, as witnessed by the Bible and received by faith.

Revelation functions as a source when the self-revelation of God in Christ and in the Bible furnishes the substance of belief. Central examples are the character of God as the giver of life, laws, ordinances, and promises through covenants with all humankind, and especially with Israel; and the identity of Jesus as Messiah of Israel and Son of God, whose death and resurrection overcome human faithlessness and renew creation's life with God.

By contrast, revelation functions as a norm when criteria for formulating and assessing theological claims are derived from the person, works, and words of Christ, or from the Bible more generally. The Reformation principle *sola scriptura* ('by scripture alone') emphasizes the role of the Bible not only as source but also as sole final norm in arbitrating theological claims.

Central challenges concerning revelation as a principle of theology include: what role do human and textual mediators of revelation play? By whom, and by what criteria, is revelation adequately interpreted? How are experiences of 'private revelations', professed by many Christian believers and groups, to be evaluated? How is revelation to be understood in relation to other ways in which humans acquire reliable beliefs?

2.1.2 Reason

Theologically, reason may be understood as the illumination of the human intellect by the light of Reason, that is, of God's own ordering of creation. In the opening of John's gospel, '*en arche en ho logos [...] kai ho logos sarx egeneto*', traditionally translated 'In the beginning was the Word...and the Word was made flesh (see John 1:1–14), may also be translated 'in the beginning was Reason [...] and Reason was made flesh'.

However, in common modern usage, reason is usually understood not in this metaphysical but in a procedural sense, as the capacity to understand the qualities, causes, and interrelations of objects or classes of objects, both physical and abstract, through disciplined processes of observation, description, and forming connections. Such reasoning processes always begin from assumptions and data that are accepted as axiomatic, even if separate reasoning processes may investigate these assumptions and data, relying on others in turn accepted as axiomatic. In this sense, reason understood procedurally is always grounded in principles not directly accessible to it. Since the nineteenth century, when these grounding principles were no longer universally assumed to be divine, questions about the grounds of reason have become sources of profound cultural anxiety, and there have been growing concerns that reason may always rely on biases themselves rooted in desire for advantage.

Reason functions as a source of theology when reasoning processes provide the *material* of theological claims. Strictly speaking, this is the case only very rarely, most notably in the ontological argument for the existence of God, which seeks to rely solely on logic. More broadly, reason is sometimes adduced as a source for 'natural theology', understood as a theology that suspends trust in revelation and draws its substance entirely from human reason. However, insofar as reason is a capacity to connect or orient oneself within what is antecedently given in experience, conversation, or imagination, such a use of reason as source in practice always relies on prior sources. In its fullest theological sense of the human intellect's participation in the order of creation, reason functions as a more comprehensive 'source' of theology; but see [6.1](#) ('Theology as science'; see also [Theology and Science](#)).

Reason functions as a norm when it is employed in the rational evaluation, organization, and elaboration of material given in revelation, tradition, and experience. In this capacity,

reason is intrinsic to theology as to all human thought, though it is open to important challenges.

Central challenges concerning reason as a principle of theology include: how is reason conditioned? What are its grounds and proper limits? What is the relationship between 'ho Logos' and human exercises of reason?

2.1.3 Tradition

Tradition describes the process of handing on from one generation to the next, and comprises the deposit of norms, texts, practices, and sensibilities that is passed on within a church or other group over significant lengths of time.

Tradition functions as a source when rules, stories, and practices that have arisen and been handed down within a group form part of the substance of theological work. The form of the biblical canon and the credal affirmations of the ecumenical councils function as sources for most Christian traditions; papal pronouncements, conciliar documents, and confessions (such as those of Augsburg or Westminster) function as identity-defining sources for particular denominations.

By contrast, tradition functions as a norm when theological sources are interpreted, assessed, and elaborated according to the precedents, priorities, and practices of a particular tradition.

Central challenges concerning the principle of tradition include: who determines tradition? How does one distinguish between the development of tradition and aberration from it? How does one distinguish its core from its ephemera? Is its authority limited to a group, or claimed as universal?

2.1.4 Experience

Experience is the phenomenon of being consciously the subject of a condition or action, or of being consciously affected by an event, including that of divine self-revelation. More widely, experience describes one's affective and lived engagement with the world, other people, oneself, and God.

Experience functions as a source of theology when such engagement and affect, including affective and transformative experiences of divine reality, form part of the substance of theological work. Augustine's 'restless heart' (*Confessions* 1.1), Schleiermacher's 'feeling of absolute dependence' (Schleiermacher 1996: ch. 2), and John Wesley's experience of a 'heart strangely warmed', shared by so many people of faith, can be sources in this sense (see *The Journal of John Wesley*). Experiences of prophecy and miracles, especially in charismatic movements, form more contentious sources of theological assertion. Beyond

religious experience, the ordinary experiences of socially defined groups are key sources for contextual theologies in twentieth- and twenty-first-century theology.

By contrast, experience functions as a norm when theological sources and claims are assessed against experiential criteria, for example in questions such as: is a rule or description consistent with experience? Does it lead to suffering or exclusion? The elevation of non-religious experience as a norm for theology is a distinctive and contentious aspect of twentieth- and twenty-first-century theology.

Central challenges concerning the principle of experience include: how does one evaluate experience? In particular, how does one adequately take into account both that experience is compelling in its immediacy and that it is nevertheless contingent and malleable? How does one balance its position between subjectivity and universality?

2.2 The capacities of theology

How theologians treat particular subjects depends not only on the principles in which their understanding is rooted and by which it is conditioned, but also on their basic intuitions about the capacities of theology to approach, articulate, and shape Christian belief. The question what theology (as opposed to other articulations of faith, for example in prayer) is capable of achieving is vital for a critical practice of theology, and all theological work explicitly or implicitly reflects intuitions about its own capacities.

2.2.1 Language

A central question about theology's capacities concerns its use of language, particularly in speaking about God. Since God is not an ordinary object of human understanding, but trusted as the ground and horizon of all being, knowledge, and speech, the questions whether and how ordinary language is capable of referring to God determine not only the content but also the form of any theological work.

There are two basic ways in which theology may be capable of speaking of God: *kataphasis* (affirmation) and *apophasis* (negation). Cataphatic language comprises what may be said affirmatively or positively about God; apophatic language comprises what may only be said by negation, which may include negating a final opposition between affirmation and negation (see Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology* 1.2). Some thinkers and traditions practice theology as effectively cataphatic; others regard it as necessarily apophatic to a larger or smaller degree.

The distinction between cataphatic and apophatic language is related to that between univocal and analogical language as means of speaking about God. To speak univocally about God and creation is to use words in just the same sense when applying them to God as when applying them to created things: to say that 'God loves' means just what it means

to say 'humans love' unless differences are specified adjectivally. To speak analogically is to expect that words, when applied to God, will not mean exactly what they mean when applied to created things: saying that 'God loves' is intended as both similar and infinitely different to saying that 'humans love', though the exact differences will require elaboration. Some thinkers and traditions regard univocity as the basis of a reliable and meaningful theology; others regard theological language as necessarily analogical.

2.2.2 Method

Another central question about theology's capacities concerns the methods by which the substance of faith is best approached. These in turn depend on how that faith itself is understood.

Metaphysical methods approach the Christian faith as disclosing a metaphysical structure which theology is capable of explaining. They usually yield works of systematic theology, philosophical theology, or fundamental theology.

Hermeneutic methods approach the Christian faith as communicating divine and human intentions which theology is capable of interpreting and responding to. They usually yield works of biblical theology, as well as other works of interpretation (including some forms of historical interpretation).

Historical methods approach the Christian faith as constituting a history that theology is capable of expounding. They usually yield works of historical theology or intellectual history.

Critical methods approach the Christian faith as involving assumptions, biases, or errors that theology is capable of identifying and resolving. They usually yield works of critical or contextual theology.

Pragmatic methods approach the Christian faith as presenting practical questions and challenges that theology is capable of addressing. They usually yield works of pastoral, practical, or 'occasional' theology.

2.2.3 Style

The question of theological method is closely related to that of theological style, which reflects the primary aims that a theological work sets itself in relation to the substance of Christian belief. Many works of theology combine several styles, though they often deploy one more successfully than the other.

Dogmatic styles seek to formulate how best to understand the subjects of Christian belief (see [section 1](#)) on the basis of theology's principles (see [2.1](#)) and capacities (see [2.2](#)), often in accordance with particular traditions (see [section 5](#)).

Didactic styles seek to explain and pass on received beliefs, usually within particular settings such as churches or educational institutions (see [2.3](#)), and often in the context of particular traditions (see [section 5](#)).

Apologetic styles seek to show the vitality and truth of Christian beliefs to those who do not share them, and to defend these beliefs against erosion and encroachment, often by appealing to or establishing shared principles (see [2.1](#)).

Critical styles examine specific theological beliefs (see [section 1](#)), principles (see [2.1](#)), or capacities (see [2.2](#)), testing them against intellectual and practical challenges from within or outside theology.

Constructive styles seek to develop the substance of belief creatively to address new questions and challenges, often arising from within particular contexts (see especially [2.3](#), [5.3](#)) or interdisciplinary confrontations (see [section 6](#)).

2.3 The settings and tasks of theology

Theology is deeply shaped by the settings in which it is practised, and the tasks that it fulfils in those settings. The four main settings of theological work are the community of worship ([2.3.1](#)), the individual life ([2.3.2](#)), the academy ([2.3.3](#)), and the public sphere ([2.3.4](#)). The following subsections introduce theology in these settings, describing the aims to which it contributes there and the qualifications required to pursue it. Although different traditions prioritize the four settings and tasks differently, all four play some role in most traditions of theology (see also [section 5](#)).

2.3.1 The community of worship

Theology, as Karl Barth describes it, is ‘the rational self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God’ (Barth 2010: 3): it is communal reasoning about and in light of the faith received and handed on by the church. Theology in this sense is situated within a Christian community, and plays a vital role in its self-understanding, worship practices, teachings, wider activity, and organization. Theology’s tasks, in this setting, are to illuminate and deepen the church’s worship; to equip its mission; to inform its self-organization; to clarify its teachings and their meaning in changing contexts (for example through sermons, lectures, study groups, publications, and councils); and to guide and hold to account its internal and external practice. The qualification for leading these theological tasks is typically an ecclesial role, originally that of [bishop](#), but also other ordained or lay church ministries (such as pastor, priest, or catechist), a consecrated life within the church (such as monks, nuns, or friars), and high church office other than bishop. These are supported by lay theologians and the entire

church community. Significant theological differences mark different denominations and traditions; these are discussed in [section 5](#) below.

2.3.2 The life of faith

Theology, as Anselm describes it, is 'faith seeking understanding' (Anselm of Canterbury 2008: 83): it is the attempt to gain a better understanding of one's faith, and how it relates to the whole breadth of one's experiences, convictions, and actions. Theology in this sense is situated within a life of faith and plays a vital role in its maturation. Its task is to achieve increasing aptness, clarity, and coherence of belief and practice, and thereby to support a deeply rooted, mature, generous, and reflective faith. There are no special qualifications for this task, insofar as it is not optional but always already being pursued to some extent. All people of faith have theological intuitions, which are informed by their formation and disposition, their devotional and church practices, reading and listening habits, and their engagements with people of the same, other, and no faiths. These intuitions sometimes remain unreflective and unintegrated: they do not always cohere with each other or with surrounding beliefs, experiences, and practices. But whether implicit or explicit, they influence how believers understand and interact with God, other people, the world, and their own lives. The task of seeking aptness, clarity, and coherence through prayer, personal reading, communal learning, and discussion, and in some cases academic study, is therefore a vital part of a life of faith.

2.3.3 The academy

Theology, as Thomas Aquinas defines it, is the study of 'all things [...] treated of under the aspect of God: either because they are God Himself or because they refer to God as their beginning and end' (*Summa Theologiae* 1.1.7). Theology in this sense is a subject of study within the university, and plays a role in its mission to conserve, expand, integrate, and apply knowledge. Theology's task, in this setting, is the rational examination of the content, principles, practices, and contexts of religious faith. The qualification for these theological tasks is an academic rather than ecclesial role, often with a specialization in one or more subdisciplines, such as biblical studies, historical theology, systematic theology, practical theology, or religious studies. There is a wide spectrum of approaches to the academic study of theology; these are discussed in [2.4](#) below.

2.3.4 The public sphere

Theology, as Jürgen Moltmann describes it, 'has to be public theology [...] for the kingdom of God's sake' (Moltmann 1999: 5). Theology of this kind is driven by a sense of public responsibility, as assumed by Paul in his speech on the Areopagus (Acts 17). Its main tasks are to share and apply the [gospel](#), to articulate and defend religious responses to public questions, and to oppose public ills. There are no formal qualifications for these theological tasks, which may be undertaken by Christians in any profession, though

especially by missionaries, teachers, writers, speakers, and other public figures. The widening separation of church and state, and the secularization of the public sphere since the eighteenth century, have increasingly problematized the public role of theology: the basis and scope of theological interventions in public discourse is a subject of debate both within and across religious boundaries. In many countries, public theology is censored either officially or tacitly, and incurs risk of professional, private, and sometimes legal detriment. Nevertheless, the gospel as the announcement of God's kingdom is not reducible to the private sphere or the visible church, but addresses itself to all aspects of personal and communal life.

2.4 The structure of theology as an academic discipline

Theology as an academic discipline is organized into subjects, which developed in their modern forms in the nineteenth century and continue to evolve. These subjects represent distinctive approaches to theology and focal points within its key areas. They are shaped by canons of texts and arguments, and by evolving methodological protocols, apparatus, and debates.

The organization of subjects varies with their institutional contexts, depending especially on educational setting and denominational affiliation. The most common academic settings are seminaries, research universities, and liberal arts colleges. Most larger church bodies around the world operate seminaries for the education of their ministers. These tend to be small, and offer both intellectual formation and practical training in church ministry. Within the wider academy, many research universities were Christian foundations, and commonly retain theological faculties (as in Europe) or affiliated seminaries (as in the USA). Though denominationally shaped, these long-established faculties and seminaries generally accept students of many denominational affiliations for ministerial study, and students both with and without religious intent for academic study. Similarly, many liberal arts colleges in the USA are Christian foundations, and some continue to provide a religious education, both by including a theological curriculum and by teaching the liberal arts within a broadly religious context.

Theology as an academic discipline is often called Divinity, particularly at institutions or in academic degrees focused on ministerial training. Although originally a higher degree, pursued after a foundational education in the liberal arts, it is now often taught from undergraduate level onwards, especially as an academic (rather than ministerial) subject. Academically oriented degrees include the standard degrees of BA, MA, and PhD in Theology, and the (now often honorary) higher Doctor of Divinity (DD). Graduate degrees preparing for ministerial or professional work within the churches include the Bachelor of Divinity (BD, now mainly UK) or Master of Divinity (MDiv, mainly US), as well as the Doctor of Ministry (DMin, mainly US) as ministerial degrees; the Master of Theology

(MTh or MTheol, sometimes also MTS or STM) and Doctor of Theology (DTh or ThD) as professional academic degrees; and Pontifical bachelors (STB), licenciates (STL and JCL) and doctorates (STD and JCD) as professional academic degrees within Roman Catholicism. (See also the histories of theological institutions in [4.1](#) to [4.5](#).)

Subsections [2.4.1](#) to [2.4.7](#) introduce the subject areas into which theology is divided within most Roman Catholic and Protestant seminaries and faculties of theology worldwide: biblical studies ([2.4.1](#)), historical theology ([2.4.2](#)), systematic or dogmatic theology ([2.4.3](#)), practical theology ([2.4.4](#)), religious studies ([2.4.5](#)), and varieties of contextual and interdisciplinary theological studies ([2.4.6](#)). Practical theology ([2.4.4](#)) encompasses a wide range of subjects relevant to church ministry and is most strongly represented at seminaries. Religious studies ([2.4.5](#)) and contextual and interdisciplinary studies ([2.4.6](#)) were widely established in the late twentieth century and are represented primarily at research universities. Each subsection outlines the *range* of its subject and the *methods* it commonly employs.

2.4.1 Biblical studies

Biblical studies include the study of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible and of the New Testament: their origins, languages, and textual and literary forms and relationships; religious and theological questions within and arising from them; the histories, languages, and texts of surrounding cultures; and (especially in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries) the reception of the Bible in later history. Their methods include philology, exegesis, hermeneutics, various forms of criticism (especially textual criticism, source criticism, form criticism, and literary criticism), epigraphy, and archaeology.

2.4.2 Historical theology

Historical theology includes historical particularities and developments of theology, as well as church history (commonly periodized into Patristic, medieval, Reformation, and modern). It uses methods shared with history, including manuscript studies, textual analysis, contextualization and comparison, and (especially in the case of church history) attention to material culture.

2.4.3 Systematic theology

Systematic theology includes dogmatics, theological ethics, philosophical theology, philosophy of religion, and (especially in Roman Catholicism) fundamental theology. It uses methods shared with a variety of disciplines: with philosophy, it shares logical analysis, critical argument, phenomenological investigation, and other approaches; with ethics, methods of common-sensical and formal analysis, distinction, and generalization; with literature, close reading and application of theoretical frameworks; with history, contextualization and comparison; and with biblical studies, hermeneutics and exegesis.

Systematic theology uses these methods synthetically, aiming to understand theology as an intellectual system, with articulated sources, assumptions, criteria, and claims, and with defined parts that stand in coherent relation to other components as well as to extra-theological realities.

2.4.4 Practical theology

Practical theology can be understood in two ways: as comprising subjects relevant to church ministry, including pastoral care and leadership, liturgics, homiletics, and missiology; or as theological engagement with the practices of church and society. In the first sense, practical theology cultivates practical skills shared with other professions, including counselling, rhetoric, management, and administration. In the second sense, it combines theological and empirical studies in a wide variety of ways.

2.4.5 Religious studies

Religious studies include comparative religion, anthropology of religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion, and history of religions. These studies often adopt an etic (external) rather than an emic (internal) approach to theology. They apply the methods of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and comparative studies to manifestations of religious faith and practice, analysing religion as a cluster of psychological, social, and anthropological phenomena.

2.4.6 Contextual and interdisciplinary theological studies

Contextual theology includes the study of theology through the lens of critical theories (including gender and queer theories, and race and postcolonial theories), political theologies, and the study of religion and society. Major fields of interdisciplinary theological study include theology and philosophy, theology and the arts, and theology and science (see also 6.2).

3 Biblical sources

The Christian Bible, consisting of texts collected in the Old and New Testaments and received as the inspired word of God, is Christian theology's foundational canon of texts. It is the source of theology in at least four ways. First, it conveys God's words, actions, character, and will as revealed to his people Israel and to the wider world. Secondly, it unfolds the story of God's good creation, humanity's alienation, and God's faithfulness and redemption which has shaped the history and self-understanding of Israel and of the church. Thirdly, the Bible therefore institutes theology as a practice that is not merely speculative, but forms part of a human response to God's call, aiming to 'be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Rom 12:2). Fourth, in these and other ways, it

shapes what sociologists call the ‘imaginary’ of Christian theology, that is, the shared set of intuitions, values, and symbols through which Christians imagine and encounter their world.

These four sources of theology – disclosures of God’s agency and will, accounts of salvation history, expressions of divine calling and human response, and the unfolding of images, symbols, and stories that fill the Christian imaginary – require a great range of means of expression. The Bible, accordingly, abounds in different textual genres and styles, which themselves represent different ways of doing theology. The following sections explore biblical genres and textual forms in the Old and New Testaments ([3.1](#) and [3.2](#)), and in the Bible as a unified canon ([3.3](#)). They discuss the ways in which different types of text seek to represent and mediate God, the forms of human response they enable, and some of the ways they have influenced later theology. These outlines do not aim to present a biblical theology or to describe all biblical genres, but only to offer an introduction to the complex relationship between biblical texts and Christian theology.

3.1 Theology in the Old Testament

The Old Testament of the Christian Bible is traditionally divided either into the three ancient Jewish categories of Torah, Prophets, and Writings, or into the four categories of Pentateuch, historical books, wisdom books, and prophetic books. The precise extent of the Old Testament canon varies slightly among denominations.

3.1.1 History as theology

The Pentateuch, the historical books, and large portions of the prophetic books contain historical material. This material concerns above all the creation and population of the world, the vocation of the Patriarchs, and the fraught history of Israel as the people of God’s covenant. It reveals God as the sovereign agent of creation, provision, retribution, and redemption. In Christian theology, the history recounted in the Old Testament also furnishes the scheme of salvation history, establishing a characteristically theological view of history as directed by God towards covenant and consummation. The character of God as expressed in these histories, and the challenges of interpreting global and personal history in light of salvation history as instituted through the biblical texts, have shaped theology and its interactions with other domains from the early church to the present day.

3.1.2 Law and wisdom as theology

The Pentateuch, the historical books, and the wisdom books (especially Proverbs) contain extensive legal and prudential material: rules, precepts, and maxims intended to order the lives of communities and individuals. In these texts, the good order of such lives presupposes, constitutes, and enables knowledge of God, by whom it is ordained and to whom it is directed. In Christian theology, the laws and moral precepts of the Old

Testament form complex sources of Christian reasoning. On the one hand, they are regarded as foundational for moral reasoning and social theory; on the other, they are seen as requiring figurative interpretation, recasting some (but not all) of Israel's laws and precepts typologically through the mediating lens of Jesus Christ's person, teaching, and work. The challenges posed by this complex process of reinterpretation and normative application have defined theological disputes both internally and externally throughout Christian history.

3.1.3 Narrative as theology

The Pentateuch, historical, wisdom, and prophetic books contain stories and parables of divine and human action. Some are stories told by the books' characters with explicit aims, such as the parable of the sheep owners told by the prophet Nathan to his king David with the conclusion, 'thou art the man' (2 Sam 12:7). Others are stories comprising entire books, arguably including Job and Jonah. They illuminate moral and metaphysical questions or provide commentary on historical and legal material. These stories are significant in figurative and canonical contexts (see [3.3.1](#) and [3.3.2](#)), and serve as exemplars for later literary forms.

3.1.4 Prayer as theology

Pervading the Pentateuch, historical, and prophetic books – and concentrated in Job, the Psalms, and Lamentations – are texts of praise, lamentation, supplication, and thanksgiving. Some of these are the prayers or compositions of individuals, others the ritual prayers of communities. In praise and lamentation, God is addressed as one who not only beholds, but pervades, elucidates, and transforms human experience. Historically, the Psalms and Canticles which structure the daily prayers of individuals, congregations, and monastic orders have shaped the theological imaginary and self-understanding more than most other biblical texts. The common detachment of modern academic theology from these frameworks of affect, expression, and encounter is a significant rupture with far-ranging effects.

3.1.5 Prophecy and vision as theology

The dominant mode of the prophetic books, which account for about one quarter of the Old Testament, is prophetic speech and vision. In words and visions imparted by God or his angels, God is encountered as speaker, sender, and sovereign actor, and as one whose providence may be hidden from ordinary sight, yet is active and manifest in prophetic and apocalyptic vision. This providence, though sometimes retributive, is ultimately redemptive. Much of the prophetic material of the Old Testament – whether it explicitly speaks of future events or relates to God's agency and disposition in the prophet's present – is accordingly seen, both in and after the New Testament, as foretelling the coming, work, and significance of Jesus the Redeemer. In Christian theology, prophetic material is

also interpreted ethically or allegorically, and sometimes interpreted as predicting certain historical events, both now past and yet to come. Particularly charged is visionary and prophetic material concerned with the *eschata* or ‘last things’, on which much of Christian eschatology (see [1.9](#)) depends. More generally, these texts assume formal significance as loci of revelation inaccessible by unaided human reasoning.

3.1.6 Names of God as theology

The biblical texts abound with names addressing or referring to God, including El, Elohim, El Shaddai, Elyon, and YHWH. These and other names are important sources for discussions of God’s character in Christian theology, especially in the Patristic and medieval periods. YHWH (also referred to as the Tetragrammaton, sometimes vocalized as Yahweh or Jehovah, and often rendered LORD in biblical translations) assumes special significance as a derivation of God’s self-revelation to Moses in Exod 3:14. That self-revelation, usually translated ‘I am’ (or, less commonly, ‘I will be’), also forms the background to the ‘I am’ sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of John (6:35; 8:12; 8:58; 10:7; 10:11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1; 18:4-5), and to later metaphysical accounts of God as Being itself (e.g. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.2.3). Other names and forms, including terms such as ‘the Spirit of the Lord’, as well as the plural form of Elohim, are sometimes linked in Christian theology to the persons of the Trinity.

3.2 Theology in the New Testament

The New Testament is the recapitulation, transformation, and expansion of the covenantal history of Israel in the light of Jesus Christ – his person, ministry, work, and commission. It consists of four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), a chronicle of the work and experience of the apostles (Acts of the Apostles), twenty-one letters to young churches, and a visionary book or apocalypse (the Book of Revelation). Like the Old Testament books, these comprise a range of textual forms that reflect significant theological modes. Subsections [3.2.1](#) to [3.2.6](#) present these as paralleling and transforming Old Testament modes.

3.2.1 History as theology

The four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and parts of the letters contain histories of Jesus Christ and of his followers. They continue and reinterpret the history of Israel, presenting God’s covenants with Adam, Abraham, and Moses as oriented towards a kingdom ushered in by Jesus through instruction, personal and social transformation, and the institution of a new covenant in his death and resurrection (see also [3.3.1](#) and [3.3.2](#)). In this new covenant, the New Testament histories also find history itself transformed, marked no longer by a division between the Jews as God’s chosen people and all Gentiles as aliens, and by a perpetual succession of births and deaths among both Jews and Gentiles, but rather by the promise of resurrection and eternal life with God extended to all

humanity. The historical claim that Jesus rose from the dead is therefore the central claim of the New Testament, and foundational for Christian theology.

3.2.2 Ethical teaching as theology

All books of the New Testament contain moral teaching. This forms an important part of Jesus' teaching, often in explicit dialogue with the Mosaic law, which Jesus seeks to clarify, revise, and consummate. Moral teaching also forms a significant stratum of the apostles' teaching in the public sphere and, above all, the newly formed Christian communities. The New Testament's moral injunctions and advice present interpretative challenges arising from three key tensions in its understanding of the Christian life. The first tension is between the conflicting experiences of the Christian life as, on the one hand, a decisive death to sin and rebirth to God and, on the other, as the continuing exercise of ordinary human capacities and ongoing struggle with temptation and sin. This is partly related to the second, theological tension between the call to imitate Jesus' perfection through works of righteousness on the one hand, and the unconditional forgiveness of sins received through faith in his death and resurrection on the other. The third tension is between the conflicting horizons of Christian agency: on the one hand, the imminent eschaton, which requires readiness and detachment from the world; on the other, the growing church and contemporary world, which require intervention and investment. These tensions have continued to shape theological thought about moral frameworks and orientations throughout Christian history.

3.2.3 Narrative as theology

The four Gospels contain an extensive catalogue of stories and parables that Jesus tells to disciples, critics, and crowds. These stories offer analogies and images of aspects of the kingdom of God which Jesus announces as coming. They are surprising, puzzling, and sometimes in tension with each other, demanding iterative interpretations and readiness to identify with their characters and learn from them. They therefore address their hearers' reason, imagination, and emotions, enabling them to see their own lives and world through new and shifting lenses. Addressed to all ages and estates, the stories and parables of the New Testament are among the central elements of Christian instruction, and formative for Christian imagination and art throughout history.

3.2.4 Prayer as theology

Most books of the New Testament record prayers, both by the books' subjects and by their authors (especially Paul's prayers for his addressees, and the prayer 'Amen, come Lord Jesus' concluding the Book of Revelation). Of special significance is the prayer Jesus teaches his disciples to exemplify how to pray (see Matt 6:9; Luke 11:2), which became formative for Christian spirituality and theology through its adoption as 'the Lord's Prayer' or 'Our Father'. Of notable importance are also those prayers and doxologies which invoke

the Son, and sometimes the Holy Spirit, as or in association with God, and thereby serve as earliest exemplars for the development of Trinitarian theology (see e.g. Rom 9:5; Rom 16:25–27; 2 Cor 13:13; Eph 3:20–21; 1 Tim 6:14–16; 2 Tim 4:18).

3.2.5 Prophecy and vision as theology

Many books of the New Testament, including the Gospels, Acts, and several letters, contain prophetic and visionary material. This material includes prophecies uttered by Jesus and the apostles, as well as divine visions seen by Peter, Stephen, Paul, and others. The Book of Revelation as a whole is a visionary book, revealing the *eschata* or 'last things' that take place or will take place as God establishes his everlasting kingdom. These highly charged visions project a complex world-historical structure, with a double culmination first in Jesus' incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension (the historical events animating the New Testament), and secondly in his expected return to raise the dead, gather his redeemed, and reign eternally.

3.2.6 Names of God as theology

The Gospels, letters, and Book of Revelation describe and invoke God by various names. One of the most characteristic is the invocation of God as Father, primarily of Jesus Christ and secondarily of all believers. Equally significant are the names and invocations of Jesus: his personal name, Jesus (Hebrew: *Yeshua*, 'Saviour'); his epithet, Immanuel (Hebrew: God with us); his address as the Word of God, the Son of God, the Lamb of God, Messiah, and Lord; and his self-identification as bread of life (John 6), light of the world (John 8:12), door (John 10:7), good shepherd (John 10:11), true vine (John 15:1), resurrection and life (John 11:25), and the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Also significant are personal invocations of God's Spirit as Paraclete, Holy Spirit, and Spirit of God. These names are sources for central Trinitarian and christological doctrines, and shape theological reflection on God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit throughout Christian history.

3.3 Theology in the canon

The biblical texts have been read not primarily as individual texts, but as part of a canon, composed of two testaments. In this canon, the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus recapitulate and fulfil God's act of creation and God's history with his people Israel. Institutions such as priesthood, sacrifice, and kingship, and the crises they undergo in Israel's exile and colonization, are recast; they now appear as anticipations of the decisive sacrifice, the eternal priesthood, and the everlasting kingship of Jesus as Israel's Messiah and Son of God. Within the kingdom of God Jesus inaugurates, Gentiles as well as Jews are able to 'worship the Father', 'neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem [...] but in spirit and truth' (John 4:21–23).

3.3.1 Figuration and typology as theology

All categories of Old Testament books contain what the New Testament and later Christian writers regard as figures or types, that is, as anticipations of Jesus Christ and of the history he shapes. These include events and characters of the Pentateuch and historical books, literary personae of the wisdom books, and figures in prophetic utterances and visions. In the New Testament, the citation of Old Testament personages and events as ‘types’ is a generative means of interpreting Jesus and his work, both in specific details (e.g. in the many biblical glosses on Matthew’s gospel narrative) and more generally (e.g. in Matthew’s interpretation of Jesus as the new Moses, or Paul’s of Jesus as the second Adam). Impetus for such typological readings is already found within the Old Testament canon, where difficult or obscure phenomena are sometimes interpreted by reference to earlier or later ones: the seventh day of creation as precedent for the weekly Sabbath and pledge of the messianic kingdom of peace; circumcision and sacrifices as types of the dedication of human hearts; the kingship of David as surety of an eternal kingdom. These relations of figuration serve as interpretative lenses on both the earlier and the later occurrences, which are understood in light of each other.

Types and figures suggest a complex interconnectedness of reality and imply God as an author poetically narrating, arranging, and illuminating the world. This sense of interconnection decisively shapes the Christian imaginary, whether or not it is explicated in theoretical terms.

3.3.2 Canon as theology

The canonical arrangement of the Old and New Testaments is a significant source of theological understanding and practice, not only because it shapes a continuous narrative, but also because it establishes central principles of reading texts: principles of coherence, of permitting mutual inflection and elaboration, of explaining the obscure by the clearer, and of understanding divine inspiration not primarily through the model of individual authorship but through the dynamic accumulation and disruption of tradition. Apart from typology, prominent examples include the complementary perspectives and mutual commentary of the wisdom books, and the fourfold perspective of the gospels. In Christian history, this form of reading has also influenced approaches to ecclesial textual traditions more widely.

3.4 Biblical scholarship and theology

In the early, medieval, and Reformation church, commentary on biblical texts formed a central part of theological learning, teaching, and discovery. In theology as practised in the community of worship (see [2.3.1](#)), the life of faith (see [2.3.2](#)), and in confessional seminaries (see [2.3.3](#)), this often remains true today, especially for Protestant

denominations. By contrast, in theology as practised in the research university (see [2.3.3](#)), biblical scholarship and theology have, since the eighteenth century, increasingly diverged. The professionalization of philosophical, philological, historical, and empirical disciplines has led to the pursuit of theology and biblical studies as separate academic subjects with distinct methods and aims (see [2.4](#)). Their integration has become a challenge rather than a point of departure.

In this context, the theological significance of biblical texts is most commonly either an area of interdisciplinary engagement or a specialism within biblical studies and theology, respectively. Within biblical studies, 'biblical theology' (as well as 'Old Testament theology' and 'New Testament theology') denotes study of the theological rather than textual, social, or historical dimensions of the biblical texts. It seeks to identify the distinctive (even conflicting) theological perspectives of different biblical authors, and the contexts to which they respond. Within theology, 'biblical theology' comprises various attempts to reconstruct the theological outlook of the biblical texts, often with the intent to conform contemporary theology as closely as possible to their original substance and terminology. A wider reintegration of biblical scholarship and theology is regarded as an important task in many theological institutions.

4 History of theology

Christian theology arose from an attempt to make sense of the reality of Jesus Christ, encountered as both man and God, in light of the faith of ancient Israel and the philosophies of Greece and Rome. In the first centuries, theological work clustered in the Greek-speaking East and the Latin-speaking West of the Roman Empire. Despite periods of close dialogue and shared dogmas codified at seven ecumenical councils between 325 and 787 AD, and East and West formed distinctive traditions, adopting the epithets 'Greek' and 'Latin' or 'Roman', respectively. The Greek tradition predominated in the early centuries; as Western Europe expanded and the Byzantine empire receded, Western theology grew to dominance. After the Great Schism of 1054, East and West formed separate churches each using the title 'Catholic' (from Greek *katholikos*, 'universal'), with the East also using 'Orthodox' (from Greek *orthos doxa*, 'right faith or worship'). This article surveys the history of theology primarily from a Western perspective, supplying only a brief overview of Eastern developments after the era of the seven ecumenical councils.

The history of Western theology is traditionally surveyed in five long periods: Patristic (first to seventh centuries), medieval (eighth to fifteenth centuries), Reformation and post-Reformation (sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries), Enlightenment (mid-seventeenth to eighteenth centuries), and modern (nineteenth to twenty-first centuries). Sections [4.1](#) to [4.5](#) introduce each of these periods, enumerating their distinctive concerns, challenges, and achievements, and their outstanding theologians. They also describe theology's

characteristic institutions and forms, which express its priorities and possibilities and form its structures of communication.

An outline of Eastern periodization follows in [4.6](#), and a brief discussion of the history of Jewish Christianity in [4.7](#).

4.1 Patristic theology (first to seventh centuries)

4.1.1 Challenges and achievements

The New Testament texts theorize about God in language and categories shaped by the Old Testament and inflected by the revelation of Jesus Christ. They profess that the God covenanted to Israel is revealed in and through the person of Jesus, who is ‘the Son of God’ (Luke 1:32–35; etc.) and ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15). Christ’s virgin birth, messianic ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and commission to ‘go and make disciples of all nations’ (Matt 28:19) recapitulate and fulfil God’s promises to his people Israel, and extend his covenant beyond that people’s bounds to the whole world.

This framework of understanding God and his self-revelation in the person of Jesus Christ depended on a lived covenantal history of the Jewish people as the chosen people who had received God’s law, inhabited the land he had promised, endured exile and foreign rule, and held fast to the promise of redemption. As the gospel of Christ’s universal rule and reconciliation with God spread to the Graeco-Roman world, it had to be made intelligible within or against that world’s theology in its three dimensions: civic religion (*theologia civilis*), pagan myth (*theologia fabulosa*), and metaphysical and moral philosophy (*theologia naturalis*). Christian theology as it emerged in the early church was shaped by this conversation.

Between the second and seventh centuries, Christian theologians engaged in great detail with the public worship, mystery cults, and philosophical traditions of classical and late antique Greece and Rome, especially middle and neo-Platonism and Stoicism. They reshaped terms from philosophical discourse including *logos*, *ousia*, and *hypostasis* to express the metaphysical realities seen to underlie and make sense of biblical witness. In doing so, questions of orthodoxy or heresy – faithful interpretation of God’s self-revelation or its distortion through misapplied philosophy or incorrect exegesis – were central criteria of engagement. Central dogmas about the reality of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and about the reality of Jesus Christ as the eternal Son born as a man, were codified at ecumenical councils representing the church in both East and West.

Consolidated initially in the midst of imperial persecution, the Christian faith was legalized and then adopted as the imperial religion in the early fourth century, after which theology was looked to (and sometimes forcefully wielded) as a unifying power within the Roman empire and its successors.

4.1.2 Institutions and forms

The doctrinal, catechetical and speculative developments of the early church were enabled by two institutions. One comprised schools and free teachers, who shaped and passed on knowledge orally, and produced commentaries, apologetic and polemical writings, and philosophical treatises. The other was the episcopacy, which oversaw the churches, delivering catechetical instruction and sermons, as well as letters and other pastoral documents; and which sat in councils, issuing conciliar documents including creeds, anathemas, and proceedings. From the fourth century on, councils were often called and partly manoeuvred by the imperial court, which gradually became its own locus of theological importance. Notable individuals also wrote hymns (e.g. Ephrem the Syrian), poetry (e.g. Gregory of Nazianzus, Ambrose of Milan, Prudentius, and Augustine), and autobiographies (especially Gregory of Nazianzus and Augustine).

4.1.3 Theologians

Patristic theologians are traditionally categorized either chronologically (into Apostolic, ante-Nicene, and Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers) or linguistically (primarily into Greek and Latin Fathers).

Among Apostolic Fathers, the most notable named theologians are Polycarp, Clement of Rome, and Ignatius of Antioch.

Among ante-Nicene Fathers, notable Greek-speaking theologians include Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen of Alexandria; notable Latin-speaking theologians include Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, and Lactantius; notable Coptic-speaking theologians include Anthony the Great.

Among Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers, notable Greek-speaking theologians include Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa), John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, and John of Damascus; notable Latin-speaking theologians include Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, Augustine of Hippo, Pope Gregory the Great, Isidore of Seville, and Boethius; notable Syriac- and Coptic-speaking theologians include Ephrem the Syrian, Macarius of Egypt, and Isaac the Syrian.

4.2 Theology in the medieval church (eighth to fifteenth centuries)

4.2.1 Challenges and achievements

Medieval theology, building above all on the seminal work of Augustine, was conditioned by conflicts between state and papal power in the Christian West, and by the schism of

Eastern and Western churches in the eleventh century; by movements of reform and reformation in different parts of the church, driven especially by religious orders and reformers; and by interreligious encounters especially between Christianity and newly expanding Islam, both conflictual (as in the Muslim conquest of Hispania or the crusades to the Holy Land) and constructive (as in the intellectual exchanges occasioned by the Arabic rediscovery and translation of Aristotle; see [**** Christian Views of Islam](#)).

The theological work that emerged from these contexts profoundly shaped medieval Europe and determined the course of theology, both substantially and as a catalyst, for many centuries. This work had legal, mystical, and scholastic dimensions. In the papal court, canon law was formalized and expanded, setting the practical parameters of theological reasoning. In the religious orders, the ideals of evangelical simplicity and mystical union with God blossomed in enduring works of mystical vision and theology, which inspired poetry and art, exploring the far reaches of human experience. In the universities, the newly appropriated Aristotelian physics and metaphysics – especially his models of form and matter (*hylomorphism*) and of act and potency, and his resultant accounts of causality, motion, and the acquisition of knowledge and virtue – enabled theologians to formulate a unified understanding of physical and intellectual realities in their relationship to God and each other. These progressively formalized accounts encompassed medieval understandings of science, revelation, history, metaphysics, and ethics, sometimes at the price of increasing remoteness from ordinary experience and the language of biblical revelation.

4.2.2 Institutions and forms

Courts and councils continued to mould theology in the Middle Ages. Alongside and in rivalry with imperial and princely courts, the papal court gained significant influence over the doctrinal, administrative, and disciplinary affairs of the Western church from the eleventh century onwards. It convened councils, issued bulls (formal letters), and sponsored legal documents, collected in the *Corpus Iuris Canonici* ('Body of Canon Law').

Cathedrals continued to exert theological influence, creating and performing choral and other liturgical settings, offering catechesis and direction, and establishing schools for the education of clergy and laity. In this, they were often supported by religious orders, themselves among the most significant institutions of medieval Europe. Beginning with St Benedict and the order he established in the sixth century, religious communities of monks or nuns, and later friars, spread throughout Europe, working, praying, studying, teaching, as well as creating and copying the manuscripts of ancient and modern learning and piety.

Cathedral and monastic schools were instrumental in the development of the other great institution of medieval Europe, the university. Established from the eleventh century onwards, universities trained clergy and lay professionals in the liberal arts

and the higher disciplines of law, medicine, or theology; alongside monasteries, they produced, translated, and transmitted written texts, including the newly rediscovered works of Aristotle. The proliferation of theological and philosophical sources required the development of a critical method for their apposition, assessment, and harmonization. That method, employed in both research and teaching, included commentaries on seminal texts and the structured disputation of questions arising from them. Pioneered by Anselm and others, this scholastic method informed the great philosophical-theological syntheses of Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham.

Other forms of medieval theology included hagiographies, biographies, and autobiographies; mystical writings; and the theological sensibilities expressed and stimulated by art, architecture, poetry, and music.

4.2.3 Theologians

Medieval Western theologians are traditionally categorized as pre-scholastic, scholastic, or mystical.

Pre-scholastic theologians notably include Alcuin of York, John Scotus Eriugena, and Bede the Venerable.

Scholastic theologians notably include Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard, Hugh of St Victor, Richard of St Victor, Alexander of Hales, Albertus Magnus, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham.

Mystical and devotional theologians notably include Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, John of Ruysbroeck, Johannes Tauler, Catherine of Siena, Nicholas of Cusa, Marsilio Ficino, Julian of Norwich, Jean Gerson, and Thomas à Kempis.

4.3 Theology during and following the Reformation (sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries)

4.3.1 Challenges and achievements

Scholastic systematization came under intense scrutiny in the sixteenth-century Reformation of the church. The moral impetus of the Reformation was the perception of grave distortions of the gospel by church authorities. Its intellectual impetus was derived from the aim to relativize human speculation in favour of an immediate reliance on divine pro-action through receptive faith informed by biblical witness (*solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura*). The reformers found these not to be achievable within existing structures and hierarchies. The Lutheran and Reformed churches, as well as the Church of England, emerged as separate church bodies, carrying forward the theological and organizational reforms of the magisterial Reformers. Radical reform groups also formed throughout Europe, prominent among them the Anabaptists, whose expectation of the

imminent return of Christ intensified a more widespread sense among reform-seeking Christians that the profound upheavals of the time carried apocalyptic urgency.

These upheavals affected theology at all levels. On the one hand, the Humanist rediscovery of ancient and early Christian texts enabled a more immediate understanding of theological sources than the curated medieval compilations had afforded, and invigorated the study of the Bible and the early Church Fathers. On the other hand, the intellectual structures within which knowledge of God and creation had previously been ordered were pervasively entwined with theological understandings of the church and its mediation of divine reality and revelation. The division of the church made a simple reliance on its universal magisterium impossible. This fuelled a profound scepticism about reliable modes of knowledge and argument, which catalysed the intellectual developments of modernity.

4.3.2 Institutions and forms

Theology during the Reformation and post-Reformation era continued to be shaped by universities, as well as by the establishment of dedicated seminaries for the training of clergy and missionaries. In the Roman Catholic Church, the papal court continued to exert strong influence on the development of theology; in the Protestant churches, by contrast, the critique of church hierarchy led to a fresh emphasis on parish churches as loci of theological learning and transmission. The need to re-establish theological foundations also led to a renewed prominence of councils, synods, and convocations in all Western churches, which produced or ratified the great confessional statements of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, as well as reassertions and reforms of Catholicism (especially in the Council of Trent, which was foundational for the post-Reformation Roman Catholic Church).

The rise of the print industry after the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century enabled a proliferation of theological forms, including tracts and polemical treatises, catechetical materials, collections of sermons, and above all vernacular translations of the Bible. The ability to reproduce and distribute printed works also significantly simplified the transmission of confessional statements and other forms of theological material.

4.3.3 Theologians

Reformation and post-Reformation Western theologians are generally categorized by denomination.

Roman Catholic theologians notably include Erasmus of Rotterdam, Thomas Cajetan, Johann Eck, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, Philip Neri, Charles Borromeo, John of the Cross, Robert Bellarmine, and Cornelius Jansen.

Lutheran theologians notably include Martin Luther, Argula von Grumbach, Philip Melancthon, Andreas Osiander, Martin Chemnitz, Jakob Andreaä, Johann Arndt, Jakob Böhme, Johann Gerhard, Georg Calixtus, Abraham Calov, and Johannes Quenstedt.

Reformed and Presbyterian theologians notably include Huldrych Zwingli, William Farel, Martin Bucer, Peter Vermigli, Heinrich Bullinger, John Calvin, John Knox, Theodore Beza, and Samuel Rutherford.

Anglican theologians notably include William Tyndale, Thomas Cranmer, Richard Hooker, Lancelot Andrewes, William Perkins, William Laud, Jeremy Taylor, and Richard Baxter.

Radical Reformers notably include Thomas Müntzer, Andreas Karlstadt, Caspar Schwenkfeld, Sebastian Franck, Jacob Hutter, Michael Servetus, and Faustus Socinus.

4.4 Theology in the Enlightenment (mid-seventeenth to eighteenth centuries)

4.4.1 Challenges and achievements

In the seventeenth century, the separation between philosophical and theological claims – originally motivated by theological concerns – catalysed an emancipation of rational thought from theological authority. The resultant critique of religious tradition prompted new attempts to integrate philosophy and theology, usually by erecting a modest theology on the foundation of philosophy understood as pure rationality. Philosophical theologies of the early Enlightenment, such as those of René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and John Locke, characteristically focused on accounts of God that are derivable from the nature of the world and of human knowledge. Many central eighteenth-century philosophical debates arose from the contested viability of such natural theology, especially in its radical Deist form. David Hume's critiques of causation and induction presented a radical challenge to Deist claims. Hume's perspective in turn elicited Immanuel Kant's critiques of pure and practical reason, which transposed Protestant scepticism of philosophical constructs of God into an Enlightenment focus on the nature of reason.

These and other developments took place within a wider context of increasing criticism of tradition and authority, leading (in the political sphere) to the increasing separation of church and state and (in the academic sphere) to a surge of new discoveries, theorems, and theories, often described as 'the scientific revolution'. Resistance to these understandings of rationality and emancipation emphasized the irreducible significance of experience and feeling, expressed in the terms of the Romantic movement and of various religious renewal movements including the Pietists and Methodists.

4.4.2 Institutions and forms

During the Enlightenment, intellectual culture developed institutions separate from ecclesial oversight, through the establishment of academies, learned societies, clubs, and salons. Theologians participated only to a limited extent in these endeavours, though theologically influenced philosophers and scientists were among their driving forces, publishing academic treatises, encyclopaedia entries, journal articles, and tracts.

Within ecclesial circles, the papal court continued to grow in theological influence within the increasingly ultramontanist Roman Catholic Church. Meanwhile, local and general synods and assemblies set the theological and practical course of the Protestant churches. Seminaries and colleges for the education of clergy became widespread, including in America, where the nine colonial colleges were founded, training ministers in a range of denominations.

4.4.3 Theologians

Enlightenment theologians may be categorized by the denomination to which they adhered or by which they were formed.

Roman Catholic theologians or philosophers notably include René Descartes, Blaise Pascal, Giambattista Vico, Nicholas Malebranche, Nicolas-Sylvestre Bergier, and Benedict Stattler.

Lutheran theologians or philosophers notably include G. W. Leibniz, Philipp Spener, David Hollatz, Johann Sebastian Bach, Immanuel Kant, Johann Georg Hamann, G. E. Lessing, and Johann Gottfried Herder.

Anglican theologians notably include George Berkeley, John Wesley, Charles Wesley, and George Whitefield.

Reformed, Presbyterian, and non-conformist theologians notably include John Owen, Isaac Watts, Jonathan Edwards, Thomas Reid, and John Witherspoon.

4.5 Theology in the late modern era (nineteenth to twenty-first centuries)

4.5.1 Challenges and achievements

In late modernity, and for the first time since the Apostolic era, theology developed in a context which it was no longer actively shaping. Although many of the intellectual and social structures of the modern West were rooted in Christian ideas, values, and expectations, these structures became increasingly uprooted from their theological soil, and were justified and developed on new, secular terms. In the intellectual world, the pursuit of discoveries and theories without theological assumptions produced explanatory frameworks that rivalled, and radically challenged, Christian ones. This is especially the

case in materialist accounts of constitution and causation (spanning both the natural world and the human psyche), and modern critical theories of the origins of biblical texts, structures of authority, and other traditional sources of Christian identity. Theologians, consequently, increasingly adopted stances that were either responsive (rethinking theology in the light of secular developments) or oppositional (setting theological principles against prevailing cultural or intellectual ones). Among the former, feminist, postcolonial and liberation theologies, and (in the twenty-first century) queer and critical race theories, have decisively shaped contemporary theology especially in North America. Among the latter, traditionalist Catholic and other denominational movements, as well as forms of Protestant fundamentalism, have grown increasingly influential. Beside responsive strategies, mediating strategies – attempting to illuminate and sublimate secular developments theologically – have often marked the academic theological elite, as in the Protestant and Catholic Tübingen Schools, Christian existentialism, post-liberalism, and Radical Orthodoxy movements.

Within the churches, increasing resistance or disregard from wider society led to a continuing splintering of religious denominations, driven by contrasting responses to this secular context. At the same time, there has been an increasing need and desire for Christian unity, pursued through ecumenical dialogue and interdenominational associations.

4.5.2 Institutions and forms

In the nineteenth century, the establishment of the modern research university – first in Germany and then across Europe and North America – led to increasing professionalization and subdivision within theology. Modern forms of academic writing, including theological journals, monographs, and large systematizing works, became standard modes of developing, debating, and disseminating theological arguments. Although sometimes still under ecclesial oversight, the appointment of university scholars became increasingly independent from church office and standing, and the university came to be understood as a secular sphere in which theology should pursue a discourse convertible with that of other disciplines. Decolonization and globalization unsettled the casual assumption of European and white American centrality in the theological enterprise, and called for engagement with the widely divergent experiences and perspectives of different people groups, including the suffering caused by the forceful imposition of dominant views.

The churches, too, have undergone increasing professionalization, resulting in the establishment or reform of specialized departments (including the papal congregations) and commissions to advise church leaders on theological matters. Decolonialization and globalization led to the establishment of independent church bodies especially in former British colonies, and to increasingly complex international denominational associations.

These brought the contrasting theological realities and priorities of different areas to the forefront of theological discussion.

In the public sphere, theological sensibilities have been expressed, fostered, and increasingly questioned through poetry, novels, plays, and ephemera including radio, television, and (in the twenty-first century) online media.

4.5.3 Theologians

Modern Western theologians are most commonly categorized by denomination.

Roman Catholic theologians notably include John Henry Newman, H. E. Manning, Joseph Kleutgen, Tommaso Maria Zigliara, Matthias Joseph Scheeben, Prosper Guéranger, Désiré-Joseph Mercier, Thérèse of Lisieux, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, Yves Congar, Romano Guardini, Edith Stein, Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, and Joseph Ratzinger.

Lutheran theologians notably include G. W. F. Hegel, N.F.S. Grundtvig, J. K. W. Löhe, Isaak August Dorner, C. F. W. Walther, Albrecht Ritschl, Søren Kierkegaard, Adolf von Harnack, Wilhelm Hermann, Ernst Troeltsch, Rudolf Otto, Albert Schweitzer, Gustaf Aulén, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Anders Nygren, Bo Giertz, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Robert Jenson, Eberhard Jüngel, Tuomo Mannermaa, and Christoph Schwöbel.

Reformed and Presbyterian theologians notably include Friedrich Schleiermacher, Thomas Erskine, Charles Finney, Charles Hodge, John McLeod Campbell, Philip Schaff, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, B.B. Warfield, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, G.C. Berkouwer, T.F. Torrance, and Jürgen Moltmann.

Anglican theologians notably include Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keble, Edward Pusey, John Henry Newman, F.D. Maurice, Benjamin Jowett, B.F. Westcott, J.B. Lightfoot, Charles Gore, Alfred Whitehead, William Temple, C.S. Lewis, Austin Farrer, Michael Ramsey, E.L. Mascall, Henry Chadwick, J.I. Packer, John Mbiti, Oliver O'Donovan, N. T. Wright, Rowan Williams, Sarah Coakley, John Milbank, John Webster, and Kathryn Tanner.

4.6 The Eastern churches

The Eastern understanding of the Church as manifested in local churches specific to geographic regions deters attempts at a unified theological history of the Eastern Christianity organized by a single system of periodization. Nevertheless, histories of Eastern theology commonly share the following broadly chronological elements.

The first and second centuries marked a founding era dedicated to theological definition, identity, and establishment.

The second to fifth centuries comprised a seminal era for the formation of christological and trinitarian dogma, in which theologians consolidated theoretical-speculative and spiritual-meditative reflection upon the church's foundational definitions and institutions. Alexandrine dissent from the Chalcedonian definition of Christology resulted in a separation of portions of the churches in Armenia, Egypt, and Syria from the rest of the Christian church, establishing what are now known as the Oriental Orthodox churches.

The sixth to fifteenth centuries were dominated by the Byzantine Empire, including its rise, mission or expansion, fall, and the consequence of this dissolution, including life with and under Islam. The ninth to twelfth centuries were also shaped by the Great Schism with the Western Church, its antecedents and consequences.

The twelfth to twentieth centuries are generally described in separate accounts of the lives and concerns of regional or national Churches. These are often presented relatively autonomously, though typically with some reference to the more recent history of the Russian Church.

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been marked by brutal persecution under communism, and by a wide dispersion and concomitant theological activity. This includes reflection upon Orthodox identity in relation to other Christian Churches, the relation of the present to the Patristic era, and the Church and Orthodox spiritual life in the modern world.

Notable theologians include:

- Byzantine: John of Damascus, Theodore the Studite, Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory Palamas, and Nicholas Cabasilas.
- Early modern: Cyril Lucaris, Peter Mohyla, Dositheus of Jerusalem, Macarius Notaras, and Nicodemus the Hagiorite.
- Modern: Aleksey Khomiakov, Alexander Bukharev, Vladimir Solovyov, Sergius Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky, Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, Dumitru Staniloae, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Alexander Schmemmann, Oliver Clement, Boris Bobrinsky, John Meyendorff, John Zizoulas, Kallistos Ware, Christos Yannaras, and David Bentley Hart.

See also [5.1.1](#).

4.7 Jewish Christianity

Neither of these periodizations reflects theological developments in Jewish Christianity or in Messianic Judaism, understood as adherence to Jesus Christ as a form of Jewish identity. A significant constituency within the New Testament church were Jews who

followed Jesus as Israel's Messiah and Son of God. The Gospel of Matthew, the Didache, and sources underlying the fourth-century Pseudo-Clementine writings bear witness to the existence and vitality of communities which combined faith in Jesus and a commitment to distinctive Jewish patterns of life. From at least the third century onwards, however, the two identities were treated by most Jewish and Christian authorities as mutually exclusive. The causes, means, and timescales of the 'parting of the ways' of Judaism and Christianity are matters of significant scholarly debate.

In the nineteenth century, adherence to Jesus as Israel's Messiah re-emerged as a form of Jewish identity among self-identified Hebrew or Jewish Christians. This modern phenomenon originated among Jewish Christians associated with Protestant environments, but by the twentieth century also appeared in Catholic and Orthodox settings. In the final third of the twentieth century, Protestant-inflected streams of Jewish Christianity consolidated into a new movement calling itself 'Messianic Judaism'. Adherents of this movement worship Jesus (a name usually rendered in its original Hebrew form, Yeshua) as God's son and Israel's Messiah, and seek to live their faith and identity in distinctive Jewish patterns of life. In the twenty-first century, Jewish followers of Jesus operate in diverse contexts, both Messianic Jewish and historic Christian, where they have developed a range of institutions, forms, and emerging traditions.

Key theological figures have included Alfred Edersheim, Joseph Rabinowitz, Paul Levertoff, Jakob Jocz, Edith Stein, Elias Friedman, Cardinal Jean-Marie Aaron Lustiger, Alexander Men, David Stern, Daniel Juster, and Mark Kinzer.

5 Traditions

Theology is a traditioned practice: it is pursued and passed on within traditions of study, worship, and life. These traditions are of different types. The most conspicuous are denominational; that is, traditions that shape a particular church over an extended period (5.1). Others are more broadly spiritual, crossing denominational lines; these include liturgical traditions, holiness traditions, evangelical traditions, mystical traditions, and charismatic traditions (5.2). Yet others are contextual, shaping theology through the geographic or demographic contexts within which it is practised (5.3). This section briefly introduces these types of traditions, indicating their central features and aspects of their development.

5.1 Denominational traditions

The most visible traditions are denominations: large church groupings bearing a common name, sharing common beliefs and practices, and organized within a common administrative structure. Denominations have their historical origins in successive divisions within Christianity: the eleventh-century schism between Eastern and Western Churches;

the sixteenth-century division of the Western Church into Roman Catholic and Protestant churches during the Reformation; and subsequent divisions between Protestant churches continuing to the present day. Notwithstanding these divisions, denominations understand themselves as 'the church' in one or more of several ways: as its fullness, as its local manifestation, as a movement for its reform, or as its faithful remnant.

Denominational traditions are shaped by a denomination's origins, especially if these are marked by conflict; by its foundational figures, especially if these are outstanding theologians; by its local conditions, especially if it is established in a particular country; and by factors such as size and antiquity. The following subsections briefly outline the distinctive traditioning elements of the largest denominations or groups of denominations in the Christian world: the Eastern Orthodox Church (5.1.1), the Roman Catholic Church (5.1.2), the Lutheran churches (5.1.3), the Reformed churches (5.1.4), the Anglican churches (5.1.5), and the Free churches (5.1.6).

5.1.1 Eastern Orthodox Church

The Eastern Orthodox Church dates the origin of its order, teaching, and practice to the Apostolic and Patristic eras. Its theological tradition is governed by the biblical canon, the Nicene Creed, and the seven ecumenical councils, and guided by the writings of exemplary theologians (see 4.1 and 4.6 above). It consciously distinguishes itself from developments in Western theology and intellectual culture, especially postdating the Great Schism of the Eastern and Western Church in 1054.

Eastern Orthodox theology is decisively traditioned by the church's spiritual practices, above all the divine liturgy and daily office, the veneration of icons, fasting and other ascetic practices, and deference to monastic guidance. The divine liturgies of the Orthodox churches date with some variations from the fourth to sixth centuries. They form the centre of wider practices, especially the veneration of saints and icons at church and in the home, and communal fasts on Wednesdays and Fridays, during the Nativity Fast and Great Lent, and in preparation for other feasts. These spiritual practices are often seen as led and sustained by monastic communities, which provide exemplars and spiritual direction.

As a communion of autocephalous (i.e. not subject to the authority of an external patriarch or archbishop) churches broadly coinciding with national boundaries in eastern and south-eastern Europe and northern and central Asia, the Eastern Orthodox Church also displays notable local traditions; among these, the Russian (as the most populous) and the Greek (as linguistically continuous with the early church) exert worldwide influence. In the USA, significant communities of converts without ethnic ties to the East have also emerged.

In line with these traditioning elements, recurrent themes in Eastern Orthodox theology include:

- the seven ecumenical councils and synodality
- the dogmas (especially christological and trinitarian) agreed at the ecumenical councils
- monastic and ascetic traditions and their continuing influence
- the place of icons in Orthodox liturgy and spiritual life
- Hesychasm (the Orthodox tradition of seeking inner quietude through asceticism and contemplative prayer) and related mystical-spiritual practices and associated debates
- saints
- relations with the Western Churches, including church-political tensions and theological disagreements (especially the *filioque*)
- relations of the Orthodox Church to local political powers
- the relationship of Orthodoxy to modernity, especially Western modernity, prompted by the twentieth-century dispersion of Orthodox faithful throughout the West.

5.1.2 Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church traditionally dates the origin of its order and teaching to the Apostle Peter as the first bishop of Rome. Its theological tradition is governed by the biblical canon, the ecumenical creeds, and the magisterium – that is, the authority of the pope and of councils of bishops, under set conditions, to pronounce doctrinal and moral teachings that are binding for members of the church. These include ecumenical councils, which the Roman Catholic Church enumerates beyond the widely recognized seven to include fourteen further councils; most recently, the First and Second Vatican Councils (1869–1870 and 1962–1965). Catholic theology is also guided by exemplary theologians, above all Thomas Aquinas, who was the first post-Patristic theologian declared a Doctor of the Church (in 1567), and who was proclaimed its central theologian in Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879).

Roman Catholic theological tradition has also been shaped by the Mass of the Roman Rite, which constitutes the Church's central liturgy, and by the daily offices of prayer said or sung in monastic and other ecclesial contexts. These liturgical traditions were codified and harmonized at various times, especially the sixteenth century (associated with the Council of Trent), and undergoing significant change in the late twentieth century (associated with the Second Vatican Council). Similarly, since the twelfth century, Roman Catholic order, practice, and consequently also theology were distinctively shaped by the church's canon law, collected in the *Corpus Juris Canonici* ('Body of Canon Law'). This too was significantly revised in the twentieth century (1917 and again 1983). Among common devotional practices with a shaping influence on Roman Catholic theology are a heightened veneration of Mary, associated with feast days, rituals, prayers and hymns, and a widespread and often locally concentrated devotion to the saints.

The Roman Catholic Church is the state church or dominant denomination of a large number of countries, especially in Central and South America, in western, southern, central and eastern Europe, and in parts of western and central Africa and of South-East Asia. Because its ecclesial governance is firmly centred in the Vatican, itself a sovereign city-state in Rome, Roman Catholic theology and practice have often been shaped by the shifting relationships between national and ecclesial authorities.

In line with these traditioning elements, recurrent themes in Roman Catholic theology include:

- the relationship of revelation and reason, and the question of a *philosophia perennis* (universal or perennial philosophy)
- the relationship of nature and grace
- the seven sacraments: baptism, holy communion, penance, confirmation, marriage, ordination, and anointing of the sick
- the role of Mary in salvation history and in personal devotion
- the identity, example, and teaching of the saints
- the role and authority of the magisterium, especially the pope
- relations with the Protestant churches formed during the Reformation, and with the Eastern Orthodox Church
- relations of the Church to local political powers
- the relationship of Roman Catholicism to modernity, especially its intellectual, moral, and political culture.

5.1.3 Lutheran churches

Lutheran Christianity comprises a range of church bodies which originate in Martin Luther's organizational, doctrinal, and liturgical reforms of the Western Church. The Lutheran theological tradition, which remains in close contact with the work of its founding theologians, especially Luther, is governed by the biblical canon as containing the unique revelation of God, above all in Christ. The creeds and the Lutheran Confessions are also held as governing expressions of the scriptures, as are the traditions of the church. Among these traditions, calendars and lectionaries, formulations of councils or significant theologians, and liturgical orders are largely continuous with their earlier Western forms. Some mediaeval Western traditions, such as conciliarism, shape Lutheran more distinctly than Roman Catholic theology. Lutheran theology draws on biblical concepts of God's 'living word' to see the proclaimed scriptures as God's power active in the world, convicting and absolving sin, empowering the sacraments, and accomplishing his purposes.

In light of this emphasis on the word, a natural goal of the Lutheran reforms of the sixteenth century was a raising of the educational standard of the clergy and thereby the

laity. The products of this effort, in the shape of catechisms, sermon collections (postils), and biblical commentaries, continue to shape Lutheran Christianity.

The Lutheran Reformation was also accompanied by a new attitude to church music, exemplified by the introduction of vernacular hymns alongside existing chant. Beginning with Luther, the authorship and deployment of these 'chorales' has been one of the most distinctive features of the Lutheran churches; hymns remain a focus of Lutheran piety. Lutheran composers, above all Johann Sebastian Bach, drew on this tradition to create sacred cantatas which elevate the common language of worship to sacred art.

The Lutheran Reformation was accepted and advanced at the state level in much of northern Europe, beginning with the Augsburg Confession (AD 1530), presented by German rulers. Lutheran Christianity is therefore also the bearer of local traditions, especially in and relating to Germany and Scandinavia.

In line with these traditioning elements, recurrent themes in Lutheran theology include:

- the primacy of God's action and will
- the centrality of Christ
- the sufficiency of scripture, grace, and faith for salvation
- the proclamation of the Word, often focused on the principles of law and gospel
- the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist
- the vocations of ordinary believers
- the excesses and aberrations of the Roman Catholic Church
- the omissions and contractions of the Reformed churches.

5.1.4 Reformed churches

Reformed Christianity comprises a range of denominational groups, including Continental Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and some evangelical Anglican. These originated in the organizational, doctrinal, and liturgical reforms of the Western Church led by Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, John Knox, and others. The Reformed theological tradition is governed primarily by the biblical canon and secondarily by the creeds; the first four ecumenical councils; and by various confessional documents, especially the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Confession. Although it is guided by exemplary theologians, Reformed theology is traditioned less by exegesis of its founding figures than by the development of their methods, formalized in the Reformed Scholasticism that dominated the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

Reformed theology is shaped by characteristic, restrained liturgical practices focused on biblical elements, including confession, psalmody, and the reading and preaching of scripture. The Eucharist is celebrated less frequently and understood in memorial or receptionist terms. The constant assurance and joy of salvation is emphasized over

against distinct feast days and seasons, which are sometimes regarded as distracting or indulgent.

Besides baptism and Eucharist, Reformed theology typically regards discipline as the third mark of the church. The Reformed churches are therefore organized in polities that lend structure to such discipline. They are led by ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament and by Elders; more widely, they are overseen by presbyteries (local groups of ministers), regional synods, and national general assemblies with elected moderators (or, in some cases, episcopal oversight, as in the Hungarian Reformed Church and historic Anglican churches). This plurality of leadership creates distributed centres of discipline and theology, also reflected in the Reformed confessions as products of plural voices. As a loose association of churches and groupings, Reformed Christianity is also locally inflected, especially where national identities were decisively shaped by its reformatory zeal, including in Switzerland, Scotland, and the United States of America.

In line with these traditioning elements, recurrent themes in Reformed theology include:

- doctrinal themes, especially divine election or predestination, human sin (understood as complete depravity), the means of salvation (often understood as penal substitution), and the *ordo salutis* ('order of salvation': calling, justification, regeneration, sanctification)
- the sovereignty of God
- covenant theology
- the significance and place of natural theology, and the inspiration and authority of scripture
- elements of church order and practice, especially the Eucharist (often understood in receptionist or memorial terms)
- questions of individual and communal conduct.

5.1.5 Anglican churches

Anglican Christianity (since 1867 organized as the Anglican Communion) comprises a range of national and regional churches, or provinces, historically in communion with the See of Canterbury. The forty-one provinces continue or emanate from the Church in England as jurisdictionally distinct from the rest of Western Christianity since the Reformation, and mediatory between its theological divisions. This includes the Church of England, the Church of Ireland, the Church in Wales, the Scottish Episcopal Church, and Anglican Churches especially in North America (most prominently the Episcopal Church of the United States of America), South America, Africa, South-East Asia, and Australasia. Anglican theology is governed by the biblical canon, the creeds, four or seven ecumenical councils, the statements on doctrine and practice that comprise the Thirty-Nine Articles, and episcopal oversight.

More than by specific teachings, Anglican theology is traditioned by distinctive patterns of prayer and worship, rooted in the Book of Common Prayer (in its various recensions since 1549, especially that of 1662) and the King James Version of the Bible (published in 1611). Anglicanism understands itself to be part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church whilst at the same time refusing the centralized authority of the Papacy and the Roman magisterium, and the confessional systems of the European protestant churches. Whilst Anglican theology is often thought to receive its classic expression in the so-called 'High Church' tradition of seventeenth-century England, it remains a broad tradition encompassing elements of evangelical, Catholic, and liberal Christianity. The rise of evangelicalism amongst Anglicans in Britain and the United States in the late eighteenth century emphasized its roots in Reformed theology. The Tractarian or Oxford Movement of the nineteenth century revived Catholic Anglicanism through an emphasis on the centrality of the sacraments and ritual worship, and the continuity of the Church of England with the primitive church. Under the influence of the Tractarians, Anglicans returned to patristic theology as a vital source for Christian teaching. Whilst remaining rooted in the Book of Common Prayer, the influence of a moderate catholic tradition in Anglicanism led to a return to patristic liturgical patterns in Anglican churches and a consequent alignment with Roman Catholic liturgy following the vernacular reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

In line with these traditioning elements, recurrent themes in Anglican theology include:

- the nature of authority (often expressing a conciliar and dispersed understanding of authority rooted in episcopal oversight)
- the relationship between church and state, and between the Christian community and wider society
- ecumenism and the role of Anglicanism within the relations between churches, often understood as the *via media* (middle way)
- the importance of critical reason and of various traditions in theological enquiry.

5.1.6 Free churches

Many other churches trace their distinctive identities to the Reformation or to subsequent reforms of the churches that emerged from it. These churches prominently include the Methodist (originating in an eighteenth-century revival within the Church of England), Baptist (originating in seventeenth-century dissent from the Church of England or, some argue, in the Radical Reformation), Adventist (originating in the nineteenth-century Baptist Church), and Pentecostal (originating in nineteenth-century Methodism and wider early twentieth-century revivals).

These churches generally reject any association of the church with state authority, and any central authority within the contemporary church. They place a strong emphasis on the authority of scripture and, in some cases, the indwelling and personal guidance of

the Holy Spirit, as well as on personal holiness and discipline. They generally regard the creeds as normative and the ecumenical councils as informative, and draw widely but often unsystematically on various textual, liturgical, and spiritual traditions. Their theological traditions are strongly shaped by personal and communal practices, above all biblical reading (guided by sermons, commentaries, informal teaching, and group discussion), communal worship (including, besides traditional liturgical elements, the public examination of conscience and giving of testimony, spontaneous praise and prayer, and extended practices of preaching), and practices of piety (including study and support groups, charitable work, and public witness through prayer, testimony, evangelization, and practical aid). These churches are often theologically shaped for certain periods of time by influential individuals or movements, particularly charismatic leaders, preachers, or writers.

In line with these traditioning elements, recurrent themes in free church theology include:

- biblical commentary and reflection
- the character, will, and intentions of God
- guidance for personal devotion and piety
- the Christian life in the contexts of Christian community and secular modernity
- theological interpretations of current events, trends, and ideas.

5.2 Spiritual traditions

Theology is also shaped by spiritual traditions that cross denominational lines and are found across a range of churches at various times in history. Sometimes, these traditions develop at the same time in different churches, in response to shared wider contexts; sometimes, they flower at characteristic stages of a church's life, and therefore become manifest at different times in history. Many such traditions can be identified, among which the following are especially notable: liturgical traditions ([5.2.1](#)), holiness traditions ([5.2.2](#)), evangelical traditions ([5.2.3](#)), and mystical and charismatic traditions ([5.2.4](#)).

5.2.1 Liturgical traditions

The Christian churches' liturgies of divine worship share roots in the early church, from which originate both the traditional elements of worship and specific forms of words. These elements of worship include confession of sins, adoration, recitation of psalms and canticles, readings from scripture, sermon, prayers of thanksgiving and supplication, offering, Eucharistic prayers and actions, and blessing. Early and Patristic forms of words include the *Gloria Patri*, the *Kyrie*, the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the *Te Deum*, and the *Sanctus*, as well as liturgical renditions of biblical canticles, above all the *Benedictus*, the *Magnificat*, and the *Nunc Dimittis*.

These shared elements and words have been developed in a wide variety of ways, not only between but also within some denominations, showing a wide range of realizations

especially within Protestant churches. In terminology adapted from Anglican usage, these liturgical realizations are often grouped into 'high' and 'low'. 'High' liturgies display highly elaborated forms of ritual (especially sacramental ritual), music, vestments, vessels, and other artistic artefacts; 'low' liturgies emphasize simplicity, authenticity, and communality of word, gesture, music, and decoration. This division is formalized in the Anglican church, but present in other Protestant churches including Lutheran and Reformed; although 'high' liturgical practice is traditionally associated with the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, the liturgical reforms associated with the Second Vatican Council have introduced 'low' practices within much of the Roman Catholic Church. These liturgical traditions often inspire, and are inspired by, theological sensibilities that shape the development of theology in manifold ways.

5.2.2 Holiness traditions

The Christian churches share roots in the formative work of the leaders and theologians of the early church, who regarded the gospel as divine teaching that imparted true knowledge and demanded a life lived in its light. The lives of holiness or sainthood pursued by early believers were among the most significant factors in the spread of Christianity and shaped the foundations of many of its lasting structures, texts, and ideals. Across denominations, distinctive forms of the pursuit of holiness have been passed on and in some cases formalized. These may be oriented either towards an otherwise ordinary life or away from ordinary life; a prominent theological theme throughout Christian history are the relative merits and risks of these orientations.

In the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican churches, the most visible holiness tradition oriented away from ordinary life is monasticism. Monasticism is the formal dedication to a life of work and prayer, sometimes solitary but usually communal, renouncing the pursuit of ordinary human satisfactions including autonomy, ownership, sexuality, and offspring. Subject to repeated critique and reform within and across denominations, monastic traditions have nevertheless been instrumental in preserving, shaping, extending, and communicating theological work throughout Christian history.

In all churches, there are also traditions of holiness pursued within an otherwise ordinary life: that is, a life lived within wider human society and its mores, though in partial resistance to it. These have a wide range of manifestations and theological frameworks, the most explicit and prominent being found in the cross-denominational Holiness movement originating in nineteenth-century Methodism.

5.2.3 Evangelical traditions

The Christian churches share roots in Jesus Christ's commission to his disciples to proclaim the gospel, the good news of God's kingdom, throughout the world (Matt 28:18–20). In all churches, especially in Protestant denominations, there arise sustained and

recurrent calls to return to this founding gospel and 'great commission'. These evangelical traditions usually emphasize personal devotion to Christ, adherence to the words of the Bible simply understood, evangelistic outreach, and communal forms and practices modelled on the New Testament church. They resist ecclesial traditions and structures of authority not attested in the Bible. Theologically, they tend to be suspicious of theological system-building that is perceived to be removed from the Bible in its presuppositions, substance, or form, e.g. in scholasticism or philosophical analysis.

Evangelical impetuses arise at various times in all churches, and consolidate into traditions in many. Examples in the historic churches include the Franciscan movement in thirteenth-century Catholicism, the Pietist movement in seventeenth-century Lutheranism, the Evangelical movement beginning in eighteenth-century Anglicanism, and the Tolstoyan movement in nineteenth-century Orthodoxy. Evangelical impetuses have also engendered or decisively shaped many Protestant denominations and non-denominational movements, often referred to collectively as 'evangelicalism' or 'evangelical Protestantism'. (See Evangelical Theology.)

5.2.4 Mystical and charismatic traditions

The Christian churches share roots in the New Testament church, which was characterized by the experience of a direct and transformative presence of God, and by the exercise of spiritual gifts including prophecy, glossolalia (speaking in tongues), healing, and exorcism (see Charismatic Gifts). In most churches, such presence and powers are experienced in renewed form at various times in history or among certain groups. Although institutionally channelled through sacraments and ordinances, especially baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, and anointing of the sick, God's presence may also be experienced and his gifts exercised directly and spontaneously. The preparation for, experience of, and reflection on unmediated communion with God is often described as 'mystical'; the experience of divine presence habitually issuing in prophecy, glossolalia, or other gifts is sometimes described as 'charismatic'. Traditions of mystical practice and writing have been attested since the early church and have remained highly regarded and influential in the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and some Protestant churches. They have engendered distinctive forms of theology, sometimes called mystical theology, and have influenced other theological as well as artistic forms. Wider charismatic experience and practice are more sporadic and contested, but in the twentieth century gave rise to Pentecostalism as well as charismatic movements within many historic churches.

5.3 Contextual traditions

Theology is also traditioned by its wider contexts, especially geographical, demographic, and political. Many geographic regions have developed distinctive theological traditions

shaped by indigenous concerns, transnational interactions, and by their cultural and socio-economic histories more generally.

The scope and impact of these and other contexts is the immediate subject of contextual theologies, which have assumed central importance in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Christianity, when expanding globalization and forms of emancipation, including postcolonialism, foregrounded radically diverging social and religious experiences. In de-emphasizing canons of texts and ideas, and delineating the unique experiences and traditions of particular groups (especially those marginalized in Western political, social, and intellectual history), contextual theologies seek to rebalance what they perceive as theologically distorting social, intellectual, and religious hierarchies. Among contextual theologies, those concerned with gender, sexuality, geographic region, and race have been among the main shaping powers of twenty-first-century theology, especially in North America and Europe.

Where geographic contexts entail significant interactions with other locally practised religions, such interactions may shape a theological tradition in distinct and sometimes creative ways. Historical examples include first- to third-century encounters with classical paganisms, twelfth-century debates with Islamic interpreters of Aristotle, sixteenth-century appropriations of Jewish mysticism, the inculturation of Christianity in native contexts, and twentieth-century encounters with Buddhism.

6 Theology between science and art

6.1 Theology as science

To speak of 'science' has, since the Middle Ages, been to speak of the university and its faculties. The history of theology as a science therefore correlates closely with that of the university, from its establishment in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries to its re-establishment in the nineteenth century.

The term 'science' came to be used in the sense of a unified field of rational enquiry in the thirteenth century, with the rise of the medieval universities. There, the liberal arts comprising the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) supplied the preparatory curriculum for the higher sciences of theology, medicine, and law. Theology as enquiry into the highest realities thus occupied a central place in these universities, although the principle of its unity and the ground of its rationality remained matters of debate. This debate was often focused through the Aristotelian requirement that scientific explanation be rooted in self-evident principles. Attempts to formalize the self-evidence of theology's principles – most importantly, the existence of God – through proofs such as the ontological argument were controversial (see esp. 'Proslogion', Anselm of Canterbury 2008). Aquinas famously argued that

God's existence, being identical with his essence, is self-evident to those who grasp that essence, namely God and the blessed. Earthly human beings, however, whose finite and sinful condition precludes knowledge of God's essence, achieve knowledge of his existence through the study of his effects, and through revelation received in faith (*Summa Theologiae* part 1, qq. 1–2).

Although the role of reason in faith was fiercely debated during and after the Reformation, the description of theology as a science long remained commonplace across denominations (see e.g. Hooker 2013 (vol. 3): ch. 8, para. 11; Westcott 1892: 89). In the last two centuries, however, the description has confronted institutional challenges. In the German-speaking world, the establishment of the modern research university formalized a fragmentation of theology into specialized subdisciplines variously concerned with texts, history, doctrine, and practice, which challenged the unity of theology as a field of study. 'Theological encyclopaedias' were developed to re-establish this unity (see esp. Schleiermacher 2011). In the English-speaking world, meanwhile, rapid progress in biology, physics, and chemistry resulted in a narrowing of the reference of 'science' to the natural sciences, and a shift of its perceived value from stewardship of knowledge to mastery by knowledge. Theology is nevertheless aptly called a science in the wider sense of *Wissenschaft*, possessing a unified field of enquiry and defined critical methods for its investigation (see, for example, Torrance 1969).

6.2 Theology and the sciences

Theology, as speech about God and all things in relation to God, interacts in some measure with all other disciplines, including the natural, applied, and social sciences. These interactions have historical, critical, and constructive dimensions which merit close and careful attention. (See The History of Science and Theology.)

The natural sciences investigate structures and processes of the natural world at its macro- and microlevels, their history and potential future. There are significant interfaces between these investigations and theological questions about creation, eschatology, divine providence, and human nature. (See Theology and Evolution.)

The application of scientific knowledge in medicine and technology intervenes in organisms and processes long considered natural and unchangeable. Medicine and technology therefore interact with theological questions and claims concerning the integrity of human nature and of moral action, the significance of life and death, and the divine ordination of natural processes. (See Theology and Technology.)

The social sciences observe and explain patterns of behaviour in individuals and groups. In particular, psychology and neuroscience investigate the triggers, processes, and objects of human emotion, cognition, and behaviour, including their neural and other organic

substrata. They therefore interact directly with theological questions and claims about the nature of faith and virtue, knowledge and understanding, free will, and sin. (See [Theology and the Cognitive Science of Religion](#).)

6.3 Theology and the arts

To have religious faith is not only to believe in unseen things, but also to see the visible world as possessing an immaterial ‘depth’ of order, goodness, and purpose. The task of theology is therefore not merely to rationalize the Christian faith but also to enable such depth vision. In this task, theology is more akin to art than to science. Throughout Christian history, faith and the arts have inspired, enlarged, and challenged one another, and continue to do so.

Since late antiquity, artistic forms, methods, and subjects have been created or adapted to express Christian belief, often in ways not available to non-artistic forms of expression. In the fine arts, these include icons, mosaics, and a wide range of religious motifs; in architecture, basilicas and cathedrals; in music, chants, Mass settings, cantatas, passions, and oratorios; and in literature, religious lyrics, (auto-)biography, and mystery, passion, and morality plays. Conversely, Christian beliefs have been energized and shaped by artistic realizations, especially devotional and ecclesial art and music.

In the nineteenth century, when widespread belief in God receded, human art was widely regarded as an alternative source of depth, beauty, order, and purpose, and aesthetic experience as a more genuinely human form of religious experience. In the twentieth century, however, aesthetic order and experience began, in turn, to appear illusory and manipulative, masking the ineradicable irrationality, violence, and fragility of human life within society and nature. Elite forms of art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries increasingly saw their task as social and cultural critique, including critique of religion. In all these contexts, the relationship between theology and the arts has been complex but vital, as the two domains clarify, contest, and expand one another.

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