

# Theology:

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Theology is rightly called the Queen of the Sciences, since it is the center of both the value of the person and the hope of philosophic certainty. From the Catholic theological perspective there flows a distinctive approach to all other intellectual disciplines as sources of real, if limited, knowledge. The queen is not so by arbitrary authority but by imprinting a specific and life-giving character on all the activities within the kingdom. Incarnational theology is the intellectual outworking of our acceptance of the revelation of God's presence among us: the quiet omnipresence of our Father and Creator, the specific historical and sacramental presence of Jesus, our Incarnate Redeemer, and the gentle interior presence of the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier. This theology affirms and supports human life in the natural world of its making; it is opposed in the anti-culture by various forms of Gnosticism which reject the entire landscape of Christian revelation.

To an unbeliever, it may seem strange to call Theology Queen of the Sciences — for is not the study of God the very opposite of Science? This opinion is based on two misunderstandings — first, of the definition of science and second, of the definition of theology.

Science is reasoning from evidence to conclusions. Since theology is reasoning about God from various evidences, including revelation and religious experience, it is a science. Without this foundation, as we will see, all the other sciences lose their confidence and cease the search for truth.

What is theology?

## INCARNATIONAL THEOLOGY:

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In terms of theological and religious education, Catholics have a definite curriculum outline in the Scriptures and the Catholic Catechism. Furthermore, we have the liturgy which incorporates intellectual and spiritual elements into a beautiful whole. and we have a community of intellect and wisdom, widespread in both space and time. To present these resources so that our students are supported in their search for holiness is the educational task of a Catholic school, and to organize this task is the function of a Catholic curriculum. Since religious education must be a work of faith, it will always draw power from the teacher's desire for holiness, but not to the extent that any such desire can atone for ignorance. The intrinsic value of right information must not be underestimated; truth has extraordinary power, even in a humble vessel.

The basic mysteries of incarnational theology — theology based on the presence of God within this world — are the Creation, the Incarnation, including the Cross, and the Indwelling of the Spirit of God. Each of these mysteries makes its distinctive contribution to the curriculum.

1. That God created everything, visible and invisible, is the first great revelation and the first fundamental thought-revolution recorded in the Scriptures. God created not only spiritual things, nor only the “heavenly bodies” — leaving the devil to make the material and/or earthly ones; no, He created everything. Earthly reality is therefore His work; nothing has been made outside of grace or by an evil or lesser creature. Our certainty of a single creator leads to a confident search for order in the universe and for a right direction in our interior lives.

2. Going the next step, the Christian who sees in Jesus the person of God-made-Man is constrained thereby to believe that, whatever its sorrows and imperfections, life on earth is compatible with divine life; else God could not have sent his Divine Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, to live the life of a true man. A whole raft of heresies about the nature of Jesus bears witness to the difficulty of comprehending this idea and interiorizing its implications. Faith in the incarnation yields enormous confidence in man’s potential to embrace goodness and triumph over evil. It makes the call to personal holiness real, present, and living. And in case the daily experience of sin should discourage us, the Cross of Jesus lifts us up repeatedly, so that we may submit our needs and unite our sufferings to His life. Thus we may always walk in love and hope.

3. Finally, to enable our entry into the Trinitarian life, the Holy Spirit dwells within us, constantly bringing to mind the words of Jesus and renewing the vitality of our search for divine union. This joyful and encouraging presence teaches us how to work at building the “City of God” on earth, regardless of all setbacks.

Such a trinity of meditations prepares believers for a direct and joyful encounter with the world — as a creature. The Christian does not worship any part of physical cosmology; neither does he fear it, nor does he spurn it, nor is he wearied by the responsibility of being its god. It is his workshop, his studio, his home, and his inheritance.

## CHRISTIAN PRAYER AND MEDITATION

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It is essential that Christian theology be supported by clear and practical teaching on Christian prayer and meditation. Christian prayer is always personal, because it is addressed to our Father and to those who share his fatherhood and are thereby our sisters and brothers. It is cry of love, of confidence, of need, of thanksgiving — always the expression of a loving relationship.

Christian meditation is the disciplined backdrop of prayer. It is always mind-filling: concepts, images, and memories of God's perfect and personal nature and His creative work on earth and the life of Jesus are placed before the mind, and become formative. Such meditation works effectively, if slowly, to displace other thoughts, but never seeks to empty the mind, a serious danger with alternative forms of meditation. In time, when it seems right and safe to the Lord and when the way of love is chosen at a consistent and dependable depth, Christian prayer and meditation yield to contemplative adoration, profound joy, and a peace that passes worldly understanding.

### **GNOSTICISM, THE ANTI-RELIGION OF THE ANTI-CULTURE:**

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Someone has said that there is only one heresy: Gnosticism. In the context of understanding that there is only one Way to the Father, through His Son Jesus, it is not hard to see that Gnosticism is the opposite of Incarnationalism. Gnosticism, in a variety of guises, shrouds God in an impenetrable cloud of uncertainty, the very cloud so definitively penetrated by revelation. Gnosticism is the name for the whole pseudo-religion in which God cannot be approached or known except through a "hidden knowledge," or "gnosis" — which you only "know when you know it". Such a religion offers no haven for the lost who must still wander; no strength for the weak who remain insecure; no joy for the humble, who cannot know what will sustain them; no comfort for the suffering, whose pains are without value. Gnosticism is a rich man's religion, full of in-group innuendoes and empty of divine protection — of saving power. It is important to explore this thought and make sure that the curriculum invites some deep reflection on it.

You may be thinking that the opposite of theology, "the study of God" should be atheism, the belief that there is no God. I do not think so, and I offer in rebuttal the remark attributed to Chesterton, "When people cease to believe in God, they do not believe in nothing, they believe in anything." People always have a highest loyalty which orders their lives, and no culture (or anti-culture) goes far without seeking a relationship with the supernatural. It is not long before the members of an atheist subculture become immeasurably more superstitious than the most gullible Christian who nevertheless has the First Commandment standing between him and the weekly horoscope. In any case, atheism, as such, is not a systematic body of thought, but merely a guerilla war on theology: why would you believe in God when... all the arguments that have been raised and addressed a thousand times in history; nothing very clever about them.

Neither do we find the clearest opposite of theology in agnosticism — the position of definitive uncertainty (definitive uncertainty?!) about God's existence.

Agnosticism is its own species of Gnosticism, for Gnosticism is precisely the position that God cannot be known except in a manner completely interior, non-rational, and unverifiable. The agnostic does not say that God does not exist, but merely that it cannot be known whether He exists. To be firm about uncertainty is certainly to embrace an irrational and unverifiable position; thus agnosticism is little more than Gnosticism taken to its natural extreme.

The Hindu *Gita* might provide one avenue of reflection on Gnosticism. Because it was written by people who were, at least in some measure, seeking God, it also contains truthful and beautiful passages, which would be useful to know as we address those influenced by Hinduism, a substantial audience, since Hindu writings are favored within the New Age movement.

A superficially very different avenue for the consideration of Gnosticism might be the writings of Calvin or *The Westminster Confession*, especially in its original form. As a definitive but limited departure from the Catholic Church, these documents provide a basic case study in the irrational dividing of truth. The insistence on Scripture as the sole guide to faith, as if neither its source nor the vagaries of personal error and fashionable scholarship were worthy of consideration, is the very essence of the Gnostic attitude: don't bother me with arguments; I myself evaluate truth from within. Furthermore, each of the documents insisting on scripture as the sole guide to faith contains an explicit instruction on how to interpret scripture, the very matter for which the Catholic Church is being criticized. Some exposure to such writings is extremely valuable for an understanding of how many people think about religion.

A third approach to the study of Gnosticism is simply the study of psychology because many Gnostics believe that man is god (or as much of god as there is), and from this it follows that psychology (see below) is theology, (or as much of theology as you're going to get). From this exaltation of human nature, there naturally follows the secular psychologists' definitive refusal to categorize any human action as good or evil, either because he is god, or because nothing is certain. Either way, a very confusing position!

## GNOSTIC MEDITATION

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Since God is not understood to be personal, prayer is not a regular practice within the anti-culture, but meditation is. In practical terms, it is important to know something about such Gnostic counterfeits of spirituality as Transcendental Meditation and other New Age meditation systems, which, by emptying the mind, do create a kind of serenity though they also invite spiritual apathy, mental disorganization, and even a vulnerability to demonic influence. Students must understand this problem before they are sent into the world to encounter it. Non-

Christian meditation is emotionally intoxicating, but it cannot, long term, nourish the spirit or support the love of God or man. It is of this matter that Paul says so firmly that the Spirit of God clearly recognizes the difference between the soul of man, which Gnosticism addresses with moderate thoroughness, and the spirit of man, that is, the soul acting in its unique power to turn attentively towards the transcendent personality of God. Truly, the reality and effect of this openness is discernible only to — and only through — the Spirit of God.

#### NATURAL THEOLOGY — AFTERWORD

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Since first writing this essay, I have come into contact with the writings of Luigi Giussani, and have been struck by their power.

Because Catholic Christians are not limited to scripture as the only source of religious wisdom, we can speak of natural theology, that is, theology pursued in the light of reason and without special attention to the scriptures. Such an approach is of particular importance for the student who constantly interfaces with the secular world and needs to find ways to express his ideas so they are meaningful to friends who are not interested in explicitly religious discussion.

Natural theology is not complete; we know God because He approaches us, not only because we approach Him. Some Christians would conclude that natural theology is therefore a contradiction in terms, but that is not the Catholic position. Natural theology, properly pursued, it is a corroboration of revelation. It means looking at what we know by revelation and seeing the extent to which reason can approach such concepts. Even if reason is not sufficient to discover what we know by revelation, it is able to confirm the reasonableness of revealed truth, and by this means, to set it more deeply into our thinking.

Giussani, founder of the movement called Communion and Liberation, has written a vibrant trilogy in which he considers the human hunger for the infinite, the manner in which Jesus is God's response to that hunger, and the gift of the Church as a community of support for receiving Jesus. His writing and his worldwide community are a singular and contribution to religious thought and life.