

# Contents

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Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xi
<b>1. “That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Conceived”: The Making and Remaking of the Christian Doctrine of God</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction	1
More Truly Imagined Than Described	6
Retrieving the Christian Tradition: Three Occasions in the Formative History of God	14
<i>“In the Beginning”</i> : The Early Israelite History of God	15
<i>“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”</i> : God and Greek Philosophy	31
<i>Three-in-One and One-in-Three: God as a TriUnity</i>	38
Recasting the Christian Tradition: Contemporary Problems with and Reformulations of the Concept of God	47
<i>Why Three? Contemporary Trinitarian Perspectives</i>	48
<i>Is God the Unmoved Mover or the Most Moved Mover?</i>	53
<i>“Why, Lord?”</i> : God and the Problem of Evil	55
Concluding Remarks	60
<i>For Further Reading</i>	61

<b>2. Deciphering the Riddle of the Human Condition: A Survey of the Insights and Efforts of Christian Theological Anthropology</b>	65
Introduction	65
Retrieving the Christian Understanding of Human Nature	71
<i>Human Beings: Creatures of God</i>	71
<i>Human Beings: Created in God's Image</i>	73
<i>Human Beings: Created to be Good</i>	79
<i>Human Beings: Embodied Persons</i>	81
<i>Human Beings: Created for Fellowship</i>	84
<i>Human Beings: Both Bound and Free</i>	89
<i>Human Beings: Sinful Creatures</i>	92
<i>Human Beings: Looking to Jesus as the Prime Example of a Righteous and Authentic Life</i>	101
Renewing the Christian Doctrine of Humanity	103
<i>Reclaiming and Accentuating Our Social and Relational Nature</i>	104
<i>Rethinking the Doctrine of Original Sin</i>	109
<i>Cherishing Our Corporeality and Sexuality</i>	119
<i>Recognizing Our Relation to Nature</i>	127
Concluding Remarks	134
<i>For Further Reading</i>	137
<b>3. God and the Potential of Life as Seen in and through Jesus: A Summary of Christology</b>	141
Introduction	141
A Sketch of the Historical Jesus	143
From Jesus to Christology: Early Christian Interpretations of the Religious Significance of Jesus	168
<i>Christology and the New Testament</i>	170
<i>The Rise of Orthodox Christology</i>	178
<i>The Development of Atonement Theories</i>	188
Recent Developments in Christology	201
Concluding Remarks	218
<i>For Further Reading</i>	223
Index of Subjects and Authors	227

# Introduction

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The present-day student of theology doesn't lack for books that introduce and advance the discussion of key Christian theological themes. I have read and used many of these books myself, for personal enlightenment, research pursuits, and classroom teaching. For example, I can mention Justo Gonzalez's *A Concise History of Christian Doctrine*; Shirley Guthrie Jr.'s *Christian Doctrine*; Bradley Hanson's *Introduction to Christian Theology*; Tyron Inbody's *The Faith of the Christian Church: An Introduction to Theology*; Alister McGrath's *Christian Theology: An Introduction*; Daniel Migliore's *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*; Dorothee Soelle's *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology*; and Clark Williamson's *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology*.<sup>1</sup> These are just some of the *single-authored* introductory theology texts that are currently available for purchase and reading. There are also many *multi-authored*, edited textbooks about Christian theology. These include Peter Hodgson and Robert King's *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*; Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland's *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*; William Placher's *Essentials*

1. See Justo L. González, *A Concise History of Christian Doctrine*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005); Shirley C. Guthrie Jr., *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994); Bradley C. Hanson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Tyron Inbody, *The Faith of the Christian Church: An Introduction to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005); Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004); Dorothee Soelle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 1997); Clark Williamson, *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999).

of *Christian Theology*; and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John Galvin's *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*.<sup>2</sup>

Even so, there seems to be a need for a theology text that traces the historical origins and development of Christian tenets. We know that Christian ideas and convictions did not drop from the sky ready-made for our consideration and utility. We know that they emerged at a particular time in human history and that they developed through time as Christians reflected on such things as the possibility of a transcendent reality, the great riddle of the human condition, and the question of the significance of Jesus of Nazareth. Christians were reflecting on these issues to gain meaning and direction in life. Some theological textbooks do not consider this human, historical, and contextual element. But theological constructs cannot be fully understood if they are divorced from the movement of human history. It is important, therefore, that theology texts help us to see how and why Christian ideas and convictions emerged and developed in and through time.

I also sense that there is still room in the theological domain for an introductory text that highlights the diversity of Christian thought. Christian theology has always been a more complex phenomenon than some have realized, with a variety of perspectives, languages, schools of thought, options of belief, and expectations or hopes. There are some who recognize this variety but renounce, downplay, or hide it as if it were something to be afraid of or ashamed of. But we should not be scandalized by diversity: we should be able to see that variety is usually a good thing. This holds true even in theology. I submit, therefore, that the variegated, prismatic, and colorful form that Christian theology assumed very early on is to be acknowledged, studied, valued, and highlighted. Some theology texts do this well and encourage us to do this as well. Yet many do not.

Also, there is a need for theology texts that place Christian theology in conversation with other disciplines and fields of inquiry, such as science, archaeology, sociology, psychology, and the history of religion. Indeed, I sense that there is a need for theology texts that place Christian theology in conversation with the pressing problems and concerns of our time, calling attention to some of the central points at issue in contemporary Christian reflection. And

2. See Peter C. Hodgson and Robert King, eds., *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, ed., *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); William Placher, ed., *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John Galvin, ed., *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).

there is room for a text that can carry out these kinds of efforts in an engaging, conversational style.

This book will try to be the desired theology text I have just described. Yet in it I do not explore all of the big issues of Christian theology, only the topics of God, humanity (i.e., theological anthropology), and Christ (i.e., Christology). I have chosen to limit my inquiry to these themes or topics in order to examine them as thoroughly as I can. The truth is that it would be extremely hard to comply with the list of requisites and directives I mentioned above if one were bent on trying to cover all or most of the big topics and doctrines of Christian theology. That would make for a lengthy and unwieldy text, quite possibly for a costly one as well. Furthermore, a text of that magnitude would take an extremely long time to write. This one took me long enough to write! For these reasons I have chosen to focus on three of the big topics of Christian theology.

I have selected the themes of God, humanity, and Christ because they take us to the very center of Christian theology. The other classic themes and doctrines of Christianity are important, of course, and they do complete the Christian picture or narrative. Topics such as creation, ecclesiology, eschatology, and all the other traditional doctrinal loci deserve our continuous reflection so that we may learn about their emergence, historical development, and present state and relevance and so that we may be better able to determine how and why they need reformulation today. But we must admit that the topics of God, humanity, and Christ are *very big topics* in Christian theology. And there is a sense in which they take us to the heart of the Christian proposition and story. They present Christianity's picturing of the God, human, salvific drama, one could say. In this wise they even seem to go together or to join together well. And this is another reason why I have chosen to focus on them in this book. Simply put, the topics of God, humanity, and Christ cohere well and provide for a coherent text.

Because it explores three Christian themes at length, the book contains three sizable chapters. Each one offers an introduction to and an overview of the history and contents of a Christian theme. Chapter 1, "That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Conceived," traces the unfolding of the Christian understanding of God. It begins with a consideration of the nature of God-thought and God-talk. But it moves on from there to reflect upon three questions: How did the prevailing Christian conception of God develop? What are the main tenets of this conception? And how has this understanding of God been taken on or revised in more recent time?

Chapter 2, "Deciphering the Riddle of the Human Condition," surveys the insights and efforts of Christian theological anthropology. Here I reflect upon the essential Christian affirmations about human being. I submit that

Christian anthropology revolves around eight essential affirmations about human beings: (1) that human beings are created, are creaturely beings; (2) that human beings are created in God's image; (3) that human beings are created to be good; (4) that human beings are embodied persons; (5) that human beings are created for fellowship; (6) that human beings are both bound and free; (7) that human beings are fallen, sinful creatures; and (8) that human beings can look to Jesus for a revealing and inspiring example of a righteous and authentic life. These are not the only declarations Christianity has made with regard to humanity, I clarify, but they are some of the more central and prevailing ones. After offering an interpretation of the sum and substance of these historic affirmations, I proceed to throw light upon four recent trends and developments that have marked contemporary Christian anthropology. These include, first, the reclamation and accentuation of our social and relational nature; second, the rethinking of original sin; third, the acknowledgment and cherishing of our corporeality and sexuality; and fourth, the recognition of our relation to nature.

Chapter 3, "God and the Potentiality of Life as Seen In and Through Jesus," tenders a summary of Christology. Christology can be defined as the subdiscipline in theology that seeks to decipher the religious or saving significance of the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. And often it is spoken of in the singular form, Christology. But the truth is that, because every generation of Christians has had to construe Jesus Christ's importance by using the resources of their time and place, we have inherited multiple renderings of the significance of Jesus—various different Christologies. In this chapter I explore some of the more important, influential, and lasting ones of these. Here I include several early Christologies that appear already in the New Testament documents, and the so-called classical or orthodox Christology that came into view at the early church councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon. I also take a look at the atonement theories that emerged in the patristic era and in the eleventh and twelfth centuries of our Common Era because these convey an understanding of the salvific impact and enduring significance of Jesus. Finally, I survey some of the recent developments in the contemporary christological scene to give an idea of the ongoing evolution or flowering of Christology.

These are the three chapters of my book. And just on the basis of my brief descriptions, it should be evident that they are substantive ones. But this is the idea and intention of the book. It is meant to be a substantive, historically sweeping, well-founded, up-to-date, and yet rhetorically accessible introduction to the Christian themes of God, humanity, and Christ. As partly introduction to Christian doctrine and partly history of Christian doctrine, the book aims to provide readers with a solid overview of the history and content

of these three key topics in Christian theology. To help students and teachers in their further exploration of these topics and their subtopics, each of the book's chapters ends with suggested readings.

The structure of the book's chapters is grounded in a particular vision and understanding of the vocation of theology. As I see it, theology is defined by a tripartite set of tasks that includes (1) the retrieval and interpretation of a religious tradition; (2) the questioning and assessment of the tradition; and (3) the rethinking and reconstruction of that tradition so that it can remain relevant and living. The headings of the chapters do not always bear these exact words, but it should be easy to see that they comply with this understanding of the theological vocation and that they follow a pattern of retrieval and interpretation; contemporary questioning and assessment; and present-day rethinking and reconstruction.

As for the title of the book, it derives from the sense that what these chapters tender are maps of the theological terrain. Each chapter attempts to map out or trace the contours of a Christian theological theme, with attention being given to the nature of the topic, the history of the topic, the contents and meanings of the topic, and the contemporary relevance and reformulation of the topic. In the case of this book, the topics mapped out are about God, humanity, and Christ.

The title allows for another association. Maps are mostly used when one is going to take a trip. In fact, they can even encourage travel and make travel easier. I am hoping that my theological maps will encourage and help people to traverse, explore, or wander over the Christian topics of God, humanity, and Christ.

For all those who are intrigued and want to come along with me on this journey of theological discovery, I am glad you will be joining me, and I hope you enjoy the trip. The journey now begins.