

Awake to the Moment

An Introduction to Theology

THE WORKGROUP ON CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

Laurel C. Schneider
and Stephen G. Ray Jr., editors

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*The Workgroup on Constructive Theology
dedicates this project to every thinker about God who
transforms the world toward greater justice and mercy.*

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Acknowledgments

This is a project that some said could not be done. In 2010 over seventy members of the Workgroup on Constructive Theology decided to work collectively on a project that would introduce the basic assumptions, approaches, and commitments that bring us together as constructive theologians. This project took its shape and urgency from the demand by our members teaching in colleges and universities that we speak to a new generation of students whose passions are shaping the world. Heed to this call created something quite remarkable—a moment in which seventy theologians animated by shared commitments to social justice set aside many of our differences and our own projects to do something together. Not everyone agreed on every point, of course, but every member of the Workgroup helped in some fashion to shape and support this work. It would not have been possible without each one.

During the writing of this book two long-standing members passed away. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and founding Workgroup member Edward Farley left us too soon. We were privileged to work with them, and they still help us to keep our theological focus and our justice commitments clear.

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Introduction

The idea of God has taken many shapes in Christian history. While the diversity of images, opinions, and practices means that there have been and continue to be many versions of Christian faith and at least as many disagreements among Christians, there are nonetheless some common threads that hold together this global religion with its millions of adherents and tens of thousands of sometimes loudly different denominations. The story of the young carpenter Jesus, son of an impoverished unwed mother from the town of Nazareth in Israel, is one such thread. And the story of God, creator of *all* that is, who inexplicably became that lowly human being in a poor, colonized country, is another thread. The story of how that God reached out and still reaches out to save and empower those who suffer everywhere is yet another thread that weaves through the colorful Christian tapestry.

Theology is a kind of thinking that reflects directly on the meaning of these stories of God on behalf of the world *as it is today*. It is concerned with the many ways that Christians and others have tried to express their faith as they search for better ways to live together on this earth. It is an academic discipline in part, but more importantly, theology

is what everyday people do when they try to make sense of the teachings that come from their religious traditions, especially when they try to think through the practical applications of their beliefs. In the 1990s, for example, it became popular among some Christians to ask the question “what would Jesus do?” in relation to even the smallest questions of their daily lives. “WWJD” became a common acronym that some stamped on bracelets, notebook covers, or T-shirts as reminders to stop and *think* about what they had been taught, to imagine how those Christian stories and teachings might guide them in their own individual circumstances. These were reminders to those who wore the acronym on their bodies to *be* theologians themselves, to think through the ideas embedded in the sacred stories in relation to specific questions in their own lives. This impulse to make meaning is basic to theology, from the simplest rubber bracelet with “WWJD” stamped on it to the most sophisticated multivolume academic treatise, such as Thomas Aquinas’s medieval *Summa Theologiae*. They are not the same, of course. The bracelet is an individual exercise, focused on immediate, individual concerns, while academic theological texts take up wider contexts and longer histories. But they both speak at heart to the work of Christian theology—the effort to understand and put into practice the meaning of Christian teachings, stories, and ideas in order to bring God better into focus for the needs of this time, this moment, this age.

Theologians take each part of the Christian faith seriously, from Jesus’ strongly worded claim that any harm done to the “least” among us is done to him to church teachings on almost every subject. The point is, for theologians from the eleventh century or the twenty-first, that Christian Scriptures and ancient church teachings do not interpret themselves by themselves. Biblical scholars and theologians and individual seekers and believers interpret them. What is more, the interpretations of other centuries might not speak appropriately or even accurately to later generations—older interpretations reflect the concerns (and prejudices) of other times. This

does not mean that those ancient teachings should be discarded. Not at all. They contain wisdom, but sometimes they need to be revised. Just as the question “what would Jesus do?” reflects an awareness that specific contexts require specific interpretations, theologians undertake the challenge of interpreting Christian ideas as best they can for their own age and the specific challenges that face that age, without losing the wisdom and revelatory messages embedded in the long histories and traditions of Christians who have sought to be faithful in the past.

Today our time is full of immense social struggles, new technologies, and changing landscapes. The theological challenges of interpreting Christian faith, hope, and life are as great as they ever have been, perhaps greater. We live in a world that is increasingly troubled by mass killings specifically targeting innocents; that is increasingly assaulted by racial, religious, environmental, and sexual violence; that is confronted by the militarization and enslavement of children, and more. Each of the twenty-eight theologians who came together on this project to write this book believes it is imperative that Christian theologians not turn our eyes away from this world and the challenges of this time. Christian theology, to be true to its own claims about God’s intimate and enfleshed love for the world, must find its way into and through the very midst of these troubles to find the God who reached—and still reaches—to each creature who suffers and to each who dances. Theology that gets its own hands dirty with the real pain and the real joy of life in *this* very world, in *this* very time comes closer to expressing something meaningful about the God who became full and fleshly present in *that* real time and real place two thousand years ago, a place so much like our own, a place and a time as much in need of new pathways to healing as ours is now.

If we do not begin with the reality of human experience in the world as it is, theologians cannot hope to speak with any wisdom to that world. To do so, we would sound hopelessly naive or overly optimistic about our own faith in the Spirit of love and justice. It can be difficult to talk about

life having value when human, animal, and planetary life is commodified, devalued, and destroyed in the names of progress, tradition, purity, or profit. How do we get at real hope for a different outcome when daily there are bombings in marketplaces and children are slaughtered by hunger and the abuse of neglect, when the earth itself is in distress and whole island nations watch their ancestral homes sink under rising oceans? How do we make sense of Christian faith in a God who chose and continues to choose our human fate when a simple, welcoming Bible study group in a Charleston church is gunned down on behalf of white supremacy? Where is our basis for hope in *real* terms, not pie-in-the-sky terms? If we take compassion for others as seriously as Jesus apparently did, if we believe that God really does love this world passionately, what can we celebrate and how can we be the fun-loving people we want to be *and* devote ourselves to steady, honest, and concrete acts of ongoing repair in a world of so much harm and hurt?

It can be hard not to opt for easy answers or quick fixes, to spiritualize our problems or turn them into abstractions instead of being inconvenienced by actually changing our ways so that others might do a little better. Jesus tells a story about a man walking on the road one day who is assaulted by robbers, beaten, and left for dead. Two different men of the victim's own faith come along but cross the road to avoid the bleeding man. Finally a foreigner, an enemy even, comes along. He stops and helps the man, gets him to a place where he can recover, and even leaves him some money to help pay for his recovery!¹ This is a parable Jesus tells to someone who has just asked him what to do to attain eternal life. His answer is indirect, but the message is clear. What you do to help alleviate the suffering of others—even others you don't know—is more important than who you are or what beliefs you profess.

Christian theology that looks away from the actual harm happening all around us is no better than the two busy men who could not be bothered by the inconvenience of an assault victim lying by the side of the road. If Christian

theology does not guide us to stand up for something greater than ourselves in a world of multiplying complexity, and to do so without diminishing that complexity, then it is not worth doing or studying. If Christian theology does not help us to figure out how to stand up for those being hurt who are right around us and those far away, then it is not worth doing or studying. We need theology that can help us to talk intelligently about the Spirit that moves through the earth (and the many spirits that animate us) in ways that hold together the vast and interesting differences between us on this beautiful planet.

Constructive Christian theology starts from the embodied, compassion-oriented Jesus who had the courage to live and die for the integrity of others, even others unlike himself. Constructive Christian theology recognizes that there is no point to theology, no point to talk of God, Christ, or Spirit if it does not enter fully into all of what it means to be alive and present in these days of change, wonder, and challenge.

Understanding Christian faith, the Christian triune God, is a huge theological task, one that is perhaps impossible for any one person or any one community to undertake. But trying for that understanding can be a pleasurable spiritual path, especially if there are others to talk with, to wonder with, to sing with, to protest with, to be still and listen with. We theologians seek to understand the three-way combination of the great universality of the God whom Christians and others worship, the minute specificity of that Jewish son of Mary and of God, and the rich diversity of spirit that flows from those sources in ever-widening and diversifying (and yes, sometimes divergent) communities of Christian faith. While some would argue that there should not be differences among Christians in their faith and understanding, we see these differences as essential to the evolving and growing process of wisdom in a religion that never told its stories in only one voice or only one way. Let us always remember that even the life story and teachings of Jesus come in four versions in the Bible (the four Gospels) that are not the same in every way.

What About Those Who Say That Religion Is the Problem?

Religion is not innocent, and theology plays an important role in speaking back to our own traditions about the ways we have fallen short and the ways that we can move forward with greater attention to justice and peace, “walking more humbly with our God” as the Hebrew prophet said. This is no small challenge. In an episode of a popular television show, the main character indulged in a rant that earned the show wide acclaim on fan blogs: “Is it just me,” he demanded, “or is the human race armed with religion, poisoned by prejudice, and absolutely frantic with hatred and fear, galloping pell-mell back to the Dark Ages?”² Despite (or perhaps because of) his role as a ruthless international fugitive going after even more ruthless criminals, the character is symptomatic of widening skepticism about the ability of governments and religions to stem or control spiraling international greed, racial and gendered violence, and ecological destruction across the planet. And in this particular scene he eloquently fingered religion for the roles religious people seem to play, over and over again, in human oppression and suffering. The show expressed a view that many people continue to hold: religion is the root cause of war, bloodshed, and suffering. But one does not have to be antireligious or hold to an atheist faith to critique religion, just as one need not be antipatriotic to critique one’s government. Indeed, we contend that critique of one’s own religious tradition can be as vital a part of faith as celebration of it.

The rising cycles of violence, suffering, and planetary distress are real. Something is wrong in the human world that has effects across the globe and beyond human environments. It can be a relief to pin all of that horror on something concrete and relatively simple to blame, like “religion,” especially when the religions are indeed complicit in these histories. But such a simple accusation, though satisfying, may avoid the equally true complicity of religions in peace and justice making throughout history. The view that the entire history of human conflict and genocide belongs at the feet of the world’s

religious traditions declares that religious ideas set groups of people implacably against one another and impede scientific progress. Religion, in this view, is the source and manager of superstition blessing ignorance of the ever-changing world. Because over the centuries there have been religious people doing exactly these terrible things in the name of their God, there is good cause for such disaffection toward religions and the religious. Certainly the Christian history of Europe and of European colonial expansion around the world is liberally sprinkled with holy fervor, claims of divine right, and even, in some cases, visions of global or cosmic domination. The human history of the world is replete with Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious stamps of approval for bloody conquests of disputed lands, righteous invasions, violent martyrdoms, enslavement of peoples, oppressive economic systems, and wholesale destruction of cultures. In the face of this historic reality, why wouldn't reasonable people who seek peace, justice, and progress turn away from religion entirely?

On the other hand, that view ignores the fact that religious ideas have also given rise to notions of justice and to actions for peace. The story is incomplete without accounting for the ways that the religions give us the very ideas of peace with justice that enable us to stand up against atrocity, exclusion, and injustice. Movements of protest against violence and oppression go all the way back to Jesus himself and further back to the Hebrew prophets he studied, just as ideas of harmony and movements of peace exist in all of the ancient religious traditions of the world. The ideas of peace with justice exemplified by Jesus were picked up by virtuous and not-so-virtuous Christian figures across the two thousand years since. Francis of Assisi is one, the English Quakers are others, the slave songwriters in the American South and the Protestant villagers of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon yet more, and of course the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is another in a long list of people whose Christian understanding formed the basis of their leadership in whole movements against oppressive structures, movements that changed the world. So is it quite

so simple as that: to conclude that religion is the problem, ignoring the answers it can and does give? It is impossible to separate the history of Christianity from the bad, but it is also impossible to separate it in the past and the present from the good. The very idea of the “bad” and the “good” are religiously, or theologically, implicated, as are the principles and ideas that make peace and justice conceivable.

Theology as a Practice of Truth Telling and Exploration

The authors of this book accept the reality of Christianity’s complicity in the history of human suffering and believe that telling the truth about it will lead us to deeper understanding, better answers, and a more interesting faith. It is said that Jesus told his disciples one day that “the truth will make you free.”³ We do not seek to deny Christian responsibility in injustice, war, and atrocity. Just taking the examples of the Atlantic slave trade in millions of African persons that spanned four hundred years over multiple countries and the equally long assault on Native peoples and lands in the Americas—in both cases carried out largely by Christians who used religious justification for their violence—is enough to bring us to our feet in protest, anger, and deep sorrow. The fact is, constructive Christian theologians share our neighbors’ disaffection with religious superiority and arrogance of any stripe, and we see religious denial of wrongdoing or triumphalist arrogance as part of the problem that we, as Christian theologians, must address even as we find within the Christian literature, traditions, and histories incredible models for courageous resistance to tyrants and resources for celebrating a world of vast diversity, beauty, and vulnerability. Our motivation for being theologians is in part our own outrage over abuses in the world done in Christ’s name. We too are disaffected from those Christianities that turn away from responsibility for harm and pain in a world that needs more honesty, more welcome of difference, more compassion, more healers, and less spin. It is because of these commitments that we find simple rejection of religious ideas or of religious communities

inadequate to the task of moving toward a world of peace, justice, and the open exchange of exciting new knowledge.

One of the reasons that we see protest as essential to good theology is that when people rise up—especially poor, excluded, and oppressed people—they do so because some spirit of change and hope is moving in the midst of despair. This hope and spirit of change is fragile—they can be silenced, diminished, or distorted by repressive violence. But hope and the spirit of change embodied in protest can also become a basis for new understandings and practices that actually begin to heal the world. There is always something to learn from what is happening in the world, both as warning and as avenue of hopeful and faithful religious action. This is why theology that locates itself at the center of life where the needs are greatest is also theology that actually can help to make a difference in the world.

The protest movements in Ferguson, Missouri, that erupted after the police shooting of Michael Brown in 2014 reflect a key moment in our time to which theologians who are committed to imagining God's creation must attend, since racism continues to deeply wound that creation again and again. Theologians who stand with the young protesters, not to quell their anger but to support them and help expose the historic and ongoing harm of racism as a religious concern, also help to channel the hope and spirit of change that signals the Spirit of God in the midst of their visionary demands for an end to daily violence against black persons in our society.

Another call for theological engagement in our time is the precipitous rise of religious extremism around the world, with its demands for sameness and the militarization of disciples. Religious people of a multitude of spiritual traditions, who together understand God's creation to reflect not sameness but a vast harmony of differences, must help those of their own communities to understand the challenges of living in a world of sometimes uncomfortable otherness and of sometimes unsettling changes—to understand the challenges as expressions of God's own life and existence rather than as threats to it. The terrifying destruction that violent religious

extremism promotes and valorizes is a provocation to theology by theologians. It is a kind of gauntlet thrown before theologians, a theological claim that God favors some over others and justifies the extermination or intimidation of those who differ. Theologians have the choice of ceding God to these interpretations or of vigorously accepting the challenge to interpret God otherwise. It is a theological opportunity as much as a dire need.

Finally, theologians today are confronted every day with the effects of environmental distress and the global effects of corporate wealth production. The depths of working poverty into which millions of human souls are falling is not unconnected to the erosion of arable lands, loss of animal habitats and species diversity, and lack of clean water. The doctrines of profit that govern whole nations challenge theologians as never before to think through the relationship of the planet itself—creation—to the spirit of God. Christian theologians have to decide how they interpret Jesus' claim when he says he has been anointed by God to "bring good news to the poor," just as Jewish theologians must do the same with the same words by the Hebrew prophet Isaiah (Jesus was quoting the prophet).⁴ Are "the poor" inevitable, or does God dwell among them, as Jesus' teaching seems to imply? Does "the poor" mean only humans, or all those creatures in God's care without voice, vote, or the means to live? Theology that begins where "the poor" live, whether in gun-ridden projects or toxic rivers (which often run past barrios and projects), must also be able to address the powers and principalities that have created those places of despair and hurt. It is not enough to say that God loves those who suffer without addressing the sources of the suffering as well.

In essence, these concerns (and others like them) lie at the root of what we mean by the term *constructive theology*. We are theologians who are not afraid to criticize the role our own religious traditions have played in creating the problems in our world today. Out of our anger and protest at Christian abuses and out of love of our Christian traditions, we are inspired to engage those traditions more energetically

and constructively. We see in all of the religious traditions—and in our own traditions of Christianity specifically—many seeds of hope and wisdom for the world for which we passionately work, a world of peace and justice, a world where racism, sexism, poverty, ecological degradation, and oppression are overcome. When some of us say that Jesus, the Son of God, reveals God to us, we mean that God's intention to come close, to become human, is evident in the Jesus story. There is a divine intimacy with the world, a divine blessing of all that we experience, a faith that suffering is not the final word. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is an ineradicable vote of confidence in our human capacity to be better even than we think we can be, to accept God's reality in our own flesh and in the flesh of the world. It is also divine indictment of the powers that be when those powers would crush the weak on behalf of the strong. Jesus was not a powerful man from a powerful family. He was part of a despised and conquered people in a conquered corner of the earth. God showed up there, and if we say that Christian theology follows Jesus the Christ, then it only makes sense that that theology also seeks to root itself among the less powerful, to invite the powerful to that perspective, and to find divine wisdom in the conquered corners of the earth where God became (and becomes) flesh and lives among us.

This is why we do not see simple rejection of religious ideas or of religious communities to be sufficient to the task of moving toward a world of peace, justice, and the open exchange of new knowledge. Also, because we are scientifically minded, we cannot simply dismiss all the religions as error or ignorance, for in doing so we dismiss the evidence, which is the intelligence of so many millions of people throughout the world who are religious or spiritual in such a variety of ways. If we declare religious ideas and experiences entirely delusional, we disavow the lived knowledge of the majority of humankind. That is not good science or rationality. Religious ideas, or theology, undergird the meaning systems of human societies. Constructive theologians engage those meaning systems, grounded in the particular traditions of wisdom that

formed us (in our case, Christian traditions). With our feet firmly planted in the present, in all that the sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences offer, we are convinced that what we have to learn from our religious traditions are pathways toward a world of healing, of justice, and of reparation for the wrongs of our past.

So constructive theology is a distinctive form of Christian theology that does not separate heavenly concerns from worldly ones. Some theologians see their work to be a careful stewardship and reiteration of sacred doctrines handed down by church authorities, and they strive to keep those doctrines as pure as possible of the messy world of politics and social struggles. But constructive theologians see religious ideas as inseparable from the fabric of human existence. We are theologians because we are convinced of the significance of religious ideas in the *whole* tapestry of human and creaturely life, and we are constructive theologians because we apply a critical lens to the many ways that Christian ideas participate in making the world, both for good and for bad. We recognize that all of theology is a blend of human and divine, of imagination and revelation. All theology is constructed out of the best efforts of human beings to understand the ineffable reality and experience of divinity in the world. And so theology always must be treated with a mixture of credulity and criticism. Like human hearts, theology is always undergoing improvement so long as it remains open.

The Bible too is always in translation (its origins are in many languages), always flowing through the linguistic and interpretive lenses of those who read it, always requiring interpretation. The fact that so many Christians differ in our interpretations does not make the Bible less the Word and words of God, but more so. God is in relation, always, to us, and we to God. And every real relationship is a living thing, requiring care, communication, and revision to correct misunderstandings. We humans often misunderstand each other; how much more often do we misunderstand God? Constructive theology starts from the recognition that we are not perfect in our understanding or our interpretations and so need

always to improve, to learn from our mistakes, to build and rebuild right relations with each other and with the God who never gives up on us, no matter how slow we are to learn.

Finally, like those who would do away with religion entirely, we too are disaffected from the religions' abusive complicity in a world of hurt. Disaffection is a powerful roadblock or motivator to creative change, all depending on whether or not the experience of disaffection gets stuck in mere opposition. Mere opposition cannot see past what it opposes and ends up doing nothing beyond negation. But disaffection that leads to creative change is opposition that looks past what it opposes to other possibilities. Let's say a voter in the two-party democratic system has finally become so disgusted with the polarized negative campaigning and hollow posturing that she loses all faith in the system and she no longer wants to participate. Her disaffection could stall there, and she simply stops voting. But what does that change? Conversely, what if her disaffection leads her instead to imagine other forms of participatory democracy, and she sets herself on a long-view path toward change? She is motivated by disaffection but not stymied in opposition. She uses her disaffection to learn more, to reassess the causes and sources of the problems she sees, with an eye toward repair or toward building something better. Her no is also a long-term yes.

Like those who are disaffected from all things religious because they see so clearly a "human race armed with religion, poisoned by prejudice, and absolutely frantic with hatred and fear," constructive theology seeks to address the very religious terrors that poison us by identifying their causes and the systems that keep those terrors pumping. And like those whose spirituality undergirds and nourishes their dedication to peace and justice, we are enlivened and inspired by the long tradition of wisdom, healing, courage, and prophetic peacemaking that run through our scriptures and histories. The task, as we see it, is not to turn our backs on religious ideas, as if we could, but to engage them with all of the clarity and creativity that our disaffection and our inspiration engender in us.

The Elements of Christian Theology

Christian theologians in every age have faced large, crucial questions of meaning that face everyday people. During the period of the plagues in Europe, for example, when in some places every third person died, it was reasonable for people to ask how a supposedly good God could let innocent people die such excruciating deaths. Some theologians sought answers in lofty equations, others in revised notions of sin, and still others looked again to the story of Jesus' death as a sign of God's intimate compassion (the so-called *Pestkreuz* or plague cross is an example of this in medieval art).⁵ Theologians then and now had to think through the questions that real life poses, and sometimes their answers led people to greater harmony, orientation, and sense of purpose in the face of challenging and disorienting times, and sometimes their answers failed to help at all.

How theologians develop meaningful accounts of Christian ideas has much to do with how they understand and address the signifying issues of their time. In the eleventh century Anselm famously defined theology as *faith seeking understanding*.⁶ He recognized that religious articles of faith are not always self-evident. Consider, for example, the statement that Jesus is the son of God. A theologian can say that this is true, even that God has revealed it, but what does it mean? How can the theologian help people to understand it? What illustrations will clarify? What contemporary concerns will not only anchor the claim but give it life and potent meaning? Conversely, what contemporary concerns or ways of knowing will reveal misunderstandings and errors in past understandings? The long struggle of Blacks in the United States not only to eliminate slavery but also to resist and help others to resist persistent racism led theologians like James H. Cone, for example, to unmask the fallacy of Christian depictions of Jesus as a fair-haired, blue-eyed northern European. What we know about ethnicity and geography and what we are learning about racism even in our images of God matters in how we think theologically. Cone was able, through

important changes in the social context of knowledge in the late twentieth century, to explain the idolatry of whiteness at work in much postslavery theology in ways that would have made little or no sense in Anselm's eleventh century.⁷ But Cone's criticism grounds a new possibility for us in understanding the story of Jesus, a new understanding for grasping its imperative in a modern world still wounded and stunted by racism.

The approach to doing theology known as constructive theology starts, therefore, not only with what counts as knowledge in our time but also with how we know what we know. This is what philosophers call *epistemology*. There was a time when Europeans "knew" that darker skin was a sign of inferiority and even a mark of inhumanity. What gave them a basis for this knowing? What errors in judgment and forces in society allowed it to flourish? What kind of knowing can undo this terrible error? What unlearning has to happen? This is a theological concern for Christians precisely because whatever claims we make about God, Jesus, and the divine Spirit that moves still through the earth must strive toward that incarnate love revealed in the story of God becoming one of us. We are prone to making mistakes, particularly when money and power are at stake. And we are prone to making mistakes when the traditions of our grandparents come face-to-face with such errors and we face difficult choices of staying, leaving, or changing those traditions. And we are prone to making mistakes when we think that critical knowledge has nothing to do with faith, just as we are prone to making mistakes when we think that critical knowledge is all we need.

The next basic element of theology that is necessary to constructive theology is a deep engagement with the many traditions that hold and shape what we know of God. Theology never does its work in a vacuum and has no interest in throwing out any of the beautiful wisdom that has come down through the centuries across many different expressions of faith in community. The Christian tradition is a vast inheritance, a rich source not only of guidance and wisdom in the form of books but also of practices and communities that

reveal the ongoing presence of Christ in the world. These traditions are inseparable from cultures and yet stretch beyond them as well—Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, multifaith, contemplative, and more traditions, refracted through African, Indonesian, Mexican, German, Maori, Lebanese, and more cultures, and on and on. The traditions that have shaped Christian theology are also shaped in turn by theology that speaks back to people in specific cultural contexts, in specific kinds of trouble and specific places of rich celebration. “The tradition” in Christianity is many traditions, and that is its beauty and its challenge. Theology that does not root itself deeply in what Christians understand to be their sacred traditions cannot speak meaningfully to those Christians, nor can it hope to guide them in any meaningful way toward the God for whom they long.

Ultimately, embracing both the disaffection and the resonance that characterize contemporary attitudes toward religion, constructive theology considers two primary questions: What is the relevance of Christian faith in today’s world? And can Christianity help us to live well in the face of multiple threats to meaning, identity, community, and planetary survival?

The theologians who met together over the course of several years to work on this project acknowledge the despair and deep-seated worry about the future that characterize our day, and we recognize that too often, religion responds with little more than distractions, condemnations, irrelevancies, or (worse yet) beckoning the end.

In the face of such realizations, our way of doing theology stages a kind of intervention—an interruption of business as usual in order to share a vision of the world that is a different version, rooted in life and flourishing. The wager is that this version of things, this constructive Christian theology, is robustly relevant to the questions and challenges we face today. Moreover, this theology can help us live well—that is, with hope, courage, and imagination—in the midst of contemporary threats to meaning, wholeness, and material justice.

In particular, after looking at how we know and what we must unlearn in order to move toward the grace of living and loving well, and after we take up the riches of our traditions, we highlight the concrete *practices* of a life-giving, justice-seeking version of Christianity, a faith to which we gesture throughout this book. We articulate a plurality of practices for world making, for remaking the world, in the midst of significant threats to identity, community, and planetary survival. From the cultivation of bodily habits of contemplation and wonder, to rituals of protest and lament, to online community building and the daily working of the soil, the practices we consider in the final sections of this book invite you into a capacious Christianity that encourages solidarity and justice. These practices do not deny or suppress the alarming forces of greed, suffering, and violence that threaten today's world, but they stubbornly refuse to give these realities the last word. Instead, we call attention and bear witness to the resilience and palpable holiness of life.

Group writing is not easy, but it can become a practice of community building and a surprising spiritual exercise. The Workgroup on Constructive Theology responded to a call from a number of younger members that we needed to explain better why we do what we do, and how we do it, especially for readers who are perhaps drawn to understand Christian ideas but do not presuppose a background in them. We accepted this challenge to write together (rather than write separately and publish an anthology of individual essays) in order to address our growing sense that constructive theology has tools to offer to those who seek to link their spirituality with their commitments to justice, peace, and healing in the world today. The pages of this introduction lay out our passion for theology that meets the world where it lives, in all of the beauty and mess of life and in the very real struggles of each part of God's creation. Twenty-eight theologians therefore met together over the course of several years to work out agreements about the core elements of constructive theology—those agreements became the sections of this book. Each section was then cowritten by a team of theologians, tasks

that required prodigious efforts at communication, listening, revising, and even rewriting as each section took shape. This is consequently a book that is truly a labor of love, cowritten by a large group of scholars whose lives and commitments cover a wide range of approaches, practices, experiences, and affiliations. The shared thread is our dedication to Christian theology that attends to the realities of this world in all of its complexity, dignity, and need for justice and healing.

Awake to the Moment is an opening and an invitation to constructive Christian theology. In it we invite you into the deepest relevance of your own life and spirituality by offering signposts for doing theology in ways that honor the struggles as well as the heart-lifting joys. We are all called to be theologians, to think through the spiritual meaning in life, to participate in prophetic vision for a healed world, and to encourage practices that move us all toward it.

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