

# Studying developments in Christian thought

.....  
*What are the fundamental questions of life?*

*Why study Christianity in a theological way?*  
.....

## **Why study developments in Christian thought?**

'Theology at its broadest is thinking about questions raised by and about religions' (D.F. Ford, *Theology, A Very Short Introduction*, 2000, p. 3). At a time when religion is debated and challenged in the world, it seems important to explore question raised by and about religions.

To study theology is to attempt to look at religion from the inside, using the methods, the language and the view of the world from the insider's perspective. It explores the doctrines, dogmas and teachings that Christians live by.

This does not mean there is no debate. From the beginning of Christianity there has been debate, in different attempts to make sense of a Christian life and the fundamental questions that distinguish Christianity: What is the nature and purpose of human life? Is there something unique about a person, and does anything continue of that person beyond death? How is it possible to know anything about these questions? Who is Jesus Christ and what does it mean to live a life of Christian moral principles and actions?

Over time, some have tried to answer these questions, sometimes in strikingly different ways, influenced by the ways of thinking and history of their times, and possibly influenced by something else, something beyond their limitations.

To understand these theological ideas and beliefs it is helpful to cultivate an open mind to the



possibility that there might be something meaningful within them. This does not mean surrendering personal belief or opinion, but being disposed to listen to the voices of others, to take seriously their own insights and convictions, and to decide how to stand in relation to this way of understanding meaning and purpose in the world.

### **The life and the self**

Arguably the first question we might ask is what does it mean to be a human being? Is there some purpose to human behaviour or relationships? Is there a development that can happen that might change a human life? The idea that human beings are created, have a purpose and a need to fulfil that purpose is a key aspect of Christian theology. If it is possible to become something more, if it is possible to live a better life than the one already lived, then these questions provoke exploration. What kind of life, what kind of being, can a person become?

Is there something more than the physical, the limited life that a human lives on earth? Is there a future beyond death where something that is meaningfully human continues to exist? These questions are explored through Christian theology on human nature and the purpose of life, life after death and immortality.

### **Knowledge of God**

Religion is a complex aspect of life in today's world. Though religion is declining in some Western countries, religion and belief is becoming more prominent globally. The numbers of people aligning themselves to a religious belief worldwide is greater than ever before.

Given these changes the question of what we can know about God becomes key. What can be known of God, if indeed such a being exists? What is the role of faith? Can such truths be revealed and if so, in what ways?

### **Jesus**

The central figure of Christianity is Jesus. The key doctrines, beliefs and teachings of Christian faith relate in some way to Jesus. The nature of God is interpreted through a sense of the connection between the divine and the human in the possibility that Jesus may be God as well as a man. Whether Jesus was a figure of an ancient world or whether he is encountered in life today, is thought to be crucial to any understanding of a Christian way of life. The question of the identity of Jesus remains a compelling one for people beyond Christian faith. He is a figure who has marked the development of human civilisation like few others.

### **Christian moral principles and action**

Another starting place is to ask what sort of life should a Christian live? What ideals and principles should drive actions in day-to-day life. What would those actions look like?

Christianity is a tradition with a number of moral ideas linked to beliefs about the world – about the place of love and forgiveness, about what it means to live a pure life, a good life. Christianity is not a theoretical system but an applied one. Belief leads to changes in attitudes and behaviour.

At the heart of Christian belief is the idea that there is a communication from God to humanity, a revelation of something that is worth knowing, that contains certain truths which, if followed, make a difference to life.

### **How to be a theologian**

The student of Christianity becomes a theologian. Traditionally theologians were always Christian, and always held Christians beliefs themselves. Theology was an exploration of those beliefs, and this included debate and sometimes argument. However, theology in modern times has developed beyond the confines of Christian belief with some who consider themselves to be outside conventional Christian belief.

Could anyone be a theologian irrespective of belief? Perhaps the student of theology today could be thought of as someone who makes an enquiry from where they stand, looking intently into the mysteries of belief, doctrine and religious life, open to the possibilities that those mysteries might offer



people, and with some sense of how they themselves relate to those beliefs, doctrines and approaches to religious life. Perhaps a theologian is an interpreter of religion – one who actively enquires and seeks to comprehend. Taken in this way, the student of Christian theology might be of any belief or religion, or none that is fixed.

In trying to interpret a religion or text there are a number of things you could try to do. These are drawn from scholars of hermeneutics:

- Be attentive to the texts you study. What do they say to you? How do others perceive them?
- Try to spot preconceived ideas affecting how you interpret the sources you are examining. Are you bringing pre-formed decisions and attitudes into your interpretation of what you perceive?
- Be self-critical about your interpretation of the sources. Is it serving your own interests?
- Learn to become aware about how different theological perspectives engage with the different sources and ideas.
- Look out for examples where the sources present something counter-intuitive, or subversive, where something new is provoked. These could be signs that you are making a connection to ideas in those sources, not simply your own preconceptions.
- Try to adopt a charitable approach to interpret the sources and ideas you experience. Try to seek out the meaning that others give before you decide and judge for yourself.

### Questions for thought and reflection

- A. What is the nature of human life?
- B. How, if at all, can human beings learn about the existence and nature of God?
- C. How do different beliefs about Jesus influence other beliefs about the Christian faith?
- D. What are the implications of Christian beliefs and teachings on ethics?

These are big questions which frame the chapters in this section of the book. Return to them as you explore the different ideas in this section. Give space and time to how you relate to these questions, as well as the ideas presented in this text.

# NOTES