

What Kind of Theology?

Everyone has some sort of belief, which may or may not include a belief in God. In every society there are dominant belief systems, and various things which are assumed to be RIGHT. It is, for instance, RIGHT to be clean, courteous, ambitious or whatever. Though these values may not have been made explicit, they are expressed in the ways people behave and expect others to behave. In addition to the beliefs that are impressed upon us by our society, there are beliefs that are explicitly taught in school, family or Church. These are imposed on us from outside and we may or may not accept them as our own. The net result is that a number of belief systems jostle with each other to claim our allegiance. It is easy to swim with the tide and simply conform to what is expected of us in any particular situation. But this leaves us unsatisfied, divided and ill at ease with ourselves. We want to be mature and integrated people – living and thinking in a consistent way, and somehow or other we have to respond to the situations in which we find ourselves.

The purpose of theology is to help us work through this confusion and find a personal integrity of belief and action. Christian theology helps us look at the whole of life from the perspective of faith in God as he has made himself known in Jesus Christ. This means that we must ‘do theology’ in context. That is to say we must reflect on our present experience in the light of Christian tradition (i.e. the witness to Jesus in the Bible and subsequent Christian experience), discover how the two relate to each other, and what God is asking of us here and now. This is different to what some people assume theology to be.

Traditional theology is done outside everyday life by academics and ministers. It is distant from and may even contradict the experience of ordinary people. Contextual theology may be done by anyone who is struggling with questions of living and believing. Traditional theology tends to develop all encompassing systems, which give the impression of delivering the answers. Contextual theology focuses on the present activity of God in the world and is aware of the impossibility of arriving at final answers.

In our present western world there is a tendency to separate the spiritual and physical, religion and science. Contextual theology attempts to re-unite all aspects of human experience within the Christian faith.

A main difference is the methods used. Traditional theologies tend to assume that theology is unaffected by the situation. Contextual theologians do not make categorical statements about God, for they recognise that all theologies are shaped by their context, that is who does them and where.

Traditional theology is about learning, digesting, appreciating and criticising other people’s theologies. Contextual theology is about ‘doing theology’ yourself as a way of coming to know God and what he calls you to be and to do here and now.

Traditional theology has text books. Contextual theology has tools. Contextual theology uses the work of academic theologians, but is primarily an attempt to see the world through God’s eyes. It challenges the practitioner to look at her own situation and see her own practice from a critical perspective. If you don’t want to be challenged to change your ways – don’t do theology!

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