

Topic 2: How Can We Talk about God if God Is Absolute Mystery?

Theology is talk about God. According to the Bible, however, God is a mystery, and at the beginning of his *Summa Theologiae* Thomas Aquinas states as a basic principle governing all theological reflection that "we cannot know what God is but only what God is not." Must we not think, then, that theology sets itself an impossible task? (Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job*, xi)

I. The Task of Theology: So what is theology? Framing the question in this way focuses on theology as a concept and a discipline that employs concepts. What are we doing when we "do" theology? This question highlights the point that theology is something theologians "do"; implicitly it hints at the concern to assess what does and does not count as theology.

Why do we do theology? This perspective probes the motives at play behind the casual theological discourse and the production of formal theologies. For whom do we do theology? This question of „audience" can be taken in at least two directions: who directly engages the theological thoughts that we produce? Who benefits from the ways we do theology?

Rather than focus only (or even primarily) on the somewhat static question, "what is theology," it might be better to ask, "What are we doing when we do theology?" This way of asking the question puts the accent on action: theology is an action, an endeavor.

If theology is an action (something we "do"), it presumably affects people and reality. Likewise, it does not occur in a vacuum, but in fact springs up in certain contexts in response to certain situations. The motives and contexts of theology are thus important. This observation leads to the refinements of our initial question. Where does theology come from and where does it go? That is, what is the sphere of reality which theology engages and addresses? Most importantly, on whose behalf do we do theology?

II. Beyond the Everyday Use of the Word "Theology" Both in professional circles and in popular discourse, the word theology is used with great flexibility and a kind of studied ease, as if everyone knows what we mean when we use the word. We speak about "the theology of this or a theology of that" -a theology of justice, a theology of pain, a theology of the secular, a theology of business, a theology of art, a theology of science... does this word have one meaning that includes all of these usages? Or is it so loose as to be virtually meaningless?

For example, if biology is the study [logos] of life [bios] and anthropology is the study of the human (anthropos), is theology the "study of God"? Obviously, the word has similar Greek roots and while this surface logic is suggestive, it is also misleading.

Theo-logy is talk about God (Theos (God) + logos (word; principle of rationality)]. However, we cannot "directly experience" God or empirically verify the accuracy of our talk about God. Hence, any sense that theology is or should be like one of the modern sciences - able to study God and the things of God directly - is not only misleading and potentially arrogant, it falls into a basic epistemological error, that is, a mistaken notion about the nature and scope of human knowing ("epistemology" is the philosophical discipline that attempts to answer the seemingly innocent question, how do we know?)

St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest theologians in the entire history of Christianity, made a distinction among three uses of language that is relevant here: "It is impossible to predicate anything univocally of God and creatures" (Aquinas) because of the absolute difference between them in the order of reality. If all our speech about God taken from this world is equivocal and arbitrary, then we could in fact say nothing about God (cf. the tradition of "negative theology.") The language we take from ordinary experience to speak about God is analogical: "whatever is said both of God and creatures is said in virtue of the order that creatures have to God as to their source and cause..."

A simple example: we often unconsciously speak of "knowing" with reference to the metaphor of "grasping": "Oh, I get that... I can grasp that concept." But God, creator or the entire cosmos, is beyond all human "grasping." We can never grasp God on our own; but God can grasp us! In this lies the key to properly understanding religious language.

God cannot be directly known but can be encountered if God so chooses. This means that theology is not talk about God in se, but reflection on God's "self-communication" or divine revelation. As such, along with a close reflection on the meaning of faith, one of the central tasks of this course will be to carefully examine the logic of revelation.

III. Humility: The Right Attitude for Speaking about God - In the quotation with which we began, Gustavo Gutierrez asks, "Must we not think, then, that theology sets itself an impossible task?" Here is his initial answer to the question: No, the task is not impossible. But it is important to keep in mind from the very

outset that theological thought about God is thought about a mystery. I mention this here because it influences an attitude to be adopted in the effort to talk about God. I mean an attitude of respect that is incompatible with the kind of God-talk that is sure, at times arrogantly sure, that it knows everything there is to know about God. (On Job, xi).

For Gutierrez, the pressure to do theology arises most powerfully and poignantly from the experiences of human suffering, and in particular what we might call innocent suffering. The subtitle of his brilliant book. On Job is God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent. The terrible problem confronting theology and the proclamation of the faith in Latin America: how can I tell the poor person that God loves her or him? In the context of undeserved suffering and unjust oppression, how are we to talk about God?

Why do we do theology? To make sense out of our experiences of life, especially those of suffering and evil. Theology begins with an experience of negativity which we try to understand in terms of our "contrasting sense" of the goodness of God. Notice that, following Aquinas, Gutierrez emphasizes that "theological thought about God is thought about a mystery." Revelation is gratuitous and directed above all to those most in need of it. That is, "doing" theology, along with the notion of theology as "talk about God" or "reflection on the mystery of God," presupposes the gratuitousness of God's self-revelation. Humility is the right attitude for doing theology.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why is it difficult to do theology?
2. How is talk about God different from every other kind of the human use of language?
3. Why is an attitude of humility necessary for one who would like to speak rightly about God?