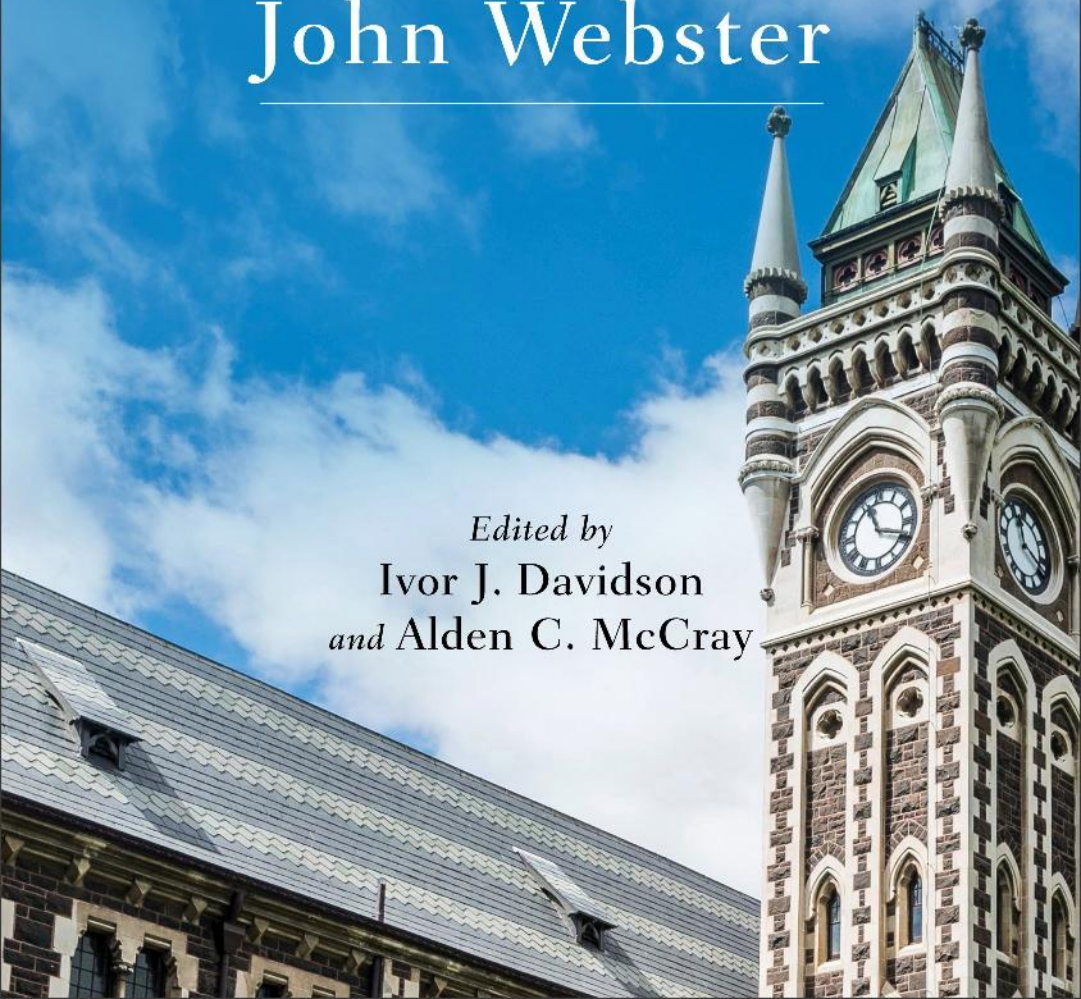


The CULTURE *of* THEOLOGY

John Webster

Edited by
Ivor J. Davidson
and Alden C. McCray



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Introduction

IVOR J. DAVIDSON

WHAT FOLLOWS IN THIS LITTLE VOLUME is a brief account of the nature and tasks of Christian theology. The theme absorbed its author for life; this particular expression of his thought has been a somewhat neglected jewel in his literary legacy.

John Webster was a theologian's theologian.¹ If anyone in the recent history of the discipline has pondered what it means to do Christian theology “theologically”—as distinct from some other way—he did. What we have here is one statement of that vision, and a few of its practical entailments. The accents belong in a particular phase of their author's development and do not say everything as he would later have said it. For Webster, an Oxford chair counted as mid-career achievement;² *The Culture of Theology* was produced within his second year in that position. In later years he felt aspects

1. For a brief overview of his career, see Ivor J. Davidson, “John,” in *Theological Theology: Essays in Honour of John Webster*, ed. R. David Nelson, Darren Sarisky, and Justin Stratis (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 17–36; also Ivor J. Davidson, “In Memoriam: John Webster (1955–2016),” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18 (2016): 360–75.

2. Webster was Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford from 1996 until 2003. He had previously held positions at St. John's College, Durham (1982–86), and Wycliffe College, Toronto (1986–96). He left Oxford to be Professor of

of his work in this period lacked nuance or required qualification; the underlying instincts could be expressed better, and with less risk of distortion, by bringing a number of other emphases to the fore, locating the practices of theology on a still more specific and yet grander scale. Some differences would emerge. But the argument in this text expounds a number of principles to which he remained strongly committed and presents a fundamental view of its subject from which he did not greatly depart; it gives indication of how those convictions had taken form at that stage in his career and of some of his key concerns at the time.

Though the scale of the work is relatively modest, it remains one of the fullest and most integrated examples of Webster's thinking on how the practice of theology ought to be approached. He went on to write other studies that expand on several of the themes and qualify some of the investments. Those studies were envisaged as preliminary to a multivolume exposition of systematic theology in which he would set out his sense of the discipline at large, the culmination of a further two decades of reflection. His sudden death on May 25, 2016, deprived us of that: the completion of even the first part of the project was not to be. Webster thought of *The Culture of Theology* as a staging post; as things are, it stands as one of his more substantial endeavors to reflect holistically on the privileges, resources, and responsibilities of theological work. He considered the text inchoate: self-conscious, over-invested in the language of cultural practices, not yet clear enough on a doctrine of creation or history or on the abundance of God's Godness as basis of God's outer works, and thus as beginning and end of everything the theologian ever is or does. This had been an early and fairly brief venture on a vast matter; refinements were in order, and a number were adumbrated. Yet this little work sets much before us in a style that remained its author's own; in its elegance, coherence, and conceptual power it offers a magisterial short treatment of what Christian theology is all about, and what it means to take it seriously.

Webster wrote and presented the material as a series of six lectures, the Thomas Burns Memorial Lectures at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, in mid-August 1998. The series contributed

Systematic Theology at the University of Aberdeen (2003–13). His last appointment was as Professor of Divinity at the University of St. Andrews (2013–16).

to a distinguished academic tradition, endowed in the name of the first chancellor of New Zealand's oldest university. The lectures were delivered over a two-week period³ and were open to a general audience—theologians and biblical scholars, academics from other disciplines, church leaders, and members of the public. They were published shortly afterward in the New Zealand journal *Stimulus* but have not been reprinted elsewhere.⁴ Their instruction has been relished by those in the know; it is high time for the beneficiaries to increase.

I

Webster's overarching argument is quite simple. Christian theology's principal setting is not, he proposes in his opening lecture, its intellectual or social context but "the world which is brought into being by the staggering good news of Jesus Christ" (43). Christian thought and speech about God and about all things else in relation to God are features of Christian *culture*: they take place, first and foremost, in an *eschatological* space, the sphere in which Christian faith and life have their existence by the miracle of God's grace. Christian theology

3. Lectures 1–3 in the first week, 4–6 in the second. Versions of the lectures were also delivered elsewhere in New Zealand; financial support for Webster's visit was contributed by the University of Otago, the Presbyterian Church Synod of Otago and Southland, the Anglican Church, and Bible Society New Zealand.

4. *Stimulus* 6, no. 4 (November 1998): 2–23 (lectures 1–3); *Stimulus* 7, no. 1 (February 1999): 2–20 (lectures 4–6). The published versions replicate the manuscript prepared for the lectures, including its idiom. The text that follows in this volume reproduces this with permission, though minor typographical and stylistic corrections have been made, and the present version adopts US style. Webster's quotations and references have been standardized and at numerous points corrected. The textual divisions in the lectures are Webster's. The present editors have also had access to a copy of Webster's original typescript for the lectures, which has at one point supplied a section of text missing (with loss to the sense) in the *Stimulus* version: see lecture 6 (138–40). A roughly edited version of the typescript for lecture 2 forms the bulk of the essay published as John Webster, "Scripture, Reading, and the Rhetoric of Theology in Hans Frei's Analysis of Texts," in *Ten Year Commemoration to the Life of Hans Frei (1922–1988)*, ed. Georgy Olegovich (New York: Semenenko Foundation, 1999), 41–53; it may clarify the representation of one paragraph in lecture 2 (72). All substantive editorial emendations or additional comments in the present volume appear in square brackets in the footnotes.

flourishes when its roots in that territory are deep; it withers when its tasks are pursued in detachment from the traditions of belief and practice in which alone its work can prosper. In late modernity, the practice of theology has been inhibited not so much by outward circumstances—the challenges posed by an intellectual, social, or political environment—as by internal disorder. All too often, theology has become dislocated from its most fundamental context; it has lost sight of the resources, responsibilities, and prospects that situation affords. Remedy lies in the “reintegration” of Christian theology into the true culture of Christian faith—the church, its texts and traditions—and in the deployment of genuinely theological categories in the conception and practice of theological work. Whatever their historical setting may be, theology’s practitioners need to cultivate habits of mind and soul befitting those for whom the gospel itself is the most important reality.

The first lecture begins with a basic thesis: “Christian theology is an activity in a culture which reaches out toward [the] miracle” that is the “comprehensive interruption of all things in Jesus Christ” (43). Webster then proceeds to define more closely what he means by “culture.” The term refers to theology’s activity as occurring in a social space, characterized by its own practices, forms, modes of engagement with other worlds, and strategies for submitting itself to judgment: theology is undertaken in “the strange world of the gospel and the church” (44). Existing within a culture, theology needs to be *cultivated*, not least through habits of reading, both in Scripture and in classical Christian texts. Theology accordingly involves *formation*: the cultivation of persons shaped by the culture of Christian faith. “Good theological practice depends on good theologians” (45).

Webster is aware that the language of “culture” has limitations. Christian faith is not simply a human project; as eschatological, it is never domesticable: “The culture of Christian faith and therefore the culture of theology stand beneath the sign of their contradiction, which is the gospel of God” (46). Christian faith and theology are also an *anti*-culture, “the site of a struggle against . . . domestic idolatry” (47), and the cultivation of Christian culture includes—vitality—self-critique and repentance. The intellectual activities of theology are not detached mental acts or transcendent forms of judg-

ment but practices within a particular kind of region; the culture of faith is unlike any other, for it is reliant for its existence, continuity, and final consummation upon the gratuitous purposes and action of God. Theology's culture originates in a divine summons and is directed toward the manifestation of God's glory; on the way to that *telos*, its place is one in which human life is caught up into the process of *conversion*, the pattern of being overthrown and re-established by divine grace. Theology is thus "poised uneasily between location and dislocation" (55). On the one hand, it is fixed, a positive rather than a free science, summoned into being, sustained, and directed by the specific movement declared in the gospel of Jesus Christ; on the other, it is fixed upon the living God, the judge, whose presence and action remain overwhelming, untamable, disturbing. God is no passive object or item of cultural capital; God is living subject, his presence to us sovereign, eloquent, intrusive, dangerous. Theology's practice accordingly calls for both *roots* and *astonishment*: theologians must learn what it means to belong within a territory, with all its vast privileges and resources; but they must also express amazement, inasmuch as all of their living and thinking takes place "in the presence of Easter" (61).

The second lecture sets about the task of defining more closely the place of texts in theological work, in particular the place of Holy Scripture as "the primary bearer of Christian culture" (65). Noting that a good deal of modern church life demonstrates a loss of confidence in Scripture, Webster suggests that the roots of the problem lie not so much in the perceived consequences of historical-critical methods as in "a failure of socialization" (66);⁵ the answer is to be found not merely in better theoretical arguments about the nature of the Bible or the mode of its production but by learning what it means to "inhabit" Scripture, to "think and speak as people of the gospel" (66). Pursuit of this goal means frank eschewal of general hermeneutics and the articulation to the contrary of a *theological* account of Scripture and its reading. But a theological account itself must be located in the right doctrinal place: not as a treatment *a priori* of whether or how God might be said to speak, but as an

5. The phrase is taken from Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 169.

a posteriori depiction of the identity of God who speaks and of those whom God addresses. Holy Scripture is the instrument of divine self-communication, the means by which “the mortifying and vivifying self-manifestation of God addresses the church, slaying and making alive” (71). The intrusive force of Scripture’s power is to be emphasized; the authority of the Word is interruptive and critical, never a matter for the church’s control, a reality to be acknowledged rather than ascribed.

Local hermeneutical culture in evangelical context involves the elaboration not so much of a set of interpretative tactics as an anthropology of the reader. The Christian reader of the Bible is situated in the history of divine salvation; “Christian acts of reading Holy Scripture are encounters between the gracious, eloquent God of the gospel and the sinner who has been arrested and made new” (74). What is required is “teachableness” (74; cf. 146), humble submission to the transformative dynamic of being overthrown and remade by the divine address. Theological discourse stands in necessary relation to this disposition; if theology’s language seeks to persuade, to engage its readers so as to shape their beliefs and influence their behavior, it must do so in particular terms. The kind of rhetoric fitting to theology’s culture is, first, the rhetoric of effacement, an attentive, ascetic reading of Scripture, a hearing of the Word that has already been spoken. “It is . . . of prime importance to avoid construing theology as a set of improvements upon Scripture” (77). Repetition of Scripture, a modest, transparent articulation of the Word, not some attempt to displace it with human cleverness, is vital. But, second, a rhetoric of edification is called for: theology depicts so as to commend the gospel, to form disciples in spiritual and moral terms. In light of these convictions, which he sees as deeply embedded in classical approaches to the relationship between exegesis, doctrine, and ethics, Webster commends the primacy of meditation upon the biblical text; perhaps “theologians should consider ceasing to write systematic treatises and confine themselves to the work of exposition of Scripture” (80).

If the second lecture is concerned with texts, the third considers traditions, the socially embodied forms in which Christian confession exists in the particular history that applies to the church. The

language of a “public covenant” for faith is taken from Kant, but the burden of Webster’s argument is to push in precisely the opposite direction from Kant’s contrast between a pure religion of interiority and the outward forms found in historical or ecclesiastical faith. Once again, specificity is essential: Christian theology requires an account of tradition that is “decisively shaped by theological factors,” not a general case about the constitutive role of Christian traditions in human life and thought but a tracing of the particular sort of culture in which faith is set—“the permanent revolution to which the gospel gives rise” (84). To talk of tradition here is to speak of the apostolicity of the church, and that is less a reference *backward* than *upward*, to the presence of the risen Jesus to the church in the power of the Holy Spirit. Care is needed to phrase the matter aright if the material content of Christian confession is not to dissolve into an account of churchly practices, or if the dangers of ecclesial inflation are avoided only by recourse to a minimalist or apophatic doctrine of God. Theology’s understanding of tradition must posit the operative, communicative presence of the risen and ascended Christ and the work of the Spirit.

Webster presents an account of the presence of Christ in the Spirit’s power that emphasizes the uniqueness of the exalted Christ as agent of his own presence and avoids equation of the church’s role with his. The gratuitousness with which the church is declared to be the body of Christ is important; “however much it may live ‘in Christ,’ the public covenant of the church is no second Christ, no extension or prolongation of his presence” (91). Tradition is certainly a historical, visible reality, but the visibility of the church is also special, a “spiritual event of assembly around, and life from, the summons of God in Christ through the Spirit” (92). The community constituted by divine action is apostolic, appointed, called, commissioned, and generated by the free Lord. Its task is witness: the confession and proclamation of his prior reality and the freedom in which he ever comes to us, the one who is “indefatigably alive” (96). Theology is one of the ways in which the Christian tradition inquires into its apostolic character. The task is descriptive or didactic, the orderly depiction of the Christian good news; it is also critical, a form of protest against the church’s tendency to naturalize or routinize the

gospel's revolution. Attentiveness to the gospel means, once more, submission to Scripture, the instrument by which de-eschatologizing of tradition is prevented. Theology's work involves indicating the reality of the living Jesus and also countering the drift of tradition into stasis or self-satisfaction.

Having mapped the culture of Christian faith in a strongly eschatological projection in lectures 1–3, Webster turns in the second half of the series to address an obvious concern: Can theology so conceived actually be done in practice? Lectures 4–6 aspire to offer, respectively, “a politics, a critical theory, and an ethics of the theological task” (100). Lecture 4 considers in particular the place of Christian theology in the modern research university. Webster suggests that the subject is often approached in the wrong way. Instead of asking “What sort of discipline does Christian theology need to be if it is to be accorded a place in the public academy?” we might be better to ask this: “What sort of institution might the academy have to become if it is to profit from having Christian theology as a contributor to its conversations?” (102). What is needed is a better politics of intellectual exchange, or (to borrow a further term from Kant) a better “conflict of the faculties,” understood as a meaningful conversation in which there is argument that recognizes genuine *difference*. Theology's contribution to the university is not made by “suspending its strong concerns,” far less by the “deadly role” of purveying so-called values, but by “*nonconformity*: an unanxious pursuit of its own proper concerns” (103). Theology must be *itself*.

As Webster explains in lecture 4, contest of the faculties means abandonment of naive ideas of all disciplines as subject to the tribunal of reason, somehow detached from the constitutive role of traditions; it equally requires refusal of a postmodern idealizing of pluralism in which universities are but free markets of opinion in which theology may conceivably function as “one more source of amusement, one more item for curiosity” (106). Neither forensic reason nor the infinite play of desire serves a vision of the university as a place in which positive sciences of diverse kinds collide and, at their best, promote encounter with genuine otherness. Webster proposes that the university ought to be envisaged as a *collegium* of different spheres of intellectual inquiry related by colloquy—not polite conversation of

a banal kind, but exchange in which the participants evince both advocacy of their own territory and attentiveness to the territory of others. The implementation of such ideals is clearly challenging and requires theologians to prize spiritual graces, not least the avoidance of *superbia*. Nevertheless, “Christian theology will make its greatest contribution to the conversations of the academy when it pursues Christian difference with an easy conscience and with a measure of determination and doggedness in the face of those who would persuade it to do otherwise” (113). The lecture closes with some reflections on the entailments: the absolute need for theology to pursue its ever-unfinished tasks of self-articulation in exegesis and dogmatics (“There is no such thing as theological capital,” 113); the avoidance of timidity concerning the *positum* that is the theologian’s concern; the “devastating imperative” of holiness (114); the discontinuity between the transcendent splendor of the gospel and any contingent representation of it in the witness of Christian confession.

Lecture 5, the shortest in the series, revisits the theme of Christian culture’s capacity for self-criticism. Webster is again keen to avoid the generic: what matters is not some overall theory of criticism, but what might count as criticism *here*, in the domestic culture of Christian faith. Because it is constituted as it is, by the presence of God in judgment and mercy, the culture of faith contains a “fundamental impulse” that “*subverts* as well as *grounds* the cultural activities which appeal to it” (116). Criticism is not merely imposed from the outside: it is primary to the vocation of the Christian community. The point could be illustrated along almost any major doctrinal trajectory; it is pursued here by appeal to the doctrine of divine revelation. That doctrine is not well mapped in general or comparative terms, where Christian claims about revelatory action are treated as but one instance of a putative revelatory experience in human life and history; nor is it adequately appraised when it is reduced, as so often it has been in modern theology, to an epistemological category, the furnishing of a foundation for belief. Indeed, “The Enlightenment critique of revelation was prepared in some measure by Christian theology itself, when natural philosophy was granted the task of establishing on nontheological grounds the possibility and necessity of revelation” (120). The native soil for the doctrine of revelation is, to the contrary,

the particularity of divine self-communication, supremely in Christ by the Spirit, the specific way in which God graciously affords creatures some measure of participation in the boundless self-knowledge that is his. This singular movement is the history of the Triune God's covenant with humanity, a majestic, gratuitous reality in which God makes himself accessible to us but remains mysterious even in his self-disclosure. Over against the mythology of "total critique," demonstrably problematic on a variety of levels, divine revelation as it stands at the center of Christian culture sets a particular standard. The end of critical theological inquiry is "to press the question of the fidelity of all forms of Christian apostolic life, thought, and speech to the revelation of God which projects them into being" (125).

Revelation both *authorizes* and *disturbs*. Theology is but one of the church's critical undertakings (alongside the hearing of the Word and celebration of the sacraments), the church's necessary ways of submitting itself to the judgment of the gospel, a standard "infinitely more searching, radical, and truthful than anything the church could ever generate out of its own resources or by listening to words of criticism directed to it from without" (127). Critical theology is not simply the church setting before itself paradigmatic ideals but its attentiveness to a norm that is "free, personal, and present, and utterly resistant to incorporation" (128). In the end, Christian theology is critical "because of—not despite—the fact that it is a theology of revelation" (128). If critical theology is a mode of reflective attention to the gospel, repentance, humility, and other spiritual virtues are basic to its work.

The final lecture sketches an ethics or, "perhaps better, an *anthropology*" of the theologian (131). The culture of Christian faith requires the cultivation of persons, a costly and indeed at one level impossible affair, dependent entirely upon appeal to God for mercy. "Good theology demands good theologians. . . . Good theologians are those whose life and thought are caught up in the process of being slain and made alive by the gospel and of acquiring and exercising habits of mind and heart which take very seriously the gospel's provocation" (133). Philosophical and educational instincts militate against due integration of scholarship and piety. While the significance of personal formation has helpfully been re-emphasized in some dominant styles of moral and political philosophy, particularly those shaped

by neo-Aristotelian accounts of virtue, Christian theology needs to beware of naive ideas of theological education as *simply* a school for character, somehow detached from political forces or the enduring judgment of the gospel. What is being formed in *this* school is “*gospel* character” (136, emphasis added). Because Christian culture is never a steady state, Christian moral psychology is set in the context of human conversion, the transformation and reordering of human life by divine agency. Existence in this region is not “the realization of latent human possibilities, but a *gift*” (140).

Human existence is defined in Christian terms not by what it has been, is, or makes of itself but by what it becomes, as defined forever in the risen Lord Jesus Christ. To be Christian is to have our center not in ourselves but in Christ: to be raised with him and to live in expectation of the consummation of our new life in him. However strange it may seem as a piece of moral psychology, the essence of the life and endeavors of Christian faith lies in “the utter sufficiency of another,” and “the life and acts of the believer are wholly taken up by indicating that which he supremely is and does” (142–43). If theological existence is existence in the theater of divine grace, there is “no technology of the Spirit, no moral or intellectual or even spiritual performance which will automatically make us into theologians” (143). At the heart of the theologian’s calling, rather, lies *prayer*, the challenging, humble, urgent, intense calling upon God for help: “Prayer underlines the destitution of the theologian when faced with the task of thought and speech of God” (144). Formation and cultivation of the soul have to do, essentially, with waiting on God. In the present situation of Christian theology, the theologian might well seek three things in particular: the fear of God, teachability, and freedom from self-preoccupation. The lecture itself concludes with a prayer.

II

Webster saw *The Culture of Theology* as an attempt to think through the nature of theology’s work from the ground up. Questions to do with method, sources, skills, and contexts were familiar to any student of the discipline, but many modern approaches were, he had

1

Culture

The Shape of Theological Practice

CHRISTIAN FAITH, and therefore Christian theology, emerges out of the shock of the gospel. Christian faith, and therefore Christian theology, takes its rise in the comprehensive interruption of all things in Jesus Christ, for he, Jesus Christ, now present in the power of the Holy Spirit, is the great catastrophe of human life and history. In him, all things are faced by the one who absolutely dislocates and no less absolutely reorders. To this regenerative event, this abolition and re-creation, Christian faith, and therefore Christian theology, offers perplexed and delighted testimony. That perplexity and delight—that sense of being at one and the same time overwhelmed and consumed yet remade and reestablished—are at the heart of the church, or as we might call it, Christian culture. Christian culture is the assembly of forms and practices which seeks somehow to inhabit the world which is brought into being by the staggering good news of Jesus Christ, the world of the new creation. “Behold,” says the enthroned one in the climactic scene of the Apocalypse, “I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5). Christian theology is an activity in a culture which reaches out toward that miracle, sharing that culture’s astonishing new life.

That, in briefest outline, is the heart of what I want to say in these lectures. My proposal is that much can be gained by thinking of Christian theology as part of Christian culture—as one of the practices which make up the disturbing, eschatological world of Christian faith and life. Christian theology flourishes best when it has deep roots in the region, the cultural space, which is constituted by Christian faith and its confession of the gospel. Moreover, within my proposal about the nature and tasks of Christian theology there is a diagnosis of the current state of the discipline. If Christian theology today is sometimes in disarray—as, indeed, I believe it is—then one of the major reasons is its dislocation from its cultural place. What inhibits Christian theology is not only the generally inhospitable intellectual and institutional environment in which it has to flourish but its lack of roots in the traditions of Christian belief and practice which are the soil in which it can grow. It is, in other words, as much internal disorder as external discouragement which cramps the exercise of Christian theology. And if this is so, then one of the most important tasks for Christian theology in the present is its reintegration back into the culture of Christian faith. Yet it is crucial to my argument that that culture is not a steady, stable world which affords those who belong to it the security of being *placed* in some definitive way. It is, paradoxically, a place which is no place, a place made by the presence of God who invades and interrupts all places. Being located in that kind of culture is equally a matter of *dislocation*, of discovering how to be more theological by encountering once again the shock of the gospel.

In using terms like “the culture of Christian faith” and “the culture of theology,” I have three things in mind. First, Christian theology, like any other form of reflective activity, takes place in a culture, that is, in a public or social space. Theological ideas both bear and are borne along by cultural practices, and cannot be isolated from the arena in which such practices occur. Discerning the plausibility of theological ideas is not a matter merely of seeing how they work in the abstract but rather of trying to figure out the functions which they perform in the particular world in which they have their home: the strange world of the gospel and the church. A good deal of what I want to say in these lectures concerns the components of Chris-

tian culture which bear on the practices of Christian theology—its canonical texts; its corporate, historical, and institutional shape as the ecclesial community; its ways of engaging with other cultural worlds; and its strategies for submitting itself to judgment. One of the things we need to undertake is an exercise in theological ethnography: a theological depiction (rather than a critical inquiry into the possibility) of the world of the church in which theology happens.

Second, I use the word “culture” to suggest that theology needs to be “cultivated.” The encouragement of good theology requires that certain interventions be made in order to promote certain practices and achieve certain ends. Thus, for example, I shall argue that among the most important practices which need to be cultivated—especially at the present time—are textual practices, habits of reading. There can be few things more necessary for the renewal of Christian theology than the promotion of awed reading of classical Christian texts, scriptural and other, precisely because a good deal of modern Christian thought has adopted habits of mind which have led to disenchantment with the biblical canon and the traditions of paraphrase and commentary by which the culture of Christian faith has often been sustained. Such practices of reading and interpretation, and the educational and political strategies which surround them, are central to the task of creating the conditions for the nurture of Christian theology.

Third, fostering the practice of Christian theology will involve the cultivation of persons with specific habits of mind and soul. It will involve “culture” in the sense of *formation*. To put the matter in its simplest and yet most challenging form: being a Christian theologian involves the struggle to become a certain kind of person, one shaped by the culture of Christian faith. But once again, this is not some sort of unproblematic, passive socialization into a world of already achieved meanings and roles. It is above all a matter of interrogation by the gospel, out of which the theologian seeks to make his or her own certain dispositions and habits, filling them out in disciplined speech and action. Such seeking is painful; as a form of conversion it involves the strange mixture of resistance and love which is near the heart of real dealings with the God who slays us in order to make us alive. Good theological practice depends on good theologians; and

good theologians are—among other things—those formed by graces which are the troubling, eschatological gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Before proceeding any further with making my proposal, however, two introductory comments need to be made if we are not to get off track. The first is a qualification about my title: the culture of theology. For all its usefulness when deployed to talk of Christian theology in relation to Christian faith, the term “culture” has some definite limitations. Certainly, Christian faith is a culture: like any other distinctive, large-scale pattern of human life, it is a historically embodied project through which the world is given meaning. And I hope to show that we may learn a good deal more about the nature and tasks of Christian theology by considering it in relation to that historical project than we do by subsuming theology under some ideal of disengaged, acultural critical reason. Yet the notion of culture begins to reach the limits of its applicability when we realize that, for its practitioners, Christian faith is not simply a human project, a set of human undertakings and activities. Christian faith is eschatological. It is a response to God’s devastation of human life and history by the miracle of grace. Moreover, the response which we make is itself somehow contained within the miracle. Christian faith and culture are never simply a matter of appropriating that miracle, making it “our own,” for grace is always utterly free and present only as the event of gift. If all that is so, then there is a necessary tension—even, in one sense, an antithesis—between “faith” and “culture.” For all that it may be necessary to speak of the culture of Christian faith, Christian culture is in one real sense an impossibility: How can the shock of the gospel become a culture without being stripped of its sheer difference and otherness? At the very least, we have to say that the culture of Christian faith and therefore the culture of theology stand beneath the sign of their contradiction, which is the gospel of God.

The second introductory comment is an anticipation of dissent on the part of you, the audience. I have no doubt that to some of you what I have to say will seem to fly in the face of some of the prevailing trends of modern theology. That’s because it does. My diagnosis of the present state of the discipline, as well as the therapy which I have to offer, cuts across the grain of what—despite some

pretty heavy shelling—remain well-entrenched intellectual conventions in post-Enlightenment Christianity. Nor will what I have to say be particularly congenial to those whose turn from the Enlightenment has led them into one or other variety of postmodernism; however chastened by the genealogists, I remain unrepentantly (though not, I hope, belligerently) committed to grand narratives and substance ontology, which are in my judgment far more serviceable to anyone seeking to give an account of the Christian gospel than are philosophies of playful contingency. But I fear that the expression of such commitments may raise all sorts of anxieties. Do they not inevitably lead to the ecclesiastical captivity of theology, its withdrawal from both modernity and postmodernity into a closed (premodern?) religious world, its isolation from interchange and conversation, which are the essential conditions for intellectual life? And does it not mean the prosecution of a style of theology which, devoid of criticism, slips into becoming repetitious, self-perpetuating, and, in the end, ideological? These are, indeed, crucial questions and will occupy us much over the course of these lectures. At this stage, let me merely indicate the way I hope to respond to them. I will try to argue that the capacity of Christian theology to sustain lively conversations with what lies outside its culture, as well as to engage in serious self-criticism, is dependent upon its grasp of its own proper object: the gift of the presence of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Because that object is what (who) it is—the living God among us with sheerly intrusive force—the culture of Christian faith and theology is at the same time an anti-culture. It is the site of a struggle against the domestic idolatry of Christendom, against the creation and establishment and defense of settled representations of God. And if this is so, then the cultivation of Christian culture, far from isolating theology from subversion through critique, is in fact the essential precondition for a theological practice characterized above all by repentance.



First, then, we tackle the question: to what extent may we think of Christianity as a culture and of Christian theology as a practice within a culture?

What is a *culture*? In using the term I am not referring to “high culture”; nor am I using it in quite the same sense that Richard Niebuhr famously used it in *Christ and Culture* to refer to the world which lies outside church and faith. Rather, at risk of a dramatic oversimplification of the issues, I mean something like this: a culture is a space or region made up of human activities. It is a set of intentional patterns of human action which have sufficient coherence, scope, and duration to constitute a way of life. A culture is not occasional (limited to a single fragment of time) or utterly local (restricted to a mere handful of persons in a particular place), for it must have sufficient range and comprehensiveness to make a world within which primary, enduring aspects of human life and experience can be negotiated. The elements of a culture—language, ideas and beliefs, shared patterns of behavior, roles, dispositions and habits, norms of evaluation, and instruments of identity—assemble together to form an arena within which thought, speech, and action are meaningful, and human life can be projected. Thus defined, culture is the frame of actions; it is the larger field within which human life-acts take place, and without which they would lack purpose and intelligibility. Our capacity to formulate ends for ourselves, to undertake actions to realize such ends, and to evaluate our performance—all are dependent upon a sense of orientation in historical and social space. Culture is thus what Heidegger called the “region of objects”¹ or what the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz called a “finite province of meaning.” If these geographic, spatial metaphors point to the way in which culture locates human life and activity, we need also to bear in mind that culture is also history, giving order and direction to discrete temporal activities, and enabling us to see human life as a coherent project through time. In sum: culture is that through which human life and activities have enduring shape, identity, and meaning.

What of the term “practice”? Once again, at the risk of oversimplification or caricature, we might say something like this: A practice

1. Martin Heidegger, “Phenomenology and Theology,” in *The Piety of Thinking: Essays by Martin Heidegger*, ed. James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 5–21, at 6. See also Alfred Schutz, “On Multiple Realities,” in *The Collected Papers of Alfred Schutz*, vol. 1 (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1962), 207–59.

is a set of activities through which human beings pursue complex, socially established goals. Because they are socially established, practices transcend particular practitioners. Undertaking a practice involves playing a role, that is, shaping one's actions in accordance with certain conventions about how to realize the goals that are pursued. And as "conventional" behavior, practices involve us in attending to norms through which we are able to judge whether we have attained our goals, and with what degree of excellence. Culture and practice are clearly mutually defining concepts: part of what constitutes a culture is sets of practices; practices as forms of social activity take place and have their meaning in a cultural region. Thus it is through practices that we inhabit cultural space, as it were colonizing the world, making it habitable as a place in which we may be human.

So far, perhaps, so good. But now we have to ask: How does this affect the way in which think about the tasks of Christian theology?

Intellectual activity is a practice in a culture. Far from being abstract, ahistorical, and asocial, intellectual activity is a complex form of human action which occurs in a determinate cultural locale and, in some measure, takes its shape from that locale's conventions. Intellectual activity is not simply "the life of the mind," if by "mind" we mean some special region *within* me, or perhaps some clear, uncluttered space above and beyond time, society, and persons. "The life of the mind" is not bodiless interiority nor does it consist of a capacity to abstract ourselves from our historical entanglements and look down on them from some privileged vantage point. "The life of the mind" is always the life of the mind *here*, in *this* space. The theological ramifications of this point can best be appreciated by drawing a rather rough-and-ready contrast.

The Enlightenment ideal of absolute reflection has sustained serious damage: from hermeneutical philosophy, from critical theorists, and, most recently, from the clutch of thinkers we call postmodernists. Yet many of the reigning models of intellectual practice (and especially some to which we appeal in pursuing the theological disciplines) remain wedded to the idea that it is the task of intellectual reflection to stand apart from all determinate states of affairs and all cultural locales so that we can think critically about them. The aim of the life of the intellect is to reach judgments about the conditions

of possibility of any particular cultural configuration. This act of judgment is transcendent, taking place in a kind of absolute space. Rational activity is by definition activity which operates according to universal, context-invariant criteria which draw the world into the presence of the inquiring mind and make it an object for inspection and critique. Such a model of the life of the mind tends to be pre-occupied with the question of how we can disabuse ourselves of false notions, mere derivative and unverified opinion. This is particularly the case in the original sponsors of the ideal—Descartes and, above all, Locke—for whom epistemology provided the only way of breaking the logjam of appeal to authoritative cultural representations in religion and morals. But the same fundamental motivation often animated its application in theology, for example, to questions of the history and interpretation of the biblical texts. What is important to notice here is that the critical task performed by epistemology tends to go hand in hand with a privileging of subjectivity, which in turn reinforces a certain anthropology or picture of the self. That picture, dominated by an ideal of total reflection, stripped the thinker of all particular characteristics derived from history and cultural location and conviction. Thinking is a process of reaching judgments which is undertaken by no one in particular nowhere in particular.

By way of contrast, we may consider an understanding of intellectual activity not simply as a mental act but as a practice, not as a mode of consciousness but as a complex operation in a historical, tradition-constituted space. Intellectual activity is, in other words, *regional*. The difference here is that this second account of intellectual activity is not tied to an anthropology in which the constitutive moment is reason's deliverance of the self from the errors of unexamined tradition. On this account of things, mapping the intellectual life will involve us, therefore, in developing something more historical and social in orientation, a sort of ecology of intellectual practices and their habitats. And such an account will not be preoccupied with so-called perennial problems but concerned much more with giving an analytical depiction of what "we" (the inhabitants of this bit of cultural territory) do.

There are some immediate advantages for the pursuit of Christian theology if we think of the intellectual life in such terms. Most

obviously, it gives us purchase against the ideals of disengaged reason, interiority, and critique which have exercised such a prevailing influence over our understanding of what learning is and which remain deeply entrenched in the politics and institutions of reflection. Such an understanding of learning and its public forums has rarely been willing to sponsor theological inquiry informed by Christian faith. The realization that that understanding is not absolute but simply a potent and highly successful cultural convention ought to offer considerable relief to the often anxious intellectual conscience of modern theology. And there are other advantages, too. Understanding intellectual life as “regional” (a practice in a particular cultural space) will mean that the particularity of Christian theology will be allowed to be itself without being too anxious about its standing vis-à-vis other disciplines, especially its near neighbors in history and philosophy. And this, in turn, may ease one of the most damaging side effects of modern ideals of critical inquiry, namely their homogenizing tendency, their eliding of difference, and their preference for what is common across all contexts and situations. Or again, calling into question some modern ideals of responsible intellectual activity may help us to begin work on a task which has so far scarcely been touched, namely telling the story of modern theology from the perspective of the culture of faith. Told from that vantage point, the story will not be organized around the idea of gradual release from the tutelage of authority into the free and open spaces of critical inquiry; rather, it will be a story of loss of roots, of detachment, and of the declining accessibility of the space within which to cultivate the Christian life of the mind.



To sum up so far: because the notions of culture and practice help us to re-regionalize intellectual activity, integrating reflection back into the historical processes of society, they may prove useful in moving us beyond the bifurcation of Christian theology and the life of Christian communities. Yet it is at just this point that we have to turn the argument back on itself and face a critical theological objection: How can we talk of Christian faith as culture without collapsing into immanence? Does not talk of Christianity as a culture and of

theology as a practice in such a culture threaten to erode, suppress, or even supplant talk of God's presence and action? Once Christianity is conceived of as a moral, social, or religious "world," does it not become increasingly difficult to know what critical difference is made by direct talk about God, Christ, Spirit, and so forth? Is not such language easily reduced to becoming symbolic of nothing more than a somewhat anonymous and opaque origin of cultural forms and activities? And when this happens, have we not repeated the unhappy exchange of subjects which so deeply grieved Barth as he surveyed the splendors of nineteenth-century Protestantism?

Along with Kierkegaard, Barth is a crucial witness here. More than any other theological writer of the twentieth century, he urged with a single-minded passion that, for much of the history of modern Protestant theology, talk of God and talk of the cultural realities of the Christian religion have been inversely proportional. The steady expansion of "immanent" accounts of Christianity is matched by the contraction of talk of divine action. And so in what is surely one of the most remarkable pieces of theological prophecy this century, Barth's famous 1919 Tambach Lecture, "The Christian's Place in Society," he urged that the synthesis of Christianity and cultural action which had so dominated the social ethics of the Ritschlian school of theology rested on an entirely inadequate foundation, namely the reduction of the divine to a mere aspect or function of the world of human moral and cultural endeavor. Barth's dismay about this theology turned upon his deep sense of its fundamental incompatibility with the content of the Christian gospel, above all because it threatened to convert the purely miraculous, unassimilable, and free action of God into some perceptible cultural form with which human activity could then be coordinated. Christ, Barth told his bewildered audience in 1919, is not a cultural principle or mere incitement to moral action; he is "the absolutely *new from above*,"² and the life which he imparts is "not our best understanding and experience of God, not our best godliness, not an experience apart from others"; rather, "this new life is that from the third dimension . . . ; it is the world of God breaking through from its self-contained holiness and

2. Karl Barth, "The Christian's Place in Society," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), 272–327, at 286.

appearing in secular life; it is the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead.”³ Or as he puts it in a crucial phrase: “Beyond, *trans*: *that* is the crux of the situation; *that* is the source of our life.”⁴ Yet for Barth, none of this ought to lead us to conclude that Christian faith and culture or society exist in a pure and irreconcilable disjunction or that the gospel cannot somehow assume cultural forms. It is a matter not of denying that Christian faith is a form of life but of seeing that the form of life which Christian faith is both emerges from and is ceaselessly called into question by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. “The *resurrection* of Jesus Christ from the dead is the power which moves both the world and us, *because* it is the appearance in our corporeality of a *totaliter aliter* constituted corporeality.”⁵

There is a quite crucial lesson to be learned here, which is this: the culture of Christian faith is an “eschatological” culture. That is to say, it is a culture which is generated, sustained, and perfected, and also exposed to radical questioning, by the utterly gratuitous presence of God in the risen Jesus through the Holy Spirit’s working. By speaking of Christian culture as “eschatological,” I am referring to much more than simply the fact that Christian belief includes reference to such themes as Christ’s *parousia*, the last judgment and vindication of the elect, or life everlasting. Rather, “eschatological” refers to that single, perfect reality which is the basis and end of all realities, that absolute which, as the origin of all that is, is pure, free, ungraspable, approachable only by virtue of its own prior approach to us in a kind of loving devastation. For Christian faith, that “absolute” is nothing other than God’s great “I am,” declared in the covenant and uttered supremely in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead: “I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold, I am alive for evermore” (Rev. 1:17–18). He, the risen Jesus, the new (counter-) creation, *is* the presence of the eschaton, and it is because of him that Christian culture is eschatological. Brought into being by his disruptive presence and thereby pointed toward its proper end, the world of Christian faith is the strange cultural space in which the re-creative work of God is confessed. How can this exotic culture be depicted?

3. Barth, “Christian’s Place in Society,” 286–87.

4. Barth, “Christian’s Place in Society,” 321.

5. Barth, “Christian’s Place in Society,” 323.

Its origin lies in the divine call from all eternity, which is identical with the self-declaration and summons of the risen Christ: “I am with you always” (Matt. 28:20). Christian culture exists as the fruit of that divine self-manifestation which, in its imperative force, appoints humanity to fellowship with God and commissions humanity to life ordered toward that fellowship. As an appointment rooted solely in the divine will, the summons of the risen Christ entirely transcends human worth, expectation, or capacity; indeed, it is a summons only because over and above this it is a divine making, a determination of us for life in fellowship with God. Such a divine “making” is simply not communicable; there is no point at which God’s action retires in favor of human undertakings. And so Christian eschatological culture is never just “made” by us in any straightforward sense. In one sense, of course, it *is* made by us: to say anything less would be docetic. But our making of a culture is as it were our inhabiting of a space in which we have been set, acting out roles and fulfilling tasks to which we have been appointed, and doing so with an energy which is God’s own gift. It is this, of course, which sets Christianity at a distance from both the ethics of culture in bourgeois religion and the aesthetics or poetics of culture in some varieties of postmodernism; neither can make much sense of cultural forms as *generated*.

Christian culture thus originates in the divine summons; this is Christian difference seen in terms of cultural archaeology. The goal or end of Christian culture is Christian difference as teleology. The *telos* of Christian culture is the lordly rule of Jesus Christ in all things. Christian culture stretches out beyond itself to a future which is the manifestation of God’s glory, the utter radiance of God, who is all in all. The perfection of Christian culture is thus not some immanent teleology, a matter of self-realization through historical process, and working toward that perfection is a matter of struggling to make the forms of culture transparent to a future which is God’s. Christian culture has a distinct and different sense of its own history: existing from the divine call, it exists toward the divine consummation in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Third, emerging from this origin in the resurrection of Jesus as the divine summons, and having its end in the final manifestation of his consummate lordly rule over all things, Christian eschatological

culture is a place where God's overthrow of sin attains a special visibility. Doubly determined by its origin and end, it is a place where convertedness can be discerned. Christian culture is the place where human life is caught up into the process of what the old Protestant dogmatists called "continual" or "second" conversion, in which the effectiveness of regeneration is brought to bear on human ruin. Continual conversion is the sanctification of human life through its mortification and vivification in Christ. Christian culture, caught up in Christ's sanctifying work, is thus characterized by a pattern of *overthrow and reestablishment*. Being in this culture means simultaneously being put to death and made alive. This pattern, of course, is nothing other than the baptismal pattern of dying and rising with Christ, which forms the deep structure of life in Christ, both as its divine genesis and as its distinctive moral and spiritual shape. The discriminating mark of Christian culture, poised between this origin and this end, is thus, baptism. For Christian culture is that space, that set of human forms, which owes its origin to and derives its particular configuration from the paschal mystery of Christ, presented to the believer in the common life of the church through the work of the Holy Spirit.

What are the implications for the practice of Christian theology if it takes place in this particular space in the world? To put the matter at its simplest: it means that Christian theological reflection is poised uneasily between location and dislocation. To make the point, we may reflect on a passage of early Christian exhortation:

You have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel. (Heb. 12:18–24)

This remarkable passage can be read as a depiction of the spiritual space within which one early Christian community found itself. It is a space characterized by a dialectic of homelessness and belonging. Like much in Hebrews, the passage revolves around a contrast between what is tangible and what is “heavenly.” “You have not come to what may be touched”: that is, the spiritual space of the people of Jesus is not the district around some palpable, local theophany. Fire, darkness, gloom and tempest, the sound of the trumpet, and the terrifying voice—all the appurtenances of Sinai—are too dense, too tactile. While there are, of course, “Platonic” overtones here, the real point of the imagery is to say: the true space of the people of Jesus is *other*. Yet the description which is offered of this true space is nevertheless cast in densely *cultural* imagery: a mountain, the foundation of the new order; a heavenly city; an assembly. It is place, structure, and society, but place, structure, and society transformed beyond mere tangible locality by the fact that at its center is the living God, the judge, Jesus himself. The Christian community lives, acts, and suffers in *this* space—a space constituted by the personal rule and authoritative speech of Jesus. Only this space is unshakeable, the Letter to the Hebrews continues, for only this space is a “kingdom,” established by the God who shakes not only earth but heaven.

The space of Christian theology is this space. Its identity, its tasks, and its modes of operation are shaped by its occupation of this particular space. Its choices about what constitutes its significant questions, and about how those questions are to be pursued, are determined by its inhabitation of this city and its keeping company with angels and the assembly of the firstborn. However bizarre this may seem as a description of intellectual activity, I do not think anything less can be said about Christian theology without a fundamental mis-mapping. Yet, because it exists *here*, theology must be pervaded by a sense that it has “not come to what may be touched.” What we are indicating when we point out the region of faith and theology is thus not simply a set of determinate practices, a configuration of human life which can finally be represented. Rather, we are indicating a process of sanctification, a divine undertaking, a heavenly reality of which there can no more be an ethnography than there can be a psychology or an economics or an aesthetics. Nor, in one important sense, can

there even be a theology of this space. However much we may stress that theology is properly located *here*, it is always, if it really makes a reference to its proper object, faced by its own refutation of itself.

If we look at this dialectical picture of the situation of Christian theology in a little more detail, we note, first, that Christian theology is an activity in this space and is therefore characterized by a certain regional specificity. Christian theology is not a free but a positive science, and its *positum*, the given which determines its nature and tasks, is the eschatological culture of Christian faith. Christian theology thus has a particular identity, an identity which, moreover, is not merely a human religious or intellectual construction but something which in a real sense is given and *required*. One very important implication here is that the Christian theologian also has a specific identity: as an inhabitant of this eschatological space, he or she is a “practitioner within the Christian tradition.”⁶ Once again, the full force of this claim can be felt only by setting it in contrast to some commanding modern notions of intellectual activity. As the bearer of a particular identity, as one caught up within the process of overthrowing and reestablishment, which is potently signified to us in baptism, the Christian theologian is called to break free from an influential modern understanding of human identity, according to which the shape of my life is nothing other than the externalization of my freedom or the expression of that freedom in the assumption of contingent commitments. In intellectual form, that modern account of human identity surfaces in the assumption that intellectual dignity resides in freedom of inquiry, and that freedom of inquiry is undetermination by situation—all of which is a transposition into the life of the mind of political and spiritual ideals, with which Christian theology has no little quarrel. Taking a different direction here will mean a reevaluation of the kinds of competencies which are thought indispensable for undertaking the task of Christian theology. At the very least, it will mean that competence in the rules of life of some strand of the Christian tradition will have much higher profile in assessing theological work than it customarily enjoys in much modern theology. Attentive, adaptable familiarity with what goes on in the strange space of Christian faith, prayer, and work, as

6. George Schner, *Education for Ministry: Reform and Renewal in Theological Education* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1993), xiii.

well as a mature inhabitation of the roles which are fitting in that space, are not—as is so often suggested—a *hindrance* to thought, but rather thought’s social and historical anchor. The conditions for theology’s success include crucial internal conditions.

But if theology is thus in one sense “fixed,” the one upon whom it is fixed—the living God at the heart of the new Jerusalem, the judge—is always a source of overwhelming and destabilizing. Over against some postmodernism, this does not mean that “givenness” is always mere idolatry, or that theology has to stand apart from any ideologically constituted space. For the Letter to the Hebrews, we may remind ourselves, we really have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God. But because it is *this* city, *this* space to which we have come, then alongside the permanent task of focusing the identity of Christian theology there has to be another task, which Barth once called “a penultimate ‘deassuring’ of theology, or . . . a theological warning against theology.”⁷ He went on to describe this as “a warning against the idea that [theology’s] propositions or principles are certain in themselves.” Perhaps we may put it thus: the God whose presence and activity generate the eschatological culture which is Christian theology’s space is mystery. God as mystery means, not God unknown, but God in the utter freedom with which he makes himself present to us. God cannot be objectified, that is, rendered as a feature in some assemblage of cultural forms, even (especially!) the forms of Christian eschatological culture. “We cannot,” Barth noted, “give the Word of God its own sphere in the world which is known to us and which is to be conceptually classified by us. All our delimitations can only seek to be signals or alarms to draw attention to the fact that God’s Word is and remains God’s, not bound and not to be attached to this thesis or to that antithesis.”⁸ However crucial it may be that theology be tied to its object and grasped as a positive science operative in a particular sphere, it is equally crucial that the object of theology is *subject*. The living God is not a passive and silent natural object, nor an item of cultural capital; rather, this God is eloquent, disturbing, spiritual presence, a consuming fire more dangerous even than that tangible fire of Sinai.

7. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 164–65.

8. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, 164.

My suggestion, then, is that the peculiar character of the Christian confession of the gospel, and its sense of itself as what goes on in its region, are such that Christian theology stands in a complex relation to its culture, both located and dislocated by the reality which brings it into being. Theological activity characteristically displays a tendency to give profile to one or the other pole of the dialectic, to function, that is, in what Jonathan Smith calls either a “locative” or a “utopian” fashion.⁹ The prominence accorded to one particular strategy will depend by and large upon the judgments reached by theologians about the current health and needs of Christian culture, about the context in which faith and theology find themselves, and about what plans of action need to be followed if it is to fulfill its vocation of indicating the gospel of Jesus Christ. The theologian will thus not only be a skilled inhabitant of a particular cultural world but will demonstrate skills in reaching judgments about circumstance, and skills in reading his or her situation well. In some situations, it may be that Christian culture is considered to be in danger of becoming “de-regionalized,” that is, prone to cut itself adrift from that through which it acquires its specific identity, perhaps because of the weight of authority accorded to factors external to the region of Christian faith. When this is the case, then Christian theology may adopt a strategy of emphasizing the need to safeguard specificity. In doing so, theology will normally give profile to those aspects of Christian faith and practice which heighten difference, dissonance, and boundaries. My own judgment, for what it’s worth, is that for all the dangers associated with this strategy—closure, mislocation of boundaries, indifference to the task of self-critique—it is one which in the current situation ought most to command our attention. In other situations, it may be that Christian culture is threatened with idolatry—with what Richard Niebuhr identified as “henotheism,” that is, “the social faith whose god (value-center and cause) is society itself.”¹⁰ If that is so, then Christian theology may feel required to adopt a tactic which will heighten the sheerly other, uncapturable

9. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

10. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper, 1960), 26–27.

character of that to which Christian culture is a response. But in the end the strategies are, in fact, inseparable; what enables theological critique of idolatry is precisely a deeply formed sense of the content of the Christian gospel, and the formation of such a sense cannot bypass the social processes of coming to learn how to understand and act out Christian difference.

Let me try to draw together the threads of the argument by suggesting that the practice of Christian theology in the culture of Christian faith requires two things: roots and astonishment. The need for roots was articulated with her unique combination of political astuteness and moral and spiritual compassion by Simone Weil in her book of that title, written in 1943 over the last few months of her life. She wrote,

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and the least recognized need of the human soul. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future. . . . Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw wellnigh the whole of his moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part.¹¹

Though not only a natural community, Christian culture will be worth very little if it does not enable us to order the soul, educating and nourishing us with the discipline of location. And likewise, Christian theology will be not much more than a trivial pursuit if it does not seek to put its roots deep into the troublesome, contrary world of the Christian gospel. In the lectures which follow, I want to explore some of the things which are involved in this discipline of location—reading these texts, exploring these traditions, struggling to be shaped by these habits.

But alongside the need for roots is the no less important need for astonishment. Barth once wrote that “only if there is . . . astonishment

11. Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), 41. See Eric O. Springsted, “Rootedness: Culture and Value,” in *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture: Readings toward a Divine Humanity*, ed. Richard H. Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 161–88.

. . . can there be serious, fruitful and edifying Christian thought and utterance.”¹² Christian astonishment is the amazed realization that all human life and thought is undertaken in the presence of Easter, for Jesus the living one makes himself into our contemporary, startling us with the fact that he simply *is*. If Christian culture is a strange reality, it is because it seeks to live out that amazement; and if Christian theology is indeed to be “serious, fruitful and edifying,” if it is truly to live up to the little qualifier “Christian,” it cannot be a stranger to the disruption which amazement brings.

12. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 287.