

Investigator:

THEOLOGIAN



Introducing theology

Theology is all about talking about God. It does not usually focus on whether there is a God or not (theology often starts out on the basis that there is a God). It is not just what people think about God, either – theology tries to say true and helpful things about the God many people believe in, and about how to live today.

Theologians are interested in questions about what God is like and what God does. We think that knowing what God is like has an impact on how people think and live too.

To find this out, theology needs to pay attention to the past. This is because we find most of our information about God in texts, or scriptures. We usually believe that these texts (such as the Bible, the Qur'an, the Vedas) are in some way inspired by God.

Theologians study their sacred texts and other sources of authority, to try to explain the answers to questions about what God is like, how people should live, and what our relationship is with the Earth. We usually do this to help people who believe in God today.

As a Christian theologian, I believe that we find out most about God by looking at Jesus, as shown through the Bible, and in particular the New Testament. We look at what the stories about Jesus meant to people at the time and why they were written, as well as what they mean to people today. Key to this is the belief that Jesus shows Christians what God is like. Incarnation means that Jesus is God, in the flesh. For me, God is not just an idea or a theory; in Jesus, God is personal, interacting with human beings, involved in their lives.

For Christians, the character of God is revealed in the character of Jesus, so exploring his life and teaching is central to knowing more about what God is like.

People have been thinking about these questions for many centuries, so we often build on what thinkers from the past have said.

It's great to ask lots of questions about life, the world, and what people think, believe and do. You can explore the same topic by asking different kinds of questions. You can also use different methods to answer these questions. This affects the kind of answer you get – which affects what knowledge is produced.

This book introduces you to some investigators who look at things from their specialist discipline.

In the left hand column, Dr Simeon Zahl introduces the discipline of theology.

**Dr Simeon Zahl
answers questions
on what kind of
investigating
theologians do:**

What do you investigate?

Theologians deal with questions of meaning, truth, beauty and practice, in relation to religion. In particular, we study God. We examine what God is like and what God does, including ideas of creation, human nature, salvation, how people should live, life after death etc.

What kinds of questions do you ask?

Christian theologians ask questions such as:

What is God like? What does it mean to say that Jesus is God? Why do people need to be 'saved'? What does it mean for God to forgive? What does it mean to say that the world was created from nothing? Is it possible for people to change for the better? How can we love others and seek justice in the world, and how does God help people to do this?

How do you find out the answers?

We use lots of different methods, usually basing our study on the Bible. We look at the text: what it meant to the people who first wrote it, how people have made sense of it through history, and what it means to people today. We pay close attention to what Christians have taught and believed in the centuries since the Bible was written, and we use tools from philosophy to think deeply about the questions the Bible raises.

What tools do you use?

For a Christian theologian, our most important 'tool' is really the biblical text. We look at it in lots of different ways, such as:

- looking at the historical and cultural background of biblical texts
- asking questions about style and content, to see what the writers meant when they wrote it
- examining how the message of the Bible can transform the lives of people today, e.g. people on the edges of society, challenging injustice or the climate crisis.

We also use philosophical reasoning. This means thinking as logically and coherently as possible about religious ideas and problems.

For theologians, this includes:

- analysing how coherent religious ideas are
- reflecting on how ancient ideas transform and remain relevant when applied to the modern world
- thinking through what God's existence means for questions about meaning, purpose, hope and justice
- exploring the limits of what human beings can know about God, ourselves, and the world.

What evidence do you look for?

We pay attention to the past – theology believes that the greatest wisdom about God and how to live is found in ancient texts, and in the rituals, practices and teachings these texts have generated.

We look at what these texts say about e.g. the life and teaching of Jesus, and how that might apply to people today. We also look at Christian ideas and practices today, so that we can understand where Christians tend to go wrong in how they live their faith, and how they can flourish.

What are the basic methods you use?

- We look to see if the text of the Bible is reliable and if it really says what we think it says.
- We look at how Christians through history have understood things, trying to learn from them and test their understanding.
- We look at whether the ideas we find in the Bible reflect the way the world is and what people are like.
- We use philosophical reasoning to analyse whether theological ideas are coherent and how these might apply beyond what the Bible discusses directly.
- Most theologians also ask if the text 'speaks' to us as if God were speaking, and consider what impact that has on our hearts, minds and actions.

What assumptions do you need to look out for?

Many Christian theologians believe in the God that we study, so we do not have to argue whether or not God exists. We do not all agree how much we can rely on the Bible text: some see it as inspired by God, without mistakes, whereas others might see it as mainly a human creation. Our background and worldview will affect how we read and interpret texts, so we must always be aware of our own perspectives, and how they influence us.

How do you evaluate your conclusions?

As Richard Kueh has suggested¹⁰ we examine Christian beliefs by evaluating their:

- **coherence** (do they make sense overall?)
- **fruitfulness** (do they help people to flourish and live good, holy lives?)
- **faithfulness** (do they reflect the overall message of Jesus, the Bible and Christian tradition?)
- **significance** (are these teachings for everyone, for all time?)

Can you apply your answers to everyone?

While many theologians believe the message of Christianity is for everyone, we are cautious about claiming this. People live in all kinds of contexts; there are few simple answers. Theology also teaches that we all make mistakes, even when our intentions are good, so theology must always be done with humility.

¹⁰ Richard Kueh (2020), 'Disciplinary Hearing Making the Case for the Disciplinary in Religion and Worldviews' in Mark Chater *Reforming RE* (John Catt)