

5-4-2023

## A Central Task of Theology: Authenticity in Relationship with God

Lydia Mattern

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, lmattern001@csbsju.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mattern, Lydia. 2023. A Central Task of Theology: Authenticity in Relationship with God. *Obsculta* 16, (1) : 186-194. <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol16/iss1/17>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Obsculta* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

**ABSTRACT:**

This article is a reflection on the beautiful mystery of theology and what it means to be in authentic relationship with God. It is a reflection on the cumulative ideas taught by Kristin Colberg in “Thinking Theologically,” a class that changed Lydia’s life. It demonstrates that theology is a vehicle used to come to understand God.

# A Central Task of Theology

## Authenticity in Relationship with God

*by Lydia Mattern*

Theology is often defined as *faith seeking understanding*, but it is more than that single definition. Theology is rooted in mystery; it dives deep into revelation, scripture, the Doctrines of the Church, and the notion of freedom and sin. When studying theology, theologians consider creation and salvation as an ongoing process and faith as a response to revelation. Theology holds the identity of the Church true and considers the human experience of every individual as an authoritative source. Theology tries to put into

words what we know to be true. A central task of theology seeks to answer the most fundamental questions about what it means to be our truest self and in relationship with God.

To study theology is to attempt to understand mystery. It is important to understand the difference between a problem and a mystery. “So, the first step in understanding the nature of theology is to recognize, with the Christian tradition and with all traditions of all the great religions of the world, that God is incomprehensible and ineffable: no thought, no image, no concept can adequately grasp God’s reality, and really, the deepest knowledge of God is *to know we cannot ever know*.”<sup>1</sup> A problem can be solved, while a mystery seeks to be understood. A problem can be comprehended; there are steps taken toward an answer. For example, in disciplines such as math and science, there are equations that have a step-by-step process that result in a clear-cut answer. In addition, the answers to problems may be hard to find, but they can be found in the world. Mysteries, however, can never be fully comprehended because they are open-ended in nature and their realities do not exist in the physical world. God and the human person are both mysteries because both are consistently revealing and being revealed to.

Furthermore, theology is a vehicle to understand the mystery of who God is and who we are in relationship with God. Theology guides the human person to know God in the fullest possible way without reducing God to an object or problem. Theology is faith seeking an understanding of the mystery of God, not seeking comprehension for who God is.

By using theology to guide us closer to who God is, we come to know ourselves authentically. We do this by looking at creation and salvation not only as moments in history, but also as on-going processes in every human existence. The Doctrine of Creation teaches us what it means to not only be in existence, but what it means to be a human.<sup>2</sup> Along with this, we have a relationship with God as our Creator. We can look at how God made the choice to create and that through creation we can freely

---

1 Stephen B. Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (New York: Orbis Books, 2009) 13.

2 CCC: 279-324

chose God. God does not become better or more perfect by what God does, because God sets the standard for what good and perfect is. We can also come to know how the world came to be and how everything in it, is related to God. The human person is in relationship with God, and God is perfect and good simply by being. “We pray that God be the fullness of God, and that we may be what it is to be creatures, i.e., fully dependent on God. And that the purpose of prayer” to celebrate the goodness, the rightness of precisely what we find so frightening- being a creature.”<sup>3</sup> By understanding creation and salvation as on-going in nature, we can come to know God’s *godliness* and our *creatureliness*.

God is so radically other than creation; we are God’s finite creatures. When God created the world and sent God’s Son to die for the salvation of the world, God did not do it out of necessity, but out of possibility. Because of this, we can understand the nature of God as our loving Father. God is fully actualized perfection and goodness. There are moments of possibility, actuality, and necessity in human lived experience. Before the world there was God and the possibility of God’s creation. “The possibility is rooted not only in the potentialities of what already is and always been, but in the power of God to make them be.”<sup>4</sup> Before the world there was an “indeterminate future; before the beginning might be, but it also might not be.”<sup>5</sup> Sokolowski explains that there was a time of possibility where God made the choice to create. The choice was not necessary for God because it was no gain or loss to God. God made the choice to create, God is indifferent to the world. What deems creation as so radical and beautiful is that the Creator created out of freedom.

Everything God has given us through creation, redeemed through salvation, is a gift. Again, God does not gain or lose anything by creating. “If God is not perfected by creating, then God does not create out of need, and His creating is all the freer and more generous. There is no self-

---

3 Bevens, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, 25.

4 Robert Sokolowski, *Christian Faith and Human Understanding: Studies on the Eucharist, Trinity, and the Human Person* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 182.

5 Sokolowski, *Christian Faith and Human Understanding*, 184.

interest and no ambiguity in the goodness and benevolence of creation.”<sup>6</sup> By seeing the mysteries of creation and salvation as an on-going, lifetime process, not only moments in history. We come to know the nature of who God is, and experience self-actualization because as humans, we are oriented back to our Creator.

Similar to creation and salvation, revelation is an on-going process in which theology guides the human person to knowing God and themselves. The response to God revealing Godself to us is faith. Theology dives deeply into what faith is and who it makes us as humans. According to Haight and Bevans, faith is not simply believing in truth but rather something of greater value.<sup>7</sup> Faith is a response to revelation and a gift from God. Revelation is God revealing Godself to us. Faith cannot happen without first recognizing and accepting the gift of revelation. Karl Barth says, “only when we are able to call God “Thou” in return can revelation really happen, can God really give the gift of God self.”<sup>8</sup> To have faith, we must understand that God giving us the opportunity to know God; faith is a gift that we have the choice to accept and peruse. God’s presence is revealed when we are aware of it by the response of faith. God reveals Godself objectively through human experience, historical events, and through people and objects. The human response to these things is faith. God offers Godself as accepted truth, for example, Jesus dying on the cross. God reveals Godself objectively through symbols like beautiful nature demonstrating God as Creator. God also reveals Godself to us by inviting us to transform and grow. An example of this is by works of service toward others. When God reveals Godself to humans in these ways, we have “options” of how we accept and respond. We respond to revelation by giving ourselves to God by belief, affectivity, and personal conversations; these are all “forms” of faith.

In addition to faith being a response to revelation, it is also a personal relationship we have with God. “The act of faith is the way that human persons are open to or offer their own personhood or subjectivity to God.

---

6 Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, 184.

7 Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*

8 Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, 27

Like the offer of revelation, by which God gives God's very self, God's very Mystery to women and men, the act of faith is the way that women and men give themselves by giving God something objective."<sup>9</sup> God freely gives Godself to us; in turn, we freely give ourselves to God.

Faith allows us to experience God and be touched by God in our everyday life. *Dei Verbum* describes faith by saying, "the obedience of faith must be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which men and women entrust their whole selves freely to God, offering "the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals," and freely assenting to the truth revealed."<sup>10</sup> Faith requires the wholeness of a person; it allows experience of God to happen. Another important thing to note about faith is that it is not a feeling or an emotional response toward God. It also may not be a definitive moment in a person's life but rather a decision-making process, a journey one undergoes. "Faith is something continuous, something we are challenged to renew everyday as we come in touch with the revelatory events in our ordinary, daily lives."<sup>11</sup> Faith is a free response, a choice. The response to revelation is rooted in human experience, knowing something is true with the inability to explain reality. Through the relationship between revelation and faith, we come to know God and ourselves fully and authentically.

Faith is a gift from God. Faith puts us in relationship with God, a relationship of trust and freedom. Human freedom is a gift from God as well. The Christian notion of freedom looks much different than that of the world. Freedom in the Christian tradition is not the ability to choose between a multitude of options, but rather becoming the most authentic version of ourselves. Through human freedom, God is active in every human experience. Human freedom is directly connected to the central task of theology, being our most authentic selves, because with the gift of freedom from God, we are moving toward God and knowing ourselves throughout the process.

---

9 Bevens, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, 28

10 Bevens, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, 30

11 Bevens, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, 31

One of life's deepest questions asks, "How does the mystery of freedom shape and orient the life of humans?" As humans, we are created to return to God; we are naturally oriented toward God. "Freedom is saying 'YES' to God, actualizing who we are called to be."<sup>12</sup> Freedom is not the act of making a choice. Rather, freedom, in a theological light, is our human experience where we know and actualize our truest self. Freedom is the agency of faith humans use to move toward God, authenticating who we are as humans as well.

To put freedom and faith into practice, to actualize our truest self, there must be a starting point for this central task of theology. Even though each theologian may use a different starting point, the goal and process are the same: to come to know who God is and ourselves in the most authentic way. Karl Rahner, arguably one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, suggests the starting point of theology is human experience. Rahner explains how we cannot start with a "non-starter," meaning there should be a common ground for all people to understand theology. Rahner says that if God doesn't exist or if God is an illusion to some people, God cannot be the starting point. If people cannot make sense of Jesus Christ and the scriptures, then neither of those things can be the starting point either. Throughout Rahner's work, he explains the dense concept of what it means for humans to experience. He says, "theology itself implies a philosophical anthropology which enables this message of grace to be accepted in a really philosophical and reasonable way, and which gives account of it in a humanly responsible way."<sup>13</sup> Here, Rahner describes the human experience as philosophical. He tries to explain this by saying philosophy and theology go hand in hand. He notes that to understand human experience as the starting point, we must know we are in existence to do so. William V. Dych, an author who writes about Rahner's idea of the starting point for theology, explains this well in his reading by saying, "if we are going to take human existence as the starting point for our theological reflection, we must state a very important principle here at the outset: One must first

---

12 Bevens, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, 25

13 Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, 25

be in existence before one can reflect on it.”<sup>14</sup> This is called “experiential knowledge,” the knowledge we get from being within existence. The transcendence awareness we have as humans is what allows us to gain knowledge because we have an openness to being, to existing. We have the freedom to gain knowledge and come to an understanding of Who God is. This ties into our Christian understanding of what freedom is. Rahner explains that our transcendence, openness to being, is what gives us the opportunity to reach our telos. It is what gives us the chance to be the “hearer.”

Rahner argues it should be the human experience of God because not all Christians agree with the doctrines or teachings of the Church. If the doctrine of the Church is the starting point for Theology, it is more difficult to have a conversation with those who see them as a “non-starter.” However, the teachings of the Church and human experience cannot be looked at individually. In an article written by Thomas Weinandy, Weinandy says, “experiences of God to be primary and doctrinal formulations to be secondary.”<sup>15</sup> We cannot separate experience from doctrines because they guide and enhance one another in truth.

Whether human experience or the Church teachings are the starting point, the central task of seeking to answer the most fundamental questions about what it means to be our truest self and in relationship with God, leads us to truth. Truth gained through this central task of theology may not be facts, but rather events in which we encounter God, knowing who God is and who we are because of the encounters. There is an order to truth considered when starting conversation with one another.

To further prove my point, a goal for Vatican II was to start conversation to promote a unity among all people centered around truth. To have these conversations, truths must not be viewed individually, but as in wholeness with one another because truths are lost in fragmentation. We can look to where Christians disagree with one another and “retrace” back to a central truth that which we agree on because there are no truths greater than other truths. When reflecting on this idea of the hierarchy of truths,

---

<sup>14</sup> Dych, *Theology in a New Key*, 3

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 7



it is important that to have discussion, what binds Christians together is much more powerful than what makes them different. While theology tries to put into words what we know is true, truth is a gift of mystery found in human freedom, and a personal relationship with God.

To know the truth of who God is, a personal relationship with God is necessary to authentically actualize ourselves. Theology is also done in community, meaning it is best when we share our experiences and encounters with God with others. “The symbol for the Church as a mystical communion is community. The Church is a community of people united by their shared life in the Holy Spirit; thus, the interior bond of communion is more important than external, juridical ones.”<sup>16</sup> Theology works together with a reflection of the personal relationship God invites us to be a part of and the Church.

Theology is a mystery in which we look at creation and salvation as events in history and on-going processes. Theology guides the human heart to faith as the response to revelation, the Christian notion of freedom and sin, and human experience. Theology is done in community where we learn from one another, but it also requires an acceptance to the personal relationship God calls to.

Theology is for everyone: those in academia, research, religious life, and lay persons. It is also for those searching for answers to life’s deepest, most meaningful questions. Theology is for anyone who has a desire to be their most authentic self in relationship to who God is. “Theology is that which reveals to us our deepest selves.”<sup>17</sup> Theology guides the human person to the truth about knowing who God is and allows us to encounter God in our everyday lives, aiding in accepting the gifts of freedom and seeking what we know as truth.



---

16 Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 64

17 Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*

## Works Cited

- Bevans, Stephen B. *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church. Accessed March 1, 2023. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM).
- Dych, William V. *Karl Rahner. Outstanding Christian Thinkers*. London: Continuum, 2000.
- Rahner, Karl, and Andrew Tallon. *Hearer of the Word: Laying the Foundation for a Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Continuum, 1994.
- Sokolowski, Robert. *Christian Faith and Human Understanding: Studies on the Eucharist, Trinity, and the Human Person*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2006.
- Weinandy, Thomas. *Does God Suffer?* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000.