

ENTERING THE CONVERSATION

*We are all called theologians,
just as [we are] all [called] Christians.*

MARTIN LUTHER, "SERMON ON PSALM 5:17"



TELL ME ABOUT GOD.

For some people the question of whether or not God exists is a painful and haunting uncertainty not easily dismissed. But for most people the question is not whether God exists, but what is God like. Not whether there is a deity, but how many, and which one(s). How do we know God? Can God be trusted? Does God care? And is God good?

Whenever we speak about God we are engaged in theology. The term "theology" means a word (*logos*) about God (*theos*), so when anyone speaks about God, whether that person dropped out of high school or completed a PhD in philosophy, he or she is engaged in theology. Theology is not reserved for those in the academy; it is an

aspect of thought and conversation for all who live and breathe, who wrestle and fear, who hope and pray.

Theological questions surround our lives, whether we know it or not. A wife and husband facing infertility inevitably struggle through deep theological questions, whether or not they want to voice them. College students working through issues of identity, culture, politics and ethics struggle—in one way or another—with theological convictions and how to live them. Our concepts about the divine inform our lives more deeply than most people

If I speak truth here, it is not so much knowledge that lifts me up, but rather the ardor of a burning soul that urges me to try this.

Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173),
“Book Three of the Trinity”

can trace. Whether we view God as distant or near, as gracious or capricious, as concerned or apathetic, the conclusions we reach—whether the result of careful reflection or negligent assumptions—guide our lives.

Christians must care deeply about theology. If the true God is renewing our lives and calling us to worship him “in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:23), then such worship includes our thoughts, words, affections and actions. Do we want to worship Yahweh or waste time and effort on a deity we have constructed in our own image? Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), a nineteenth-century atheist philosopher, ar-

gued that talk about God is no more than amplified talk about ourselves: “God” is merely the projection of human thoughts and desires.¹ Surprising as it may seem, Christians share a fundamental concern with Feuerbach, for

Whether our theology is good or flawed, those we love most will be first to feel the effects.

Carolyn Custis James,
When Life and Beliefs Collide

we recognize the temptation to create our own gods—gods that belong to us—rather than to respond faithfully to the One who is.

The Scriptures testify to the God who made the heavens and the earth, who created men and women to enjoy his creation and their communion with him. But sin has entered the world, creating chaos instead of order, death instead of life, and substituting idolatry for the worship of the true God. The Bible often describes our temptation to create and follow false gods. For example, after delivering Israel from Egypt, God warns them against forgetting their Redeemer and turning to false gods: “Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them” (Deut 11:16). The Song of Moses warns that, despite this display of God’s

¹Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841; reprint, New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004). This line of thinking was also picked up and popularized, for example, by Sigmund Freud.

favor and power, the Israelites would eventually look to “strange gods . . . to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth” (Deut 32:16-18). The Song warns coming generations against provoking God with their idols—with “what is no god” (Deut 32:21).

Theological reflection is a way of examining our praise, prayers, words and worship with the goal of making sure they conform to God alone. Every age has

Praise is, among other things, a form of thinking, and aims to “think God” as adequately as possible.

David Ford and Daniel W. Hardy,
Living in Praise

its own idols, its own distortions that twist and pervert how we view God, ourselves and the world. Whether it is the distant and uninterested deity of modernity or the fragmented and territorial gods of postmodernity, all times and cultures carry the danger of warping our worship. We aim not to escape our cultures, however, but to recognize that God calls us to respond faithfully to him in our place and time, whatever our particular social and philosophical climate. We, not just our ancestors, are invited to know and love God—and thus to worship him.

While most of us are no longer drawn to the Baals and Ashtaroths of the past, we still look to idols—that which is not God—for our security, happiness and comfort. Is it not true that when many of us feel anxious or depressed, we seek relief by purchasing things: we head to the contemporary temples of self-indulgence in the malls across the country or on the Internet, where the shopping experience is meant to calm our souls? Similarly, the emphasis in American culture on comfort, which exalts the consumer over the community, skews how we view ourselves, others and creation. We lose sight of our relational nature, embracing instead the myth of individuality and autonomy. One of the greatest theological challenges of our time is to move our worship beyond self-absorption. This takes us back to Feuerbach’s critique of religion: that

Let me seek you in longing,
and long for you in seeking.
Let me find you in love,
and love you in finding.

Ambrose of Milan (c. 340-378),
Proslogion

we religious folks are, in the end and at the start, concerned only with ourselves. Sociologist Alan Wolfe has criticized contemporary evangelical churches for mirroring the self-centered aspects of American culture. “Television, publishing, political campaigning, education, self-help advice—all increasingly tell Americans what they

already want to hear. Religion, it would seem, should now be added to that list."² One great danger of idols is that we try to fill our souls with what cannot satisfy, and then in our loneliness, questions and despair we wonder where God is. We were created for fellowship with God, and apart from that communion we are lost. Theology is about life, and it is not a conversation our souls can afford to avoid.

²Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2003), p. 36.