Reason

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Every word that you speak or write as a theologian will be a product of human reason. What else could it be? As soon as you have put a moment's thought into what you say, or as soon as you accept that what you say might be open to any kind of correction, you have already become involved in reasoning. It makes no more sense to ask whether your words are too much or too little the product of reason than it does to ask whether the words I am writing now are too much or too little the product of my typing. What matters is not the quantity, but the quality and kind of reasoning involved.

The fact that 'reason' is the first of this book's four main sections does not imply that we think reason is somehow more authoritative than scripture, or tradition, or experience. As we have explained in the introduction, we don't find it particularly helpful to think of theology as an attempt to balance the claims derived from four different sources, and to get the priority among those four sources right. To say that theology is reasoning all the way

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through is not yet to say anything – whether positive or negative – about theology's relation to the Bible, or to tradition, or to experience. Different qualities and kinds of reasoning will relate to Bible, tradition, and experience in very different ways.

But what is reasoning? In order to provide an initial answer to that question, I am going to begin with an analogy. Reasoning is, I claim, like the building of a child's wooden railway. I'm thinking of the kind of railway that comes as a set of wooden track sections – straights, curves, junctions, bridges – ready to be fitted together into networks. My family is, I think, typical in having a rather random collection of pieces, some inherited, some bought. The attempt to make a coherent layout from them all (such that the train will be able to navigate the whole network without having to be lifted from the tracks), still more to make a *complete* layout (one that uses all the pieces and leaving no loose ends), is no easy business. You get a certain way through, and then realize that you do not have enough curves left to join the two remaining ends – so you take a curve out here and a straight there in order to free up an extra piece, only to find that now you have a spare junction, and nowhere to put it. Working towards a coherent and complete layout – if that is indeed what you want – is a complex process. You can't simply start at the beginning, add the pieces one by one, and carry on all the way to the end. You have to experiment with a possibility, then unpick it a

little and rebuild slightly differently, so as to respond to what that experiment has shown you.

It is a matter of ongoing, iterative, unpredictable negotiation. 'Ongoing', because you try experiment after experiment, and it all takes time; 'iterative', because each experiment responds to the problems exposed by the last experiment, and you try again and again to make the layout work; 'unpredictable', because nothing can tell you in advance how thoroughgoing the reworking of your existing layout will need to be as you face any particular inconsistency; 'negotiation' because every change you make involves seeking some agreement between the connection you want to make and the tolerances of the connections already made.

Of course, when one has, with triumph, produced a workable network, all pieces in place (and without too much strain on any of the joints), it inevitably happens that some small child (probably in revenge for the adult takeover of his or her playthings) will discover an extra piece of track from behind the sofa. And the finding of that extra piece will start the whole iterative process going again.

We can use the noun 'settlement' to refer a coherent track layout: a workable arrangement in which all the presently available pieces have been

placed together, to the present satisfaction of the builders. However, we can also use the verb 'to settle' to denote the activity of *seeking* a settlement: the active process of iterative renegotiation and repair by which broken networks are remade in pursuit of settlement. And though the application to theology may not yet be clear, my claim is that 'reasoning' is, at its most basic, simply *the faculty of settling*: the faculty by which one thinkingly pursues ongoing, iterative, unpredictable negotiation with the materials given to one, in search of a settlement. It involves serious playfulness (the willingness to experiment, to unpick and remake again and again); it involves a quick imagination (the ability to see possible reworkings of the materials one has to hand); and it involves various kinds of practical knowhow (familiarity with how tight a curve one can persuade the pieces to yield, or with the ways in which an articulated bridge can be put together). It is a skill, or set of skills: one can practice it, learn, and get better at it – though however skilled one becomes, the game never loses its iterative, negotiable character.

When you hear the word 'reason', therefore, try not to think too quickly of an argument written down in clear steps on a page. That is not reasoning but the record of some reasoning, like the diagram of a completed train track. Think instead of an activity, of people seeking a settlement: an ongoing, iterative, unpredictable negotiation.

REASONING IN THEOLOGY

Theology involves reasoning – or, better, theology *is* a practice of reasoning – in precisely this sense. It is an ongoing, iterative, unpredictable, negotiation. Think, for instance, of an individual theology student. She brings with her some set of inherited ideas (a settlement of some kind), and finds herself faced with all sorts of new ideas from her teachers, her fellow students, and from the books and articles she reads. (She's presented with the extra track piece, from behind the sofa – or has someone take away the piece that currently joins her bridge to her turntable.) Her existing settlement involves certain ways of using the Bible, which imply certain claims about what it is and how it should be read. It involves some claims about earlier generations of Christian settlers, and what notice deserves to be taken of *their* attempts at settlement. It involves claims about the nature of the world she inhabits, and about the proper ways of living in it. But the new claims that she encounters unsettle her settlement: they call it into question, or present her with ideas that she does not know how to assimilate. She becomes engaged in active settling, in *reasoning*, to the extent that she tries to make sense of these new ideas – trying to see how they might fit in to her settlement, trying to see what alteration to that settlement might be

necessary, trying to do justice to what she believes ought to remain central to that settlement, trying to decide what might need to be rejected.

The process of settling might be set off by something relatively trivial. Perhaps she hears one of her lecturers confidently arguing that the book of Isaiah is not a unified whole, but includes material by Proto-, Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah. As well as assessing the cogency of the lecturer's arguments, she finds herself wondering whether and how such a conclusion affects other things she has been taught as she grew up. Does it call into question things she's been taught about the reliability and integrity of biblical authors, or the nature of prophecy? Can she adjust this track piece without having to rearrange the whole layout? It is unlikely that she'll find answers to these questions immediately, or that she'll know quickly what ripples of change might spread out around her settlement from this point. Making sense of this claim will involve an ongoing, iterative, unpredictable negotiation.

This example risks missing something important, however – something that has been visible when I have, on occasion, made the train track analogy very practically in class. I have sometimes brought in a bag of track pieces, tipped them onto a table, and asked a group of students to make a coherent and complete layout. It is fascinating to watch. Various members of the

group propose possible settlements. They argue. Often, a loud and plausible voice manages to dominate early on, until the settlement that he was working towards fails, and other participants take over. The activity becomes a mixture of co-operation, consultation, disagreement and negotiation. The settlement-making faculty here is not a matter of isolated individual contemplation, but is a social activity. Individual imagination is certainly involved, but only as an ingredient in a complex social pattern of give and take – of ideas offered, tried, rejected, and improved upon. It is an activity in which specific people engage, and their personalities and habits of interaction with those around them change the activity's character and outcome.

It might be better, therefore, to think not so much of an individual thinker, but of a Christian *community* engaged in active settlement: a community with some existing habits of practice and belief, some existing patterns of commitments, some remembered history; a community working out how to order its life in its present context, how to relate to new challenges and questions. Imagine, for instance, a Christian congregation faced for the first time with a member who has an intersex condition – someone who is biologically not straightforwardly classifiable as male or female. If the life of this congregation is in part ordered by practices that assign clearly-defined and different roles to men and women, the presence of someone

who can't easily be assigned to either group may possibly set off a chain reaction of rethinking and reordering that could end up reshaping the whole life of the community. The community will be engaged in active settling to the extent that it tries to make sense of its life in the light of this new challenge that it faces, and in the light of all that it is committed to and all that it has inherited. And that settling is likely to be a social process, a complex mess of co-operation, argument, negotiation, politics.[1]

THE CHARACTER OF THEOLOGICAL REASONING

The skills involved in being a theological reasoner are analogous to those involved in being a good builder of railway layouts. Reasoning involves a practiced familiarity with the materials that need to be taken into account while settling. It involves knowing well how those materials can and do connect. It involves a sense for how much 'give' there might be in any specific connection. What tremors through a whole settlement are going to be set off by a change here? Which connections will that change break, and which can bend to accommodate it? What, therefore, is really at stake in that change? To be a good theological reasoner is to be someone adept at tracing

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[1] On this topic, see S. Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology*, London / Oakeville, CT: Equinox, 2010.

the connections, and so at seeing the constraints and the possibilities faced by those seeking settlement.

To put it another way, theological reasoning involves a Christian community taking responsibility for the exposure to challenge of all that it says, does and thinks. The German theologian Karl Barth, at the very beginning of his massive *Church Dogmatics*, says that theology arises when the church 'realizes that it must give an account to God for the way in which it speaks'[2] and 'takes up … the task of criticising and revising its speech about God.'[3] To say that all theology is reasoning through and through is to say that all theology is engaged in this taking of responsibility, this criticising and revising. To say that what matters is not the quantity but the quality and kind of reasoning is to say that what matters is how that task of critique and revision is carried out. On what basis is the speech and action of the church properly criticized and revised – and how does that criticism

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[2] He includes in the church's 'speaking' its 'specific action as a fellowship, . . . proclamation by preaching and the administration of the sacraments, . . . worship, . . . internal and external mission including works of love amongst the sick, the weak and those in jeopardy.' K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975, p. 3.

[3] Ibid.

and revision then proceed? What kind of exposure to challenge does the church face?

A Christian community might, for instance, claim to be obedient to Scripture in certain ways. If people in that community come to realize that, in what it says, does and thinks, it is implicitly claiming that Scripture says *x*, they discover a very specific way in which their community is exposed to challenge. It is exposed to the possibility that more assiduous reading of Scripture will show that it does not, in fact, quite say *x*.

I don't at this stage want to discuss the precise forms of exposure that drive theological reasoning. Different Christian communities will understand their exposure to challenge in other ways – and the whole of the rest of this book could be thought of as an attempt to trace some of the forms of exposure that are central to Christian theology, and to trace the practices of 'criticism and revision' that respond to them. I am more interested at this point in the *form* that all such taking of responsibility shares.

If theological reasoning involves a Christian community taking responsibility for the exposure to challenge of all that it does, says, and thinks, for instance, then it must also involve taking responsibility for discovering how all those things interconnect. The explicit, clearly stated

exposure to challenge of the community's action, speech and thought may be rather limited – but it may turn out, on more careful investigation, that there are deeper connections, increasing the ways in which any given aspect of the church's life is exposed. A church decides not to buy fair-trade coffee for its refreshments after services, for instance, because the catering committee felt the taste was not good enough – but it turns out that this issue is not only connected to the church's vision of how to provide a warm and hospitable welcome, but also connected to questions about justice and financial responsibility. Or it turns out that the church's habits in regard to the proper length of sermons are related to deep patterns of thinking about the convicting work of the Spirit in bringing people to repentance. Or it turns out that the church's policy on the ministry of women is related to deep questions about the shape of its operative Christology. Each of these connections increase the ways in which the action, speech and thought of this community is exposed to question. To take responsibility for exploring such exposure is to take responsibility for exploring these connections.

Such theological reasoning is not, however, simply about exposure, challenge, and criticism. It is also about what Barth calls 'revision': the imagination and proposal of ways forward, new forms of action, speech and thought – new ways of settling the pieces that this community has been given, including the new demands that it faces. This means that theological

reasoning involves not simply a commitment to tracing commitments and exposures that already exist, but a work of constructive imagination. It involves glimpsing a way that things might be able to hang together differently, and making a proposal for how the layout of all this community's pieces might be remade, in some way that this community can acknowledge to be good.

In other words, theological reasoning involves both *unsettling* (tracing the community's exposure to question, and seeing where those questions lead), and *settling* (imagining new layouts, and seeing to what extent they are possible).

The process of unsettling can be very unsettling indeed. I said earlier that 'nothing can tell you in advance how deep the reworking of your existing layout will need to be as you face any particular inconsistency' – and acknowledging that your current way of putting things is exposed to a question that it cannot immediately answer can trigger anything from a minor correction to a wholesale rethinking. Think of both the examples I gave earlier – of a theology student trying to discover how to settle with a claim about the authorship of Isaiah, or a Christian community trying to understand how to relate to someone with an intersex condition. In each case, one can imagine that the challenge might trigger a whole chain

reaction of rethinking and altered practice – a whole process of unsettling and resettling – at least if the student or some members of the community are taking seriously the nature of the connections that hold their current settlement together, and are willing to follow the implications of this challenge along those various connections. And in each case, this process might lead to a new settlement emerging: to the development of a new way of imagining how things hang together, and what their connections and exposures can be.

WRITING AS REASONING

Something of this settling-and-unsettling nature of theological reasoning can be seen in a very practical way when one writes an essay or a paper. For most of us, the difference between an adequate and a great essay is made at the revision stage. Before that, you might have managed to get quite a lot of relevant material down on paper, and given a plausible shape to it; it might make a more-or-less connected whole. In other words, you have something like a settlement – an arrangement of material that is meant to be more-or-less complete (that is, it includes all the relevant pieces – or, at least, as many of those pieces as is reasonable in an essay of this length and level), and an arrangement that is meant to have some coherence to it (that is, so to arrange the pieces that each is connected into a structure that includes all of

them). But then you look at what you have written, and ask how cogent all the connections are that hold this layout together – whether this bit really goes with that bit, whether this claim really flows from that claim, whether here you have tried to slide past an idea that you didn't really get, or whether there you have simply asserted something that really ought to have been argued for, whether you have simply stacked on claim upon another without showing effectively how they do in fact link up with one another.

At first, the whole thing might be rather muddy – to the extent that it is hard to say exactly what is wrong with it, except that it is not very clear and well ordered. But as one revises and polishes, giving as much clarity and precision as one can to what one has written, it can become easier to see what the real problems are – the real inconsistencies or breaks in the argument. And, as with the train track, it is not always possible to know in advance how fundamental a revision will be called for by any particular problem that one identifies.

Eventually, one may end up with an essay that is a clear, coherent, orderly argument or presentation – something with an introduction and a conclusion, and a body of writing between the two that actually leads from the former to the latter. One might be tempted to say that the finished presentation is an example of theological reasoning – but actually it is the

process of composition and revision (and revision and revision and revision) in pursuit of such a finished presentation that is the real example of theological reasoning. The finished presentation is simply the trace or product of that reasoning – and hopefully a prompt for theological reasoning by others.

Of course, a finished presentation is unlikely to be 'finished' in the sense that everything is settled, all questions answered, and no further lines of enquiry have been exposed. There will almost certainly be questions left open, ideas you have not been able to get clear, material you are aware could have been worked in better to the overall structure. There will, in other words, be a residue of unsettled material (and it is normally best to acknowledge this, and to be as clear about it as you can, rather than trying to pull the wool over your own or your readers' eyes). There is *always* going to be such unsettled material outstanding in any large-scale attempt at settlement; nobody ever finishes settling. And yet that unsettled material retains its power to unsettle. It has the potential to drive further work, further thinking, the unpicking and re-stitching of one's settlement – and who knows the size of the transformation that these unsettled questions have the power to trigger?

The writing of an essay or paper like this is not a bad model for theological reasoning more generally. Reason involves what one might think of as an ascetic journey, or a spiritual discipline. On the one hand, it involves stepping out in faith, trusting that you have something to say – or that if you do not, you will be able to discover, by means of diligent attentiveness, something to say. But it also involves the willingness to expose your ideas and claims to rigorous testing, and so to expose yourself to the possibility of discovering that you have been wrong. Theological reasoning can therefore be a painful process, in which things in which you have invested time and energy, things that are dear to you, have to be left behind.

One might even say that theological reasoning is a kind of journey of discipleship, or something akin to it: a willingness to follow the implications of the gospel wherever they lead, to trace their connections into any and all areas of practice and thought, to allow them to unsettle and resettle your community's and your own ways of making sense – and to allow your understanding of the Christian gospel itself to be deepened and transformed in the process. The diligence involved in making connections and testing them, the diligence involved in seeking clarity and good order, even the diligence involved in revising an essay over and over again – at their best, these forms of diligence are simply ways of seeking greater accountability

(for the church and for oneself) in what you do, say and think in response to the Christian gospel.[4]

WHO REASONS?

As in my example above of the student learning about Isaiah, the word 'reason' can conjure up a picture of something done in solitude – by the student with her books, sitting in a secluded corner of a library, perhaps. That might lead one to think that becoming a theologian is a matter of becoming an individual expert: one who has wrestled his or her settlement into order by dint of heroic intellectual struggles in private, and is now ready to pronounce his or her findings to a wider public. In some theologies – some theological settlements – that might be exactly the vision of the theologian that is promoted, but we should certainly not take that for granted. In different theological settlements, the nature of the practice of reasoning itself will be seen in different ways.

In some, the reasoning activity that is most central to theology will be a matter of the shared deliberations of a local Christian community, seeking

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[4] I elaborate this point a little in *Vulnerable Learning: Toward a Theology of Higher Education*, Cambridge: Grove, 2005, and a lot in *A Theology of Higher Education*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

discernment for the ordering of their life in a changing world; in others, it will be centred on debates between church leaders gathered in councils, setting the boundaries within which they believe the life of their church will flourish most faithfully; in others, it might take place most obviously in the seminars, conferences, journals and books of an academic discipline, in which a restless intellectual conversation is carried on.

In other words, to know what it means for theology to be a form of reason involves asking questions about who reasons, and about those for whom they reason; and it involves questions about the relationships between the deliberations of individual believers, local communities, church leaders, and academic disciplines.

As will have been clear already, I've assumed in this chapter that theological reasoning is first of all the corporate deliberation and argument of the church – without trying at this point to specify too closely the scale I have in mind when I say 'church', or where I take the boundaries of the church to be. (And yes, that does mean that what I have said is not 'neutral'; it will work better for some theological settlements than for others.) The primary kind of settling I have in mind is the process by which the members of the church deliberate together about the right ordering of their life together: about how the church can be faithful to its calling in the situation

in which it finds itself; about how it can do justice to the gospel, to the various responsibilities given to it, to what it has inherited, and to the challenges it now faces. It is the process by which the members of the church seek to know how to go on together *as* a Christian church.

If that corporate settling has priority, then the individual theologian's activity of settling – the process by which he or she tries to make sense for herself of all that she has learnt – is secondary. It is not unimportant, but it matters primarily insofar as it affects, or serves, or participates in the broader, more corporate process of settling of the church. The individual Christian theologian who makes some claim about the sense that can be made of things is not thereby finishing the theological task, but is setting it going: she is making a *proposal* for how the church and its members should order their life together in the world, and launching that proposal into the life of the church to see what becomes of it.[5] As such, her work is inherently

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[5] This means, incidentally, that the question of whether the individual theologian thinks of himself or herself as a Christian believer is not the most important question to ask. What does matter is the ability of the individual theologian to make proposals about the life of the church that make sense to the members of that church – proposals that do justice to the deep commitments and habits of thought and action of that church. That certainly requires empathetic and imaginative understanding of the life of the church,

experimental: she does not deliver an authoritative ruling that others are required to obey, but makes a claim that others will test.

One of the problems sometimes faced by academic theology – especially theology studied in a university setting – is that there is little practical connection between the reasoning activity that takes place in the classroom or library and the reasoning activity of the church. Worries about theology being too much a matter of human reason sometimes come down to this: the worry that the processes of theological settlement have lost their moorings in the Christian community, and have become a free-floating activity with no real routes by which they can make a difference to the ordering of the church's life. It can be the worry that the motor that drives theological development has ceased to be the attempt to do justice to all the demands and commitments that shape the church's life, and has instead become the desire for intellectual resolution amongst academics. By losing the wherewithal to take serious responsibility for the church's life, academic theology has become *ir*responsible.

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and to do it well will almost certainly involve some kind of immersion in the life of the church – but it is not hard to imagine someone committing to pursuit of that kind of understanding, and to making a contribution thereby to the life of the church, whilst still considering themselves an observer rather than a member.

If becoming a good theological reasoner involves a practiced familiarity with the materials for settlement, and with the actual and potential connections between them, it also involves an awareness of the connection between the individual theological reasoner and the community or communities with whom and for whom he or she reasons. It involves understanding how these communities take responsibility for the exposure, connection, and development of their own lives, and of the place that the individual theologian can play in that process. To understand theological reasoning means understanding the shape of the community in and for which it takes place.

WHO IS LISTENING?

The question about the community or communities for whom the theological reasoner reasons – about the audience to whom she offers reasons – is actually a deeply controversial one. By some accounts, it is *the* controversy that has shaped modern theology – and one influential way of mapping the bewildering variety of forms of theology over the past two

hundred years or so is to look at how different theologies answer that question.[6]

What I have written in this chapter so far has taken Christian theology to be a practice of reasoning by which the church seeks to understand better how to order its own life and how to live its life in the wider world. I have, therefore, presented theological reasoning as a form of reasoning addressed primarily to the church. It might, however, also be understood as a practice of reasoning by which the church seeks to understand how to address the wider world.[7] A good deal of modern Western theology can be categorized according to whether it offers its reasons primarily to the church, or primarily to the wider world. So, there are theologies that address their reasons solely to members of the Christian community insofar – and to them only insofar as they are already faithful members of that community. For instance, in answer to the question, 'Why do you believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ?', the reason offered might ultimately be 'Because the

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[6] See H. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. G. Hunsinger and W.C. Placher, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, and my discussion of it in *Christ, Providence and History: Hans W. Frei's Public Theology*, London: Continuum, 2004, ch. 8.

[7] And that might include its own members, insofar as they are citizens of the world as well as members of the church.

Bible tells me so!' or 'Because the creeds tell me so!' or by pointing in some other way to the commitments and sources that shape Christian life. There might still be robust, rigorous, detailed and extended argument about what Christians should do, say and think – argument that cites and examines evidence, and that is capable of changing minds – but it will be argument that takes certain basic sources or authorities for the church's life for granted – and it will be argument that has weight for people only insofar as they adhere to those sources or authorities.

On the other hand, there are theologies in which the reasoning is entirely and solely aimed at that strange abstract creature sometimes known as 'any reasonable human being', and in which there turns out to be no independent room for the specific claims, habits, sources and authorities of the Christian tradition (or indeed any other tradition). The Christian community's claims will only count as true or proper to the extent that they are translations of claims that could equally well have been made without reference to Christian sources or authorities.

It would be hard, in fact, to use the name 'Christian theology' for something that wholly met this description, because the Christian tradition would, strictly speaking, be entirely dispensable – except as a useful cover under which to convey philosophical content to a particular community. But one

would only need to move a little way away from this extreme to find a position that was much more recognisable as a form of Christian theology. There are, after all, plenty of theologies that try to begin with reasons addressed to 'any reasonable human being', and that are supposed to be convincing regardless of the particular community or tradition that the addressee might inhabit – but which claim that there are good generally accessible reasons to attend to specific Christian sources and authorities. So, in answer to the question, 'Why do you believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ?', a theologian focused on providing reasons for any reasonable human being might say 'Because I have examined all the available historical evidence, using the standards of historical argument that I would expect any historian to use, Christian or secular, and I have concluded that this is the most probable interpretation of that evidence.' Such an answer is intended to have weight with any listener who is willing to weigh the historical evidence fairly, and abide by widely accepted standards of historical reasoning.

Most modern theology involves a more complex negotiation between reasons offered solely to the Christian community entirely on its own terms, and reasons offered to other constituencies. It is worth noting, though, that the tension between a 'reasons for any reasonable human being' kind of theology and a 'community reasons only' kind is not a tension between

'rational' and 'irrational' (nor between 'liberal' and 'conservative' or 'radical' and 'orthodox'). All these forms of theology can involve analysis and debate, the assiduous marshalling of evidence, the testing of one's claims against the data that is relevant to them, and the possibility of having one's mind changed by the force of the better argument.

Nevertheless, the worry that theology is irrational, and the opposite worry that theology gives inappropriate sway to human reason, do sometimes rely upon the assumption that rationality really only means the offering of reasons to 'any reasonable human being' – and that the offering of reasons that are only telling for some specific community is not really reasoning at all. But that is an assumption that, in the broadest sense of the word, often has an implicit *politics* behind it. That is, it often rests upon a picture of society as consisting of a neutral public sphere (the realm of arguments open to 'any reasonable human being'), within which there sit various private religious spheres (each the realm of arguments that make sense only to members of a specific tradition). The demand for reasons addressed to 'any reasonable human being' goes with the belief that properly public discourse can only be conducted in terms sterilized of commitment to particular communities or traditions, if peaceable order is to be given to a society with multiple such particular communities and traditions. Yet this picture of how secularity and religion relate is, to say the least, controversial – especially its

portrayal of the secular public sphere as itself neutral and traditionless, and its claim that it is possible to address people in the abstract as 'any reasonable human beings', rather than as members of this or that specific culture, formed by this or that specific history.[8]

Worries about the rationality of theology – either the worry that there is too little of it, or that there is too much of it – are therefore tangled up with questions about how particular religious communities negotiate their place in a secular world. They are tangled up with questions about the supposed neutrality or openness of the public sphere, and with questions about the ability of religious participants in the public sphere to speak in their own voices in public. They are tangled up with questions about how peaceful order is maintained in religiously plural societies (and that's why there is a chapter on 'Theology and public reason' later in this section: reason and politics are inseparable). For the purposes of this introductory chapter, however, the point to take away is much simpler. Theology is not written for no one in particular. If a theology offers reasons at all, it is worth asking

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[8] Most famously, perhaps, these ideas were criticized by John Milbank, in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, which begins: 'Once there was no secular. And the secular was not latent, waiting to fill more space with the steam of the "purely human", when the pressure of the sacred was relaxed' (p. 9).

to whom they are offered – or to whom the author takes himself or herself to be offering those reasons. And even though many of the writing exercises that are set for students of theology are framed as if you were to write for nobody in particular, it is worth asking for whom you are in fact writing, and what difference the identification of the audience makes. For whom will your reasons be telling, and why? To whom are you responsible, in your reasoning? After all, theological reasoning does not live on pages in books hidden away in libraries: those are only the traces of theological arguments. Theological reasoning lives in the giving and receiving of reasons designed to sway or inform or challenge or encourage, and such giving and receiving always takes place, if it takes place at all, between *people*.

WHAT PROMPTS REASONING?

One of the definitions of 'theology' given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 'a system of theoretical principles; an (impractical or rigid) ideology'. The worry that theology might be all too much a matter of 'human reason' sometimes comes down to this: that the theological reasoner is too intent upon finding an *intellectual* settlement (a coherent intellectual scheme in which there are no left over pieces), and too little upon finding a *habitable* settlement, in which a Christian community can live with integrity. The worry is either that the theologian will be too willing to do violence to the

commitments and constraints of the community's life for the sake of his or her system, or that he or she will devote time and energy to questions that, from the point of view of habitability, reek of idle speculation. Here, 'idle speculation' would be a matter of providing answers to questions which only arise out of the desire to make the theologian's intellectual system neater, but which make no difference to the life of the community that the theologian's reasoning is supposedly serving. They are questions in which nothing is really at stake.

Theological reasoning might perhaps be thought of instead as something like a matter of solving problems with the habitability of an existing settlement – and the primary form of coherence or neatness that it seeks is therefore that of renewed habitability. That is not to say that simple intellectual coherence is unimportant: for a settlement to be habitable for people who think, and who seek integrity and honesty in their speech, some kind of intellectual coherence is going to be important. But intellectual coherence in and for itself is not itself the goal.

Theological reasoning might, even better, be thought of as responding to challenges that face a Christian community – as it encounters some form of suffering or of need or of outcry to which it does not yet know how to respond. It is not the comfort of the reasoners that is in question – their

ability to rest easily in their settlement because it has no rough edges or awkward seams rubbing against their scheme – but their ability to respond, to be responsible. Its goal is the development of new ways of living that answer to the cries of others.

Part of what makes a good theological reasoner is, therefore, a practiced eye for what is really at stake in a given theological argument. What real problem in the life of Christian communities in the world prompted this argument? For whom is that problem real and pressing, and why? Who cares – and, if nobody cares, why *should* they care? If this question were to be left unanswered, or we were simply to admit our ignorance on the matter, what difference would it make?

Of course, to insist upon such questions will not mean that one gets to avoid knotty metaphysical questions. The history of Christian theology is, in part, a history of people finding that the strangest things *did* matter: that there were real questions about Christian life in the world at stake in arguments about the relationship between the Father and the Son in the life of the Trinity, or about the proper shape of claims about Christ's divinity or humanity, or in claims about the operations of grace on the human will, and so on. Nevertheless, there is no theological claim or conclusion so deeply

rooted in the life of the church that it is not in danger of being pulled free from that mooring and becoming a free-floating intellectual game.

This warning should itself come with a warning, however. Theological reasoning can sometimes be a matter not of problem-solving, nor of idle speculation, but of delight.[9] The boundary between delight and idle speculation is a very hazy one, and easy to slip across, but there is certainly a place for theology as a contemplative exploration of the richness and interconnection of the faith a community has inherited: such delight is, after all, one of the ways in which the theological reasoner deepens his familiarity with the materials available for settlement, and with the connections possible between them. Nevertheless, the ideas that the theological reasoner delights in exploring and connecting are ideas that have their place in the life of the church, and in the life of discipleship – and the theologian's delighted exploration of those ideas is therefore at the same time an exploration of possible forms of Christian life in the world. Even in delight, theological reasoners should not lose track of what is at stake. Theological reasoning is above all an active pursuit of settlement, an ongoing, iterative, unpredictable social negotiation in pursuit of responsible

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[9] Rowan Williams refers to this as the 'celebratory' mode of theology (rather than the 'critical' or 'communicative'), in *On Christian Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p. xiv.

habitability – and the rest of this book is an attempt to delve deeper into the forms of responsibility, and the forms of negotiation, that this reasoning properly involves.

LOOKING AHEAD

The chapters in this section explore various aspects of the practice of theological reason.

Brad Kallenberg describes some of the different forms that theological reasoning has taken in the history of the church. His chapter shows how far from the mark we would be if we imagined this history to be made up of individual thinkers developing ideas while sitting in their studies or libraries reading books. The history of theological reasoning is not simply a drama of ideas: it is a drama of communities and practices, of experiments in corporate life, of conversations and interactions.

Nicholas Adams' chapter looks more closely at one aspect of this history of theological reasoning: arguing. He shows, again, that arguing is not one single activity, rightly practiced in only one way. Theological reasoners have conducted arguments in different ways; they have taken themselves to be doing different kinds of thing when they argue. Adams' chapter itself

argues that we should attend to the different shapes and practices of argument – the different logics in play – when we encounter the theological arguments of others, and when we engage in argument for ourselves.

Karen Kilby focuses on another aspect of theological reasoning: the attempt to achieve clarity. She shows that different theological reasoners have hoped for different kinds of clarity, and have worked towards them in different ways. In order to understand the kind of clarity available in theological reasoning, we need to ask what it is that we are trying to be clear about – and that means that theological clarity, which involves clarity about God, might be rather different from other kinds. Kilby nevertheless argues (clearly!) that theological reasoners can and should aim at clarity – even if it will sometimes be clarity about what we can't understand and why.

Simon Oliver explores theological reasoners' engagement with philosophy. In line with earlier chapters, he shows that 'philosophy' is not one thing; it is an activity that has varied in form from context to context and generation to generation. Oliver stresses the ways in which philosophy has, in different ways at different times, been a corporate and practical discipline – a search together for wise ways of living. He then looks at various different ways in which theologians, who are themselves engaged in a search together for wise ways of living, have engaged with philosophy, and the different things

they have hoped for – and suggests some questions theological reasoners today might have in mind when they read philosophy.

This section finishes with Chad Pecknold's investigation of the relationship between theological reasons and the public sphere, or public reason. His chapter displays some of the characteristics described above: it is not a general account written by nobody in particular, but a specific argument written by a particular theologian at an identifiable moment in history. Pecknold is a Catholic theologian involved in debates about his tradition's place and role in the public sphere in the United States, and his chapter offers quite a sharp argument from that specific context. That argument displays the kinds of thinking and questioning in which theological reasoners in other contexts, or working within other traditions, might need to engage.