The term “spirituality” has been widely used in recent years to refer to the reaction against purely materialist ways of viewing the world. The growing recognition of the importance of the interior world of personal experience has resulted in considerable interest in the concept of spirituality. Yet not all spirituality can be regarded as “Christian.” The use of the adjective “Christian” indicates that Christian beliefs interact with spirituality, fostering and encouraging certain approaches to the spiritual life and rejecting or criticizing others. It is therefore of considerable importance to explore the way in which Christian ideas impact upon spirituality.

The term “theology” is widely used to refer to the body of Christian beliefs, and the discipline of study which centers upon them. Theology is a discipline of convictions, an attempt to survey and correlate the matrix of Christian beliefs. Perhaps the simplest way of characterizing the relation between theology and spirituality is to suggest that the former is about the theory, and the latter the practice, of the Christian life. Like all simplifications, it has the potential to mislead. For example, there are continuing debates within the disciplines over the precise meanings of “theology” and “spirituality,” with the result that any understanding of the relation between the two disciplines is dependent upon prior agreement as to exactly how each is to be understood. Many writers, for example, would argue that theology, rightly understood, embraces spirituality. After all, did not Evagrius Ponticus (346–99) argue that theology was all about prayer? Might not theology therefore be thought of as the application of Christianity to the mind, and spirituality the application of Christianity to the heart?
In the present chapter, we shall be exploring some of the general ways, both positive and negative, in which theology and spirituality interact. Before doing this, we shall explore how the discipline of “theology” came to emerge.

The Nature of Theology

The term “theology” is widely used to refer to systematic reflection on the intellectual content of the Christian faith. The word can be broken down into two constituent elements, based on the Greek word *theos* ("god") and *logos* ("word" or "discourse"). Theology could thus be said to be “discourse about God,” in much the same way as biology is “discourse about life” (Greek: *bios*), or pharmacology is “discourse about drugs” (Greek: *pharmaka*). There is evidence that, at an early stage in the development of the Christian tradition, the term “theology” was used to refer specifically to Christian teachings about God (rather, than, for example, its teachings about the person and work of Jesus Christ, the nature of the church, and so forth.) However, the term has since developed the more general sense of “systematic analysis of the nature of the Christian faith,” including — but not limited to — the Christian understanding of God. A number of technical terms are used to refer to specific areas of theology; some of these are listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical Terms Relating to Areas of Theology</th>
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<tr>
<td>anthropology</td>
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<td>Christology</td>
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The discipline of “Christian theology” is to be rigorously distinguished from “religious studies.” “Christian theology” deals with the specific teachings of the Christian faith; “religious studies” is used to designate a more general approach to religion and religious issues, often on the basis of the assumption that “religion” is a genuinely universal concept. One of the reasons for making this point is that Christian spirituality rests on the basis of assumptions which, as we shall see, are not universal to all religions. For example, the concepts of “incarnation” and “resurrection” are specific to the Christian faith, and have major implications for the shaping of the Christian worldview and outlook. (Some scholars have argued that echoes of these ideas may be found in other religions, especially Hinduism; the parallels are, however, rather less than persuasive.)

A major development which has implications for the relation of Christian theology and spirituality may be traced back to the eighteenth century, but has become increasingly important in the last hundred years. Most of the great theologians of the Christian faith prior to the eighteenth century were themselves concerned for spiritu-
THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR SPIRITUALITY: BASIC ISSUES

Athanasius (c.296–373), Augustine of Hippo (354–430), Anselm of Canterbury (c.1033–1109), Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–74), Martin Luther (1483–1546), and Roberto Bellarmine (1542–1621) – to name but a few examples – were theologians who saw no tension between the intellectual exploration of the Christian faith and its practical outworking in spirituality, preaching, ministry, and pastoral care.

In more recent times, theology has come to be viewed as a professional academic discipline, set apart from the life of the church. The Enlightenment held that any form of religious commitment was an obstacle to objectivity, and thus cultivated the idea of religious neutrality in theology. This is now widely regarded as incorrect; nevertheless, the Enlightenment paradigm has had considerable influence within western academic circles. The outcome of this is that “theology” has often been conceived as the academic study of religious concepts, with no connection with Christian life as a whole. This paradigm has been disastrous for the right understanding of the relation of theology and spirituality, as it deliberately eliminated such a connection in the first place. Happily, the widespread rejection of the Enlightenment paradigm in the West is now opening the way to a re-establishment of the original link between theology and spirituality – a development which can only be welcomed.

The Relationship of Theology and Spirituality

Many writers in the field of spirituality argue that there is a serious tension between the disciplines of “theology” and “spirituality.” There can be no doubt that this is the case if theology is defined in highly abstract terms – such as “the study of Christian concepts or doctrines.” Yet it needs to be realized that, partly in response to pressures within western academic culture in general, the western understanding of “theology” has undergone a shift in the last two centuries which inevitably leads to precisely this tension emerging. It is thus important to appreciate that the tension is thus not primarily between theology and spirituality, but between modern western concepts of theology and spirituality.

In his important study (1983) Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education, the noted American writer Edward Farley (1929– ) points to a series of developments in theological education which have led to the loss of a defining theological vision characterized by the coinherence of piety and intellect. Farley argues that the term theologia has lost its original meaning, which he defines as “sapiential and personal knowledge of divine self-disclosure” leading to “wisdom or discerning judgement indispensable for human living.” Theology used to be – and, in Farley’s view, still ought to be! – “not just objective science, but a personal knowledge of God and the things of God.”

This is an important point, as it indicates that the term “theology” has suffered a serious and detrimental shift in meaning in the last century. Properly understood, theology embraces, informs and sustains spirituality. It is easy to argue for a gulf having opened up between theology and spirituality in the last century or so – but this must be seen in the light of cultural assumptions, especially within the western academy, which have forced theology to see itself as an academically-neutral subject, not involving commitment on the part of its teachers or students, which is primar-
ily concerned with information about abstract ideas. This is not how theology was understood in earlier generations. It is perfectly proper to point out that Christian theology cannot remain faithful to its subject matter if it regards itself as purely propositional or cognitive in nature. The Christian encounter with God is transformative. As John Calvin (1509–64) pointed out, to know God is to be changed by God; true knowledge of God leads to worship, as the believer is caught up in a transforming and renewing encounter with the living God. To know God is to be changed by God. The idea of a purely “objective” or “disinterested” knowledge of God is thus precluded. For someone to speak objectively about “knowing God” is as realistic as the lover speaking dispassionately of the beloved. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) argued that to know the truth is to be known by the truth. “Truth is something which affects our inner being, as we become involved in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness.”

Theology, in this classic sense of the term, is a “heartfelt knowledge of divine things” (Farley), something which affects the heart and the mind. It relates to both fides quae creditur and fides qua creditur, the objective content of faith, and the subjective act of trusting. But all this has changed, not on account of any fundamental difficulties with this classic conception of theology, but on account of the increasing professionalization and specialization of theological educators. The study of theology has become little more than the mastery of discrete bodies of data. It has something you simply know about – where it should be something relational, something that is known, that shapes your life, provides a reason to live, and gives direction to ministry.

It is thus little wonder that so many seminaries report a burgeoning interest in spirituality on the part of their students, when they have been starved of the experiential and reflective dimensions of theology by the unwarranted intrusion of the academic attitude towards the subject just noted. The idea of theology as a purely academic subject forces issues of personal spiritual formation and Christian living – originally, it must be stressed, part of the idea of “theology” – out on a limb. The time has come to welcome them back, and to do so by both rediscovering what theology is meant to be all about, and ensuring that the close link between theology and spirituality is preserved.

In what follows, we shall explore some of the positive and negative aspects of the relation between theology and spirituality.

Positive aspects of the relationship

For the purposes of this analysis, let us assume that theology can be thought of simply as the systematic analysis of the basic teachings of the Christian faith. What relevance might this have for spirituality?

The most important role of theology is to establish a framework within which spirituality is to be set. Christianity cannot really be thought of as a vague and muddled set of attitudes or values. At its heart is a series of quite specific beliefs. An excellent example of this is provided by the doctrine of human nature and destiny, often referred to as “anthropology.” A central theme of all Christian thinking about human nature is that its true nature and destiny can only be understood and fulfilled through
a relationship with God. A more secular approach might well stress the autonomy of human nature, and regard God as something of an irrelevance to human fulfillment and identity. We shall be exploring this issue in more detail later in this work (see pp. 41–7); at this point, however, we may note that Christian spirituality is grounded in the belief that human fulfillment can only be fully achieved through a deepened relationship with God.

It is thus no accident that “Creeds” play a major role within Christianity, as they give a quite definite shape to what Christians believe about God and human nature, to mention only two major themes for spirituality. A classic distinction within Christianity relates to the meaning of the word “faith.” This can be understood in two different, though clearly related, senses: “faith as trust in God” and “what is actually believed.” (These two senses are often referred to by the Latin slogans fides qua creditur and fides quae creditur, respectively.) Faith can thus be understood to have both volitional and intellectual elements.

We can explore this point a little further by considering the Apostles’ Creed, perhaps one of the best-known of the Christian Creeds. This opens with the assertion “I believe in God.” At one level, this could be taken simply as an assertion that I believe that God exists. However, as the creed progresses, it becomes clear that the Creed is affirming certain quite definite things about God and Jesus Christ, which give Christianity its shape and substance. The Apostles’ Creed is widely used in the western church as a succinct summary of the leading themes of the Christian faith. During the twentieth century, the Apostles’ Creed has become widely accepted by most churches, eastern and western, as a binding statement of Christian faith despite the fact that its statements concerning the “descent into hell” and the “communion of saints” (here printed within brackets) are not found in eastern versions of the work. In a later section of this chapter, we shall explore the relevance of some of these articles of the creed for spirituality.

The basic point being made here is that theology has a major effect on the way in which Christian people live and behave. Theological differences between different

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**The Apostles’ Creed**

1. I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of the heavens and earth;
2. and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;
3. who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary;
4. suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried;
   [he descended to hell;]
5. on the third day he was raised from the dead;
6. he ascended into the heavens, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty;
7. from where he will come to judge the living and the dead.
8. I believe in the Holy Spirit;
9. in the holy catholic church;
   [the communion of saints;]
10. the forgiveness of sins;
11. the resurrection of the flesh;
12. and eternal life.
types of Christians also lie behind some significant differences between styles of Christian spirituality, as we shall see during the course of this volume. To illustrate the importance of theology for spirituality, we may consider two beliefs, one of which is Christian, and the other not.

1. The world was created by God.
2. The world was created by an evil and demonic force, opposed to God.

The first of these is a classic Christian belief; the second represents a form of Gnosticism (see p. 36), which became influential in the second century. To understand the importance of theology to spirituality, we need to ask this question: what difference would accepting one of these beliefs make to the way we live?

The first belief encourages us to affirm and explore the natural world as a way of finding out more about God. If God made the world, God’s “signature” (so to speak) may be found within the created order. Thomas Aquinas puts this point as follows:

Meditation on [God’s] works enables us, at least to some extent, to admire and reflect on God’s wisdom . . . We are thus able to infer God’s wisdom from reflection upon God’s works . . . This consideration of God’s works leads to an admiration of God’s sublime power, and consequently inspires reverence for God in human hearts . . . This consideration also incites human souls to the love of God’s goodness . . . If the goodness, beauty and wonder of creatures are so delightful to the human mind, the fountainhead of God’s own goodness (compared with the trickles of goodness found in creatures) will draw excited human minds entirely to itself.

Something of the torrent of God’s beauty can thus be known in the rivulets of the beauty of the creation. Furthermore, the creation is not to be worshipped as God, but is to be honored as God’s. Immediately, we can see the foundations of a Christian approach to ecology emerging. If the world belongs to God, and not to us, then our responsibility is that of stewardship – we are to tend and care for something which belongs to God. We do not have the right to exploit it, because it is not ours.

The second belief, in marked contrast, leads to the idea that involvement in the world leads us away from God. It encourages the idea that the material order is evil, so that those who study it or care for it are rebelling against God or deliberately affirming forces which are opposed to God. Salvation is thus likely to be achieved only by withdrawing from the world, in order to avoid becoming contaminated by its evil influence. As the study of Christian history makes clear, precisely these attitudes can be discerned within some forms of Gnosticism in the second century, and also some variants of Christianity during the Middle Ages which were influenced by such ideas.

It will thus be clear that theology impacts on attitudes to the world, and the manner in which people live. Yet it must be noted that the traffic between theology and spirituality is not one-way. The way in which Christians worship and pray has a major impact on Christian theology. The nature of this interaction is sometimes expressed in the Latin tag lex orandi, lex credendi (a loose translation of which is “the way you pray affects the way you believe”; or, more precisely, “the law of prayer is...
This became especially clear during the Arian controversy of the fourth century, which we shall consider in more detail presently (pp. 55–8). Here, the fact that Christians worshipped Jesus Christ and prayed to him were seen as factors which had to be accommodated within the Christian understanding of the identity and significance of Jesus.

Theology, then, rightly understood (and this qualification is of considerable importance), has a positive relation to spirituality. For Thomas Aquinas, theology had its origins in God, spoke of God, and led to God. In a later section of this work, we shall explore further aspects of the positive interaction of theology and spirituality, with specific reference to seven areas of Christian doctrine. However, it is important to appreciate that this relationship is not always harmonious. Sometimes the tension arises through the intrusion of western ideas about detachment and neutrality into theology; sometimes it comes about as a result of an impatience with the limits of theology. In what follows, we shall explore the potentially negative aspects of this interaction.

**Negative aspects of the relationship**

As we suggested earlier, western Christian theology has often taken the form of explicitly academic reflection on the content of the Christian faith. In other words, it is about knowledge, reflection and speculation. Particularly within the modern western academic context, this can lead to two serious difficulties.

1. Theology becomes so concerned with intellectual intricacies that it loses sight of the relational aspects of the Christian faith.
2. The western academic demand that scholarship should be detached and disinterested leads to a weakening of the link between theology and prayer.

Each of these difficulties has been recognized for some considerable time. We shall illustrate each of them from the rich tradition of Christian spirituality.

First, we consider the danger that theology will become so absorbed in abstract ideas that it loses touch with the living reality of God. This point was made particularly clearly during the fifteenth century by Thomas à Kempis (c.1380–1471). During the Middle Ages, the theology of the Trinity became the subject of considerable theological speculation, occasionally leading to the Trinity being seen as little more than a mathematical puzzle or logical riddle. Thomas vigorously opposed this trend, seeing the proper role of theology as leading to love for God, contrition, and a changed life. In his *Imitation of Christ*, Thomas sets out a strongly anti-speculative approach to the Christian faith, which rests firmly on the need to obey Christ rather than indulge in flights of intellectual fancy. Speculation concerning the Trinity is singled out as a case of such speculation, which he urges his readers to avoid.

What good does it do you if you dispute loftily about the Trinity, but lack humility and therefore displease the Trinity? It is not lofty words that make you righteous or holy or dear to God, but a virtuous life. I would much rather experience contrition than be able
to give a definition of it. If you knew the whole of the Bible by heart, along with all the
definitions of the philosophers, what good would this be without grace and love? “Vanity
of vanities, and all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2) – except, that is, loving God and serving
him alone. For this is supreme wisdom: to draw nearer to the heavenly kingdom through
contempt for the world. . . . Naturally, everyone wants knowledge. But what use is that
knowledge without the fear of God? A humble peasant who serves God is much more
pleasing to him than an arrogant academic who neglects his own soul to consider the
course of the stars . . . If I were to possess all the knowledge in the world, and yet lacked
love, what good would this be in the sight of God, who will judge me by what I have
done? So restrain an extravagant longing for knowledge, which leads to considerable
anxiety and deception. Learned people always want their wisdom to be noticed and rec-
ognized. But there are many things, knowledge of which leads to little or no benefit to
the soul. In fact, people are foolish if they concern themselves with anything other than
those things which lead to their salvation.

Notice the manner in which Thomas stresses the limits on knowledge and its benefits.
Knowledge is not necessarily a good thing; it can be a distraction from God, and a
temptation to become arrogant.

The second danger (which we noted earlier) concerns the way in which
western academia has come to regard detachment as essential to academic integrity.
All academic disciplines – such as theology, philosophy, and history – are to be
studied without any precommitment on the part of students. Often, this approach
is characterized as “objective,” meaning that the filtering out of any precommit-
ments on the part of students will allow them to get a much more accurate and
unbiased understanding of the subject. Yet Christian spirituality is widely
regarded as presupposing exactly some such commitment to the Christian
faith! There is thus a tension between spirituality and a detached approach to the-
ology. However, this is not the only approach to theology; monasteries and
seminaries foster a sense of commitment to the Christian faith on the part of their
students, and thus create an ideal intellectual environment for the development of
spirituality.

The point about the negative implications for spirituality of a “detached” approach
to theology has been made by many western spiritual writers, who are critical of the
trend towards fostering “neutral” attitudes toward theology in the academic work.
We shall note two writers who express criticisms of this trend, and argue for the inte-
gration of theology and contemplation.

Our first example is Thomas Merton (1915–68), a Trappist monk who has had a
major influence on modern western spirituality. Merton affirms that there is a close
link between the two disciplines, which must be affirmed and recognized for the
mutual good of each.

Contemplation, far from being opposed to theology, is in fact the normal perfection
of theology. We must not separate intellectual study of divinely revealed truth and con-
templative experience of that truth as if they could never have anything to do with one
another. On the contrary, they are simply two aspects of the same thing. Dogmatic and
mystical theology, or theology and “spirituality,” are not to be set in mutually exclusive
categories, as if mysticism were for saintly women and theological study were for prac-
tical but, alas, unsaintly men. This fallacious division perhaps explains much that is actu-
ally lacking in both theology and spirituality. But the two belong together. Unless they are united there is no fervour, no life and no spiritual value in theology; no substance, no meaning and no sure orientation in the contemplative life.

Note how Merton forges a link between the two disciplines, and indicates that their artificial separation is to their mutual impoverishment. You may find it helpful to try to summarize in your own words the danger that Merton identifies in studying or pursuing either theology or spirituality on its own, without reference to the other discipline.

A second example of a writer who opposes this trend, and notes its serious implications, is the noted evangelical theologian James I. Packer (1927–), who comments thus on the positive relation between spirituality and theology.

I question the adequacy of conceptualizing the subject-matter of systematic theology as simply revealed truths about God, and I challenge the assumption that has usually accompanied this form of statement, that the material, like other scientific data, is best studied in cool and clinical detachment. Detachment from what, you ask? Why, from the relational activity of trusting, loving, worshipping, obeying, serving and glorifying God: the activity that results from realizing that one is actually in God’s presence, actually being addressed by him, every time one opens the Bible or reflects on any divine truth whatsoever. This . . . proceeds as if doctrinal study would only be muddled by introducing devotional concerns; it drives a wedge between . . . knowing true notions about God and knowing the true God himself.

Notice how Packer is critical of conceiving theology in purely informational terms; rightly understood, it is relational. You will find it helpful to summarize Packer’s concerns about the pursuit of neutrality in theology in your own words. You might like to ask how the relationship between theology and worship illustrates this general point.

It will thus be clear that the understanding of the relation between theology and spirituality rests, in part, on how theology is to be understood. The new interest in spirituality suggests that the understandings of theology which have emerged in the recent past are viewed as deficient by some, not least on account of their apparent lack of connection with the life of faith.

In order to understand this matter properly, in the next chapter we shall explore the spiritual dimensions of seven leading themes of Christian theology, noting the vital connections between the two disciplines.

FOR FURTHER READING

The specific issue of the interaction of theology and spirituality can be explored from the following:


THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR SPIRITUALITY: BASIC ISSUES