

Faith, Understanding, and Reflection

MURIEL WAS A PROFESSOR of art (now retired) at a major university. She used to leave her office door unlocked so students and colleagues could walk in and leave messages on her mural-sized bulletin board, a collage of clippings, photographs, sketches, and notes. For about a year, two items stood out from the creative clutter. One was a large, carefully lettered card left by an anonymous visitor: *Muriel, everything is really very simple*. Just below it, a subsequent (also anonymous) caller had tacked a sheet of notebook paper on which he or she had scrawled in black marker: *Muriel, nothing is ever simple*.

Whenever you ask an expert how to do an unfamiliar task, watch out if the person responds, “It’s simple! You just . . .” It isn’t going to be simple.

A simple-sounding definition of theological reflection is “faith seeking understanding.” It is a promising staging area from which to start out upon theological reflection. The journey, of course, will not be as uncomplicated as the phrase might imply (*Muriel, nothing is ever simple*). Each of us does theology at different levels and in different ways. Theology is simple. Theology is complex.

To become aware of having any faith at all is to have some idea of its meaning. Christian faith, therefore, carries with it a measure of understanding at the outset. This understanding of faith’s meaning develops within us in much the same way as a language is learned. From what the church says and does, from contact and involvement with others, we first come to understand ourselves as Christian.

But that word *Christian* is itself a highly charged label, and giving an account of its meaning is one of the perennial tasks of theology.

Based on what most of the churches have said about it most of the time, we gather that Christian identity has to do with faith in God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, with the gospel, with taking part in the life and ministry of the church, with upholding certain ethical principles and ideals, and so on. To say only this much about the meaning of Christian faith, however, is to operate at a broad and abstract level. It leaves us far from either the specific or the full meaning that the faith holds for Christians. Pressing on, we note that what people understand their Christian faith to mean varies from one age to another, from denomination to denomination, from congregation to congregation, and from person to person.

Here is an example of the difficulty. Not so long ago, a debate took place in Texas Christian University's student newspaper on the subject of the school's alcohol policy. Letters to the editor argued that if TCU

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were really "Christian," alcohol would be banned on campus. To this, other writers responded that a Christian school ought to respect the right of each student to decide whether or not to drink a beer. Both groups of writers seemed to assume that once they had explained what being a Christian university meant, university officials would act accordingly. It is impossible to gauge how ultimate a concern this was to the debaters, but in stat-

ing their understandings of what Christianity means in one particular instance, they were (perhaps unwittingly) acting as theologians. The controversy stemmed from differing understandings of faith—that is, differing theologies.

In the debate on drinking, differing theologies are at odds, and because of these differences, neither view can be taken for granted. Such debates, especially when their topics may appear to be of far greater consequence than this example, remind us that for Christians, understanding what the faith means is both a given and a continuing task. There are initial understandings that we have more or less grown into and that we take for granted. And there are efforts to seek increased understanding. The following comments will look at the theological interplay of our faith: our initial or implicit understandings and our quest for greater understanding.

Embedded Theology

Christians learn what faith is all about from countless daily encounters with their Christianity—formal and informal, planned and unplanned. This understanding of faith, disseminated by the church and assimilated by its members in their daily lives, will be called *embedded theology*. The phrase points to the theology that is deeply in place and at work as we live as Christians in our homes, churches, and the world. Other terms would surely work as well. In religious language, what we are calling embedded theology is often known as *first-order theology* or *the language of witness*, being made up of the most immediate and direct testimonies to the meaning of faith. It is rooted (embedded) in the preaching and practices of the church and its members. It is the implicit theology that Christians live out in their daily lives.

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Every church community sees itself to be conducting its affairs in accord with Christian faith. What it says and does is intended to fulfill the church's mission of bearing witness to God's gospel in Jesus Christ and implementing God's will in the world. Its words and deeds reflect what these Christians understand to be called for by their faith. How well they may have thought about or studied the Christian message is in one sense beside the point. Testimony of this sort is the outcome of theological reflection, and the messages arising from such theological reflection comprise embedded theology. The theological messages intrinsic in and communicated by praying, preaching, hymn singing, personal conduct, liturgy, social action or inaction, and virtually everything else people say and do in the name of their Christian faith, fall into this category.

The meaning of Christian faithfulness is conveyed in many and varied ways. It is communicated by *teaching and learning the language of faith*—a symbolic language, inasmuch as it deals in images, metaphors, analogies, and stories whose plain meanings serve to point beyond themselves to other matters relating to God, faith, and spiritual life. The role that the language of faith plays in passing on an embedded theology can hardly be overestimated.

Christian practices also communicate the meaning of Christian faith. Children learn, for example, that being Christian means going to church for worship and knowing how to behave there—when to stand, sit, or

kneel, and when to listen, pray, or sing. From words and action together comes familiarity with an entire set of meanings associated with the faith: good and bad; rituals and customs; and organizations, programs, and activities. Theological understandings are embedded in these actions, no less than in the grammar and vocabulary of the language of faith.

These theological messages from the church have been bred into the hearts and minds of the faithful since our entry into the church. Many of us were born and raised in this theology. It began in us before we could speak, developed during years of Sunday worship, church school, and youth groups, and was reinforced by the life example of our parents, friends, and ministers. As we grew older and began to think for ourselves, this theology was reshaped and became very much our own, in some ways like and in other respects unlike the theology we encountered in our homes and churches. The development may have unfolded as a slow, steady, trouble-free growth; or it may have been stormy, as we questioned or even rejected our childhood understanding of faith in favor of another understanding.

Some of us find it easy to articulate the embedded theology that we carry with us. But many do not. Ask any of us: What is your concept of God, your understanding of sin or salvation, your account of the nature and purpose of the church, or your Christian view of right and wrong? Caught short by the question, we may come up with a pat answer. This is understandable. Or we may hesitate and stammer, unless we have stopped at some earlier point to consider the matter. And yet our day-to-day decisions are based upon this embedded theology. We pray to the God of this theology. This is the God we love or fear—and serve and sin against. We make decisions at work and play, in our families and in society, according to our embedded understanding of God’s message.

Embedded theology is what devoted Christians have in mind when they say things like, “My faith and my church mean a lot to me.” Wrapped up in such simple statements is a host of associated elements—

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memories, beliefs, feelings, values, and hopes—not necessarily stated, and perhaps not at all clear.

Embedded theology is also the stuff that makes for a great deal of real-world skepticism and indifference. It is unlikely that many people shy away from Christianity because they have thoroughly examined all

the arguments and conclude that its claims are not intellectually compelling. More probably, they give up on the faith because of what they have gathered about it from the embedded theological testimonies or actions of other people and their churches. Most mental health professionals and pastoral counselors have spent time tending counselees who were scarred by what passed for Christianity in their homes or their home churches.

And it is embedded theology that rushes to the frontline in every battle over the moral and social issues of the day. Christians rise up to defend their theological convictions or express outrage when those convictions are threatened. Turn on the evening news and witness the two sides of the abortion question facing off: even their placards testify to their differing embedded understandings of faith.

No wonder, then, that so many Christian laity and clergy alike often report that they feel as though they are living in the trenches. They are! They volunteer or are pressed by others to enter the fray, taking their stands on one side or another of the great debates of the day. To take time to weigh theological options is to risk being tagged a know-nothing or do-nothing Christian. If it is any comfort, it has always been so. Whether or not church people understand the meaning of Christian faith adequately and communicate it effectively makes a real-world difference. The professional, academically credentialed theologians of the church are expected to lend some support and guidance; after all, they have special expertise. But the final burden rests with ordinary Christians—parishioners and pastors—who face daily opportunities and conflicts with whatever resources their embedded theologies provide them.

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Life in the trenches is exciting and challenging, and sometimes ugly. The theology we operate with cannot be tied up in a neat bow, as it sometimes appears to be in the published works of professional theologians. For ordained ministers and laypersons alike, time is short, jobs wait to be done, emergencies come without a moment's notice. This is part of what the Christian life is all about, and this is the world in which Christians carry out their calling as theologians.

Deliberative Theology

Our embedded theology may seem so natural and feel so comfortable that we carry it within us for years, unquestioned and perhaps even unspoken except when we join in the words of others at worship. We may be secure in the conviction that this is what Christianity is all about and leave it at that. Indeed, laypeople are tempted to let their pastors take care of theological reflection, and pastors in turn to let the church hierarchs or scholars handle it. But occasions arise that require us to think about our embedded theology, to put it into words, and then subject it to serious second thought. Frequently it is during crises that people first experience this call to theological reflection.

Deliberative theology is the understanding of faith that emerges from a process of carefully reflecting upon embedded theological convictions. This sort of reflection is sometimes called *second-order theology*, in that it follows upon and looks back over the implicit understandings embedded in the life of faith. By its very nature, second-order reflection is marked by a certain critical distance toward each testimony of faith. Deliberations are undertaken at a far vista, removed from the more intensely personal viewpoint of embedded theology. Feelings, memories, and (to whatever degree possible) preconceptions are either set aside or evaluated along with other pertinent data, for the purpose of discovering insights that our narrower personal view might not allow.

Deliberative reflection questions what had been taken for granted. It inspects a range of alternative understandings in search of that which is most satisfactory and seeks to formulate the meaning of faith as clearly and coherently as possible. The theologian wants to take all the testimony and evidence under advisement, press beneath the surface to the heart of the matter, and develop an understanding of the issue that seems capable—at least for the present—of withstanding any further appeal. This is deliberative theological thinking.

Embedded theology is the understanding(s) of faith disseminated by the church and assimilated by its members in their daily lives. Deliberative theology is a process of reflecting on multiple understandings of the faith implicit in the life and witness of Christians in order to identify and/or develop the most adequate understanding possible.

For example: A toddler wanders too near the edge of his grandparents' swimming pool, falls in the water, and drowns. The family's tortured outbursts—"Why did God allow my child to die? Why couldn't God let me die instead?"—express the issue of *theodicy*, or the problem of evil and misfortune coexisting with a God who is all-powerful and altogether good. Their embedded theology leads them to state their anguish in such terms. But their "Why?" indicates that at this very moment they face a question of faith for which their embedded theology had not fully prepared them. They are in desperate need of comfort, to be sure; friends may try to console them with the thought that their faith will pull them through. But they also desperately need to *understand*. This life crisis is also a theological crisis; real death cannot be processed in bromides or vague abstractions.

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When such a crisis abates, some may put behind them the issue that stemmed from that crisis. But many others will want to pursue it. In so doing, they are led to give serious second thoughts to their initial understanding of the faith and so enter into the realm of deliberative theology.

Due to its critical distance and elevated, if not high-blown, language, some laity and even some ministers complain that deliberative theology is merely academic (or worse, unbelieving). "Will it preach?" is an oft-repeated challenge thrown by some parish pastors at the feet of professional theologians. A seriocomic cartoon gleefully circulated by several generations of seminary students portrays Jesus sitting in a pew among the congregation, sound asleep, while the preacher spouts multisyllabic theological gibberish from the pulpit. What the cartoon preacher spouts is, to some (or, we fear, many) people, deliberative theology.

The arrow is often painfully on target. Just because a theological tome is difficult to read and loaded with footnotes does not mean it is necessarily good deliberative theology. In fact it may be lousy theology, and poor prose as well. Deliberative theology does not have to be inaccessible in order to be good, and readers of theology need not be impressed or intimidated by theologians who are only acting like they are profound.

Unfortunately, many people have shied away from deliberative theological reflection, in spite of the church's historic efforts to support theological schools where teacher-scholars engage in such reflection and seek to foster it among their students. Regrettably so, because deliberative theological reflection has a vital role to play. It serves, among other things, to keep the church honest. Its task is to be faithful to the gospel in each new age.

Deliberative theological reflection also carries us forward when our embedded theology proves inadequate. Sincere or not, our embedded theology may be ill-informed or even mistaken, sufficient only until a crisis, a conversation, a controversy, or our own spiritual growth leads us to reflect again. For some, such as those who wrestle with the question of theodicy because of a tragic death, a more deliberative view than their embedded theology offers may well be the “faith seeking understanding” that pulls them through.

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But theological reflection is not only for those in crisis or for the incurably curious. An impulse within faith itself calls forth deliberative theological reflection. This impulse is *conscientiousness*. The impulse wells up within us from feeling-levels of faith so deep that words to describe it are difficult to find. It is an awareness that is at once a “fear of God” and a “joy in the Lord.” Though its origins are hidden in the depths of faith, the impulse makes itself known as an intense concern to say and do only that which honors the One Holy God. Thus, conscientiousness means taking care to live lives that witness to God in the most fitting way possible.

Embedded theologies certainly can be conscientious. They are, after all, directly reflective of our faith. They are our own witness to the Christian message of God as we have come to understand it. The impulse of conscientiousness prompts us to examine whether we have been diligent theologically. Conscientious Christians are aware, like Paul, that our vision of God is always imperfect and partial, a seeing in a mirror dimly. Faith's impulse of conscientiousness causes us as Christians to continue seeking a deeper understanding of what it means to be followers of the Way.

So it is that Christians feel prompted to strive for increased understanding. That impulse leads them to compare their understanding of faith with that of others, and to deliberate over its character and adequacy.

Conscientious Christians are called to be firm in their convictions. They are also called to humility with regard to their understanding of faith, and therefore eager to deepen, broaden, and (if there is good reason to do so) correct that initial understanding in light of critical deliberation.

Pressing issues of church teaching and practice also lead to theological reflection. Christians simply cannot avoid making decisions, individually and corporately, about how they will carry out their calling. Although it is certainly possible for an embedded theology to be so widely accepted or deeply entrenched in a particular church that these decisions are made automatically, this is the exception more than the rule. Decision making ordinarily reckons with alternatives. It involves airing different views and evaluating them. The responsible decision-making process reviews an entire range of options, gives each a careful and fair hearing, and seeks a conclusion that is in keeping with whatever the investigation has uncovered. Here Christians are not merely expressing their convictions; they are examining the adequacy of convictions, their own and others', in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the meaning of faith.

The Relationship between Embedded and Deliberative Theology

The boundary lines between embedded and deliberative theology are at times striking, even hard-edged, separating divergent theological convictions. For example, where one group of Christians communicates the message that everything having to do with the human body and sexuality is filthy and ungodly, deliberative theological reflection discloses that such a theology is akin to that upheld by certain groups in the early church that made distinction between spirit (as good) and the body (as evil) so strict that other Christians were led to condemn their views.

More often, though, the two orders of theology overlap and the boundaries between them exist only as points along a continuum, a matter of degree. On one hand, the theologies of church leaders or scholars—based as they are on extensive research and weighing of evidence—may appear (or pretend) to be far more deliberative than they really are. Consciously or unconsciously the theologians may have been too uncritical, too reluctant to examine and weigh alternatives to their own views, to be genuinely deliberative.

On the other hand, embedded theologies are by no means always or irretrievably undeliberative. Nearly all *Christian doctrines* or teachings (“doctrine” coming from the Latin verb *docere*, to teach) set forth in the historic creeds were composed in response to controversies over

conflicting embedded theologies. Hence at least some degree of theological deliberation is preserved, and can be detected, in their formulations of the Christian message.

In any case, to say that embedded theology is comprised of the most direct and passionate testimonies reflective of Christian faith is not to say that these words and deeds are altogether thoughtless and unconsidered. Take preaching, for instance. Many a preacher comes to the sermon-preparation task fresh from the trenches—from crises, joys, personal struggles, failures, and victories. The minister's challenge is to study the meaning of faith, to deliberate theologically, and to correlate those deliberations with life experience before fixing upon what to say. The sermon may rise out of an embedded, first-order theological understanding, but it is the hard-won result of second-order theological reflection.

Laypeople do much the same in their efforts to decide what their faith means for their personal relationships, politics, work, or leisure time. How, for example, shall we speak of God? The familiar image of God as Father bears for many Christians a comforting sense of strength and care. For others, such as those who were sexually abused by their fathers, the same image may be associated with pain and anger. It may

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even lead them to consider their healthy resistance to abuse as somehow wrong. Deliberative theological reflection allows them to examine their implicit theology, to separate God from Daddy, and to develop an image of God that provides a more fulfilling understanding of the faith.

Christians encounter diverse views in the church as well as in wider society, and they undergo constantly changing life experience. Thus, it is both natural and inevitable that they find themselves giving serious second thought to their embedded theologies at some time or another. To grow in faith is to deepen, extend, and perhaps revise our understanding of its meaning and to arrive at clearer means by which to state and act on our convictions.

The Challenge of Thinking Theologically

Widespread as deliberative theological reflection may be, it is not so commonplace that Christians—though they are theologians—inevitably

leap at the slightest chance to theologize. When the time does come for them to state their theology, many Christians hardly know what to say except to echo familiar phrases.

Consider, for example, this scenario. At their pastor's request, members of the church council of First Church met to "articulate our theology of the church" in preparation for the coming fall financial campaign. Seven of the ten said that the church was "the body of Christ"; the rest called it "the people of God." When it was noted that they seemed to have two views of the church, several said almost in unison, "Right—the church is both the body of Christ and the people of God." Everybody nodded yes when one person added, "Our church is open to people with different theological views."

Gently pressed to explain what these phrases meant, one member said that the church was "where we meet with Jesus," another that "the church is made of people who obey God." Efforts to press further—Do we actually meet Jesus in church? Do all church members really obey God all the time?—began to make the group anxious. The pastor tried another tack: "Why would you say that people should come to church—say, this church in particular?" One person responded that "this is where you can find really good and caring friends," another that "God loves us if we go to church and worship."

The minister was still feeling somewhat frustrated by the brief and vague statement the church council settled upon when he described the incident to colleagues at the weekly ministers' luncheon. They were eager to talk. None said (or dared to say) that the church is "where we meet Jesus," but one pastor observed that "the Christ-event occurs there in the *kerygma*," and someone else cited the Reformation view that the church is "where the Word is preached and the sacraments are administered." One suggested that it took a skilled small-group-process leader to get a church council to discuss theology. Leaving the meeting, one of the other pastors quipped, "It seems that laypeople aren't the only ones who get scared off when they're asked to articulate their theology." Revealing our own theological views of such basic Christian concepts as "church" can be extremely hard for all of us—especially when the speaking or writing of what we believe is both true to our own heart and is thoughtful as well. Speaking of one's own theological beliefs can be scary; it even can seem like a waste of time that keeps us from acting as Christians in the world.

Both groups said a great deal, and implied still more, about topics of theology such as the church, friendship, acts of worship, obedience, who God loves or does not love, clergy-laity relations, and seminary teaching.

At least some of the people articulated a portion of their embedded theologies with honesty and seriousness of purpose. Even so, the portions were doled out in such formulaic and shorthand terms that it was hard to know what to make of them. This was raw material for deliberative theological reflection, but not the thing itself. Sound bites about body of Christ, people of God, Christ-event, *kerygma*, and group process are not yet a deliberative theology of the church.

It may be that these understandings of the church were skimpy only because discussion time was short or the assignment unclear. Certainly all involved were doing the best they could with the resources at hand. Nor is there any doubt that all were devoted to the faith and the church. It is not the quality of devotion that makes the difference in developing a clearly worked-out deliberative theology. There have been and always will be genuine saints who are unable to articulate their theology very well. By the same token, there have always been award-winning academic theologians who are anything but genuine saints.

Theological reflection cannot flourish unless it is valued and practiced in the church itself.

It is unfortunate when the Christian message of God is communicated in such a way that stifles the healthy impulse toward deliberative theological reflection. There are, we hope, precious few churches like the one in a recent cartoon that placed this sign on its church door:

“Please leave your hats and your minds in the cloakroom before entering the sanctuary.” Theological reflection cannot flourish unless it is valued and practiced in the church itself.

Left to fend for themselves, most Christians are tempted to get by as well as they can. They may do some reading, join a class at church, or seek out their minister. Others, uncertain about where to begin, may end up doing nothing at all. For their part, harried pastors may try to steal a little time to read a book or listen to tapes of a lecture with high hopes of getting some insight or enrichment from a Big Name Theologian. But catching up or keeping up with theological scholarship often loses its appeal in the face of so many real-life demands. There are funerals to perform, classes to teach, new members to visit, and sermons to be prepared.

The result is the same for ordained ministers and laity. Attempts to do deliberative theological reflection too frequently are piecemeal and fragmented. Even if more urgent concerns do not squeeze it out altogether, it tends to sink into the all-too-predictable ruts of embedded

theology. If something is to be read, let it be congenial to the position we already hold. The briefer and simpler it is, the better. The tendency is to listen only to what we already like, and close our ears to what we already dislike. Even though faith impels us to seek an increase of understanding, though we want our witness to be well informed and responsible, and though we cannot avoid deciding among a variety of options before us, we tilt toward the familiar. At that point deliberations about the meaning of faith go no further than repeating our favorite phrases and finding fault with the views of others.

Rethinking requires self-conscious effort. It means being receptive and open, but also honest and probing. It is hard work—the sort of hard work that growth in the life of the faith calls for—and it is part of our calling as Christians.

To claim or to be claimed by any Christian faith at all is automatically to join the roster of Christian theologians. With the faith comes some measure of understanding of Christianity's message of God and a responsibility to grow in our understanding of the faith. Engaging in deliberative theological reflection is part of our Christian calling.

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Where this calling might lead if we accept it cannot be foreseen. Those who set out on its path surely hope that the journey will be pleasant and its outcome enriching. That hope is a possibility but by no means a certainty. Striving for a degree of distance from our embedded understanding of faith and subjecting it to a searching examination may prove hard and painful work. It may lead to a dark night of the soul, or to some forty days or many years in the wilderness. What had seemed so obvious as to be beyond question may not withstand a thorough theological examination; in the final analysis it may turn out to be quite uncertain, one option among many, or no longer tenable. Our first understanding may prove to have been a misunderstanding.

As Christians we are called to pursue growth in faith—by relearning and reinforcing what we already understand faith to be and by expanding, deepening, and even correcting our initial understandings of the faith.

For all that, what is to be gained from deliberative theological reflection cannot come by any other means. As Christians we are called to pursue growth in faith—by relearning and reinforcing what we already understand faith to be and by expanding, deepening, and even correcting our initial understandings of the faith. We are called to know God and ourselves more deeply and to pull together the consequences of that knowledge for our own lives and the world at large.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Have you ever been singing a hymn and had a negative response to the imagery or language? Examine hymns that you love and see if you truly agree with the theological images. You may be surprised. How do you respond when the images and language in a hymn conflict with your theology?
2. What is embedded in your theology? If you are having trouble articulating this, try to write a credo on a faith-related (moral/social) topic. This exercise will allow everyone to examine their embedded theology.
3. Can you recall events in your life that caused you to question some of your embedded theological beliefs and positions? What have you had to remove from your theology because of a change in your theological understanding?
4. What do you think the authors mean when they say that deliberative theology helps keep “the church honest”?
5. Theological tensions that are felt within a community of faith can develop when the embedded theology of the church is being challenged. Can you name issues in today’s world that may lead to such a challenge?
6. Can you recall moments or issues that caused theological tensions within you? How did you resolve the tension?
7. Do you agree with authors that most Christians are often unable to articulate their theological understandings and beliefs? If they are correct, why do you think this is?
8. Does your current community of faith value and practice theological reflection? In decision-making discussions, how much “theological energy” is devoted to the conversation? How do you think your community could be more intentional in valuing and practicing theological reflection?
9. Is it threatening to think that possibly our embedded theologies are in need of repair/replacement? Why or why not? What other factors become threatened as well, i.e., our feelings of comfort or security, family values, social values, church doctrines, etc.?

FOR FURTHER READING

- Campbell, Ted A. *Christian Confessions: A Historical Introduction*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1966. Campbell provides a lucid, one-volume comparison of the teachings of Christianity's major church traditions.
- Jones, Linda, and Sophie Stanes. *In a Dark Wood: Journeys of Faith and Doubt*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. This book tells of experiences in the region of doubt and recovery of faith among Jews, Catholics, and Protestants, women and men.
- Kinast, Robert L. *What Are They Saying about Theological Reflection?* New York: Paulist, 2000. This is a brief but fine introduction to classical and contemporary discussions of theology. Kinast focuses especially on the experiential components of theological reflection.
- McKim, Donald K., ed. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996. This is a reliable account of the familiar terms used by Christian theologians. It can be used to look up unfamiliar theological terms as well as to advance the reader toward better-informed, more deliberative theological thinking.
- Musser, Donald W., and Joseph L. Price, eds. *New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology*. Revised edition. Nashville: Abingdon, 2003. Presents informative articles on theology's standard and current topics, written by more than one hundred well-known current theologians.