

## Chapter 1



# The Terrain Ahead

A tour through the streets and scenes of London: such is the Preface's image, suggesting and suggested by this book's title, *Theology within the Bounds of Language: A Methodological Tour*. What, now, more precisely, is the London in question, the terrain to be reconnoitered? Though the terms *theology*, *language*, and *methodological* provide a general indication of the ground to be covered, the area they collectively encompass is still too vast. Each of these three expressions requires further delimitation.

First, *language* interests theology in various ways, many of fundamental importance; yet not all of them lie within the primary focus of the present work. Here, emphasis will fall on basic questions concerning the use of language rather than its interpretation, on successful discourse rather than on accurate exegesis. This emphasis does not signify exclusion, for the first type of question connects importantly with the second. Deeper understanding of the appropriate use of language brings with it more discerning awareness of how language is in fact employed in discussions or documents we may wish to decipher. Still, in what follows, attention will center primarily on the former sort of question rather than the latter—on linguistic practice rather than linguistic interpretation.

*Theology*, too—ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, popular and professional—takes in more than this work will attempt to explore. Although most of what is said will apply more broadly, attention will center primarily on Christian theology, from which illustrations and applications will typically be drawn. Though restricted, this focus is nonetheless ample. A recent observer has noted, retrospectively, the “many-faceted richness and vitality of twentieth-century Christian theology,” which “has been overwhelming to the point of bewilderment.”<sup>1</sup> There has been Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox theology; European, African, Asian, North American, and Latin American; liberal and conservative;

biblical, dogmatic, kerygmatic, systematic, pastoral, social, and spiritual; confessional and ecumenical; black, feminist, philosophical, ecological, and so forth, with endless variations. Yet common to all these versions and varieties of Christian theology, as to other kinds, has been the use of language. Whether thinking, speaking, or writing, theologians employ a system of signs. And whatever the topics they discuss, they usually wish their statements, using those signs, to have intelligible meaning and to be true. Common, therefore, to the theological enterprise are methodological issues of linguistic practice such as those here addressed. Though much has been written on these questions, they are usually slighted in works of fundamental theology or theological method, and, as already noted, no study has gathered them together in a handy compendium. Such is the aim of the present guide.

*Methodology*, the category to which this work belongs, captivates few readers. The very word *methodology* has a dry, abstract sound to it. Yet in theology as in philosophy, science, history, and other areas of inquiry, questions of method hold fundamental significance. And in theology more than in most other disciplines, methodological issues with regard to language are among the most fundamental. Or at least some are, and on those this study will focus. Interest will not center on topics such as rhetoric considers, with regard to style, effective argumentation, or the art of persuasion, but on others of a kind whose nature can be suggested, in advance of the many examples to come, by means of a remark of John Macquarrie. "Theology," he has written, "may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available."<sup>2</sup> Here the closing words, "the clearest and most coherent language available," suggest stylistic virtues. "Clarity, clarity, clarity!" insist primers on style. Break up involved, complicated sentences! Make sure relative pronouns have clear referents! Avoid ambiguity! Have mercy on your readers! The present study will not take this tack; it is not a treatise on style. Instead, attention will focus, for example, on issues of the kind raised by Macquarrie's opening five words, "Theology may be defined as." The proposed activity, defining, is linguistic; that much is clear. But here in this quotation as often in theological discussion, the nature and purpose of the activity are less evident. Does the proffered definition aim to capture the existing meaning of the English word *theology*? Does it propose, instead, to fashion a substitute meaning of the term? Or, more interested in theology than in the word *theology*, does it aim to describe all the activities covered by that expression? Or just some of them, or the better ones, or the ones more worthy of serious consideration, or the essence they

all share? Without clarification of such questions as these, the “defining” enterprise cannot hope to succeed—assuming that, on closer scrutiny, it still appears worth undertaking.

Reflection at this deeper level can throw further light on all three foci of this study—theology, language, and methodology—and thereby illustrate, and not merely talk about, the direction the study will take.

## Theology

In *Meaning and Method*, Anders Nygren declared: “An investigation aimed at getting a clear answer to the question ‘What is theology?’ and ‘What is philosophy?’ and clarifying their scientific status is very greatly needed.”<sup>3</sup> In Nygren’s view, the proper practice of either discipline requires such clarification. Many have thought similarly, specifically about theology and also more generally (consult the passages for further reflection at the end of this chapter). Thus, Wolfhart Pannenberg, for example, has written in a similar way: “Any rational reform of the theology course must be guided by a decision about what theology in fact is and what knowledge and skills a person must acquire to become competent in theology. The crucial question here is what specific subjects make up the essential area of theological enquiry.”<sup>4</sup> This sounds reasonable and suitably scientific: How can you teach theology if you don’t know what theology is, and how can you teach theology properly if you don’t know *precisely* what theology is? In response, rather than specify any essence of theology, we might proffer a sampling of theologies from different times, places, cultures, and schools of thought. This, we might say, is what theology is, specifically, concretely. However, for Nygren, Pannenberg, and like-minded thinkers (whose number, I sense, has declined of late), such a sampling would give no clear or certain indication of what philosophy or theology really is—of its definition, its genuine nature, its essence. And that, they would suggest, is what we need to know, if we wish to proceed scientifically or with overall clarity about what we are doing.

A later chapter will indicate problems for the defining enterprise so conceived. Here, a passage from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* can suggest the problems’ general nature. “How should we explain to someone what a game is?” asked Wittgenstein. “I imagine,” he replied, “that we should describe *games* to him, and we might add: ‘This *and similar things* are called “games.”’ And do we know any more about it ourselves? Is it only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is?—But this is not ignorance. We do not know the boundaries

because none have been drawn.”<sup>5</sup> Neither have clear, sharp boundaries been drawn for “theology.” So what might we still need to know about theology when we know only that these, those, and similar things are called theology? And what importance would that missing knowledge have for the proper conduct of theological inquiry?

According to a common, still influential conception, to many a term there corresponds an essence shared by all and only the members of the class of things covered by the term. An essence of theology, for example, would be shared by all and only the things that people have called theology. It would appear, therefore, in the thought and works of extremely varied thinkers, differing in practically every other respect besides their common classification as theologians: in the topics treated, the questions asked, the answers given, the methods employed, the purposes and audiences envisaged for their inquiries, and so forth. The common essence would be shared by historical, sacramental, pastoral, fundamental, spiritual, systematic, and mystical theologians, and by Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Orthodox, Native American, and other thinkers writing, theologically, on any imaginable topic (family, sport, death, sacraments, grace, evolution, politics, or the City of God).

Accordingly, the shared essence would prescind from all these differences. It would not indicate one area of inquiry rather than another, one type of question rather than another, one verdict rather than another, one method or technique or purpose rather than any other among all those favored by various theologians. For otherwise it would not be common to them all and to their theologies. It would not be a shared essence.

Notice, then, the implications of this conception. Such a bare kernel would offer no guidance on any of these issues, but would pass over each option—of area, question, answer, method, goal—and leave us on our own to decide between alternatives. The nuclear trait or traits shared by all and only theologies would be neutral in every respect that matters for decision, for theologies have differed in every one. To illustrate the point, think again of games, and suppose, for example, that all games had rules. This common fact about them would not dictate what rules to adopt, what games to play, or how to play them. Similarly, suppose, for example, that all theologies made truth-claims. This common fact about them would not indicate what questions to address or what evidence to consider or what conclusions to accept as true. And the like would hold for any trait common to all theologies, whether or not, in addition, the trait belonged to some essence shared only by members of the class of things called theology.

The existence of such an essence looks highly dubious, for reasons, both general and specific, that we shall have occasion to consider. Here,

we are concerned with the further question of whether an essence, if found, would offer practical guidance. And the verdict, so far, seems to be clearly negative. An essence of the classical kind we have been considering would just be something possessed in common, not a value, goal, or ideal. Accordingly, it would be neutral with respect to all important options. It would be neutral, first, because it would leave out all points of divergence. It would be neutral, second, because it would favor none of the options it ignored. It would be neutral, furthermore, because what traits it did include would not thereby be shown to be particularly valuable or desirable. They would simply form a common nub (like the uninteresting core that joins the edible leaves of an artichoke).

Perhaps, then, to have the kind of significance often supposed, the question “What is theology?” should be given a different, ideal sense. The essence in question might not be something common to everything *called* theology but to everything *rightly* called theology. However, who or what might validate such a proprietary claim to the label “theology”? Should we consult a Platonic Form of theology, eternal and unchanging in some conceptual heaven? If familiar linguistic usage can be ignored as a test of what counts as theology, what test should replace it? Theologians, like philosophers, often lack answers to questions such as these. Indeed, like philosophers, they may simply declare, in the words of a noted theologian, “what theology really is,”<sup>6</sup> without troubling about linguistic issues of the kind on which this study will focus.

Consider, for example, a couple of sample definitions of theology, chosen not so much for their notable divergence (more disparate ones might have been cited) but for the seriousness with which they are proposed and argued for. In *An Essay on Theological Method*, Gordon Kaufman has written of his “growing conviction that theology is, and always has been, an activity of what I call the ‘imaginative construction’ of a comprehensive and coherent picture of humanity in the world under God.”<sup>7</sup> This is what theology consists in; here is its essence. John Carnes, for his part, after noting critically how freely and variously the term *theology* is applied, has argued for his own definition: theology is “the effort to understand systematically our religious experience.”<sup>8</sup> These sound like differing descriptions of what theology is, not recommendations of how it should be conducted, still less of how the word *theology* is or should be applied. However, there is no indication that Kaufman and Carnes, though they both use the word *theology*, are talking about some single entity and describing it differently. Thus, taken descriptively, their accounts may be mere tautologies: the kind of theology they describe is as described. And even as veiled methodological recommendations, these contrasting definitions appear problematic. For it is doubtful that either

author would exclude in practice what the other includes in his definition. Kaufman would not oppose the effort indicated by Carnes, to understand religious experience, and neither, for his part, would Carnes oppose the imaginative construction described by Kaufman, of a coherent picture of humanity in the world under God. It is still more doubtful that they view their declarations of what theology “is” as implicit recommendations that the word *theology* be restricted to the variety they describe.

By now, I fear, some readers may be feeling restive. Granted, there may be no single essence of theology. Granted, there may be no single ideal form of theological activity. But surely, here at the start of a work on methodological issues in theology, I should indicate as precisely as possible just what I understand by the word *theology*. Yet why is that? I ask. What sense, on closer reflection, does such a demand have? Suppose, to revert to our earlier comparison, that someone offered to show you around London: Would you insist that the person first define London as precisely as possible? Would you be lost without such a definition? Would the tour somehow fail of its purpose? Hardly, and the like holds for theology. During decades of theological reading and discussion, never, at any moment or in any context, have I discerned any need for a precise definition of the discipline such as many have judged desirable. It would have served no purpose then, and it will serve no purpose here. Chapter by chapter, the reader will know well enough where we are. And if, for instance, we happen to stray over the border from theology into philosophy, no harm will be done, nor will it be necessary to indicate exactly where, if anywhere, that nebulous border lies. (Implicitly or explicitly, to varying degrees, philosophy permeates the whole of theology, for the breadth and depth of philosophy match the breadth and depth of theology.)

I have said enough for the moment to suggest in a preliminary way why my approach to theology will not be “scientific,” as that prestigious term has often been understood, and why, instead, I will pay attention to the linguistic considerations that call such aspirations into question. To become attentive to language is to become aware, not only of the possibilities of theology, but also of its limitations. So let me say more about language.

## Language

If anything, the term *language* has been still more widely, variously applied—especially in theology—than the term *theology*. It has been said, for example, that “faith is language,”<sup>9</sup> that tradition is language,<sup>10</sup> indeed,

quite generally, that “Being that can be understood is language.”<sup>11</sup> (One thinks, perhaps, of potatoes, earthquakes, and the stock exchange, all of which can be understood—and wonders.) Amid all this terminological diversity, it seems no more realistic or useful to try to identify an essence of language than to seek an essence of theology. Here, however, for the purposes of the present study, one major instance of this diversity requires attention and emphasis from the start: namely, the distinction between language as *medium* (e.g., the English language that I am here using) and language as *discourse* employing that medium (e.g., my use of the English language to say the things I am saying). As a telephone is not a telephone conversation and a ten dollar bill is not a ten dollar purchase, so the English language, say, is not an utterance, speech, conversation, or treatise employing that language.

Though this distinction between medium and employment is fundamental, its significance is often overlooked. In particular, the distinction and its importance receive slight recognition in theology, where stress typically falls on language as discourse rather than on language as medium of discourse. In the present study, for reasons that will appear, this imbalance will be redressed. Indeed, for clarity’s sake, in the following pages (save for some quotations from other writers), the word *language* will always refer to the medium, the system of signs, and not to the linguistic activity conducted by its means. To assure that this distinction is understood and is kept in mind hereafter, it will be well to linger on it a moment longer.

In theological literature, relatively seldom does one encounter the term *language* used with clear reference to just the medium of discourse. Much more frequently the word refers to the uses made of language. When, for instance, Langdon Gilkey speaks of “the theological language of the Church,”<sup>12</sup> or “the realm of discourse called ‘religious language,’”<sup>13</sup> he is not referring to the various languages spoken in the Church (French, Latin, Syriac, or the like), nor to those employed in religious discourse. He is speaking of the languages’ employment. A similar focus is evident when Rino Fisichella distinguishes “theological language” from “liturgical language,” “religious language,” “catechetical language,” and “pastoral language,”<sup>14</sup> or when Macquarrie writes: “[A]t this point we may draw more sharply the line between theological language and the wider phenomenon of religious language. The latter expression would be used to include such diverse kinds of utterances as praying, praising, exhorting, blessing, cursing, and perhaps many other things besides.”<sup>15</sup> Here, as in countless other instances in theological writings, attention centers on the praying, praising, exhorting, and the like—that is, on the utterances, the speech acts, and not on the medium employed in making them.

There is nothing wrong about this application of the word *language*; it is a standard use cited in dictionaries, along with other applications of the term. And the focus represented by these quotations is understandable. After all, theology aims at truth, and languages are not true or false; neither are their words, rules, and conventions. Statements are; utterances are. So attention centers on the utterances. Besides, theologians' interest extends beyond the bare truth of what they say. "Theology," writes Claude Geffré, "can be defined as an attempt to make the already constituted language of revelation more intelligible and meaningful for contemporary man. That language is already an interpretative language and, as a new interpretative language, theology relies on it to develop the meanings of the Christian mystery that are valuable in the present for the Church and society."<sup>16</sup> This new language, notice, is not an improved version of German, English, or the like but a more effective use of whatever tongue is employed. The day will come, predicts Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "when men will once more be called so to utter the Word of God that the world will be changed and renewed by it. It will be a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, but liberating and redeeming."<sup>17</sup> Again, the "new language" Bonhoeffer here envisages is not a replacement for our mother tongues. His focus, appropriately for his message, is on language as discourse, not language as medium.

The explanation of this characteristic emphasis goes deeper than contextual appropriateness or relative importance. For the most part, words resemble spectacles that we look through but seldom at. We need to have such command of whatever language we speak that we are free to attend to the things we say, without figuring out how to say them. Discussion of genetics, investments, politics, or the greenhouse effect—or of God, grace, conversion, baptism, church, or salvation history—may be sufficiently complex without our deliberating just what expressions to use, sentence by sentence, and how. To function efficiently, language must become second nature, and so it does, from infancy.

Inattention to the medium of discourse has still deeper roots. To some extent, speech resembles tennis. Just as proficient players pay little attention to how they make their strokes and much to what strokes they make and where they send the ball, so experienced speakers attend much less to the basics of speech—to the intricacies of syntax and semantics—than they do to what they are saying. There is a difference, however. For many tennis players, there was a time when they received explicit instructions concerning the fundamentals of the game; but for language acquisition there neither is nor can be any comparable process. We cannot be told how to speak before we know any language. (Anne Sullivan could sign "water" as she splashed Helen Keller, and hope



she would catch on, but she could not explain to her, in English, the use of the word *water*.) Neither, therefore, can we now call to mind a comprehensive set of instructions, learned long ago, that encapsulate the tactics and techniques of speech. Even the best grammar text takes a great deal for granted. Whether in using language, therefore, or in learning language, our attention is fixed elsewhere—on the topics of discourse or the statements made about them rather than on the rules of the system of signs employed.

It is natural, then, for theologians and others to adopt the perspective they typically do, centered on language as discourse rather than on language as medium. (“The primary job of the theologian,” Frederick Ferré rightly remarks, “is not to philosophize about his language but to use it.”)<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, for the most part, on most occasions and in most contexts, words can indeed take care of themselves. If, occasionally, expressions are ambiguous, we can indicate the intended sense (as I did above for “language”). If they are not sufficiently precise for our purposes, we can sharpen them. Where necessary, we can fashion new ones. Otherwise, we can get on with the business at hand. We can report the weather, describe the party, explain the explosion, predict the election’s outcome, or what have you. Yet in theology, as also in philosophy, this customary stance, centered on the message rather than the medium, can veil serious problems. Examples in this introductory chapter—for instance, with regard to the definition of theology and the need for such a definition—suggest already how significant these problems may be. However, only much fuller illustration, of the kind to be offered hereafter, can possibly remedy the vicious circle that otherwise threatens: not reflecting seriously on our linguistic medium, we may see no reason to do so; seeing no reason to do so, we may not do so. Thanks to this self-perpetuating merry-go-round, difficulties in dire need of attention may not receive it.

The natural fixation that I have been explaining reflects, and has helped to perpetuate, a major feature of Western thought. Languages were long viewed, and sometimes still are, as mere codes, needed to communicate thoughts from mind to mind but having no life of their own. (What semantic complexity or social, cultural richness does Morse Code reveal?) In this conception, meaning and truth reside in the thoughts expressed, not in their arbitrary linguistic expression. That, then, is where attention has turned: to thought and its objects far more than to words and the languages to which they belong. The next chapter, reflecting much recent thinking, challenges this conception of the relationship between language and thought. Language has far more significance for meaning and truth than the traditional viewpoint recognized or permitted to appear at all clearly or forcefully.

## For Further Reflection

1. “The most prolegomena to theology can appropriately do is provide readers an advance description of the enterprise. Even this cannot be a pre-theological beginning, for every attempt to say what sort of thing theology is implies material theological propositions, and so is false if the latter are false”<sup>19</sup> (Robert Jenson).
2. “We can describe an important feature of the service which the community should expect from theologians as ‘faith seeking *a new language*.’ Christians express their faith through worship, preaching, teaching, pastoral care and social action. Theologians, more than other groups, have the task of testing, criticizing and revising the language which—in all these activities—the community uses about God and the divine revelation communicated through Jesus Christ”<sup>20</sup>(Gerald O’Collins).
3. “Because the method of a science is dependent upon its nature, the method of moral theology cannot be determined without taking exact account of the nature of theology in general and of moral theology in particular”<sup>21</sup> (M. Labourdette).
4. “A primary responsibility of metareligious thought that aims at being comprehensive and critical is to determine as *generally* and, at the same time, as *precisely* as possible what it is that we are thinking about. That is, one of the first and most important tasks of philosophy of religion must be to supply an adequate definition of ‘religion’ ”<sup>22</sup> (Frederick Ferré).
5. “Tillich, like Luther before him, suggests another way of distinguishing theological issues from other issues: a theological issue is one that concerns us ultimately. Only those issues are theological that deal with a matter of ultimate concern, such as our relation to God and each other, the possibility and nature of redemption, and the meaning of our lives”<sup>23</sup> (Owen Thomas and Ellen Wondra).