

Season 11: The Theologians

John Dickson (studio)

I want you to imagine two 5th-century Irish peasants humbly approaching the great St Patrick with a theological question ...

MEDIA - [St Patrick's Bad Analogy](#)

John Dickson (studio)

That's an animation from the online skit creators 'Lutheran Satire' ... setting up the mysteries and dangers of Theology!

'Theology' – from the Greek *theos* 'God' and *logos* 'word' or 'knowledge'.

It's the discipline of saying intellectually responsible things about divinity.

And we're all doing it, whether we believe or not.

I've never bought the quip of atheist friends that atheism isn't an affirmation of anything; it's just the lack of belief in gods ... like 'a-philately', a lack of interest in stamp collecting. It's not really a thing; it's just the absence of thinking of a thing.

The problem is - with due respect to ardent philatelists (director Mark, for example) – lack of interest in stamp collecting has no philosophical consequences. But *not believing in a wilful Source of reality* has massive flow-on implications for whether there is meaning and intention in the universe, whether human beings have value beyond the value we choose to assign to them, whether there is any such thing as good and evil.

Even atheists are doing a kind of theology. If they're thinking all the issues through - and many sceptics are - they're thinking theologically: drawing logical conclusions about reality from God's existence or non-existence!

Of course, Theology proper is one of the oldest disciplines, partly because asking questions about the universe inevitably leads to thinking about a Source behind everything.

The mathematics and physics of Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle, necessarily led them to thinking about God. Check out Aristotle's famous work *Metaphysics*, book 12, for a classic statement of why everything, in the end, goes back to the question of God. Everything is ultimately 'theology'.

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And, remember, Aristotle was doing this without any 'revelation'. He made no claim to have heard from God or read anything from God. He just knew that if you ask enough questions about the reason for things being the way they are, you are led to contemplating the Cause of all causes.

Now, when we add to this purely logical deduction the notion of divine revelation – that the Cause of all causes has spoken – then our repertoire for intellectual reflection greatly expands.

We don't then do away with observation, logic, and philosophy; we employ all these in seeking to understand and apply the things God has disclosed.

We examine God's world and God's Word.

And *that*, in essence, is the formal discipline of Theology that exploded in the centuries following Jesus.

The first Christians believed God had stepped out of Eternity and into history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And that changes everything.

You can know *that* there is a God without any revelation (Plato and Aristotle demonstrate that). But you can't actually *know* God without his self-disclosure. It's a bit like ... how you can work out *that* your house had an architect, but you can't know the architect. You can work out from a brilliant film *that* there was a director, but you can't actually know the director.

That is ... unless the architect knocks on your door for a cup of tea ... or the Director inserts himself into the film, like Martin Scorsese occasionally does.

The claim at the heart of Christianity is that God has knocked on our door, invited himself in, and told us a few things about reality - things that aren't contrary to rational inquiry but are beyond what rationality can discover on its own. Like the architect telling you what she was trying to achieve in the design of your house!!

And the people who devoted their lives to rationally scrutinizing God's word and his world, whether Irenaeus in the 2nd century or Karl Barth in the 20th century ... they are the 'Theologians' ... and there are about 20 of them we should probably all know something about – whether we believe or not. And we're going to cram all 20 into this next hour (or so). And just a heads-up, St Patrick - bless him - isn't one of them.

I'm John Dickson and this is Undeceptions.

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INTRODUCTION

John Dickson (Studio)

This journey to getting our heads around history's great theologians started close to home ... in my office at Wheaton College.

No plane trips, no hire cars, no google maps ... just a few comfy chairs in my Wheaton hidey-hole to sit down with two well-respected, academic friends ...

John Dickson: so we're talking about theology, theologians. Um, and there'll be some who straight up think theology is not even a subject. You know, I mean, some of the atheists of a few years ago used to say it shouldn't be even an academic discipline because there's no God. So what's there to study? Okay. So what do you say as a defense of the discipline of theology?

Jennifer: Yeah, I would say that understanding theology helps us actually to understand our world, world history. Um, we're not really going to appreciate the causes of, of why history has developed the way that it has. Um, you know, people's mindsets in those time periods, for example, um, how they were engaging with philosophical questions. Um, if we don't understand theology, if we, um, theology gets to it, the motivations that people might have for You know, how they see the world for why they do what they do. Um, I know for me, one of the. The things that really helped capture my love of church history and the history of theology was when I heard about the French Revolution, but told through the lens of what were the clergy doing? What were they thinking? How were they understanding, you know, how theology met with this political situation? And that just, I think brings it alive and highlights how integrated our world is, and not only the intellectual currents, but then all of the other facets of our world, politically, economic.

John Dickson (Studio)

That's the Reverend Doctor Professor Jennifer Powell McNutt.

Jennifer got her PhD from the University of St Andrews, Scotland, and she's the Franklin S. Dyrness Chair of Biblical and Theological Studies and associate professor of theology and history of Christianity at Wheaton College.

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She directs the MA programs in Theology and History of Christianity—thoroughly recommended, by the way. She wrote the very cool Routledge volume, *Calvin Meets Voltaire: The Clergy of Geneva in the Age of Enlightenment*. She's also the co-editor of the forthcoming *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and the Reformation* (OUP, 2024)

You might remember Jennifer helped us out for the cracking Reformation episodes.

Sitting next to her is Dr. David McNutt—her husband!

David is an Associate Lecturer of Core Studies at Wheaton College. He has a Masters of Divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary and a PhD from the University of Cambridge.

They are serious theological boffins. No doubt they chat about St Patrick's drifts into Modalism and Arianism over their cuppa in the morning. And, so, it's perhaps inevitable that they'd write a book together. And it's one I seriously love. I hope everyone reads it – believer or doubter. It's called 'Know The Theologians'. It's not a theological tome. It's a high speed intro to the most important thinkers of church history. The Irish peasants in our opener seem to have read it; and St Patrick should have!

David and Jennifer have taken arguably the highest and most intellectually integrative disciplines in the humanities ... and brought it down to earth.

John Dickson: I think that's one of the things people don't understand about theology. It is one of the ultimate integrative 03:00 disciplines. So professional theologians, they've got multiple languages, so they have to be a linguist. Greek, Hebrew, Latin, German, often French, as well as English. Um, They've got to be a historian, they've got to be a philosopher, they've got to be a literary critic, um, and a Bible nerd. bit

David : All of those things.

John Dickson: That's really good, yeah. Um, so at the very least it's a pretty hard discipline. I, I, I'm glad I'm just a humble historian. We only have to know a few things

David : You've got to know all the dates though.

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John Dickson: right, that's the challenge. Um, how did you choose, David, uh, just 16. names for this, uh, book about the theologians you ought to know.

David : Well, that was a challenge because there are more than 16. So there's a huge number of theologians over the course of the church's history. So when Jennifer and I were thinking about this project, you know, we wanted to have a number of theologians that would show the breadth of the church's reflection over the faith. And we were just talking a moment ago about why theology matters. Uh, it is, you know, to Jennifer's point, not only integrative, but it, it's also an expression of our faith, a way of understanding the world. And that faith has been expressed differently in different times and in different contexts. So it's really helpful to, you know, Say, okay, we're going to learn from the early church, but we're also going to learn from people who lived at a different time period of the medieval church or the Reformation period during the modern period. So we want to have a scope of that as a way of reflecting the global faith and not just global in geographic terms, but in terms of across time and to recognize that we can learn things from Christians who've gone before us in the faith.

John Dickson: I have to, ask, is it weird having two theologians in the one house? I mean, mean, it just overkill.

David : We have interesting conversations that the kids are sometimes, uh, yeah, they're introduced to some theological conversations early on, I think.

John Dickson: school, what does your mom do? she's a theologian. Oh, right. what does your dad do? He's a do? Oh, he's a theologian. That's -

David : That's a lot of fun, actually. We, and, and, you know, this is in part what brought us together is our shared faith and shared study of this discipline. And, and so, you know, we've been reading each other's work for a long time, you know, dating at the coffee shop.

I think we've learned a lot from each other. Uh, you know, I've, I've learned so much from, Jennifer's own work and research and I never knew I'd know quite much about 18th century Geneva, which was the her doctoral -

Jennifer: I never thought I would think so much about theology in the arts. So that's a benefit.

John Dickson: Okay, so mostly what I want, to do is a rapid fire round. And you guys have produced these awesome collectible cards, with little pictures, you know, like the baseball cards of old, right? Oh, I want, I want Calvin. I'm trying to collect, You know, Julian of Norwic h! Anyway, they're not widely available, are they? I mean,

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David : they're available in ... and so Zondervan was kind enough to produce those.

John Dickson: Huh. We'll have to link to that in the show. Okay, here we go, ready? Rapid fire round. Ready. Uh, damn. You Americans say Irenaeus of Lyon. Uh, I say Irenaeus of of Lyon.

READING

Irenaeus - also known as Saint Irenaeus - was born around the year AD 130 in the ancient city of Smyrna in modern day Turkey.

He was a student of Polycarp, who was himself a disciple of the Apostle John - a direct line to the teachings of Jesus that lent weight to Irenaeus's theological insights.

As the bishop of Lugdunum - Lyon in the south of Franch - Irenaeus defended mainstream Christian beliefs like the goodness of creation and the authority of the four Gospels.

His most famous work - Against Heresies - is one of the earliest and most important theological texts in history.

Jennifer: Irenaeus, so he is a defender of the Christian faith. He is someone who is engaging in philosophical questions. And I think for the non-Christian, he is someone who appreciates and values the human body. And talks about how the body, we live in embodied existence.

John Dickson: Yeah. So he's not like pie in the sky. All that matters is the spirit. Yeah. No. Um, But he's second century. He is blooming early. Is he the first theologian do you think?

David : That's an interesting question. I don't, I don't know that he's necessarily, I mean, there were 07:30 apostolic fathers predate him. So right from the but are they doing theology proper, do you think, or, you know, writing letters and sermons.

Jennifer: That's a good point. Maybe he is. Yeah, he is the first. Cause he is engaging with the internal questions as well as the external questions. So you know, inward facing and outward facing, I would add though, the apologists, the Justin martyr and, for example, as they're thinking about How does Christian theology

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relate to Greek philosophy? Um, you know, addressing all the misconceptions of the faith in the Roman Empire,

John Dickson: Now I know I started this as a rapid fire round and I've already sidelined the rapid rapid fire round. But but I think for the first, you know, for this first guy, Irenaeus, what do

Jennifer: you think?

John Dickson: Uh, I think he is the first, um, to sort of systematize Christianity. in order to combat a departure from Christianity. So tell me about the Gnosticism he was trying to knock on the head.

David : Yeah. So, I mean, that was one of the great challenges to the faith early on was this idea that, you know, for Gnostics, the second century movement, they were saying things that were opposed to the Christian faith, but claiming to be Christians, you know, that God didn't actually create the world.

I mean, they had denied the goodness of the material world. And so by implication, They argue that God actually didn't create the world, they certainly did not affirm a genuine incarnation of Christ, or bodily resurrection, all these things that are central to the Christian faith, so Irenaeus or Irenaeus comes along and along with other apologists, people like Origen and others, you know, they're defending the faith and saying, actually, this is what it means to be Christian.

That, that view that you're holding is actually not what we affirm. And we know that because we can trace it back through the generations, which for him was only a couple, you know, to Polycarp and then to John, like that John, you know, who was with Jesus just, you know, a couple of generations prior. So, really important response to the faith as it was trying not only to articulate, you know, begin to articulate its own faith kind of internally, but also then press back on certain external threats to it and kind of, kind of pressures and questions.

John Dickson (Studio)

Hey, just to clarify a few terms that come up in this conversation.

The word 'heresy' comes from the Greek word for 'choice', αἵρεσις, but it doesn't mean an honorable choice. A heretic is more like a conspiracist, who chooses to depart from consensus and evidence and willfully pursue – as a choice – novelty.

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Heterodoxy is a bit softer. It means a “different opinion or belief”: ἕτερος, different and δόξα, belief or viewpoint.

Then there's “orthodoxy” - ὀρθός means "straight" or “right” - so this is correct belief or viewpoint.

Back to Irenaeus and his defence of orthodox Christianity...

Jennifer: He also highlights probably one of the biggest surprises about the beginnings of Thinking through the question of who is Christ and that is That there's already an assumption that Jesus is divine. And so Irenaeus is trying to emphasize that Jesus is human. And that really surprises people. Because we come to that story of Christianity and we think the divinity of Christ has got to be the first question they have. And it's, and it's not.

John Dickson: No, because there were some people running around saying that he wasn't human, he was only divine. That's right. He just appeared to be human. Yeah. So, so amazing how, um, how off the rails Christianity went at, at different points. Um, Okay. Late third, early fourth century.

Athanasius of Alexandria. Go.

READING

Athanasius was born in the Egyptian city of Alexandria some time around AD 296 and died in 373 AD.

He spent his life defending orthodox beliefs about the nature of Jesus - fully God and fully man.

“The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection.”

— Athanasius of Alexandria, On the Incarnation

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David : He is answering one of the most basic questions for all of us, which is the same question that Jesus asked of Peter and the disciples is, Who do you say that I am?

And Athanasius from, uh, North Africa, from Egypt, is responding by claiming this is the eternal Word of God made flesh, who is also still fully God. And so then it takes the church a while to kind of figure out exactly how you hold those two things together. How does it make sense that these two natures are united in one person? at its heart, I think he's answering the question that we're all asked and all have to respond to in one way or another.

John Dickson: He's super nerdy philosophically

But I mean, he's so, he's so adept at A, the Greek language and B, Greek modes of thought.

Jennifer: Yeah. And he's so caught up in the political dynamics as well, as we think about the Roman Empire and the governance, how that to the authority of the church. And he's really caught in all of the complexity of that.

John Dickson: And he's a player at the Council of Nicaea, He's a, yeah, exactly. So this is where they invented the idea that Jesus is God, right?

Jennifer: Oh, oh no. On the Incarnation is written before the Council of Nicaea. I think we have to appreciate that, uh, sequence of events.

John Dickson (Studio)

In AD 325, at the Council of Nicaea, Athanasius found himself opposing the Arians, who followed the teaching of Arius who believed Jesus was not God but a creature designed to be a bridge between us and God.

Athanasius' position – which had been the earlier position – overwhelmingly won. The result was the Nicene Creed which says of Jesus that he is “eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from God ...”

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David : He's often, uh, uh, rightly, you know, held up today as somebody who's this, like, great pillar of the faith that, you know, affirmed both Jesus full divinity and full humanity. What's interesting, of course, is that he spent much of his life in exile after the Council because, you know, of who was in power and the, the, um, successor to Constantine was actually, uh, a follower of Arianism, so Athanasius ends up in exile for much of his life, and yet it's his faith that has prevailed.

John Dickson: Okay, let's, uh, oh my goodness. We're going to be really quick. It's wrong. I'm committing many sins today. Really quick. Saint Augustine of Hippo.

John Dickson (Studio)

I'm going to take this one ...

Augustine was born November 13, AD 354 and died on August 28, AD 430.

He is arguably the most influential mind in the West for a thousand years.

His works like *Confessions*, *The City of God*, and *On Christian Doctrine* had a profound effect on Christian theology - on how we understand sin, grace and human will, as well as the role in the church in society (hint: he didn't think the church should call the shots!!)

His autobiography, *Confessions*, is sometimes called the first psychological autobiography. It describes his conversion, but it's actually a sweeping internal and intellectual odyssey and a dangerously life-changing book to read. The opening words are: "To praise You, Lord, is the longing of every person who is a part of Your creation. You stir in all, so that they take delight in praising You: for You have made us for Yourself and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in You."

Jennifer: Well, he's the father of Western theology Um, he is, I think we can connect with Augustine today and thinking through how he's grappling with his own life ethic, the ethics of his life. He's grappling with a heart that is, is hungry, is, is restless for God for answers. Um, he is very open to exposing kind of the life that he's lived and how God discovering, um, Jesus Christ and how scripture is really transformed him. Um, and I think also he is an important voice at the crumbling of the Roman empire in the West and navigating really significant questions about, you know, what What

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does it mean for this empire to crumble after it has Christianity, and how do we understand the basically, the problems of evil that we face in the world

John Dickson: We're doing a whole episode on Saint Agustin real so, okay. Yeah. Yeah. going to park, that one. But I often think he, was the most influential thinker for a thousand years. Um, okay, sorry, sorry Augustine, I'm going to? put you down there. Ah, oh, down there. Cappadocian the Cappadocian Four.

READING

The Cappadocian Four is a catch-all phrase for four theologians of the fourth century church - two brothers, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa; their older sister, Macrina the Younger; and their friend Gregory of Nazianus. They were all socially active. Macrina rescued abandoned infants, Basil founded history's first public hospital, and the two Gregories thundered in their sermons against slavery and society's neglect of the poor.

But they also tackled the intellectually challenging doctrine of the Trinity. That's the belief that God is three distinct, co-equal and co-eternal persons, and yet at the same time existing as only one God.

The McNutts describe this in their book as, "... a high-wire act," where, "... it's easy to fall off and into heresy waiting on either side."

David : Well, they're answering the, if Athanasius is answering the question of who is Jesus in a way, the Cappadocians help the church understand who God is. Like, what does it mean, what's the Christian understanding of God? What makes our view of God Christian? And it is um, At its heart, an affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity, that God is Father, Son, Holy Spirit. And so you have this family, basically, and their friends that are working with the church at the time. talking, Basil the Great, Gregory, Nyssa, friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, and one that we've included here, Macrina, the younger, their older sister, who deeply informed their faith. And they have other brothers, as well. And, you know, the

Jennifer: Their family is amazing.

David : yeah, that are also regarded as saints. And so it's just this wonderful example of a kind of doing theology together, kind of it in community, doing it as a family and friends. And they go a long ways towards helping the church articulate the doctrine of the Trinity.

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John Dickson (Studio)

Seven theologians down ... thirteen to go.

After the break, we head to the Middle Ages.

BREAK 1

MEDIA - [Horrible Histories](#)

John Dickson (Studio)

That's the BBC's Horrible Histories with an amusing though disturbing look back at the flagellates of the Middle Ages - believers who used to punish themselves as a sign of penance or religious devotion.

That's pretty much most people's idea of Medieval religion. That's why it's the Dark Ages, right?

But ... there was a bit more going on than that.

READING

John of Damascus was a theologian, monk and government official who was born around AD 675.

Damascus at that time was part of the Umayyad Caliphate, and John served as a high-ranking official in its Muslim administration.

He eventually resigned his position and retired to the monastery of Saint Sabas, near Jerusalem, where he wrote several theological works as well as numerous hymns which are still in use in Eastern Orthodox liturgical services today.

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Jennifer: Yeah. John of Damascus is a really important thinker. I think that stands at the, uh, at the center. 15:00 sorry, at the, um, at the juncture between Eastern and Western Christianity, especially as, um, Christians are sorting out the rise of Islam and what it means to live as Christians either, you know, under Islamic rule and thinking about things like images and what does it mean to depict God and icons, right?

John Dickson (Studio)

One of John of Damascus's most famous works was *On The Divine Images* (also known as *Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images*).

It's basically a defence of icons ... sacred paintings Jesus, Mary, Joseph, saints, angels and so on, that were thought to be windows to the divine.

This is the part when good Protestants get a little creeped out ... I certainly couldn't bring myself to venerate an icon ... but, actually, I quite like them as art ...

John Dickson: Don't tell anyone. I have several icons, up there. Um, but I mean, how, how did he, how did he defend icons? You know, when the scripture says, you shall make no graven images.,

David : well, he actually appealed, uh, as many have to the incarnation and just said, listen, before this happened, like, you know, I can't depict, the Trinity. I can't depict, you know, the eternal God, but now that Jesus has taken on flesh, now that God has become a flesh, I can depict the way that God has depicted God's self in a way like I can. God did first. Yeah. So, so I can do that. But now you're right that some have. said, well, the second commandment seems to be a problem here. And so some traditions have, has, have been more hesitant around that. But for the Eastern Orthodox Church and for other Christians, you know, icons are actually a way that we can worship God. It's a way kind of, as they sometimes say, a windows to the divine, a way that we can worship God without worshipping the thing itself. So for John and a lot of Eastern Christians, it was really important and has been even to this day.

John Dickson: This is this is something I've had to try and get my head around as a good Protestant. The Orthodox do not believe they're worshipping those

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READING

"I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand. For this also I believe - that unless I believe I shall not understand."

John Dickson (Studio)

Anselm was the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 until his death in 1109. He was a theologian and a philosopher, and he's widely thought of as one of the key thinkers of the Middle Ages.

He's famous for conceiving the ontological argument for the existence of God. Basically, God is by definition the greatest being we can imagine. Now, a being that exists in the mind *and* in reality is obviously greater than one that just exists in our minds—because existence is greater than non-existence. So, if God exists only in the mind, we can imagine something greater than God. But, by the definition already established, we *cannot* imagine something greater than God because we can't imagine a being greater than the greatest possible being that can be imagined ... therefore, God exists.

If Anselm's line of reasoning left you mystified, you're in good company. But don't worry, Research AI will put a link to a more detailed explanation in the show notes.

John Dickson: Uh, Anselm of Canterbury, 11th, 12th century, now. We're racing through time. Right. I know. We really are. It's hard.

Jennifer: Yeah. So I think Anselm's a great example of the really the father and first theologian of the European universities. So as we think about the rise of cities, It's the rise of the university, even some that we know to, to this day, Anselm is, is a, um, more formalized, uh, theologian who's also thinking about the relationship between faith and reason and faith seeking understanding that it's a good thing for us to explore and understand and ask these questions about our faith. What do we mean when we say faith? I'm going to be talking about this in a moment, but first let me just say that we believe in the existence of God. Um, you know, he's speaking out of a heart of devotion, Um, and yet he's probing these important fundamental questions.

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John Dickson: I have no idea how you're going to sum this guy up. Okay. Thomas Aquinas.

John Dickson (Studio)

Another of my favourites, so I'll give you the background.

Saint Thomas Aquinas, born around 1225 in Italy and dying in 1274, was a Dominican monk renowned for merging Christian theology with the philosophy of Aristotle.

He advocated for natural theology, using reason and logic to explore God's existence, a topic covered in Episode 123 with the one and only Alister McGrath.

Aquinas' seminal work was the *Summa Theologiae*, compiles key Catholic doctrines for seminarians and educated laypeople. It's recognized as a pivotal work of Western literature. Seriously, I was a good Protestant critic of Aquinas, until I started reading what he wrote. It's amazing.

Aquinas believed truth is grasped through human thought, echoing Augustine, but stressed that reason alone isn't sufficient to understand divine plans.

READING

"I answer that, It was necessary for man's salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason. Firstly, indeed, because man is directed to God, as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason: "The eye hath not seen, O God, besides Thee, what things Thou hast prepared for them that wait for Thee" (Isaiah 66). But the end must first be known by men who are to direct their thoughts and actions to the end. Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation. Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few."

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Summa Theologiae, Thomas Aquinas

Jennifer: Probably the most important theologian, as it turns out, for Roman Catholicism, for sure. Um, I think he's such an interesting figure in, as we think about the recovery of, um, Greek philosophy in the West through the Iberian Peninsula, the translation of Uh, you know, Aristotle from Arabic into Latin, and then how that shapes the, the universities of Europe, how that shapes Christian theology.

And again, asking some of these good questions about God's existence, about the Trinity, about, well, actually the whole faith, right? And understanding. Again, um, when I look at the world, um, can I trust what I see and how do I understand what I see and sort that out?

He is, uh, very positive when it comes to that exchange.

John Dickson: Yeah. Okay. I mean, we've mentioned one great woman in Macrina the, uh, the Younger, Um, but let's talk about Julian of Norwich.

READING

Julian of Norwich was born some time around AD 1343 and died after 1416.

She lived in the English city of Norwich which, during her lifetime, suffered from the devastating effects of Bubonic plague - The Black Death.

Norwich was an important religious centre, and Julian was an anchoress, a religious recluse.

Her works are based on a series of visions of the passion of Christ which she says she received when she was around 30 years of age.

Jennifer: Julianne of Norwich. Um, so she is, Such an important figure, especially as we think about, um, writings in the English language. So the, her writing on revelation, divine revelations or showings is the earliest surviving texts that we have, uh, written by a female in the English language.

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So it's, she's incredibly important just for that purpose. But I think also she reflects the kind of ministry that could happen, um, through the, Um, medieval church through the anchorite, so that she had a cell that was connected to a church and we often think about those people as very isolated, but she's actually living in the busiest city in England or one of the busiest cities in England, and she is doing pastoral care and engaging with, you know, People in the town. And so there's kind of this urban care, I think, and attention that the church has through her and she is also giving a good word at a very difficult time post bubonic plague, you know, the a hundred Years war, all of these things going on. And she is saying, you know, that all will be well not because of anything that humans can do, but because of who God is and who, what God can do.

John Dickson: Mmm. Um. Is it right that she sometimes described God as mother?

Jennifer: She did, yes.

John Dickson: like this sort of feminist 600 years early?

Jennifer : You could say it's, you know, and also true to how the biblical text Someone say the first woke

John Dickson: theologian. We don't like that.

David : What words do we use to describe God? That's one of the basic questions of theology. And the challenge that we have across the discipline is knowing that any words that we choose will fall short. Our language when it comes to God is imperfect. None, nothing that we say will fully capture the living God, right? Um, creaturely language. So what do we do? We use the language of Scripture. We use the language, the words that God has given us. to describe God's self. And Julian, in a way, is returning that. Now, it's true that there's lots of language in Scripture about God as Father and King and, you know, shepherd and other terms that have these kind of, you know, either male kind of implications or specificity. She's also appealing to other parts of Scripture that describe God in motherly terms, as the mother who cares for Israel, as the, you know, as Jesus looks at Jerusalem and wants to gather people in like a mother hen. And so, She talks about, um, God as mother. She talks about Christ as mother, as The one who brings new life. So It's a kind of expanding, if you like, of our understanding of who God is, and it's true that across the centuries these theologians might be using language that we're not as familiar with or as comfortable with, but hopefully it's a way for us to expand our understanding of who God is.

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John Dickson: Now given we've done a double episode on the Reformation with you Jennifer, let's do Martin Luther And John Calvin in the 16th century together in 45

Jennifer: you torturing me?

John Dickson: And we'll just, we'll send people back to that wonderful episode.

Jennifer: Yeah, um, so, oh gosh.

John Dickson (Studio)

I think rather than do a summary of Martin Luther and John Calvin here, we'll just point you to Episodes 91 and 92, The Reformation, parts one and two, where you can delve into those incredible years to your heart's content.

Back in my office, Jennifer is doing a great job of summarising Luther and Calvin's impact on the history of theology...

Jennifer: So I would say if I have to boil it down into one sentence, I would say that, that Luther reminds us that we are not saved by, um, by what we have done, but what God has done for us. And it's a gift that we receive. And it's just, he's reminding the church of that, uh, as the core of what it means to follow Christ is, is true. Because of what God has done for

John Dickson: then how did Calvin add to that, subtract from that,

Jennifer: Yeah, I think Calvin lives into that and really embraces that message. And also, um, you know, highlights that for his community that is living in exile. That is experiencing displacement and is really seeking a comfort and assurance. That, that God is the who's in control and that God is a good God. And so he really is directing that. Um, his pastoral work and writing towards that end.

John Dickson: Um, around the same time, but sort of taking a slightly different tack is Menno Simons

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READING

Menno Simons was born to dairy farmers in the Netherlands in 1496 and died in 1561.

Menno became a priest in 1524 without ever having opened a Bible, explaining later that he feared it would confuse him.

That did not stop him from becoming an important teacher among the Anabaptists—he did eventually read the Bible very closely. Famously, he advocated for a principled pacifism, the separation of church and state, and for adult-only baptism.

Jennifer: So, Menno Simons was a Roman Catholic priest who was inspired by Luther's writings and then eventually came to disagreement on the question of baptism. And then really experienced a call when, uh, A group known as the Anabaptists or the Rebaptizers, um, who were seen as part of the radical wing of the Reformation when they were experiencing crisis and he might have had actually a brother involved in terrible crisis that happens at the city in Münster in Germany. and Um, Um, really feels called to shepherd this scattered flock and, um, he develops convictions around believers baptism, um, that are also, he kind of codifies them. And then also, you shouldn't baptize babies. shouldn't baptize babies. And then also, and it's part of that volunteerism that, you know, that I have a will as well and I can choose. Um, but then also. He really emphasizes our need to be willing to suffer for Christ as Christ has suffered for us, and that, um, generates this tradition of non resistance, and we would say also pacifism.

John Dickson: So is he the beginning of pacifism as a sort of theological project

Jennifer: Um, that's a good question. I don't think he's the beginning, but he is, um, he really will become the final voice for that sense. I mean, we would look at Michael Sattler before him, and I'm sure that there are others before that. But he is really then resistance.

John Dickson: Hmm. Do you want to add to that, David?

David : Well, I think he's such, such an interesting figure, and you're right, I think kinda lesser known among the, the people that we've highlighted. And so that was one of our intentional reasons for, for choosing him in a way, is he kind of represents

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this much broader tradition that even today we feel the, you know, the effects of, uh, with not just the Mennonite.

The broader church or the Amish, you know, the, those that have in their relationship with culture at large said, no, we're going to stand apart from that. You know, that actually we're going to express our faith in part by distancing ourself from certain things. So we might answer that question differently today, but I think all of us have a question of like, well, how do I, as a Christian relate to the culture at large, to technology, to media, to 26:00 social media? Like, so this is one way that some Christians have answered that question. And he becomes a pattern for that for many. Yeah.

John Dickson: still hovering around the 16th century. It sounds like that was a really important century. Yes. Uh, Teresa of Avila.

Jennifer: Yeah, so she is the first female doctor of the church, of the Roman Catholic Church. So that is a huge deal. Um, she's also such an important female leader who is, uh, Um, grappling with the post Council of Trent Catholicism, um, bringing attention to the need for reform within the orders, and specifically the Carmelite order.

John Dickson (Studio)

Jennifer and David are such nerds they assume everyone knows all about the Council of Trent.

It was a Catholic mega-meeting in the 1540s-60s convened by Pope Paul the Third in response to the Protestant Reformation.

It brought about all sorts of reforms within the Roman Catholic Church itself. It addressed clerical abuses and corruption, as well as standardising many parts of Catholic church services, and, importantly, insisted the Protestant Reformers (like Luther and Calvin) were dead wrong to say that salvation came through 'Justification by faith' alone, without the cooperation of our good deeds.

The Carmelite order was initially established in the Crusader period by prayerful monks of the 12th century. They lived on Mount Carmel, way up in the north of Israel. They were trying to emulate the OT prophet Elijah, who poured out his heart to the Maker on Mount Carmel.

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They weren't there long. They had to relocate to Europe in the 13th century – because, you may remember, the Crusaders only held Israel for about 80 years, before the Islamic forces of Saladin defeated them.

Anyway, Teresa of Avila was active in the European monasteries and convents of the mid to late 1500s.

Jennifer: She's so inspiring to so many, and Really focused, she is, um, would say for a non Christian person, her theology really contributes to thinking through kind of meditation and the interior life of the, um, and, you know, prayer, a prayerful life. Um, in this case, obviously to the Lord, but -

John Dickson: is something, um, not a lot of people know that the, the Protestant reformation actually did trigger a kind of reformation within the Catholic church. Not just the counter reformation that was, you know, trying to knock Protestantism, but actually it did lead to reforms within Catholicism. Can you tell us what were the kind of reforms Teresa wanted? Yeah.

Jennifer: I mean, I think there was a lot of attention to the vows of poverty, um, to really, those were already introduced in the Roman Catholic Church in the monastic movement through Benedict of Nursia and the Benedictine orders, but the church has often struggled with how does it relate to money, you know, and, and when there are pious people who give, you know,

Church is always and will always really struggle with this question. And when, um, you know, when pious people seek to show their devotion, they often will give money to the church or give money to, to leaders. And, and the church is not as often failed, you know, and, and how it grapples with that. So I think all of the reform that's happening in the monastic orders. In response to the Reformation, or even started before the Reformation, are seeking to answer really this question in a fundamental way, um, and also attention to celibacy. What does it mean to, um, devote your whole life? To the church and, um, to in from their perspective, not be distracted, perhaps by the demands and the needs of family, which, of course, the protestant church is going to be doing going in a different direction on that issue. Um, trying to think. She was actually traveling all around. She was meeting with very important figures, with the Pope. She's being asked about important questions for the life of the church. Um, she is very active, um, in this time period.

John Dickson (Studio)

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Up next... we hit the big theologians of the modern period.

BREAK 2

MEDIA - John Wesley

John Dickson (Studio)

That's John Wesley - the 1954 feature, produced by the Radio and Film Commission of the Methodist Church ... some might say constructed by the Methodist Church as it's possibly the most wooden film ever made.

Director Mark thought you might appreciate the reminder of how just how far films have come - we'll put a link in the show notes.

But it does do some justice to the outrage that government officials felt towards the 18th century English theologian John Wesley, as he preached at vast outdoor events on the pursuit of holiness through the use of spiritual disciplines - what became known as Methodism.

John Dickson (Studio)

Our rapid-fire round of theologians brings us to the Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries.

READING

Friedrich Schleiermacher, the German Reformed theologian, was born in Breslau in 1768 and died in 1834.

He is referred to as the 'Father of liberal Protestantism' for his emphasis on redefining Christianity in emotional and psychological terms. Theological doctrines aren't necessarily true in the strict sense; they are rather ways of speaking about the soul's connection to the divine.

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John Dickson: Friedrich Schleiermacher. So now we're 18th century, early 19th century, yeah. Um, tell us about him. I mean he was Significant.

David : Very Significant. yeah. I mean, Schleiermacher, I think, uh, one of the great legacies that he has is to remind us that our faith is a lived faith. That our experiences matter, that our emotions matter. So some would say he might have, like, tipped the scales a little bit too far in some of that direction, and I think we'll have some response here in a moment on that, but, you know, for Schleiermacher, it was important to remember that our faith is a lived faith. Experienced faith. And this is, you know, something that, you know, is picked up partly in response to the Reformation. You have people like the heart Christians, the, you know, Spenner and Zinzendorf and others who are saying, hey, let's, let's not lose our faith in Jesus, you know, in the midst of our sort of writing these theological treatises and coming to clarification around, you know, confessions that are written for specific traditions and responding to very specific, sometimes theological questions.

Um, Let's not forget about the fact that this is a lived faith, an experienced faith. So they, and Schleiermacher who comes after them, kind of, you know, reflect that. And that's an important thing for us to remember remember today.

John Dickson: Would it be fair, as people sometimes say, that he, let sort of, um, intellectual doctrine slide in order to make this focus on the emotions and the, you know, the effective life?

David: Yeah, he's, he's often, I would say, critiqued in that way, but perhaps caricaturized. Like, he's, he's not, it's not like he has nothing to say in, um, about traditional doctrines of the faith. So he does write about the doctrine of the Trinity. But he puts it at the very end of the Christian faith. Um, and so he's using quite different language, things that, terms that, um, you know, in our churches we might not use. We don't see this in some of the ancient creeds. He's kind of using new language in a way that's kind of what theologians are doing for every age, right?

How does our faith today reflect the concerns of people today, reflect the questions that we have today? So in one way, for me, this is what's so exciting about theology is that, yes, it's the same faith that's being articulated. but you're sort of saying the same thing in a new way every time. I mean, it's sort of the challenge of the preacher every week.

Like, I'm going to, they know the story or, you know, some are hearing the story for the first time, but it's the same story that I'm telling, but I'm going to say it in a new way, something else about the faith that's going to connect. So Schleiermacher is a

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great example, I think, of the ways that theology continues to develop and sometimes uses sort of fresh vocabulary.

John Dickson: So you don't think he was the prototype of the progressive liberal theologian?

David : Well, he is the, um, sort of the standard bearer often for a liberal Protestantism, uh, that people like Barth come to reject.

John Dickson (studio)

David's not talking about the Simpsons ... We'll get to *Karl* Barth in a moment.

David: So, again, like, he helpfully reminds us about the experience of faith. The problem with that, if you overemphasize that, is it becomes detached from God's revelation to us, and it becomes a kind of simply experience, simply interior faith. So, how do we still affirm the, the, um, truths that God has revealed to us, the ways that the church has articulated the faith. So you don't, you don't want to tip the scales too far.

Jennifer: Yeah, I think that's why we need to be able to see the exchange that's taking place the dialogue that's happening across time and also among contemporaries to see the the questions that they're answering and then the next generation has to deal with sometimes just the implications of what was being said and when we see pluck people out of their time period. It can be hard for us to see why theology has developed the way it has and, you know, where we are even today in the questions that we have. So not everybody is going to fulfill all of the needs Except for Jesus.

John Dickson: And Augustine. But um, Sorry, did I say that or just think it? Um, Okay. You've already mentioned Karl Barth, A big nine to Schleiermacher

READING

Karl Barth was a Swiss Reformed theologian who was born in Basel in 1886 and died in 1968.

Barth is associated with a movement known as Neo-Orthodoxy.

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He reacted strongly against what he perceived to be the human-centredness of Schleiermacher and the liberal theology he inspired. A towering intellect, Barth sought to reclaim the centrality of the Bible and the sovereignty of God.

He rejected any attempt to reduce Christianity to human feelings or achievement. Everything depended upon the free grace of God.

“True theology is an actual determination and claiming of man by the acting God.” - Church Dogmatics, Karl Barth.

David : Bart like, he, he, you know, is, he grew up in the tradition of Schlei mocker in, in the tradition of liberal prostatism. You know, for me, Bart is this great example of what it means to do theology in the midst of crisis. And the crisis was initially World War I, which he was shocked to see, you know, the German professors that he had studied under. sign off on that, basically. Barth himself was Swiss. And so he was shocked by that and dismayed by that. And so when he was a pastor in this small town in northern Switzerland, he was like, I can't go down that road if this is where it's going to lead us. And so he, he broke from that. So he kind of, he never totally left Schleiermacher behind. Like, he sort of still grapples with that legacy of liberal Protestantism, but instead he wanted to return to scripture and to the fact that scripture testifies to Jesus. And so his whole kind of outworking was, well, what does it mean? post World War I, and then in the midst of World War II, and the rise of the Nazi party and National Socialist, what does it mean for us to articulate a faith that looks to Jesus first and foremost, uh, above anyone or anything else? So, there's a lot of pressure, uh, throughout Barth's career on making sure that we are articulating our faith in Christ rather than a faith in someone or something else that might want to co opt the church.

So, unfortunately, there were some Christians who did that, you know, some German Christians who did that. And Barth and others responded with things like the Barman Declaration to say, no, we listen first and foremost to God's Word, which testifies to Jesus. So he's the, uh, uh, I he's a great example of articulating faith in the midst of crisis.

John Dickson: In the modern, day. Theological setting. Would he be the most influential 20th century theologian do you that's fair.

David : Yeah. He's still casting a large shadow.

People are still kind of dealing with his theology, which actually he never finished writing his church dogmatics. He got almost through four volumes. And so, you know, there've been attempts to kind of like fill it out a little bit or kind of think about

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the influence of it from not just, you know, you know, restructuring of the doctrine of election through Christ, but also an emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity.

David : And, you know, my work's been interested in like the doctrine of creation and, you know, so yeah, I think we're still kind of dealing with the after effects of Barth's

Jennifer: Yeah, bringing us back to the Bible, I mean, in my field of study, recovering John Calvin's theology for the 20th century and thinking about the, in a more systematic way, um, which has been hugely important for modern theology as well, so.

John Dickson: Can I ask a bonus that's not in the collectibles? Yeah. Wolfhard Pannenberg.

David : Oh gosh, yeah.

John Dickson: Yeah. That's for you. Ha ha ha.

READING

Wolfhart Pannenberg was a German theologian born in 1928 and died in 2014.

He combined linguistic, philosophical, historical, and scientific knowledge to argue for the central importance of 'history' in God's self-revelation. God acts in the world - in Israel and in Jesus Christ. The Scriptures testify to genuine divine action in time. And the Scriptures stand as a pledge of the resolution of all things, within history, in the kingdom of God.

John Dickson: I mean, there's a lot of lot of Yes. love him but tell me, am I allowed to love him?

David : Sure, yeah, no, yeah, you can, yeah. I, what I find so fascinating about Pannenberg is his, his, Viewing everything through the lens of history and the way that I'm so far. I'm not surprised for he talks about the the way that how important history is to our faith But he has this such broad perspective of history that it's not just about The things that happened at such and such date in this time.

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David: It's actually like it's about God's history. It's this like he's trying to paint a picture of a sort of a cosmic history. So he's looking ahead to the fulfillment of history. The sense in which, you know, in his language, we have this like proleptic kind of, you know, glimpse of history. But we have this kind of like foreshadowing of like, well, this is, this is the much broader canvas on which God is writing the story of salvation.

John Dickson: I think

David: I often, feel that, you know, if there's anyone out there who He thinks theologians aren't really doing serious academic

John Dickson: Yeah, exactly. and Like, his expertise across disciplines is, is, frightening.

John Dickson (studio)

I'll say more about Penneberg at the end of the episode, because, for me, he sums up why theology is an important subject, even if you don't believe in God!!

John Dickson: Dorothy L. Sayers. she's a favorite on the show. We did a whole show about her. Recently, actually.

John Dickson (studio)

Sorry - back again! You can find out everything you need to know about Dorothy in episode 98 of Undeceptions: Dorothy L. Sayers. She's so important, we broke our two-word title rule to include her middle initial.

John Dickson: So tell us why you included her.

David: Well, we wanted to include her not only as a modern woman, to show once again the ways that women have shaped the faith throughout the church's history, but also to point to the importance of arts and creativity for many Christians.

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Uh, she was herself a playwright, um, and, and she also wrote theology as a lay theologian. I mean, she would say, I'm not a theologian, which is, you know, That's kind of what you say when they start asking you the hard questions, but she also I think really helpfully shows like, no, we need to think about our faith, our faith. You know, the ancient faith is relevant today. A lot of her work was trying to show the relevance of the ancient creeds.

It's a way almost, we like her as an example of, of saying, we're all called. in one way or another to be theologians. Maybe not professionally, maybe not like, you know, taking classes in this, but if you are at all engaged in articulating your faith, saying something about your belief in Jesus, You are already engaged in theology.

READING

Gustavo Gutierrez is a Peruvian theologian and Dominican priest who was born in 1928 and is best known for his work, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation.

"The poor are a by-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible," he writes. "They are marginalized by our social and cultural world. They are the oppressed, exploited proletariat, robbed of the fruit of their labor and despoiled of their humanity..."

"The denunciation of injustice implies the rejection of the use of Christianity to legitimize the established order."

John Dickson: Uh, We're now 20th century.

Jennifer: he is alive.

Jennifer : Yes.

John Dickson: yeah, exactly. You give it a birth date and then no death

John Dickson: That's right. Yeah.

Jennifer: We're talking about someone who's alive. Um, he, he is such an important representative figure of the, what, what we would call contextual theology, but this

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attention to thinking through, um, you know, how do I relate to Christ in my own space, in my own context?

And in this case, um, Kind of a Vatican to, uh, voice of the 20th century thinking about Christ's, um, you know, uh, solidarity with the poor and, you know, how God sees the plight of the poor and we can see connections with also with, um, Black theology as it's emerging with, um, uh, feminist and womanist theology, also asking these questions of how do I, as, as a woman, relate to Christ and what does his sacrifice mean for me, or as a black person, um, male or female, you know, how does that especially relate to me, um,

John Dickson: It's very political oriented kind of, would I be right in

David: There's always, there's a practical element to it. And it's sort of like this, the faith has practical implications. So, yes, in the outworking of that, especially in the development of liberation theology, there's often a, a, a practical outworking, you know, economic questions, questions about voting rights or access to healthcare or education.

You know, there's, there's often a, a very practical outworking. of the faith, but the broader question in a way is, how does this faith relate to everybody? You know, how does this faith relate not just to the theologians and the leaders of the church, but you know, how does it actually relate to everybody? How is the gospel good news for all? And in a way, people like Gutierrez point out that this is good news for us as well.

John Dickson: Um, you sometimes hear people say, he's basically just a Marxist, uh, dressing it up in theology.

David: Well, the, the reading of this, it's no doubt that there are like political implications to this, but it's also depends upon your reading of scripture. So, uh, to say, uh, as, uh, we find him in scripture that, you know, Christ became poor so that we might become rich. Well, uh, Is that simply spiritual? Are there some kind of broader implications to that? So, yes, the, you know, some liberation theologians have been critiqued for kind of Marxist leanings or kind of, you know, the implications of, uh, for economic policies on their views.

But I think, again, it goes to the broader point. However one, you know, or particular, you know, countries or systems kind of work that out, I think it goes to the question of, well, what does it mean for us to follow Jesus faithfully today? And if, Jesus himself was caring for the poor, for Gutierrez, and others, the question is, well, how do we replicate that? How do we do that today? The answer is going to be different than it was in Jesus time. We're in a different political climate, different economic

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system. So what does it look like for us? What does it look like for the church to serve, uh, the poorest?

Jennifer: Connecting to the world, right? How does Christ not only transform me, but how does Christ transform the world? And I think that they are encouraging us and, and pushing us to ask that

John Dickson: Our last one, um, is one I'd never, heard. James Cone.

READING

James Cone - born 1938, died 2018 - was an American Methodist minister who was best known for his pioneering work in Black liberation theology.

He believed that Christianity, when properly understood and practised, should be a liberating force for oppressed peoples, especially Black Americans who have faced systemic racism in which the church has often been complicit.

*In his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone wrote: "In the 'lynching era', between 1880 to 1940, white Christians lynched nearly five thousand black men and women in a manner with obvious echoes of the Roman crucifixion of Jesus. Yet these 'Christians' did not see the irony or contradiction in their actions."*

John Dickson: Tell us about him.

David : Well, not unlike Gutierrez, he also is thinking about the application of faith to a particular community. He's writing from an African American perspective, and so, author of books like *God of the Oppressed*, he's thinking about the ways that, again, uh, the African American community can relate to the Gospel message, can relate to Jesus, who um, suffered and still overcame forces of oppression. So for Cone to see the evidence of God sustaining God's people, for example, in the Exodus and bringing God's people out of slavery, that becomes a principal metaphor for African American theology.

David : Um, You know, for him to say, yeah, this is good news for us, too, even though in our own history, it has been misapplied, misused, been, you know, a force sometimes of oppression and subjugation to say, well, there's hope here, like this is

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actually good news for us. And it's found once again in what God has done for us in Christ.

John Dickson: So it's not just activism. It really is genuine theological rigor. But applied, like in a sense all theologians have always applied, of course. to that particular black experience.

David: I like to remind my students that all theology is contextualized. That's right. There's no, there's no theology that is divorced from that, but I think more recent theologies have paid particular attention to

John Dickson: Yeah.

David: Uh, and, and Cohen and Gutierrez are, I think, good examples of that. So, you know, we're all writing from a particular space or place. So what does it mean for us to, to do theology from where we're at?

John Dickson: Okay, I'm going to ask the impossible question now. Who's your favorite?

Jennifer: Well, that's probably easy for me. Justin.

John Dickson: It's boring. let's just, assume. you can't, The correct answer is Augustine and Calvin. Okay, but let's just, let's just park that.

Jennifer: Um, probably Julian of Norwich. Yeah, absolutely. Because she is so soundly Orthodox. She is thinking about and talking about the Trinity. She is engaging with Scripture. She is engaging with the pastoral needs of the church the community. She's leading leaders of the church, and she is faithfully writing, um, just seeking God with her whole life. So not only inspiring in that way, but also what she's written, I think, is timeless. And we didn't even know about her for, for centuries. And then it's really only been pretty recent that we've been able to recover her writings and her impact has been seen. So that's kind of exciting, too.

David: Well, my doctoral work was in BART. So like, if I can't, say the theologians that I really came to appreciate more through this project, through writing this book together, um, and maybe as an example of that, were the Cappadocians. And to expand it a little bit, and to see the influence of, you know, their older sister, Macrina, upon them, you know, as, it was sort of almost a bit of a meta, you know, metaphor for us in writing this project together. It's like, here's this group that was doing theology together. We're writing this book together. We're kind of, we're doing theology. We're writing chapters and passing them back and forth and, you know,

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that sort of thing. So I love kind of diving even more into their theology, which I'd read before, but then to see especially her influence upon them, to dive into more of the writings by Gregory of Nyssa and the way he appeals to Moses and his work and, you know, so it's a different tradition than ours. Like, you know, it's in many respects, we're far removed from them, but to see the ways that they help the church articulate a faith and an understanding of the triune God, which of course we share was, was, was great. I really enjoyed that the other

John Dickson: The thing I love about that family is not only are they the biggest nerds in the fourth century, I mean, intellectually Yeah,

Jennifer: Yes.

John Dickson: Incredible. Um, they were socially engaged. Do you think Macrina the Younger is, is collecting exposed children and and them in this little sort of community of other women.

Jennifer: That's right, the monastery

John Dickson: Basil the Great founds the very first public hospital in world history in the 370s. You're And Gregory of Nyssa preaches the first that we know of full-blown abolitionist sermon. Yeah. Basically saying, you're going to hell if you own a slave. I mean, it's incredible. So here are highbrow theologians, we might think, who are socially engaged. Connect those two things for me.

David : Our faith should always be socially engaged. I mean, you know, I, One of the things I find in my theology classes, I do spend some time talking about Jesus earthly ministry. Like, well, what did he actually do? It's very easy for theologians to move from this doctrine to that doctrine to that one and kind of stay at that sort of level. And I think it's really important for us to remember the ways that Christ himself engaged with people. Like, you know, the faith that we have in Christ, of God taking on flesh was not removed from the realities of the world. Like that. And so our faith is lived out. It reflects the ways that Jesus himself served people. So sometimes there's criticism that, you know, well, we should just keep our faith over here in this space that we shouldn't, we don't need to be socially engaged over here.

Christ was engaged in all kinds of social issues and breaking all sorts of, you know, social customs. And so, um, our faith is lived out. So the, these theologians, you know, across the board in one way or another, whether it's through you know, Basil writing about social justice or, you know, Anselm's work in, uh, the flourishing universities or, you know, uh, more contemporary theologians thinking about their specific communities. Like we're actually all engaged in the social faith.

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Jennifer: It, it helps us, I think, to Context can help us to humanize these figures and to realize that they are, like you're saying with the Cappadocian fathers, that they are part of a family, right? And that they are, you know, contributing in multiple different ways and, and aspects that are transformative. Um, like you were saying, the beginnings of basically monasticism with Basel's rule as well. Um, that also, engaged in the leadership of the church, right? As the Bishop of Constantinople. And, you know, so they, they are, living out their faith in, in its fullness. And I think sometimes our memories can be selective in that we can begin to narrow them too much and maybe even dehumanize them in that way. I was thinking of one really good example as we think about black theology in American history is, you know, our country really talks and stresses Martin Luther King, Jr., um, and sort of sees him just as like a civil rights activist rather than also seeing him as a pastor, right? Seeing him, his sermons and preaching and understanding, you know, how theology and his reading of scripture shapes the work that he does. Um, but we don't have to go to the modern era in order to see these accounts.

John Dickson: Finally, we have, um, quite a few listeners of Undeceptions who aren't sure what to make of Christianity They're interested. They'll give our episodes a listen. But, you know, they don't believe yet. Um, Finally, I want to ask you both, so you both can have a go at it, why, why should someone who's not a Christian or isn't sure what to make of Christianity, care about all of these thinkers?

Jennifer: So, I think it's because it is part of human history. I mean, it is part of the world that we live in. Um, these ideas, these convictions, um, these motivations that people have, the way that they see the world, the way that they understand their value and purpose, um, you know, You can't ignore these figures if you want to understand our world. So I think that's one part of it I also think that they reflect the main questions of human life like their writings are addressing some of the most important questions of human life that have to do with you know Who am I and do I have value and and why am I here? And, you know, why do these things happen to me?

And how do I manage that? And why, or why do I feel unsettled inside? What's wrong? Um, you know, these theologians, these thinkers have answers for those kinds of questions that we all face and all want to explore. Um, I actually don't think that we can talk about human rights. and human dignity apart from valuing and appreciating what Christianity has contributed to that conversation about the Imago Dei and being made in the image of God is, is gives humans a dignity that is become fundamentally important to our, you know, entire world.

John Dickson: We are a theologically... We

Jennifer: are already shaped whether we recognize it or.

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John Dickson: David would you add to that?

David: Well, I can understand, um, the concerns, the questions that people might have about Christianity as a religion. Like, you know, you don't have to go far to find where the church has gone wrong throughout its history. You don't have to go far to find a story of a Christian who's not lived out their faith well. But Again, I think what these theologians reflect is that our faith gives us answers to these very basic questions that we have. And ultimately, you know, questions of who am I? Why do I matter? Why am I here? What's the meaning of this?

Um, questions that we all ask. They can point us in the direction of the one who can actually offer us those answers. So, they have their own articulation of that, their own way that they've said, Well, here's how I understand myself, right? Here's how I understand the world around me. But what each of them does in their own way is pointing to Christ who alone can answer those questions for us. So, if we're, you know, thinking about, What it means to be human, or, you know, what's my life going to look like, or what do I want to do for my work, or my family life? These are the kind of basic questions of life.

As we're struggling with that, I think all of these theologians, in one way or another, show us a way that they too have thought about those things. We're not the first people to ask these questions. And here are some people who have answered that, and each one of them, in a different way, but still in a consistent way, have pointed to what God has done through the personal work of Christ.

John Dickson (studio)

Theology matters even if there's no God.

That's the title of an article I wrote for the mainstream press years ago, when the Wolfhart Pannenberg (mentioned earlier) died. It was part obituary and part defence of the whole discipline of theology. Happily, it was published by ABC's The Drum, an outlet not normally given to promoting things Christian. We'll link to the full published piece in the show notes, but here's the brief version, can I say "5 Minute Pannenberg" ...

Last week saw the death of perhaps the greatest theologian of the last 50 years, Munich University's Wolfhart Pannenberg. It's as good a time as any, then, to offer a brief defence of this 'queen of the sciences' against the taunts of atheists like Richard Dawkins and Lawrence Krauss, who say that Theology is not even a 'subject', let alone a discipline in a modern university. After all, there's probably no god!

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Although I have an undergraduate degree in Theology, I am no theologian. I have found ancient history much easier—as a discipline—than theology. Why? Because theology incorporates pretty much all of the basic skills of the historian plus a ton more. Today's professional theologian will have a good knowledge of ancient languages, including Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, as well as full reading fluency in modern English and German (a requirement for all theologians today, regardless of nationality). Not only must they be across the history of both the Old and New Testaments—that's Ancient Near Eastern history and Graeco-Roman history—they will have a thorough knowledge of church history, that is, the history of thought from Augustine, through Aquinas, to the modern day greats like Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann, Colin Gunton, Miroslav Volf, and the incomparable Wolfhart Pannenberg.

That's just the beginning. Virtually all academic theologians today have advanced training in philosophy. The best theologians today also have expert knowledge of the history and philosophy of science. Yes, science. When my atheist friends have challenged me over the years about the 'conflict' between science and Christianity, I've usually directed them to the three-volume Systematic Theology by Wolfhart Pannenberg, where readers will find an interlocutor thoroughly at ease with the questions thrown up by modern physics and biology.

Practically no important field is untouched by the discipline of theology. How does brain science challenge the Western notion of the self? How does the doctrine of the Trinity find expression in some of the great classical composers? How does time relate to eternity? What does quantum mechanics say about the notion of divine freedom, and vice versa? All of these and more are proper theological topics.

All of this is why the quip that theology is not a discipline because there's probably no god sort of misses the mark, and why Lawrence Krauss' 'challenge' to name one contribution to knowledge offered by theology *entirely* misses the point.

Theology is perhaps the most comprehensive integrative discipline around. It explores all important forms of human knowledge and probes how they shed light on Christian belief and, indeed, how Christian belief might shed light on them. And given that more than two billion people today identify as Christian, these attempts to integrate human knowledge are perfectly relevant and academically sound. Christian belief is a fact; it is a phenomenon of the real world—just as Australian history is, or Shakespearean literature, or Aristotelian philosophy, or feminist studies, or anthropology, or musicology.

A true giant of human inquiry died last week. And the fact that many will never have heard of Wolfhart Pannenberg does not mean that his contribution to the life of the mind—through his countless students at Munich, as well as through his hundreds of books and published essays in multiple languages—is not truly significant. His mark

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on theology, like theology's mark on Western thought, is profound. Even if there is no god, in other words, theology remains one of the most subtle and sophisticated academic pursuits on the planet.

You can press PLAY now!!!