



Theology and Piety*

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Theology is reflection on the object of piety. Piety is a fundamental stance toward what is given in the world and human life: it is an attitude or disposition of respect, awe, and even devotion that is evoked by human experiences of dependence on powers we do not create and cannot fully master. Piety is not something esoteric; it is not to be confused with piousness—that pretentious display of religiosity that offends all of us, nor with pietism—that movement of religious life that strives to engender and sustain a high pitch of emotions. Piety is not self-stimulated; it is a response to the powers, objective to ourselves, that bring life into being and sustain it, that bear down upon us, and threaten us.

I use the term piety rather than faith. To be sure, there is a long history of theology as “faith seeking understanding.” This expression can create what are, from my point of view, erroneous perceptions of theology. Faith often is construed to be trust in the ultimate powers, and particularly a confidence that God guarantees the ultimate well-being of the human species, and even my ultimate well-being. Piety, in contrast with this, does not assume that a divine beneficence guarantees human fulfillment; it includes the possibilities of not only trust and love toward God, but also dread and anger.

Faith is sometimes construed as a deposit of revelation, a kind of knowledge that is authorized by God in such a way that it is exempt from critical scrutiny. Piety, in contrast with this, is an attitude and disposition toward a wide range of objects of human experience, and thus theology must be open to learning from data and theories about the powers that order life which come from many areas of human investigation.

Faith is sometimes contrasted with reason; the polarity invites the opinion that theology is fundamentally unreasonable, its authorization secure from

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critical evaluation, and that it is futile to develop arguments for the object of theological investigation. Piety, in contrast, invites rational justification. To be, sure, since its ultimate object is not a phenomenon like DNA, theological investigation does not use the methods of scientific investigation, and its conclusions are not susceptible to the same tests of validity. But the attitude and disposition of piety is not an unreasonable one; rational activity can provide backing and warrants for it, and can point to some features of its ultimate object.

Piety involves human affections. “True religion,” Jonathan Edwards wrote, “in a great

part consists in holy affections.”¹ This assertion, born in the turmoil of the emotionalism of the religious revivals of eighteenth century New England, was developed into signs and tests of true and false religious affections. While its elaboration was time- and culture-bound, and led to an almost nauseating introspection, the fundamental perception is correct. Religion is a matter of the affections. It is not a matter of fleeting emotions evoked by the glory of a sunset over New Mexican mesas, or by the failure to fulfill an obligation that leads to anguished guilt, though these can be religiously and theologically construed. Piety expresses deeper, more settled affections.

It takes the form of a profound sense of dependence that comes with the recognition that, for all our human achievements, the world was brought into being by powers long before the emergence of our species; that the continuation of life relies upon powers that are not fully in human control; and that the destiny of the universe is not in human hands.

Piety takes the form of a sense of gratitude. Many possibilities for human flourishing come from achievements of human culture, but the deepest necessary conditions for human flourishing are not created by man, but given. Indeed, in religious terms they are a gift, and evoke gratitude. To be sure, much human pain and suffering is caused by forces beyond human control; God is the source of human good, but God does not guarantee it. The measure of flourishing we have, the human good that we experience, has a source beyond our capacities to create. For this, gratitude is an appropriate affection.

Piety takes the form of a sense of obligation. To acknowledge our dependence on processes of life beyond full human control, to recognize that we are sustained by the care of others and that others (including the natural world) are in our care—these are aspects of experience out of which a sense of obligation arises. In biblical imagery, we are called to be responsible stewards of what is given us in nature and in society; we have obligations to discern what human actions and relationships fit our place in the larger scheme of things.

From time to time piety takes the form of a sense of remorse, which can lead to a sense of repentance. Failure to recognize our dependence on the powers that sustain and bear down upon us can lead to claims for human self-sufficiency which erode or destroy human relationships and the proper relations between human life and the natural world of which we are a part. Traditional religious language terms this “pride.” Failure to participate actively in the conduct of the affairs of our communities, to share in the nurture of our world is

¹Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University, 1959) 59.

equally a fault. Traditional religious language terms this “sloth.” For these, and other forms of “sin,” we feel remorse.

Piety takes the form of a sense of possibilities, the form of hope. Except for the darkest nights of despair, and the most disastrous catastrophes, human beings see, or seek for, possibilities to alter those conditions that oppress them, to protect themselves against destructive forces, and to sustain the conditions that support them. We have capacities of human agency; we can intentionally intervene into the course of events. Within limits we, as individuals, can strive to become what we now are not. Some of the external conditions in which we live are alterable. The powers that rule the world do not fate us; they provide conditions of possibility for human activity: for the achievements of the arts, the sciences and technology, for justice and peace.

Piety takes the form of a sense of direction. The end might be as general as human happiness; it might have the particularly religious qualities of a vision of God, of communion with God, or of honoring God. To be sure, there are many persons whose lives are impulsive, wandering, self-contradictory, reactive, and in other ways aimless. But piety opens us to vision of the place of human life in the whole of creation, and of larger ends and purposes that human life can serve.

To say something theological is to say something religious—in the sense that what we say about the ultimate power is moved and informed by piety, by affections. To play on words of John Calvin, piety is the awe and reverence induced by the acknowledgment of the powers that bring the world into being and control its destiny.² Theology seeks to construe the meaning of those powers, and ultimately *the* power that induces piety.

²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955) 1.41.