

Module 1

THEOLOGY

Thesis Statement:

Theology is a journey of faith seeking understanding. As a response to the growing gap between Christian faith and everyday life, theology aims to move the youth to a more mature understanding of their existential questions in light of faith, through integration and inculturation.



Section 1: What is Theology?

*“Them I will bring to my holy mountain
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be acceptable on my altar,
For my house shall be called
a house of prayer for all peoples.”
-Isaiah 56:7*

Section 1A - The Audience of Theology

We live in an age of indifference, cynicism and skepticism. Globalization and modernization affirm Friedrich Nietzsche’s forecast of the death of God. We can see Nietzsche’s claim to hold most true today: “I will only believe in the Christians’ Redeemer if the Christians themselves look more redeemed.”¹ A disconcerting pluralism haunts our time, where truth is relative to the interpreter. Anything can be truth, which leads many to argue that nothing is true.

In such troubling times, is there a place for theology? For whom is fundamental theology intended today? As a search for truth and meaning in the world, it is a field open to all humans endeavoring purposeful existence. It is for both the believer and the nonbeliever. In other words, theology is for all peoples. Why do we say this? As human beings living together on the same earth, we are inspired by the same hopes and seized by the same terrors. Our common experience allows us to resonate with others’ experience of the world (the phenomenological Lifeworld, or *Lebenswelt*) and keep us connected, where in faith or unfaith. However, theology works in a specific way to these two sets of audiences.

For believers, we can say theology acts as faith seeking understanding (Latin *fides quaerens intellectum*). The term was originally coined by Saint Anselm of Canterbury, elaborating the role of theology saying that, “I do not seek to understand in order to believe. I shall not understand unless I believe.”² For the believer doing theology, faith is a prerequisite, however big or small that initial faith (Latin, *initium fidei*, literally “the beginnings of faith”) might be. Armed with whatever inchoate faith he or she might have, the believer begins a quest for deeper reflection and explication of the reality of faith and God. As Anne Sexton puts in her poem, Small Wire:

My faith
is a great weight
hung on a small wire,
as doth the spider
hang her baby on a thin web,
as doth the vine,
twiggy and wooden,
hold up grapes
like eyeballs,
as many angels
dance on the head of a pin.

God does not need
too much wire to keep Him there,
just a thin vein,
with blood pushing back and forth in
it,
and some love.
As it has been said:
Love and a cough
cannot be concealed.
Even a small cough.
Even a small love.
So if you have only a thin wire,

¹ Cf. Rino Fisichella, “Fundamental Theology II: Whom Is It For”, in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. René Latourelle & Rino Fisichella (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 335-6.

² Anselm of Canterbury, *St. Anselm’s Proslogion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

For nonbelievers, theology is a form of appreciation of the capacity of human beings to acquire faith. It is by no means a form of indoctrination, in no way is it an attempt to convert people into Christianity or Catholicism. Rather, it is an invitation to take a look. Observe our practice, study our dogma, learn from our faith. It can be said that the Christian faith can be studied by outside observers as a kind of philosophy, while others may view it as immersing in a different culture. As humans with the same capacities, my capacity to believe reveals that you yourself, even as a nonbeliever, are equipped to comprehend the logic of faith. It is my hope that by the end of this theological journey, that even if you still do not believe, that the knowledge imparted to you will have an impact on the way you live, even in simple and small ways. As we've already determined, a small wire is enough.

Section 1B - Youth as Theological Audience

We have determined that all peoples can do theology, but amongst all these possible audiences, theology resonates most with the problems of the youth. Theology is especially important for the youth. Why? Youth is a time of great self-discovery and self-concern. It is at this point where the search for meaning and understanding is at its peak.

At no other time is the establishment and security of the self necessarily so deeply in question. Most of the energies of the self are directed toward self-establishment and self-securing. In adolescence, more than at any other time, people use others as mirrors in which to see themselves. That is why solidified peer groups and uncomplicated ideologies are so important and attractive to the youth. Adolescence is noted for stereotyping and conventionality, even if the particular conventions young persons adopt seem unconventional from an adult point of view.³

Young people of this day and age of postmodernity are called *millennials*. These youth are different kind, a whole generation beyond their parents who grew up in the era of Vatican II. The millennial generation is the generation of individuals born in the late 80's all the way to the early 2000's.⁴ The millennial generation has been characterized as non-cynical (with a deep optimism and idealism for change and reform in the world) and civic minded (with a capacity to be propelled to action when they see change is needed). They believe in political engagement, reorganization and transformation.⁵ Because of the Internet, youth culture is becoming a global culture rather than just a national and regional culture, and therefore, they become more in tune with the problems and concerns of other people, despite cultural, geographic and national borders.

One can argue that what the youth take in now, ideology-wise, is determined by what they see, hear, read, watch, and surf. Albert Nolan speaks of the youth's "fascination with vampires, aliens, and magic, with the occult, the supernatural and the preternatural."⁶ This is actually a symptom of something graver, that by shifting towards these new fascinations, they are moving towards horizons originally satisfied by the mythic and prophetic foundations of faith, particularly Christianity. At the heart of the matter, the youth are searching for meaning because for them the trust in what religion once offered has died. But it does not mean that their search for meaning has ceased. Rather, they are now searching for that meaning elsewhere, where it is most accessible, most interesting, most fantastic, most gratifying.

It can be said as well that the youth are very much aware of their eventual transition into adulthood, and are thus very future-oriented. They are beginning to ask questions concerning direction, vocation, career choices, commitment and self-understanding. However, it is a general feeling among the youth that when searching for the answers to these questions they have, theology is not the source for answers.

³ Craig Dykstra, *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator's Alternative to Kohlberg* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1981), 141.

⁴ Cf. Neil Howe, William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 3-4.

⁵ Cf. Eric Greenberg, *Generation We: How Millennial Youth Are Taking Over America and Changing the World* (Emeryville: Pachatusan, 2008), 26-34.

⁶ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 5.

...the temporal structure of youth is future-laden. The preparation for success in terms of acquiring knowledge and therewith power seems relatively unnecessary because ideas and character are overrated. The lack of experience signifies that youth has no idea what he can do, what others are able to do, or what in general can be done: he lacks awareness of the tenacity of facticity, that factuality that inheres in the human condition. He lacks awareness of the uncontrollability of human affairs. He lives for the future, but exuberantly, over-expectantly.⁷

In fact, millennials are incredibly hopeful of the future. In an article about the millennial generation in *Time* magazine, it was characterized how the members of the millennial generation are “so hopeful about the future you might think they hadn’t heard of something called the Great Recession.”⁸

Take note though that young people are not so much antagonistic as they are indifferent to religious education. This is partly because they feel that it is not really concerned with their lives. Take for instance a study done by Graham Rossiter, where he presented the idea of an ‘issue-oriented content’ in religious education curriculum. This is because in his study, religious education failed to engage students sufficiently at the level of contemporary spiritual and moral issues. In other words, they do not adequately touch the spirituality of young people - the areas of life where they are confronted by its spiritual and moral dimension.

In fact, it is especially possible for theology to engage students by drawing from the youth’s human experience of being immersed in the globalized world. Popular culture - music, fiction, movies, the internet - can become a new avenue of grace that theology may use to further the message of the Good News to young people. Not everything about popular culture is graceful, but by extracting that which is, it becomes easier to touch the lives of one’s intended audience. Human experience is a key source for theological discourse. By drawing from the day-to-day experience of the people, one is able to fully integrate and inculturate the faith into their lives.

Eg. From Jan Frederick Cruz, an Economics Lecturer of the Ateneo de Manila University had this to say about popular culture and its role in the public sphere: “In Thailand [with regards to the 2014 Thai coup d’état], the protestors use the three-finger symbol – a Hunger Games reference – to symbolize opposition against the military junta. Popular culture is often derided as crass, tasteless, or lacking in aesthetic value. On the other hand, pop culture’s ‘popularity’ can be a reflection of shared sentiments or a framework for collective meaning-construction, a repository of symbols and gestures whose meaning is well-understood and which can be channeled by the people to the public space when the time calls for it.”

As a final note, Fr. John Fuellenbach, while working with Filipino youth who toyed with the idea of joining communist radicals in the hills, asked what was so attractive about the communist movement. One of the youth answered, “Maoism provides us young people in our present situation with four essential things: (1) a unified and coherent vision of the world, history and reality; (2) a definite goal to work for, live for, and die for; (3) a call to all people for a common fraternity; and, (4) a sense of commitment and a mission to spread the good news that there is hope for the hopeless. The fact is that the Christian faith in all its beauty seems to be unable to provide us with such a vision.”⁹

Direction, commitment, call - these are all within the vision of the Christian faith. Why then do the youth still search elsewhere, when what they are searching for is already found within the Christian vision? Maybe there is a way to present this vision to the youth that will be more palpable and acceptable, and that is the modern challenge of the Church in this new time.

⁷ Donald Vanderburg, “Life-phases and Values,” *Educational Forum* 32 (1968): 296.

⁸ Josh Sanburn, “Millennials: The Next Great Generation?” *Time*, May 9, 2013. <http://nation.time.com/2013/05/09/millennials-the-next-greatest-generation> (accessed May 13, 2014).

⁹ John Fuellenbach, “The Challenge of Jesus’ Message Today” in *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 1-22.

Section 1C - Theology as Unity and Diversity

One question that comes out from the attempt at defining theology is whether theology is more like science (in matters of universal agreement in all logical truths) or more like philosophy (with its multiplicity of views). However, choosing one or the other will greatly reduce the essence of theology. Let us take a look at the International Theological Commission's definition of theology in their latest released document.

“Theology is scientific reflection on the divine revelation which the Church accepts by faith as universal saving truth. The sheer fullness and richness of that revelation is too great to be grasped by any one theology, and in fact gives rise to multiple theologies as it is received in diverse ways by human beings. In its diversity, nevertheless, theology is united in its service of the one truth of God. The unity of theology, therefore does not require uniformity, but rather a single focus on God's Word and an explication of its innumerable riches by theologies able to dialogue and communicate with one another. Likewise, the plurality of theologies should not imply fragmentation or discord, but rather the exploration in myriad ways of God's one saving truth.”¹⁰

In this manner, it can be said that in aspects of fundamental doctrine, we must be all united under one common understanding. For instance, in the central belief in the Resurrection, all theologians and all members of the Catholic Church are united in faith of such an essential tenet. However, one must also affirm that there are many perspectives that will help enrich such an understanding of the Resurrection (take for instance a liberationist perspective, or a feminist perspective).

Theology, in unity and diversity, is to be called the *scientia Dei*, the science of faith:

Theology is therefore *scientia Dei* in as much as it is a rational participation in the knowledge that God has of himself and of all things.

A criterion of Catholic theology is that, precisely as the science of faith, ‘faith seeking understanding [*fides quaerens intellectum*]’, it has a rational dimension. Theology strives to understand what the Church believes, why it believes, and what can be known *sub specie Dei*. As *scientia Dei*, theology aims to understand in a rational and systematic manner the saving truth of God.¹¹

Like science, theology must live in unity of the essential fundamental principles. However, just like science, theology is to be done in a creative fashion, acquiring a diversity and liberty in the perspectives and methods to be used towards theological discourse.

Thus, always remember this phrase when dealing with theological unity and diversity:

In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas¹²

“In essentials, unity, in non-essentials, liberty, but in all things, charity.”

¹⁰ International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria* (2011), paragraph 5.

¹¹ Ibid., paragraph 18 and 19.

¹² Archbishop Marco Antonio de Dominis, *De republica ecclesiastica libri X*, (London, 1617), 676.

Section 2: What method shall we use for Theology?

Section 2A - Is Philosophy Enough?

The first question that we must ask regarding method would primarily stem from the relationship theology has with another very important field in the humanities: Philosophy. The primary question is this. Is Philosophy enough?

Philosophy is theology's sister field. Philosophy helps greatly in dealing with theological discourse. They ask similar questions regarding the human being, the human condition and the world in which that human lives.

Philosophy is concerned with fundamental and comprehensive questions. It deals with the great questions, questions concerning the whence, the what, and the how of things, the destiny and purpose of our life, questions concerning the why and what-for, the reasons [Gründe] and mysteries [Abgründe] of what, for lack of a better term, we call reality, questions concerning being and nothingness, the open paths and errant trails of thinking, willing, feeling, and acting.¹³

In this case, philosophy and theology appear as equals with similar tasks, but they are equals that approach seeking answers to similar questions with different methodologies. Theology uses its own distinct sources and its own set of fundamental truths and hierarchies to such truths.

For example, Theology always answers existential questions in the light of faith, and draws from its unique set of primary sources like Scripture and Tradition, coupled with a secondary source of Human Experience. On the other hand, Philosophy, on the other hand, draws from its rich tradition of thought that expanded from Greek thinkers in the ancient times, moving through the Medieval and Renaissance philosophers, where advancements in empiricism and rationalism grew. Even today, contemporary philosophers continue to reshape the philosophical process. Theology and Philosophy may appear similar initially, but they use different means to the same ends.

Eduardo Mendieta gives eight distinct definitions of philosophy, each can also be applied to the theological method as well. The very final definition can be seen as the union point between theology and philosophy.

1. Love of learning - philo + sophia
2. Second order questioning - questioning the questions raised
3. Pedagogy of the mind - the proper method of teaching, "a way of proceeding," eg. logic
4. Always a failure - the world is always "mystery" and knowledge is never static. eg. the good back in the Greek times meant "being a good citizen." But come medieval times, the good meant following the moral code of Christianity. Therefore, is there really a true "goodness"?
5. A lesson in humility - reveals the limitedness of the questioner
6. Capacity to stand open without prejudice before the world's unexpectedness
7. Understanding with moral value - not everything studied in philosophy is about morality, but everything dealt with in philosophy eventually has some moral weight or consequence.
8. A holy voyage

The final definition is most vital to our use in this course. It would be best to define theology as "*a holy voyage, a Heilsweg, a pilgrim's progress.*"¹⁴ It is an constant inquiry into one's faith, and the relationship between the human being and God. When we speak of holy voyage, however, we do not mean that only those who are prayerful and religious can do theology. So one must not think that holiness is reserved for a select few, for priests, for nuns, for the religious or for theologians alone. Holiness is for everyone, and for everything. In this manner the whole created reality's goal is to be holy.

¹³ Holger Zabarowski, "Towards a Phenomenology of Dwelling," *Communio* (Fall 2005), 492.

¹⁴ Eduardo Mendieta, "Society's Religion: The Rise of Social Theory, Globalization, and the Invention of Religion" in *Religions/Globalizations: Theories and Cases* (Duke University Press, 2001), 53.

Holiness here means two things: (1) *shalom* (שָׁלוֹם), or wholeness; and (2) *kedushah* (קְדוּשָׁה), the characteristic of being set apart. Together, it means that it is an ongoing process of finding our place in the world, our wholeness set apart – that which will make us whole.

Let us examine the twofold understanding of holiness in greater detail in this section:

SHALOM (שָׁלוֹם)

Shalom or “peace” is how Jews define the highest aspiration for the world in which we live in. It can be characterized as “the dream” in Judaism. It is the value that is placed above all others. Rabbinic teaching describes it as the only “vessel” through which God’s blessing can flow into this world. *Shalom* is the value within the individual person as well. In our complex world, we are too torn between conflicting goals, values, dreams and aspirations. *Shalom* is related to the Hebrew word “*shelemut*,” meaning “wholeness.” We need to set our course in life and live it wholly. *Shalom* with oneself and with God are impossible without one another.¹⁵

Shalom is not just a dream of humans, but also a dream of God. God has a vision for all creation. That persistent vision of joy, well-being, harmony and prosperity is not captured in any single word or idea in the Bible, and a cluster of words is required to express its many dimensions and subtle nuances. But the term that is in current discussions used to summarize this vision is shalom. As a term, it bears tremendous freight – the freight of a dream of God that resists all tendencies to division, hostility, fear, drivenness and misery. It runs blatantly against our favorite divisions – black-white, rich-poor, male-female, gay-straight, East-West, old-young – finding them unreal and uninteresting. Shalom is the substance of the biblical vision of one community embracing all creation.¹⁶

KEDUSHAH (קְדוּשָׁה)

A primary meaning of *kadosh* is “dedicated” or “set aside.” When sacrifices were offered in the Temple in ancient Jewish practice, anything set aside for offering to God was declared *kodesh* (holy). This need and ability to make things holy, which is found in all religions, bears witness to our creation in the image of God (*tselem elohim*). *Kadosh* also has about it a sense of transcendence; the holiness of God is of a depth that we can never fathom. The best-known Biblical designation of God as “holy” is that of Isaiah 6, where the prophet envisions the angels singing “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is filled with His glory!” When this verse is recited in part of the Jewish daily liturgy of *kedushah*, it is customary to stand on tiptoe and stretch upward three times, as though we were rising to grasp the unreachable holiness of God. Although *kadosh* is the single attribute that properly belongs to God alone, humans share in God’s holiness by following the ethics of proper living: loving your neighbor, protecting the stranger, caring for the poor. God’s holiness may indeed be a mystery beyond us, but we realize it in this world by simple and concrete acts of human living. Remember, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” (Leviticus 19:2)¹⁷

¹⁵ Arthur Green, *These Are the Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999), 170.

¹⁶ Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom* (New York: United Church Press, 1983), 15-25.

¹⁷ Arthur Green, *These Are the Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999), 129-130.

Remember: “Our minds are finite, and yet even in these circumstances of finitude we are surrounded by possibilities that are infinite, and the purpose of life is to grasp as much as we can out of that infinitude.”¹⁸

To answer the initial question, “**Is Philosophy enough?**,” my response will come in the form of a very Atenean answer: Yes and No.

In a sense, One can actually answer the same questions Theology seeks to answer using Philosophical methods and tools alone. However, in another sense, we can also argue that a richer answer might be drawn if we couple philosophical inquiry with the answers that faith offers as well in the theological realm. Therefore, think of it through the metaphor of the second opinion. In as much as going to one doctor (or mechanic, or building contractor) might give you an already acceptable and proper solution to your inquiry, a second opinion from another professional might help fill in the gaps, or reaffirm what has already been said, or in other cases, provide a different perspective, such that the answer you are looking for might become richer and enlivened. In this case, Theology acts as that second opinion to existential questions, but always in the light of faith.

Section 2B - Practical Theology

What about the methodology of theological discourse? What kind of theology is proper in this academic environment of the Ateneo. We must put on the spirit of **Practical Theology** when engaging theological discourse. What is practical theology? Practical theology is a way of doing theology that highlights the importance of the relationship between theory and practice. What we know affects what we do. Similarly, what we do shapes what we know as well. There is no “one way” street from theory to practice, but rather a network of highways that run between what is theoretical and what is practical.¹⁹

Practical theology is a proper avenue for responding to the need of catechesis for young people in the Philippines. According to the National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines, catechetical methods for the Philippines today, especially for the youth, must be geared towards integration, inculturation and community-formation.

Practical theology is appropriate for this task because:

1. **Practical theology is integrated.** “People come to faith and grow in faith and in the life of faith by participating in the practices of the Christian community.” It is in a theology of practice that Catholic educators can engage believers, whose journeys of faith are in itself a living practice. Practical theology is very much grounded on the actual living out of the Christian faith, particularly in the living out through Christian practice, and thus coincides very well with the experiential integration approach that is demanded by the new catechesis espoused by the National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines.
2. **Practical theology is inculturated.** By taking a look at how practices are done within the particular setting in life of the Filipino, they become catechized “perceiv[ing] the ‘Good News’ as addressed to them personally, in their own uniqueness and concrete Philippine context”. For instance, many practices, like the Bisita Iglesia during Holy Week, or the Simbang Gabi during the Advent season, are distinctly Filipino, and are familiar practices that can be source of catechetical discussion.
3. **Finally, practical theology is community-forming.** Dorothy Bass beautifully defines a Christian practice as “a complex pattern of human activity, engaged in with others over time, in and through which life together takes shape in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ.” Practices, therefore, are necessarily social in character, thus having the chance to form communities.

¹⁸ Quote by Alfred North Whitehead.

¹⁹ For greater understanding regarding this portion of the lesson, it is suggested that the student read the article Terry Veling, “What is Practical Theology?,” in *Practical Theology: On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (Markynoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 3-22.

Section 2C - Hermeneutic Phenomenology

To achieve theology that is practical, and grounded in the actual experience of the person doing theology, one must approach their encounter of faith through a simultaneous method of phenomenology and hermeneutics.

If we truly understand the significance of human experience as foundational to theology, then we must be able to describe this experience we go through. This is what phenomenology is. Pre-reflectively, before any attempt at interpreting the meaning of experience, we must be able to say with clarity what the experience is first and foremost.

Phenomenology does this as the study of the lifeworld. Tell the story first. Phenomenology asks the pertinent pre-reflective questions of the who, what, where, when and how of experience.

The actual reflective questions, the why and the how come of experience, comes as a result of **hermeneutics**, the art and science of interpretation. Hermeneutics is the process that extracts meaning from the experience described and defined in phenomenology. Once the story is told, the story is given meaning via lenses of interpretation.

Together, **hermeneutic phenomenology** is the bridging of experience and meaning. Tell the story, and show what the story means. Everything in this world can be subject to hermeneutic phenomenology, whether you actual human experiences in your daily life, or the lives and experiences of other people around you. The various text that can be being "read" in this approach is practically limitless, as fiction, poetry, movies, history, and even the faith experiences can be subjected to hermeneutic phenomenology.

In theology, the most familiar kind of hermeneutic phenomenology that is being done is **biblical exegesis**, the art of describing and interpreting the texts and narratives of the Bible. Through exegesis one can take a look at the attempt at describing the stories, not just happening within the biblical text, but also of the stories that are beyond the text. These includes phenomenologies of the context of the writers and audience of the text, as well as actual phenomenology of the text itself, especially when dealing with Biblical narratives. Exegesis is also hermeneutics, because it attempts to interpret what these stories mean, often through the interpretation of symbol, metaphor and rhetorical devices present within the text. And it comes full circle when the hermeneutical interpretation of the text is made relevant once more to the actual human experience of the reader and interpreter. Thus, the story of human experience in the Bible is bridged and connected with the story of human experience of the readers and users of the Bible. Thus, a theology that is practical.

Section 3: How does Theology shape our worldview?

Section 3A - Necessity of a Vision

Why is it necessary to have a vision? At its core, a vision allows life to acquire meaning and direction. Ask yourself: "What keeps me waking up every day? What do I want my life to become?" To make a change towards something meaningful, a vision is required. A vision allows reality to become graceful. *"And in the end, it's not the years in your life that counts... It's the life in your years."*²⁰

Another reason for the importance of vision is that vision is what guides a human in their quest for answers to existential questions. What are existential questions? These are questions regarding the very nature and purpose of existence, especially of our own human existence. Such questions include:

1. Who am I? (e.g. Philosophy of the Human Person, Ontology, Psychology, Anthropology)
2. What is the world? (e.g. Phenomenology, Metaphysics)
3. How can I be happy? (e.g. Aesthetics, Epistemology of Happiness)
4. What should I do with my life? (e.g. Theology of Vocation)
5. How do I make right choices? (e.g. Moral Theology, Ethics, Political Science)
6. Where do I belong? (e.g. Philosophy of Human Society, Sociology)
7. Why do we strive when life is so short? (e.g. Theodicy, Eschatology)

²⁰ Quote by Abraham Lincoln.

In theology, the vision we equip when we do hermeneutic phenomenology, the lens by which we see existence, is mythic vision. Why do we need a mythic understanding when we look at our life? The mythic gives an aspect to our life that is charged with meaning, and reality becomes graceful when we believe we are called towards an eternal horizon of meaning and value. Stephen Larsen calls this a “mythological seeing through,”

“To see mythically... is not just to fantasize richly... The mythically awake imagination would rather see through the ordinary-seeming surface of everyday life to discover the “secret cause,” the mythic archetypal patterns beneath... Mythical forms light up our world; they are the self-luminous forms that arouse psychological motives and incite behavior... Ultimately our mythological seeing through should transform us, not into cynics, but into believers of a new kind - in the reality and ubiquity of spiritual experience and in the endless creativity of human beings in the face of it.... a whole psyche perceives a wholesome universe, when one looks into any mythology one finds a wisdom tradition embedded among its images.”²¹

This “*mythic seeing through*” opens the imagination beyond the created reality. In this manner, we can say mythic seeing is holistic, and that we put things back together, allowing us to glimpse the deeper reality and deeper goodness of the whole of creation, and in this we can see the “light beyond light,” God. (It is very Ignatian to see God in all things, something that we can apply very much to our daily lives.)

Think about Dumbledore’s statement to Harry in the final book of the series: “Of course it is happening inside your head... but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?”²²

We must distinguish however between mythology classically understood and the Old Testament genres. Thorir Kr. Thordarson summarizes this generally held position of most Biblical scholars:

“Mythology has been discarded in the Hebrew Scriptures. In mythological thinking, the beings of myth lord it over the lives of men. But in the Old Testament, the world of mythology has been exchanged for a world of freedom. Man is a partner of God through a bond of love and kinship.”²³

When we speak of the biblical narrative, drama and poetry, we do not speak of “myth” but of the “mythic.” Of this mythic language we can say that : “It evokes in our minds another dimension from our ‘ordinary’ experience. It is the dimension of being suspended, as it were, between heaven and earth and yet partaking of both at the same time.”²⁴ Transcendent mystery is depicted in anthropomorphic form. Therefore, we can speak of the mythic as that which represents the deep truths about the world, nature and human existence, in form of traditional narrative and imagery.²⁵

²¹ Stephen Larsen, *The Mythic Imagination* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1996: first published by Bantam Books), 50-67 *passim*.

²² J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

²³ Thorir Kr. Thordarson, “The Mythic Dimension: Hermeneutical Remarks on the Language of the Psalter,” *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 24, Fasc. 2 (April 1974), 219.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.

²⁵ Roger Haight, “Sin and Grace” in *Systematic Theology Volume I*, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Calvin eds. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 90.

Section 3B - Dark Horizons

Let us begin with a phenomenological endeavor of suicide. What pushes a person to commit suicide? When a person experiences the lack of meaning in life and desires to discontinue it. Often this is coupled with physical and emotional pains where a person is forced into a situation of choice: is the pain of living greater than the pain of dying?

This is an example of a dark horizon, a horizon which refuses to see any light in creation, sometimes including blindness to one's own light (or in some cases blinded by too much light in the self). This is the consequence of the lack of mythic seeing.

Without mythic seeing, we lose both spirit and sense of life's endless possibility for meaning. an example of such a view is Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, in which he claims:

"Reality alone is reliable... Dreams, expectations and hopes serve to define man only as deceptive dreams, abortive hopes, expectations unfulfilled."²⁶

An existential horizon like Sartre's is a dark horizon, one with little or no meaning or value. By adopting this kind of thinking, it would seem as though human life is not lit up by anything. We lose sight of that glimmer of light, because the extent of our seeing is darkness.

In philosophy, a variety of approaches that may lead to dark horizon (though not always necessarily the case), include:

1. **Existentialism** - The philosophy that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It is the view that human beings define their own meaning in life. The most famous existentialist is Jean-Paul Sartre, His main philosophical point is that human beings are "condemned to be free," a reflection of his belief that the world and existence is indifferent to human living. Thus, it is pointless to believe in destiny, or to the hidden meaning behind the world. The human makes up meaning for himself in the face of an apparently meaningless and absurd world.
2. **Absurdism** - The belief that it is impossible for human beings to understand the essential meaning and purpose of the world and human existence. This belief, however, affirms that there is essential meaning and purpose in the world and existence, but that it is impossible to comprehend. All efforts to find meaning will ultimately fail due to the limitedness of human beings. One of the most famous absurdists is the great thinker Albert Camus, who claims that humans should embrace the absurd conditions of existence while defiantly continuing to explore and search meaning, despite it being a rather Sisyphian endeavor. Another important work of absurdist literature is Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*.
3. **Nihilism** - the most dangerous of the three. This is the belief that nothing in the world has purpose or value. It is a radical skepticism of existence, condemning all human action as pointless. The most famous philosopher associated with nihilism (although himself not identifying as one) is Friedrich Nietzsche, who speaks of nihilism as an emptying of the world and human existence of meaning, purpose, comprehensible truth and essential value.

Section 3C - Can Mythic Horizons Answer Existential Questions?

The mythic is that which takes us to the eternal and the transcendent. Our lives have an eternal dimension to them, and by ever searching the eternal, we forever wish to transcend ourselves. Through love, trust and courage, we are drawn to something beyond ourselves. Remember, we are "a little less than angels," with one foot as creatures on earth, and another foot in the eternal.²⁷

²⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1948), 495.

²⁷ Cf. Psalms 8:5

Reality becomes graceful when we get the sense of the eternal, and this sense takes three forms:

1) Sense of Eternal Value

Intrinsic to everything created is a value that is eternal. The fact that God sustains each and every part of creation into existence means that he continues to care for each one, and such a love highlights how valuable each one of creation is to God.

“Birds don’t fly because they have wings; they have wings because they fly.”

2) Sense of Eternal Purpose

Everything has a purpose (counter to existentialists, absurdists and nihilists). We have to search for and sense that purpose which brings us to the eternal. It does not have to be a grand design. Everyone has a part to play. *“Life is not about things happening to you, or even about making things happen. Life is about giving birth to a new self and a new world.”*

3) Sense of the Eternal Thou

When your ultimate set of values is one charged with meaning, rather than a limited finite one, you will have the sense of the Eternal Thou, the other. This is both understanding the sense of the “other” (other people, the created reality, etc.) and the completely “Other” (God).

The eternal thou can refer to other human beings (whether friends, family and even strangers), other living things (animals and plants), other created reality (the earth), and even vocations and advocacies (education, health, justice). The eternal Thou refers solely to God. Our whole lives become purposeful and fulfilling because we direct it to the eternal thou, and in doing so, directing it to the eternal Thou.

To expound on this dual nature of the thou/Thou, we will borrow some ideas from the philosopher Martin Buber. In his classic, *I and Thou*, he explains that every “you” we speak contains within it echoes of “the eternal You.” This insight came to him because he was thinking in Hebrew (Martin Buber was an Austrian-born Israeli Jew).

The Hebrew word for “you” is *atah* (אתה). Every *atah*, for the hearer sensitive to Hebrew, bears within it the *atah* that is said when one turns to God in prayer. The first two letters of *atah* are *aleph* (א) and *tav* (ת), these two form the beginning and the end of the Hebrew alphabet. Since the mystical masters believe that God created all the worlds by combinations of letters, *aleph* and *tav* can be seen to stand for all Creation: All that ever was or will be comes about only through the letters from aleph through tav. (This is something like Jesus’ saying, using the Greek alphabet, “I am the alpha and omega,” meaning “I am the beginning and the end.”). Together, *aleph* and *tav* form the word *et* (את) which, grammatically, is a participle used for direct objects. *Et* is a thing, an object, an “it.”

The third letter of *atah* is *heh* (ה) and it is a letter often used to stand for the name of God. Add God’s name to *aleph* and *tav* and the word comes alive. With the *heh* added (even though *heh* is nothing but a breath!), the word is no longer “it,” but “You.”²⁸ With *atah*, we address the various eternal realities around us, not anymore as inanimate, abstract and unimportant, but rather diaphanous and alive! In the eternal thou around us, we find traces of the eternal Thou.

At the same time, our relationship to the eternal Thou isn’t just one way. Insofar as our lives flow toward the eternal Thou, so too does the eternal Thou direct Himself to us. God then becomes the constant companion of the human being in his journey of life, a constant, even if we often forget to notice. Let us look at the following poem for some inspiration on this matter:

²⁸ Arthur Green, *These Are the Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999), 7-8.

Autumn
by Rainer Maria Rilke

*The leaves are falling, falling as if from far up,
as if orchards were dying high in space.
Each leaf falls as if it were motioning "no."*

*And tonight the heavy earth is falling
away from all other stars in the loneliness.*

*We're all falling. This hand here is falling.
And look at the other one. It's in them all.*

*And yet there is Someone, whose hands
infinitely calm, holding up all this falling.*

All things end in death, but greater than all this, there is someone who gently holds us in his hands. This is about having faith, believing things we cannot see. This is why we believe in things such as friendship, love and God. When we start dying to ourselves, and start living to the others, to the "Thou," that is when we truly *live*.

Summary

"While we cannot wholly know God, all the same there is much that we can know. Our problem is that in coming to know God and in speaking about God we have to use human language - it's all we have. The problem is compounded because, in this age of science and technology, our language is becoming more and more "earthbound": strictly related to what can be scientifically determined and proved, the "nuts and bolts" kind of stuff. Our consciousness is so largely shaped by our earthbound language that anything that cannot that anything that cannot be described in scientific terms tends to lose its meaning for us...

Mystery cannot be trapped in scientific categories; we cannot easily bring it down to earth, so to speak, domesticate it, control it, which is what we are always trying to do. We need a language of symbol and metaphor, a language that leaves room for the poetic and aesthetic, a language that lifts us beyond the drab and the mundane and points us in the direction of the transcendent."²⁹

* * *

Late have I loved you, O beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved you! . . . You called and cried to me and broke upon my deafness; and you sent forth your beam and shone upon me, and chased away my blindness; you breathed fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and do not pant for you; I tasted you and I now hunger and thirst for you; you touched me and I now burned for your peace.

-St. Augustine of Hippo

²⁹ Ian Knox, *Theology for Teachers* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1999), 17-29.