

**THE CHRISTIAN  
UNDERSTANDING  
OF GOD**

**THEO 331 – week 7**

## **RESPONSES TO CLASSICAL THEISM**

- **Since the 1500s, the classical Christian understanding of God has been severely challenged.**
  - **Some of these challenges were more to the religious institutions than to the understanding of God, but included both.**
  - **Other challenges were truly theological and emerged within the Christian tradition.**

# **THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION**

- **The Protestant Reformation can be said to have set the theological stage for contemporary debates on God.**
- **Martin Luther's contribution was to ask the question: How are we saved?**
  - His key focus was in the act of faith in the individual.
- **John Calvin's contribution was his theology of predestination.**
  - If God knows everything, and is completely sovereign, then even our salvation or damnation has already been foretold.

# **PHILOSOPHICAL SHIFTS**

- **The modern and post-modern periods in Western thought have been characterized by attempts to grapple with Nominalism.**
  - **Nominalism is a philosophical doctrine that challenges the idea that true knowledge of the nature of a thing can be communicated by properly crafted definitions.**
  - **According to Nominalism we cannot escape from our dependence on words, which are themselves arbitrary labels for things, and so a cycle of scepticism sets in.**

# PHILOSOPHICAL SHIFTS

- **The philosophy of René Descartes (d. 1650) is generally held to be the start of a new era in philosophy: the Modern period.**
  - **Descartes sought to find an irrefutable truth upon which to base a new philosophical approach.**
  - **His conclusion: *cogito ergo sum*, i.e. “I think, therefore I am”.**
  - **Note: this conclusion actually goes beyond its own method, and establishes a hidden bias in favour of free will over intelligence.**

# PHILOSOPHICAL SHIFTS

- **Modern philosophy is generally characterized by a focus on the philosophy of knowledge (epistemology) rather than the philosophy of nature (e.g. metaphysics)**
  - **That being said, theories of knowledge generally contain an implicit understanding of the nature of the so-called “real world” (i.e. the thing to be known).**
  - **A huge number of new philosophical schools of thought has emerged since this period, each with its own influence on theology. It is not an exaggeration to say that most theological debates today are not really theological, but philosophical.**

## **CHALLENGES TO WHO GOD IS**

- **Deism: stemming from the scientific revolution**
- **Pantheism: Hegel and the dialectic**
- **Materialistic atheism: Marx, Nietzsche, Comte, Russel, the Existentialists...**
- **Process philosophy (and theology) as expounded by Alfred North Whitehead**

## **CHALLENGES TO HOW GOD ACTS**

- **At the heart of this set of challenges is our understanding of God's providence and governance.**
- **One key challenge is found in the problem of evil, summarized in this statement:**
  - **If suffering is bad, and God is all-good, and God is all-powerful, why does evil exist?**
- **A second key challenge comes in the affirmation of freedom over predestination.**
- **In both cases, rebellion against God can seem like a viable option.**



## **CHALLENGES TO HOW WE RELATE TO GOD**

- **The scepticism of the Modern (and post-modern) periods led to major questions of how we can have any authoritative knowledge at all.**
  - Religious authorities, whether people or books (like the Bible) have come under intense scrutiny.
  - Liberal Protestantism's focus on *Gefühl* ("feeling") as a criterion of subjective truth has placed a new emphasis on individual sincerity.
- **With the relativisation of creeds, the role of religious communities in our relationship with God comes under severe criticism.**