

“I wish I had had this book when I began teaching theology! It is grounded as it invites ‘everyday theologians’ to the reflective task of thinking about their lives theologically. With characteristic humility, Colin Harris writes a sophisticated yet accessible primer on the process of theological construction. He wisely understands that humans are relentlessly theological, and his thinking calls us to a more disciplined approach to interpreting our lives in a communal and dynamic way. I recommend this for both classroom and congregational settings.”

—Molly Marshall, *President, United Theological Seminary*

“Colin Harris’ readable new book reminds me of the four gospels. Like the Gospels, his book is overflowing with parables that are delightful as well as insightful, and it offers an understanding of faith as living in a covenantal relationship with God. Harris is writing especially to Christians who appreciate the religion of their childhood but who, as they read the Bible and as they experience life, find themselves on a journey toward a more mature and consistent understanding of their faith. This book is a manual of wisdom for that journey. It is a gentle wisdom, modest, compassionate, and intensely biblical. I am especially drawn to Harris’ highly original suggestion that theology is a pilgrimage toward community.”

—Fisher Humphreys, *Professor of Divinity Emeritus, Samford University*

“Colin Harris, in his book, *Keys for Everyday Theologians*, has done what he, an experienced teacher, does best. He has laid out principles of theological study for ‘inquiring minds who want to know more.’ Far from the perspective of a ‘stuffy’ academic theologian, his goal as both teacher and author is to help students/readers broaden and deepen their understanding of the religious dimension of their lives to help them be better equipped to deal with life’s challenges. Casting the faith as a ‘covenantal relationship,’ his ‘keys’ are accompanied by pertinent, easy-to-understand examples of what they mean and how to use them. Understanding that the lens through which we all see issues of faith is unique to our own perspectives, always giving us an incomplete view, this book is a valuable resource for any Bible or faith student who wants to develop more effective ways of reading, studying, and applying scripture to their lives.”

—Clarissa Strickland, *Retired Manager of Reference and Referral, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*

“Colin Harris has not only taught religious studies in college classrooms for 50 years, but he has also been a Sunday school teacher for most of that time. His passion for helping people from all walks of life to develop a working understanding of what one’s faith means and how it is lived in real time is matched by his ability to express his thoughts and ideas in ways that everyone comprehends. What Dr. Harris has done for students in his classes, he has also done for everyone who reads *Keys for Everyday Theologians*. Basic concepts, perspectives, and discernments are clearly explained and illustrated, enabling each reader to give voice to their experiences with God and to share the implications of this covenantal relationship with others. The keys identified in this book will provide a framework for dealing with the challenges, questions, and opportunities that emerge from the faith journey so that every pilgrim can become a theologian. I highly recommend *Keys for Everyday Theologians* to all seeking to understand faith in a healthy way and to discuss what is learned in a helpful way.”

—Bob Browning, *Retired Pastor*

“In a style that is engaging and informative, Colin Harris invites readers on a journey toward faith and understanding. Doubt and questions are not viewed as a threat to the Christian life, but rather serve as catalysts on this sacred pilgrimage. In a world filled with empty answers and shallow faith, Harris offers a healthy and helpful new perspective, advocating for a belief that is emerging and evolving, growing deeper and wider through thoughtful reflection. He explores not what to believe, but why and how to believe in the postmodern world.”

—Chris George, Senior Pastor, Smoke Rise Baptist Church, Stone Mountain, Ga.

“As an academic theologian and a fellow pilgrim of faith, Colin Harris embodies what his writing advocates: theology is a life-long process of refining, changing, and growing. He writes for a ‘community of everyday theologians on a pilgrimage together,’ and this book confirms that he is a faithful guide along the way. This fine work reminds the reader that theology as a shared journey is more about formation than information. It is a grace, a gift, for Harris to invite us along as fellow pilgrims, finding home and hospitality with one another.”

—C. Gregory DeLoach, Dean, McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University

“Colin Harris begins *Keys for Everyday Theologians* with the statement that every person of faith is a theologian, thus inviting all into the conversation he undertakes in this masterfully crafted work. Part 1 offers keys to unlocking ten basic concepts that shape an individual’s theology, and Part 2 addresses many of the specific questions people often ask about their faith. Harris’ work reminds us that faith is a life-long pilgrimage, not a destination to which we can arrive and simply ‘settle in.’ *Keys for Everyday Theologians*, an excellent resource for those with questions about faith in general and for new and ‘seasoned’ Christians, is ideal for individual reading, Bible study groups, and the seminary classroom.”

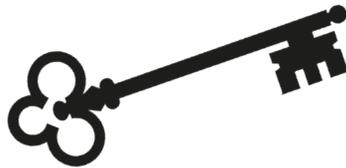
—Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, Carolyn Ward Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages,  
McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University

“What you are about to read is a thoughtful and carefully written introduction to important questions that arise almost inevitably from serious reflection upon one’s personal faith experience. It comes from the pen of a man who speaks directly to issues and concerns that reflect honest efforts to speak of one’s faith intelligibly and convincingly. From his own experience as both student and teacher, Colin carefully and thoughtfully provides for the reader ‘keys’ to help unlock and understand the perennial dimensions and dynamics of ‘faith seeking understanding.’ What is theology and how does it relate to faith? How does one’s faith find expression in beliefs? Why should one be concerned about intellectual and theological humility? What does honesty have to do with theology? How do the Bible and church tradition relate to personal experience? What constitutes a ‘healthy’ religion? What is meant by different levels of truth? How does faith relate to science? What is the relationship between faith and history? What does faith have to do with personal development? How does ‘my’ faith relate to other faiths? And the questions go on and on and on.”

—Duane Davis, Professor Emeritus of Religion and Philosophy, Mercer University

# Keys for Everyday Theologians

*Unlocking the Doors for “Faith Seeking Understanding”*



Colin Harris

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# Introduction

## *A Theologian? Who Me?*

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People of faith sometimes hesitate at the suggestion that they are by definition “theologians.” The word tends to conjure up an image of an ordained church leader or an academic professional with formal training in the field. And, to be sure, such persons have carried the discipline of theology in a formal way through the generations, providing a structure and basis for the church’s understanding of its faith.

Also, the accumulated work of formal theologians is massive to the point of being overwhelming to many people who attempt to delve into it. Its complexity can easily dissuade those with casual interest and even those required to study it.

But there is another level of theological thinking that goes on in the life and mind of every adherent to a faith. It usually does not lead to formal expression in a systematic way, but it becomes the working understanding of what one’s faith means and how it is lived in real time. It is to this kind of theological thinking and to those who engage in it that I offer this “set of keys.”

These very basic suggestions will not delve into the depths of the doctrines of the church or explore the nuances that have accompanied the Christian tradition. There are resources aplenty for anyone who wishes to explore those avenues and their many-faceted interpretations of the faith experience. This set of keys is more basic, but no less important. They provide helpful access to the rooms of theology and a perspective for dealing with what is found there, so that the encounters can be a healthy and wholesome part of the faith journey.

There are two particular features of the theological enterprise that have prompted me to offer these suggestions. One is an insight deep in our theological history, attributed to eleventh-century theologian Anselm of Canterbury. He defined theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”), which suggests and presupposes a faith experience, but also assumes that its understanding is an ongoing quest rather than a fixed formula. This implies that theology is always a work in progress that, like any arena of understanding, will evolve in response to one’s openness to new discoveries and insights.

Anselm’s understanding of theology also implies that it is not the exclusive province of the clerics and the scholars, although they provide a valuable and necessary service in the maintenance of the tradition that carries the generations of the family of faith through history. Their work is not a substitute for the reflection and nurturing of a personal understanding of the faith experience and its application to life. “Every pilgrim a theologian” is an apt slogan for this point, and it is an assumption that underlies this offering of some basic and essential keys for engaging in the process.

The second “prompt” for what follows has resulted from some retirement reflection on fifty years of teaching in the field of religious studies, mostly at the undergraduate level, and

mostly with students who were taking courses to satisfy general education requirements. These students would represent a reasonable cross section of the general population in terms of their religious experience and affiliations. Some were vocationally focused on further, more specialized study; and their commitments provided a basis for longer and continued association. But most were my traveling companions for one term, and our agenda was an introduction to religion in general, to the Bible, to Christian thought, or to Christian ethics. Levels of interest varied, of course, from resentment at having to take a course that had so little to do with their future plans, to a claimed interest in an opportunity to study something that had surrounded their lives but had not been a subject of careful scrutiny. I always hoped that we might spark some interest that would continue beyond the scope and schedule of the course, giving attention to the religious dimension of life and its place in both personal and public arenas.

The range of backgrounds of students was always interesting. Some students embraced and held dear the religious teachings experienced in childhood and were quite familiar with the stories and general beliefs of their particular traditions. Other students had grown weary with certain features of their backgrounds and had generally abandoned any thought about them. Some had never encountered in a serious way persons of a faith tradition different from their own, while yet others had observed the ways in which religious concepts could be “weaponized” and exploited in various ways to support other agendas.

That mix of experience usually led to meaningful discoveries about the diversity of religious experience and its application to life, and to an appreciation for the companionship of one another on the semester-long leg of the academic journey. I frequently heard these parting words: “I didn’t really want to take this course, but I’m glad I did.” There were, of course, memorable exceptions.

I describe this context at some length to characterize the present project as a response to my own discovery over the years that there are some very basic concepts, perspectives, and discernments that underlie an effort to understand faith in a healthy, maturing way. If I were doing my teaching efforts over again, these are some things on which I would spend more time at the beginning of every course, suggesting that these “keys” would be helpful in opening ways of thinking about topics that have both the blessing and the challenge of being familiar and often dearly held.

What this exercise will be, then, is an identification of some simple concepts, and some distinctions that are built into them, that sometimes don’t appear in ordinary conversation. They are not complex or sophisticated, but they do require some precision of thought in their distinctions that matter a great deal in the ongoing process of “faith seeking understanding.”

I hope you will not be put off by the seeming simplicity of the reflections that follow. I can anticipate the frequent response, “Of course we know that.” I ask your patience to work through the implications of each of the “keys” to see their relevance for the task of understanding—and for helping others to understand—the faith we share. Many of the “theological conflicts” that challenged students in the formal study of religion found resolution in the embrace, absorption, and application of these basic conceptual tools. I believe much of the

tension in the larger public discourse about religion would be lessened if adherents were to understand them.

When I was a seminary student more than a half-century ago, we were asked to read a little book by the German theologian Helmut Thielicke titled *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*. It was described by preface writer Martin Marty, himself an esteemed historical theologian, as a kind of “greeting card” for aspiring ministers, offering simple yet profound principles and perspectives, along with warnings of attitudinal pitfalls, for those who would assume roles of leadership in the faith community. I found it helpful then, and it has been a helpful re-read over the years as the context of the Christian faith and the function of Christian theology have experienced dramatic changes.

While in no sense presuming to offer the kind of insights contained in that classical invitation to the formal theological profession, I have thought of the suggestions that follow as a kind of “Little Exercise for Everyday Theologians.” Perhaps in spirit, if not in substance, you will find the invitation to be a “greeting card” for the theological endeavor that belongs to us all.