Reason, Faith, and Tradition

Explorations in Catholic Theology

Martin Albl

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Introduction

One of the tragedies of our modern world is the widespread belief that faith and reason are opposites. In more than ten years of teaching theology at the college level, I have encountered numerous students who assume that a person must choose between a rational, scientific view of the world, and a worldview based on faith. The message of this book is that we need not choose. In the Christian understanding of reality, these two views, properly understood, are in perfect harmony. The ultimate goal of Christian theology is to demonstrate that harmony, and this book, I hope, makes a small contribution toward achieving that goal.

This book is not intended as a comprehensive introduction to all aspects of Christian or Catholic theology. Rather, I hope to introduce students to the Christian and Catholic theological tradition by exploring some key questions involving the relationship between faith and reason. This approach allows us to go straight to the heart of Christian theology: the deep conviction that faith and reason are harmonious.

To help illustrate the organic nature of the centuries-old Christian theological tradition, I include a fair amount of cross-referencing within the text. Students need not look up each cross-reference to understand any particular topic, however. Rather, the references serve as a reminder that Christian theology is best understood as a whole, and as an aid to studying a specific topic in further depth if the student so desires.

Key theological terms are defined within the text; some of them also are defined in a brief glossary. Terms included in the glossary are highlighted in bold at first use in the text. Also following this introduction you will find listed some abbreviations used in this text.

An introductory book such as this one can only skim the surface of many deep and complex issues. But if it can help motivate students to continue their own efforts to recognize the deep harmony between faith and reason, it will have achieved its purpose.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this text:

BCE = before the Common Era (dates before the birth of Jesus)

c. = *circa*. Means "approximately."

CCC = *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed.; Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997)

CDF = Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

CE = Common Era (dates after the birth of Jesus)

NJBC = R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990)

par. = parallels. In references to the Gospels, this means that the cited passage has parallels in one or both of the other Synoptic Gospels.

PBC = Pontifical Biblical Commission

SCG = Thomas Aquinas's *Summa contra Gentiles*

ST = Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*

Vatican II documents

All references are to Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II,* vol. 1, *The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1992).

DV = *Dei Verbum (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation)*

GS = *Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)*

LG = *Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)*

NA = *Nostra Aetate (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions)*

UR = *Unitatis Redintegratio (Decree on Ecumenism)*

1

Faith and Reason I

Are Reason and Faith Contradictory? 1.1

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The title of this book combines two terms that may seem incompatible: *reason* and *faith*. Many people assume that religious beliefs or faith can only be opinions and conjectures about the unknown and unknowable. The very fact that there are so many different religions (often with widely differing beliefs and practices) seems to prove that religious beliefs lie simply in the realm of opinion, and are not open to reasonable discussion and investigation.

The central aim in this book is to show that reason and Christian belief are in fact neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive. In fact, we'll argue that the two are inseparable. Reason, aided by Christian faith, reveals truths about the universe and about humans that could never have been reached by reason alone. Conversely, Christian faith needs reason in order to communicate its beliefs clearly, to arrange

those beliefs in a more systematic form, to guard it from straying into fanaticism or error, and to provide answers to reasonable objections to those beliefs.

Specifically we will be considering Christian **theology**—the reasonable study of the Christian faith. Studies of this type have sometimes been mocked as useless theoretical debates about such topics as "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin." The argument of this book is that, on the contrary, theology is intensely practical, because our religious beliefs (or lack of beliefs) profoundly shape the way in which we understand the world, and thus how we act in the world. Theology helps us to clarify what our basic religious beliefs are (or are not), and how these beliefs influence all aspects of our daily life and world.

The third word in our title, ***tradition***, essentially means "a way of life" or "customs" that are passed down through the generations. We hear the word used in many ways: a family has certain holiday traditions; different nations and peoples have "traditional" music, dances, or food.

In this book *tradition* will refer to the specific way of thinking that is the Roman Catholic theological tradition—a way of combining reason with religious faith that has been passed down from generation to generation for two thousand years.

In a world full of many different religious and theological traditions, isn't it rather narrow-minded, or even prejudiced, to focus on just the Catholic tradition? Wouldn't it be better to be more inclusive, and study a diverse range of theological ideas?

Although we'll discuss the reasons for focusing specifically on the Catholic tradition in more detail below (sec.s 1.11–1.13), we will here make three quick observations:

1. Any theological thinking must be thinking within a specific theological tradition: it is simply impossible to think theologically in general.
2. The Catholic theological tradition has a rich, two-thousand-year-old intellectual and spiritual heritage that has profoundly influenced Western culture (and, through Western culture, the rest of the world): anyone wishing to gain a true understanding of the broader culture must also consider this heritage.
3. While our study focuses on Roman Catholic thought, it does not exclude important contributions from non-Catholic thinkers (for example, C. S. Lewis and Hans-Georg Gadamer).

Our study will not be a technical one, explaining in detail what theology is, or how theology works. Rather, our approach will be to select certain basic theological issues and questions (for example: Can God's existence be proven? Do science and religion contradict one another?) and study how the Catholic tradition has combined faith and reason in an attempt to respond to these questions. We will also consider some basic Christian beliefs (for example: that God is a Trinity, that the Bible is God's word, that people spend eternity in either heaven or hell after death) and ask how faith and reason relate in these specific beliefs.

Before discussing Christian theology specifically, however, we must first explore how reason relates to human religious belief in general. So we begin by trying to gain a better understanding of that often-strange human activity that we call "religion."

Centrality of Religion 1.2

If we have any desire to understand human existence, we must consider the role of religion in people's lives. Billions of people throughout the world identify themselves as members of religious traditions: they are followers not only of the great religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism but also of countless smaller or lesser-known traditions. We have only to watch the news on television or to read the newspaper to know that religion and religious beliefs play a central role in a variety of national and international issues: the conflicts in the Middle East, the discussion on teaching evolution in the public schools, the public policy debates on such issues as same-sex marriage or abortion.

At the personal, subjective level, the vast majority of humanity seems to experience some sense of the religious. Even if people do not regularly attend religious services or follow an organized religion, they will certainly have been confronted with what we call "religious" questions at some point. For example, when a close friend or family member passes away, a natural human response is to wonder, "What happened to my loved one? Is she in a better place? Will I see her again?" As young people consider which career to pursue, or which college major to choose, the question may arise (even if somewhat vaguely), "What is the purpose of my life?" or, more specifically, "Does God have a plan for my life?" Or perhaps as a couple considers marriage, each one may wonder, "Is this the person whom I was meant

to marry?" These questions are "religious" to the extent that they all imply the existence of a supernatural reality—a reality completely different from our everyday experience in this world.

People who do not identify themselves as "religious" often still consider themselves "spiritual"—they believe in a "higher power" that exists beyond the visible and tangible world, and they believe that this "higher power" gives sense and purpose to their lives.[1]

From both these general and individual considerations, it is clear that religion is a central dimension of human life, and thus an important subject of study.

Religion: Encounter with the Transcendent 1.3

We will try now to define the term *religion* a little more closely. We commonly refer to Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as religions; we can also refer to Lakota religion, Hopi religion, or the religious traditions of various indigenous groups throughout the world. We speak, too, of ancient Greek, Roman, or Babylonian religions. But it is difficult to identify what it is, exactly, that makes all these religions. What do they all have in common?

Clearly it is not just a belief in God. While adherents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are monotheists (believers in one God), the ancient Greeks were polytheists (believers in many gods), and other traditions speak not of gods but of spirits or other supernatural beings. While Buddhism accepts the existence of gods and spirits, the Buddha himself focused not on these supernatural powers but on the ability of humans to achieve a state of being known as Nirvana. So once again we face the question, "Is there a common link that unites all these various beliefs?"

In his classic study *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto claims to have found that common link.[2] Otto identifies the primary source of all religious feeling in the common human encounter with what he calls "the numinous." The Christian writer C. S. Lewis summarizes Otto's concept well:

> Suppose that you were told that there was a tiger in the next room: you would know that you were in danger and would probably feel fear. But if you were told "There is a ghost in the next room," and believed it, you would feel, indeed, what is often called fear, but

> of a different kind. It would not be based on the knowledge of danger, for no one is primarily afraid of what a ghost may do to him, but of the mere fact that it is a ghost. . . . Now suppose that you were told simply, "There is a mighty spirit in the room," and believed it. Your feeling would then be even less like the mere feeling of danger; but the disturbance would be profound. You would feel wonder and a certain shrinking—a sense of inadequacy to cope with such a visitant and of prostration before it. . . . This feeling may be described as awe, and the object which excites it as the Numinous.[3]

Otto himself uses the Latin phrase *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* to sum up his understanding of the numinous. *Mysterium* refers to the "wholly other": something we experience as completely different from ordinary human knowledge and experience. *Tremendum* refers to the overwhelming power of the numinous presence: people become acutely aware of their human limitations and can only react by falling to their knees in worship. Otto illustrates this term with two biblical examples: When Moses encounters God in the burning bush, "Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (Exod 3:6). After Jesus had performed a miracle, Simon Peter "fell at the knees of Jesus and said, 'Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man'" (Luke 5:8).

But the numinous is also *fascinans*—it attracts a person in spite of the person's fear and dread. This double reaction can be illustrated in the fact that most people, even while experiencing some fear, are attracted to, and even fascinated by, ghost stories or other paranormal accounts. At more developed levels, Otto finds the *fascinans* in the Christian's desire for the beatific vision of God (seeing God "face-to-face") and in the Buddhist's desire for Nirvana—that state of pure peace and bliss that is beyond all human language and even conception.

Another scholar of world religions, Mircea Eliade, agrees that all religions share a common belief in a realm of otherworldly, numinous reality (a realm he calls the "sacred"), one that is distinct from the profane (everyday, visible reality).[4] Religions use this distinction to divide the world into sacred space (such as temples, altars, or sacred places in nature where the numinous may be encountered) and profane space (all other places of ordinary human activity); they divide time into sacred time (such as special times of year marked by festivals and religious rituals) and profane time (all other times of ordinary human activity).

As a general term to cover both Otto's concept of the numinous and Eliade's concept of the sacred, we shall use the word **transcendent** to refer to a reality that transcends natural, everyday human experience. The belief in the transcendent is at the heart of all religions.

The Transcendent Horizon of Human Nature 1.4

The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner argues that the experience of transcendence is found not only in special encounters with the numinous, but also in the very structure of the human person himself.[5] In every human experience, we are aware not only of our own human limitations but, at the same time, of the possibility of transcending those limitations. Our basic human experiences point beyond themselves to a "transcendent horizon." Let's consider a hypothetical example.

Jeff claims to be a complete skeptic: he denies that any absolute, objective truth exists. "Truth" is really only based on people's perceptions. Every society, he insists, has had its own subjective opinions about truth, and the stronger or more ruthless society usually imposes its own version of truth on the weaker.

But notice the logical problem in Jeff's analysis: if Jeff's statement, "There is no such thing as truth" is true, then there is at least one statement (Jeff's) that is in fact true. But if Jeff's statement is true, then Jeff's claim ("there is no truth") makes no sense. By the very act of denying truth, Jeff in fact shows that absolute truth must exist.

As humans, we realize that our own thinking and opinions will always be limited (whether because of our prejudices, lack of knowledge, or limited experiences). But at the same time, we are also aware that it is necessary for this absolute truth to exist, or we would never be able to think at all. How else would we know that our grasp of truth is limited, unless we had a sense of an absolute truth? With this intimation, this glimpse into absolute truth, a person transcends himself—he knows that there is an absolute horizon of truth that is infinitely beyond his (or any other human's) knowledge and control. He becomes aware of the transcendent.

Let's consider another example. In Clara's studies of social sciences such as psychology or sociology, she becomes aware of the great influence that outside forces have on human personality. Psychology, for

example, shows her how profoundly a childhood trauma may affect an adult's experiences and choices. She learns from sociological and pedagogical studies that a child's capacity to learn may be severely limited if the child is raised in an impoverished or insecure environment.

Clara herself was raised in a poor neighborhood plagued by crime and violence, and she suffered childhood traumas. She knows that these experiences have influenced her deeply—yet at the same time, she knows that these factors, and any other outside factors, do not define her. The very fact that she can think about these experiences, analyze them, and learn from them shows that she has transcended them. Despite the very real difficulties, she is free to rise above these limitations. In Rahner's terms, she has realized that in her freedom to respond to these traumatic events, her life is open to a transcendent horizon.

Meaning and Transcendence 1.5

The personal religious questions that we mentioned in section 1.2—"What is the purpose of my life?" or, "Is this the person whom I was meant to marry?"—are questions about *meaning*, and they are clearly transcendent questions. They presume that life has a meaning beyond itself.

Many common, everyday expressions also presuppose that life has a transcendent meaning. A common response to an unpleasant or even a tragic event may be, "Everything happens for a reason." An often heard response to a disappointment is, "I guess it wasn't meant to be." If it is true that a certain event "wasn't meant to be," it can only be true if some kind of transcendent plan exists that shapes whether events occur or not.

A more philosophically inclined individual might ask if life itself has a meaning, a purpose, or is human life simply a random collection of cells, tissues, and organs that, through blind chance, evolved the ability to think about itself? (We will discuss this question in chapter 4.)

Raising questions about meaning is an essential human characteristic, and a central function of any religious tradition is precisely to provide believers with a sense of meaning. Thus the person who encounters the numinous is not left with only fear and terror, but rather is given an orientation and a mission that help to make sense of daily life. To return to Otto's examples, after Moses' encounter with

God, Moses is sent to free his people from Egypt; after his encounter with Jesus, Peter is sent out as an apostle. Eliade describes how sacred space and time give structure and meaning to the basic worldview of a religious people. The discovery of a sacred space, for example, can be conceived as the fixed reference point that "is equivalent to the creation of the world."[6]

All societies have asked questions about the basic meaning of life; countless millions have asked and continue to ask questions about the meaning of their individual lives. The question is a transcendent one, since it is oriented toward ultimate meaning, a meaning transcending the meaning any individual person or group can give to human life. For the religious person, this transcendent realm gives everyday life its meaning.

Right, Wrong, and Transcendence 1.6

The first part of C. S. Lewis's book *Mere Christianity* is entitled, "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe."[7] Lewis points out that all humans of every culture have the same basic sense of right and wrong. Of course some details vary, but all cultures share the basic sense that such things as lying, stealing, and committing adultery are truly wrong, not just wrong in the opinion of some people. Even when people do lie or steal, they almost always try to rationalize or justify their behavior—thus proving that they accept the common standards of right and wrong, but are simply arguing that their particular behavior qualifies as an exception. Lewis calls this common set of ethical standards the "Moral Law."

What is the ultimate source of this Moral Law? Lewis shows that individual societies could not simply have invented it—or else how could we explain why the basic ethical standards of the ancient Egyptians, ancient Chinese, medieval Europeans, and modern Americans are essentially the same? Nor can the Moral Law simply be based on instinct, because our natural instincts are often contradictory. When another person is in danger, for example, we have a natural instinct to help a fellow human being, but we also have a natural instinct for self-preservation that functions to prevent us from helping. Some would argue that the rules of the Moral Law were simply invented in order to prevent chaos in society. But if this was so, why would anyone follow them, unless they happened to benefit that individual personally? Why should the individual care about society as a whole?

The Moral Law, Lewis concludes, can only come from a transcendent source. We did not invent it, but we feel obligated to obey it. Even when we break the Law, we feel obligated to rationalize or justify our behavior.

Experiences of Transcendence 1.7

Perhaps you have stood outside in the evening, watching a sunset. The air is still and cool, the light on the distant horizon is streaked with a palette of soft colors. A feeling of infinite peace comes over you. But the feeling only lasts a moment—a child asks you a question, you hear the sound of an airplane overhead, you recall a bill you forgot to pay, and the spell is broken. But you have had an experience of the transcendent—a sense of peace and beauty that does not seem to belong to everyday reality, but rather seems to point beyond it.

Or perhaps you have held your newborn baby in your arms for the first time. As you first gaze upon his little face, you are overwhelmed by a feeling of unlimited love and a sense of responsibility for this new life. Of course you are familiar with the biological facts of how this baby was conceived and born, and yet biology cannot describe or even begin to explain the experience of first seeing and holding your child. You are overcome with the wonder of a new life that you did not create but that was given to you as a gift. Babies are commonly described as "small miracles"—an expression that is simply one way of trying to define realities that touch on the transcendent, beyond our normal reality.

At times the experience of the transcendent can take the form of dissatisfaction with this world, restlessness, a longing for something more, something better. We are often frustrated with our lack of ability to communicate with others, to find meaning in our schooling or work, to find peace in our family life. Nor does this dissatisfaction come only when we are frustrated or unhappy. It also comes precisely when we are content, when life is good. It is after those moments when we experience the best of what life can offer us—love, beauty, peace, deep joy—that we often find ourselves longing for more. These brief experiences of happiness seem to awaken within us a desire for something on a completely different scale: perfect, lasting love; perfect, eternal peace.

The great Christian theologian Augustine (354–430) describes that experience of longing and desire with these words, "Our hearts

Transcendence and Death 1.7.1

An elderly man wakes up suddenly in the middle of the night, thinking about an old friend with whom he has lost contact. He cannot get back to sleep, so he reads some magazines, gets a drink, and finally goes back to bed – all the while still thinking of his friend and wondering how he is doing. In the morning, he calls his friend's sister. "I'm so glad you called," she tells him, "John just passed away last night."

Over the course of two years during World War II, a woman lost three sons who were serving as soldiers. On each occasion, she had a vivid dream and knew even before she received the news that one of her sons had fallen.

I have heard these stories through reliable sources; you may know of similar accounts. We can certainly dismiss these and similar stories as coincidence or exaggeration, but is that the most reasonable reaction? When faced with events that have no natural explanation, perhaps the most sensible response is to admit that our reason is limited and to leave open the possibility of an explanation that transcends nature.

are restless until they rest in thee, O Lord" (*Confessions* 1.1.1). Even the atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) knew this longing; in his most famous work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the line "All joy wants eternity—wants deep, deep eternity" is repeated several times.

The Reality of the Transcendent 1.8

Let's review our discussion so far. All recorded societies have believed in the reality of a transcendent realm. They have described this realm in different ways: as Nirvana, heaven, the gods of Mount Olympus. But in every case, these societies have agreed that a realm beyond everyday, visible, tangible reality does exist, and that this transcendent realm is absolutely crucial for giving everyday life its meaning.

We have identified that same drive toward the transcendent in our experiences of truth and freedom, beauty and love, and in certain mysterious experiences that defy rational explanation. That

same drive is apparent in our experience of an ethical law demanding right behavior, and in our restless desire for deep, lasting peace and perfect joy.

How can we explain this universal thirst for the transcendent? Various sociological or psychological reasons have been suggested. Karl Marx (1818–1883) believed that religion was a man-made illusion that functioned to keep the oppressed working classes in a passive state: religion, said Marx, was "the opium of the people."[8] Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) argued that religious beliefs arose as civilizations projected their need for a protective father-figure onto the supernatural realm.[9]

But such explanations are far too simplistic. Neither Marx nor Freud addressed a basic question: *why do humans insistently seek meaning beyond the boundaries of this world*? We can agree with Marx that humans can become alienated because of oppressive economic conditions, but why would they seek escape from these conditions in a transcendent realm? We can agree with Freud that humans have a deep desire for security, but why seek that security in an unseen transcendent realm?

Commenting on the unquenchable desire for the transcendent, Lewis concludes, "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."[10]

We have good reason, then, to take the world of the transcendent seriously as an object of study.

Religious Studies and Theology 1.9

We may identify two general approaches to the study of the transcendent or of beliefs in the transcendent. The first approach has many labels: *history of religions*, *philosophy of religions*, *comparative religions*, or simply *religious studies* (the term we will use). The religious studies scholar focuses on the human religious experience as a specific field of academic study. A common procedure is to gather data on as many religions as possible throughout history and the world and then study and interpret this data, focusing especially on beliefs and practices shared by all religious traditions. Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* is a classic work in this discipline: from his studies of a variety of

religions, Eliade identifies common beliefs (such as the division of the world into the sacred and profane) and common practices (such as rituals marking sacred times) that provide us with great insight into the nature of religion as a human activity.

In religious studies, however, the question of the truth or the reality of the transcendent is generally not allowed to arise. The religious studies scholar may either (explicitly or implicitly) deny the reality of the transcendent realm, or may simply "bracket out" the question of its existence as irrelevant. In general it would be understood as a serious fault if religious studies scholars were to let personal convictions intrude into their work: the goal of the discipline is to describe religious phenomena as objectively as possible.[11]

The theologian, however, takes seriously the reality of the transcendent—we have already discussed some of the reasons for doing so. From the theological point of view, persons who study the nature of reality in general, or of human nature in particular, while denying or ignoring the transcendent dimension can achieve only a very limited, if not distorted, view of reality and humanity. The vast majority of humanity has believed that a grasp of the transcendent dimension of reality is essential for correct understanding.

Persons who take the theological approach, however, obviously must operate from within a specific faith tradition. We have already pointed out that different religions conceive of the transcendent realm differently: the realm of the gods, the spirits, of the one God, of Nirvana. By definition, then, a particular theologian must work within the belief system of one of the traditions.

The Role of Reason in Theology 1.10

It would be a serious error, however, to conclude from our comparison that the religious studies scholar is working in an objective academic discipline, while the theologian is working with subjective religious beliefs and opinions. The theologian insists that in taking seriously the truth of the transcendent realm he is working with a broader and truer vision of reality than those who deny or ignore this realm.

The very word *theology* gives us further insight into the task of this discipline. In Greek, *theos* means God or a god; the related adjective *theios* refers to divine things. The root word ***logos*** means essentially a "study" or "disciplined use of reason." This sense should be familiar from such English words as *biology*: the study of life.

Thus theology is the reasonable, or rational, study of the divine. As an academic discipline, theology insists on the disciplined, rigorous use of reason. The essential difference between it and other academic disciplines thus lies not so much in its methodology as in its subject matter. Theology insists on the reasonable examination of *all* reality—both this-worldly and transcendent.

Access to the transcendent, however, cannot come directly through reason. It can come only through faith, but through a faith that is reasonable. Clarifying just what faith is, and showing how faith is related to reason, are two topics central to our book.

Thinking within a Faith Tradition 1.11

Is religious studies a more objective and scientific discipline than theology, since theology limits itself to one particular faith tradition, while religious studies seeks to include all religious traditions in its study?

In his book *Truth and Method*, the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that while the scientific method (observation, hypothesis formation, testing) is appropriate for understanding and attaining truth in the natural sciences, truth and understanding are attained in a fundamentally different way in fields of study such as art, history, or philosophy.[12] Gadamer insists that real truth and true understanding (not just opinions) could be attained in these latter fields—it simply couldn't be attained by employing methods appropriate to the natural sciences.

Let's consider the discipline of history, for example. A historical event, by definition, cannot be replicated in the laboratory and scientifically tested by the historian. We can know about a historical event only through the testimony of eyewitnesses, written documents, or perhaps through archaeological evidence. But even these resources cannot be understood directly. They can only be interpreted, and interpretations are not privatized, but are based on a *tradition* of understanding. Each nation, each social group, has developed certain ways of understanding history that shape the understanding of each member of that nation or group.

The same type of understanding applies also to philosophical texts. The Western philosophical tradition, for example, shapes the very way that people within Western cultures think about the world: the way in which Westerners think about good and evil, cause and effect, and even science and religion have been shaped by thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, or Descartes. When people study

a philosophical text, for example, they cannot pretend to be scientifically objective and neutral observers. They must be aware of the fact that the way in which they perceive and understand reality has already been fundamentally shaped by a particular tradition.

Let us use a hypothetical example to show how Gadamer's insights might apply to understanding within the Christian theological tradition. Jane, a college freshman, comes from a Christian background, but she isn't a churchgoer and does not consider herself to be particularly religious. One Friday night she receives a phone call telling her that her best friend Maureen has been killed in a car crash. A thousand thoughts and emotions begin to race through Jane's mind: shock, disbelief, confusion, anger, perhaps guilt. Some of her thoughts take a theological turn: Where was God when the accident happened? How could God take Maureen's life when she was still so young? Why does God allow such terrible things to happen? She is angry with God, but at the same time feels guilty about her anger. She feels that she should pray, but can't think what to say.

Jane's questions and emotions are complex—but the first point to notice is that simply by asking these questions, Jane already takes for granted several fundamental theological beliefs. She assumes, first of all, that there is one God, rather than many gods or other spiritual powers. Further, she assumes some knowledge about this God's characteristics. When she wonders why God did not prevent the accident, she seems to assume that God is all powerful, that God can control all events in the world.

Jane also seems to assume that God is generally kind and caring toward humans, because some of her confusion and anger arises from the apparent contradiction between God's goodness and the fact that a tragic event occurred in a world she assumes is controlled by a good, all-powerful God.

Where do Jane's assumptions originate? As we said, Jane does not attend church regularly and does not have a formal religious education. She may have received some religious ideas from her parents or other close family members. As she grew older, she was also no doubt influenced by ideas she picked up in school, from her own reading, or simply from everyday interactions with friends and other peers.

But where did her family, peers, and teachers pick up their religious ideas? The short answer is: from the Christian tradition, or, more precisely, the Judeo-Christian tradition.[13] Through thousands of years of history, Jewish and Christian theological ideas have spread in myriad ways through many nations in the world and have shaped the

thinking, directly or indirectly, of billions of people, including Jane's family, peers, teachers, community, culture—and thus Jane herself.

If Jane had been raised in a different tradition, she would have found different answers; in fact, she would have asked different questions. If she had been raised in a Buddhist tradition, for example, she would not have raised the same questions and assumptions about the role of the one God in the accident. Of course she would have experienced the same basic human emotions of shock and sadness, but the way in which she reflected on her friend's death would have been shaped by such traditional Buddhist concepts as reincarnation (the idea of rebirth into another life) and Nirvana.

Our conclusion, then, is that all thinking in fields such as theology *must* be guided by a particular tradition—Jane cannot, at the same time, accept the Christian belief that Maureen is in heaven and the Buddhist belief that Maureen will be reborn in another life-form according to her level of karma.

Gadamer of course realizes that individuals are not shaped completely by a tradition but also have the freedom to think critically about their own tradition. Based on their personal experiences or on knowledge from outside a particular tradition, individuals might question certain aspects of the particular tradition that shaped them. Jane, for example, might question the traditional view that God is all good in the light of her friend's seemingly senseless death. In this situation Gadamer speaks of a "fusion of horizons"—Jane allows the viewpoint (horizon) of the traditional views to interact with the understanding of her own horizon (her own personal point of view). Deeper and truer understanding arises through the merging of the horizons.

But Gadamer's point is that even in questioning a tradition a person should be aware that the very questions and the way in which these questions are asked have already been deeply influenced by that tradition. A person simply cannot approach the basic questions of the meaning of life except by means of a particular tradition.

Christian Tradition in a Pluralistic World 1.12

In this chapter, we have examined compelling reasons to take the reality of the transcendent realm seriously, and we have seen that the only way to understand that realm is to approach it through a specific theological tradition.

Thus the study of any religious tradition—especially the study of the major religious traditions (like Judaism, Islam, or Hinduism) that have influenced and shaped the thoughts and actions of countless millions of people—would be of enormous benefit for enlarging our understanding of the human being and indeed of reality itself.

Why then choose the Christian theological tradition? The reasons are many. The tradition itself is two thousand years old (not counting its deep roots in the **Jewish** tradition) and has produced, and continues to produce, a rich theological reflection on the transcendent. Christian theological ideas have deeply influenced every aspect of Western culture, and many non-Western cultures as well. Because the Christian tradition is closely related, historically and theologically, to the Jewish and Muslim traditions, the study of Christian theology can shed light on these other traditions as well.

Catholic Christian Tradition 1.13

Yet the Christian tradition includes within itself a vast variety of more specific traditions. There are various Orthodox traditions, the Roman Catholic tradition, traditions arising from the Protestant Reformation, and many more. Gadamer's point about tradition applies here as well: on many basic theological questions, it is not possible to think theologically in a generically Christian way. Theologians, in the questions they ask and in the way they ask them, will always be shaped by a particular Christian tradition. This book, then, looks at Christian theology primarily through the lens of the Roman Catholic tradition, since that is the tradition of the author. Of course Roman Catholic theology itself is varied and vast, and I am painfully aware of my own limitations of knowledge and understanding in trying to present even an outline of it. My best hope is that this book will encourage readers to their own deeper study of the tradition.

The book, however, is not limited to the specifically Roman Catholic theological tradition—already in this chapter we have referred several times to C. S. Lewis, an Anglican. In this sense, the book's approach is also "catholic" (note the lowercase *c*)—taking the word *catholic* in its basic sense of describing what is "general" or "universal" in the Christian tradition.

Since it is impossible to cover the entire Catholic Christian tradition, I have chosen to focus on a central theme of the tradition: the relationship between reason and faith. I hope to show that serious study

of the relationship between faith and reason within the Catholic (and catholic) tradition leads not to pointless pseudoknowledge about angels dancing on pins, but to a deeper, truer, more beautiful, and more satisfying view of the world than can be obtained through reason alone.

Questions about the Text

1. What is meant by *transcendent*?
2. How can religion be understood as the human encounter with the transcendent?
3. What is meant by *theology*?
4. How does the academic discipline of religious studies differ from the academic discipline of theology?
5. Describe Otto's concept of the numinous and Eliade's concept of the sacred.
6. What does Rahner mean by the "transcendent horizon of human nature"?
7. What does Lewis mean by the "Moral Law," and why does he say that it is a signal of the transcendent?
8. Explain how the universal experience of transcendence in human culture and in human nature suggests the actual existence of a transcendent realm.
9. Explain Gadamer's claim that truth in artistic, historical, philosophical, or religious experience can only be attained by following a certain tradition.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you had a personal experience of the transcendent?
2. Do you think that all people ask religious (or spiritual) questions at some point in their lives?
3. Do you agree that it is reasonable to believe in a transcendent reality?
4. What are some characteristics that all religions seem to share?

Endnotes

1. For the sake of simplicity, we will use the broad term *religious* to refer both to people who follow an organized religion and to those who simply consider themselves to be "spiritual."
2. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 17.
4. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace 1959).
5. See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 14–35.
6. Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 20–22.
7. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: HarperCollins, 2001; orig. pub. 1952), 1–32.
8. Karl Marx, "Introduction" to *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. A. Jolin and J. O'Malley, Cambridge Studies in the History and Theory of Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977; orig. pub. 1844).
9. See, for example, Freud's book, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Norton, 1989; orig. pub. 1927).
10. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 136–37.
11. Two classics in the field illustrate this procedure: William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Great Books in Philosophy; Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002; orig. pub. 1902), analyzes various religious experiences from a psychological point of view without raising the question of their objective reality; G. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J. E. Turner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986; orig. pub. 1933), uses a "phenomenological" approach—a method that attempts to give an exact description of the data without imposing value judgments on it.
12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994).
13. The Christian theological tradition is founded upon Jewish conceptions of God and God's relationship with humans. But as it developed, the Christian theological tradition quickly took on a distinctive shape (e.g., in conceiving of God as a Trinity) and this fact justifies reference to the "Christian theological tradition" throughout the book.

Is religious belief reasonable? And specifically, are the doctrines of the Catholic faith consistent with reason?

In ***Reason, Faith, and Tradition: Explorations in Catholic Theology,*** Martin Albl tackles this central question of the reasonableness of faith by exploring the following topics:

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> One of the tragedies of our modern world is the widespread belief that faith and reason are opposites. In more than ten years of teaching theology at the college level, I have encountered numerous students who assume that a person must choose between a rational, scientific view of the world and a worldview based on faith. The message of this book is that we need not choose between a rational worldview and a faith perspective. In the Christian understanding of reality, these two views, properly understood, are in perfect harmony. The ultimate goal of Christian theology is to demonstrate that harmony, and this book, I hope, makes a small contribution toward achieving that goal.
>
> — *From the author's introduction*

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