John Markey's engaging primer *Making Sense of Mystery* invites students to learn theology by *doing* it. Markey prompts readers to probe their own experiences of curiosity, uncertainty, and inquiry to show how theology emerges from life's deepest questions. Distinguishing mystery from problem, he breaks the unnecessary tension with science to show the breadth and depth of what it means to "know." In just one example of the text's masterful pedagogy, Markey models theological thinking by linking critical analysis to creative insight in a guided exploration of the Ghent Altarpiece. In Markey's hands, faith and theological thinking become dynamic practices, shaped by critical reflection and expressed in action to meet the needs of the times. *Making Sense of Mystery* invites students, whatever their worldview, into conversation with the Christian tradition in the shared human endeavor to understand the world and our place in it.

—Kathleen M. Fisher, Assumption College

In *Making Sense of Mystery*, John Markey presents an accessible and engaging introduction to the discipline of theology. Also an invitation to more seasoned scholars to consider their own operative approaches, the book is clearly written, comprehensive, and conversant with major streams of theological scholarship. With easy-to-digest examples, questions for discussion and ongoing exploration, and up-to-date resources for further reading, this book is designed for the classroom. Yet it also implicitly challenges narrow approaches to theology that overlook the variety of sources and methods drawn upon by the discipline.

—Paul Kollman, CSC, University of Notre Dame

This excellent primer on studying theology by John Markey begins with the experience of mystery and the search for meaning, thus countering any idea that theology concerns problem-solving. Markey helpfully distinguishes "faith" (a personal relationship with God) from abstract "belief" and refreshingly acknowledges the dynamic interplay of belief and doubt. Markey outlines major theological concepts and describes the classic as well as new branches of theology. He encourages us to actively engage in theological reflection rather than merely to study the ideas of others. In the end, "doing" theology is personal, critical, contextual, and practical within a community of faith.

—Philip Sheldrake, Westcott House, University of Cambridge

Markey's primer on theological thinking dispels some common misunderstandings of the theological enterprise. His clear and compact volume outlines basic contours of the sources, methods, and purposes of theology, highlighting its contextual, practical, and spiritual dimensions. A refreshing read that will enable theological newbies to jump into the work of engaging and doing theology themselves. A great introduction to the theological project!

—Cara Anthony, University of St. Thomas

An excellent guide for anyone wanting to make a first foray into theological thinking. In clear and accessible prose, with pertinent examples drawn from everyday life, *Making Sense of Mystery* draws the reader into the theological world step by step. Ideal for the seeker who wants a sensible introduction to dealing with the profound questions that are part of human existence.

—Robert Schreiter, Catholic Theological Union

Making Sense of Mystery provides a thoughtful and accessible introduction to theology by exploring the depths of lived experience. In human struggle and love, fear and hope, Markey finds hints of a mystery that is as much a challenge to faith as to doubt. On the basis of these shared experiences, Markey ably introduces the major themes of fundamental and systematic theology.

—Vincent J. Miller, University of Dayton

Respected theologian John Markey has given us a terrific primer on how to think theologically. *Making Sense of the Mystery* invites students to understand theology, its relation to reason, its sources, and its methodology. Drawing on important philosophers and theologians, Markey skillfully guides the reader through all the primary issues that make theology competent, accountable, and, most importantly, relevant.

—Peter Feldmeier, University of Toledo

Making Sense of Mystery

A Primer on Theological Thinking

John J. Markey

ANSELM
A C A D E M I C

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Dedication

Stephen B. Bevans, SVD

Contents

Introduction

"What is the meaning of life?" Enter this query into any internet search engine, and you will receive several hundred million results. How do you begin to sort through the innumerable competing claims about life and the meaning of existence, the universe, and reality itself, which each entry represents? Is there some transcendent being that hears prayers, or answers them? If there is some transcendent reality, does it (or they) have concern for the whole world or only certain members of it? If not, is existence essentially meaningless? How do you narrow the search and determine which if any of these results are helpful or interesting or valuable, let alone true? Moreover, what are the practical, ethical, social, and religious implications of these answers? Regardless of how one answers, there always remains a certain degree of mystery, awe, and wonder in the sheer face of the grandeur and magnitude of these questions.

Ultimately, these mysteries cannot be adequately explored without first determining the context of the searcher. To return to our search engine analogy: which entries appear at the top of the page will likely depend on such variables as the user's past search history, which advertisers have paid the search engine that is being used, and the searcher's geographic location. One's life context is informed by such internal and external forces as language, family, social and political factors, personality traits, and history. This complex of contextual issues plays a role in determining which answers seem acceptable, but it also influences the manner in which these types of questions are asked (or not asked). Collectively, these factors can be viewed as "tradition." Traditions often gather around central authorities such as sacred texts or important leaders that exert a certain amount of influence on individuals who identify with that tradition. Some of the most important traditions providing answers to these ultimate

questions include the religions of the world, philosophical schools, and national and political institutions.

Christian Response to Mystery

This book explores the Christian tradition's[1] response to mystery and introduces students to the field of theology. For Christians, the exploration of mystery is centered on belief in God and making sense of the presence and action of God in the midst of human lives. The term *theology* means, literally, the study (Gr. *logia*) of God (Gr. *theos*). Monk and scholar Saint Anselm (1033–1109) is the source of the following well-known definition of *theology*: faith seeking understanding. One is doing theology when trying to make sense of one's personal faith or the faith of a community. Theology takes up questions about who God is and how God relates to human beings and explores myriad related questions about the implications of belief in God for all aspects of human existence.

Overview of This Book

To understand theology in the Christian tradition, it is helpful to explore the human experience of mystery, how belief and doubt form and interact, human ways of knowing, and the process of human transformation resulting from these experiences. Also important is understanding how reliable ways of knowing emerge over time not only in individuals but in wider communities of people seeking to know and understand the world. These matters are the focus of

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1. The author is writing from a Catholic Christian perspective. Catholics are Christians, and all Christians share core beliefs. Different types of Christians (called denominations) emphasize different aspects of this core faith, and different denominations often emerge because of specific historical contexts or events. Christianity therefore has a plurality of interpretations and representations. These unique interpretations, often represented by a specific denomination, are shaped by diverse historical developments, theological tendencies, and practical habits arising from their unique experiences and perspectives. Catholic Christians therefore represent a unique perspective that the author will attempt to point out when relevant or necessary. Nevertheless, much of what follows regarding faith, revelation, and theology is shared by many or most Christian denominations. The author, therefore, will be using the term *Christian* to describe common views, while remaining aware that not every Christian might agree with or convey in the same way all that is being examined.

chapter 1, "Encountering Mystery: Knowledge, Belief, and Interpretation," which sets the stage for exploring the Christian response to mystery in chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 2, "Faith, Conversion, and Revelation," discusses concepts at the heart of theological inquiry: belief in God, faith, religious conversion, revelation, and tradition.

Chapter 3, "Doing Theology in a Contemporary Context," discusses the nature of theology, the methodology at its core, and some of the ways it is practiced, professionally and by all people of faith, in the contemporary moment. This chapter also explores art as theology, using Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* as a focus.

Chapter 4, "Elements of Academic Theology," considers method in theology, branches of theology, and new theological fields of concentration that have emerged in the last two centuries.

This book is not exhaustive or complete; it does not provide a detailed study of all the subjects it investigates. Rather, it has been developed with the goal of helping students to think more clearly about their experience of mystery, how Christians interpret God's presence in their lives and history, and how the two might (or might not) connect. The goal of this study is not only to explain ideas but to encourage students to engage in the kind of theological reflection the text describes.

Often, real knowledge comes when one can connect personal experience with some wider human experience conveyed in art. To make sense of the world requires both rational knowledge and creative insights that enable people to grasp truth and meaning for themselves. What follows is a logical and creative interplay aimed at helping the reader understand some of the foundational concepts of Christianity.

This work is not intended to convince sceptics and convert readers to the Catholic Christian point of view. Rather, the goal of this book is to offer some of the fruits of the Christian tradition to all those who seek to understand and respond to the most basic aspects of every human life. Even without assenting to religious beliefs and insights, readers can "compare and contrast" their personal experiences to a wider endeavor that shares the same impulses and contours.

Encountering Mystery: Knowledge, Belief, and Interpretation

Returning to the analogy of using a search engine to seek answers to the meaning of life, thousands, perhaps millions, of the links pulled up for this query would begin with the statement "life is a mystery" or something like "To understand the mystery of life . . ."

How is life a mystery? What does that statement mean? To answer that question, it is helpful to distinguish a *mystery* from a *problem*.[1] A problem is something that one does not presently know or understand but to which, through a process of analysis, investigation, and experimentation, one can eventually hope to find an answer or solution. Problems can be solved, understood, and controlled. In trying to solve a problem with a car, one can "stand back" and study the machinery to get a sense of where the "problem" lies. A mystery, however, is an experience everyone has but no one can fully grasp, let alone solve. There is no way to "stand back" to get a perspective on mystery, because it is everywhere and there is no point where one can

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1. This distinction comes from the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1888–1973). See Stephen B. Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 14; and Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1965), 117.

get a full view of it. Mysteries are not problems that can be solved or even fully understood. Rather, mysteries are a part of human existence and must be dealt with on a daily basis.

The Experience of Mystery

Mystery is like standing on the deck of a ship at open sea and watching the horizon continually recede as the ship moves toward it. Mystery is something human beings live within rather than something they can control. Unlike a problem that may eventually be solved, mystery defies full comprehension, because it encompasses all human beings and human experience. Mystery is the horizon of human existence; humans are part of the reality they are trying to observe. Therefore, like a person standing on the deck of ship amid a vast sea, it is impossible to see all of reality, but it is possible to learn to navigate it.

Mysteries like the experience of death, love, suffering, fear, hope, and meaning cannot be fully comprehended, but they can be interpreted. To interpret a reality is to "make sense" of it through images, concepts, and creative insights or connections. Interpretation attempts to understand mystery by trying to determine what consequences and implications it has for one's life. Humans interpret mystery in terms of beliefs. Beliefs are like "working hypotheses" or tentative judgments about the meaning of mystery and the implications this mystery has for one's life. Beliefs enable people to make decisions, to choose one action over another, and to behave in consistent and predictable ways. Beliefs are essential for human life, because they form a kind of navigation system that helps one exist within the vast horizon of life's mystery.

Almost everyone acknowledges the mystery of realities such as death, love, suffering, fear, hope, and meaning: singers sing about them, poets write about them, novelists tell stories about them, philosophers think about them. Human beings, however, cannot "solve" these realities—they can only recognize them, name them, and interpret them. People try to make sense of the mystery of life by trying to understand what life means for them, how mystery affects their daily life, how to embrace it, or engage it, or hide from it, or

even ignore it, but mystery always remains completely present while ambiguous and beyond human grasp. What are commonly called *beliefs* help people solve problems and interpret mystery: beliefs span both aspects of reality.

Experience, Belief, and Knowledge

The Interplay of Belief and Doubt

To make sense of the world eventually requires that one choose to believe some things and doubt others. This interplay between belief and doubt is what keeps the process of human inquiry going. The seventeenth century European philosopher René Descartes once demonstrated it is possible to doubt almost everything, because human perception and reason are limited and fallible.[2] Descartes argued that because people cannot be certain any of their judgments about reality are true beyond any doubt, the search for knowledge must begin by calling everything humans think they know into question. Descartes and subsequent thinkers often wanted to begin every investigation or thought process "from scratch."

But no one can doubt everything at once; that person would be trapped in an endless search for a certainty that is elusive at best and unattainable at worst. That kind of conundrum defies common sense and leaves a person unable to make any decisions whatsoever. Most people, for instance, cannot bring themselves to doubt the reality of gravity or the laws of physics, even if they don't understand them or cannot prove that these theories are always and everywhere true. Nevertheless, most people know not to step out of a second story window or walk in front a moving car. Ordinary people live their lives presuming that much of what they perceive about reality, while not being absolutely clear, understandable, or even knowable, is generally valid and reliable. Most people begin with some beliefs about the world and how it works that may be partial, limited, or wrong,

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2. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, ed. John Cottingham, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), see especially the "Second Meditation," 16–23.

but that are nonetheless necessary if they are to make sense of and make decisions about their lives. Consequently, human lives are generally based on the tentative acceptance of some hypotheses about the world and the "way things work" that enable people to live their lives, make decisions, and learn new things.

These working hypotheses are beliefs that enable people to live sensibly, make reasonable decisions, understand and interpret their experiences, and make plans for the future.[3] People have innumerable beliefs from simple ones like vitamin C prevents colds or certain cloud formations mean it will rain, to more complex and serious beliefs such as humans have souls or life exists after death. Some beliefs are helpful and last a long time, and others turn out to be faulty or wrong and fade away or disappear. Human lives are filled with beliefs; some are just ideas a person thinks might be true (e.g., UFOs are visiting Earth or ghosts can haunt old houses) but they have no direct consequences or impact on their lives. The most important beliefs are those that have direct and meaningful consequences for the way a person lives his or her life or the way a person makes decisions or judgments. Human understanding is constantly working from, assessing, evaluating, and reevaluating basic beliefs about the world.

Ways of Knowing

Those who study thought and ways humans make sense of the world generally recognize that people employ two different but interrelated ways of grasping reality and establishing beliefs. There are many ways to categorize these two dimensions but in general it is agreed the human mind "knows things" in two ways: the pre-rational (or nonrational) way and the rational way. Nonrational or pre-rational does not mean *irrational* or *unreasonable*. Pre-rational knowing involves sensations, perceptions, feelings, intuitions, imagination, memories, creative insights, and random ideas. These things are continually part of people's thinking, and they create the conditions for rational,

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3. Charles Sander Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," and "The Fixation of Beliefs," in Charles S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 5–41.

logical reflection, which primarily serves to clarify, interpret, and judge the data it receives from the pre-rational dimension of the mind. The rational mind makes sense of one's beliefs: it generates hypotheses, deduces the implications that would be the case if a hypothesis were true, and sets out to produce, find, investigate, and analyze data to determine whether these deductions and the hypotheses that give rise to them are true. Furthermore, the rational dimension of the mind not only interprets data it receives from the other dimension of the mind, it considers strategies and makes plans to act on or implement these ideas. In this way the human mind continually engages reality, interprets it, acts on it, and then evaluates those actions. The nonrational and rational dimensions of the mind therefore are not in competition with each other; neither is the "true" or "best" way to know reality. Both forms of knowing are always necessary, complementary, and interacting.

Imagine, for instance, driving down the street on the way to school one morning. A thousand different things call for attention: the cars in front or behind, flashing lights and stop signs, the radio, the other person riding with you, the shops you are passing, people walking on the street, and birds in the trees. Suddenly a ball rolls out in the street in front of your car. You react quickly and apply the brakes before hitting the ball. You turn instinctually to look for the child who, your past experience tells you, might be running after the ball. The presence of this child tells you that you are passing an elementary school and playground that you had not noticed. After the child picks up the ball, you automatically proceed more slowly and with greater caution because you always drive carefully while near a school or playground. The school calls up memories of your own childhood; you ponder how you used to play ball and how much you loved recess. This nostalgic reflection fades as you come to a four-way stop sign and have to concentrate on your turn to cross. You suddenly remember the street ahead is closed for a university event, and therefore you have to find a different route to get to the campus. After thinking through the possibilities, you decide to turn left up two streets to a major road you usually avoid. You check to ensure the way is clear and proceed through the intersection, noticing that one of the cars near you happens to be the exact model you dream of owning. As you proceed through the intersection, you receive a text

message. You pick up your phone to see who the message is from before deciding to read the text later.

Most people's daily experiences are filled with nonrational dimensions: noticing passing stores and trees, listening to the radio, being aware of other people in the car, paying attention to the street ahead, remembering the past, feeling happy or content, wanting a new car. Sometimes something will intervene in this ongoing flow of sensations, intuitions, memories, feelings, and perceptions and cause you to make a sudden judgment based on memory, a perceived threat, or practical, learned experience. Occasionally, you will be confronted with rational considerations that require a more sustained process of reflection, like deciding what speed to go in a certain area or figuring out an alternate route to school given new information. Sometimes, you are presented with choices that seem simple, but that have far-reaching consequences—like texting while you are driving. One should use a rational process to consider possible options: whether to look at the text message now, wait until later, or pull over, read the message, and respond to it before proceeding. All of these options have different advantages and drawbacks—but normally a decision of this kind is made automatically or out of habit without consciously reviewing each option separately. Nevertheless, given the responsibility of driving safely, some level of rational reflection is preferable to a simple habitual response to the sound your phone makes when receiving a text. Actions of this type have what are called moral consequences: they affect other people and are rooted in duties and responsibilities humans have to and for other human beings and the common good.

Human life is made up of this process of ongoing experience and therefore requires that people continually interpret reality and make decisions based on beliefs: both those that are rationally acquired and considered and those that are accepted uncritically or developed from the pre-rational dimension of human knowing. Daily life constantly requires human beings to use both dimensions of their minds to experience, make sense of, and make decisions about reality. The jobs or careers people choose often focus attention on one aspect of knowing or interpreting reality. Many jobs require people to "detach" from their immediate experience to focus on a broader concern or interest they specialize in; many people

then devote much of their lives to becoming experts. In this sense, human knowledge is always gained immediately and directly on the one hand and is the result of long-term investigation and development on the other. People can know more and more as time goes on and constantly learn new things and also have new experiences that change or expand what they already know. Human knowledge therefore constantly emerges from not only personal experience but also sharing these experiences with others. In this sense, human knowing is virtually infinite and can develop from generation to generation and age to age through nonrational and rational processes. The beliefs, simple and complex, on which people base their lives, form their opinions and habits, and shape their understanding of reality, therefore, are dynamic and evolve out of this personal and social process of human knowing.

Beliefs, Knowledge, and Community

Individuals are never alone in their quest to make sense of the world or interpret their experience. They always live in a social context that shapes their pre-rational perceptions and the rational processes they use to ground their conceptions of the world. Language itself, a foundation of thinking, comes to individuals from the social world into which they are born and raised. Many of the feelings, images, stories, and creative dimensions of one's personal life (music, art, poetry, games, etc.) emerge from and are shared by large communities of people that both preceded one in time and will remain after one is gone. This social context of knowing is complex and basic: indeed, one could argue that all individual knowing arises from and is rooted in social and communal knowing.

The individual is given the capacity for unique, personal experience in part through the shared experience of the communities in which he or she participates. This means many individual beliefs and practices derive from communal beliefs and practices. Consider the experience of driving narrated earlier in the chapter. The car, the roads, the surrounding buildings, the music coming from the speakers, the phone, the text, the people that come into view and make up the surrounding neighborhood, the "rules" of the road, and the

knowledge of how to drive a car, all come from a society in which many people, acting together in complex ways over long periods of time, continue to create, sustain, and develop. An individual will always find herself or himself within this web of historical and social processes.

This social context of knowing profoundly impacts the interplay between belief and doubt mentioned earlier. Because an individual does not encounter mystery in isolation, often the social situation in which one finds oneself will significantly impact how one makes sense of the world. Each society or community holds an array of beliefs, conceptions, and interpretations that are conveyed to individuals through language, customs, and social practices. Individuals cannot rationally review and decide to accept or reject each of the countless assumptions about the world they are given, so people must presume and take much of their knowledge about the world from the society or community in which they find themselves.

Families, communities, and societies, however, are limited in their knowledge of reality in the same ways that individuals are. The diverse and complex processes required for knowing can lead people and communities to act on beliefs that are based on not reliable or credible knowledge but rather limited or false perceptions of reality Individuals' sense of knowing is deeply affected by the communities in which they live, and therefore human action, like human knowing, is also deeply affected by a person's social and historical reality. People can reliably be predicted to adopt the habits and tendencies of their society, and therefore individual action can never be understood in isolation from its wider social context.

Actions of individuals are more likely to be positive when they are rooted in communities that are generally hopeful in their outlook, when they gather and process information using rational methods, and when there is a genuine willingness to test one's perspective against others. Also, people's habits of behavior will generally be more beneficial when they live in a society that uses the Golden Rule, that one should treat others the way one wants to be treated, and when that society is also aware of and concerned about the well-being of people different than and distant from themselves.

Tradition, Traditions, and Authority

The beliefs, practices, habits, and tendencies that characterize a community and are shared by its members over long periods of time are referred to as traditions. Traditions are not only customs and practices but also shared ways of thinking, imagining, and interpreting reality that serve as a foundation for social life. Traditions tend to emerge gradually over time, though sometimes they can be traced to a specific historical event or communal experience that shaped the way a community views all later experiences. Think back to the metaphor of driving: the rules of the road (driving on the right side of road rather than the left, the practice of allowing the car at one's right to go through a stop sign first, the need for drivers to slow in school zones, etc.), the placement of signs and lights, the kind of cars on the road, the types of food sold along the way, the many possible events each driver must respond to practically and morally are all rooted in the past experience of the society in which the particular driver is now driving. No one person or group of people in a special time or place created all these conditions; rather, many of these concrete conditions emerged from the thoughtful consideration of certain people at certain times and slowly became the standard way of "doing things." Often, these traditions are expressed through authoritative texts (like constitutions, laws, rules, and policies), and various forms of art and popular culture (movies, music, literature, the visual arts).

Traditions then, are not simply the accumulation of past experiences, they also emerge from the decision-making of people within a society who have either expertise in a certain area (e.g., car design or civil engineering) or have been given the responsibility to maintain order and clarify modes of behavior for the good of all (e.g., legislatures, city councils, safety commissions). Such decision-making entities are referred to as authorities. Authority in general refers to individuals and designated groups of people who have specific knowledge of designated areas of common life and are given responsibility for the common good, or the safe, harmonious working of the society in which they live. Consider what would happen if the person driving one morning ignores certain traffic signs or decides to text while driving in a school zone; someone would need to be responsible to warn or stop a driver who ignored safety rules and

endangered other drivers. In such a case, civil authorities would not be randomly harassing people or creating unnecessary obstacles to the driver's attempt to get to school on time. These authorities would be ensuring all travel happens as orderly as possible and that everyone on the road and in the community is kept safe.

Each individual depends on those in authority to consider the common good in the ways they design, organize, and interpret the issues under their care. Likewise, most individuals in a society are an authority in some dimension or aspect of shared social life. For instance, parents, managers, teachers, community leaders, specialists in different fields of work and study, all have some level of authority within their respective spheres. So, authority is not exercised by the few over the many but is shared by all in many interconnected and interrelated ways over time.

Conclusion

Encounters with mystery give rise to ongoing attempts to know and understand the world, to make sense of it by adopting beliefs, and to carry beliefs forward from generation to generation by developing and perpetuating traditions. Mystery, far from being a strange and remote part of human life, lies at the center and serves as the foundation of much of human experience. As described above, human beings find themselves navigating through life like ships at sea: one can never see beyond the horizon and navigation requires that individuals and communities continually adjust, revise, and adapt their interpretations of reality based on the emerging situations they face.

The presence of mystery begs a deeper set of questions as well: What is the source of this mystery? Is there something or someone behind it or present in it that gives it meaning, direction, and purpose? Are human beings present merely randomly, by chance, on this Earth at this time, or are they here for some reason and purpose? If so, is this reason and purpose discernible or accessible in any way? The navigation of human life depends on the answer to these questions. The response of Christian tradition to these questions and the methods it uses to navigate the mystery of life is the focus of the rest of this book.

Review Questions

1. What distinguishes a "problem" from a "mystery"?
2. How did René Descartes attempt to make sense of the world?
3. Name and describe the two basic modes or approaches by which the human mind attempts to make sense of the world?
4. Describe how social context shapes knowing and thinking. How does the social context of knowing affect the interplay of doubt and belief?
5. Explain the meaning of the term *tradition*.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe as the most compelling mystery in your own experience. How is this experience similar to or different from "mystery" as described in this chapter?
2. Other than religious beliefs, enumerate some of the beliefs you hold about your life and the world.
3. Can you discern some of the traditions that shape and influence you? What impact do these have on your view of the world? What are some of the positive and negative implications of these traditions?
4. Do you have a positive view of authority? Do you see authority as something helpful or primarily as something negative? Do you discern different types of authority in your society given the description in this chapter? How do they differ and what makes them positive or negative?

Additional Resources

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