With *Reason, Faith, and Tradition: Explorations in Catholic Theology, Revised Edition*, Martin Albl has written a timely book that corrects the increasingly prevalent assumption that faith and reason remain antithetical to each other. Lucidly written, this learned but accessible book provides a thoroughgoing analysis of the best arguments on all sides in an effort to demonstrate the reasonableness of faith; a rational person may indeed believe in God. More than that, however, Albl writes perceptively about our inherent desire for the transcendent, that foundational awareness that one has been called beyond the finite realm to participate in an infinite good.

—Ian Christopher Levy
Providence College

Martin Albl's *Reason, Faith, and Tradition, Revised Edition*, offers a brilliantly written text that serves well for in-class use. Professors and students will benefit from the additional chapters and the helpful links to videos and websites that offer supplementary content. The extended discussion and guided reading questions draw out key ideas and can be used for class discussions. The chapters do an impressive job of highlighting the historical development of key theological concepts without simplifying the complex history of thought in the Catholic tradition.

—Randall Woodard, PhD
Saint Leo University

I've been teaching Introduction to Catholic Theology for the past eighteen years, and I only wish that Martin Albl's *Reason, Faith, and Tradition: Explorations in Catholic Theology, Revised Edition* had been there from the beginning! Albl's book has a central argument—that faith and reason, which have been tragically separated in modernity, are compatible by nature—which it makes while introducing all manner of doctrines, theologians, controversies, etc. This second edition contains significant improvements over the first. I can't imagine using anything else in my introductory courses.

—Rodney Howsare
DeSales University

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Reason, Faith, and Tradition

EXPLORATIONS IN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY, *REVISED EDITION*

Martin C. Albl

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Contents

Abbreviations

BCE before the Common Era, referring to dates before the birth of Jesus

ca. circa, meaning "approximately"

CCC *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed.

CDF Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a Vatican office

CE Common Era, referring to dates after the birth of Jesus

par. parallels. When given with a Gospel passage, *par.* indicates the passage has parallels in other Gospels.

PBC Pontifical Biblical Commission

SCG *Summa contra Gentiles* by Thomas Aquinas

ST *Summa Theologica* by Thomas Aquinas

Documents of the Second Vatican Council

All references are to the translations available on the Vatican website, *www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm*.

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

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 Ecumenicism*)

Papal Encyclicals and Apostolic Exhortations

EG *Evangelii Gaudium* (*On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*) by Francis

SS *Spe Salvi* (*On Christian Hope*) by Benedict XVI

UUS *Ut Unum Sint* (*On Commitment to Ecumenism*) by John Paul II

VD *Verbum Domini* (*On the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*) by Benedict XVI

Introduction

One of the tragedies of our modern world is the widespread belief that faith and reason are opposites. In more than fifteen years of teaching theology at the college level, I have taught 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 this is a false dichotomy. In the Christian understanding of reality, a scientific worldview and a faith perspective, properly understood, are in perfect harmony. The ultimate goal of Christian theology is to demonstrate the harmony of faith and reason, 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.

The text includes numerous links to print and video resources for further study that are available on the Internet. Descriptions of these resources and the URLs where they can be found are presented in footnotes in the print version of the text and in either footnotes or endnotes in the digital versions of the text. Readers of digital versions with Internet access can use the hyperlinks in the text to access the resources.

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

1

CHAPTER

Faith and Reason I

Reason and Christian Faith 1.1

The title of this book includes 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 are simply opinions and are not open to reasonable discussion and investigation.

The central aim of this book is to show that reason and Christian belief are neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive. In fact, the two are inseparable. Reason, aided by Christian faith, reveals truths about the universe and humans that reason alone could never have reached. Conversely, Christian faith needs reason to communicate its beliefs clearly, to arrange those beliefs systematically, to guard it from straying into fanaticism or error, and to provide answers to reasonable objections to those beliefs.

Specifically, this study considers Christian **theology**—the reasonable study of the Christian faith. Theological studies 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 theology is intensely practical, because religious beliefs, or lack of beliefs, profoundly shape the way people understand the world and how they live in the world. Theology helps clarify basic religious beliefs and explores how they influence all aspects of life.

The third main word in the book's title, ***tradition***, essentially means "a way of life" or "customs" passed down through the generations. This word is used in different ways: A family has certain holiday traditions; different nations and peoples have traditional music, dances, or food.

In this book, ***Tradition*** refers 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. This raises some questions: 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?

The reasons for focusing specifically on the Catholic tradition will be discussed in detail in section 1.11. For now, consider three brief points:

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 clear understanding of that culture must also consider this heritage.
3. While this 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).

This study is not technical, explaining in detail what theology is, or how theology works. Rather, the text addresses certain basic theological issues and questions (for example: Can one prove that God exists? Do science and religion contradict one another?) and considers how the Catholic tradition combines faith and reason in its response to these questions. The text also considers 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 explores how faith and reason relate in these specific beliefs.

Before discussing Christian theology specifically, however, the text explores how reason relates to human religious belief in general. Trying to gain a better understanding of that sometimes-strange human activity called religion is a good place to start.

Why Study Religious Beliefs? 1.2

People wishing to understand the world and its inhabitants must consider the influence of religious beliefs. Billions of people throughout the world identify themselves as members of religious traditions,[1] following major religious traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism as well as countless smaller or lesser-known traditions. Every society in human history has had some kind of religious belief. One has only to follow the news 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, political debates on the role

1. The interactive chart "Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents" is accessible at *http://chartsbin.com/view/3nr*.

of Hinduism in Indian society, the discussion on teaching evolution in public schools, and public policy debates on same-sex marriage and abortion.

At the personal level, the majority of people, even those who do not regularly attend religious services or follow an organized religion, sooner or later confront "religious" questions. For example, when a close friend or family member passes away, one may 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 vaguely, "What is the purpose of my life?" or, more specifically, "Does God have a plan for me?" Perhaps as a couple considers marriage, each 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 one's everyday experience in this world. Such questions ask whether everyday life has a meaning given to it by a supernatural power. Notice that even atheists face religious questions, even if only by the choice not to believe in a reality beyond this world.

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

The Heart of Religion: Encountering the Transcendent 1.3

Defining the term *religion* more closely is the next step. Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are commonly referred to as religions. People such as the Lakota and the Hopi, and various indigenous groups throughout the world have religious traditions. History tells of ancient Greek, Roman, and Babylonian religions. However, it is difficult to identify what exactly makes all of these religions. What do they have in common?

Clearly it is not just a belief in God. While Jews, Christians, and Muslims are monotheists (believers in one God), the ancient Greeks were polytheists (believers in many gods). Other traditions speak not of gods but of spirits or other supernatural beings. While Buddhism accepts the existence of gods and spirits, the Buddha's teaching focused not on these supernatural powers but on the ability of humans to achieve a state of perfect peace known as Nirvana. So once again the question arises: Is there a common link that unites these various beliefs?

In his classic study *The Idea of the Holy*, German philosopher, theologian, and historian Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) claims to have found the 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:

2. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).

> 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 uses the Latin phrase *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* to sum up his understanding of the numinous. *Mysterium* refers to the "wholly other": something people 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 before Jesus and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8).

In this terracotta relief, eighteenth-century Italian artist Angelo Bigari captures the ambiguity of religious experience: Moses is attracted to, yet overwhelmed by, the mysterious power of God's presence.

However, 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 that most people, even while experiencing some fear, are

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 17.

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.

Scholar of world religions, Mircea Eliade[4] (1907–1986), agrees that all religions share a common belief in a realm of otherworldly, numinous reality, a realm he calls the "sacred," in contrast to the realm of the profane (everyday, visible reality).[5] Religions, Eliade adds, 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).

A general term that covers both Otto's concept of the numinous and Eliade's concept of the sacred is the word ***transcendent***, referring to a reality that transcends, or goes beyond, natural, everyday human experience. The belief in the transcendent is at the heart of all religions.

Transcendence and the Meaning of Life 1.4

The personal religious questions mentioned in section 1.2—"What is the purpose of 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.

Consider how some common, everyday expressions also presuppose that life has a transcendent meaning. When one experiences an unpleasant or even tragic event, a friend may try to offer comfort by saying, "Everything happens for a reason." In the face of a disappointment, one might say, "I guess it wasn't meant to be." Notice that such statements seem to imply that a transcendent power has a plan.

Philosophically inclined people might ask themselves if human life has meaning and purpose rather than being the result of a random collection of cells, tissues, and organs that, through blind chance, evolved the ability to think. (This question will be discussed 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. The person who encounters the numinous is not left with

4. An overview of the life and thought of Mircea Eliade by Brian Rennie in the 1998 Routledge *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is accessible at *www.westminster.edu/staff/brennie/eliade/mebio.htm*.

5. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959).

only fear and terror but 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 Peter's encounter with Jesus, Peter is sent out as an apostle. Eliade describes how discovering a sacred space—a manifestation of the sacred—gives structure and meaning to life. He equates this discovery with the creation of the world because it helps make sense of a world that can seem chaotic and even terrifying.[6]

All societies have asked questions about the meaning of human life; countless millions have asked and continue to ask questions about the meaning of their individual lives. The question is a transcendent one because it is oriented toward ultimate meaning, a meaning that transcends that which any individual person or group can give to human life.

People, then, have a sense that a transcendent reality gives meaning to visible reality. However, this sense raises questions: Why? What gives people the idea that the invisible gives meaning to the visible?

Moral Law: Sign of the Transcendent 1.5

The first part of C. S. Lewis's[7] book *Mere Christianity* is titled, "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe."[8] Lewis points out that all humans of every culture have the same basic sense of right and wrong. Some details vary, but all cultures share the sense that such actions as lying, stealing, and committing adultery are truly wrong—not just wrong in the opinion of some people. Notice that when people do lie or steal, they often try to rationalize or justify their behavior—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 one explain why the basic ethical standards of the ancient Egyptians, ancient Chinese, medieval Europeans, and modern Americans (all cultures that developed with no direct contact with one another) are essentially the same?

Nor can the Moral Law simply be based on instinct, because natural instincts are often contradictory. When another person is in danger, for example, one has a natural instinct to offer help, but one also has an equally natural instinct of self-preservation that prompts one to avoid danger. The Moral Law helps people decide which instinct to follow.

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6. Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 20–22.

7. A video overview of the life and work of C. S. Lewis is accessible at *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHCztUy3kGU* (time 0:24:21).

8. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: HarperCollins, 2001; orig. pub. 1952), 1–32.

The Moral Law, Lewis concludes, can only come from a transcendent source—a supernatural power. Humans did not invent it but feel obligated to obey it. The Moral Law, then, is a sign that a transcendent power, the author of the Moral Law,[9] really does exist.

Personal Experience: Sign of the Transcendent 1.6

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; however, 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. You have had an experience of the transcendent—a sense of peace and beauty that does not seem to belong to everyday reality but seems to point beyond it.

A feeling of unlimited love and a sense of responsibility for new life overwhelm many parents holding their newborn babies for the first time. The biological facts of how babies are conceived and born cannot describe or even begin to explain the experience. Parents speak of being overcome with the wonder of a new life that they did not create but that was given to them as a gift. Babies are commonly described as "little miracles." This description expresses the feeling that some experiences are simply beyond the ordinary—they touch on something transcendent.

At times the experience of the transcendent can take the form of dissatisfaction with this world, restlessness, a longing for something more, something better. People are often frustrated with their lack of ability to communicate, to find meaning in school or work, to find peace in their family life. This dissatisfaction comes not only at times of frustration or unhappiness but also at times of contentment, when life is good. Following experiences of the best of what life can offer—love, beauty, peace, deep joy—people often find themselves longing for more. Those moments of happiness don't last, but they do awaken a desire for something on a completely different scale: perfect, lasting love and perfect, eternal peace.

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

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9. An excerpt from *Mere Christianity* (book 1, chapter 2) in which C. S. Lewis argues that Moral Law is a sign that absolute truth exists is accessible at *www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/ownwords/mere1.html*.

If people have a longing for something that this world seemingly cannot provide, a longing for a perfect world, from where did that longing come?

Transcendence and Death 1.6.1

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 from reliable sources; many have heard similar accounts. While these and similar stories can be dismissed as coincidence or exaggeration, one wonders if that is the most reasonable explanation? When faced with events that have no natural explanation, perhaps the most sensible response is to admit that reason is limited and leave open the possibility of an explanation that transcends ordinary experience.

Reason and Truth: Signs of the Transcendent 1.7

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.[10] In every experience, people are aware not only of their own human limitations but, at the same time, of the possibility of transcending those limitations. Human experiences—the ordinary as well as the extraordinary—point beyond themselves to a "transcendent horizon." Consider a hypothetical example:

Jeff claims to be a complete skeptic: He denies that any absolute, objective truth exists. "Truth," he claims, is really based on people's perceptions. Every

10. See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 14–35.

society, he insists, has had its own subjective opinions about truth, and strong or ruthless societies usually impose their version of truth on weaker societies.

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

Most people realize that their own thoughts and opinions will always be limited (whether because of their prejudices, lack of knowledge, or limited experiences). At the same time, most are also aware that it is necessary for this absolute truth to exist, or humans would never be able to think at all. How else would people know that their grasp of truth is limited, unless they had a sense of an absolute truth? With this intimation, this glimpse into absolute truth, people transcend themselves—they know there is an absolute horizon of truth that is infinitely beyond their (or any other human's) knowledge and control. They become aware of the transcendent.

Is Belief in the Transcendent Just Wishful Thinking? Responding to Some Challenges 1.8

Thus far, it's been noted that all societies known to historians have expressed belief in the existence of a transcendent realm. While it's true that they have described this realm in different ways (e.g., as Nirvana or heaven or as Mount Olympus), in every case, these societies have agreed that a realm beyond everyday, visible reality does exist, and that this transcendent realm gives meaning to human life.

It's also been noted that people encounter the transcendent through their deep desire to find meaning in life (e.g., "Does everything happen for a reason?") or through experiencing things that defy ordinary explanations. The sense of the transcendent is also manifest in the experience of a moral law not invented by humans, in the restless desire for deep, lasting peace and perfect joy, and in one's implicit sense that absolute truth must exist.

Various sociologists and psychologists have put forth theories attempting to explain the universal human awareness of and desire for the transcendent. Karl Marx (1818–1883) believed that the ruling classes fabricated religious beliefs to keep the oppressed working classes in a passive state. Religion, Marx asserted, is "the opium of the people," the false promise of an invisible world of peace and justice that distracts workers from demanding their rights in this world.[11]

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11. 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).

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) argued that religious beliefs arose as civilizations projected their need for a protective father figure onto a supernatural realm. In order to feel better in a dangerous, unpredictable world, humans invented the myth of a kindly father in the sky who watches over them.[12]

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? One can agree with Marx that many humans suffer under oppressive working conditions, but why would they seek escape from these conditions in a transcendent realm? There are plenty of earthly escapes, after all. One can agree with Freud that humans have a deep desire for security, but why seek that security in an invisible world? Doesn't it make more sense to look for security in a world one can see? Why and how did people come up with this belief in this other world in the first place?

Commenting on this persistent belief in a transcendent world, Lewis reflects that

> 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.[13]

Such arguments suggest that it is reasonable to take the world of the transcendent seriously as an object of study.

Religious Studies and Theology 1.9

If indeed it is important to study religious beliefs, then how should one undertake such a study? Two general approaches are religious studies and theology.

The first approach, religious studies, has had many labels: *history of religions*, *philosophy of religions*, *comparative religions*, or simply *religious studies*, the term that will be used in this text. The religious studies scholar focuses on human religious experience as a specific field of academic study. A common procedure is to gather data on religions from various times and places 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,

12. See, for example, Freud's book, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Norton, 1989; orig. pub. 1927).

13. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 136–37.

such as rituals marking sacred times, which give deep insight into the nature of religion as a human activity.

The goal of religious studies is to describe religious beliefs and actions as objectively as possible.[14] This makes the approach of religious studies departments, found in many state universities, similar to approaches taken in departments of sociology or **anthropology**. Scholars and students working in the area of religious studies avoid the question of whether a transcendent world exists. They aim to keep personal views about the transcendent apart from their analysis of religions and religious beliefs.

In contrast, the second approach—theology—begins by accepting the reality of the transcendent and attempting to better understand that reality. In other words, the theologian begins with a faith commitment to a specific religious tradition (e.g., Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Lakota), and uses reason to better understand that tradition's beliefs. Saint Anselm[15] (ca. 1033–1109 CE) offered a definition of theology that has been widely embraced: "faith seeking understanding."

Breaking down the word *theology* into its two Greek root words gives 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 a "study" or "disciplined use of reason." *Logos* is a familiar term for many as it is a common part of many English words, such as bio*logy*: the study of life.

It would be easy to conclude from this comparison that religious studies deals with *facts* (e.g., some societies believe in God; others believe in many gods) while theology deals with unprovable *opinions* (e.g., there is one God; Jesus is divine). It would be more accurate, however, to conclude that theology is concerned with *meaning*, in particular, with ultimate meaning. Does human life have a transcendent meaning or not? Did a transcendent power create the universe and give it meaning? These are not simply interesting but, ultimately, pointless speculations about things one can never truly know. Rather, they are serious questions about the ultimate nature of reality and human life. If God really does exist, if there really is a heaven or hell, they make a difference in how one lives. Such questions lie at the heart of the theologian's work.

Although theology deals with beliefs about the transcendent, theologians insist that one can deal with this "other world" by using reason. While the

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14. 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.

15. An overview of the life and work of Saint Anselm is accessible at *plato.stanford.edu/entries/anselm/*.

starting point of theology is in faith—the faith that a transcendent world does exist—once this starting point is granted, the theologian aims to apply reason in a way that is just as rigorous and disciplined as in other academic fields of study.

The essential difference between theology and other academic disciplines lies less in its methodology than in its subject matter. Theology insists on the reasonable examination of *all* reality—both this-worldly and transcendent. Theologians believe access to the transcendent, however, cannot come directly through reason. It comes only through faith, a faith that is reasonable.

The Role of Traditions in Theological Thinking 1.10

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 other fields of study such as art, history, or philosophy.[16] Gadamer insists that one can arrive at real truth and understanding, not just opinions, in these latter fields; one simply can't get there by using methods designed for the natural sciences. The method appropriate for seeking truth within humanities and fine arts involves accepting a certain tradition and thinking within it.

Take the discipline of history, for example. A historical event, such as the Cuban revolution of 1959 when the Communists under Fidel Castro took power, cannot be replicated in the laboratory or scientifically tested. People know about this event only through material evidence or the oral or written testimony of eyewitnesses. How they *interpret* that event, however, is shaped by particular traditions. If interpreted from within a Western tradition that values individual freedom and free markets, one may see it as a great disaster and loss of freedom for Cubans. If interpreted from within a socialist or Communist tradition that prioritizes the good of the community and centralized economic planning, one may to see it as an improvement for Cuba.

The same type of understanding applies to philosophical texts. The Western philosophical tradition, for example, shapes the way Westerners think about the world. Thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Descartes have shaped how Westerners think about good and evil, cause and effect, and even science and religion. In contrast, a person influenced by Eastern tradition would think about these topics differently. Thus when studying a philosophical text, one cannot pretend to be a scientifically objective and neutral observer. One must be aware that one's perception and understanding of the text has been

16. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994).

fundamentally shaped by a particular tradition. People always read with certain prejudices, literally "prejudgments."

Most people are taught that prejudice is a bad thing. However, Gadamer's point is that certain prejudices, or prejudgments, are necessary; otherwise, one couldn't begin to think at all.

At the same time, this does not mean that a person's thoughts and beliefs are simply imprisoned within a particular tradition. Rather, as people become more self-aware of how traditions have shaped their basic assumptions, they are able to think critically about them. Encounters with other traditions, other ways of thinking, may lead people to rethink certain assumptions or see them in a new light. Here Gadamer[17]speaks of a "fusion of horizons"—an insight from one tradition (horizon) can "fuse" or merge with an insight from another tradition (horizon), producing a deeper understanding than could be gained through thinking in either tradition alone.

Theology's Method: Thinking within a Theological Tradition 1.11

Using a hypothetical example shows how Gadamer's insights might apply to understanding within the Christian theological tradition. Jane, a college freshman, although from a Christian background, doesn't attend church regularly, and doesn't consider herself particularly religious. One Friday night, she learns 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, 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 doesn't know what to say.

Jane's questions and emotions are complex and even confused. Notice, though, that simply by asking certain questions, Jane shows that she is already thinking within a certain theological tradition and assumes that certain beliefs about God are true. She assumes, first, that there is one God, rather than many gods or other spiritual powers. 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. This is the source of her confusion and anger: If God is good and all-powerful, how could he allow an innocent person's life to be taken in such a senseless way?

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17. An overview of the life and work of Gadamer is accessible at *plato.stanford.edu/entries/gadamer*. See especially section 3.1 on the positivity of prejudice and 3.2 on the fusion of horizons.

Jane's thinking, then, is shaped by several fundamental theological assumptions. Why does she have these unquestioned assumptions? Despite not attending church regularly or participating in formal religious education as a child, Jane had learned certain beliefs from her family. Then, as she grew older, she was influenced by ideas she picked up in school, from her own reading, and from everyday interactions with friends and other peers.

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.[18] 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, for example, Buddhist, she would have asked different questions. 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), good and bad karma, and Nirvana. She would not have asked how the one creator, God, could allow her friend to die, because Buddhists do not believe in an all-powerful creator God.

The example supports the idea that thinking in fields such as theology *must* be guided by a particular tradition—Jane cannot simultaneously 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.

At the same time, following Gadamer's thought, Jane still has the freedom to think critically about her own tradition. For example, Jane might question the traditional view that God is all-powerful and all good in the light of her friend's seemingly senseless death. If she seeks answers within the Christian tradition (for example, through reading the Bible or speaking with a pastor), she will ask her questions in a more theological way—using reason to try to better understand traditional beliefs. Gadamer's point is that even in questioning a traditional view, Jane 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.

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18. The Christian theological tradition is founded on Jewish conceptions of God and God's relationship with humans. However, 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.

Studying the Catholic Tradition in a Pluralistic World 1.12

The study of religious traditions—especially the study of the major religious traditions such as Judaism, Islam, or Hinduism that have influenced and shaped the thoughts and actions of countless millions of people—helps people understand both human societies and their own search for meaning.

Why then study the Christian theological tradition in particular? The reasons are many. The tradition is two thousand years old, not counting its deep roots in the Jewish tradition, and it 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. 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.

Yet the Christian tradition is made up of 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. Why focus on the Catholic tradition in particular? Like the Orthodox traditions, the Catholic tradition traces its beginnings to the earliest years of Christianity. The Catholic **Church** has been enormously influential in shaping religious, political, and cultural history, especially in the West, and remains a powerful spiritual and cultural force to this day. In addition, the Catholic theological tradition continues to shape Christian thinking and culture.

Although this book focuses on the Catholic theological tradition, it will draw on insights from other theological traditions. Already the text has considered the thought of Otto, Eliade, Lewis, and Gadamer, all non-Catholics. Openness to recognizing truth in other traditions is a fundamental characteristic of Catholic theology.

More specifically, this book frequently uses the term ***traditional*** or ***orthodox*** *Christianity* to refer to beliefs and practices shared by Catholic, Orthodox, and many Protestant and **evangelical** churches. Many of these shared beliefs are expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds—important early Christian summaries of beliefs.

Because it is impossible to cover the entire Catholic theological tradition, this book focuses on a central theme of the tradition: the relationship between reason and faith. Serious study of the relationship between faith and reason within the Catholic tradition leads not to pointless speculations about angels dancing on pins but to a deeper, truer, more beautiful, and more satisfying understanding of the world and of human life than can be obtained through reason alone.

Questions about the Text

1. Why have all known human cultures developed religious beliefs?
2. What does the word *transcendent* mean and how is it related to religious beliefs?
3. What does it mean to ask whether human life or the universe as a whole has a transcendent meaning?
4. What are some reasons for thinking that a transcendent realm exists?
5. What is the root meaning of the word *theology*? How does the academic discipline of religious studies differ from theology?
6. 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? Explain.
2. Do you think that all people wonder about religious questions—questions about the transcendent—at some point in their lives? Why or why not?
3. Do you agree that it is reasonable to believe in a transcendent reality? Why or why not?
4. What are some characteristics that all religions seem to share? Why do all religions share these characteristics?
5. Has the Christian tradition shaped the way in which you think about the existence of God, life after death, or the meaning of life? Explain.