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Getting Started: Preliminaries



Starting to study Christian theology involves exploring a whole range of issues. Some of these center on the identity and characteristics of theology itself. For example, what is theology? And how did it develop? How does it relate to other areas of life, such as philosophy or culture? How does our way of talking about God relate to our everyday language? To what extent – and in what ways – can the existence of God be proved?

The present chapter provides readings which explore all of these issues, some in depth. The following general themes are especially recommended for study.

- 1 The patristic debates over the relation of philosophy and theology. The early church witnessed an especially interesting and important discussion of the extent to which theology should interact with secular philosophy.

The Patristic Debate on the Relation of Philosophy and Theology

- 1.1 Justin Martyr on Philosophy and Theology
- 1.2 Clement of Alexandria on Philosophy and Theology
- 1.3 Tertullian on the Relation of Philosophy and Heresy
- 1.4 Augustine on Philosophy and Theology

- 2 Since the Middle Ages, Christian theology has found itself dealing with the issue of whether God's existence can be proved. A number of approaches have been set forward, particularly by Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas. Exploring this debate is an excellent way of engaging with some issues of fundamental theological importance.

Can God's Existence be Proved?

- 1.7 Anselm of Canterbury's Proof for the Existence of God
- 1.8 Gaunilo's Reply to Anselm's Argument
- 1.9 Thomas Aquinas on Proofs for the Existence of God
- 1.15 René Descartes on the Existence of God
- 1.16 Blaise Pascal on Proofs for the Existence of God
- 1.18 Immanuel Kant on Anselm's Ontological Argument
- 1.20 John Henry Newman on the Grounds of Faith
- 1.24 Ludwig Wittgenstein on Proofs for the Existence of God

- 3 A third area of considerable interest is the way in which theology makes use of language and imagery, including the question of whether theological language is analogical or metaphorical in character. The following readings introduce these important themes.

Theological Language and Images

- 1.10 Thomas Aquinas on the Principle of Analogy
- 1.13 The Heidelberg Catechism on Images of God
- 1.23 Ludwig Wittgenstein on Analogy
- 1.26 Paul Tillich on the Method of Correlation
- 1.27 Sallie McFague on Metaphor in Theology
- 1.29 Brian A. Gerrish on Accommodation in Calvin's Theology
- 3.36 Jacques Ellul on the Theology of Icons

1.1 Justin Martyr on Philosophy and Theology

In his two apologies for the Christian faith, written in Greek at Rome at some point during the period 148–61, Justin sets out a vigorous defense of Christianity in which he seeks to relate the gospel to secular wisdom. Justin has an especial concern to relate the Christian gospel to the forms of Platonism which were influential in the eastern Mediterranean region at this time, and thus stresses the convergence of Christianity and Platonism at a number of points of importance. In particular, Justin is drawn to the pivotal concept of the “Logos” (the Greek term means “word”), which plays a key role in both Platonic philosophy and Christian theology – for example, see John 1: 14, which affirms that “the Word became flesh, and dwelled among us.” A central theme in Justin’s defense of the Christian faith is the idea that God has scattered “the seeds (*spermata*) of the Logos” throughout the world before the coming of Christ, so that secular wisdom and truth can point, however imperfectly, to Christ. See also 1.2; 1.3; 1.4.

We have been taught that Christ is the firstborn of God, and we have proclaimed that he is the Logos, in whom every race of people have shared. And those who live according to the Logos are Christians, even though they may have been counted as atheists – such as Socrates and Heraclitus, and others like them, among the Greeks. . . . Whatever either lawyers or philosophers have said well, was articulated by finding and reflecting upon some aspect of the Logos. However, since they did not know the Logos – which is Christ – in its entirety, they often contradicted themselves. . . . Whatever all people have said well (*kalōs*) belongs to us Christians. For we worship and love, next to God, the Logos, who comes from the unbegotten and ineffable God, since it was for our sake that he became a human being, in order that he might share in our sufferings and bring us healing. For all writers were able to see the truth darkly, on account of the implanted seed of the Logos which was grafted into them. Now the seed and imitation (*mimēma*) of something which is given on the basis of a person’s capacity to receive it is quite different from that thing itself, of which the communication and imitation are received according to the grace of God.

Comment

Note how Justin argues that Jesus Christ *is* the Logos. In other words, the foundational philosophical principle of the Platonic system, according to Justin, is

not an abstract idea which needs to be discovered by human reason, but something which has been made known to humanity in a specific form. What the philosophers were seeking, has been made known in Christ.

It follows that all true human wisdom derives from this Logos, whether this is explicitly recognized or not. Justin argues that philosophical contradictions and tensions arise through an incomplete access to the Logos. Full access to the Logos is now possible, however, through Christ.

Justin then asserts that anyone who honestly and sincerely acts according to what she knows of the Logos can be reckoned as being a Christian, including Socrates.

It thus follows that what is good and true in secular philosophy can be accepted and honored by Christians, in that it derives from the Logos.

Questions for Study

- 1 Why do you think Justin wanted to stress the convergence of Christianity and Platonism?
- 2 What attitude to secular philosophy results from Justin's understanding of the Logos?
- 3 What difficulties arise from the assertion that the pagan philosophers Socrates and Heraclitus can be regarded as Christians?

Clement of Alexandria on Philosophy and Theology

1.2

The eight books of Clement's *Stromata* (the word literally means "carpets") deal at length with the relation of the Christian faith to Greek philosophy. In this extract from the *Stromata*, originally written in Greek in the early third century, Clement argues that God gave philosophy to the Greeks as a way of preparing them for the coming of Christ, in more or less exactly the same way as he gave the Jews the law of Moses. While not conceding that philosophy has the same status as divine revelation, Clement goes beyond Justin Martyr's suggestion that the mere seeds of the Logos are to be found in Greek philosophy. See also 1.1; 1.3; 1.4.

Thus until the coming (*parousia*) of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness. And now it assists those who come to faith by way of demonstration, as a kind of preparatory training (*propaideia*) for true religion. For "you will not stumble" (Proverbs 3: 23) if you attribute all good things to provi-

dence, whether it belongs to the Greeks or to us. For God is the source of all good things, some directly (as with the Old and the New Testaments), and some indirectly (as with philosophy). But it might be that philosophy was given to the Greeks immediately and directly, until such time as the Lord should also call the Greeks. For philosophy acted as a “custodian” (*epaidagōgei*) to bring the Greeks to Christ, just as the law brought the Hebrews. Thus philosophy was by way of a preparation, which prepared the way for its perfection in Christ.

Comment

It is clear that Clement is concerned to explore the ways in which Greek philosophy can be thought of as preparing the way for the gospel. Clement argues that the Old Testament prepared the way for the Jewish people to receive the Christian faith; Greek philosophy, he argues, served a similar function for the Greeks.

Clement clearly regards philosophy as having a continuing positive role for Christians. It has not been made irrelevant by the coming of Christ; it remains a way by which sincere and truth-loving people can make their way to faith.

Christ is seen as the perfection and fulfilment of philosophy, just as he is also to be seen as the perfection and fulfilment of the Old Testament.

Questions for Study

- 1 Read the following verse from Paul’s Letter to the Galatians: “Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3: 23–4). The Greek word here translated as “custodian” is the same word that Clement uses to refer to the role of philosophy. There is no doubt that Clement intended his readers to pick up on this parallelism. What points does Clement hope to make? You may find it helpful to begin by asking what role Paul appears to assign to the law in this Galatians passage, and then compare this with the role assigned to philosophy by Clement.
- 2 “Christ is Logos and Nomos.” This summary of the relation of Christ to both Greek philosophy and the Old Testament is often encountered in the literature, and was first proposed by the noted German historian of Christian thought Adolf von Harnack. “Logos” is, as we have seen, the Greek word for “word,” and has important overtones for Platonic philosophy. “Nomos” is the Greek word for “law,” and picks up on the important role assigned to the law in the Christian faith by Paul. So what points are made by the statement “Christ is Logos and Nomos”? And why would writers such as Clement or Justin want to make such points in the first place?

- 3 The New Testament often identifies two broad audiences for the gospel: “Jews and Greeks.” Read the following brief extract from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1: 22–4). In what way does Clement develop and extend Paul’s concerns?

Tertullian on the Relation of Philosophy and Heresy

1.3

Tertullian was noted for his hostility toward the intrusion of philosophy into theology. Philosophy, he argued, was pagan in its outlook, and its use in theology could only lead to heresy within the church. In his *de praescriptione haereticorum* (“On the Rule of the Heretics”), written in Latin in the first years of the third century, Tertullian sets up a celebrated contrast between Athens and Jerusalem, symbolizing the tension between pagan philosophy and the revelation of the Christian faith. Tertullian’s basic question concerned the relation of Christian theology with secular philosophy, especially Platonism. The Greek city of Athens was the home of the Academy, an institution of secular learning founded by Plato in 387 BC. For Tertullian, Christian theologians inhabited a completely different mental world to their pagan counterparts. How could there be a dialogue between them? See also 1.1; 1.2; 1.4.

For philosophy provides the material of worldly wisdom, in boldly asserting itself to be the interpreter of the divine nature and dispensation. The heresies themselves receive their weapons from philosophy. It was from this source that Valentinus, who was a disciple of Plato, got his ideas about the “aeons” and the “trinity of humanity.” And it was from there that the god of Marcion (much to be preferred, on account of his tranquility) came; Marcion came from the Stoics. To say that the soul is subject to death is to go the way of Epicurus. And the denial of the resurrection of the body is found throughout the writings of all the philosophers. To say that matter is equal with God is to follow the doctrine of Zeno; to speak of a god of fire is to draw on Heraclitus. It is the same subjects which preoccupy both the heretics and the philosophers. Where does evil come from, and why? Where does human nature come from, and how? . . . What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem? between the Academy and the church? Our system of beliefs (*institutio*) comes from the Porch of Solomon, who himself taught that it was necessary to seek God in the simplicity of the heart. So much the worse for those who talk of a “Stoic,” “Platonic” or “dialectic” Christianity! We have no need for

curiosity after Jesus Christ, nor for inquiry (*inquisitio*) after the gospel. When we believe, we desire to believe nothing further. For we need believe nothing more than “there is nothing else which we are obliged to believe.”

Comment

Athens and Jerusalem are here contrasted: the former is the home of pagan philosophy, the latter of divine revelation, culminating in Christ. The “Academy” is a specific reference to the Platonic school of philosophy at Athens, rather than a more general reference to what would now be known as the “academic” world (although this modern English word derives from the name of Plato’s school.)

Note how Tertullian argues that it is a simple matter of historical fact that heresies seem to derive their ideas from secular philosophy. This, in his view, is enough to raise very serious questions concerning the use of philosophy in theology.

Many of the heresies that Tertullian mentions are forms of Gnosticism. In particular, he makes reference to the second-century writer Marcion, who was excommunicated in the year 144. According to Marcion, Christianity was a religion of love, which had no place whatsoever for law. The Old Testament relates to a different God from the New; the Old Testament God, who merely created the world, was obsessed with the idea of law. The New Testament God, however, redeemed the world, and was concerned with love. For Marcion, the purpose of Christ was to depose the Old Testament God (who bears a considerable resemblance to the Gnostic “demiurge,” a semi-divine figure responsible for fashioning the world) and replace this with the worship of the true God of grace.

Tertullian’s basic thesis is that secular philosophies contain core ideas which ultimately are inconsistent with the Christian faith. If these philosophical systems are used as the basis of Christian theology, a serious tension will result, which could lead to the erosion of Christian integrity.

Questions for Study

- 1 Tertullian and Justin Martyr (1.1) both make reference to the pagan philosopher Heraclitus. Summarize their differing attitudes to him. How would you account for these differences?
 - 2 What does Tertullian mean by the following question: “What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem? between the Academy and the church?”
 - 3 Tertullian is a Latin-speaking theologian, based in the western Mediterranean region; Justin and Clement were both Greek-speaking, based in the eastern Mediterranean region. Does this observation have any relevance to their attitudes to philosophy?
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Augustine on Philosophy and Theology

1.4

In this extract from *de doctrina Christiana* (“on Christian doctrine”), originally written in Latin around 397, Augustine deals with the relation between Christianity and pagan philosophy. Using the exodus from Egypt as a model, Augustine argues that there is no reason why Christians should not extract all that is good in philosophy, and put it to the service of preaching the gospel. Just as Israel left behind the burdens of Egypt, while carrying off its treasures, so theology can discard what is useless in philosophy, and exploit what is good and useful. See also 1.1; 1.2; 1.3.

If those who are called philosophers, particularly the Platonists, have said anything which is true and consistent with our faith, we must not reject it, but claim it for our own use, in the knowledge that they possess it unlawfully. The Egyptians possessed idols and heavy burdens, which the children of Israel hated and from which they fled; however, they also possessed vessels of gold and silver and clothes which our forebears, in leaving Egypt, took for themselves in secret, intending to use them in a better manner (Exodus 3: 21–2; 12: 35–6). . . . In the same way, pagan learning is not entirely made up of false teachings and superstitions. . . . It contains also some excellent teachings, well suited to be used by truth, and excellent moral values. Indeed, some truths are even found among them which relate to the worship of the one God. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and their silver, which they did not invent themselves, but which they dug out of the mines of the providence of God, which are scattered throughout the world, yet which are improperly and unlawfully prostituted to the worship of demons. The Christian, therefore, can separate these truths from their unfortunate associations, take them away, and put them to their proper use for the proclamation of the gospel. . . . What else have many good and faithful people from amongst us done? Look at the wealth of gold and silver and clothes which Cyprian – that eloquent teacher and blessed martyr – brought with him when he left Egypt! And think of all that Lactantius brought with him, not to mention Marius Victorinus, Optatus and Hilary of Poitiers, and others who are still living! And look at how much the Greeks have borrowed! And before all of these, we find that Moses, that most faithful servant of God, had done the same thing: after all, it is written of him that “he was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7: 22).



Comment

Note how Augustine adopts a critical yet positive attitude to philosophy. It asserts some things which are true, and others which are false. It cannot be totally rejected on the one hand; on the other, neither can it be uncritically accepted.

It is important to note that Augustine is affirming that Christians are free to make use of philosophical ideas, which can be detached from their pagan associations. It must be remembered that, until the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine, pagan culture was strongly hostile to Christianity, and encouraged its persecution and oppression. Augustine's argument is that philosophical ideas can be extricated from their historical associations with the pagan culture which persecuted earlier generations of Christians. Although this persecution had ended nearly a century before Augustine's time, it was still an important theme in Christian thinking. Augustine's approach allowed a more positive attitude to be adopted to the ideas and values of secular culture.

Notice how Augustine appeals to a series of distinguished Christians who were converted to Christianity from paganism, yet were able to make good use of their pagan upbringing in serving the church. Cyprian is of especial importance for Augustine, in that Cyprian had been martyred by the Romans in the third century.

Questions for Study

- 1 Augustine makes use of a number of biblical passages in making his points. What is the specific point of the reference to the Israelites leaving Egypt? And what is the importance of the "gold and silver" to Augustine's argument? Note how these commodities are things that are mined, rather than created. Does the fact that they are extracted from the ground, rather than fashioned by human hands, affect Augustine's argument in any way?
- 2 Augustine declares that Moses himself was "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians." What biblical passage is this based upon? And what role does this observation play in Augustine's argument?
- 3 Augustine's attitude to secular philosophy could be described as one of "critical appropriation." How does this compare with those adopted by Justin, Clement, and Tertullian?

1.5

The Nicene Creed

The Nicene creed is widely regarded as the basis of orthodox Christianity in both the eastern and western churches. The word "creed" derives from the Latin term *credo* ("I

believe”), with which many creeds open. Although the focus of this specific creed is primarily Christological, its importance relates to its function as a “rule of faith” within the churches. As part of its polemic against the Arians, the Council of Nicea (June 325) formulated a short statement of faith, based on a baptismal creed used at Jerusalem. This creed was intended to affirm the full divinity of Christ against the Arian understanding of his creaturely status, and includes four explicit condemnations of Arian views, as well as its three articles of faith. As the full details of the proceedings of Nicea are now lost, we are obliged to rely on secondary sources (such as ecclesiastical historians, and writers such as Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea) for the text of this creed. Note that the translation provided here is of the Greek original, rather than of the Latin version of Hilary of Poitiers. Note also that the term “Nicene creed” is often used as a shorter way of referring to the “Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed,” which has a significantly longer discussion of the person of Christ, and also makes statements concerning the church, forgiveness, and eternal life. See also 2.7; 2.22; 4.6; 4.7.

We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty (*pantocrator*), the maker of all things seen and unseen.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God; begotten from the Father; only-begotten – that is, from the substance of the Father; God from God; light from light; true God from true God; begotten not made; being of one substance with the Father (*homoousion tō patri*); through whom all things in heaven and on earth came into being; who on account of us human beings and our salvation came down and took flesh, becoming a human being (*sarkōthenta, enanthrōpēsanta*); he suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into the heavens; and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

As for those who say that “there was when he was not,” and “before being born he was not,” and “he came into existence out of nothing,” or who declare that the Son of God is of a different substance or nature, or is subject to alteration or change – the catholic and apostolic church condemns these.

Comment

It is clear that this creed is specifically directed against Arius’ position, which can be summarized in the following manner.

- (a) The Son is a creature, who, like all other creatures, derives from the will of God.
- (b) The term “Son” is thus a metaphor, an honorific term intended to underscore the rank of the Son among other creatures. It does not imply that Father and Son share the same being or status.

- (c) The status of the Son is itself a consequence not of the *nature of the Son*, but of the *will of the Father*.

Each of the specific condemnations in the text is directed against a fighting slogan of the Arian party.

The use of the phrase “being of one substance with the Father (*homoousion tō patri*)” is especially important. During the Arian controversy of the fourth century, debate came to center upon two terms as possible descriptions of the relation of the Father to the Son. The term *homoiousios*, which means “of similar substance” or “of like being,” was seen by many as representing a judicious compromise, allowing the close relationship between Father and Son to be asserted without requiring any further speculation on the precise nature of that relation. However, the rival term *homoousios*, “of the same substance” or “of the same being,” eventually gained the upper hand. Though differing by only one letter from the alternative term, it embodied a very different understanding of the relationship between Father and Son; namely, that the Son was ontologically identical with the Father. This affirmation has since come to be widely regarded as a benchmark of Christological orthodoxy within all the mainstream Christian churches, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox.

Questions for Study

- 1 This creed focuses on the identity of Christ, and especially his relation to God the Father. Why is this? Why is there relatively little material relating to other aspects of the Christian faith? You might like to compare this creed with the later Apostles' creed (1.6) to appreciate this point.
- 2 What is the point at issue in the discussion over whether the Son is *homoiousios* or *homoousios* with the Father? Is it important?
- 3 What does this creed mean when it asserts that Christ is “God from God; light from light; true God from true God”?

1.6

The Apostles' Creed

The document known as the Apostles' creed is widely used in the western church as a succinct summary of the leading themes of the Christian faith. Its historical evolution is complex, with its origins lying in declarations of faith which were required of those who wanted to be baptized. The twelve individual statements of this creed, which seems to have assumed its final form in the eighth century, are traditionally ascribed to individual apostles, although there is no historical justification for this belief. During the twentieth century, the Apostle's creed has become widely ac-

cepted by most churches, eastern and western, as a binding statement of Christian faith, despite the fact that its statements concerning the “descent into hell” and the “communion of saints” (here printed within square brackets) are not found in eastern versions of the work. See also 2.7; 2.22.

- 1 I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of the heavens and earth;
- 2 and in Jesus Christ, his only (*unicus*) Son, our Lord;
- 3 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary;
- 4 he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; [he descended to hell;]
- 5 on the third day he was raised from the dead;
- 6 he ascended into the heavens, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty;
- 7 from where he will come to judge the living and the dead.
- 8 I believe in the Holy Spirit;
- 9 in the holy catholic church; [the communion of saints;]
- 10 the forgiveness of sins;
- 11 the resurrection of the flesh (*resurrectio carnis*);
- 12 and eternal life.

Comment

Note how the document is traditionally divided into twelve affirmations, each of which is linked with an apostle.

The credal statements are brief, and non-polemical. It is interesting to compare this with the Nicene creed (1.5), which is concerned to counter Arian ideas, and thus explicitly condemns such teachings. The Apostles' creed avoids such polemics and does not have the same Christological preoccupation found in the Nicene creed.

The brevity of the credal affirmations reflects the origins of this creed as a statement of faith which would be made at the time of an individual's baptism. There are many examples of Christian works from the patristic period which provide expansions and explanations of these statements, such as Cyril of Jerusalem's catechetical lectures.

Questions for Study

- 1 How do you account for the differences in format and content between the Nicene and Apostles' creeds?

- 2 Why do you think that this creed has become increasingly important in ecumenical discussions between Christian denominations in recent decades?
- 3 There is no mention made in this creed of the sources of Christian beliefs, such as the idea of revelation, or the important place of the Bible in the Christian life. Why not?

1.7 Anselm of Canterbury's Proof for the Existence of God

In his *Proslogion*, written in Latin around 1079, Anselm of Canterbury offers a definition of God as “that than which no greater thing can be thought” (*aliquid quo maius cogitari non potest*). He argues that, if this definition of God is correct, it necessarily implies the existence of God. The reason for this is as follows. If God does not exist, the idea of God remains, yet the reality of God is absent. Yet the reality of God is greater than the idea of God. Therefore, if God is “that than which no greater thing can be thought,” the idea of God must lead to accepting the reality of God, in that otherwise the mere idea of God is the greatest thing which can be thought. This, however, contradicts the definition of God on which the argument is based.

Therefore, Anselm argues, given the existence of the idea of God, and the acceptance of the definition of God as “that than which no greater thing can be thought,” the reality of God necessarily follows. Note that the Latin verb *cogitare* is sometimes translated as “conceive,” leading to the definition of God as “that than which no greater thing can be conceived.” Both translations are perfectly acceptable. See also 1.8; 1.18.

This [definition of God] is indeed so true that it cannot be thought of as not being true. For it is quite possible to think of something whose non-existence cannot be thought of. This must be greater than something whose non-existence can be thought of. So if this thing (than which no greater thing can be thought) can be thought of as not existing, then, that very thing than which a greater thing cannot be thought is not that than which a greater cannot be thought. This is a contradiction. So it is true that there exists something than which nothing greater can be thought, that it cannot be thought of as not existing.

And you are this thing, O Lord our God! So truly therefore do you exist, O Lord my God, that you cannot be thought of as not existing, and with good reason; for if a human mind could think of anything greater than you, the creature would rise above the Creator and judge you; which is obviously absurd. And in truth whatever else there be beside you may be thought of as not existing. So you alone, most truly

of all, and therefore most of all, have existence: because whatever else exists, does not exist as truly as you, and therefore exists to a lesser degree.

Comment

This approach is often referred to as the “ontological argument.” (The term “ontological” refers to the branch of philosophy which deals with the notion of “being.”) Anselm himself does not refer to his discussion as an “ontological” argument.

It is important to note that the *Proslogion* is really a work of meditation, not of logical argument. In the course of this work Anselm reflects on how self-evident the idea of God has become to him and what the implications of this might be. We must be careful not to present Anselm as setting out to offer a foolproof argument for the existence of God, which he clearly did not intend to do.

The crux of Anselm's point is this: the *idea* of something is inferior to its *reality*. It therefore follows, according to Anselm, that the idea of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” contains a contradiction – because the reality of God would be superior to this idea. In other words, if this definition of God is correct, and exists in the human mind, then the corresponding reality must also exist.

Questions for Study

- 1 Anselm offers a very specific definition of God as the basis of his argument. But where does this definition come from?
- 2 Does the idea of something imply its existence? We shall consider this question further in 1.8.
- 3 Anselm's argument is set in the context of a sustained meditation on the nature of God, rather than a logical analysis of the nature of God's being. How important is the context of Anselm's argument to the form it takes?

Gaunilo's Reply to Anselm's Argument

1.8

In this response to Anselm's argument for the existence of God (see 1.7), written at some point in the late eleventh century, the Benedictine monk Gaunilo argues that the mere idea of something – whether a perfect island or God – does not guarantee its existence. This document is sometimes referred to as “The Reply on behalf of

the Fool," a reference to the fool who denied the existence of God in Scripture (Psalm 14: 1). See also 1.7; 1.18.

To give an example. People say that somewhere in the ocean there is an island which, because of the difficulty (or rather the impossibility) of finding that which does not exist, some have called the "Lost Island." And we are told that it is blessed with all manner of priceless riches and delights in abundance, far more than the Happy Isles, and, having no owner or inhabitant, it is superior in every respect in the abundance of its riches to all those other lands that are inhabited by people. Now, if someone were to tell me about this, I shall easily understand what is said, since there is nothing difficult about it. But suppose that I am then told, as though it were a direct consequence of this: "You cannot any more doubt that this island that is more excellent than all other lands truly exists somewhere in reality than you can doubt that it is in your mind; and since it is more excellent to exist not just in your mind but in reality as well, therefore it must exist. For if it did not exist, any other land existing in reality would be more excellent than it, and so this island, already conceived by you to be more excellent than others, will not be more excellent." I say in response that if anyone wanted to persuade me in this way that this island really exists beyond all doubt, I should either think that they were joking, or I should find it hard to decide which of us I ought to think of as the bigger fool: I myself, if I agreed with them, or they, if they thought that they had proved the existence of this island with any certainty, unless they had first persuaded me that its very excellence exists in my mind precisely as a thing existing truly and indubitably and not just as something unreal or doubtfully real.

Comment

There is, according to Gaunilo, an obvious logical weakness in Anselm's "argument" (although it must be stressed that Anselm does not really regard it as an argument in the first place). The weakness can be understood as follows. Imagine, Gaunilo suggests, an island, so lovely that a more perfect island cannot be conceived. By Anselm's argument, that island *must* exist, in that the reality of the island is necessarily more perfect than the mere idea.

In much the same way, someone might argue that the idea of a hundred dollar bill seems, according to Anselm, to imply that we have such a bill in our hands. The mere idea of something – whether a perfect island or God – thus does not guarantee its existence.

The response offered by Gaunilo is widely regarded as exposing a serious weakness in Anselm's argument. It may, however, be pointed out that Anselm is not so easily dismissed. Part of his argument is that it is an essential part of the definition of God that God is "that than which nothing greater can be conceived." God there-

fore belongs to a totally different category than islands or dollar bills. It is part of the nature of God to transcend everything else. Once the believer has come to understand what the word “God” means, then God really does exist for him or her. This is the intention of Anselm’s meditation in the *Proslogion*: to reflect on how the Christian understanding of the nature of God reinforces belief in his reality. The “argument” does not really have force outside this context of faith, and Anselm never intended it to be used in this general philosophical manner.

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Questions for Study

- 1 Summarize in your own words the point which is made by Gaunilo in the idea of the “Lost Island.”
- 2 Anselm argued that Gaunilo had not entirely understood him. The argument which he set out in the *Proslogion* did not, he insisted, involve the idea that there is a being that is, as a matter of fact, greater than any other being; rather, Anselm had argued for a being so great that a greater one could not even be conceived. How would you respond to Anselm’s counter-argument?
- 3 In the light of Gaunilo’s criticism, can any further use be made of Anselm’s reflections on the existence of God?

Thomas Aquinas on Proofs for the Existence of God

1.9

In this famous discussion, Aquinas sets out five ways in which the existence of God may be demonstrated. Although these cannot be regarded as “proofs” in the strict sense of the word, Aquinas regards them as demonstrating the consistency of Christian theology with what is known of the world. The “Five Ways” do not include the argument set out by Anselm earlier, which we considered at 1.7 and 1.8. The *Summa Theologiae* (“The Totality of Theology”), which Aquinas began to write in Latin in 1265 and left unfinished at the time of his death, is widely regarded as the greatest work of medieval theology. Note that the Latin term *motus* can be translated “motion” or “change.” The first of Aquinas’ arguments is normally referred to as the “argument from motion”; however, it is clear that the *motus* in question is actually understood in more general terms, so that the term “change” is more appropriate as a translation. See also 1.7; 1.8; 1.15; 1.16.

2 Whether God's Existence Can Be Demonstrated

There are two types of demonstration. There is demonstration through the cause, or, as we say, "from grounds," which argues from cause to effect. There is also demonstration by means of effects, following the order in which we experience things, arguing from effect to cause. Now when an effect is more apparent to us than its cause, we come to know the cause through its effect. Even though the effect should be better known to us, we can demonstrate from any effect that its cause exists, because effects always depend on some cause, and a cause must exist if its effect exists. We can therefore demonstrate that God exists from what is not evident to us on the basis of effects which are evident to us. . . .

3 Whether God Exists

The existence of God can be proved in five ways. The first and most obvious proof is the argument from change (*ex parte motus*). It is clearly the case that some things in this world are in the process of changing. Now everything that is in the process of being changed is changed by something else, since nothing is changed unless it is potentially that towards which it is being changed, whereas that which changes is actual. To change something is nothing else than to bring it from potentiality to actuality, and a thing can be brought from potentiality to actuality only by something which is actual. Thus a fire, which is actually hot, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, thus changing and altering it. Now it is impossible for the same thing to be both actual and potential in the same respect, although it may be so in different respects. What is actually hot cannot at the same time be potentially hot, although it is potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that, in the same manner and in the same way, anything should be both the one which effects a change and the one that is changed, so that it should change itself. Whatever is changed must therefore be changed by something else. If, then, whatever is changing it is itself changed, this also must be changed by something else, and this in turn by something else again. But this cannot go on forever, since there would then be no first cause to this process of change, and consequently no other agent of change, because secondary things which change cannot change unless they are changed by a first cause, in the same way as a stick cannot move unless it is moved by the hand. We are therefore bound to arrive at a first cause of change which is not changed by anything, and everyone understands that this is God.

The second way is based on the nature of an efficient cause. We find that there is a sequence of efficient causes in the observable world. But we do not find that anything is the efficient cause of itself. Nor is this possible, for the thing would then be prior to itself, which is impossible. But neither can the sequence of efficient causes be infinite, for in every sequence the first efficient cause is the cause of an intermediate cause, and an intermediate cause is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether there are many

intermediate causes, or just one. Now when a cause is taken away, so is its effect. Hence if there were no first efficient cause, there would be no ultimate cause, and no intermediate cause. But if there was an infinite regression of efficient causes, there would be no first efficient cause. As a result, there would be no ultimate effect, and no intermediate causes. But this is plainly false. We are therefore bound to suppose that there is a first efficient cause. And everyone calls this “God.”

The third way is from the nature of possibility and necessity. There are some things which may either exist or not exist, since some things come to be and pass away, and may therefore exist or not exist. Now it is impossible that all of these should exist at all times, because there is at least some time when that which may possibly not exist does not exist. Hence if all things were such that they might not exist, at some time or other there would be nothing. But if this were true there would be nothing in existence now, since what does not exist cannot begin to exist, unless through something which does exist. If nothing had ever existed, it would have been impossible for anything to begin to exist, and there would now be nothing at all. But this is plainly false, and hence not all existence is merely possible. Something in things must be necessary. Now everything which is necessary either derives its necessity from somewhere else or does not. But we cannot go on to infinity with necessary things which have a cause of their necessity, any more than with efficient causes, as we proved. We are therefore bound to suppose something necessary in itself, which does not owe its necessity to anything else, but which is the cause of the necessity of other things. And everyone calls this “God.”

The fourth way is from the gradation that occurs in things, which are found to be more good, true, noble and so on, just as others are found to be less so. Things are said to be more and less because they approximate in different degrees to that which is greatest. A thing gets hotter and hotter as it approaches the thing which is the hottest. There is therefore something which is the truest, the best, and the noblest, and which is consequently the greatest in being, since that which has the greatest truth is also greatest in being. . . . Now that which most thoroughly possesses the nature of any genus is the cause of all that the genus contains. Thus fire, which is most perfectly hot, is the cause of all hot things. . . . There is therefore something which is the cause of the being of all things that are, as well as of their goodness and their every perfection. This we call “God.”

The fifth way is based on the governance of things. We see how some things, like natural bodies, work for an end even though they have no knowledge. The fact that they nearly always operate in the same way, and so as to achieve the maximum good, makes this obvious, and shows that they attain their end by design, not by chance. Now things which have no knowledge tend towards an end only through the agency of something which knows and also understands, as in the case of an arrow which requires an archer. There is therefore an intelligent being by whom all natural things are directed to their end. This we call “God.”



Comment

The first way begins from the observation that things in the world are in motion or change. The world is not static, but is dynamic. Examples of this are easy to list. Rain falls from the sky. Stones roll down valleys. The earth revolves around the sun (a fact, incidentally, unknown to Aquinas). This, the first of Aquinas' arguments, is normally referred to as the "argument from motion"; however, it is clear that the "movement" in question is actually understood in more general terms, so that the term "change" is more appropriate as a translation at points. Aquinas argues that everything which moves is moved by something else. For every motion, there is a cause. Things don't just move – they are moved by something else. Now each cause of motion must itself have a cause. And that cause must have a cause as well. And so Aquinas argues that there is a whole series of causes of motion lying behind the world as we know it. Now unless there are an infinite number of these causes, Aquinas argues, there must be a single cause right at the origin of the series. From this original cause of motion, all other motion is ultimately derived. This is the origin of the great chain of causality which we see reflected in the way the world behaves. From the fact that things are in motion, Aquinas thus argues for the existence of a single original cause of all this motion – and this, he concludes, is none other than God.

The second way begins from the idea of causation. In other words, Aquinas notes the existence of causes and effects in the world. One event (the effect) is explained by the influence of another (the cause). The idea of motion, which we looked at briefly above, is a good example of this cause-and-effect sequence. Using a line of reasoning similar to that used above, Aquinas thus argues that all effects may be traced back to a single original cause – which is God.

The third way concerns the existence of contingent beings. In other words, the world contains beings (such as human beings) which are not there as a matter of necessity. Aquinas contrasts this type of being with a necessary being (one who is there as a matter of necessity). While God is a necessary being, Aquinas argues that humans are contingent beings. The fact that we *are* here needs explanation. Why are we here? What happened to bring us into existence? Aquinas argues that a being comes into existence because something which already exists brought it into being. In other words, our existence is caused by another being. We are the effects of a series of causation. Tracing this series back to its origin, Aquinas declares that this original cause of being can only be someone whose existence is necessary - in other words, God.

The fourth way begins from human values, such as truth, goodness, and nobility. Where do these values come from? What causes them? Aquinas argues that there must be something which is in itself true, good, and noble, and that this brings into being our ideas of truth, goodness, and nobility. The origin of these ideas, Aquinas suggests, is God, who is their original cause.

The fifth and final way is sometimes referred to as the "teleological" argument. Aquinas notes that the world shows obvious traces of intelligent design. Natural

processes and objects seem to be adapted with certain definite objectives in mind. They seem to have a purpose. They seem to have been designed. But things don't design themselves: they are caused and designed by someone or something else. Arguing from this observation, Aquinas concludes that the source of this natural ordering must be conceded to be God.

Questions for Study

- 1 Does Aquinas really regard these five lines of thought as “arguments”? If not, how would you describe them?
- 2 Why is the idea of an infinite regression of causes impossible? Aquinas clearly assumes that this is the case, and his arguments seem to depend on the validity of the assumption. Thus the argument from motion only really works if it can be shown that the sequence of cause and effect stops somewhere. There has to be, according to Aquinas, a Prime Unmoved Mover. But he fails to demonstrate this point.
- 3 Do the arguments set out above lead to belief in only *one* God? The argument from motion, for example, could lead to belief in a number of Prime Unmoved Movers. There seems to be no especially pressing reason for insisting that there can only be one such cause, except for the fundamental Christian insistence that, as a matter of fact, there is only one such God. What would Aquinas say in response?
- 4 Notice how often Aquinas concludes his discussion with words such as: “and everyone agrees that this is ‘God.’” But is he right? For example, can the “Prime Unmoved Mover” be directly equated with the Christian God?

Thomas Aquinas on the Principle of Analogy 1.10

One of the issues which Thomas Aquinas discusses in his *Summa Theologiae* (see 1.9) is the way in which language about God works. The critical question is whether language which is used to refer to God – as in the phrases “God is righteous” or “God is wise” – bear any relation to the same words, when used to refer to human beings – for example, in the phrase “Socrates is wise.” The basic idea that Aquinas explores is that these words are used analogously in these different contexts. Although they are used with different meanings, there is a clear relationship between them, reflecting in part the fact that the created order bears the likeness of its creator. See also 1.24; 1.27.

5 Are Words Used Univocally or Equivocally of God and Creatures?

It is impossible to predicate anything univocally of God and creatures. The reason for this is that every effect which is less than its cause does not represent it adequately, in that the effect is thus not the same sort of thing as the cause. So what exists in a variety of divided forms in the effects exists simply and in a unified way in the cause – just as the simple power of the sun produces many different kinds of lesser things. In the same way, as we said earlier, the many and various perfections in creatures pre-exist in God in a single and unified form.

So the perfection of words that we use in speaking of creatures differ in meaning, and each of them signifies a perfection which is distinct from all the others. Thus when we say that a man is wise, we signify his wisdom as something distinct from other things about him – such as his essence, his powers or his existence. But when we use this word in relation to God, we do not intend to signify something distinct from his essence, power or existence. When the word “wise” is used in relation to a human being, it so to speak delimits and embraces the aspect of humanity that it signifies (*quodammodo circumscibit et comprehendit rem significatum*). This, however, is not the case when it is used of God; what it signifies in God is not limited by our meaning of the word, but goes beyond it. Hence it is clear that the word “wise” is not used in the same sense of God and a human being, and the same is true of all other words, so they cannot be used univocally of God and creatures.

Yet although some have said that this is mere equivocation, this is not so. If it were the case, we could never argue from statements about creatures to statements about God – any such argument would be rendered invalid by the fallacy of equivocation. But we know, both from the teachings of the philosophers who prove many things about God and from the teaching of St Paul, who says, “The invisible things of God are made known by those things that are made” (Romans 1: 20), that this does not happen. We must say, therefore, that words are used of God and creatures according to an analogy, that is a certain proportion, between them (*nomina dicuntur de Deo et creaturis secundum analogiam, id est, proportionem*).

We can distinguish two kinds of analogical uses of words. First, there is the case of one word being used of several things because each of them has some proportion to another. Thus we use the word “healthy” in relation to both a diet and a complexion because each of these has some order and proportion to “health” in an animal, the former as its cause, the latter as its symptom. Secondly there is the case of the same word used because of some proportion – just as “healthy” is used in relation to both the diet and the animal because the diet is the cause of the health in the animal.

In this way some words are used neither univocally nor purely equivocally of God and creatures, but analogically (*analogice, et non aequivoce pure neque pure univoce*). We cannot speak of God at all except on the basis of creatures, and so whatever is said both of God and creatures is said in virtue of a certain order that creatures have in relation to God (*ordo creaturae ad Deum*) as their source and cause in which all their perfections pre-exist.

This way of using words lies somewhere between pure equivocation and simple univocity. The word is neither used in the same sense, as in the case of univocation, nor in totally different senses, as with equivocation. The several senses of a word which is used analogically signify different relations to something, just as “health” in a complexion means a symptom of health and in a diet means a cause of that health. . . .

6 Are Words Predicated Primarily of God or of Creatures?

. . . All words used metaphorically in relation to God apply primarily to creatures and secondarily to God. When used in relation to God they signify merely a certain likeness between God and the creature (*nihil aliud significant quam similitudines ad tales creaturas*). When we speak of a meadow as “smiling,” we only mean that it is seen at its best when it flowers, just as people are seen at their best when they smile, according to a similarity of proportion (*secundum similitudinem proportionis*) between them. In the same way, if we speak of God as a “lion,” we only mean that he is mighty in his deeds, like a lion. It is thus clear that, when something is said in relation to God, its meaning is to be determined on the basis of the meaning it has when used in relation to creatures.

This is also the case for words that are not used metaphorically, if they were simply used, as some have supposed, to express God’s causality. If, for example, “God is good” meant the same as “God is the cause of goodness in creatures,” the word “good,” as applied to God, would have contained within its meaning the goodness of the creature. “Good” would thus apply primarily to creatures and secondarily to God.

But it has already been shown that words of this sort are said of God not just causally, but also essentially (*causaliter, sed etiam essentialiter*). When we say “God is good” or “God is wise,” we do not simply mean that God causes wisdom or goodness, but that these perfections pre-exist supremely in God. We conclude, therefore, that from the point of view of what the word means it is used primarily of God and derivatively of creatures, for what the word means – the perfection it signifies – flows from God to the creature. But from the point of view of our use of the word we apply it first to creatures because we know them first. That, as we have mentioned already, is why it has a way of signifying what is appropriate to creatures.

Comment

In this major analysis of the way in which the created order mirrors its creator, Aquinas points out that speaking about God involves using words that normally apply to things in the everyday world. So how do these two different uses relate to each other? Aquinas draws a distinction between the “univocal” use of a word (where the word means exactly the same thing whenever it is used) and the “equivocal” use

(where the same word is used, but with different meanings. Thus the word “bat” is used univocally when it is used to refer to a vampire bat and a long-eared bat, in that the word refers to a nocturnal flying animal with wings in each case. But the word “bat” is used equivocally when the same word is used to refer to both a nocturnal flying animal with wings, and a piece of wood used to strike a ball in baseball or cricket. The word is the same; the meaning is different.

In this important passage, Aquinas argues that words cannot be used univocally, to refer both to God and humanity. The word “wise” does not mean the same in the statements “God is wise” and “Solomon is wise.” The gulf between God and humanity is too great for the word to mean the same. Yet the word is not used equivocally, as if it referred to something totally different. There is a relation between its use to refer to God, and its use in human contexts. The word “wise” is used *analogously*, to mean that divine wisdom is not identical to, nor totally different from, human wisdom. There is “an analogy, that is a certain proportion, between them.”

Questions for Study

- 1 What does Aquinas want us to understand by the phrase “God is a lion”?
- 2 “When used in relation to God [words] signify merely a certain likeness between God and the creature.” Locate this statement within the text. What does Aquinas mean by this? And how is this related to his doctrine of creation?
- 3 “When we say ‘God is good’ or ‘God is wise,’ we do not simply mean that God causes wisdom or goodness, but that these perfections pre-exist supremely in God.” Locate this statement within the text. What does Aquinas mean by it? And how does this help establish the relationship between the statements “God is wise” and “Solomon is wise”?

1.11 Martin Luther on the Theology of the Cross

In 1518 the German reformer Martin Luther defended a series of theses in a disputation at Heidelberg, in which he set out the basic features of the “theology of the cross.” Of particular importance is the idea that theology involves a response to the “rearward parts of God” (*posteriora Dei*), which are only made known in the cross. The theses allude to Exodus 33: 23, which refers to Moses only being allowed to catch a glimpse of God from the rear, as he disappears into the distance. See also 1.17; 3.35.

19 The person who looks on the invisible things of God, as they are seen in visible things, does not deserve to be called a theologian.

20 But the person who looks on the visible rearward parts of God (*visibilia et posteriora Dei*) as seen in suffering and the cross does deserve to be called a theologian.

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Comment

For Luther, the cross is the center of the Christian faith. The image of the crucified Christ is the crucible in which all responsible Christian thinking about God is forged. Luther expresses the centrality of the cross in a series of terse statements, such as “the cross alone is our theology” (*crux sola nostra theologia*) and “the cross puts everything to the test” (*crux probat omnia*). Luther draws a now-famous distinction between the “theologian of glory,” who seeks God apart from Jesus Christ, and the “theologian of the cross,” who knows that God is revealed in and through the cross of Christ.

The two biblical texts which govern Luther’s thinking in this matter are Exodus 33: 23, and 1 Corinthians 2: 2: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” This latter text, for Luther, establishes the centrality of the cross. The former, however, establishes the notion of a “hidden revelation” of God. The text, set in its context, reads as follows: “And the LORD said, ‘Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.’” The words are addressed to Moses and suggest, for Luther, that the best that human beings can hope for is to get a glimpse of the back of God as God passes by, rather than be permitted to gaze on the face of God. This theme is clearly stated in the second of the two theses set out for study above.

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Questions for Study

- 1 Try to set out clearly Luther’s distinction between a “theologian of glory” and a “theologian of the cross.”
- 2 Luther makes reference to “visible rearward parts of God (*visibilia et posteriora Dei*) as seen in suffering and the cross.” What does he mean by this? And how does this relate to Luther’s idea that the cross is the supreme locus and focus of the revelation of God?
- 3 On the basis of these theses, what attitude would you expect Luther to adopt to

the idea of natural theology – that is, that God can be known through the natural order?

1.12 John Calvin on the Nature of Faith

In this important analysis of the nature of faith, provided in the 1559 edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the Protestant reformer John Calvin establishes a direct relation between faith and the merciful promises of God. Note the emphasis placed upon the role of the Holy Spirit in revealing and sealing this knowledge. Calvin also deals with the question of whether the certainty of faith necessarily implies that doubt is excluded from the Christian life. For Calvin, doubt is a normal part of the Christian life and is not inconsistent with his emphasis upon the trustworthiness of God's promises. See also 6.30; 6.34.

Now we shall have a right definition of faith if we say that it is a steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us (*divinae erga nos benevolentia firmam certamque cognitionem*), which is founded upon the truth of the gracious promise of God in Christ, and is both revealed to our minds and sealed in our hearts (*revelatur mentibus nostris et cordibus obsignatur*) by the Holy Spirit. . . .

When we stress that faith ought to be certain and secure, we do not have in mind a certainty without doubt, or a security without any anxiety. Rather, we affirm that believers have a perpetual struggle with their own lack of faith, and are far from possessing a peaceful conscience, never interrupted by any disturbance. On the other hand, we want to deny that they may fall out of, or depart from, their confidence (*fiducia*) in the divine mercy, no matter how much they may be troubled.

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Comment

This important definition of faith firmly links the notion to the promises of God. Faith is not about believing that God exists; it is about trusting the promises of a benevolent God.

Calvin does not draw the conclusion that faith exists without doubt, but stresses that a trust in the reliability of the divine promises may coexist with a human failure to trust in those promises.

Calvin's concept of faith is closely linked with the person of Christ, who is seen as a confirmation of the promises of God.



Questions for Study

- 1 Calvin's definition of faith is trinitarian, in that quite definite roles are assigned to different persons of the Trinity. Set out, in your own words, the respective involvements of the three persons of the Trinity in this account of faith.
- 2 Faith "is founded upon the truth of the gracious promise of God in Christ." What considerations might lie behind Calvin's wording at this point? You might find it helpful to ask why Calvin does *not* offer the following definition: "Faith is founded on God's promise." What insights are safeguarded by Calvin's specific form of words?
- 3 "Believers have a perpetual struggle with their own lack of faith." What does Calvin mean by this? Does he imply that a lack of faith means that God is one who cannot be trusted? If not, how does Calvin account for this weakness in faith?

The Heidelberg Catechism on Images of God

1.13

This Protestant catechism of faith, written in German in 1563, was intended to set out the main features of the Reformed faith for a German audience. In this section, the catechism develops the idea that images of God are neither necessary nor helpful for Christian believers. There is an interesting parallel with Islam here, in that both Islam and Reformed theology are concerned to avoid images of God becoming objects of worship in themselves, instead of being aids to the worship of God. See also 3.36; 4.18.

Question 96. What does God require in the next commandment?

Answer: That we should not portray God in any way, nor worship him in any other manner than he has commanded in his Word.

Question 97. So should we not make any use of images?

Answer: God cannot and should not be depicted in any way. As for creatures, although they may indeed be depicted, God forbids making use of or having any likeness of them, in order to worship them or to use them to serve him.

Question 98. But should we allow pictures instead of books in churches, for the benefit of the unlearned?

Answer: No. For we should not presume to be wiser than God, who does not want Christendom to be taught by means of dumb idols, but through the living preaching of his Word.

Comment

Note the question-and-answer format of the catechism. The same format can be seen in other catechisms of the period, including Luther's Lesser Catechism of 1529. The work was designed to be learned by rote, offering short answers which could easily be remembered.

The text shows the traditional Reformed emphasis which gives priority to word over image. Note especially the importance which is attached to preaching as a means of consolidating the Christian faith.

The target of the criticism implied in these questions is both the eastern Orthodox use of icons, and the Roman Catholic use of devotional images – such as a crucifix, or an altar painting showing Christ on the cross. Lutherans, however, saw no difficulty in continuing to use such devotional aids.

Questions for Study

- 1 The text of the second commandment reads as follows: “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exodus 20: 4). In what way do the responses to the three questions under consideration reflect the concerns of this biblical passage?
- 2 What specific objection is offered to the devotional use of any kind of images?
- 3 How do the ideas set out in this extract help us gain an understanding of early Reformed approaches to religious art?

1.14 John Locke on the Formation of the Concept of God

In this passage from his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which was published in December 1689, the English empiricist philosopher John Locke argues that the notion of God is derived from experience. The human mind constructs the idea of God by extrapolating ideas already present in the world to infinity, thus

leading to the idea of God as a supreme Being. The idea of God thus results from experience, rather than from pure reason. See also 1.19.

For if we examine the idea we have of the incomprehensible supreme Being, we shall find that we come by it the same way; and that the complex ideas we have both of God, and separate Spirits, are made up of the simple ideas we receive from Reflection; v.g., having from what we experiment in our selves, got the ideas of existence and duration; of knowledge and power; of pleasure and happiness; and of several other qualities and powers which it is better to have, than to be without; when we would frame an idea the most suitable we can to the supreme Being, we enlarge every one of these with our idea of Infinity; and so putting them together, make our complex idea of God. For that the mind has such a power of enlarging some of its ideas, received from sensation, has been already shewed.

If I find, that I know some few things, and some of them, or all, perhaps imperfectly, I can frame an idea of knowing twice as many; which I can double again, as often as I can add to Number, and thus enlarge my idea of Knowledge, by extending its Comprehension to all things existing, or possible. The same I can also do of knowing them more perfectly; i.e., all their Qualities, Powers, Causes, Consequences, and Relations, etc., till all be perfectly known, that is in them, or can any way relate to them, and thus frame the idea of infinite or boundless knowledge. The same may also be done of Power, till we come to that we call infinite; and also of the Duration of Existence, without beginning or end; and so frame the idea of an eternal Being; the Degrees of Extent, wherein we ascribe Existence, Power, Wisdom, and all other Perfection (which we can have any ideas of) to that Sovereign Being, which we call God, being all boundless and infinite, we frame the best idea of him our Minds are capable of; all which is done, I say, by enlarging those simple ideas, we have taken from the Operations of our own Minds, by Reflection; or by our Senses, from exterior things, to that vastness, to which Infinity can extend them.

For it is Infinity, which, joined to our ideas of Existence, Power, Knowledge, etc., makes that complex idea, whereby we represent to our selves the best we can, the supreme Being.

Comment

Locke is an empiricist philosopher, who places considerable emphasis on gaining knowledge through an analysis of experience. Note how his argument is that experience allows us to form an idea of certain core qualities, which we then “enlarge” to form the idea of God.

Locke’s *Essay* can be said to lay much of the intellectual foundations of Deism. Locke argued that “reason leads us to the knowledge of this certain and evident

truth, that there is an *eternal, most powerful and most knowing Being*.” The attributes of this being are those which human reason recognizes as appropriate for God. Having considered which moral and rational qualities are suited to the deity, Locke argues that “we enlarge every one of these with our idea of infinity, and so, putting them together, make our complex *idea of God*.” In other words, the idea of God is made up of human rational and moral qualities, projected to infinity. Note also the language that Locke uses to refer to God, such as “the supreme Being.”

Note that the English text has not been modernized, and that there are a few points which might cause difficulty for modern readers. The word “shew” is the older form of “show.”

Questions for Study

- 1 What place does Locke assign to the Bible in forming the idea of God?
- 2 On the basis of Locke’s analysis, what are the most reliable grounds for asserting the existence of a “supreme Being”?
- 3 Locke speaks of making “our complex idea of God.” Locate this passage in the text. Is Locke suggesting that God is the free construction of the human mind?

1.15 René Descartes on the Existence of God

Descartes’ argument for the existence of God, dating from 1642, bears obvious resemblances to that set out in the eleventh century by Anselm (see 1.7). God is a “supremely perfect being.” As existence is a perfection, it follows that God must have the perfection of existence, as he would otherwise not be perfect. Descartes supplements this argument with two examples (triangles and mountains). To think of God is to think of his existence, in just the same way as to think of a triangle is to think of its three angles being equal to two right angles, or thinking of a mountain is to think of a valley. See also 1.7; 1.8; 1.14; 1.16; 1.18; 1.24.

Having given the matter careful attention, I am convinced that existence can no more be taken away from the divine essence than the magnitude of its three angles taken together being equal to two right angles can be taken away from the essence of a triangle, or than the idea of a valley can be taken away from the idea of a mountain. So it is no less absurd to think (*cogitare*) of God (that is, a supremely

perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a certain perfection), than to think of a mountain without a valley. . . . I am not free to think of God apart from existence (that is, of a supremely perfect being apart from supreme perfection) in the way that I am free to imagine a horse either with wings or without wings. . . . Whenever I choose to think of the First and Supreme Being, and as it were bring this idea out of the treasury of my mind, it is necessary that I ascribe all perfections to him. . . . This necessity clearly ensures that, when I subsequently point out that existence is a perfection, I am correct in concluding that the First and Supreme Being exists.

●

Comment

Descartes' emphasis upon the notion of divine perfection is of considerable importance, and allows him to make an appeal to geometrical analogies in his discussion of the existence of God.

Descartes' basic concern was to establish the existence of God on grounds that would not be vulnerable to criticism. His appeal to reason initially proved very attractive, and can be seen as allowing a new form of rational apologetics to develop within French Catholicism. However, this excessive reliance upon reason proved to be a liability in the longer term, in that the rise of the Enlightenment worldview seriously eroded the rational foundations on which Descartes had constructed his defense of God's existence.

●

Questions for Study

- 1 Why does Descartes' emphasis on the perfection of God make the issue of suffering and evil in the world a more serious problem for faith than it need be?
 - 2 "The God in whom the nineteenth century ceased to believe was invented in the seventeenth century" (Alasdair MacIntyre). How helpful is this comment in understanding the role of Descartes' ideas?
 - 3 "This necessity clearly ensures that, when I subsequently point out that existence is a perfection, I am correct in concluding that the First and Supreme Being exists." Locate this sentence in the passage for discussion. What is the point that Descartes is making? How convinced are you by his assertion? And how does his approach relate to that adopted by Anselm of Canterbury (see 1.7)?
-

1.16 Blaise Pascal on Proofs for the Existence of God

Pascal's *Pensées* ("Thoughts"), originally written in French during the period 1658–62, represent a collection of jottings and musings which were assembled after his death. In this selection, Pascal stresses the role of the heart, rather than reason, in our knowledge of God, as well as the limitations of reason. He also makes the point that "knowledge of God" is of little use to anyone unless it is accompanied by an awareness of human misery and of the possibility of redemption in Christ. See also 1.7; 1.8; 1.14; 1.18; 1.24.

110. We know the truth, not only through our reason (*raison*), but also through our heart (*cœur*). It is through this latter that we know first principles; and reason, which has nothing to do with this, vainly tries to refute them. The sceptics have no intention other than this; and they fail to achieve it. We know that we are not dreaming. Yet however unable we may be to prove this by reason, this inability demonstrates nothing but the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of all our knowledge, as they assert. . . . Our inability must therefore do nothing except humble reason – which would like to be the judge of everything – while not confuting our certainty. As if reason could be the only way in which we can learn! . . .

188. The final step which reason can take is to recognize that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. It is merely impotent if it cannot get as far as to realize this. And if natural things are beyond it, what are we to say about supernatural things? . . .

190. The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God (*les preuves de Dieu métaphysiques*) are so remote from human reasoning, and so complex, that they have little impact. Even if they were of help to some people, this would only be for the moment during which they observed the demonstration, because an hour later, they would be afraid that they had deceived themselves. . . .

449. . . . It is equally as dangerous for someone to know God without knowing their misery as it is for someone to know their misery without knowing the Redeemer who can heal them. Only one of these insights (*connaissances*) leads to the pride of the philosophers, who have known God but not their misery, the other to the despair of the atheists, who know their misery without a Redeemer. . . . Even if someone were to be convinced that the relations between numbers are immaterial and eternal truths, which depend upon a first truth, called God, in which they subsist, I would not think that he or she had made much progress towards being saved.



Comment

Note that the numeration of the *Pensées* used follows that of the edition of Louis Lafuma, rather than that of the older Braunschweig edition.

The format of the *Pensées* makes them difficult to study, in that they take the form of individual isolated passages. There is a certain “bittiness” to them which makes them difficult to study as a whole. The four which are noted here are best studied as individual statements, rather than as a collected whole.

Pascal may be regarded as an important critic of the growing trend towards rationalist defenses of the Christian faith. While in no way decrying human reason, Pascal is nevertheless concerned to point out its weaknesses. One such concern is that the human mind is exalted over the human heart; another is that the metaphysical “proofs” of God’s existence are virtually unintelligible.



Questions for Study

- 1 “We know the truth, not only through our reason, but also through our heart.” Why does Pascal demand that increased attention be given to the heart? What respective roles does he allocate to “reason” and “heart”? And what are the implications of this approach for the debate over the existence of God?
- 2 “It is equally as dangerous for someone to know God without knowing their misery as it is for someone to know their misery without knowing the Redeemer who can heal them.” Locate this passage. What point is Pascal making? And what are its implications for human self-awareness?
- 3 Pascal suggests that a faith which is based on arguments for God’s existence is a vulnerable faith, in that there will always be a question concerning the reliability of the argument which brought about faith in the first place. What are the consequences of this insight for the nature and grounds of faith? And how does it relate to Pascal’s insistence that both reason and heart are involved in this matter?

Blaise Pascal on the Hiddenness of God 1.17

In a series of brief passages known as *Pensées*, written over the period 1658-62, Pascal argues that it is both proper and necessary for God to be at least partly concealed. If this is not the case, humanity would become arrogant, trusting in its

own ability to discover the full truth. The “obscurity” of God in the world forces humanity to recognize its own limitations, and thus to pay attention to God’s self-revelation in Christ. See also 1.11.

232. We can understand nothing of the works of God unless we accept as a matter of principle that he wished to blind some and enlighten others. . . .

242. As God is hidden, any religion that does not say that God is hidden is not true, and any religion which does not explain why this is does not educate. . . .

446. If there was no obscurity, humanity would not be aware of its own corruption. If there was no light, humanity could not hope for a cure. Thus it is not only right for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed; it is also useful, in that it is equally dangerous for humanity to know God without knowing its own misery or to know its own misery without knowing God. . . .

449. What can be seen on earth points to neither the total absence nor the obvious presence of divinity, but to the presence of a hidden God. Everything bears this mark.

Comment

In these comments, Pascal develops some of the points made concerning the limitations placed upon human reason. For this reason, you are advised to read 1.16 to gain an idea of the general approach adopted by Pascal, before exploring this specific aspect of his thought.

Pascal’s basic point is that the existence of God is *not* obvious to human reason. This means that humanity is obliged to seek assistance – specifically, in the form of divine revelation – if God is to be found and known. God’s hiddenness can thus be seen as part of a divine strategy to impress upon humanity the limitations placed upon human reason, and the need for humility in matters of faith.

Note that the numeration of the *Pensées* used follows that of the edition of Louis Lafuma, rather than that of the older Braunschweig edition.

Questions for Study

- 1 What reasons, according to Pascal, may be given for God’s desire to be hidden from us?
- 2 In what way does Pascal’s approach to the “hiddenness of God” differ from that adopted by Martin Luther (see 1.11)? Are there any similarities between them, either in terms of their specific ideas, or the insights which they draw from them?
- 3 “If there was no obscurity, humanity would not be aware of its own corruption.

If there was no light, humanity could not hope for a cure.” Locate this passage. What does Pascal mean by these words? What light do they cast on his understanding of human nature? And of the Christian faith?

Immanuel Kant on Anselm's Ontological Argument

1.18

The noted German philosopher Immanuel Kant was unimpressed by the arguments of either Anselm (1.7) or Descartes (1.15) for the existence of God. Kant, who appears to be have been the first person to refer to this approach as the “ontological argument,” insists that “being is not a predicate.” As a result, conceiving the idea of God cannot in any way be thought to necessarily lead to conceiving the idea “God exists.” His analogy of the “hundred dollars” makes more or less the same point made earlier by Gaunilo (see 1.8): having an idea does not imply that its object exists! See also 1.7; 1.8; 1.15; 1.16.

Now “Being” is clearly not a genuine predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations, as existing in themselves. Logically, it is merely the copula of a judgement. The proposition “God is omnipotent” contains two concepts, each of which has its object – God and omnipotence. The little word “is” adds no new predicate, but only serves to posit the predicate *in its relation* to the subject. Now if we take the subject (God) with all its predicates (among which is omnipotence), and say “God exists” or “There is a God,” we do not attach any new predicate to the concept of God; we merely posit the subject in itself with all its predicates. In fact, we posit it as being an object that stands in relation to the concept. The content of both must be one and the same. Nothing can have been added to the concept, which expresses merely what is possible, by my thinking its object (through the expression “it is”) as given absolutely. Otherwise stated, the real contains no more than the merely possible. A hundred real dollars would not be worth more than a hundred possible dollars. For as the latter signify the concept, and the former the object and the positing of the object, my concept would not, in that case, express the whole object, and would not therefore be an adequate concept of it. My financial position is, however, affected in a very different manner by a hundred real dollars than it is by the mere concept of a hundred dollars (that is, the concept of their possibility). For the object, as it actually exists, is not analytically contained in my concept, but is added to my concept (which is a determination of my state) synthetically; and yet the conceived hundred dollars are not themselves in the least increased through thus acquiring existence outside my concept.



Comment

The most fundamental point stressed by Kant is that existence is not a predicate. There is no connection between the idea of God and the reality of God. It is possible to clarify the relation of terms in statements such as “God is omnipotent.” Yet statements about God cannot become proofs that there is a God.

Kant distinguishes *in intellectu* (“in the mind”) from *in re* (“in fact”). *In intellectu* is associated with such notions as being “well-formed,” “not self-contradictory,” and so forth; *in re* concerns a definite proposition which is based on empirical evidence and is capable of being actually true. Questions of existence are always to be decided *a posteriori* by evidence, and cannot ever be settled *a priori*, by an appeal to ideas.

In the original German, Kant uses the German word *Thaler* as a unit of currency; I have translated this as “dollar” to give a more contemporary feel to the passage, taking advantage of the fact that the word “dollar” derives directly from this original German term.

Questions for Study

- 1 What are the implications of Kant’s analysis for (a) Anselm of Canterbury (1.7); (b) René Descartes (1.15)?
- 2 In what ways does Kant’s criticism of the ontological argument differ from that offered by Gaunilo (1.8)?
- 3 “A hundred real dollars would not be worth more than a hundred possible dollars.” Locate this statement. What does Kant mean by it?

1.19 Vatican I on Faith and Reason

The First Vatican Council (1869–70) was convened in Rome by Pope Pius IX, partly in response to the new situation in Europe as a result of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars, which had caused serious difficulties for the Roman Catholic church in southern Europe, and also in response to various intellectual trends which seemed to call into question the authority of the church and the truth of many traditional Christian teachings. In its third session, the Council set out its views on the relation of faith and reason, indicating that limits had to be set to the free use of human reason, especially in relation to matters of faith. See also 1.1; 1.2; 1.3; 1.4.

The consensus of the catholic church has maintained and maintains that there is a twofold order of knowledge, distinct not only in relation to its source, but also in relation to its object. In relation to the source, we have knowledge at one level by natural reason, and at another level by divine faith. In relation to the object, in addition to those things to which natural reason can attain, we have knowledge of mysteries which are hidden in God which, unless they are divinely revealed, are incapable of being known. Wherefore, when the Apostle, who affirms that God was known to the gentiles through the created order (Romans 1: 20), comes to deal with the grace and truth which came by Jesus Christ (John 1: 17), he declares: "We speak of a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this. God has revealed it to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God" (1 Corinthians 2: 7, 8, 10). And the Only-begotten himself, in his confession to the Father, acknowledges that the Father has hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to the little ones (Matthew 11: 25). . . . Reason is never able to penetrate the mysteries in the way in which it penetrates those truths which form its proper object. For the divine mysteries, by their very nature, so far surpass the created understanding that, even when a revelation has been given and accepted by faith, they remain covered by the veil of that same faith and wrapped, as it were, in a certain obscurity, as long as in this mortal life we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5: 6-7).

While it is true that faith is above reason, there can never be any real disagreement between faith and reason, since it is the same God who both reveals mysteries and infuses faith, and who has endowed the human mind with the light of reason. God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever be opposed to truth. The appearance of this kind of inane contradiction is chiefly due to the fact that either the dogmas of faith are not understood and explained in accordance with the mind of the church, or that mere opinions are mistaken for the conclusions of reason. Therefore we assert "that every assertion contrary to the truth of enlightened faith is totally false" (Lateran V).

Furthermore the church which, with its apostolic mandate of teaching, has received the charge of preserving the deposit of faith, has also the sacred right and duty of condemning what "wrongly passes for knowledge" (1 Timothy 6: 20), in case anyone should be "led astray by philosophy and empty deceit" (Colossians 2: 8). Hence all faithful Christians are forbidden to defend such opinions which are known to be contrary to the doctrine of faith as if they were the legitimate conclusions of science, particularly if they have been condemned by the church. Furthermore, they are absolutely bound to hold them to be errors which have the appearance of truth.

Not only can faith and reason never be in tension with each other; they mutually support each other. On the one hand right reason, established upon the foundations of the faith and illuminated by its light, develops the science of divine things; on the other hand, faith delivers reason from errors, protects it, and provides it with knowledge of many kinds. For this reason, the church does not hinder the development of human arts and studies; in fact she assists and promotes them in many ways.

She is neither ignorant nor contemptuous of the advantages which derive from this source for human life, but acknowledges that these things derive from God, the lord of all sciences (1 Kings 2: 3), and, if they are properly used, may lead to God by the help of his grace. Nor does the church forbid these studies to make use of its own proper principles and method within its own specific area of study; but while she grants this legitimate freedom, she takes particular care that they do not become infected with errors by conflicting with divine teaching, or by going beyond their proper limits, and thus intruding upon what belongs to faith and thus give rise to confusion.

For the doctrine of the faith, which God has revealed, is handed down, not as some philosophical discovery capable of being perfected by human intelligence, but as a divine deposit committed to the spouse of Christ to be faithfully protected and infallibly declared. The meaning of these sacred dogmas which has once been stated by holy mother church must be maintained, and there must never be any abandonment of this sense under the pretext or in the name of a more profound understanding. “May understanding, knowledge and wisdom increase as the ages and centuries pass, and greatly and vigorously flourish, in each and all, in the individual and the whole church: but this only in its own proper kind, that is to say, in the same doctrine, the same sense, and the same understanding.”

Comment

It is important to appreciate that Vatican I met against the backdrop of increasing hostility to traditional approaches to authority, especially within the church. There was a need for reaffirmation and defense of traditional teachings.

The new intellectual climate which was emerging in Europe at the time made it essential to clarify the way in which members of the Roman Catholic church were to relate to these developments. Vatican I developed an approach which affirmed the right of Roman Catholics to become involved in these disciplines (Vatican I uses the Latin term *scientia*, which can be translated as “science” or “discipline”), while realizing that each discipline made use of its own distinctive methods which could not necessarily be applied to matters of faith.

The long closing quote is taken from Vincent of Lérins.

Questions for Study

- 1 How does Vatican I understand the relation between faith and reason? Is there a tension between revealed truths and other kinds of truth?
- 2 In what way does Vatican I suggest that faith and reason may be mutually supportive?

- 3 The language of the “deposit of faith” is especially important. What does Vatican I mean by this expression?

John Henry Newman on the Grounds of Faith

1.20

In his important *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870), the English theologian and philosopher John Henry Newman argues that the grounds of assurance of faith rest on a deep-seated intuitive or instinctive knowledge of God, which is not necessarily enhanced by rational arguments or demonstrations. The full logical structures of faith can thus never be fully understood, as religion ultimately depends upon an immediate and spontaneous “feeling” or “revelation,” which cannot be adequately grasped or expounded on the basis of reason. There are important parallels here, probably unknown to Newman, with Pascal’s emphasis upon the role of the heart in religious knowledge and experience. See also 1.7; 1.8; 1.14; 1.15; 1.18; 1.22.

We know from experience that beliefs may endure without the presence of the inferential acts upon which they were originally elicited. It is plain that, as life goes on, we are not only inwardly formed and changed by the accession of habits, but we are also enriched by a great multitude of beliefs and opinions, and that on a variety of subjects. These, held, as some of them are, almost as first principles, constitute as it were the furniture and clothing of the mind. Sometimes we are fully conscious of them; sometimes they are implicit, or only now and then come directly before our reflective faculty. Still they are beliefs, and when we first admitted them we had some kind of reason, slight or strong, recognized or not, for doing so. However, whatever those reasons were, even if we ever realized them, we have long since forgotten them. Whether it was the authority of others, or our own observation, or our reading, or our reflections which became the warrant of our belief, anyhow we received the matters in question into our minds, and gave them a place there. We believed them and we still believe, though we have forgotten what the warrant was. At present they are self-sustained in our minds, and have been so for long years. They are in no sense “conclusions,” and imply no process of reasoning. Here, then, is the case where belief stands out as distinct from inference.



Comment

In this essay Newman concerned himself with the question of the rationality of religious belief. What reasons may be given for believing? What are the warrants of faith? The question had occupied Newman for some time; some years earlier, he had written a tract with the title “On the Introduction of Rationalistic Principles into Religion.” Newman’s basic concern is to uphold the reasonableness of the Christian faith, without making it depend upon rationalist presuppositions. In effect, Newman wishes to distance himself from the kind of approach offered by Descartes and his followers.

The basic argument is that there is no knock-down argument for God’s existence, but rather a series of cumulative considerations which, taken together, persuade the individual of the truth of the gospel. In particular, Newman develops the “illative” sense of moral judgment – which can be argued to parallel a similar approach found in the writings of Aristotle, known as *phronesis* – by which the human mind reaches conclusions on grounds which, though rational, lie outside the limits of strict logic.

Questions for Study

- 1 Newman opens this section of the work by considering how faith, originally based upon one given consideration, can exist apart from that original factor, or can come to rest on another. What is the practical importance of this concern?
- 2 Writing of the factors which shape our beliefs, Newman observes that “Sometimes we are fully conscious of them; sometimes they are implicit, or only now and then come directly before our reflective faculty.” What does he mean by this? And how does this relate to Pascal’s insistence that the human heart, as well as human reason, is important in such matters (1.16)?
- 3 “Here, then, is the case where belief stands out as distinct from inference.” What does Newman mean by this? And what are the implications of the conclusions that he draws?

1.21 Adolf von Harnack on the Origins of Dogma

In a series of important works, especially his mammoth *History of Dogma* (1886–9), the German Protestant theologian and “historian of dogma” Adolf von Harnack

set out his understanding of how “dogma” arose within the church. Harnack’s basic conviction was that many of the dogmas of the early church – such as that of the incarnation – resulted from an unhappy and quite inappropriate marriage between the Christian gospel and Hellenistic philosophy. In this extract, taken from the briefer work *The Outlines of the History of Dogma*, Harnack sets out his understanding of how dogma had its origins, and subsequently came to develop within the church. See also 2.33.

3. The most thorough-going attempt at solution hitherto is that which the Catholic Church made, and which the churches of the Reformation (with more or less restrictions) have continued to make, viz., Accepting a collection of Christian and Pre-Christian writings and oral traditions as of Divine origin, to deduce from them a system of doctrine, arranged in scientific form for apologetic purposes, which should have as its content the knowledge of God and of the world and of the means of salvation; then to proclaim this complex system (*of dogma*) as the *compendium* of Christianity, to demand of every mature member of the Church a faithful acceptance of it, and at the same time to maintain that the same is a necessary preparation for the blessedness promised by the religion. With this augmentation the Christian brotherhood, whose character as the Catholic Church is essentially indicated under this conception of Christianity, took a definite and, as was supposed, incontestable attitude toward the science of nature and of history, expressed its religious faith in God and Christ, and yet gave (inasmuch as it required of all its members an acceptance of these articles of faith) to the thinking part of the community a system which is capable of a wider and indeed boundless development. *Thus arose dogmatic Christianity.*

4. The aim of the *history of dogma*: (1) To explain the *origin* of this dogmatic Christianity, and, (2) To describe its *development*.

5. The *history of the rise* of dogmatic Christianity would seem to close when a well-formulated system of belief had been established by scientific means, and had been made the *articulus constitutivus ecclesiae*, and as such had been imposed upon the entire Church. This took place in the transition from the first to the fourth century when the Logos-Christology was established. The *development* of dogma is *in abstracto* without limit, but *in concreto* it has come to an end. For,

- (a) the *Greek Church* maintains that its system of dogma has been complete since the end of the “Image Controversy”;
- (b) the *Roman Catholic Church* leaves the possibility of the formulating of new dogmas open, but in the Tridentine Council and still more in the Vatican it has in fact on political grounds rounded out its dogma as a legal system which above all demands obedience and only secondarily conscious faith; the Roman Catholic Church has consequently abandoned the original motive of

- dogmatic Christianity and has placed a wholly new motive in its stead, retaining the mere semblance of the old;
- (c) the *Evangelical* churches have, on the one hand, accepted a greater part of the formulated doctrines of dogmatic Christianity and seek to ground them, like the Catholic Church, in the Holy Scriptures. But, on the other hand, they took a different view of the authority of the Holy Scriptures, they put aside tradition as a source in matters of belief, they questioned the significance of the empirical Church as regards the dogma, and above all they tried to put forward a formulation of the Christian religion, which goes directly back to the "*true understanding of the Word of God.*" Thus in principle the ancient dogmatic conception of Christianity was set aside, while however in certain matters no fixed attitude was taken toward the same, and reactions began at once and still continue. Therefore is it announced that the history of Protestant doctrine will be excluded from the history of dogma, and within the former will be indicated only the position of the Reformers and of the churches of the Reformation, out of which the later complicated development grew. Hence the history of dogma can be treated as relatively a completed discipline.

6. The claim of the Church that the dogmas are not simply the exposition of the Christian revelation, because deduced from the Holy Scriptures, is not confirmed by historical investigation. On the contrary, it becomes clear that dogmatic Christianity (the dogmas) in its conception and in its construction was *the work of the Hellenic spirit upon the Gospel soil*. The intellectual medium by which in early times men sought to make the Gospel comprehensible and to establish it securely, became inseparably blended with the content of the same. Thus arose the dogma, in whose formation, to be sure, other factors (the words of Sacred Scripture, requirements of the cult, and of the organization, political and social environment, the impulse to push things to their logical consequences, blind custom, etc.) played a part, yet so that the desire and effort to formulate the main principles of the Christian redemption, and to explain and develop them, secured the upper hand, at least in the earlier times.

7. Just as the formulating of the dogma proved to be an illusion, so far as the same was to be the *pure* exposition of the Gospel, so also does historical investigation destroy the other illusion of the Church, viz., that the dogma, always having been the same therein, have simply been explained, and that ecclesiastical theology has never had any other aim than to explain the unchanging dogma and to refute the heretical teaching pressing in from without. The formulating of the dogma indicates rather that theology constructed the dogma, but that the Church must ever conceal the labor of the theologians, which thus places them in an unfortunate plight. In each favorable case the result of their labor has been declared to be a *reproduction* and they themselves have been robbed of their best service; as a rule in the progress of history they fell under the condemnation of the dogmatic scheme, whose foundation they themselves had laid, and so entire

generations of theologians, as well as the chief leaders thereof, have, in the further development of dogma, been afterwards marked and declared to be heretics or held in suspicion. Dogma has ever in the progress of history devoured its own progenitors.

8. Although dogmatic Christianity has never, in the process of its development, lost its original style and character as a work of the spirit of perishing antiquity upon Gospel soil (*style of the Greek apologists and of Origen*), yet it experienced first through Augustine and later through Luther a deeper and more thorough transformation. Both of these men, the latter more than the former, championed a new and more *evangelical* conception of Christianity, guided chiefly by Paulinism; Augustine however hardly attempted a revision of the traditional dogma, rather did he co-ordinate the old and the new; Luther, indeed, attempted it, but did not carry it through. The Christian quality of the dogma gained through the influence of each, and the old traditional system of dogma was relaxed somewhat – this was so much the case in Protestantism that one does well, as remarked above, no longer to consider the symbolical teaching of the Protestant churches as wholly a recasting of the old dogma.

9. An understanding of the dogmatico-historic process cannot be secured by isolating the special doctrines and considering them separately (Special History of Dogma) after the epochs have been previously characterized (General History of Dogma). It is much better to consider the “general” and the “special” in each period and to treat the periods separately, and as much as possible to prove the special doctrines to be the outcome of the fundamental ideas and motives. It is not possible, however, to make more than four principal divisions, viz.:

- I The Origin of Dogma.
- II. a. The Development of Dogma in accordance with the principles of its original conception (Oriental Development from Arianism to the Image Controversy).
- II. b. The Occidental Development of Dogma under the influence of Augustine’s Christianity and the Roman papal politics.
- II. c. The Threefold Issuing of Dogma (in the churches of the Reformation – in Tridentine Catholicism – and in the criticism of the rationalistic age, i.e., of Socinianism).

Comment

It is important to appreciate that Harnack is a critic of dogma, who believes that uncovering its history is the first stage in effecting its removal.

The term “evangelical” is best understood as “Protestant” throughout this

passage. The German term *evangelisch* is at times difficult to translate into English, and there is no doubt that Harnack intends the term to refer to the Protestant churches.

The “Image Controversy” to which Harnack refers is better known as the “Iconoclastic controversy,” which took place within the eastern Orthodox church, and primarily concerned the question of whether the use of icons was appropriate in worship or personal devotion.



Questions for Study

- 1 Does Harnack consider the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant churches to have equal commitments to the notion of “dogma”? How would you account for any differences between them?
- 2 “Dogmatic Christianity . . . was *the work of the Hellenic spirit upon the Gospel soil*.” Locate this citation within the text. What does Harnack mean by this? And what are the implications of this assertion, if true?
- 3 Read paragraph (7), which deals with the development of dogma, and asserts that dogma has, as a matter of observable historical fact, *not* been the same throughout Christian history. How does this contrast with the language of Vatican I concerning the permanence of the “deposit of faith” (1.19)?

1.22 Karl Barth on the Nature and Task of Theology

Over the period April 10–12, 1934, Karl Barth delivered three lectures on theology to the Free Protestant Theological Faculty at Paris. The lectures were given alongside three seminars on the theology of Calvin, and dealt with the general topics of “Revelation,” “Church,” and “Theology.” This extract from the third of Barth’s three lectures, which dealt with the topic of “Theology,” sets out a vision of the inspirational nature of the subject, and mounts a vigorous protest against any temptation to professionalize the subject. Theology is a matter for the church, not for some professional elite.

Of all the sciences which stir the head and heart, theology is the fairest. It is closest to human reality, and gives us the clearest view of the truth after which all science quests. It best illustrates the time-honored and profound word: “Fakultät.” It is a landscape, like the landscape of Umbria or Tuscany, in which distant perspectives

are always clear. Theology is a masterpiece, as well-planned and yet as bizarre as the cathedrals of Cologne and Milan. What a miserable lot of theologians – and what miserable periods there have been in the history of theology – when they have not realized this! . . .

The task which is laid upon theology, and which it should and can fulfil, is its service in the Church, to the Lord of the Church. It has its definite function in the Church's liturgy, that is, in the various phases of the Church's expression; in every reverend proclamation of the gospel, or in every proclaiming reverence, in which the Church listens and attends to God. Theology does not exist in a vacuum, nor in any arbitrarily selected field, but in that province between baptism and confirmation, in the realm between the Scriptures and their exposition and proclamation. Theology is, like all other functions of the Church, uniquely based upon the fact that God has spoken to humanity and that humanity may hear his Word through grace. Theology is an act of repentant humility, which is presented to humanity through this fact. This act exists in the fact that in theology the Church seeks again and again to examine itself critically as it asks itself what it means and implies to be a Church among humanity. . . .

The task of theology consists in again and again reminding the people in the Church, both preachers and congregations, that the life and work of the Church are under the authority of the gospel and the law, that God should be heard. . . . It has to be a watchman so as to carefully observe that constant threatening and invasive error to which the life of the Church is in danger, because it is composed of fallible, erring, sinful people. . . .

Theology is not a private subject for theologians only. Nor is it a private subject for professors. Fortunately, there have always been pastors who have understood more about theology than most professors. Nor is theology a private subject of study for pastors. Fortunately, there have repeatedly been congregation members, and often whole congregations, who have pursued theology energetically while their pastors were theological infants or barbarians. Theology is a matter for the Church.

●

Comment

This lecture was given in 1934, at a time when Hitler had come to power in Germany, and a serious threat to the well-being of the German churches and the integrity of German Christianity had arisen. Although given in Paris, the lectures show an awareness of the importance of theology for maintaining the true identity of the Christian church, in the face of pressure to conform to the social norms of Nazi Germany. These points were developed further in the Barmen Declaration, which also dates from around this time (7.24).

The lecture offers a vision of theology which liberates the discipline from the stuffiness of the academic world, and insists upon its relevance to the life and mission of the church. There are obvious parallels with the Reformation doctrine of the

“priesthood of all believers,” which asserts that all believers have a priestly ministry; for Barth, all Christians are, whether they realize it or not, potentially theologians.

Although by this stage Barth had established a reputation as a vigorous critic of liberal theology, and a forthright defender of the priority of divine revelation, these concerns are not as apparent from this lecture as might be expected; the earlier Paris lecture on “Revelation” is perhaps most clearly influenced by these concerns. The present passage is marked above all by its vision of theology as an exciting intellectual discipline with a real integrity and relevance, which can be grasped by ordinary believers as much as by academics.



Questions for Study

- 1 What purpose is served by the analogy of the Tuscan or Umbrian landscapes? What point does Barth hope to make from it?
- 2 Etienne Gilson, a famous French historian of medieval philosophy, suggested that scholastic theology was a “cathedral of the mind.” Barth hints at some such idea when he compares theology to the cathedrals of Cologne or Milan. What is the point of this comparison?
- 3 “It has to be a watchman so as to carefully observe that constant threatening and invasive error to which the life of the Church is in danger, because it is composed of fallible, erring, sinful people.” Locate this passage. What specific relevance might this have for the situation faced by the German churches, as a result of the Nazification of Germany at this time?
- 4 “Theology is a matter for the Church.” What does Barth mean by this? What viewpoint is he critiquing in making this assertion?

1.23 Ludwig Wittgenstein on Analogy

In this passage from his *Philosophical Investigations*, originally published in German with an accompanying English translation in 1953, two years after the author’s death, the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that the meaning of words is established by their use in real life. The use of terms in this way allows their “family resemblances” to be established. Wittgenstein’s insistence upon the actual usage of words is an important corrective to more ontological approaches to analogy. See also 1.10; 1.14.

Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games.” I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?

Don't say: "There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games' – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to them all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look! – Look for example at board-games with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. – Are they all "amusing"? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear.

And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: "games" form a family.

Comment

One of Wittgenstein's most familiar concerns is to examine the ways in which words are *used*. For Wittgenstein, the *Lebensform* ("form of living") within which a word was used was of decisive importance in establishing the meaning of that word. The Christian *Lebensform* is thus of controlling importance in understanding what the Christian concept of salvation implies, presupposes, and expresses.

This has important implications for how we use words. As Wittgenstein himself pointed out, the same word can be used in a large number of senses. One way of dealing with this might be to invent a totally new vocabulary, in which the meaning of each word was tightly and unequivocally defined. But this is not a real option. Languages, like religions, are living entities, and cannot be forced to behave in such an artificial way. A perfectly acceptable approach, according to Wittgenstein, is to take trouble to define the particular sense in which a word should be understood, in order to avoid confusion with its many other senses. This involves a careful study of its associations and its use in the "form of living" (*Lebensform*) to which it relates.

On the basis of this, Wittgenstein suggests the image of “family resemblance” to explore the way in which words relate to each other. They are not identical; yet they are related.

Questions for Study

- 1 How does Wittgenstein propose that we set about establishing the meanings of words?
- 2 How might this approach be applied to the vocabulary of the Christian faith? For example, what would Wittgenstein urge us to do if we were to ask what was meant by the term “redemption”?
- 3 How does Wittgenstein’s approach relate to that set out by Thomas Aquinas (1.10)?
- 4 How is Wittgenstein’s general approach helpful in identifying the specifically Christian associations of words which are used to mean other things in different contexts? For example, St Paul uses the term “justification” to refer to a new relationship established between God and humanity through faith (e.g. see Romans 5: 1–2). But in everyday English, “justification” means such things as “aligning the right hand side of a margin” or “offering a reasoned defense of a position.” How does Wittgenstein help the theologian *retain* and *clarify* the vocabulary of the Christian faith?

1.24 Ludwig Wittgenstein on Proofs for the Existence of God

In this passage from the work *Culture and Value*, originally written in German and published after his death, the important twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein demonstrates the limitations of logical deductions of the existence of God, and stresses the importance of experience and life in bringing about belief in God. See also 1.7; 1.8; 1.14; 1.15; 1.18; 1.19.

God’s essence is supposed to guarantee his existence – what this really means is that what is at issue here is not the existence of something. Couldn’t one actually say equally well that the essence of colour guarantees its existence? As opposed, say, to white elephants. Because all that really means is: I cannot explain what “colour” is, what the word “colour” means, except with the help of a colour sample. So in this case there is no such thing as explaining “what it *would* be like if colours were to

exist”. . . . And now we might say: “There can be a description of what it would be like if there were gods on Olympus” – but not “what it would be like if there were such a thing as God.” And to say this is to determine the concept “God” more precisely. . . . How are we taught the word “God” (its use, that is)? I cannot give a full grammatical description of it. But I can, as it were, make some contributions to such a description; I can say a good deal about it and perhaps in time assemble a sort of collection of examples. . . .

A proof of God’s existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists. But I think that what *believers* who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is to give their “belief” an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs. . . . Life can educate one to a belief in God. And *experiences* too are what bring this about: but I don’t mean visions and other forms of sense experience which show us the “existence of this being,” but, e.g., sufferings of various sorts. These neither show us God in the way a sense impression shows us an object, nor do they give rise to *conjectures* about him. Experiences, thoughts – life can force this concept on us.

Comment

In this interesting passage, Wittgenstein makes a number of fundamental criticisms of traditional metaphysical approaches to the question of whether there is indeed a God. Notice in particular his insistence that believers themselves do not base their faith upon such arguments.

As we noted earlier (1.23), Wittgenstein places considerable emphasis upon the way in which words are used in real life in determining their meaning. The role of life-experiences in relation to faith is clearly indicated in this passage, especially in relation to suffering.

Questions for Study

- 1 “I think that what *believers* who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is to give their ‘belief’ an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs.” How valid is this comment? How might it apply to Anselm of Canterbury (1.7) and Thomas Aquinas (1.9)? Did they come to faith as a result of their “proofs,” or were those “proofs” the consequence and expression of their faith?
 - 2 What does Wittgenstein mean when he suggests that life can “force” the concept of God upon us?
-

1.25

Dietrich Bonhoeffer on God in a Secular World

In this letter from Tegel prison, the German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of the new challenge to Christianity in a world in which the existence of God is not taken for granted. He identifies a central theme of Christianity, which distinguishes it from all other religions, in its focus on the sufferings of God in Christ. Bonhoeffer is one of the most vigorous critics of the idea that human “religiosity” is a point of contact for the gospel. The theme of a suffering God is of major importance to Bonhoeffer, as this passage makes clear.

Now for a few more thoughts on our theme. I’m only gradually working my way to the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts; the job is too big for me to finish just yet.

On the historical side: There is one great development that leads to the world’s autonomy. In theology one sees it first in Lord Herbert of Cherbury, who maintains that reason is sufficient for religious knowledge. In ethics it appears in Montaigne and Bodin with their substitution of rules of life for the commandments. In politics Machiavelli detaches politics from morality in general and founds the doctrine of “reasons of state.” Later, and very differently from Machiavelli, but tending like him towards the autonomy of human society, comes Grotius, setting up his natural law as international law, which is valid *etsi deus non daretur*, “even if there were no God.” The philosophers provide the finishing touches: on the one hand we have the deism of Descartes, who holds that the world is a mechanism, running by itself with no interference from God; and on the other hand the pantheism of Spinoza, who says that God is nature. In the last resort, Kant is a deist, and Fichte and Hegel are pantheists. Everywhere the thinking is directed towards the autonomy of man and the world.

(It seems that in the natural sciences the process begins with Nicolas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno and the “heretical” doctrine of the infinity of the universe. The classical *cosmos* was finite, like the created world of the Middle Ages. An infinite universe, however it may be conceived, is self-subsisting, *etsi deus non daretur*. It is true that modern physics is not as sure as it was about the infinity of the universe, but it has not gone back to the earlier conceptions of its finitude.)

God as a working hypothesis in morals, politics, or science, has been surmounted and abolished; and the same thing has happened in philosophy and religion (Feuerbach!). For the sake of intellectual honesty, that working hypothesis should be dropped, or as far as possible eliminated. A scientist or physician who sets out to edify is a hybrid.

Anxious souls will ask what room there is left for God now; and as they know of

no answer to the question, they condemn the whole development that has brought them to such straits. I wrote to you before about the various emergency exits that have been contrived; and we ought to add to them the *salto mortale* [death-leap] back into the Middle Ages. But the principle of the Middle Ages is heteronomy in the form of clericalism; a return to that can be a counsel of despair, and it would be at the cost of intellectual honesty. It's a dream that reminds one of the song *O mußt'ich doch den Weg zurück, den weiten Weg ins Kinderland*. There is no such way – at any rate not if it means deliberately abandoning our mental integrity; the only way is that of Matthew 18: 3, i.e., through repentance, through *ultimate* honesty.

And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*. And this is just what we do recognize – before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15: 34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matthew 8: 17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.

Here is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness. This will probably be the starting-point for our secular interpretation.

Comment

Bonhoeffer wrote this letter from prison shortly before his execution. The letter deals with the vulnerability of approaches to religion and theology which proceed on the assumption that humanity is intrinsically religious. For Bonhoeffer, the Nazi experience has called that presupposition into question.

The letter deals extensively with the issue of the autonomy of the world, and the apparent powerlessness of God, which Bonhoeffer regards as exhibited on the cross. Bonhoeffer's brief account of intellectual history since the Middle Ages is concerned to bring out how the world has come of age, and lives as if there were no God.

Note that the German song title referred to in the text is to be translated as “If only I knew the way back, the long way to the land of childhood.”

Questions for Study

- 1 What is the distinction between living “as if there were no God” and atheism?
- 2 How does Bonhoeffer account for the world’s “coming of age”? What factors does he see as leading to its development? Although Bonhoeffer does not directly address this issue in the passage, in what way does the Nazi period illustrate this point?
- 3 “Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.” Locate this passage within the text. What does Bonhoeffer mean by these words?

1.26 Paul Tillich on the Method of Correlation

Paul Tillich was a German émigré who settled in the United States and became one of the most significant American theologians of the twentieth century. One of his primary concerns was apologetic. To ensure the continuing credibility of Christianity, he argued, it was necessary to correlate the gospel proclamation with the questions which secular culture raised, especially in North America. For Tillich, culture raised what he termed “ultimate questions,” to which theology was obliged to respond. In this lengthy and important passage, Tillich explores the general principles of correlating the Christian message with secular culture.

The passage in question is lengthy, and has been cited to allow more extended engagement with a text than is normal in this collection of readings.

The principle of methodological rationality implies that, like all scientific approaches to reality, systematic theology follows a method. A method is a tool, literally a way around, which must be adequate to its subject matter. Whether or not a method is adequate cannot be decided *a priori*; it is continually being decided in the cognitive process itself. Method and system determine each other. Therefore, no method can claim to be adequate for every subject. Methodological imperialism is as dangerous as political imperialism; like the latter, it breaks down when the independent elements of reality revolt against it. A method is not an “indifferent net” in which reality is caught, but the method is an element of the reality itself. In at least one

respect the description of a method is a description of a decisive aspect of the object to which it is applied. The cognitive relation itself, quite apart from any special act of cognition, reveals something about the object, as well as about the subject, in the relation. The cognitive relation in physics reveals the mathematical character of objects in space (and time). The cognitive relation in biology reveals the structure (*Gestalt*) and spontaneous character of objects in space and time. The cognitive relation in historiography reveals the individual and value-related character of objects in time (and space). The cognitive relation in theology reveals the existential and transcending character of the ground of objects in time and space. Therefore, no method can be developed without a prior knowledge of the object to which it is applied. For systematic theology this means that its method is derived from a prior knowledge of the system which is to be built by the method.

Systematic theology uses the method of correlation. It has always done so, sometimes more, sometimes less, consciously, and must do so consciously and outspokenly, especially if the apologetic point of view is to prevail. The method of correlation explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence.

The term "correlation" may be used in three ways. It can designate the correspondence of different series of data, as in statistical charts; it can designate the logical interdependence of concepts, as in polar relations; and it can designate the real interdependence of things or events in structural wholes. If the term is used in theology all three meanings have important applications. There is a correlation in the sense of correspondence between religious symbols and that which is symbolized by them. There is a correlation in the logical sense between concepts denoting the human and those denoting the divine. There is a correlation in the factual sense between man's ultimate concern and that about which he is ultimately concerned. The first meaning of correlation refers to the central problem of religious knowledge. . . .

The second meaning of correlation determines the statements about God and the world; for example, the correlation of the infinite and the finite. . . .

The third meaning of correlation qualifies the divine-human relationship within religious experience. The third use of correlative thinking in theology has evoked the protest of theologians such as Karl Barth, who are afraid that any kind of divine-human correlation makes God partly dependent on man. But although God in his abysmal nature is in no way dependent on man, God in his self-manifestation to man is dependent on the way man receives his manifestation. This is true even if the doctrine of predestination, namely, that this way is foreordained by God and entirely independent of human freedom, is maintained. The divine-human relation, and therefore God as well as man within this relation, changes with the stages of the history of revelation and with the stages of every personal development. There is a mutual interdependence between "God for us" and "we for God." God's wrath and God's grace are not contrasts in the "heart" of God (Luther), in the depth of his being; but they are contrasts in the divine-human relationship. The divine-human relation is a correlation. The "divine-human encounter" (Emil Brunner) means

something real for both sides. It is an actual correlation, in the third sense of the term.

The divine-human relationship is a correlation also in its cognitive side. Symbolically speaking, God answers man's questions, and under the impact of God's answers man asks them. Theology formulates the questions implied in human existence, and theology formulates the answers in divine self-manifestation under the guidance of the questions implied in human existence. This is a circle which drives man to a point where question and answer are not separated. This point, however, is not a moment in time. It belongs to man's essential being, to the unity of his finitude with the infinity in which he was created, and from which he is separated. . . . A symptom of both the essential unity and the existential separation of finite man from his infinity is his ability to ask about the infinite to which he belongs: the fact that he must ask about it indicates that he is separated from it.

The answers implied in the event of revelation are meaningful only in so far as they are in correlation with questions concerning the whole of our existence, with existential questions. Only those who have experienced the shock of transitoriness, the anxiety in which they are aware of their finitude, the threat of nonbeing, can understand what the notion of God means. Only those who have experienced the tragic ambiguities of our historical existence and have totally questioned the meaning of existence can understand what the symbol of the Kingdom of God means. Revelation answers questions which have been asked and always will be asked because they are "we ourselves." Man is the question he asks about himself, before any question has been formulated. It is, therefore, not surprising that the basic questions were formulated very early in the history of mankind. Every analysis of the mythological material shows this. Nor is it surprising that the same questions appear in early childhood, as every observation of children shows. Being human means asking the questions of one's own being and living under the impact of the answers given to this question. And, conversely, being human means receiving answers to the questions of one's own being and asking questions under the impact of the answers.

In using the method of correlation, systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions. The analysis of the human situation is done in terms which today are called "existential." Such analyses are much older than existentialism; they are, indeed, as old as man's thinking about himself, and they have been expressed in various kinds of conceptualization since the beginning of philosophy. Whenever man has looked at his world, he has found himself in it as a part of it. But he also has realized that he is a stranger in the world of objects, unable to penetrate it beyond a certain level of scientific analysis. And then he has become aware of the fact that he himself is the door to the deeper levels of reality, that in his own existence he has the only possible approach to existence itself. This does not mean that man is more approachable than other objects as material for scientific research. The opposite is the case! It does mean that the immediate experience of one's own existing reveals

something of the nature of existence generally. Whoever has penetrated into the nature of his own finitude can find the traces of finitude in everything that exists. And he can ask the question implied in his finitude as the question implied in finitude universally. In doing so, he does not formulate a doctrine of man; he expresses a doctrine of existence as experienced in him as man. When Calvin in the opening sentences of the *Institutes* correlates our knowledge of God with our knowledge of man, he does not speak of the doctrine of man as such and of the doctrine of God as such. He speaks of man's misery, which gives the existential basis for his understanding of God's glory, and of God's glory, which gives the essential basis for man's understanding of his misery. Man as existing, representing existence generally and asking the question implied in his existence, is one side of the cognitive correlation to which Calvin points, the other side being the divine majesty. In the initial sentences of his theological system Calvin expresses the essence of the method of correlation.

The analysis of the human situation employs materials made available by man's creative self-interpretation in all realms of culture. Philosophy contributes, but so do poetry, drama, the novel, therapeutic psychology, and sociology. The theologian organizes these materials in relation to the answer given by the Christian message. In the light of this message he may make an analysis of existence which is more penetrating than that of most philosophers. Nevertheless, it remains a philosophical analysis. The analysis of existence, including the development of the questions implicit in existence, is a philosophical task, even if it is performed by a theologian, and even if the theologian is a reformer like Calvin. The difference between the philosopher who is not a theologian and the theologian who works as a philosopher in analyzing human existence is only that the former tries to give an analysis which will be part of a broader philosophical world, while the latter tries to correlate the material of his analysis with the theological concepts he derives from the Christian faith. This does not make the philosophical work of the theologian heteronomous. As a theologian he does not tell himself what is philosophically true. As a philosopher he does not tell himself what is theologically true. But he cannot help seeing human existence and existence generally in such a way that the Christian symbols appear meaningful and understandable to him. His eyes are partially focused by his ultimate concern, which is true of every philosopher. Nevertheless, his act of seeing is autonomous, for it is determined only by the object as it is given in his experience. If he sees something he did not expect to see in the light of his theological answer, he holds fast to what he has seen and reformulates the theological answer. He is certain that nothing he sees can change the substance of his answer, because this substance is the *logos* of being, manifest in Jesus as the Christ. If this were not his presupposition, he would have to sacrifice either his philosophical honesty or his theological concern.

The Christian message provides the answers to the questions implied in human existence. These answers are contained in the revelatory events on which Christianity is based and are taken by systematic theology *from* the sources, *through* the medium, *under* the norm. Their content cannot be derived from the questions, that is, from an analysis of human existence. They are "spoken" to human existence

from beyond it. Otherwise they would not be answers, for the question is human existence itself. But the relation is more involved than this, since it is correlation. There is a mutual dependence between question and answer. In respect to content the Christian answers are dependent on the revelatory events in which they appear; in respect to form they are dependent on the structure of the questions which they answer. God is the answer to the question implied in human finitude. This answer cannot be derived from the analysis of existence. However, if the notion of God appears in systematic theology in correlation with the threat of nonbeing which is implied in existence, God must be called the infinite power of being which resists the threat of nonbeing. In classical theology this is being-itself. If anxiety is defined as the awareness of being finite, God must be called the infinite ground of courage. In classical theology this is universal providence. If the notion of the Kingdom of God appears in correlation with the riddle of our historical existence, it must be called the meaning, fulfilment, and unity of history. In this way an interpretation of the traditional symbols of Christianity is achieved which preserves the power of these symbols and which opens them to the questions elaborated by our present analysis of human existence.

Comment

From the outset, Tillich regarded one of the most important tasks of theology to be the relation of theological thought to non-religious situations. In this sense, his theology may be seen as apologetic, rather than dogmatic, primarily concerned with making Christianity both attractive and intelligible to twentieth-century secular culture. His “method of correlation” between the situation and the Christian message reflects this concern to make the Christian proclamation relevant to a world come of age.

Tillich clearly sees existentialism as offering important insights and resources to Christian theology as it seeks to engage with this new situation. The key to this task was existentialism in the form associated with Martin Heidegger. For a short period in 1924–5 Tillich and Heidegger were colleagues at Marburg, and it is evident, both from Tillich’s own personal reflections, as well as the substance of his ontology, that he was greatly influenced by the Marburg existentialist.

Tillich sees the task of theology as the identification of the “ultimate questions” being asked by the culture, and offering answers which meet the real existential concerns which lie behind these questions. In this sense, Tillich could be said to develop an apologetics as much as a theology.

Tillich’s theological program can be summarized in the term “correlation.” By the “method of correlation” Tillich understands the task of modern theology to be to establish a conversation between human culture and Christian faith. Tillich reacted with alarm to the theological program set out by Karl Barth, seeing this as a misguided attempt to drive a wedge between theology and culture. For Tillich,

existential questions – or “ultimate questions,” as he often terms them – are thrown up and revealed by human culture. Modern philosophy, writing, and the creative arts point to questions which concern humans. Theology then formulates answers to these questions, and by doing so it correlates the gospel to modern culture. The gospel must speak to culture, and it can do so only if the actual questions raised by that culture are heard.

Questions for Study

- 1 What does Tillich understand by “correlation”? What is being related to what? And how is this to be done? You might like to explore each of the three aspects of correlation which Tillich identifies in this passage.
- 2 Tillich is critical of Barth in this passage. Why? He also interacts with Emil Brunner and with John Calvin. How would you assess his evaluation of these two Protestant writers?
- 3 “The Christian message provides the answers to the questions implied in human existence.” Locate this sentence within the passage. What does Tillich mean by this?
- 4 Tillich sets out an understanding of the relation of philosophy and theology in this passage. How would you summarize this? What is specific to philosophy? And to theology? Are they autonomous disciplines, in Tillich’s view?

Sallie McFague on Metaphor in Theology

1.27

In several of her writings, including *Metaphorical Theology* (1987), the noted American theologian Sallie McFague develops the idea that Christian ways of speaking about God are primarily metaphorical in character, drawing attention to the differences between God and humanity as well as the similarities. After making the point that theology needs images or models to stimulate and inform its reflection, she considers the particular role of metaphors, focusing on the metaphor of “God as mother.” See also 1.10; 1.23; 3.37; 3.38.

The first thing to say is that theology, as constructive and metaphorical, does not “demythologize” but “remythologizes.” To envision theology as metaphorical means, at the outset, to refuse the attempt to denude religious language of its concrete, poetic, imagistic and hence inevitably anthropomorphic, character, in the

search for presumably more enlightened (and usually more abstract) terminology. It is to accept as one of theology's primary tasks remythologizing for our time: identifying and elucidating primary metaphors and models from contemporary experience which will express Christian faith for our day in powerful, illuminating ways. Theologians are not poets, but neither are they philosophers (as, in the Christian tradition, they have often become). Their place, as understood by metaphorical theology, is an anomalous one that partakes of both poetry and philosophy: they are poets insofar as they must be sensitive to the metaphors and models that are at once consonant with the Christian faith and appropriate for expressing that faith in their own time, and they are philosophers insofar as they must elucidate in a coherent, comprehensive, and systematic way the implications of these metaphors and models. . . .

A second and more complex issue in regard to theology, as constructive and metaphorical, concerns metaphor and model. What are they, and why call theology metaphorical? A metaphor is a word or phrase used inappropriately. It belongs properly in one context but is being used in another: the arm of the chair, war as a chess game, God the father. From Aristotle until recently, metaphor has been seen mainly as a poetic device to embellish or decorate. The idea was that in metaphor one used a word or phrase inappropriately but one need not have: whatever was being expressed could be said directly without the metaphor. Increasingly, however, the idea of metaphor as unsubstitutable is winning acceptance: what a metaphor expresses cannot be said directly or apart from it, for if it could be, one would have said it directly. Here, metaphor is a strategy of desperation, not decoration; it is an attempt to say something about the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, an attempt to speak about what we do not know in terms of what we do know. Not all metaphors fit this definition, for many are so enmeshed in conventional language (the arm of the chair) that we do not notice them and some have become so familiar that we do not recognize them as attempting to express the unfamiliar (God the father). But a fresh metaphor, such as in the remark that "war is a chess game," immediately sparks our imaginations to think of war, a very complex phenomenon, as viewed through a concrete grid or screen, the game of chess. Needless to say, war is not a chess game; hence, a description of war in terms of chess is a partial, relative, inadequate account that, in illuminating certain aspects of war (such as strategizing), filters out other aspects (such as violence and death).

Metaphor always has the character of "is" and "is not": an assertion is made but as a likely account rather than a definition. That is, to say, "God is mother," is not to define God as mother, not to assert identity between the terms "God" and "mother," but to suggest that we consider what we do not know how to talk about – relating to God – through the metaphor of mother. The assumption here is that all talk of God is indirect: no words or phrases refer directly to God, for God-language can refer only through the detour of a description that properly belongs elsewhere. To speak of God as mother is to invite us to consider some qualities associated with mothering as one partial but perhaps illuminating way of speaking of certain aspects of God's rela-

tionship to us. It also assumes, however, that many other metaphors may qualify as partial but illuminating grids or screens for this purpose.

Comment

One of the tasks which Sallie McFague undertakes in her work *Metaphorical Theology* is to reclaim the use of the metaphor in theology. Inevitably, this involves clarifying what is meant by the word “metaphor,” and especially clarifying its relation to the word “analogy.” In the course of this section, it becomes clear that McFague sees the metaphor as possessing the virtue of flexibility: it is non-rigid and allows a variety of interpretations to be placed upon it.

Note how McFague stresses that a metaphor is about both “being like” and “not being like.” To suggest, for example, that “God is a wolf” – and that this is to be taken metaphorically – encourages those hearing this statement to look for points of similarity and dissimilarity between God and a wolf. It cannot be assumed that the use of this image is purely analogical; the metaphor may stress distinction, rather than similitude.

McFague is opposed to the elimination of the metaphorical from theology, partly because she believes that it would be impoverished linguistically and iconically as a result. To reject metaphor is to reject imagery – often very powerful and moving imagery.

Questions for Study

- 1 The word “metaphor” means different things to different people. What does McFague mean by the term? And how does this affect her evaluation of its theological potential?
 - 2 McFague makes it clear that she intends to resist any attempt “to denude religious language of its concrete, poetic, imagistic” character. What reasons does she give for doing so?
 - 3 McFague offers a number of religious metaphors in this passage, including “God as mother.” What insights does this metaphor convey?
 - 4 McFague notes that “many other metaphors may qualify as partial but illuminating grids.” This suggests that she sees metaphors as possessing a cumulative force, so that a range of metaphors is necessary to gain an increasing understanding of God. How might a variety of metaphors be used, in order to gain such a better understanding? How would one work out which aspects of the metaphors were to be used, and which not?
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1.28 Gustavo Gutiérrez on Theology as Critical Reflection

One of the characteristic features of Latin American liberation theology is its emphasis on practice rather than theory. This emphasis, whose origins may be traced back to Karl Marx's distinction between *theory* and *praxis*, shows itself particularly in the liberationist emphasis on the need for practical social involvement and political commitment, and the implicit criticism of western understandings of theology as a disinterested and detached academic discipline. See also 3.32; 7.27; 9.3.

Theology must be critical reflection on humankind, on basic human principles. Only with this approach will theology be a serious discourse, aware of itself, in full possession of its conceptual elements. But we are not referring exclusively to this epistemological aspect when we talk about theology as critical reflection. We also refer to a clear and critical attitude regarding economic and socio-cultural issues in the life and reflection of the Christian community. To disregard these is to deceive both oneself and others. But above all, we intend this term to express the theory of a definite practice. Theological reflection would then necessarily be a criticism of society and the Church, insofar as they are called and addressed by the Word of God; it would be a critical theory, worked out in the light of the Word accepted in faith and inspired by a practical purpose – and therefore indissolubly linked to historical praxis.

By preaching the Gospel message, by its sacraments, and by the charity of its members, the Church proclaims and shelters the gift of the Kingdom of God in the heart of human history. The Christian community professes a faith which works through charity. It is – at least ought to be – real charity, action, and commitment to the service of others. Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. *Theology follows*; it is the second step. What Hegel used to say about philosophy can likewise be applied to theology: it rises only at sundown. The pastoral activity of the Church does not flow as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it. Theology must be able to find in pastoral activity the presence of the Spirit inspiring the action of the Christian community. A privileged *locus theologicus* for understanding the faith will be the life, preaching, and historical commitment of the Church.

To reflect upon the presence and action of the Christian in the world means, moreover, to go beyond the visible boundaries of the Church. This is of prime importance. It implies openness to the world, gathering the questions it poses,

being attentive to its historical transformations. In the words of Yves Congar, “If the Church wishes to deal with the real questions of the modern world and to attempt to respond to them, . . . it must open as it were a new chapter of theologico-pastoral epistemology. Instead of using only revelation and tradition as starting points, as classical theology has generally done, it must start with facts and questions derived from the world and from history.” It is precisely this opening to the totality of human history that allows theology to fulfill its critical function *vis-à-vis* ecclesial praxis without narrowness.

This critical task is indispensable. Reflection in the light of faith must constantly accompany the pastoral action of the Church. By keeping historical events in their proper perspective, theology helps safeguard society and the Church from regarding as permanent what is only temporary. Critical reflection thus always plays the inverse role of an ideology which rationalizes and justifies a given social and ecclesial order. On the other hand, theology, by pointing to the sources of revelation, helps to orient pastoral activity; it puts it in a wider context and so helps it to avoid activism and immediatism. Theology as critical reflection thus fulfills a liberating function for humankind and the Christian community, preserving them from fetishism and idolatry, as well as from a pernicious and belittling narcissism. Understood in this way theology has a necessary and permanent role in liberation from every form of religious alienation – which is often fostered by the ecclesiastical institution itself when it impedes an authentic approach to the Word of the Lord.

As critical reflection on society and the Church, theology is an understanding which both grows and, in a certain sense, changes. If the commitment of the Christian community in fact takes different forms throughout history, the understanding which accompanies the vicissitudes of this commitment will be constantly renewed and will take untrodden paths. A theology which has as its points of reference only “truths” which have been established once and for all – and not the Truth which is also the Way – can be only static and, in the long run, sterile. In this sense the often-quoted and misinterpreted words of Bouillard take on new validity: “A theology which is not up-to-date is a false theology.”

Finally, theology thus understood, that is to say as linked to praxis, fulfills a prophetic function insofar as it interprets historical events with the intention of revealing and proclaiming their profound meaning. According to Oscar Cullmann, this is the meaning of the prophetic role: “The prophet does not limit himself as does the fortune-teller to isolated revelations, but his prophecy becomes preaching, proclamation. He explains to the people the true meaning of all events; he informs them of the plan and will of God at the particular moment.” But if theology is based on this observation of historical events and contributes to the discovery of their meaning, it is with the purpose of making Christians’ commitment within them more radical and clear. Only with the exercise of the prophetic function understood in this way, will the theologian be – to borrow an expression from Antonio Gramsci – a new kind of “organic intellectual.” Theologians will be personally and vitally engaged in historical realities with specific times and places. They will be engaged

where nations, social classes, and peoples struggle to free themselves from domination and oppression by other nations, classes, and peoples. In the last analysis, the true interpretation of the meaning revealed by theology is achieved only in historical praxis – “The hermeneutics of the Kingdom of God,” observed Schillebeeckx, “consists especially in making the world a better place. Only in this way will I be able to discover what the Kingdom of God means.” We have here a political hermeneutics of the Gospel.

Theology as a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word does not replace the other functions of theology, such as wisdom and rational knowledge; rather it presupposes and needs them. But this is not all. We are not concerned here with a mere juxtaposition. The critical function of theology necessarily leads to redefinition of these other two tasks. Henceforth, wisdom and rational knowledge will more explicitly have ecclesial praxis as their point of departure and their context. It is in reference to this praxis that an understanding of spiritual growth based on Scripture should be developed, and it is through this same praxis that faith encounters the problems posed by human reason. Given the theme of the present work, we will be especially aware of this critical function of theology with the ramifications suggested above. This approach will lead us to pay special attention to the life of the Church and to commitments which Christians, impelled by the Spirit and in communion with others, undertake in history. We will give special consideration to participation in the process of liberation, an outstanding phenomenon of our times, which takes on special meaning in the so-called Third World countries.

This kind of theology, arising from concern with a particular set of issues, will perhaps give us the solid and permanent albeit modest foundation for the *theology in a Latin American perspective* which is both desired and needed. This Latin American focus would not be due to a frivolous desire for originality, but rather to a fundamental sense of historical efficacy and also – why hide it? – to the desire to contribute to the life and reflection of the universal Christian community. But in order to make our contribution, this desire for universality – as well as input from the Christian community as a whole – must be present from the beginning. To concretize this desire would be to overcome particularistic tendencies – provincial and chauvinistic – and produce something *unique*, both particular and universal, and therefore fruitful.

“The only future that theology has, one might say, is to become the theology of the future,” Harvey Cox has said. But this theology of the future must necessarily be a critical appraisal of historical praxis, of the historical task in the sense we have attempted to sketch. Jürgen Moltmann says that theological concepts “do not limp after reality. . . . They illuminate reality by displaying its future.” In our approach, to reflect critically on the praxis of liberation is to “limp after” reality. The present in the praxis of liberation, in its deepest dimension, is pregnant with the future; hope must be an inherent part of our present commitment in history. Theology does not initiate this future which exists in the present. It does not create the vital attitude of hope out of nothing. Its role is more modest. It interprets and explains

these as the true underpinnings of history. To reflect upon a forward directed action is not to concentrate on the past. It does not mean being the caboose of the present. Rather it is to penetrate the present reality, the movement of history, that which is driving history toward the future. To reflect on the basis of the historical praxis of liberation is to reflect in the light of the future which is believed in and hoped for. It is to reflect with a view to action which transforms the present. But it does not mean doing this from an armchair; rather it means sinking roots where the pulse of history is beating at this moment and illuminating history with the Word of the Lord of history, who irreversibly committed himself to the present moment of humankind to carry it to its fulfillment.

It is for all these reasons that the theology of liberation offers us not so much a new theme for reflection as a *new way* to do theology. Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology, a theology of the liberating transformation of the history of humankind and also therefore that part of humankind – gathered into *ecclesia* – which openly confesses Christ. This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed. It is a theology which is open – in the protest against trampled human dignity, in the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of humankind, in liberating love, and in the building of a new, just, and comradely society – to the gift of the Kingdom of God.

Comment

Gustavo Gutiérrez represents the tradition of Latin American liberation theology, which has had a profound impact on western theological thinking since about 1968. It had its origins in the Latin American situation in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1968, the Catholic bishops of Latin America gathered for a congress at Medellín, Colombia. This meeting – often known as CELAM II – acknowledged that the church had often sided with oppressive governments in the region, and declared that in future it would be on the side of the poor.

This pastoral and political stance was soon complemented by a solid theological foundation. In his *Theology of Liberation* (1971), Gutiérrez introduced the characteristic themes that would become definitive of the movement, and which we shall explore from the reading above. Other writers of note include the Brazilian Leonardo Boff, the Uruguayan Juan Luis Segundo, and the Argentinian José Miguel Bonino. This last is unusual in one respect, in that he is a Protestant (more precisely, a Methodist) voice in a conversation dominated by Catholic writers.

The basic themes of Latin American liberation theology may be summarized as follows. First, liberation theology is orientated towards the poor and oppressed. In the Latin American situation, the church is on the side of the poor. The fact that God is on the side of the poor leads to a further insight: the poor occupy a position

of especial importance in the interpretation of the Christian faith. All Christian theology and mission must begin with the “view from below,” with the sufferings and distress of the poor. Second, liberation theology involves critical reflection on practice. As Gutiérrez himself puts it, theology is a “critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the word of God.” Theology is not, and should not be, detached from social involvement or political action. Whereas classical western theology regarded action as the result of reflection, liberation theology inverts the order: action comes first, followed by critical reflection. “Theology has to stop explaining the world, and start transforming it” (Bonino). True knowledge of God can never be disinterested or detached, but comes in and through commitment to the cause of the poor. There is a fundamental rejection of the Enlightenment view that commitment is a barrier to knowledge.



Questions for Study

- 1 Theology is “critical reflection on historical praxis.” According to this passage, why must priority be given to praxis? What criticisms may be directed against the traditional western emphasis upon theory preceding action?
- 2 Why is the Latin American situation seen as being so significant for theology?
- 3 Theology is seen as being orientated towards the future. Why is this so? What factors help us to understand this emphasis on relating to the future?
- 4 Gutiérrez declares that one of the tasks of theology is to equip the church to fulfil its mission. Yet it is clear that he sees this “equipping” as being both positive and critical. Give some examples of ways in which theology supports the mission of the church, and of ways in which theology critiques the church for undertaking inappropriate actions or aligning itself with inappropriate allies in the course of its history.

1.29 Brian A. Gerrish on Accommodation in Calvin's Theology

For Calvin, divine revelation takes place in a form which is “accommodated” or “adjusted” to human capacities and abilities. In this helpful analysis, Brian A. Gerrish sets out the basic features of Calvin's approach, which has had a considerable influence on Reformed theology in particular. See also 1.10; 1.12; 1.26; 6.44.

According to Calvin, the forms of revelation are adapted in various ways to the nature of man as the recipient. His general term for the several types of adaptation

is “accommodation.” It is axiomatic for Calvin that God cannot be comprehended by the human mind. What is known of God is known by revelation; and God reveals himself, not as he is in himself, but in forms adapted to man’s capacity. Hence in preaching he communicates himself through a man speaking to men, and in the sacraments he adds a mode of communication adapted to man’s physical nature. Now in speaking of the Bible, Calvin extends the idea of accommodation beyond the mode to the actual content of revelation, and argues that the very diction of biblical language is often adapted to the finitude of man’s mind. God does not merely condescend to human frailty by revealing himself in the prophetic and apostolic word and by causing the Word to be written down in sacred books: he also makes his witnesses employ accommodated expressions. For example, God is represented anthropomorphically as raising his hand, changing his mind, deliberating, being angry, and so on. Calvin admits that this accommodated language has a certain impropriety about it. It bears the same relation to divine truth as does the baby talk of a nurse or mother to the world of adult realities.

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Comment

The basic issue is how divine revelation is “adapted” to the abilities and cultural situation of its addressees. Gerrish explores the way in which Calvin understands this process, and identifies some of its implications.

The issue is not simply of historical importance, but is of continuing relevance in relation to biblical interpretation and theological construction.

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Questions for Study

- 1 According to Gerrish, what are the implications of the concept of “accommodation” to the biblical anthropomorphisms? In other words, how does Calvin’s approach help us to make sense of biblical passages which speak of God in human and physical terms – such as those referring to the “arm of the Lord”?
 - 2 How does the analogy of a nurse or mother speaking to a baby illuminate the points at issue?
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1.30 George Lindbeck on Postliberal Approaches to Doctrine

George Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine* (1984) is widely regarded as a manifesto of postliberalism. The work sets out a "cultural-linguistic" approach to Christian doctrine, which argues that doctrine regulates the language of the Christian tradition. After considering approaches to doctrine which treat it as making cognitive truth claims or expressing human experience, Lindbeck turns to set out his own position, as follows.

The description of the cultural-linguistic alternative that I shall now sketch is shaped by the ultimately theological concerns of the present inquiry, but it is consonant, I believe, with the anthropological, sociological, and philosophical studies by which it has been for the most part inspired. In the account that I shall give, religions are seen as comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world. Not every telling of one of these cosmic stories is religious, however. It must be told with a particular purpose or interest. It must be used, to adopt a suggestion of William Christian, with a view to identifying and describing what is taken to be "more important than everything else in the universe," and to organizing all of life, including both behavior and beliefs, in relation to this. If the interpretive scheme is used or the story is told without this interest in the maximally important, it ceases to function religiously. To be sure, it may continue to shape in various ways the attitudes, sentiments, and conduct of individuals and of groups. A religion, in other words, may continue to exercise immense influence on the way people experience themselves and their world even when it is no longer explicitly adhered to.

Stated more technically, a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought. It functions somewhat like a Kantian *a priori* although in this case the *a priori* is a set of acquired skills that could be different. It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (though it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully

deployed. Lastly, just as a language (or “language game,” to use Wittgenstein’s phrase) is correlated with a form of life, and just as a culture has both cognitive and behavioral dimensions, so it is also in the case of a religious tradition. Its doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical directives are integrally related to the rituals it practices, the sentiments or experiences it evokes, the actions it recommends, and the institutional forms it develops. All this is involved in comparing a religion to a cultural-linguistic system. . . .

Thus the linguistic-cultural model is part of an outlook that stresses the degree to which human experience is shaped, molded, and in a sense constituted by cultural and linguistic forms. There are numberless thoughts we cannot think, sentiments we cannot have, and realities we cannot perceive unless we learn to use the appropriate symbol systems. It seems, as the cases of Helen Keller and of supposed wolf children vividly illustrate, that unless we acquire language of some kind, we cannot actualize our specifically human capacities for thought, action, and feeling. Similarly, so the argument goes, to become religious involves becoming skilled in the language, the symbol system of a given religion. To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one’s world in its terms. A religion is above all an external word, a *verbum externum*, that molds and shapes the self and its world, rather than an expression or thematization of a preexisting self or of preconceptual experience. The *verbum internum* (traditionally equated by Christians with the action of the Holy Spirit) is also crucially important, but it would be understood in a theological use of the model as a capacity for hearing and accepting the true religion, the true external word, rather than (as experiential-expressivism would have it) as a common experience diversely articulated in different religions. . . .

In thus inverting the relation of the internal and external dimensions of religion, linguistic and cultural approaches resemble cognitivist theories for which external (i.e., propositionally statable) beliefs are primary, but without the intellectualism of the latter. A comprehensive scheme or story used to structure all dimensions of existence is not primarily a set of propositions to be believed, but is rather the medium in which one moves, a set of skills that one employs in living one’s life. Its vocabulary of symbols and its syntax may be used for many purposes, only one of which is the formulation of statements about reality. Thus while a religion’s truth claims are often of the utmost importance to it (as in the case of Christianity), it is, nevertheless, the conceptual vocabulary and the syntax or inner logic which determine the kinds of truth claims the religion can make. The cognitive aspect, while often important, is not primary.

This stress on the code, rather than the (e.g., propositionally) encoded, enables a cultural-linguistic approach to accommodate the experiential-expressive concern for the unreflective dimensions of human existence far better than is possible on a cognitivist outlook. Religion cannot be pictured in the cognitivist (and voluntarist) manner as primarily a matter of deliberate choosing to believe or follow explicitly known propositions or directives. Rather, to become religious – no less than to become culturally or linguistically competent – is to interiorize a set of skills by

practice and training. One learns how to feel, act, and think in conformity with a religious tradition that is, in its inner structure, far richer and more subtle than can be explicitly articulated. The primary knowledge is not about the religion, nor that the religion teaches such and such, but rather how to be religious in such and such ways. Sometimes explicitly formulated statements of the beliefs or behavioral norms of a religion may be helpful in the learning process, but by no means always. Ritual, prayer, and example are normally much more important. Thus – insofar as the experiential-expressive contrast between experience and knowledge is comparable to that between “knowing how” and “knowing that” – cultural-linguistic models, no less than expressive ones, emphasize the experiential or existential side of religion, though in a different way.

Comment

The emergence of postliberalism is widely regarded as one of the most important aspects of western theology since 1980. The movement had its origins in the United States, and was initially associated with Yale Divinity School, and particularly with theologians such as Hans Frei, Paul Holmer, David Kelsey, and George Lindbeck. While it is not strictly correct to speak of a “Yale school” of theology, there are nevertheless clear “family resemblances” between a number of the approaches to theology to emerge from Yale during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Since then, postliberal trends have become well established within North American and British academic theology. Its central foundations are narrative approaches to theology, such as those developed by Hans Frei, and the schools of social interpretation which stress the importance of culture and language in the generation and interpretation of experience and thought.

The “cultural-linguistic” approach set out by Lindbeck denies that there is some universal unmediated human experience which exists apart from human language and culture. Rather, it stresses that the heart of religion lies in living within a specific historical religious tradition, and interiorizing its ideas and values. This tradition rests upon a historically mediated set of ideas, for which the narrative is an especially suitable means of transmission.

Lindbeck’s *Nature of Doctrine* is widely seen as the most important work to set out the position of the “postliberal” camp.

Questions for Study

- 1 In what way can doctrine be seen as the grammar of the Christian language? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?
- 2 “Thus the linguistic-cultural model is part of an outlook that stresses the degree

to which human experience is shaped, molded, and in a sense constituted by cultural and linguistic forms.” Locate this citation within the text. What does Lindbeck mean by this? And how does this illustrate the importance of tradition and social structures for Lindbeck’s approach?

- 3 The use of the word “postliberal” suggests that Lindbeck and his colleagues regard liberalism as being superseded. On the basis of the passage, what reasons may be given for this belief?