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40. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990; orig. pub. 1971), 238.
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50. Avery Dulles refers to these traditions as “paracritical”; he notes the influence of Kant’s philosophy on them, and lists Lutheran pietism and nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism as examples (*The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* [New York: Crossroad, 1995], 4).
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52. *Dei Filius* 4. Quoted in CCC, no. 159.
53. See Joseph P. Healy, “Faith,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:744–45.
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Doing Theology

Faith and Reason in Theology

In this chapter, we will consider how specific Catholic theologians have viewed the relationship among faith, reason, and tradition in theology. We will begin with a thinker who is the classic model of the Catholic theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and then move on to consider how two contemporary theologians, the American Avery Dulles and the Canadian Bernard Lonergan, address some of the challenges of doing theology in the modern world. We will also consider the thought of the French Protestant philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, for the illumination of these issues that he offers.

Being Itself

In the Catholic theological tradition, Thomas Aquinas holds a unique position as the primary theological teacher.¹ In this section, we will consider some of Aquinas’s general principles of how faith relates to reason, and then study his

specific method of doing theology in his greatest work, the *Summa Theologica* (ST).

Let us begin by considering the foundation of Aquinas's philosophical thought, which is sometimes characterized as a "philosophy of being." First, we must attempt to grasp the importance of his concept of "being."

A child spontaneously asks very basic questions, "Why is the sky blue? Why is water wet?" But perhaps the most basic question of all can only be formulated by a childlike philosopher, "Why does anything exist at all?" In traditional philosophy, this is known as a **metaphysical** question—meaning it deals not with specific subjects, but with the ultimate questions of existence and "being" in general. Modern science (for example, physics and chemistry) attempts to explain reality as it is, and thus ignores these basic metaphysical questions—assuming that they have no practical value or sure answer.

But when we ignore metaphysical questions, we miss out on a sense of wonder at the fact of existence itself (see sec. 2.6.3). The Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain insists that we must deliberately awaken ourselves in order to regain that primal sense of wonder. Consider any object—a tree, a person, a stone. Why is the tree there? The question is not about its immediate cause ("It grew from a seed"), but rather, "Why does it exist at all?"

Maritain's point may relate to an insight from developmental psychology. At first, an infant is unable to distinguish between his own body and the environment. Even after he has learned to make this distinction, he still has no understanding of the permanence of objects outside himself: remove a toy from his sight, and it ceases to exist for him. Only as his cognitive abilities develop is he able to comprehend that a massive, wonderful, and sometimes frightening world exists, solidly and firmly and completely separate from himself.

According to Maritain, a person's primal intuition of another object's existence is accompanied at the same moment by the person's awareness of his own limitations. Because other objects exist completely independently of me, I become aware of my limitations, my smallness, my fragility, and I have an intuition that it is possible for me not to exist. I glimpse the possibility of my own death. From that perception of solid existence of an object outside of myself, seen in light of my own limited existence, I vaguely understand that any limited existence must ultimately depend on an absolute being—a solid, unchanging reality on which all other things depend. If this absolute ground to all being did not exist, then no limited being would ever have existed at all.

It is this absolute ground of all reality that the Christian calls "God."

A key biblical story illustrates Aquinas's approach. After Moses' numinous experience of encountering God in the burning bush, Moses asks,

"If they [the Israelites] ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?" God replied, "I am who am." Then he added, "This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you." (Exod 3:13–14)

The precise meaning of the phrase "I am who am" in Hebrew is debated. In the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, the phrase was translated, "I am he that is." Early Christians understood this in a philosophical sense: God *is*—God is the Supreme Being—the ultimate source of the existence of all other things. God completely transcends all other existence, but at the same time, God is intimately connected with every existing thing—since without him nothing at all would exist?

Thus Maritain shows how, in the Thomist tradition of thought, the human being is oriented toward God from the very beginning. Even before one begins to think rationally, one's very first intuition includes an intuition of God.

Aquinas on Faith and Reason 3.2

Reason Guided by Revelation 3.2.1

The human ability to reason is a true human good, but it is not adequate in itself. First, Aquinas believes that humans are directed toward the transcendent God as the ultimate goal of their lives (recall our discussion of this in secs. 1.4–7), and this transcendent goal is beyond the power of human reason to grasp. Second, although Aquinas believes that humans could know about God's existence through natural reason alone, he also thinks that such natural theological knowledge could be grasped only by a few people, and then only after a long time and with the danger of including error (ST 1.1.1).

Theology as Science 3.2.2

Aquinas defines a science as a search for true knowledge based on first principles that cannot be strictly proved. Proceeding from these first principles, a person uses logical reasoning to gain further knowledge.

Every science takes for granted certain first principles, such as the fundamental principle that every change must have a cause. Many sciences take for granted the principles established by other sciences: thus the study of music depends on principles established by mathematics. No scientists personally verify every scientific principle; rather they accept on authority a large body of previously established scientific knowledge (see sec. 4.3). So theology is comparable to other sciences when it accepts on authority the basic articles of faith (as stated in Scripture and Church teaching) as its starting point (ST 1.1.2).

From this starting point, however, the theologian then develops theological knowledge in a rational, systematic way.

Reason Answers Reasonable Objections 323

Aquinas realized that the non-Christian would not accept the Christian articles of faith as an authoritative starting point. So is any further dialogue possible with a nonbeliever on matters of Christian faith?

Yes, argues Aquinas. Theological reason cannot *prove* the truth of an article of faith to a nonbeliever, but it can answer a nonbeliever's objections that a particular article of faith is illogical or unreasonable. For example, the Christian theologian cannot prove that God is a Trinity, but he should be able to answer, by reason alone, objections that belief in the Trinity is simply illogical (for example, by showing that the three persons of God could share the same divine nature) (ST 1.1.8).

Aquinas's confidence that beliefs can be defended with reason is unshakable: "Since faith rests upon infallible truth, and since the contrary of a truth can never be demonstrated, it is clear that the arguments brought against faith cannot be demonstrations, but are difficulties that can be answered" (ST 1.1.8).³

Thus Aquinas thought that Christians should never hesitate to ask a reasonable question about their faith—an answer could always be found.

Reason as Preparation for Faith 324

Theology can use philosophical reasoning due to "the defect of our intelligence, which is more easily led by what is known through natural reason (from which proceed the other sciences) to that which is above reason, such as are the teachings of this science" (ST 1.1.5).

Aquinas holds that "faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature, and perfection presupposes something that can be perfected" (ST 1.2.2 ad. 1). In other words, the theologian may

legitimately begin with observations about the natural world before being led to consider supernatural knowledge.

Faith and reason continually interact: our reason helps us to gain a clearer understanding of our faith, but our faith first guides our reason to help it to reason rightly. On this point, Aquinas's thought is similar to the idea of the "hermeneutical circle" that we will discuss below (see sec. 3.5.1).

Non-Christian Sources and Sciences 325

Aquinas's thought fits in well with our modern openness to diversity: he was not afraid to recognize and accept truth apart from the Christian articles of faith. In fact, Aquinas's primary guide in his philosophical thinking (for example, in his description of causes and effects) was the non-Christian philosopher Aristotle: in the *Summa*, Aquinas simply refers to Aristotle as "the Philosopher." Aquinas also interacts with the arguments of Muslim thinkers such as Avicenna and Averroes and the Jewish philosopher Maimonides.

Other sciences can help to make theological teachings clearer; Aquinas calls them the "handmaidens" of theology (ST 1.1.5). Theology properly makes use of these sciences, each of which is competent in its own realm of expertise: "Hence sacred doctrine makes use also of the authority of philosophers in those questions in which they were able to know the truth by natural reason" (ST 1.1.8). Aquinas's thinking is thus in line with contemporary Catholic leaders such as Pope John Paul II, who strongly urged dialogue between theology and modern science (see sec. 4.7).

Theological Method in the Summa 33

Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* is a summary of theology designed for beginning students of theology.⁴ The work is carefully structured: it consists of four main parts, with each part divided into treatises (such as, "The One God"), and each treatise in turn divided into "points of inquiry" or "questions" (for example, "Whether sacred doctrine is a science?"). Finally, each question is divided into articles.

The article is the heart of the *Summa's* method. It consists of five steps:

1. **Focusing the question.** A specific question is narrowed so it can be answered either "Yes" or "No." Aquinas does this to focus and sharpen the issue and avoid vague conclusions.

2. **Listing objections.** Aquinas was convinced that the only way to grasp the truth is by seriously considering all sides of an issue. He usually lists up to three objections to his own eventual conclusion, stating them in a fair and balanced way.
3. **Statement of Aquinas's conclusions, backed by authority.** Aquinas bases his answer on the authority of the Bible and of Church teachings. Here he refers to the conclusions of many previous thinkers: Augustine, Dionysius, John Damascene, and Anselm, as well as of non-Christian authorities such as Aristotle. Aquinas is careful to point out, however, that the conclusions of Christian theologians are only probable: he considers only the authority of the canonical Scriptures to be unquestionable (ST 1.1.8 ad. 2).
4. **Detailed explanation of Aquinas's own position.** This is the main part of the article in which Aquinas rationally justifies his answer, providing any necessary explanations and clarifications.
5. **Specific answer to the objections.** The objections to Aquinas's position (stated in step 2) are answered in detail.

The theological method of the *Summa* is thus diametrically opposed to a model of blind faith. It is true that the Christian articles of faith are the unquestioned starting point of Aquinas's thinking, but from that starting point he proceeds with the most rigorous regard for exact and precise thinking.

Proving God's Existence

3.3.1

Let us now consider in detail what is perhaps the most famous of Aquinas's articles in the *Summa*, his response to the question of God's existence. This is the third article under the question, "Whether God exists?"

1. **Focusing the question:** The first two articles of this question had focused the discussion by dealing with preliminary questions: (1) "Whether the existence of God is self-evident?" and (2) "Whether it can be demonstrated that God exists?" Once Aquinas shows that God's existence is neither (1) so obvious that everyone must accept it, nor (2) so obscure that it must be accepted on faith alone, he is then ready to ask the specific question, "Whether God exists?"

2. **Listing objections.** Here Aquinas proceeds to outline objections to arguments for the existence of God.
 - **Objection 1:** If two things are opposites, and one is infinite, then its opposite would be canceled out and cease to exist. But since God is infinitely good, then logically the opposite of good—evil—should not exist. But it does in fact exist. Therefore God does not exist.
 - **Objection 2:** Everything that occurs in the world can be explained without referring to God. Events in nature can be explained by natural causes; events caused by humans can be explained by human causes. "Therefore there is no need to suppose God's existence."
3. **Statement of Aquinas's position, backed by authority.** Aquinas refers to God's own witness to his existence in Exodus 3:14, "I am who am."
4. **Detailed explanation of Aquinas's position.** Aquinas sketches out five "ways" by which the existence of God can be proved; we will discuss these in detail below.
5. **Specific answer to the objections.**
 - **Reply to Objection 1:** God allows evil to exist, but is able to produce good out of evil.
 - **Reply to Objection 2:** Neither nature nor the human will can explain their own existence—they both point beyond themselves to a first transcendent cause.

Aquinas's Five Ways

3.3.2

We now turn to the heart of Aquinas's argument: the five "ways" to prove the existence of God. All of Aquinas's "ways" begin with empirical observations of the physical world—reality as we can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch it. By thinking rationally about physical reality, Aquinas concludes that its very existence points beyond itself to a transcendent cause. In this sense, Aquinas's ways are a philosophical expression of the experiences of transcendence that we described in sections 1.4–7. Aquinas explains in philosophical terms the common human experience that all reality in this world, because it is limited, points beyond itself to the transcendent.

The five ways may be summarized as follows:⁵

1. The fact that there is movement or change in the physical world points toward a transcendent First Mover.
2. The fact that all things and actions in the physical world are caused by something else (specifically, that they have an efficient cause) points toward a transcendent First Cause.
3. The fact that all things in the physical world exist in a contingent way (that is, it is not logically necessary that they exist) points toward a transcendent Necessary Being.
4. The fact that we can compare degrees of quality in physical things (for example, some things are better or more beautiful than others) points toward the existence of a transcendent standard (supreme degree) of those qualities.
5. The fact that everything in the physical world seems to be designed for a purpose points toward a transcendent Intelligence that gave them that purpose.

The First Cause Argument

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In order better to understand Aquinas's approach, let's consider his second argument in more detail. Everything has a cause: nothing can cause itself to exist or to change. Thus I am able to purchase some writing paper *because* a local store stocks it. The local store has the paper *because* it was purchased by paper suppliers. The paper suppliers have the paper *because* paper factories manufactured it. The factories are able to make paper *because* there is a supply of trees. Trees exist *because* they have enough sunlight to perform photosynthesis. The sun in its turn depended upon other causes: it was caused by swirling clouds of gas pulled together by gravity.

Everything in the universe has a cause. The universe itself has a cause: currently the most widely accepted scientific theory is that the universe began with the "big bang"—an inconceivably powerful explosion and expansion of all the matter and energy in the universe. (See sec. 4.8 for a more detailed discussion of the big bang in relation to Christian thought.)

But even the big bang theory leaves one question unanswered: what caused the original energy and matter of the universe to exist before it exploded in the big bang?

Scientifically, one must presume that original energy and matter simply existed. Even if one speculates about other universes before the big bang, the same ultimate metaphysical question arises: How did these previous universes first come into existence?

Aquinas considers the possibility that the universe was eternal (Aristotle's view), concluding that one cannot know from reason alone whether the universe had a beginning in time or not. Aquinas believes that it did have a beginning in time, based on the authority of Scripture and Church teaching.⁶ What we can know from reason alone, however, is that the universe must have had a cause, since we have no experience of anything simply existing without a cause.

Since the universe cannot have caused itself to come into existence, Aquinas concludes that there must have been a "First Cause," distinct from the universe itself, that caused the universe to come into being.⁷

The First Cause Argument:

Avoiding Misunderstandings

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We must think carefully about this First Cause to avoid misunderstanding.

First, a person might be tempted to object, "What caused the First Cause?" But by definition a First Cause cannot have any other cause—otherwise it would not be the first! In thinking of the First Cause, we are trying to conceive the absolute, ultimate starting point of all existence.

Second, remember that we have only two options: (1) either there is a First Cause that brought all things into existence, or (2) the universe (or any other possible universes) either exists without a cause or caused itself to come into existence. The Christian insists that option (1) is more reasonable, since we have absolutely no empirical evidence that a thing can exist without a cause or that it can cause itself to come into being.

Third, if we accept that a First Cause caused the universe, it is clear that this First Cause must be a *transcendent* cause—something that is qualitatively and absolutely different from anything else in the universe. The First Cause cannot simply be the first cause in a chain of causes, like the first billiard ball striking a series of other balls and causing them to move. It must be a cause *outside of, transcending* the universe, because experience and observation tell us that nothing in the universe can cause itself.

Fourth, we must understand that this First Cause is necessary, not contingent (dependent on other causes). It is necessary that this First Cause simply exists on its own, without any other cause; otherwise no other contingent things could have come into existence. God is pure Being, the source of all other being.

Fifth, Aquinas's First Cause argument is not meant to prove other aspects of the Christian view of God. It does not prove that God is kind, loving, listens to prayer, or judges sin. It simply demonstrates that some kind of transcendent power must have brought the universe into existence. In terms of this proof, we are simply calling that first transcendent power by the name of *God*.

Continuing Presence of the First Cause in the Universe

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One final misconception should be avoided. The First Cause argument does not mean that God simply gave the universe the initial push and it has been rolling along on its own ever since. This view of God is sometimes expressed with the watchmaker analogy: God created and "wound up the watch" (the universe), but no longer interferes with its running. Such a conception is sometimes called the *Deist* view of God—a view of the divine closely associated with Enlightenment thinking.

But Aquinas's conception is completely different. For Aquinas, God is not the first in a series of causes. Since God is the First Being, God continues to be present in an intimate way to every existent thing, since God is the ultimate source of that thing's existence. "For the being of every creature depends on God, so that not for a moment could it subsist, but would fall into nothingness were it not kept in being by the operation of the Divine power" (*ST* 1.104.1). This conception of God's continuous upholding of the existence of the universe is sometimes called the *creatio continua*—the continuing creation.⁸

Of course, as we observe it now, all things in the universe are growing and changing through a myriad of natural causes: the laws of physics, natural processes of aging and decay, natural processes of birth and growth, and the natural law of evolution through natural selection. But from the perspective of the First Cause, all of these other causes can only rightfully be considered *secondary causes*. They did not cause themselves, and they only exist, and continue to exist, because they are continuously upheld by the First Cause. Brian J. Shanley notes that the "same God who transcends the created order is also intimately

and immanently present within that order as upholding all causes in their causing, including the human will."⁹

The belief in God as the First Cause holding all things in existence means that God is in a real sense the cause of all things, but at the same time, does not deny the reality of these secondary causes. Shanley explains that for Aquinas, "the differing metaphysical levels of primary and secondary causation require us to say that any created effect comes totally and immediately from God as the transcendent primary cause and totally and immediately from the creature as secondary cause."¹⁰ Thus the belief in God in no way contradicts a belief in scientifically observable laws of nature: God is in fact the ultimate foundation of those laws.

In philosophical terms, all reality in the universe—all things, all laws, all causes—are *contingent*. Their existence is not logically necessary; it is possible for them not to exist. Only the existence of the First Cause, God, is *necessary*, because without the transcendent First Cause, nothing else would exist.

Although our discussion about God as the First Cause has been rather abstract and philosophical, Thomist thinking insists that such reasoning actually puts us in touch with what is truly real. Far from being a vague, shadowy, unscientific opinion about reality, the First Cause is more real than any observable physical reality, because it is the necessary ground by which the existence of any physical or non-physical reality is possible.

Relevance of the First Cause Argument

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Many people today simply assume that an argument developed by a medieval theologian can carry no weight in the modern, scientific world. Such is certainly the view of biologist Richard Dawkins, who summarily rejects Aquinas's arguments as unconvincing. Let's briefly consider Dawkins's critique.

Dawkins sums up Aquinas's first three "ways," as follows: "All three of these arguments rely upon the idea of a regress and invoke God to terminate it. They make the entirely unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress."¹¹ In other words, asks Dawkins, why should this first cause itself not have a cause?

Dawkins fails to understand Aquinas's point—Aquinas is *not* claiming that God is simply the first in the series of causes (like the first billiard ball causing all the other billiard balls to move), and thus subject to the law of causation. Aquinas's point is that, logically, the

ultimate first cause of all existence must be transcendent—a necessary ultimate being standing completely outside the chain of causation.

Dawkins again misses the point when he argues that there is no reason to ascribe to this First Cause any of the attributes normally attributed to God—such as goodness or the ability to listen to prayers: Aquinas's argument *does not claim* to prove these other attributes.

How, then, would Dawkins explain the ultimate origin of all existence? He writes that "it is more parsimonious to conjure up, say, a 'big bang singularity,' or some other physical concept as yet unknown."¹² But this is simply to say that science currently cannot explain the absolute beginning to existence.

In the Christian view this is not surprising, since the absolute beginning of the universe must logically transcend it. Since science by its nature deals with questions of cause and effect within the physical universe, there is no reason to think that science could ever come up with a scientific explanation for a First Cause that, logically, must transcend the universe.

Our discussion of Aquinas's First Cause shows us that we moderns still can learn much from a medieval theologian. At the same time, it is obvious that Aquinas's medieval Christian worldview is a limitation. In general, Aquinas's thought cannot be expected to deal adequately with many modern developments—for example, scientific theories of evolution or modern developments in ethical and political thinking that have given us a greater appreciation of democracy and tolerance of differing worldviews.

To practice theology responsibly in the world today, then, the theologian must not only be willing to listen faithfully to the tradition but also to engage critical modern developments. This double task—listening to the past and engaging the present—lies at the heart of the modern theological approaches to which we now turn.

Contemporary Examples of Theological Method 344

Responding to the Critics: Three Options 341

The modern world, according to the American Catholic theologian Avery Dulles, is characterized by the rise of a critical worldview, and different contemporary¹³ approaches to theology can be characterized by how they react to this critical worldview.¹⁴

By "critical worldview" Dulles refers to the thought of philosophers such as Descartes and his theory of "methodological doubt" as well as Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume and Voltaire who directly attacked the authority of traditional Christian beliefs (see sec. 2.2.1). The rejection of religious authority continued with critics such as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. All of these thinkers share the critical assumption that "nothing is sacred" and all authority can be questioned, including the authority of the Bible and of the Church.

How can the modern theologian respond to these radical challenges?

One option is that of fideism: believers refuse to answer critical questions and instead retreat into their own world of faith (see sec. 2.7). Fideists tend to respond to critical questions with, "I can't explain it, but I know in my heart that it's true." Some historical traditions, such as nineteenth-century Lutheran pietism, chose this option.

Dulles contrasts the fideist approach with what he calls "countercritical theology." In this approach, the theologian tries to answer the critic with rational arguments alone. A countercritical theologian is convinced, for example, that he can prove that the Gospel stories about Jesus' life are completely accurate, or that Jesus' miracles, confirmed by many witnesses, prove that Jesus was divine. Dulles notes that Catholic neoscholastic theology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended toward such rationalistic views.

For Dulles the fideistic option does not trust reason enough, while the "countercritical" approach trusts reason *too* much—or, rather, trusts a rationalistic understanding of reason too much (see secs. 2.2.1 and 2.5.1).

Dulles identifies the Catholic approach as a "postcritical theology." It does not ignore the critical challenges, as fideism does, but at the same time it does not pretend that it can "prove" the truth of the Christian faith in the same way as one does a geometric proof. It accepts the broader definitions of faith and reason that we outlined in chapter 2.

Aspects of a Postcritical Theology 342

Critical Theories of Knowledge 342

Fideists "know" things in their hearts; rationalists "know" things through logical proof. Postcritical theologians cut through both models to ask basic philosophical questions: How do we know anything at all? When we think that we understand something, how do we know that our understanding is correct?

Philosophers have been asking such basic questions for centuries, and specific branches of philosophy have developed to focus on them. Epistemology addresses basic questions of how we know things at all, and **hermeneutics** studies the question of how we know whether our understanding or interpretations are correct.

These two fields of study are often abstract and difficult, but essential for postcritical theologians thinking about their faith tradition. These theologians must be able to show that the Christian worldview can respond to modern critical challenges in a responsible way.

We have already started to consider these necessary critical theories of knowledge and understanding in our earlier discussion. We saw that reasonable knowledge is not always based on pure logic: it is actually more often based on authority, tradition, probability, and personal experiences that cannot be expressed in precise rules (sec. 2.5.1). We saw that all thinking, especially in fields such as art, history, and philosophy, can only be done within a particular tradition (see secs. 1.1.1 and 2.5.1.2). With this type of reflection, the postcritical theologian begins to show that Christian thought can still play a legitimate role in reasonable discussions about human knowledge, understanding, and truth, even in the modern, critical age.

A Hermeneutic of Trust

3422

Dulles accepts that purely objective or “neutral” thinking about God and religious questions is impossible. Rather, all thinking must begin from fundamental presuppositions about the nature of God, life and death, and reality that are taken from a particular religious or philosophical tradition. We saw that Jane’s thinking about God and the meaning of her friend’s death were profoundly influenced by Christian beliefs, even though Jane herself was not an “active” Christian.

For Dulles, then, Christian theologians should begin by clearly acknowledging their commitment to the Christian faith tradition and not by pretending that they can take a completely objective position. This choice does not imply that their thinking is simply an act of blind faith, but rather a recognition that *all* thinking must begin within a tradition. “Recognizing that every affirmation rests upon some kind of faith, postcritical theology frankly relies on convictions born of the Christian faith.”¹⁵

The theologian thus begins with a “hermeneutic of trust” in the reliability and validity of the faith tradition.¹⁶ The traditional beliefs

cannot be proven to be true beforehand, but they are accepted on the basis of trust in the authority of the tradition. This does not mean that no questions, uncertainties, doubts, or even criticisms of the tradition will arise on specific points, but simply that one’s fundamental orientation is to trust the tradition.

For a Christian theologian, this basic trust includes a basic trust in specific Church authorities (see secs. 2.5.1.1–2). “[Catholic] Theology itself demands a basic confidence in the Church and its official leadership as the transmitters of the heritage of faith.”¹⁷

We can contrast the theologian’s beginning point with a “hermeneutic of suspicion”—an intellectual starting point associated with the fundamentally antireligious attitudes of thinkers such as Marx and Freud (see sec. 1.8), whose primary orientation toward the religious traditions was one of a profound distrust. Marx and Freud were convinced that religious beliefs and actions were simply a mask for true, hidden motivations—the worker’s sense of alienation due to economic oppression in Marxist philosophy, and the childlike desire for parental security in Freud’s thought.

Lived Experience of the Tradition

3423

The Christian theologian comes to a deeper understanding of the articles of faith not simply through intellectual study or purely rational understanding but also by participating in Christian worship and by attempting to live out Christian ethical principles in daily life.

This point ties in with our earlier discussion about the many ways people gain knowledge beyond strict logic (see secs. 2.5.1.3–5). As Newman wrote, “Man is *not* a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal” (see sec. 2.6.9). It is only through the commitment of the whole person, engaging both reason and the more emotional, imaginative, and affective aspects of the person, that more profound depths of understanding can be reached. It is only through an active participation in the Christian community, the Church, that the theologian can develop the tacit knowledge and skill (Newman’s “illative sense”) that is necessary for making valid theological judgments.

Consider a quick example. A Catholic theologian may understand, at the intellectual level, the belief in the Real Presence: that Christ is truly present (not just present symbolically) in the Lord’s Supper. But the theologian’s writing on that topic will be much fuller,

more understandable, more convincing, if he or she has personally experienced the truth of that theological teaching through personal participation in the Lord's Supper over the years.

Scriptural Hermeneutics

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Aquinas articulated the traditional Catholic understanding that Scripture is the foundational authority (ST 1.1.8 ad. 2). Accepting the tradition, then, is in large part an acceptance of Scripture.

But this raises a problem for the postcritical theologian: since the time of the Enlightenment, Scripture itself has been subjected to critical scrutiny. Who are the authors of the books? Were mistakes made as books were copied and passed down over the years? How can books that were written thousands of years ago in a very different time and culture still be relevant for Christian belief today?

A central task for the postcritical theologian, then, is to work out a valid scriptural hermeneutics—guidelines that, having fully taken into consideration the critical challenges to Scripture, could still help the reader to come to a valid and responsible understanding.

The Hermeneutical Circle

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A fundamental concept in modern hermeneutical theory is that of the "hermeneutical circle." Let us see how this theory can help us to understand what is happening when a modern person reads a traditional text such as Scripture.

The theory begins with the insight that no reader can read a traditional text in a completely objective manner. Even before beginning to read, the reader brings certain prejudices (in the sense of "prejudgments") or preconceived ideas to the reading.

Let's apply the theory to a reading of the first three chapters of the scriptural Book of Genesis as an example. Here we find the story of God's creation of the universe, including humans, and of humanity's first sin.

If the reader is from a predominantly Christian culture, he will have many prejudices from the Christian tradition itself. Even if reading Genesis for the first time, the reader's understandings about God, creation, sin, good, and evil will have been profoundly shaped by the scriptural tradition. A Muslim reader's understanding of the biblical story, in contrast, will be shaped by the way in which Adam is

portrayed in the Qur'an. A reader from a non-Western tradition will also bring certain prejudices about the beginnings of the universe to a reading of Genesis. These prejudices will affect what the reader notices in the text and how it is interpreted.

Many other traditions will influence readers. A reader influenced by a rationalist worldview may find it impossible to accept the literal truth of any supernatural event described in Genesis. Because of the influence of the materialist tradition, another reader may find it difficult to accept or even fully understand biblical concepts such as creation or the belief that humans are formed in God's image. A person influenced by a tradition in which the Bible is read literally may have difficulty in understanding more symbolic or metaphorical levels of meaning.

The first step, then, for a valid interpretation of Genesis, is for readers to become intentionally aware of their own prejudices. This does not mean that they will reject these prejudices, only that they become aware of them and realize that they strongly influence their understanding of the text.

Engaging the Scriptural Horizon

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In the second movement of the hermeneutical circle, readers actively engage their own horizon (view of the world, prejudices) with the horizon of the text. The biblical text presents a definite worldview: all of creation was made directly by God and is good; humans were made in "God's image" and rule over the rest of creation; humans were tempted to disobey God and so lost their original innocence and happiness.

Gadamer's hermeneutical theory (sec. 1.11) shows us that readers can never understand a text directly. Rather, understanding takes place only in the *erosion* between two horizons, when the horizon of the reader meets the horizon of the text.

First, readers must be open to considering the scriptural worldview. It is unlikely that militant atheists would be open to considering the worldview of Genesis: if they read these chapters, they would most likely adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion, perhaps attempting to prove that the account was scientifically inaccurate or ethically questionable.

But if readers are open to considering the scriptural worldview, then a "merger of the horizons"—understanding—may take place. Readers with a rationalist worldview may perhaps become more open to a broader interpretation of symbolic meaning. Readers with a

materialist worldview may be open to expanding their own understanding of reality to include spiritual realities. Muslims may merge some of their tradition's understandings of Adam with those of Genesis.

If readers encounter the traditional text more than once, the process of understanding will be ongoing. Readers first encounter Scripture with certain rationalistic, materialistic, or deterministic prejudices. If they are open to a meeting of the horizons, they will come away from their reading with their prejudices slightly changed. This new influence of the biblical worldview will in turn modify their own view of the world and cause them to see and experience events in their daily life in a different way. These new experiences and perspectives on daily life will in turn influence their reading when they return to the biblical text. The hermeneutical circle is an ongoing process.

Paul Ricoeur

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The philosopher Paul Ricoeur raises a critical question with regard to the hermeneutical circle and the interpretation of Scripture: How can modern readers truly engage the biblical worldview when it is so foreign to their own way of thinking and perceiving?

Let's say that Roger has been reading accounts in the daily news of suicide bombings, school shootings, and corrupt politicians. He begins to wonder why there seems to be so much evil in the world. In an attempt to find answers, Roger turns to reading the Bible, because he knows that it is a major source for the teachings of the Christian tradition. A friend advises him to read the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, since this provides the Christian explanation of how evil came into the world.

Roger does so, but he is disappointed. Rather than shedding light on the problem of suffering, it seems to add to his confusion. How is he supposed to believe a story in which a snake talks and a woman is formed out of a man's rib? It seems to have nothing to do with his concerns.

In Ricoeur's view, this example illustrates the fact that modern readers can no longer directly encounter a biblical text such as that found in Genesis 1–3 simply because the worldviews of the biblical text and modern people are literally "worlds apart." The biblical worldview is prescientific and symbolic; modern readers are shaped by a fundamentally scientific and literal understanding of reality. For

Ricoeur, a meaningful encounter between reader and traditional text is still possible, but it can only come *indirectly*: the reader must first go through a conscious process of interpretation.

The first stage involves the use of critical reason, since modern readers do not accept certain elements of the story that are based on pre-scientific understandings of reality. For Ricoeur, this includes the story's reference to snakes crawling on their bellies due to God's curse (Gen 3:14): this should be recognized as a prescientific explanation for why snakes crawl and is considered irrelevant for modern readers.

Next, modern readers develop a critical awareness of the type of language that the story employs. It is not a historical, literal account; rather, it is the language of mythic and symbolic foundational stories through which all ancient societies expressed their encounters with the divine.

Once readers have passed through this critical phase they are in a much better position to understand the full meaning of the symbolic language. Adam and Eve are not meant to be understood as literal, historical figures; rather their lives symbolize the experiences of all humans. The exile from the Garden of Eden again is not a literal historical event: it is one of the biblical symbols used to express the human experience of sin.

Modern readers can now reflect rationally on what Genesis tells them about the divine relationship with the human and about the reality of human sin that separates people from God, the ultimate source of meaning in their lives. Far from rejecting the story because it is written in an ancient, symbolic language, modern readers will instead recognize its symbolic nature and reflect on the light it sheds on the human condition. As Ricoeur says, "the symbol gives rise to thought."

For Ricoeur, then, modern readers must engage the biblical tradition through the hermeneutical circle. Ricoeur formulates the circle thus: "We must understand in order to believe, but we must believe in order to understand."¹⁸ "Understand in order to believe": for modern Christian believers the traditional text can only be accepted after passing through the critical questions raised by modern thought. But Christians are drawn to the text in the first place because of the traditional belief in its meaningfulness and power.

The process is not essentially different for non-Christians. They too will need to "understand in order to believe": they too will need to ask critical questions before considering the truths within the text.

Since they are not part of the Tradition, the biblical text cannot have the same meaning for non-Christians. But if they are open to bringing their own worldview into an encounter with the biblical horizon, then they too may experience a deepened understanding of the human encounter with the divine.

Loneragan's Method

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Like Dulles and Ricoeur, Bernard Lonergan understands the relationship between critical reason and faith as central to the practice of theology in the modern world.

Loneragan identifies two central tasks for the Christian theologian: (1) to listen to the "word," that is, the Christian tradition, and (2) to communicate the "word," that is, to communicate the Christian tradition to others in an understandable manner. Lonergan's method is thus an attempt to help the theologian (1) to "hear," understand, and appropriate the Tradition in a way that is responsible and aware of modern critical questions, and (2) to communicate the "word" in a way that is also reasonable, responsible, and aware of the critical challenges of our times.

Theologizing in Changing Cultural Settings 361

Loneragan writes that a theology "mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of religion in that matrix."¹⁹ Theology helps to communicate religious insights to particular cultures in a clear and systematic way, or to show how religious insights may relate to scientific or other branches of nonreligious knowledge within a particular culture.

But the modern concept of culture has changed, and thus too the task of theology. In a precritical, "classical" understanding of culture, one would think of a classic culture (for example, ancient Greece or the Middle Ages) as a stable and permanent achievement, and thus theological works could also be stable and permanent (for example, Aquinas's *Summa Theological*). But an "empirical" view of culture appreciates its more fluid foundations and thus sees theology itself as more open to development and change as it communicates a tradition to changing cultures.²⁰

We have seen how influential a particular tradition is on a person's understanding of the world. From a sociological point of view, we can relate this point to what is called the "sociology of knowledge"—the

tendency of each society to reinforce certain ways of thinking that the society defines as "normal" and punish ways of thinking that deviate from that norm. Thus, in the ancient world, people were socialized to accept slavery as a natural and inevitable institution, but in modern democracies, the belief that all people are naturally equal in their basic human rights is reinforced.

In our modern, pluralistic world, we have a much livelier sense of how cultures change and develop over time. So Aquinas's *Summa*, great as it is, cannot be a permanent achievement. We no longer live in the medieval world. The language, style, vocabulary, and even thought patterns of the *Summa* must be updated and adjusted to make sense in a changed culture.

Since theology cannot rely on an unchanging cultural paradigm, Lonergan argues that theological method must be based on something that is unchanging: the way in which the human mind works. And so, in common with other postcritical theologians, Lonergan's approach is based on a critical study of how humans know and understand (see sec. 3.4.2.1).²¹

Theology as a Collaborative Effort 362

Loneragan argues that theology must be a collaboration among many different specialists working in different fields. In universities or seminaries, for example, theology was commonly divided into scriptural studies (with further specializations in Old or New Testament), historical theology (with special focus on patristic theology, medieval theology, and Reformation theology), systematic theology (the study of basic Christian beliefs from a more philosophical perspective), and moral theology.

For Lonergan, however, the more important divisions of theology are those that he calls "functional specialties": the different tasks that are necessary to do theology in a methodical way. While the tasks can be divided conceptually, they need to be closely related to one another in actual practice. Each specialty is closely related to one of the basic functions of the human mind: experience, understanding, judging, and deciding.

The first four functional specialties are related to "hearing the word"—the systematic ways in which modern theologians study the Christian tradition—and the second four to "communicating the tradition."

Functional Specialties Hearing the Tradition

3.6.2.1

1. **Research.** Here the theologian gathers basic information by, for example, researching in a library or doing excavations at an archaeological site. Thus a historical theologian might study the life and times of Martin Luther, while a scriptural scholar might participate in an excavation in Galilee, the native province of Jesus.
2. **Interpretation.** In this specialty, the theologian gains a full awareness of the modern critical challenges to faith and learns how these challenges can be responsibly met through developing proper epistemological and hermeneutical theories (we have discussed some of these theories in secs 3.4–5 and more generally in chapter 2).
Thus the theologian rejects both rationalism (the claim that we know reality directly) and idealism (the claim that we know only our own ideas, and not actual reality itself) and adopts a third position of “critical realism”: we can know reality, but only through a critical analysis of our own ways of knowing, including an honest look at our own pre-judgments.
Developing a responsible hermeneutical approach is essential for theologians as they interpret
3. **History.** Within this specialty, theologians focus on particularly relevant periods in Christian history (e.g., the first centuries of Christianity, the Reformation), or on a particularly important historical figure (e.g., Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin). Again the specialist working in this area will need a critical awareness of the impossibility of writing a completely scientific and objective history, while at the same time insisting that valid historical truth is still attainable for historians who are critically aware of their own cultural biases and prejudices.
The theologian must understand the need to interpret historical events and historical statements within their own historical context, with a critical awareness of how particular social or cultural forces influenced the theology of a particular time. We will see in chapter

*continued**continued*

- 11 how some recent scholars have applied this historical approach to gain a better understanding of Jesus within his historical context.
4. **Dialectic.** This specialty focuses on decisive conflicts within the Christian theological tradition. So, for example, the dialectic theologian might study the issues involved in the conflict between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant movements of the Reformation, or the differences that led to the formal split of Eastern and Western Christianity in 1054. The aim is to gain deeper insight into the reasons underlying these conflicts. In studying the Catholic-Protestant debate on the relationship between Scripture and tradition, for example, the theologian would try to get beyond the emotional and polemical aspects of the debate, and focus on clarifying the real theological issues and alternatives.
Recent ecumenical dialogues between Catholics and non-Catholics (see secs 12.23, 12.25, and 12.27) are a good example of how this dialectical function can be carried out.

Communicating the Tradition

1. **Foundations.** In this specialty, the theologian attempts to describe and understand the experience of conversion: the movement from a horizon closed to the transcendent to a Christian view of the world. It does not discuss specific Christian beliefs, but presents the overall worldview within which these teachings make sense.
2. **Doctrines.** This specialty focuses on Christian teachings directly. For example, the teaching that God became human in Jesus, or that God is a Trinity. One particular consideration is to discern the extent to which Christian belief or practice developed over time. For example, the classic belief in God as a Trinity (three persons in one divine nature) is not found as such in the earliest Christian writings, including the New Testament: it is clear that this was a later theological development of the original Christian beliefs concerning the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrinal theologian studies how the development took place and to what extent these ideas are legitimate and consistent developments of earlier beliefs (see sec 6.14).

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A second consideration is how the exact language of a Christian teaching might change (for example, in a different cultural setting) while retaining the same essential meaning. Thus a doctrinal theologian might consider whether the word *persons* in the phrase “God is three persons in one divine nature” still has the same sense in modern times as it did when it was first developed in early Christian debates about the precise relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit (see sec. 6.18).

3. **Systematics.** This specialty involves a critical study of Christian doctrines, considering to what extent they are consistent with themselves and consistent with one another. In showing how they relate to one another, a deeper understanding of the doctrines is gained. The role of philosophy is

central in developing a systematic theology. Aquinas, for example, used Aristotelian categories to express many of the relationships in his systematic theology. Pope John Paul II raised the question of whether the natural sciences could play this same role in modern theology, providing a precise language with which to express some theological insights into the relationship between nature, humans, and God.²²

4. **Communications.** This specialty seeks to understand the general questions of how theological beliefs can best be communicated in the modern world. A particular area within this specialty is pastoral theology, a discipline concerned with methods of communicating theological teaching to average church members who have no special theological training. ●

Modern Theology: Faith Responding to Critical Challenges

3.7

For Dulles, Ricoeur, and Lonergan, a major task of modern theology is to demonstrate that theology is capable of making an intelligent and reasonable response to the challenges of the modern age.

These thinkers realize that theologians today cannot simply repeat past conclusions. Even if the meaning of theological truths is

unchanging, the way in which these truths are studied, appropriated, expressed, and communicated must change in order to meet modern critical challenges.

Questions about the Text

1. What does it mean to say that Aquinas's theology involves a “philosophy of being”?
2. What are some examples of metaphysical questions? How are they different from questions in the natural sciences?
3. How does Aquinas understand the relationship between faith and reason?
4. Summarize Aquinas's method of discussing questions in the *Summa*.
5. What do Aquinas's “five ways” of proving God's existence have in common?
6. Logically, why must the universe have a First Cause, and why would this Cause need to transcend the universe?
7. In Aquinas's thought, what is the relationship between God as the First Cause and the laws of nature as causes?
8. In what three ways do modern theologies respond to the critical challenges of the Enlightenment, according to Dulles?
9. Explain how a Catholic approach to theology is located between a fideistic and a countercritical approach.
10. What is the difference between starting theological study with a “hermeneutic of trust” or with a “hermeneutic of suspicion”?
11. What is meant by the “hermeneutical circle” in the interpretation of Scripture?
12. What are Lonergan's “functional specialties”? Why do you think he chose these particular eight specialties?
13. What is meant by “critical realism”?
14. In what ways does Lonergan's approach to theology differ from Aquinas's?