THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

A HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER

1

Introduction

Sociologist Peter Berger once famously remarked that if India is the world's most religious country and Sweden the least, then the United States is a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes. This is to say that the American population is very religious, but its cultural and political leaders are not. While Berger's proclamation is pithy, it is not very accurate. For one thing, many American political leaders have been quite religious. Modern presidents such as Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have all been practicing Christians. Ronald Reagan regularly spiced up his speeches with religious rhetoric and even proclaimed 1983 the "Year of the Bible." In addition, the American citizenry, while broadly claiming to be religious, is in fact rather ignorant about religion. Just over 70 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christians, but few of them know even the basics of the Bible, Christian history, or even what their specific church teaches. In his book *Religious Literacy*, Steven Prothero points out that only half of American adults can name even one of the Gospels, fewer can name the first book of the Bible, only a quarter know that the Acts of the Apostles is in the New Testament, and, humorously, 10 percent believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife.[1] Ironically, the vast majority of these Christians also believe that the Bible is the word of God.

Upon completing an in-depth study of religious beliefs among adolescents in 2005, sociologist Christian Smith concluded that most American youth and their parents know so little about the specifics of their religion, Christian or otherwise, that they embrace a broad generic worldview he has labeled "moralistic, therapeutic deism." On this view, there is a God who wants people to be good and fair, the goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself, God is not much involved in our lives except perhaps when needed to solve a problem, and nice, good-hearted people go to heaven when they die.

One of the reasons for religious illiteracy is that religion has been virtually eliminated from public schools and common discourse. In order to respect the separation of church and state and to avoid controversial religious themes, high school textbooks avoid religion altogether. As Prothero writes, "these world history texts may actually skip altogether the life of Jesus, the Protestant Reformation, and even the Holocaust—all on the theory that religion is too hot to handle in the public schools. The result, according to a report released by the Association for Supervision

and Curriculum Development, is 'massive ignorance of any faith besides one's own (and sometimes even one's own).'"[2] How many students are taught that the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century cemented American colonists' national imagination as a prelude to the Revolutionary War? How many realize that the American abolitionist, suffragist, and prohibitionist movements were all religiously inspired?

Another reason for religious illiteracy in the United States is that religious traditions in contemporary American society often ask very little from their adherents. Consider, for instance, the massive demands in money, energy, and time made on U.S. youth by schools and extracurricular activities such as sports and compare these demands to those made by religious institutions—the latter are far fewer, if they exist at all.

Nevertheless, knowing about religion and its impact on history and culture is arguably critically important. Without understanding religion, we cannot understand culture or history. Western civilization has been formed in large part by religion, particularly Christianity. Without knowledge of the Bible and Christian history, much of the Western world, including its music, art, literature, and values, is unintelligible. So, even for atheists and agnostics, knowledge about religion is crucial for understanding society and the world.

It can also be argued that religion has intrinsic value. Sociologist Mircea Eliade describes human nature as *homo religiosus*, that is, our very nature is to be religious. According to Eliade and others, humans share a transcendental mental structure that is essentially religious. We seek answers to fundamental questions about what grounds our very being. Who are we at the core? What counts as a meaningful life? What grounds morality? Where did the world come from, and why does it exist? What determines the destiny of human beings? These are all ultimately religious questions.

Religion responds by communicating an all-embracing horizon of meaning. It guarantees supreme values and highest ideals, and it gives its adherents a sense of home, trust, strength, and hope. Religion also tends to create the kinds of people that are good for society in various ways. Robert Putnam and David Campbell, in *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*,[3] found a high correlation between religious observance and what they call "good neighborliness." Religiously observant Americans, they reported, donate more money, volunteer more, and are more civically engaged. It is less the specific religion that matters, and more the depth of engagement that makes all the difference. However, even as religious people in general tend to be particularly good citizens, religions and their adherents can also be divisive. A problem with adhering to such an all-embracing horizon of meaning with such surety is that those outside one's religion can be dismissed or even attacked. Thus, religion can also operate as a source of social and political conflict. And, of course, adherents to a given religion can act divisively within their own ranks. Given this, it seems all the more imperative to be well educated about religions and their dynamics.

INTRODUCING CHRISTIANITY

Thus far we have been discussing religion as a whole. This book, however, is about Christianity, a crucially important religion to understand, particularly for Westerners. Not only has Christianity shaped much of what has grounded Western culture for well over 1,000 years, but it is the largest world religion today, boasting about 2.2 billion adherents. Christianity is the dominant religion in Western Europe, as well as in Russia, central and eastern Europe, and Latin America, and it is burgeoning in Africa too. Consider this fact: In 1900, there were 7 million Christians in Africa. Today, there are over 400 million. Christianity is a force to be reckoned with.

This book will examine the history and theological development of Christianity. In some ways, it takes the posture of an outsider. It will look at the tradition from the perspective of social science, particularly using historical and

phenomenological analyses. It is assuredly not a book that assumes the reader is religious. The facts are what the facts are, and this book will attempt to interpret them fairly and in ways that represent the best scholarship. It is meant to inform religious and nonreligious believers alike and will pass the test of secular scholarship. In another sense, however, it is indeed an insider's book in that it will also seek to examine Christianity as Christianity understands itself, that is, from its own religious intuitions and sensibility.

To appreciate the insider/outsider approach, we might imagine two architects describing a house, the second of whom happens to live in it. Both have the ability to accurately describe the structure, foundation, materials, and so on. The one who inhabits the house, however, has an additional resource. He knows how it *feels* to live there. He experiences the sunrise through the window, feels the warmth of the fireplace when it is ablaze, and hears the house creak in the wind. He knows the house on an intimate, visceral level. On the other hand, he may have become so used to living there that he no longer recognizes the basement's moldy smell or the incongruity between the landscape and the home's design. Here the outsider might see problems that escape the insider's notice. Both play essential roles in fully describing the home. In the same way, this book attempts to adopt both an insider and outsider approach. It takes advantage of the experience of a lived religious faith as articulated by that faith while simultaneously drawing on secular scholarship that may offer fresh and illuminating interpretations.

In *Religion in the Making*, Alfred North Whitehead observes that "Christianity . . . has always been a religion seeking a metaphysic, in contrast to Buddhism which is a metaphysic generating a religion."[4] This is a fascinating insight. The Buddha purported to discover the nature of the universe, its causes and conditions (metaphysics), and then created a religious movement around these teachings. Christianity, however, formed as a community of believers in Jesus of Nazareth, through whom they experienced God's salvation. The development of theological and philosophical doctrines about him, his relationship to God, and, indeed, the very nature of God as the Trinity came centuries later.

Christianity claims that adherents encounter the saving presence of God in Jesus Christ. For Christians, he is the revelation of God. The Catholic Church reflects Whitehead's insight in a document on revelation that conveys a perspective broadly shared by Christian Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical academics. The first chapter on divine revelation begins thus:

> It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will. His will was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature. . . . The most intimate truth which this revelation gives us about God and the salvation of man shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation. . . . Hence, Jesus speaks the words of God, and accomplishes the saving work which the Father gave him to do. As a result he himself—to see whom is to see the Father—completed and perfected Revelation and confirmed it with divine guarantees (*Dei Verbum*, nos. 2–4).[5]

One sees in this teaching that for Christians Jesus is central to both salvation and revelation. In this tradition revelation focuses not on doctrines to believe, but on a figure to believe in and know. Christianity formed a religion around Jesus.

CHRISTIAN SOURCES: THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL

In studying the works of John Wesley, the eighteenth-century founder of the Methodist movement, Albert Outler, a twentieth-century Methodist theologian, discovered four interrelated dynamics or sources in Wesley's theology. Officially formulated in 1968 by the United Methodist Church, these four concepts are known collectively as the **Wesleyan Quadrilateral**, a framework that the Anglican Church also

formally embraces as the "Four Pillars." The Quadrilateral looks to the creative interplay of (1) reason, (2) experience, (3) tradition, and (4) scripture to make sense of the faith. While Roman Catholics might say that authority comes from scripture, tradition, and the magisterium (the teaching authority of bishops), and many Evangelicals might say that authority comes from scripture alone, an analysis of Christian theology and practice consistently reveals Wesley's Quadrilateral. Let us consider each of these four elements in turn.

First, most Christians believe that faith ought to be reasonable. Christianity views its doctrines as intellectually compelling, and theology about doctrine is sometimes called *systematic theology*, as it attempts to make coherent the collective body of Christian beliefs. Second, Christian faith is decidedly grounded in lived experience. Christianity, like all religions, is shaped by every culture it encounters. This ongoing molding of the tradition is not problematic, since faith is made relevant in part through its lived experience within a particular culture. Today, that lived experience also incorporates the insights of the social sciences. Third, tradition involves the religious continuity of the faith lived out by adherents as well as of the authoritative voices held up by Christians. In the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican churches, these authoritative voices are represented by bishops, who are understood to assume the ongoing role of the apostles. In the Lutheran Church, doctrinal authority is conveyed through representatives who participate in regular Lutheran Conventions. In the Southern Baptist Church, representatives meet yearly to formally articulate doctrine and policies for the Southern Baptist Convention. Fourth, most Christians give the Bible a pride of place in their faith (Wesley assuredly did). Christians broadly refer to the Bible as the "word of God." Here we find the source of the early understanding of God as working throughout the histories of ancient Judaism and the early Jesus movement.

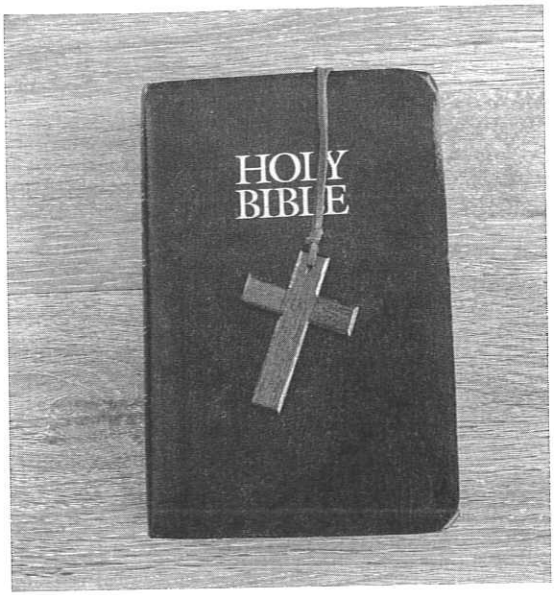

FIGURE 1-1 The Bible is one of the most, if not the most, authoritative sources for Christians.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the Bible and various ways to understand its nature and authority. The Bible is the text beyond any other text that grounds the Christian story and on which Christians rely for self-understanding. The following sections will also help ground us for the next three chapters.

THE BIBLE AS AUTHORITY

Virtually all Christians locate a great deal of authority in the Bible. It represents the written—and thus consistent and unalterable—expression of the original experiences of God's saving presence in the ancient Jewish (Old Testament) and early church (New Testament) contexts. For this reason it is Christianity's core reference text. What does it mean to say that the Bible has authority? The Bible did not come out of thin air, nor was it discovered on some bishop's desk. It is a collection that was many years in the making. Many Christian texts disseminated in the early church declared themselves to be letters or gospels by apostles, but over time the larger church

ultimately rejected most of these, determining which texts were representative of the authentic faith and which were not. This means that early Christian leaders were grounded first and foremost in a tradition. Why choose the Gospel of Matthew but not the Gospel of Philip? Or the Gospel of John but not the Gospel of Thomas? The short answer is that church leaders did not recognize the latter as representing authentic tradition, but saw the former as doing so. There are intrinsic connections between scripture and tradition, between texts and the remembered witness of the apostles, the ongoing experience of the church, the church's prayer, and its growing theological commitments. There is also a relationship between church leaders and the tradition. Bishops created canonical lists of approved texts by judging which texts reflected the authentic tradition as they understood it.

The Bible is authoritative, but what does this mean? The word "authority" comes from the Latin *auctoritas*, which means "origination" or "source." It is related to *auctorare*, meaning "to bind." Thus, to say that the Bible is *a* or *the* source of authority for Christians suggests that it is a source book that has binding power over believers. One of the few places that the Bible speaks of itself is found in Second Timothy, referencing the Old Testament: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (3:16). This is a strong statement, although it doesn't claim that scripture is "dictated" by God or that there are no other important authoritative resources.

Authority has a domain. Regarding any authority, we must ask: Over what sphere is this person or text authoritative? With respect to the Bible, over what domain or domains does the Bible have authority? Certainly not over scientific matters, as the authors did not have access to modern scientific insights. But does the relevant sphere encompass only doctrinal matters, or could the Bible be brought to bear on contemporary social policy? Does the text reveal authoritative *data* about religious matters, or does it provide authoritative *ways to think* about religious issues? Do some parts of the Bible perform one or the other of these functions better than other parts? How can the Bible deal with issues unrelated to the time, place, or cultural assumptions in which it is grounded? The Bible's authority is intimately wedded to issues of interpretation.

APPROACHES TO THE BIBLE

Secular scholars who study Christianity along with other religions recognize that the Bible plays an essential role in Christian self-understanding, but they do not see the text as divinely and uniquely inspired. Alongside the Bible's relationship to Christianity, they may assess other religious texts' relationships to their respective traditions, be they the Vedas for Hinduism, the Qu'ran for Islam, or the Sutras for Buddhism. They may regard some parts of these texts as inspiring, interesting, fascinating, or even spiritually wise, but they do not embrace a particular religion's canon as decisively different from other religions' canons, and they do not discuss whether these texts reveal something true about God. Call this the secular approach to the Bible. The secular approach simply cannot represent Christianity as it sees itself.

Another approach to the Bible adopts what is called a **biblicist** point of view. Biblicists believe that the Bible was essentially dictated by God, a perspective sometimes referred to as the *golden typewriter theory*. In *The Bible Made Impossible*, Christian Smith argues that biblicists embrace most or all of the following claims:

1. **Divine writing.** The Bible contains God's very speech and is thus inerrant.
2. **Total representation.** The Bible represents the totality of God's communication to humanity.
3. **Complete coverage.** The Bible conveys the totality of God's will in all issues related to Christianity.

4. **Easily intelligible.** Reasonable people can understand what the Bible teaches.
5. **Common sense.** The Bible is best read in the most obvious, literal sense.
6. ***Sola scriptura.*** The Bible is the only trustworthy religious authority.
7. **Internal harmony.** The Bible is internally consistent.
8. **Universal applicability.** Whatever the biblical authors wrote is valid for all places and eras.
9. **Inductively clear.** All belief and practice can be discerned from clear biblical truths.
10. **Handbook model.** The Bible is a manual for everything, including science, economics, health, politics, and so on.

Smith argues persuasively that biblicism cannot work because it ignores the pervasive interpretive pluralism in Christianity, even among biblicists themselves. These differences of opinion encompass such crucial matters as the nature of atonement, the meaning of baptism, views of hell, the nature of law, divorce and remarriage, salvation for non-Christians, gender roles, the Rapture, free will, predestination, revelation, eternal security—the list could go on and on. Smith also shows that some biblical texts are simply incompatible with others and thus require biblicists to make arbitrary determinations about which texts should be emphasized and which ignored, which texts are merely culturally relative and thus can be set aside and which are universal claims for all time. Nor can biblicism account for odd passages. If everything in the Bible came from God's mind, what ought one to make of Paul claiming that "Cretans are always liars" (Titus 1:12) or the statement in Psalms that "happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock" (Ps. 137:9)?

Because biblicism imagines that there are no problems in the Bible, it provides a kind of intellectual pass from addressing hard questions about one's method of interpretation. Few scholars are bona fide biblicists, even including Evangelical scholars, though some of their formal positions sound like biblicism. Renowned Evangelical biblical scholar Kenton Sparks, for example, writes, "The Bible does not offer a single, well-integrated univocal theology; it offers instead numerous overlapping, but nonetheless distinctive theologies. . . . The literary, historical, ethical, and theological diversity in Scripture . . . scholars have documented a thousand times over."[6]

The greatest concern about biblicism in scholarship, however, is that many regard it as philosophically naïve. God, as absolute spirit, transcends human concepts. To reduce God to human categories diminishes God to a creature, albeit a big one, one who thinks and talks like human beings. Moreover, ascribing human language to God fails to appreciate how human language works. Human words are both inherently limited and relevant principally to the cultural milieu in which they are used. This doesn't mean, of course, that one cannot gain insight from discourse from another place or time. But it does mean that any articulation must suffer from the limitations of human language. A text may be relevant to another place or time, but bringing out its relevance requires an interpretive lens that is necessarily provisional and fallible.

Consider the following texts, each of which is widely ignored or rejected by the vast majority of Christians, biblicists or not: Paul proclaims that a man with long hair or praying with his head covered is a disgrace, while women may *only* pray with their heads covered (1 Cor. 11:1–5, 11); Jesus promises that believers can drink poison without harm (Mark 16:17–18); Paul forbids women from speaking in church (1 Cor. 14:34–35); Paul forbids Christian women from braiding their hair or wearing jewelry (1 Tim. 2:9); Paul proclaims that women will be saved through childbearing (1 Tim. 2:15); Paul instructs all unmarried men against looking for wives (1 Cor. 7:27).

If one way to approach the Bible is through a secular lens, in which the Bible is simply not the word of God, and another way is through a literalist lens, in which the Bible is close to the

actual speech of God, a third way is through a faithful and critical analysis of the text and its relationship to tradition. This is not a middle way between the other two perspectives. Rather, it imagines the Bible as containing various expressions of authentic encounters with God given the context and limitations of the biblical authors. In this approach the Bible is still understood as the word of God and as revelation that conveys a saving faith, but this revelation is seen as contextual, complex, and reflective of the limitations of the human authors as well as their specific historical location. What makes this text a revelation for Christians is that Christians believe it articulates God's plan of salvation.

First and foremost, biblical scholars engage the Bible through appreciation of literary genres (*form criticism*). Some parts of the Bible are mythic, some are poetic, others narrative, others historical, and so on. Scholars interpret a given text using rules associated with the genre to which it belongs. Take Genesis 2:4b–11:9: here we find a mythical garden where God strolls in the evening, serpents walk around and talk, and sons of God have intercourse with human women to create a race of giants. To view this as a scientific text is to impose a modern framework onto a narrative not designed for that purpose. Instead, by allowing the genre to be itself, one is invited to enter into the imagination of the story to discover essential truths about humanity and its relationship to God. Taking the genre seriously actually helps the text come alive and convey its revelatory truth.

Besides sensitivity to literary genre, scholarship incorporates historical analysis (the *historical-critical method*), perhaps the most important part of authentic interpretation. In this approach scholars examine what the original language meant in its historical context. They identify cultural assumptions operative within this context, and they seek to discern the conditions that gave rise to the text. They also focus on whether and how the text was edited (*redaction criticism*). For example, Mark's Gospel has two endings. The original Gospel almost certainly ended at 16:8; the following verses 9 through 20 augment and partially contradict the original ending. One can also see where Matthew and Luke seem to cite portions of Mark's Gospel, sometimes verbatim, only to change or add to the text. This phenomenon is not seen as scandalous by Christian scholars, but as part of the revelatory dynamics of the Bible. Why was the change made, and what was the point? What's being revealed in that editorial choice?

To these scholarly engagements we could add a plethora of other necessary lenses through which to understand the Bible. *Source criticism* focuses on where the text or tradition came from. *Rhetorical criticism* focuses on how the text functions for its audience. *Narrative criticism* looks at how the text is structured, its plot development, themes, and motifs. *Psychological criticism* considers how the text affects hearers and readers. *Ideology criticism* examines how the text imagines power relations and whose voices are left out. *Canonical criticism* investigates why the church chose certain texts and abandoned others. The list could continue.

Within Christian scholarship, the purpose of diverse forms of biblical criticism is not to reduce or exhaust the Bible's contents, but to appreciate its bottomless depths and draw as much insight as possible from it. Above all, these scholarly analyses attempt to discover both the authors' original intent and how that might be appropriated today. The text is seen as inexhaustible; it always has a surplus of meaning and new relevance for Christians. For example, Paul's letter to the Galatians was meant to quell controversy as to whether non-Jewish believers in Jesus had to adopt the Jewish Law in order to be Christians. Although this was a problem for an ancient group of communities in the early church, it does not trouble many believers today. Does this mean that Paul's letter can no longer be relevant or revelatory? A central purpose of Christian biblical scholarship is to reveal facets of the text that can bring it to life for modern readers.

THEMES OF THE BIBLE

One reason why the Bible is so foundational for Christianity is that it provides the enduring patterns, motifs, and core religious framings that structure Christian self-understanding. Certain themes in both the Old Testament and the New Testament dominated the religious horizons of ancient Jews and early Christians. Being a "biblical Christian" is fundamentally about exploring, appreciating, and applying these themes within the context of one's spiritual life and one's engagement with contemporary society. It is as though the Bible were telling believers to think *this* way, imagine God like *this*, relate to each other through *these* values, and understand their relationship to God like *this*. The Bible's central themes include creation, covenant, sin and redemption, monarchy, temple and priesthood, sacrifice, prophecy, wisdom, law and grace, kingdom of God, and prayer. We will investigate these themes in the next two chapters and later see how they play out in Christian history and theology.

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

- What are some reasons why the study of religion is important for society?
- What are the four interplaying sources of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, and how do they mutually inform each other?
- What does it mean to say that the Bible has authority, and how extensive is it?
- What are some problems with biblicism?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The author believes that Americans are undereducated regarding religion. In addition to the reasons provided, are there other factors in American culture that might have contributed to such a lack of understanding?
- The author distinguishes between "insiders" and "outsiders" in scholarship. What are examples in your own life in which you are privy to information or experience unobtainable from the outside?
- What is your view of the biblicist position? Do you agree with the author's critique? Why or why not?

KEY TERMS

Biblicism

Wesleyan Quadrilateral

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NOTES

1. Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 38–39.
2. Ibid., 63.
3. Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*.
4. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 50.
5. Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, rev. ed., Vol. 1 (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1975), 750–752.
6. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 230, 244.