INTRODUCTION

Religion, Spirituality, and the Question of God

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"I'm spiritual but not religious."

A lot of folks say that these days. Maybe you, reading this introduction, have said it. But what does it mean? Granted, there are plenty of reasons to avoid the label, "religious." Watching the imagery of some religious people in the media, in cable shows, and on line, it is not hard to find reasons to avoid being pegged as "religious." "Organized religion" is often unorganized, disorganized, or over-organized. Sometimes it just seems beside the point. Hypocrisy, violence, stupidity, shallowness, boring rhetoric (add your own observations and experiences here) can come in religious packages, carried by religious practitioners.

Then again, some people are spiritual *and* religious. They might still have questions, of course. They might still argue with aspects of their religion. They may feel pulled to explore, to step out of what they have been handed, to expand their religious world. They may be intrigued by aspects of other faiths, by other religious practices of people they know, or by mysterious (or just strange) things they have heard or seen connected to religion. Even deeply religious people have religious questions. But they may wonder whether it's okay to question what has been handed them. They may wonder whether it's okay to challenge religious beliefs.

If you are reading this introduction, the chances are pretty good that you are studying theology and that this is a textbook for a course. Maybe you have been forced to take a core requirement course for college. Maybe you are intrigued by the possibility of doing academic theology. But maybe you are suspicious of a theology textbook. You might feel that you have had enough theology, and can't believe you are taking more. Or maybe you have never studied religion or theology formally and think everyone else in the class already knows a lot more than you. The backgrounds, attitudes, and opinions of your classmates may be very different from yours, yet here you all are, stuck together in the same classroom. Then again, there could be value in having a diverse group of people with different experiences looking at theological questions together.

Wherever you are coming from, whether you are spiritual, or religious, or both, or neither, whether you are struggling to find God, or struggling with the idea of God, I would like to invite you to take a chance, to take the topics in this book seriously. You might be surprised by something new, by a new angle on some old religious themes, and maybe even something that helps you to ask better questions and find helpful insights to act on.

In this book, we invite you to consider several specific theological perspectives. The authors know religion can be corrupted by unspiritual influences. We also believe it doesn't have to be. If you are spiritual but not religious, the authors

here will not ask you to be less spiritual. We ask that you take another look at what it can mean to be religious.

WHAT *IS* RELIGION?

We begin with a definition rooted in an etymology, a "root" meaning. (This is a textbook; what did you expect?) Religion comes from the Latin root *religio*: to bind or tie together. If we were asked to fill out a form that asked our religion, we might fill in "Christian" or "Catholic" or "Lutheran" or "Baptist." We might answer "Buddhist" or "Moslem" or "Hindu." Maybe we would write "Agnostic" or "Atheist" or "None" in the blank. We might just blow off the question and write something humorous (any Reformed Druids out there?). Maybe we would rather write "spiritual."

The etymology of "religion" invites a different approach than mere labeling. It invites a more subtle reflection. Maybe being a Hindu or Christian or agnostic is what ties my life together. That is my religion in name and in reality. But for some people the real thing binding my days into a life is something not ordinarily called a religion.

For some people *family* is the biggest thing in their lives. Do you know a grandmother who lives for her children and grandchildren? All of her time and energy are spent on them. Or maybe *work* ties a person together. If you go to law school, you may work for a couple of years afterwards, spending 80–90 hours a week, learning your trade, paying your dues, earning the respect of senior partners, making a place in a firm you were happy to be hired by. Even if you make it to church on Sunday, your real religion may be "Lawyer."

Power can hold a person's focus; power can hold one's life together. Accumulating and then protecting power can take all of one's time and energy. *Money* can be a religion. Money can draw us in, inspire us, surround us. Buildings erected with it and monuments created to it form as big an image on our cities' skylines today as medieval cathedrals ever did in the past.

A lot of things can tie our life together, forming a *de facto* religion.

Now notice the subtle point here. Family, work, power, money—these are not evil things. A loving family is where we are nurtured and grow, where we are safe, where we are *loved.* Work can be satisfying at a deep level; I have friends who are lawyers and they are terrific people. Power gets things done. Power can be used well or poorly. It can be shared, it can be used by those "on top" to create, to support, to infuse meaning into the lives of others. Money comes in handy when it is time to pay the bills or to open up new possibilities (*tuition* could even fit here).

The question is not whether these things are good. It is whether they can work as a *religion.* Sometimes it takes being successful in one of these areas, or in something else of central importance, for us to realize that they cannot be the whole picture. We end up asking, is that it? Is that *all*? We might then be tired enough, discouraged enough, in pain enough, or maybe creative or intrigued enough, to ask a different question. What *can* tie a life together?

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY FOR?

Humans are spiritual beings. Human history illustrates a pervasive yearning and expression of that part of us that looks beyond, that seeks transcendence, that wants to go beyond our own experiences and ourselves. From cave paintings tens of thousands of years old to tens of thousands of sites on the Internet today, human expression shows that humans seek a depth and transcendence that is spiritual. Modern astronomy offers

us tremendous views of the cosmos by the Hubble and Chandra telescopes. As we probe the expanse of the universe more deeply, we have reason to probe more deeply inside ourselves too. We may be haunted by the sense that we are part of something more.

Exercising our deepest spiritual potential is not easy. Ancient religious texts and modern efforts alike testify to spiritual frustrations, false attempts, failure, and practices that draw on religious discipline to further our efforts to be what we most want to be.

In addition to such internal challenges we face distractions and confusions from outside. The sheer plurality of beliefs and religious expressions around us can discourage us from consulting outside guides and resources. Given that some religious voices spend a great deal of time yelling at each other, the temptation is great to cut them all off. Quieter, wiser voices are harder to find. Trusting genuine, proven sources takes time and discernment, and a style of spiritual understanding that won't fit readily into a sound bite or a blog.

Much in the spiritual and religious landscape works to tear us up or throw us apart, rather than tie us together. If humans are capable of spiritual depth, we are also able to wreak violence on fellow human beings, other living creatures, and the earth itself. Natural disasters may make us wonder about what powers there might be above us, causing pain even while nature also reveals its striking beauty. Wars, pollution, and countless personal stories of tragedy make us wonder what is going on, and whether there are powers that might be able to help us.

Such obstacles raise a challenge for those of us who perceive ourselves as transcendent, spiritual beings, and who choose the spiritual path: will we put our *trust* in the spiritual, even in the face of dramatic challenges? Will we put our *faith* in transcendence and hope, or will we fall back into fear and doubt, settling for a lesser version of being human? Are we willing to *work* at being spiritual?

Independence and Interdependence

Few people would equate genuine spirituality with isolation, though we know if the reasons are strong enough and the situation important enough, we may have to stand alone at times. But that sort of strength is what makes us able, when we are at our best, to interact well with others too. Spirituality is not the ability to stand aloof, to ignore or avoid the fate of those around us.

What makes us genuine and what can lead us to a genuine sense of religion (what *can* tie us together) is an integrity that draws out our openness, our concerns, our talents, our understanding of the world and our desire to care for others, and that draws on our deepest self to grow and make an impact on those around us. Personal integrity and caring for others are linked in the deepest spiritual instincts.

People can experience this even in "small" ways. Have you ever volunteered your time to help someone? Ever tutored a kid? If you have ever worked with an eighth grader who is having trouble with math, you know it is a genuine spiritual experience. You are not going to have much opportunity to think about yourself while you are trying to explain what a variable is to a kid who is scared of equations. Chances are, if this student is this far along in school and is not a fan of algebra, there is more going on than mathematical ability or inability. Fear is big. Frustration is a habit. Are you a psychology major? You are now. You have to figure out how to use your relationship with this kid (and maybe you just met her) to try to pry open some little window where you can sneak in some self confidence, maybe a small math step or two, and maybe at least an hour spent on homework that she will not completely hate. Ever pull off something like that?

There is no greater feeling than helping someone. You don't mind not getting paid. You might feel like others should know you accomplished something (you might tell your friends), but that is beside the point. What really matters is that you know, and the kid knows, that you *helped*. And it was because you were selfless. You gave away time and energy. Even if you didn't turn the child into a math genius, you cared enough to work with her.

Specific attitudes, skills, commitments, and even discipline, go along with this sort of work. These overlap in a huge way with the spiritual life. They involve effort. They require a willingness to see what is front of us, to not be in denial. Our efforts can take time, and may lead to failure, causing us to question whether to keep at it. At some point they lead us to the realization that being satisfied is related to being comfortable, to being open to relating to others. Such experiences call us to tie together what is in us and what is in the world.

Spiritual integrity is a balance of internal and external elements. Certainly the spiritual life has subjective elements: we must interpret our own experience, follow our deepest insights. But are our subjective resources enough? Do we grow spiritually if we are isolated? We are drawn to relate to others. Spiritual honesty includes the need to guard against our ability to kid ourselves. Our deepest instincts and questions draw us out of ourselves to self-awareness, even self-criticism. Such questions come from the deepest centers of our souls and make us restless until we confront them. Not to face them is to lose our best humanity.

Our cultural identity is deeply rooted in independence. Our spiritual instincts invite us to interdependence. Put simply, interdependence is a good way to live life's challenges.

A Self Through Others

Have you ever felt part of something bigger than yourself? I recall vividly being on a football field decades ago. It was a bright, crisp, sunny Midwestern autumn afternoon. My team had the ball. We ran a screen play to the right. Each lineman picked up his block. The back read the field, cut, saw an opening, and made it into the end zone. We had practiced this screen play countless times. Each time we ran it we wanted to score. This time we did—and a few other times, too. What remains palpable in my memory is the feeling that in that moment I was part of something bigger than me. As a team we "came together." There was almost a slow-motion perception, a clearer level of realization of what was happening. Each person was needed, each person performed his role, and the touchdown was the work of the entire team. And I had an awareness during the play that I was part of something bigger than myself.

This sort of experience can happen in other places. Certainly it occurs on other fields and floors in sports. Something like it happens in theaters. Have you ever performed in a play? Have you ever felt the lines you had practiced flowing so naturally on stage that you weren't playing a part, you *were* the character? When a production "works," the audience is drawn into the scene, suspending their role as observers, entering the moment. Musicians, too, can experience such transcending the self. Several parts come together and each voice contributes to the song, but the result is more than different voices singing at the same time. It is no coincidence we use the word *harmony* to describe both this musical reality and other occasions when something big happens that joins people together as one. In these "zones" of experience, there is a deepened expression of what we are individually. We don't lose our identity; yet we are deepened as we become part of something else. There is a paradox here. We go beyond ourselves, in a sense we lose ourselves, to find ourselves in a deeper way.

Is this sort of tying together of selves the stuff of religion?

Who Can You Trust?

We are in this together.

We may experience this phenomenon in "peak" moments, whether we literally climb to the top of a mountain, or scuba dive in the depths of a coral reef; we feel ourselves coming together in exhilaration, when our individual efforts have succeeded. Or we may experience the rightness of not focusing on ourselves alone, when we help another. In experiences such as these we know that we are more truly ourselves when we don't isolate ourselves. But if we recognize the fulfillment in such interdependence, we still must face the fact that not every interaction is a peak experience. Not every play works. Not every song harmonizes. When does it work? Who can we trust? We need the skills to face that challenge, to face some very real questions. A big one is, if we wish to follow a spiritual path, who do we want to travel with?

The Value of Questions

It is healthy to ask questions. It is healthy to question companions in the spiritual life. Questioning people, and religion itself, is healthy. It is normal and important to do so; don't the best of friends do it continuously?

Depending on what we have been through, what we have been taught, what we have experienced, many of us realize we have to question, especially with regard to spiritual and religious realities. We may have been told not to question. This may have made sense at certain points in our development, for example, when we were young and learning the basics. But at some point we probably began to ask questions—and made our teachers uncomfortable.

Now we reach a crucial issue for adult believers, or nonbelievers, in religion. Is questioning a problem? Is questioning inconsistent with faith? Does questioning put one at odds with one's church, one's faith? More specifically, is questioning welcome or unwelcome in the Christian tradition, or within particular Christian churches? Is this theology text to be questioned? Is this a text that questions itself?

The answer on both counts is yes. Not only is it okay to question in the area of religion, it might be vital. It could even be one of the most important things you do. Compare the instinct to question with the experience of other relationships, perhaps with friends. How do you get to know someone? How do you deepen a relationship? How do you know how much to commit to someone?

Again, I will use myself as an example. After my wife and I met we knew each other from a distance for some months, because we worked at the same place. I knew a few things about her, because I knew some of her friends and I could ask. One weekend we had our first big "cosmic" date. We had lunch together. We talked. Then we had dinner together. We talked some more. We stayed up until 2 a.m. talking. We asked each other about where we went to school. We learned bits about what made us laugh, what we took seriously, and what our families were like (which, by the way, also fit the previous two categories of seriousness and laughing). After knowing each other for three decades we are still talking, still learning about each other. But somewhere in the first months, we knew enough to enter a serious relationship together. We answered questions about each other that led us to deeper places in our conversations, in our understanding of each other, and in the realization that we shared deep goals. Trust and love grow out of such deeper questions and realizations. We got married not because we knew each other completely, but because we knew each other well enough to know we wanted to spend the next five or six decades deepening our relationship, deepening what we knew about each other, deepening what we could be and do together.

There is a metaphor here for human relationships with God.

How can a person know God without questioning what God is like? What sort of relationship is it possible to have with anyone, God included, if we don't probe and question?

What if God loves us to explore, challenge, and ask questions as a step into better relationships? In human relationships questioning becomes more important the older we are, and the more we *choose* our relationships. Early on, we find ourselves in a family. Parents, siblings, relatives, and friends just show up around us as we realize we are here. When it's working right, the older we get, our parents open our world more and more, letting go of us more too, so that we can explore relationships ourselves. (As a parent. let me add that this process is tough on us too.) We learn, sometimes by trial and error, who to trust, who to spend more time with. Although we start out life being "handed" a family, home, safety, and love, eventually our own responsibility kicks in. We develop an openness: our own independence and interdependence.

The longer we live, the more we may ask questions. That includes asking questions about God. The more years and experiences accumulate, the more one is able to relate to other people—many people would say that their relationship to God has deepened over time as well. Many religious traditions assert that God made us; if that is true, then does it not logically follow that one's relationship to God can become as deep as one's own identity?

TRADITION

Here is another etymology. "Tradition" has the Latin root *traditio,* meaning "to hand on." Religions live by handing on traditions, just like every other human activity that lasts more than one lifetime or one generation. A lot of things are handed to us. "Tradition" may or may not be the word we use to describe what we learn about medicine, literature, the golden days of our school's sports teams, mathematics, geography, World War I history, genetics, or family stories about our great-grandfather who missed his ride on the Titanic, but these are all traditions if they are handed to us. Do we want to accept delivery? That may depend on what is on the list. There is a wise saying, "If you do not know history, you are bound to repeat it." We are not interested in merely repeating the business of life; we are moving on in the constantly changing circumstances of this world to create a life of our own.

Although we certainly should learn things for ourselves, much of what we know is interwoven with what we are given by others. We benefit from the experience and wisdom of others. And of course we will, in turn, offer what we know to others. Just as important, we should examine carefully what we are handed. Thinking critically, asking questions, is not necessarily to deny the importance of what we are being offered. It means we are taking it seriously. How else could the genuine wisdom of others become our own? How else could we improve on what others have learned, if not by adding our own experience to theirs? How else could we expect what is handed on to *live*?

If it is to be healthy, religion must be a *living tradition.*

When pursuing spirituality, we do well to listen to the depths of our own spiritual instincts. We do well to choose worthy companions and try to understand them. Following the spiritual path could take a while. There can certainly be distractions and pitfalls. We should look for good guides, for people who have a sense of depth, who have integrity, who are not manipulative. Do they have a sense of centeredness, even peace? We should seek companions and guides who have what Aristotle would call *phronēsis,* a word that means

practical wisdom. We do well to look for companions who are serious and also have a sense of humor. A guide should be someone you can trust with the right sort of questions. Look for a guide who will listen. Look for a guide who knows something, who will challenge you, not just tell you what you want to hear. Are you being challenged to deeper integrity, to be more honest with yourself?

When we pursue spirituality, we will meet people who claim to know God. It is quite legitimate to question whether their claim is genuine. If it is, then it makes sense to ask them what they know!

The chapters that follow are meant to be challenging. One of those challenges is the invitation to look—maybe to look again—at some *traditional* religious resources from those who have gone before. The texts and practices, the experiences and beliefs, the revelations and the mistakes in religious traditions are a laboratory where we can question and learn. Question the authors here. Are they worthy guides? What are they handing on?

HOW BIG IS (MY) RELIGION?

My beliefs are unique to me, since I am a unique person. But can beliefs be shared too? In a study of American beliefs and culture, especially concerned with the theme we have here called "independence and interdependence," Robert Bellah and his coauthors describe a very individualistic form of religion. In the book, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* they relate how they met a practitioner of "Sheilaism." Sheila Larson has named her beliefs after herself. She chooses not to be a member of a religion. She describes her faith as rooted in her "own little voice" (p. 221). She believes in God, and lives out her concern for herself and others, rooted in that faith.

It would be intriguing to probe more into this type of religion, to consider what Sheila has been through that supports and challenges her Sheilaism. But I introduced her religion here for another, very specific reason: to suggest a thought experiment.

What is your reaction to hearing of her sort of religion? Do you wonder who Sheila Larson is? Are you intrigued by her, or by the notion of naming a religion after yourself? Do you feel a twinge of jealousy, thinking, "My name could be in that book, I could have been interviewed by Bellah?" In some sense, each of us could be there. If religion is tying our life together, each of us *is* there in a sense. But, unless we choose to focus solely on ourselves, there is more.

While there is integrity in taking responsibility for oneself, here we also pose the question: at what point should responsibility be shared? If we are in this together, how do we work on "tying things together" *together*? If I discover worthy ideas and practices on my spiritual path, wouldn't I want to share them with people I care about? Wouldn't I be excited if those I cared about made discoveries too? How wide should the path be? The world is a big place. If we're interested in spirituality at all, how big should our spirituality be?

Worldview

What is your worldview? What is your basic approach to the world? How do you organize and make sense of what you know about the world? How do you process new experiences, knowledge, and insights? How do you relate to science and art, music and politics? What tools connect you to world events? What connects you to your friends? What basic vision do you have that makes sense of your life?

Are you consistent? Are you the same person at work or school that you are at home? What sorts of things tend to cloud your vision? What does it mean for you to "think outside the box"?

What shapes your sense of what is dreadful, wonderful, humorous, or holy? What inspires you to act well? What pulls you down? What urges you to get involved in work that needs to be done? What do you do to relax and regain your energy? What do you enjoy doing with friends, with family? What do you want to accomplish today, or over the next few years? What do you want to accomplish over the span of your life?

Or course, creating a worldview that has depth and consistency does not happen all at once. The sheer depth and breadth of human knowledge is such that no human being can know everything. Even though we are "all in this together," the scope and plurality of what humans know and care about makes us pause; does the enormous variety of views mean that humans cannot possibly, really come together? Fortunately, even from a practical point of view, we can see that this is not the case. We can see people from different places, backgrounds, and faiths working cooperatively—not always, not enough, perhaps, but it does occur. The media show us disasters and human misery, but they also show us human courage. They show us examples of people who work cooperatively, even in a world of plurality. Not just challenges, but resources can be global and varied and powerful in their impact.

The challenge for each of us is to embrace a worldview that is open to others, and that also gives us the foundation to ask the right questions. The challenge is to live with a worldview that can understand and respect the views of others, even while connecting us solidly to our own roots.

Any worldview must face key questions. How can humans get along with each other? Can our life be lived well with those with whom we agree and disagree? Does our worldview address basic human hopes? Can I trust other people? How do I deal with evil? What needs do I have, if I am to be fully human? What resources can I draw on? Is there a God? Is God a Creator who is in relationship with creation? Will God help us? Who is wise enough for me to trust, or follow? Ultimately, are my hardest efforts worth it? Is the world a good place?

The modern world certainly provides a wealth of (sometimes mixed) blessings. The time we spend with television, radio, phones, and Internet tools that link us to our surroundings and our friends can make our heads spin. How can I keep up with all that I can access, that I can connect to? Modern cultural pluralism brings several temptations. At times we may want to dig in and not listen to others. We might want to give up when we feel washed over by an ocean of information. But we also want to find ground to stand on. Can we be embedded in a point of view that nurtures us but that remains open to challenge and growth? Where can we gain a foothold, a base from which to develop our view of things?

An Experiment

Try this. Tired of the rat race? Take thirty minutes alone, and step away from all the turmoil. Spend a half hour unplugged. Turn off the television, take out the ear plugs, set aside the phone and the pager, close down the computer . . . unplug everything. If you want to set a timer so that you will know when thirty minutes is up, okay. Now, sit with your self, with your own thoughts.

Go ahead, try it. Put this book down and come back to it later.

Depending on your lifestyle and your usual habits, this experiment could be very strange. I have had one or two students become angry when I assigned it: "How *dare* you put me out of touch with my friends?!" Most people have trouble adjusting at first, but then calm down. Maybe you found yourself going over your "to-do" list in your head. Maybe you thought

about your family and friends, about people you miss. Maybe you are used to this sort of exercise, or are just good at this sort of thing, and found a small island of peace and even creativity within it. Maybe you prayed.

What enters our minds when we are not distracted? What if we take time to clear out the layers of things that keep us busy? There could be some challenges here. The "to-do" list, or the list of what I can *stop* doing, might need adjusting in the light of a different, quieter place.

Of course no exercise of this sort is sufficient to create a worldview. But it is a step that can offer perspective. And it can be repeated.

Another Exercise

Consider this question. When you die, what do you want in your epitaph, on your tombstone? This might seem like a strange, even rude question. We are not comfortable with the notion that we will die, yet each of us will. So what do you want on your tombstone? If you are planning to be cremated and won't have a gravesite, imagine someone will want to put up a plaque somewhere. What do you want on the plaque? In asking you to think about what you want said about you when you die, am I being ghoulish or macabre? No, but I am serious.

I have asked my students to write their epitaph on the first day of class in two different courses: a beginning theology course and a course on western civilization. It is the first thing I say to them on the first day, right after telling them my name and the name of the course so they know they are in the right room. Actually, I ask them to respond to two questions, each to be answered on one side of a 3 x 5 card. Not too much room there to get verbose. The first question is, "What does it mean to be human?" The second is what they want written on their tombstone. I explain that doing this at the very start of the course obtains what social scientists see as baseline data. (Probably when I ask the questions, some students still wonder if they are in the right room.)

The value in posing these questions is that they force us to focus (and for these students the challenge comes quickly and out of the blue) on what our values are. Once we are done with our time here, how would we like to be known? What is the meaning of that one human life: ours? At the end of the course, three months later, I give the cards back.

A decent course in the humanities should help us work on the answer to both questions. My favorite course in college was a year-long look at art history. Each day, through the paintings and sculptures of different artists, our professor would ask us, "What does this work say about what it means to be human?" For the test we had to know names and dates; we had to be able to identify who painted what. But this professor was far more concerned that we wrestle with what it means to be a human being. Some art helps with this. Some seems to avoid the issue. Every time I left class I was arguing, either with other students or with myself, about what it means to be human. The professor told us we should be asking these questions every day for the rest of our lives. We should be thinking about western art on our death beds.

Asking students to answer the two questions on the first day is an idea I stole—perhaps I should say, "handed on"—from my art history professor. The two questions on the index card are related for me. To be human is to be finite. We have only a certain number of days. What we do with them matters. This fact can be sobering; it may make us anxious. Our finiteness is also what ennobles us. On each day, what we do matters. If it is possible to waste time, time we can never get back, it is also possible to fill our time well, to live well. It is possible to live well each day.

A TRIP TO TUSCANY

One of my favorite places is a spot that I have visited only once; the Basilica of Santa Croce (Holy Cross) in Florence. I had read about it before going there. When I stepped inside I felt a strange connection, a familiarity, walking around the nave. On one side near the back of the church is the tomb of Galileo. Across the way is the burial place of Michelangelo. Up further are the bones of Machiavelli. Entering this church, on a day in late spring a few years ago, I stepped into the world of the Renaissance and the early stages of the modern world in Europe. I felt the challenges that are still with us. Even more importantly, I felt the strength, the resources that are still with us. In Santa Croce, I felt immersed in an incredible heritage of art and poetry, science and politics, deep traditions to which we now add our modern resources, our problems, and our technologies.

Where do *you* go to meditate, to get perspective?

Where can you return to in your mind, or visit by actually travelling, to connect to the people who nourish and enrich your world?

If you haven't done so already, why not try the index card exercise. Leave your music on this time while you think about the answers. Where would you like your plaque or gravesite to be located? Who would you like your life to inspire?

THIS BOOK HAS A WORLDVIEW

The authors of this textbook are writing from a point of view. It may or may not resemble yours. Is it possible to take them seriously? Will they take you seriously? I believe they will be honest with you. Also, they will try to challenge you. In the imagery used by the editor of this book, J. J. Mueller, SJ, the following chapters are inviting you to "come to the table," to look, listen, and discuss the issues these authors present. There is real content here, and some of it is technical. This may surprise some readers, who have not experienced theology as a rigorous discipline. Digging for historical, philosophical, linguistic, and spiritual connections in the pursuit of theological understanding is hard work. It is also worth the trouble. Real theology will not fit well in the vehicle of a blog. Some topics cannot be covered in a talk show or a news story.

What This Textbook Will Present

A major challenge for any of us is to create an honest, consistent worldview, a worldview that touches the entirety of our lives, loves, successes, failures, losses, and triumphs. A major goal of this book is to present a consistent worldview. The authors of this text believe in God. If you also believe, there may be food for thought to deepen and enrich your faith. The authors may challenge you too.

What if you are not sure if you believe there is a God, or if you are convinced God doesn't exist? Is studying theology then a waste of time for you? A fruitful exercise might be to pursue the question, how do you *know* there is not a God? Is this a matter of proof? Of assurance? Trust in God is not a matter of proving God exists. Is *not* believing subject to proof? Can you prove God does not exist?

Some modern proponents of atheism argue that religious belief is dangerous. Is it? Why? If you are open to the possibility of God being real, what clues might you expect to be worth taking seriously? Which questions would you ask?

At the root of the Christian faith, there is a foundational theological question about Jesus himself. Who *is* this man? As the chapter on the New Testament here will describe, this is the central theme of the Gospels. In this book several authors will pursue a set of questions that are all ways of getting at that central question: Who is this Jesus?

Here we will address questions of how we can read Christian Scriptures *critically*. This is necessary because people interpret the Bible in a variety of ways. Do these Scriptures therefore mean anything we want them to mean? What issues does the text itself present to us? What did the early witnesses to Jesus' life think of him? A chapter on Christology here will probe what happened when the Christian message entered a new culture. What happens when an Aramaic message encounters the language and thought patterns of Greeks?

In modern society, we still ask, "Who is this man, Jesus?" In novels, movies, and television specials we see different debates and claims. What happens when an Aramaic and Greek and Roman message encounters our contemporary wealth of languages and thought patterns? What questions matter to us? Did Jesus marry Mary Magdalene? Are there missing manuscripts that can tell us what he really was like? We are not so different from the people who created the Christological controversies of the first centuries. Academic theology engages these questions and others that are raised in each historical era. What can we take from earlier attempts to understand? What intellectual tools can we bring to such questions today?

While this text is written by Christians, they are Christians who know they live in a rich, pluralistic world. How did the church interact with the world in its first generations? How does it interact with people today, with the variety of cultures and faiths on this global stage?

We cannot understand the Christian message without understanding its mother religion, Judaism. In this text we find authors who probe the creation of the Jewish Scriptures and the experiences of a living Judaism today. Can we also come to understand another child of Judaism: Islam? Can we listen to the heart of Islam, and understand it on its own terms? Can we avoid the caricatures that too often are presented about it?

Regardless of your spiritual or religious beliefs or understandings, the chapters here will invite you to examine the workings of an ancient worldview, a worldview that has encountered many historical questions and that still engages modern conversation partners. We are inviting you to this table, believing that the discussions you find here will be valuable.

The spiritual quest cannot help but raise questions about our relationships to others, and to the Other. This book addresses such questions. It sees God as relational. Christian theology talks about God as Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity asserts that, at the most foundational level of being, God is *relational*, even as God is *One*. As we seek meaning, do we find we are "in this together"? The worldview presented here is not surprised by that. It is the conviction of the authors that we are relational because God is relational: we are made in the image of God.

Do we seek the Other? In this book you will find authors who believe the Other seeks us. In the Jewish and Christian Scriptures we find not just an encounter with the Source of human transcendence; we find humanity's Creator, initiating a relationship with human beings. Christianity embraces a God who enters into God's own creation, and meets humanity as one of us; through Jesus Christ the human and divine are joined. Christians also assert that, in the ongoing life of the church—in its sacraments, in its concerns for justice, in its concern for moral living—the living reality of Christ himself is handed on.

Christian tradition is no stranger to persons who seek meaning and spiritual depth. The questions and quest of Christianity are echoed in the words of Saint Augustine: "You made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" (*Confessions* 1.1).

Why Take a Theology Course?

One of my presuppositions and core insights into human beings is this: everyone does theology. We all think about spirituality, religion, and

the big questions. Many of us do it at 2 a.m., maybe in small conversations between two or three friends.

How many places are there to talk about such things? If you tell people you want to set aside a couple of hours over the next few weeks to talk about the "meaning of life," chances are they will laugh at you. But who doesn't, at some time, wonder where their life is going? Who doesn't wonder what their life *means*? The reason I walk into a classroom every semester is to find out if we can take up those 2 a.m. conversations at 10 a.m., in groups that are a bit bigger, in a place where we can draw on other people, and where we can draw on resources that have proven to be helpful in the past. We can find wisdom in others. And we are in this together.

Too often, religious worship and, sorry to say, classes on religion are dull and static. That's crazy. Everyone faces the task of figuring out how to tie his or her life together; how can we let this stuff be boring? Maybe we can work on *that* together. Others have done some of the work, some of the discovering before us. This does not mean just swallowing whole what they are serving up, but they do have insights we can work with. At its best, religion should mean grappling with meaning and meaningfulness. Religions were all originally created by acting and living, by not settling for unfulfilling answers, but desiring to live more authentically. Religion is more a verb than a noun. If it is done right, religion, like the spiritual life, will also at times be a struggle. But through struggle it will make us more alive.

Our wisest predecessors knew this. Socrates wasn't trying to become a famous philosopher when he walked into the agora. He argued with anyone who would listen because he wanted to understand what was true. Paul of Tarsus wasn't posing for a painting or church sculpture when he preached. He wanted to present the message of Christ. He *had* to preach (see 1 Cor 9:16). In writing to his followers, he challenged them to find a more sophisticated form of faith: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:11–12).

It is good to question. It is good to probe deeply, to use our minds as well as we can, to put into words what we can understand. "Theology" comes from two Greek roots; *theos*, meaning "god," combined with *logos*, meaning "word" or "understanding." Is theology possible? Can one put God into words? Theologians assert that we can never come to a final understanding of God. We are finite. But we can know enough of God to enter the relationship where we will learn more and more.

Theology is seeking: faith seeking understanding.

Wrestling with God

I want to offer an image for doing theology, to bring to a close these introductory reflections and as a way of opening to the chapters that follow. I invite you to think about a passage from the Jewish Scriptures.

This will work best if you read the story first: Genesis 32:22–32. You might want to read this story in context too. Earlier material on Jacob can be found in Genesis 25:19–34; 27:1–32:21.

It is the middle of the night. Jacob's family, everyone he has traveled with, is gone. He is alone. He is in the dark. It is not clear who he is wrestling with.

Jacob wrestles well; he holds his own until dawn is coming, and the foe has had enough. "Let me go for the day is breaking!" (Gen 32:26). Jacob will not quit. Is the opponent fair? He puts Jacob's hip out of joint. Still Jacob does not let go; he will not let go unless he receives a *blessing*.

Now the opponent has a question. *Who are you?* Does Jacob know? He answers correctly, doesn't he? *Jacob*. Not anymore, Jacob. "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (Gen 32:28). Now he is someone new; this new name says who he really is. The people who will come from him will carry this new name, this new identity. They will struggle too, and limp as Jacob did.

Have you ever wrestled in the middle of the night? A decision has to be made. Which job? What direction of study? Am I headed for a breakup in this relationship? What am I supposed to do with my life? The hardest part can sometimes be forming the right question, let alone answering it. The image of wrestling is a powerful metaphor here. "Wrestling" well describes our down-to-earth, "hands-on" questioning. We struggle to *come to grips* with the next steps that face us. We understand what Jacob is dealing with. We wrestle too, to connect, to tie things together.

Jacob is returning to his home after decades away from his father, whom he has deceived, and his brother, who wanted to kill him. Jacob has returned to face his past, to face his decisions, to face the need to move ahead; he must return to be whole. He must sort things out. This one night it all comes to a head. He wrestles with the One who gives him life. He will not let go.

Is Jacob having a religious experience?

Religio has its own roots in another Latin word: *ligare*. From this we get the word "ligament." With his hip put out of joint, Jacob knows the pain of torn tissue, of destroyed connections. Is Jacob having a *religious* experience? He is being torn limb from limb. Is the opponent cruel or ironic? Why does Jacob become someone new? Even with a past torn by distrust and fear—he stole his brother's birthright, and his *blessing*—he comes back. He wrestles. And he will not stop unless he is blessed.

Who can give Jacob the thing that he could not steal? Who can give Jacob a new self? At the crisis point of the story, as light starts to seep into the scene, Jacob/Israel asks his opponent, "Please tell me your name" (Gen 32:29). And he doesn't get an answer. Everything in the story gets named. Jacob calls the place "Penuel," because there he struggled with God, face to face, and lived. He limps past Penuel. He has been to the Jabbok as Jacob and leaves as Israel. But he never gets the name of the one who *blesses* him.

So what is Jacob doing? Theology?

We cannot control the Other. But when we struggle to come to grips with ourselves and the One who meets us in our greatest depths, even in our darkest nights, we become someone new. We are blessed.