

CHAPTER 1

Faith

What is faith? We have already seen that there are two senses of the word “faith”: *a set of beliefs* and *an act of believing*. This opening chapter considers some basic issues that lie behind any attempt to reflect on the contents of faith, including some reflections on the nature of faith, and the sources and methods that might be used to establish and explore basic Christian beliefs.

One of the central questions that will be considered in this opening chapter is how theology develops its ideas. Where do they come from? Traditionally, three main sources of Christian theology are recognized: the collection of texts usually known as “the Bible,” tradition, and reason. There is widespread agreement within the Christian tradition that the most fundamental source is the Bible. One of the most important questions in Christian theology therefore relates to the authority and interpretation of Scripture. (Note that many theological writings tend to use the term “Scripture” or “Holy Scripture” in preference to “the Bible,” even though these terms refer to exactly the same collection of writings.) Some of the readings assembled in this chapter deal directly with this issue.

However, from the earliest of times, it was realized that Scripture was open to a series of interpretations of varying degrees of reliability, some of which were not even remotely Christian. This insight is especially associated with the Gnostic controversies of the second century, during which

2 *Faith*

Gnostic writers put forward some intensely speculative interpretations of Scripture. In response to this, writers such as Irenaeus emphasized the need to interpret Scripture within the bounds of the living tradition of the church. This led to growing interest in the way in which tradition was to be understood as a source for theology.

The role of reason has also featured prominently in Christian theological reflection. The early church witnessed an important discussion of the extent to which theology should interact with secular philosophy. This later developed into debates about whether the existence of God could be proved by an appeal to reason. The debate over the relation of faith and reason continues in contemporary theology, reflecting the church's ongoing dialogue with secular culture over the rationality of faith.

In this chapter, we shall consider a number of issues concerning the nature and sources of theology. We begin by looking at a classic discussion of the relation between Christian theology and secular philosophy, found in the writings of Augustine of Hippo.

1.1 Augustine of Hippo on the theological use of secular philosophy

One of the most divisive debates within early Christianity concerned the extent to which the church should make use of secular cultural ideas or values. It was a debate of immense significance, as it raised the question of whether Christianity would turn its back on the classical heritage, or appropriate it, even if in a modified form. As the Roman imperial authorities distrusted Christianity, often subjecting it to repressive controls, many early theologians saw little point in exploring this question. The third-century theologian Tertullian, for example, saw it as a waste of time. It is important to appreciate that Christianity had a decidedly ambiguous legal status in the Roman empire at this time. On the one hand, it was not legally recognized, and so did not enjoy any special rights; on the other, it was not forbidden. However, its growing numerical strength led to periodic attempts to suppress it by force. Sometimes these persecutions were local, restricted to regions such as North Africa; sometimes, they were sanctioned throughout the Roman empire as a whole.

Things changed with the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in 313, which opened the way to a much more positive evaluation of the relation of every aspect of Christian life and thought to classical culture. Rome was now the servant of the gospel; might not the same be true of its culture? If the Roman state could be viewed positively by Christians, why not also its cultural heritage? It seemed as if a door had opened upon some very interesting possibilities. Prior to 313, this situation could only have been dreamed of. After 313, its exploration became a matter of urgency for leading Christian thinkers – supreme among whom was Augustine of Hippo (354–430).

Widely regarded as the most influential Latin patristic writer, Augustine was converted to Christianity in the northern Italian city of Milan in the summer of 386. He returned to North Africa, and was made bishop of Hippo in 395. He was involved in two major controversies: the Donatist controversy, focusing on the church and sacraments; and the Pelagian controversy, focusing on grace and sin. He also made substantial contributions to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, the Christian understanding of history, and – as in this passage – the theological appropriation of secular philosophy.

In his work *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine argued for the “critical appropriation of classical culture.” For Augustine, the situation is comparable to Israel fleeing from captivity in Egypt at the time of the

4 *Faith*

Exodus. Although they left the idols of Egypt behind them, they carried the gold and silver of Egypt with them, in order to make better and proper use of such riches, which were thus liberated in order to serve a higher purpose than before. In much the same way, the philosophy and culture of the ancient world could be appropriated by Christians, where this seemed right, and thus allowed to serve the cause of the Christian faith. Augustine clinched his argument by pointing out how several recent distinguished Christians had made use of classical wisdom in advancing the gospel.

If those who are called philosophers, particularly the Platonists, have said anything which is true and consistent with our faith, we must not reject it, but claim it for our own use, in the knowledge that they possess it unlawfully. The Egyptians possessed idols and heavy burdens, which the children of Israel hated and from which they fled; however, they also possessed vessels of gold and silver and clothes which our forebears, in leaving Egypt, took for themselves in secret, intending to use them in a better manner (Exodus 3:21–2; 12:35–6), not doing this on their own authority, but by the command of God. The Egyptians themselves, in their ignorance, thus provided them with things which they themselves were not using well. In the same way, pagan learning is not entirely made up of false teachings and superstitions, or heavy burdens of unnecessary difficulty, which every one of us, when going out under the leadership of Christ from the fellowship of the heathen, ought to abhor and avoid. It contains also some excellent teachings, well suited to be used by truth, and excellent moral values. Indeed, some truths are even found among them which relate to the worship of the one God. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and their silver, which they did not invent themselves, but which they dug out of the mines of the providence of God, which are scattered throughout the world, yet which are improperly and unlawfully prostituted to the worship of demons. The Christian, therefore, can separate these truths from their unfortunate associations, take them away, and put them to their proper use for the proclamation of the gospel. We must also take their “garments” – that is, human institutions such as are adapted to human relationships which are indispensable in this life – and put them to a Christian use.

What else have many good and faithful people from amongst us done? Look at the wealth of gold and silver and clothes which Cyprian – that eloquent teacher and blessed martyr – brought with him when he left Egypt! And think of all that Lactantius brought with him, not to mention Marius Victorinus, Optatus and Hilary of Poitiers,

and others who are still living! And look at how much the Greeks have borrowed! And before all of these, we find that Moses, that most faithful servant of God, had done the same thing: after all, it is written of him that “he was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22). Pagan superstition (especially in those times when, kicking against the yoke of Christ, it was persecuting the Christians) would never have allowed us access to those branches of knowledge it held useful, if it had suspected they were about to hand them over to the use of worshipping the One God, and thereby overturning the vain worship of idols. But they gave their gold and their silver and their garments to the people of God as they were going out of Egypt, not knowing how the things they gave would be turned to the service of Christ. For what was done at the time of the exodus was no doubt a type, prefiguring what happens now.

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

Augustine affirms that Christians are free to make use of philosophical ideas, which can be detached from their pagan associations. Augustine’s argument is that philosophical ideas can be extricated from their historical associations with the pagan culture which persecuted earlier generations of Christians. Although this persecution had ended nearly a century before Augustine’s time, it was still an important theme in Christian thinking. Augustine’s approach allowed a more positive attitude to the ideas and values of secular culture to be adopted.

Finally, notice how Augustine appeals to a series of distinguished Christians who were converted to Christianity from paganism, yet were able to make good use of their pagan upbringing in serving the church. Cyprian is of especial importance for Augustine, in that Cyprian had been martyred by the Romans in the third century. The fact he had made use of philosophy in this way is seen by Augustine as an important confirmation of his basic approach.

1.2 Vincent of Lérins on tradition and theology

The word “tradition” comes from the Latin term *traditio* which bears such senses as “handing over,” “handing down,” or “handing on.” At one level, it is a thoroughly biblical idea. Paul reminded his readers that he was handing on to them core teachings of the Christian faith which he had received from others (1 Corinthians 15:1–4). The term can refer both to the action of passing teachings on to others – something which Paul insists must be done within the church – and to the body of teachings which are passed on in this manner. Tradition can thus be understood as a process as well as a body of teaching. The Pastoral Epistles in particular stress the importance of “guarding the good deposit which was entrusted to you” (2 Timothy 1:14).

If any controversy served to emphasize the importance of tradition, it was the Gnostic debates of the second century. Faced with repeated assertions from his Gnostic critics that he had misrepresented the Bible, Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–ca. 200) argued that they had simply chosen to interpret the Bible according to their own taste. What had been handed down, he insisted, was not merely the biblical texts, but a certain way of reading and understanding those texts.

Irenaeus’ point is that a continuous stream of Christian teaching, life, and interpretation can be traced from the time of the apostles to his own period. The church is able to point to those who have maintained the teaching of the church, and to certain public standard creeds which set out the main lines of Christian belief. This, he argues, contrasts with the secret and mystical teaching of the Gnostics, which is not available for public inspection, and which cannot be traced back to the apostles themselves. Tradition is thus the guarantor of faithfulness to the original apostolic teaching, a safeguard against the innovations and misrepresentations of biblical texts on the part of the Gnostics.

This point was further developed in the early fifth century by Vincent of Lérins, who was concerned that certain doctrinal innovations were being introduced without adequate reason. Writing in the year 434, Vincent (who died at an unknown date before 450) expressed his belief that the controversies of his age had given rise to dangerous theological innovations. But how could such doctrinal innovations be identified as such? There was a need to have public standards by which such doctrines could be judged. So what standard was available, by which the church could be safeguarded from such errors? For Vincent, the answer was clear – tradition.

Developing this point, Vincent set out a triple criterion by which authentic Christian teaching may be established: *universality* (being believed everywhere), *antiquity* (being believed always), and *consensus* (being believed by all people).

Therefore I have devoted considerable study and much attention to enquiring, from men of outstanding holiness and doctrinal correctness, in what way it might be possible for me to establish a kind of fixed and, as it were, general and guiding principle for distinguishing the truth of the catholic faith from the depraved falsehoods of the heretics. And the answer I receive from all can be put like this: if I or anyone else wishes to detect the deceits of the heretics or avoid their traps, and to remain healthy and intact in a sound faith, we ought, with the help of the Lord, to strengthen our faith in two ways; first, by the authority of the divine law, and then by the tradition of the catholic church.

Now at this point someone may ask: since the canon of the scriptures is complete, and is in itself adequate, why is there any need to join to its authority the understanding of the church? Because Holy Scripture, on account of its depth, is not accepted in a universal sense. The same statements are interpreted in one way by one person, in another by someone else, with the result that there seem to be as many opinions as there are people. [...] Therefore, on account of the number and variety of errors, there is a need for someone to lay down a rule for the interpretation of the prophets and the apostles in such a way that is directed by the rule of the catholic church.

Now in the catholic church itself the greatest care is taken that we hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all people [*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*]. This is what is truly and properly catholic. This is clear from the force of the word and reason, which understands everything universally. We shall follow “universality” in this way, if we acknowledge this one faith to be true, which the entire church confesses throughout the world. We affirm “antiquity” if we in no way depart from those understandings which it is clear that the greater saints and our fathers proclaimed. And we follow “consensus” if in this antiquity we follow all (or certainly nearly all) the definitions of the bishops and masters.

So what should a catholic Christian do if a small part of the church cuts itself off from the communion of the universal faith? Surely the soundness of the whole body is to be preferred to the unsoundness of a pestilent and corrupt part! What, if some new contamination were

8 *Faith*

to try and infect not merely a small part of the church, but its entirety? Then the Christian must hold fast to antiquity, which in this day cannot possibly be seduced by any fraudulent novelty.

But what if some error is found in antiquity on the part of two or three men, or even in a city or a province? In that case, the Christian should give priority to the decrees of an ancient General Council (if there are any) over the foolishness and ignorance of a few people. But what if some error should arise, and no such decree is found to be of relevance? Then the Christian must assemble and consult and interrogate the opinions of ancient writers – that is, those who, though living in various times and places, stood firmly within the communion and faith of the one catholic church, and were recognized and acknowledged to be approved authorities. The Christian can believe without any doubt or hesitation whatever can be established to have been held, written, and taught, not just by one or two of these, but by all, equally, with one consent, openly, frequently, and persistently.

Read the text carefully, making sure that you understand the problem that Vincent is trying to solve. How does Vincent arrive at the need for a publicly agreed standard of Christian orthodoxy?

Now consider this statement: “Christian orthodoxy is just repeating what the Bible says.” How would Vincent respond to such a suggestion?

What does Vincent mean by “that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all people”? Do you think that this is a workable definition of orthodoxy? What problems can you see with it?

1.3 John Calvin on the nature of faith

One of the tasks of theology is to clarify the meaning of its vocabulary. What do we mean, for example, when we use the word “God”? Or what is faith? It is very easy to use the term loosely, without bothering to reflect on what it means. An excellent example of critical reflection on how this important theological term is to be understood can be found in John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which was first published in 1536 and went through many editions until the final, definitive edition of 1559. It is widely regarded as one of the most significant works of Protestant theology. Calvin (1509–64) is a very precise and logical theologian, who is generally very easy to read and understand.

Calvin’s discussion of the nature of faith in the *Institutes* is set in the context of his analysis of redemption. Having shown how redemption is related to the person and work of Jesus Christ, Calvin proceeds to discuss “the manner of obtaining the grace of Christ, the benefits which it confers, and the effects which result from it.” Calvin argues that the benefits of Christ remain external to us unless something happens by which they can be internalized. So long as we are separated from Christ, all that he achieved upon the cross is of no importance. It is by faith, Calvin argues, that these benefits are appropriated by the believer. This leads him to move on to a discussion of the nature of faith, as follows.

It is now proper to consider the nature of this faith, by means of which those who are adopted into the family of God gain possession of the heavenly kingdom. For the accomplishment of such a great goal, it is obvious that no mere opinion or persuasion is good enough. Particular care and diligence are necessary in discussing the true nature of faith on account of the serious delusions concerning it which are held by many in the present day. Lots of people, on hearing the term, think that it means nothing more than a certain common assent to the history of the gospel. [...]

Faith is the knowledge of the divine will in regard to us, as ascertained from his Word. And the foundation of it is a previous persuasion of the truth of God. So long as your mind entertains any misgivings as to the certainty of the Word, its authority will be weak and dubious, or rather it will have no authority at all. Nor is it sufficient to believe that God is true, and that he cannot lie or deceive, unless you feel firmly persuaded that every word which comes from him is sacred, inviolable truth.

10 Faith

But since the human heart is not brought to faith by every word of God, we must therefore consider what it is that faith specifically relates to in this word. The declaration of God to Adam was, “You shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17); and to Cain, “The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10). These, however, instead of being intended to establish faith, tend only to shake it. At the same time, we do not deny that it is the purpose of faith to assent to the truth of God whenever, whatever, and in whatever way God speaks. We are only inquiring what faith can find in the word of God to lean and rest upon. When conscience sees only wrath and indignation, how can it but tremble and be afraid? How can it do anything except avoid the God whom it dreads in this way? But faith ought to seek God, not avoid him. It is evident, therefore, that we have not yet obtained a full definition of faith, since it is impossible to use this word to refer to every kind of knowledge of the divine will. [...]

Now we shall have a right definition of faith if we say that it is a steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us which is founded upon the truth of the gracious promise of God in Christ, and is both revealed to our minds and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Read this through, and take in what Calvin is saying. Try to follow the flow of his argument, as he sets out to pin down precisely what faith means by exploring various possibilities, and rejecting those that he considers to be inadequate. First of all, note how Calvin’s definition of faith is *trinitarian*. Calvin ascribes different aspects of faith to each of the three persons of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit. Try to identify each of these aspects. What role is played by each person of the Trinity, according to Calvin?

Now note that the first part of this definition declares that faith is a “steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us.” It is significant here that Calvin uses language that expresses confidence in God, and stresses God’s reliability. Notice also how faith is defined as “knowledge” – but a certain very specific kind of knowledge. It is not just “knowledge”; in fact, it is not even “knowledge of God.” It is specifically “knowledge of *God’s benevolence towards us*.” Calvin’s language is very specific and intentional. Faith is grounded and based in God’s *goodness*. It is not simply about accepting that God exists, but about encountering God’s kindness to us. Do you agree with Calvin at this point?

The definition now goes on to declare that faith is “founded upon the truth of the gracious promise of God in Christ.” Notice how faith is

again affirmed to be about knowledge – the use of the word “truth” is very important here. Calvin wants to make it absolutely clear that faith is not a human invention or delusion, but something that is grounded in the bedrock of truth. But notice how Calvin then proceeds to link this with a “gracious promise of God.” For Calvin, we are dealing with a God who makes promises to us – promises which can be trusted and relied upon. Interestingly, Calvin identifies Christ as the confirmation or means of disclosure of these promises. You might like to look up 2 Corinthians 1:20, and see how Calvin’s approach relates to that text.

Finally, Calvin clearly holds that faith involves both mind and heart. Note how, once more, Calvin affirms that faith is indeed about knowledge – something that affects the way in which we think, affecting our minds. Yet it is more than this: it is something that transforms us internally. Calvin’s language about the human “heart” points to a deeper change within us than just mental acceptance of an idea. Calvin sees God as active throughout the process of coming to faith. Faith is not human insight; it is personal knowledge of God made possible by the Holy Spirit.

1.4 Karl Barth on revelation and the Word of God

The Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) is widely regarded as one of the most significant theologians of the twentieth century. His *Church Dogmatics*, one of the most substantial and influential recent works of Christian theology, was originally delivered as lectures to his students at the University of Bonn and later at the University of Basel.

One of Barth's major themes is the priority of divine revelation. God speaks; the discipline of theology is the response of intellectual attentiveness and moral obedience that God's words demand and deserve. Unlike some earlier Protestant writers, Barth does not directly equate this "Word of God" with the text of the Bible. Rather, he develops the notion of the "three-fold form of the Word of God" in Jesus Christ, Scripture, and the preaching of the church. On this approach, the Bible is a witness to God's self-revelation in Christ, and is not itself to be identified with "revelation."

These ideas, although more fully developed in the *Church Dogmatics*, are found in an earlier form in a course of lectures given by Barth at the University of Göttingen during the academic year 1924/5. Our extract is taken from an early stage in those lectures, when Barth wrestles with the question of how one is to understand the idea of the "Word of God," and its implications for how Christian theology is to be done.

In a secondary introductory subsection I would like to say more explicitly what I mean by "reflection" on the Word of God. First, I must say something about the addition I have made to "Word of God" in the thesis of this first section: "which is spoken by God in revelation, which is recorded in the holy scripture of the prophets and apostles, and which now both is and should be proclaimed and heard in Christian preaching." You can see compressed in this addition all that I am trying to say this semester in the form of prolegomena to dogmatics. For this reason any supporting or expounding of the addition would anticipate my whole series. At this point I can only show logically and grammatically what is meant.

I am distinguishing the Word of God in a first address in which God himself and God alone is the speaker, in a second address in which it is the Word of a specific category of people (the prophets and apostles), and in a third address in which the number of its human agents or proclaimers is theoretically unlimited. But God's Word abides forever (Isaiah 40:8; 1 Peter 1:25). It neither is nor can be different whether it

has its first, its second, or its third form, and always when it is one of the three it is also in some sense the other two as well. The Word of God on which dogmatics reflects – I need only refer to the common formula to show the point at issue – is one in three and three in one: revelation, scripture, and preaching – the Word of God as revelation, the Word of God as scripture, and the Word of God as preaching, neither to be confused nor separated. One Word of God, one authority, one power, and yet not one but three addresses. Three addresses of God in revelation, scripture, and preaching, yet not three Words of God, three authorities, truths, or powers, but one. Scripture is not revelation, but from revelation. Preaching is not revelation or scripture, but from both. But the Word of God is scripture no less than it is revelation, and it is preaching no less than it is scripture. Revelation is from God alone, scripture is from revelation alone, and preaching is from revelation and scripture. Yet there is no first or last, no greater or less. The first, the second, and the third are all God's Word in the same glory, unity in trinity and trinity in unity. I will not go on to say with the Athanasian Creed that those who would be saved must think thus of the Trinity, for as yet I have only said and not shown that this is so and why it is so. But I think that this statement, which must simply stand until it can be confirmed or not in the course of our discussion, will be enough to show what I have in mind when I call the object of the reflection which is the dogmatic task the Word of God.

I must add two observations. At this third point I have tried to indicate that God's Word is to be regarded as a living, actual, and present factor, the Word of God which now both is and should be proclaimed and heard. Now! Should be! Note in these expressions first of all the movement, the qualified temporal element, the turning from past to present denoted by them. The Word of God is God's speaking. It is ongoing as Christian preaching. It is not ongoing as revelation in the strict sense. It never took place as such. The statement "God revealed himself" means something different from the statement "revelation took place." Revelation is what it is in time, but as the frontier of time, remote from us as heaven is from earth. Nor is God's Word ongoing as holy scripture. It is in time as such. It took place as the witness given to revelation. But in itself it is a self-enclosed part of history which is as far from us as everything historical and past. Our experiences are not a continuation of those of the prophets and apostles. Theoretically one might declare the continuation of the biblical canon to be possible (e.g., if two lost epistles to the Corinthians were found again, or if an ecumenical

council received the *Didache* into the [New Testament]). But this would not be an ongoing of scripture, only an extension of the concept of scripture, or of what the concept means. All conceivable extensions of scripture would still belong to the past, not to the present. They would not be a step out of the past into the future. But as Christian preaching, which proceeds from revelation and scripture (as the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son), the Word of God is ongoing. It is present. Naturally, in, with, and under Christian preaching, revelation and scripture are present too, but not otherwise. In this regard we are not restricting the term “Christian preaching” to sermons from the pulpit, or to the work of pastors, but including in it whatever we all “preach” to ourselves in the quiet of our own rooms.

Barth’s thought is relatively easy to follow, once his agenda has been understood. (Note that the *Didache* is an early Christian work, which was widely respected within the early church, but is not included in the canon of the New Testament.) One of the core themes is the relation of divine revelation, the Bible, and Christian preaching. How would you summarize this relationship?

Barth sets out a threefold account of the nature of God’s self-disclosure in terms of the “addresses of God in revelation, scripture, and preaching.” Notice how he hints at some kind of correspondence or analogy between these three “addresses of God” and the three persons of the Trinity. On the basis of this passage, how committed do you think he is to this analogy? What might its implications be?

One of Barth’s concerns in this discussion is to avoid “freezing” revelation in a fixed set of statements, which determine and limit its scope and application. Where in the passage do you find this concern addressed? Do you think he is right to be concerned about this? How does the idea of the Word of God being “ongoing” address this?

1.5 Emil Brunner on revelation and reason

One of the most interesting theological debates of the twentieth century took place in 1934, between two Swiss Protestant theologians: Karl Barth and Emil Brunner (1889–1966). The debate concerned “natural theology” – the area of theology which considers what humanity can naturally know about God. Brunner and Barth had many theological similarities – for example, both stressed the priority of God’s revelation, and resisted the idea that humanity could discover the nature and character of God through the use of pure reason. Yet there were some significant differences, as this reading will make clear.

Emil Brunner began his career as a pastor in the eastern Swiss village of Obstalden. An impressive series of publications led to him being appointed professor of theology at the University of Zurich from 1924 to 1955, during which time he produced many works of significance. One of their leading themes is the priority of divine revelation over natural human reason. Brunner, like Barth, places an emphasis upon the idea of revelation as the “word of God.” But an important question emerges: is this “word of God” something that impacts immediately and directly on humanity? Or does it need to be interpreted?

One of the most fundamental differences between Barth and Brunner, which becomes clear in the passage to be studied, concerns whether the “word of God” overwhelms humanity, commanding assent and eliciting an appropriate response (Barth), or whether it addresses humanity, inviting them to make such a response (Brunner). The passage for study is taken from the work *Revelation and Reason*, which Brunner published in 1941, following his controversy with Barth on natural theology.

Since the Bible describes revelation as the “Word of God,” this shows clearly that revelation presupposes a receptive spiritual subject. The manner in which the Word works is different from all subjective-causal, concrete-magical influences. The Word does not overwhelm, it does not coerce, it does not ignore the one “over against us,” but it calls, addresses, threatens, and entreats; it “calls forth” or evokes decision. It appeals to hearing and understanding. The proclamation through the Word therefore applies only to the human creation which is endowed with reason. Certainly, “God can of these stones raise up children to Abraham” (Matthew 3:9). He can create humanity out of nothing by His almighty Word. But that is not our concern here; for God does not ordain that His Gospel shall be proclaimed to stones, plants, and

animals, but to human beings alone; for they alone are *logikoi*, beings designed for the reception of words. God can redeem even idiots who are without reason; but this does not take place through the preaching of the Word. For an idiot, in the strict sense of the word, is a creature who is incapable of understanding words; he is open to the working of God's mighty power, but not to the Word of God, because he cannot understand speech at all.

God, when He became a human being, came down to the level of humanity, in order that humanity might be able to meet Him. He has adapted His revelation to humanity, in that He clothed it in the human word of the Apostles. He chose this form of revelation because communication through speech is the proper way in which human communication is carried on. Human beings use words, wherever they awaken to their human identity; as *humanus* they use language, that is, they can speak and understand the speech of others. This capacity was given to humanity as its own in the creation. Wherever the Gospel is proclaimed this capacity is presupposed. Capacity for speech is not given to us by the message of Christ, but it is claimed and used for the message of Christ.

Human capacity for speech belongs to the *lumen naturale*; indeed, it is the primary token by which we perceive the presence and the operation of the natural light, or the light of reason. But this *lumen naturale* is not without an original relation to the divine Word, which in Jesus Christ became flesh. It is not the same, but it comes from the same source, from the Logos of God. When God created humanity as a rational being, as a *logikos*, those who can understand and use words, He created them for the reception of His Word of revelation. As the personal being of humanity is a reflection of the divine personal Being, *imago Dei*, so the human word is *imago verbi divini*. The human capacity for speech is intended by the Creator as receptivity for His Word; that is its most original and direct meaning. "God is our nearest relation," says Pestalozzi. So also the Word of God is that which alone makes us "human" in the fullest sense of the word.

The Word of God comes to us as a human word – as the word of an Isaiah, a Paul, or a John. It makes use of a definite human language that is already in existence, with its vocabulary and its grammar. The Prophet speaks Hebrew, the Hebrew which every Hebrew understands; the Apostle speaks the Greek which every Greek and every educated man of his day understands. The Word of God makes use of these languages, and thus presupposes the understanding of these

languages. It turns to the understanding of the hearer with his own particular language and mentality. It claims this understanding of language for itself. This adaptation, this consideration of that which man already has, comes out very clearly in the “translation” of the Hebrew–Greek Bible into other languages. Without this translation the Word of God remains closed and unknown. To such an extent does the Word of God presuppose an understanding of man – namely, of language – that it remains completely ineffective where this understanding cannot be presupposed. The Word of God submits to the process of translation into all the languages of the world; this shows how seriously God takes man. For God wills that human beings as subjects should not be overwhelmed, but that they should come into communion with Himself. That is why He speaks to us in a word that we are able to understand.

Read the passage slowly, and try to identify Brunner’s central concerns. Can you identify any sentences that seem to sum up his general approach in this passage? Note how John Calvin’s notion of God accommodating the form of revelation to take account of human weakness features prominently in Brunner’s discussion, especially in his statement that God “has adapted His revelation to humanity.”

Brunner clearly regards the human capacity for language as immensely important. Note how he reflects on the significance of biblical translation. The Bible, he argues, needs to be translated into languages that people can understand. Can you see the theological point that he draws out from this observation?

If not, the following discussion may help you. Suppose that the “word of God” was capable of breaking through human incomprehension, as Brunner believes Barth to teach. Since the “word of God” was originally given in Hebrew or Greek, the languages of the Bible, should not this suggest that translation is unnecessary? Yet we all know that translation is needed. This, Brunner, suggests, leads to the conclusion that God “speaks to us in a word that we are able to understand.” Locate this sentence in the passage, and make sure you understand the argument that leads to this conclusion.

Finally, try to reflect on the broader implications of this point. If God indeed “speaks to us in a word that we are able to understand,” does this imply that a human failure to understand what God speaks makes revelation impossible? Does this suggest that humanity is active in revelation, in that humans have to make sense of what God is saying?

1.6 Paul Tillich on the nature of theology

What is theology? And what is the task of the theologian? Many answers have been given throughout the long history of Christian theology, reflecting longstanding debates about the nature of Christianity, the place of critical reflection within the church, and the way in which the Christian faith engages the mind, imagination, and emotions. There is no obvious right answer – yet trying to answer the question illuminates the issues.

One answer was given by Paul Tillich (1886–1965), one of the twentieth century’s most notable theologians. Tillich was a German Lutheran theologian who was sacked for his opposition to Adolf Hitler in 1933. He emigrated to the United States, initially holding a chair in theology at Union Theological Seminary, New York, before being appointed professor of religion at Harvard University.

Our reading is taken from one of three sermons delivered during the 1940s on the topic of “the theologian,” aimed especially at students of theology at Union Seminary. Tillich opens his reflections on his theme by referring to the “Areopagus Address,” delivered by Paul in Athens (Acts 17:16–34), and notes how theology can be considered to articulate the Christian response to the “ultimate questions” that are asked within a culture.

The famous scene in which Paul speaks from the central place of Greek wisdom shows us a man who is the prototype of the *answering* theologian. Paul has been asked about his message, partly because the Athenians were always curious about novelties, and partly because they knew that they did *not* know the truth, and seriously desired to know it. There are three stages in Paul’s answer, which reveal the three tasks of the *answering* theologian. The first stage of Paul’s answer consists in the assertion that those who ask him the ultimate question are not unconscious of the answer: these men adore an unknown God and thus witness to their religious knowledge in spite of their religious ignorance. That knowledge is not astounding, because God is close to each one of us; it is in *Him* that we live and move and exist; these *also* belong to His race. The first answer, then, that we must give to those who ask us about such a question is that they themselves are already aware of the answer. We must show to them that neither they nor we are outside of God, that even the atheists stand in God – namely, that power out of which they live, the truth for which they grope, and the ultimate meaning of life in which they believe. It is bad theology and religious cowardice

ever to think that there may be a place where we could look *at* God, as though He were something outside of us to be argued for or against. Genuine atheism is not humanly possible, for God is nearer to a man than that man is to himself. A God can only be denied in the name of another God; and God appearing in *one* form can be denied only by God appearing in another form. That is the first answer that we must give to ourselves and to those who question us, not as an abstract statement, but rather as a continuous interpretation of our human existence, in all its hidden motions and abysses and certainties.

God is nearer to us than we ourselves. We cannot find a place outside of Him; but we can *try* to find such a place. The second part of Paul's answer is that we can be in the condition of continuous flight from God. We can imagine one way of escape after another; we can replace God by the products of our imagination; and we do. Although mankind is not strange to God, it is estranged from Him. Although mankind is never without God, it perverts the picture of God. Although mankind is never without the knowledge of God, it is ignorant of God. Mankind is separated from its origin; it lives under a law of wrath and frustration, of tragedy and self-destruction, because it produces one distorted image of God after another, and adores those images. The answering theologian must discover the false gods in the individual soul and in society. He must probe into their most secret hiding-places. He must challenge them through the power of the Divine Logos, which makes him a theologian. Theological polemic is not merely a theoretical discussion, but rather a spiritual judgement against the gods which are not God, against those structures of evil, those distortions of God in thought and action. No compromise or adaptation or theological self-surrender is permitted on this level. For the first Commandment is the rock upon which theology stands. There is no synthesis possible between God and the idols. In spite of the dangers inherent in so judging, the theologian must become an instrument of the Divine Judgement against a distorted world.

So far as they can grasp it in the light of their own questions, Paul's listeners are willing to accept this two-fold answer. But Paul then speaks of a third thing which they are not able to bear. They either reject it immediately, or they postpone the decision to reject or accept it. He speaks of a Man Whom God has destined to be the Judgement and the Life of the world. That is the third and final part of the theological answer. For we are real theologians when we state that Jesus is the Christ, and that it is in Him that the Logos of theology is manifest.

But we are only theologians when we interpret this paradox, this stumbling-block for idealism and realism, for the weak and the strong, for both pagans and Jews. As theologians, we must interpret that paradox, and not throw paradoxical phrases at the minds of the people. We must not preserve or produce artificial stumbling-blocks, miracle-stories, legends, myths, and other sophisticated paradoxical talk. We must not distort, by ecclesiastical and theological arrogance, that great cosmic paradox that there is victory over death within the world of death itself. We must not impose the heavy burden of wrong stumbling-blocks upon those who ask us questions. But neither must we empty the true paradox of its power. For true theological existence is the witnessing to Him Whose yoke is easy and Whose burden is light, to Him Who is the true paradox.

Tillich's sermon is clearly written, and is generally easy to understand. The first paragraph sets out a theme which is characteristic of Tillich: that human culture raises certain "ultimate questions," which the Christian faith is in a position to engage and answer. Although Tillich would later frame and answer these questions in existentialist terms, he adopts a much more open-ended attitude in this sermon. Note how Tillich suggests, following both Martin Luther and John Calvin, that culture degenerates into idolatry if its searching is not anchored to the Christian revelation. Note also his intriguing suggestion that "genuine atheism is not humanly possible." How does he arrive at this conclusion? Do you think he is right?

Later in the sermon, we find a second major theme of Tillich's theology – the idea of "paradox." As the passage makes clear, Jesus of Nazareth is one such paradox. Tillich holds that such paradoxes hold the key to theological insight, in that they force us to revise and review existing ways of thinking. How does he develop this point in the final sentences of this extract?

1.7 C. S. Lewis on myths in theology

One of the most important debates in modern theology has to do with how Christianity relates to other religions. This raises some important questions about the nature of divine revelation, and how other religions are understood to relate to this. One of the most interesting discussions of this question comes from the Oxford literary critic and novelist C. S. Lewis (1898–1963). Lewis held that Christianity takes the structural form of a myth (a word that Lewis uses to mean a grand account of things, or a “metanarrative”). Yet it differs from all other such myths, because it is the *real* myth, to which all other myths only approximate. In this extract, taken from a paper entitled “Is Theology Poetry?,” delivered to the Socratic Club at Oxford in 1945, Lewis sets out why occasional similarities between Christianity and other religions is to be expected, on the basis of the overarching nature of the Christian view of reality.

There are, however, two other lines of thought which might lead us to call Theology a mere poetry, and these I must now consider. In the first place, it certainly contains elements similar to those which we find in many early, and even savage, religions. And those elements in the early religions may now seem to us to be poetical. The question here is rather complicated. We now regard the death and return of Balder as a poetical idea, a myth. We are invited to infer thence that the death and resurrection of Christ is a poetical idea, a myth. But we are not really starting with the datum “Both are poetical” and thence arguing “Therefore both are false.” Part of the poetical aroma which hangs about Balder is, I believe, due to the fact that we have already come to disbelieve in him. So that disbelief, not poetical experience, is the real starting point of the argument. But this is perhaps an over-subtlety, certainly a subtlety, and I will leave it on one side.

What light is really thrown on the truth or falsehood of Christian Theology by the occurrence of similar ideas in Pagan religion? I think the answer was very well given a fortnight ago by Mr Brown. Supposing, for purposes of argument, that Christianity is true, then it could avoid all coincidence with other religions only on the supposition that all other religions are one hundred per cent erroneous. To which, you remember, Professor Price replied by agreeing with Mr Brown and saying: Yes. From these resemblances you may conclude not “so much the worse for the Christians” but “so much the better for the Pagans.” The truth is that the resemblances tell nothing either for or against the truth

of Christian Theology. If you start from the assumption that the Theology is false, the resemblances are quite consistent with that assumption. One would expect creatures of the same sort, faced with the same universe, to make the same false guess more than once. But if you start with the assumption that the Theology is true, the resemblances fit in equally well. Theology, while saying that a special illumination has been vouchsafed to Christians and (earlier) to Jews, also says that there is some divine illumination vouchsafed to all men. The Divine light, we are told, “lighteneth every man.” We should, therefore, expect to find in the imagination of great Pagan teachers and myth-makers some glimpse of that theme which we believe to be the very plot of the whole cosmic story – the theme of incarnation, death and rebirth. And the differences between the Pagan Christs (Balder, Osiris, etc.) and the Christ Himself is much what we should expect to find. The Pagan stories are all about someone dying and rising, either every year, or else nobody knows where and nobody knows when. The Christian story is about a historical personage, whose execution can be dated pretty accurately, under a named Roman magistrate, and with whom the society that He founded is in a continuous relation down to the present day. It is not the difference between falsehood and truth. It is the difference between a real event on the one hand and dim dreams or premonitions of that same event on the other. It is like watching something come gradually into focus: first it hangs in the clouds of myth and ritual, vast and vague, then it condenses, grows hard and in a sense small, as a historical event in first-century Palestine. This gradual focusing goes on even inside the Christian tradition itself. The earliest stratum of the Old Testament contains many truths in a form which I take to be legendary, or even mythical – hanging in the clouds: but gradually the truth condenses, becomes more and more historical. From things like Noah’s Ark or the sun standing still upon Ajalon, you come down to the court memoirs of King David. Finally you reach the New Testament and history reigns supreme, and the Truth is incarnate. And “incarnate” is here more than a metaphor. It is not an accidental resemblance that what, from the point of view of being, is stated in the form “God became Man,” should involve, from the point of view of human knowledge, the statement “Myth became Fact.” The essential meaning of all things came down from the “heaven” of myth to the “earth” of history. In so doing, it partly emptied itself of its glory, as Christ emptied Himself of His glory to be Man. That is the real explanation of the fact that Theology, far from defeating its rivals by a superior poetry is, in a superficial

but quite real sense, less poetical than they. That is why the New Testament is, in the same sense, less poetical than the Old. Have you not often felt in Church, if the first lesson is some great passage, that the second lesson is somehow small by comparison – almost, if one might say so, humdrum? So it is and so it must be. This is the humiliation of myth into fact, of God into Man: what is everywhere and always, imageless and ineffable, only to be glimpsed in dream and symbol and the acted poetry of ritual, becomes small, solid – no bigger than a man who can lie asleep in a rowing boat on the Lake of Galilee.

Lewis' argument in this passage is that, throughout its history, humanity has developed myths which can be seen as glimpsing something of the true situation. (The word "myth" is being used in a technical sense here, and does not mean "something untrue." Perhaps the idea of a "narrated worldview" expresses Lewis' approach best.) These myths can therefore be seen as approximations to a greater truth. So the question then arises: which of these myths is best? Which corresponds most closely to reality? Lewis argues that the Christian story or "myth" is to be seen as the reality to which all myths bear witness, however partially and inadequately. The incarnation, Lewis suggests, can be understood as "myth become fact."

Read the passage carefully, and try to assemble the various elements of Lewis' argument. How does Lewis account for similarities between Christianity and other religions? What does he mean by his intriguing phrase "the humiliation of myth into fact"? And how does this lead into his cryptic final statement about Jesus of Nazareth?

1.8 John Paul II on faith and reason

One of the finest essays on the relation of faith and reason was published in 1998. The encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* (“Faith and Reason”) was issued by Pope John Paul II (1920–2005), formerly the Polish cardinal Karol Józef Wojtyła. (An “encyclical” letter is a letter that is widely distributed – in this case, to all the bishops of the Catholic church.) In this letter, John Paul II explores the significance of the universal human drive to make sense of things, which underlies both philosophy and theology. He affirms the importance of reason, while protesting against excessively optimistic accounts of what it can achieve unaided. So how, he asks, does this universal human quest for truth and wisdom relate to the truths of the Christian faith? How can reflection on the world of nature lead into the presence of God?

The approach adopted by *Fides et Ratio* is classic, honoring the genuine human quest for wisdom, while insisting that this reaches its climax and goal in the person of Jesus Christ. Although wounded and partially blinded by sin, the human mind has not lost its innate longing to pursue meaning, or its ability to know the truth. John Paul II thus argues the case for a philosophy that is capable of transcending empirical data in order to attain something absolute, ultimate, and foundational – which the Christian faith declares to have been disclosed, once and for all, in Jesus of Nazareth.

“Wisdom knows all and understands all” (Wisdom 9:11)

16. Sacred Scripture indicates with remarkably clear cues how deeply related are the knowledge conferred by faith and the knowledge conferred by reason; and it is in the Wisdom literature that this relationship is addressed most explicitly. What is striking about these biblical texts, if they are read without prejudice, is that they embody not only the faith of Israel, but also the treasury of cultures and civilizations which have long vanished. As if by special design, the voices of Egypt and Mesopotamia sound again and certain features common to the cultures of the ancient Near East come to life in these pages which are so singularly rich in deep intuition.

It is no accident that, when the sacred author comes to describe the wise man, he portrays him as one who loves and seeks the truth: “Happy the man who meditates on wisdom and reasons intelligently, who reflects in his heart on her ways and ponders her secrets. He pursues her like a hunter and lies in wait on her paths. He peers through

her windows and listens at her doors. He camps near her house and fastens his tent-peg to her walls; he pitches his tent near her and so finds an excellent resting-place; he places his children under her protection and lodges under her boughs; by her he is sheltered from the heat and he dwells in the shade of her glory” (Sirach 14:20–27).

For the inspired writer, as we see, the desire for knowledge is characteristic of all people. Intelligence enables everyone, believer and non-believer, to reach “the deep waters” of knowledge (cf. Proverbs 20:5). It is true that ancient Israel did not come to knowledge of the world and its phenomena by way of abstraction, as did the Greek philosopher or the Egyptian sage. Still less did the good Israelite understand knowledge in the way of the modern world which tends more to distinguish different kinds of knowing. Nonetheless, the biblical world has made its own distinctive contribution to the theory of knowledge.

What is distinctive in the biblical text is the conviction that there is a profound and indissoluble unity between the knowledge of reason and the knowledge of faith. The world and all that happens within it, including history and the fate of peoples, are realities to be observed, analysed and assessed with all the resources of reason, but without faith ever being foreign to the process. Faith intervenes not to abolish reason’s autonomy nor to reduce its scope for action, but solely to bring the human being to understand that in these events it is the God of Israel who acts. Thus the world and the events of history cannot be understood in depth without professing faith in the God who is at work in them. Faith sharpens the inner eye, opening the mind to discover in the flux of events the workings of Providence. Here the words of the Book of Proverbs are pertinent: “The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps” (Proverbs 16:9). This is to say that with the light of reason human beings can know which path to take, but they can follow that path to its end, quickly and unhindered, only if with a rightly tuned spirit they search for it within the horizon of faith. Therefore, reason and faith cannot be separated without diminishing the capacity of men and women to know themselves, the world and God in an appropriate way.

17. There is thus no reason for competition of any kind between reason and faith: each contains the other, and each has its own scope for action. Again the Book of Proverbs points in this direction when it exclaims: “It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out” (Proverbs 25:2). In their respective worlds, God and the human being are set within a unique relationship. In God

26 *Faith*

there lies the origin of all things, in him is found the fullness of the mystery, and in this his glory consists; to men and women there falls the task of exploring truth with their reason, and in this their nobility consists. The Psalmist adds one final piece to this mosaic when he says in prayer: “How deep to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I try to count them, they are more than the sand. If I come to the end, I am still with you” (Psalm 139:17–18). The desire for knowledge is so great and it works in such a way that the human heart, despite its experience of insurmountable limitation, yearns for the infinite riches which lie beyond, knowing that there is to be found the satisfying answer to every question as yet unanswered.

Read the passage carefully, and try to identify the thread of argument that runs through it. How is a connection established between the general quest for wisdom and the Christian revelation?

Make a list of all the biblical works that are cited in this passage. You ought to be able to find six passages that are either explicitly cited, or referred to. All are taken from the Old Testament. These are: Psalms; Proverbs; Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus); and the Book of Wisdom (which Protestants treat as part of the Apocrypha, in that it was not originally written in Hebrew). Interestingly, these four books belong to the genre usually known as “wisdom literature,” both celebrating and illustrating the human longing to make sense of the world.

Much of what is stated in this section of the document can be summarized in its terse declaration that “faith sharpens the inner eye.” Locate this statement, and examine its context. What do you think John Paul II meant by this? And how does it illuminate the relation of faith and reason?