

CHAPTER 1

Faith

“I believe in God.” This opening phrase of the Creed leads us directly into our first theological topic. What does it mean to “believe in God”? What are we to understand by words such as “belief” and “faith”? This is an important question, which will help us set the scene for our reflections on the nature of theology.

What is Faith?

Christian theologians have never seen faith simply in terms of intellectual assent to Christian belief. As many philosophers have pointed out, the everyday sense of “faith” is that something is believed to be true – for example, believing that there is a God. The philosopher Richard Swinburne (born 1934) thus describes a “person of religious faith” as a “person who has the theoretical conviction that there is a God.” Yet as Swinburne himself concedes, religious belief involves substantially more than a “theoretical conviction.” He cites the example of Martin Luther to make the point that “the person of faith does not merely believe that there is a God (and believe certain propositions about him) – he trusts Him and commits himself to Him.” Faith is about existential trust and commitment; it concerns finding a solid base on which a meaningful life can be constructed.

Faith is thus a matter of the heart, not only the mind, involving personal commitment rather than mere intellectual assent. As the

English theologian William Temple (1881–1944) once pointed out: “Faith is not only the assent of our minds to doctrinal propositions: it is the commitment of our whole selves into the hands of a faithful Creator and merciful Redeemer.”

Christian theologians have traditionally made a distinction between faith as *a set of beliefs*, and faith as *an act of believing*. Two Latin phrases are often used in the theological literature to express this difference between the *content* of faith, and the human *act* of faith.

1. *Fides quae creditur* (which can be loosely translated as “the faith that we believe”). This refers to an *objective set of beliefs*, such as those set out in the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed. These are understood to provide an outline of the basic beliefs of the Christian faith.
2. *Fides qua creditur* (which can be loosely translated as “the faith by which we believe”). This refers to a *subjective act of trust or assent*, by which individual believers accept and appropriate the basic ideas of the Christian faith.

The relationship between these objective and subjective aspects of faith is regularly discussed in works of theology. There is a general consensus within Christian theology that both these elements are part of a proper and full understanding of faith. They are not inconsistent, but refer to different aspects of the act of believing. Faith affects the human mind, heart, and will. Consider, for example, this statement from the British Anglican theologian W. H. Griffith-Thomas (1861–1924):

[Faith] affects the whole of [human] nature. It commences with the conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence; it continues in the confidence of the heart or emotions based on the above conviction, and it is crowned in the consent of the will, by means of which the conviction and confidence are expressed in conduct.

This definition of faith would command wide support within Christian theology. It weaves together the core elements of the characteristic Christian understanding of faith, linking together intellectual conviction, trusting confidence, and informed conduct.

It recognizes that there are *cognitive*, *affective*, and *practical* dimensions to faith. Faith is a belief that a certain state of affairs is true; that it can be the basis of personal trust and commitment; and that it leads to an active venture of living in certain ways that are believed to be appropriate expressions of this belief.

One of the core elements of Christian faith is an attitude of informed trust in God, which stands at the heart of the Old Testament account of the calling of Abraham (Genesis 15:1–6). This tells of how God promised to give Abraham countless descendants, as numerous as the stars of the night sky. Abraham “believed” God – that is, he trusted the promise that was made to him. Abraham’s decision to act on the basis of this belief highlights a further aspect of religious faith – a willingness to entrust oneself to who or what is believed.

Similarly, the crowds that gathered around Jesus Christ are often described as having “faith” – meaning that they believed that he had some special status, identity, or authority, and would be able to heal them from their illnesses, or deal with their concerns (e.g., Luke 5:20; 17:19). Here again the basic idea is trust, in this case mingled with discernment that there is something about Jesus that merits such an attitude of trust. To believe in God is primarily to trust God – and then to put into words – to *articulate* – what we actually believe *about* God. Faith is thus both a *relational* and a *cognitive* matter.

Faith and Evidence

In everyday language, words like “faith” and “belief” have come to mean something like “a weak form of knowledge.” I know that the chemical formula for water is H_2O , or that the earth rotates around the sun. When I say “I know” that “the capital of the United States of America is Washington, DC,” I mean that this statement can be verified. But when I say “I believe in God,” I would be understood by those working with the everyday sense of the word “belief” to mean something like “I think that there is a God, but I cannot demonstrate this with any degree of certainty.”

This everyday use of the terms “faith” and “belief” is misleading, however, as it does not do justice to the complexity of the theological notion of “faith.” In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, western

philosophy widely believed that beliefs ought to be *proved by evidence* – whether by logical reasoning or by scientific experimentation. For example, the nineteenth-century British mathematician W. K. Clifford (1845–1879) declared that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” This “positivism” had a deep impact on western culture, and its influence still lingers. The idea of “faith in God” was ridiculed by some rationalist writers, who argued that unless God’s existence could be proved, it was an utterly irrelevant notion.

Yet with the passing of time, the credibility of this position has been severely weakened. In part, this reflects a growing skepticism about the confidence with which Enlightenment writers asserted the triumph of human reason. Recent critics of the Enlightenment point out that it failed to establish a reliable criterion that stands *above* human practice, by which rival visions of rationality could be judged. If reason is the supreme judge of beliefs, how can it adjudicate authoritatively and unaided between competing views of what it means to be “rational”? In his landmark study *Which Justice? Whose Rationality?*, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (born 1929) concluded that the “legacy of the Enlightenment has been the provision of an ideal of rational justification which it has proved impossible to attain.”

Anticipating this development, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) argued that faith is “an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness” – meaning that core beliefs about God, the nature of good, and the meaning of life cannot be verified, yet are deeply significant at an inward existential level for human beings. Kierkegaard’s point is that human beings have to learn to live within a world of uncertainties. It is becoming increasingly clear that many of the fundamental beliefs of western culture lie beyond proof. As Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) pointed out in his 1885 poem *The Ancient Sage*, nothing really important could be proved in the way that people like Clifford demanded:

For nothing worthy proving can be proven,
Nor yet disproven: wherefore thou be wise,
Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt,
And cling to Faith beyond the forms of Faith.

There seems to be a growing consensus about the importance of beliefs for human beings, and a recognition of the limits of human reasoning. We seem to be able to prove only shallow truths, but not the great truths of meaning, goodness and significance that lie at the heart of our existence and give order and meaning to our lives. Some beliefs can indeed be proved; but many others – such as beliefs about moral values or the meaning of life – lie beyond certain proof. This point lies behind the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s often-quoted remark that there are “no facts but only interpretations.”

This point is further developed by the Australian atheist philosopher Graham Oppy (born 1960), who holds that atheism, agnosticism, and theism are all “rationally permissible” in terms of their evidence base. Oppy defends his own preference (atheism) by arguing that this represents, in his view, the “best evaluation” of all the relevant considerations, while making it clear that not all “thoughtful, intelligent, and well-informed people” will agree with his conclusion. Why not? Because this belief that there is no God goes beyond the evidence that is available. It is a *judgment*, an *opinion* about how best to interpret a complex range of evidence. Oppy’s wise comments suggest that atheism is also a faith. An atheist believes that there is no God. This belief, however, is just as difficult to prove as the Christian belief that there is indeed a God.

Yet beliefs are deeply important to people, even though they cannot be proved to be right. God is one of these core beliefs that provides meaning and significance in life. Yet, as we shall see in the next section, while belief in God may lie beyond total proof, it is both helpful and important to explore whether belief in God is rational.

Can God’s Existence be Proved?

The basic Christian attitude to proofs for the existence of God can be set out as follows.

1. The existence of God is something that reason cannot prove *conclusively*. Yet the fact that the existence of God lies *beyond* reason does not mean that the existence of God is *contrary* to reason.

2. Certain excellent reasons may be put forward for suggesting that God exists; these do not, however, count as “proofs” in the sense of “rigorous logical demonstrations” or “conclusive scientific experiments.” It is possible to *justify* faith in God – but not to *prove* it.
3. Faith is ultimately about trust in God, rather than just accepting that God exists. It is thus a relational, not merely a cognitive, notion.

In what follows, we shall explore this aspect of Christian theology in a little more detail, focusing on Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), probably the most famous and influential theologian of the Middle Ages. Born in Italy, Aquinas achieved his fame through his teaching and writing at the University of Paris and other northern universities. His fame rests chiefly on his *Summa Theologiae*, composed toward the end of his life and which remained unfinished at the time of his death. However, he also wrote many other significant works, particularly the *Summa contra Gentiles*, which represents a classic statement of the rationality of the Christian faith, and especially the existence of God.

Aquinas believed that it was entirely proper to identify pointers toward the existence of God, drawn from general human experience of the world. His “Five Ways” represent five lines of argument in support of the existence of God, each of which draws on some aspect of the world which “points” to the existence of its creator.

So what kind of pointers does Aquinas have in mind? The basic line of thought guiding Aquinas is that the world mirrors God, as its creator – an idea which is given more formal expression in his doctrine of the “analogy of being.” Just as an artist might sign a painting to identify it as his handiwork, so God has stamped a divine “signature” upon the creation. What we observe in the world – for example, its signs of ordering – can be explained if we believe that God is its creator. If God both brought the world into existence, and impressed the divine image and likeness upon it, then something of God’s nature can be known from the creation.

So where should we look in creation to find evidence for the existence of God? Aquinas argues that the ordering of the world is the most convincing evidence of God’s existence and wisdom. This basic assumption underlies each of the “Five Ways,” although it is of particular importance in the case of the argument often referred to as

the “argument from design” or the “teleological argument.” We shall consider the first and last of these five “ways” to illustrate the issues.

Aquinas’s “First Way” begins from the observation that the world changes. The natural world is not static, but is dynamic. Rain falls from the sky. Stones roll down valleys. So what causes these changes? This, the first of Aquinas’s arguments, is normally referred to as the “argument from motion;” however, it is clear that the “movement” in question is actually understood in more general terms, so that the term “change” is more appropriate as a translation of the Latin term *motus*.

So how did nature come to be in motion? Why is it changing? Why isn’t it static? Aquinas argues that “everything which moves is moved by something else.” For every motion, there is a cause. Things don’t just move; they are moved by something else. Now each cause of motion must itself have a cause. And that cause must have a cause as well. And so Aquinas argues that there is a whole series of causes of motion lying behind the world as we know it. Now unless there is an infinite number of these causes, Aquinas argues, there must be a single cause right at the origin of the series. From this original cause of motion, all other motion is ultimately derived. This is the origin of the great chain of causality which we see reflected in the way the world behaves. From the fact that things are in motion, Aquinas thus argues for the existence of a single original cause of all this motion. This, Aquinas insists, is none other than God.

In more recent times, this argument has been restated in terms of God as the one who brought the universe into existence. Aquinas’s argument assumes that the existence of the universe is something that requires explanation. Why is there something rather than nothing? It will be clear that this type of argument relates directly to modern cosmological research, particularly the “big bang” theory of the origins of the cosmos. For this reason, it is often referred to as the “cosmological” argument (from the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning “universe”). The most commonly encountered statement of the argument can be set out like this:

1. Everything within the universe depends on something else for its existence;
2. What is true of its individual parts is also true of the universe itself;

3. The universe thus depends on something else for its existence for as long as it has existed or will exist;
4. The universe thus depends on God for its existence.

We now turn to look at the fifth and final way, known as the “teleological” argument (from the Greek word *telos*, meaning “purpose” or “goal”). Aquinas notes that the world shows signs of design. Natural processes and objects seem to be adapted with certain definite objectives in mind. They seem to have a purpose. They seem to have been designed. But things don’t design themselves: they are caused and designed by someone or something else. Arguing from this observation, Aquinas concludes that God is both the source and best explanation of this natural ordering.

This argument was developed by the English popular theologian William Paley (1743–1805), best known for his work *Natural Theology* (1802). According to Paley, the world is like a watch. It shows evidence of intelligent design (Paley uses the technical term “contrivance”); it seems to have been created for a purpose. If there was a watch, there must therefore also be a watchmaker. Paley was particularly impressed by the construction of the human eye, which he argued to be so complex and highly developed that it could only be the result of intelligent design and construction.

Paley’s argument was highly influential in nineteenth-century England. However, its plausibility was eroded by the theory of evolution proposed by Charles Darwin (1809–1882), which offered an alternative explanation of how such complex structures arose. In his *Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin insisted that these could be explained on a purely natural basis, without the need for an intelligent divine designer. Nevertheless, the “argument from design” remains a philosophically plausible idea that continues to fascinate people.

Aquinas’s arguments are similar in terms of their structure. Each depends on tracing a causal sequence back to its single origin, and identifying this with God. These are thus not “proofs” in the strict sense of the word, as they actually presuppose God’s existence. Aquinas’s approach is not to prove the existence of God, but to uncover the fundamental reasonableness of this belief. His argument is that presupposing that God made the world makes a lot of sense of

the world. In other words, the existence of God resonates well with what can be observed of the world. It is thus a confirmation, rather than a proof, of God's existence.

Are Proofs of God's Existence Useful?

Many theologians and philosophers consider Aquinas's arguments for the existence of God to be helpful; others, however, have viewed such "proofs" with skepticism. The great French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) had two major concerns about the kind of approach adopted by Aquinas. First, he found it difficult to accept that the rather abstract philosophical "god" which resulted from such arguments was anything like the living God of the Old and New Testaments. In his *Pensées*, Pascal suggested that "metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning, and so complex, that they have little impact."

And second, Pascal argued that these "proofs" assumed that God was known primarily through *reason*. For Pascal, the human heart also had its reasons for believing (or not believing!) in God. "We know the truth, not only through our reason, but also through our heart." The appeal of God to the human condition went far beyond any resonance between the world as we know it and the ideas of the Christian faith. It extends to include a deep-seated longing for God, which Pascal held to be of major importance in the long, unended human quest for God and final meaning.

One of the most severe and perceptive critics of such rational proofs for God's existence is the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). His point is simple: the so-called "proofs of God's existence" are generally provided by people who already believe in God, but hold that it is important to provide a reasoned defense or justification of their faith.

A proof of God's existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists. But I think that what *believers* who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is to give their "belief" an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs.

Yet Wittgenstein is not suggesting that such arguments are useless; he was rather noting that arguments for the existence of God serve a useful purpose both within and beyond the community of faith, in that they affirm that Christianity is rational – even if its core belief in God cannot be proved with certainty.

Faith is Beyond Reason but not Contrary to Reason

One of the most important recent discussions of the relation of faith and reason is found in Pope John Paul II's 1998 encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* ("Faith and Reason"). In this letter, John Paul II (Karol Józef Wojtyła, 1920–2005) set out the classic Christian approach to the relation of faith and reason in a very accessible way.

The letter opens with a declaration that faith and reason can work together. "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves." This is a rich and powerful statement that deserves close attention. The basic idea is that human beings long to know the truth, and are constantly searching for it. "In the far reaches of the human heart there is a seed of desire and nostalgia for God."

So can reason alone lead humanity to this truth? The letter pays a handsome tribute to philosophy, as the legitimate human quest for truth. Philosophy is "one of the noblest of human tasks," which is "driven by the desire to discover the ultimate truth of existence." Yet unaided human reason cannot fully penetrate the mystery of life. It cannot answer questions such as "why are we here?" For this reason, God graciously chose to make these things known through revelation which would otherwise remain unknown. "The truth made known to us by Revelation is neither the product nor the consummation of an argument devised by human reason."

The letter stresses that faith is not blind trust, opposed to the evidence of the world. Rather, it points out that the world – which Christians see as God's creation – is studded with hints of God's existence and nature. It appeals to Paul's sermon preached at the

Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:16–34) in arguing that it is entirely reasonable to infer the existence of God from the wonders of nature and a human sense of divinity within us. These do not count as “proofs”; they are, however, confirmation or corroboration of the basic themes of faith. In the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury argued that “faith seeks understanding.” Having believed, we long to understand the inner dynamics and structures of our faith.

Similar lines of argument are developed by John Polkinghorne (1930–2021), a leading British theoretical physicist with a strong interest in Christian theology. Throughout his many books, Polkinghorne stresses that Christianity, like the natural sciences, is concerned with making sense of the world on the basis of the evidence that is available. “Faith is not a question of shutting one’s eyes, gritting one’s teeth, and believing the impossible. It involves a leap, but a leap into the light rather than the dark.” Faith is to be understood as “motivated belief, based on evidence.” It is rigorously based on reflection on the world – on the various “clues” it offers to its origins and nature.

For example, Polkinghorne argues that science shows us a universe that is deeply intelligible, rationally beautiful, finely tuned for fruitfulness, intrinsically rational, partly veiled in character, open in its process, and information-generating in its nature. These remarkable properties, he argues, are not just happy accidents. They are something that needs to be explained. For Polkinghorne, the best explanation of these observations is that the world is the orderly creation of God. The approach is evidence-based, asking how what we observe may best be explained. It is not conclusive; it is, however, highly suggestive.

Polkinghorne also stresses the importance of the figure of Jesus of Nazareth for Christian faith. Jesus is part of the evidence that has to be assessed.

The centre of my faith lies in my encounter with the figure of Jesus Christ, as I meet him in the Gospels, in the witness of the church and in the sacraments. Here is the heart of my Christian faith and hope. Yet, at a subsidiary but supportive level, there are also hints of God’s presence which arise from our scientific knowledge. The actual way we answer the question “How?”, turns out to point us to pressing also the question “Why?”, so that science by itself is found not to be sufficiently intellectually satisfying.

Although some atheist writers persist in portraying Christian faith as a blind leap in the dark, it is clear that this is not the case. Faith, as Thomas Aquinas points out, is a motivated belief, based on evidence – a leap into the light, rather than into the dark.

Up to this point, we have considered faith primarily in terms of intellectual assent – as, for example, in Thomas Aquinas’s view of faith as “assent to divine revelation.” Yet, as we noted earlier in this chapter, there are important relational aspects of faith. To “believe in God” is about more than accepting that God exists; it is about *trusting* this God, and living on this basis. In what follows, we shall consider this important aspect of faith.

Faith and God’s Promises

Martin Luther is one of many theologians who stress that faith, as the Christian church understands this term, is far more than intellectual assent. For Luther, faith is fundamentally *trust*. Faith is about trusting a God who makes promises, and whose promises may be relied upon. In his major 1520 essay *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther stressed this aspect of faith.

Where there is the Word of the God who makes promises, there must necessarily be the faith of the person who accepts those promises. It is clear that the beginning of our salvation is a faith which clings to the Word of a promising God who, without any effort on our part, in free and unmerited mercy goes before us and offers us a word of promise.

Three points relating to Luther’s idea of faith may be singled out for discussion:

1. Faith has a personal, rather than a purely historical, reference.
2. Faith concerns trust in the promises of God.
3. Faith unites the believer to Christ.

We shall consider each of these points individually.

First, faith is not simply historical knowledge. Luther argues that a faith which is content to believe in the historical reliability of the

Gospels is not a faith which changes our relationship with God. Sinners are perfectly capable of trusting in the historical details of the Gospels; but these facts of themselves are not adequate for true Christian faith. Saving faith has to do primarily with believing and trusting that Christ was born for us personally, and has accomplished for us the work of salvation.

The second point concerns faith as “trust.” Luther often uses the Latin word *fiducia*, which can be translated as “trust” or “confidence,” to denote this aspect of faith. Luther uses a nautical analogy to bring out the importance of trust and commitment in the life of faith. “Everything depends upon faith. The person who does not have faith is like someone who has to cross the sea, but is so frightened that he does not trust the ship. And so he stays where he is, and is never saved, because he will not get on board and cross over.” Faith is not merely believing that something is true; it is being prepared to act upon that belief, and rely upon it. To use Luther’s analogy: faith is not simply about believing that a ship exists; it is about stepping into it, and entrusting ourselves to it.

But what are we being asked to trust? Are we being asked simply to have faith in faith? The question could perhaps be phrased more accurately: *who* are we being asked to trust? For Luther, the answer was unequivocal: faith is about being prepared to put one’s trust in the promises of God, and the integrity and faithfulness of the God who made those promises. Believers “must be certain that the one who has promised forgiveness to whoever confesses their sins will most faithfully fulfill this promise.” For Luther, faith is only as strong as the one in whom we believe and trust. The efficacy of faith does not rest upon the intensity with which we believe, but in the reliability of the one in whom we believe. It is not the greatness of our faith, but the greatness of God, which counts.

The foundation of someone’s faith thus matters far more than its intensity. It is pointless to trust passionately in someone who is not worthy of trust; even a weak faith in someone who is good and reliable is vastly to be preferred to a strong faith in someone who turns out to be a cheat or swindler. Trust is not, however, an occasional attitude. For Luther, it is an undeviating trusting outlook upon life, a constant stance of conviction in the trustworthiness of

the promises of God. As Karl Barth put this in the twentieth century: “In God alone is there faithfulness, and faith is the trust that we may hold to Him, to His promise and to His guidance. To hold to God is to rely on the fact that God is there for me, and to live in this certainty.”

In the third place, faith unites the believer with Christ. Luther states this principle clearly in his 1520 treatise *The Liberty of a Christian*:

Faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. As Paul teaches us, Christ and the soul become one flesh by this mystery (Ephesians 5:31–32). And if they are one flesh, and if the marriage is for real – indeed, it is the most perfect of all marriages, and human marriages are poor examples of this one true marriage – then it follows that everything that they have is held in common, whether good or evil. So the believer can boast of and glory in whatever Christ possesses, as though it were his or her own; and whatever the believer has, Christ claims as his own. Let us see how this works out, and see how it benefits us. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The human soul is full of sin, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them. Sin, death, and damnation will be Christ’s. And grace, life, and salvation will be the believer’s.

Faith, then, is not assent to an abstract set of doctrines – perhaps a possible weakness of Aquinas’s approach (although Aquinas’s conception of faith goes far beyond mere assent to certain ideas). Rather, it is a “wedding ring” (Luther), involving mutual commitment and union between Christ and the believer. It is the response of the whole person of the believer to God, which leads in turn to the real and personal presence of Christ in the believer.

“To know Christ is to know his benefits,” wrote Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), Luther’s colleague at Wittenberg. Faith makes both Christ and his benefits – such as forgiveness, justification, and hope – available to the believer. John Calvin echoes this point, and restates it with characteristic clarity. “Having ingrafted us into his body, [Christ] makes us partakers, not only of all his benefits, but also of himself.” Christ, Calvin insists, is not “received merely in the understanding and imagination. For the promises offer him, not so that we end up with the mere sight and knowledge of him, but that we enjoy a true communication of him.”

Faith and Doubt: The Problem of Suffering

Faith can never fully prove its claims. This is not, however, a problem that is unique to Christianity. Any belief system finds itself in the same position – including, incidentally, atheism, if this is understood as a belief there is no God. Belief in God can neither be proved nor disproved with total certainty. In this section, we shall explore one area of theology which confronts a difficulty that many Christians encounter. If God is good, why is there suffering and pain in the world? How can the presence of evil or suffering be reconciled with the Christian affirmation of the goodness of the God who created the world? In what follows, we shall explore some of the ways in which this has been explored within the Christian tradition.

The approach developed by the second-century writer Irenaeus of Lyons has been particularly influential. For Irenaeus, human nature is a potentiality – something that emerges. Humans are created with certain capacities for growth toward maturity. That capacity for spiritual maturing cannot develop in an abstract situation. It needs to be in contact with and have experience of good and evil if truly informed decisions are to be made. This tradition tends to view the world as a “vale of soul-making” (to use a term taken from the English poet John Keats, (1795–1821)), in which encounter with evil is seen as a means of spiritual growth and development.

In the modern period, this approach was developed by the philosopher John Hick (1922–2012) in his *Evil and the God of Love* (1966). Hick here emphasized that human beings are created incomplete. In order for them to become what God intends them to be, they must participate in the world. God did not create human beings as automatons, but as individuals who are capable of responding freely to God. Unless a real choice is available between good and evil, the biblical injunctions to “choose good” are meaningless. Good and evil are thus necessary presences within the world, in order that informed and meaningful human development may take place.

A quite different approach is found in the writings of the American philosopher Alvin Plantinga (born 1932), who offers a “free will defense” that is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. Plantinga’s approach picks up on some themes developed by Augustine of

Hippo, especially his argument that evil arises from an abuse of human free will. Plantinga's basic approach can be summarized as follows:

1. Free will is morally important. That means that a world in which human beings possess free will is superior to a hypothetical world in which they do not.
2. If human beings were forced to do nothing but good, that would represent a denial of human free will.
3. God must bring into being the best possible world that he is able to do.
4. It must therefore follow that God must create a world with free will.
5. This means that God is not responsible if human beings choose to do evil. God is operating under self-imposed constraints that mean he will not compel human beings to do good.

Hick and Plantinga both offer philosophical solutions to the problem of evil. Others have tried to adopt a more rigorously theological approach, based on the specific ideas of the Christian faith. One of the most influential of these has been the argument that God suffers – in other words, that God shares in the sufferings of the world. In *The Crucified God* (1974), Jürgen Moltmann (1926–2024) argued that the suffering of Christ on the cross is both the foundation and the criterion of an authentically *Christian* theology. Precisely because Jesus is God incarnate (an idea we shall explore later in this work), the suffering of Christ is also the suffering of *God*.

Moltmann argues that a God who cannot suffer is a *deficient*, not a perfect, God. Stressing that God cannot be *forced* to change or undergo suffering, Moltmann declares that God *willed* to undergo suffering. The suffering of God is the direct consequence of the divine *decision* to suffer, and the divine *willingness* to suffer. “In the passion of the Son, the Father himself suffers the pains of abandonment. In the death of the Son, death comes upon God himself, and the Father suffers the death of his Son in his love for forsaken man.”

Moltmann's approach opened up a new way of thinking (or allowed the retrieval of premodern ways of thinking) about the problem of suffering. Traditionally, one of the major concerns here has been the feeling that God is somehow immune from the sufferings

of the world, standing over and above it as a detached, uninvolved spectator. How, many asked, could anyone believe in such a God, who, having created the world, then abandons it to pain and suffering? Annie Besant's influential book *Why I Do Not Believe in God* (1887) expresses this concern particularly well: "I do not believe in God. My mind finds no grounds on which to build up a reasonable faith. My heart revolts against the spectre of an Almighty Indifference to the pain of sentient beings." Moltmann's response is that God chooses to share the suffering of that world. Far from being "indifferent," he shows his commitment and compassion by entering into this vale of soul-making, bearing its sorrow and pain.

The problem of suffering can, however, be engaged in two quite different ways. One approach is to try and make sense of it. We see this approach in works such as Hick's *Evil and the God of Love* and C. S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* (1940). Yet there is a second approach, which tries to help people cope with suffering – to live meaningfully and courageously in the face of the suffering and pain of the world.

This second approach is found in the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1944). For Bonhoeffer, "our God is a suffering God" – one who bears our sin, pain, and anguish. The deepest meaning of the cross of Christ is that there is no suffering on earth that is not also borne by God. The church, for Bonhoeffer, is the continuing presence of the suffering Christ in history, a body of persons called to share in the messianic suffering of God by being there for others, carrying their burdens and thus fulfilling the duty laid on them by Christ himself. It is through suffering that Christians learn to turn the final outcome of their actions over to God, who alone can perfect them in glory. And it is in dying that they find true freedom as they meet God face to face. A suffering God, according to Bonhoeffer, has not abandoned his people. Far from it; he stands by them as a fellow sufferer, and will bring them home to a place from which suffering and pain have been removed.

As will be clear from this brief discussion, much theological ink has been spilled over the question of what the existence of suffering has to say about the existence of God. The results have been inconclusive. As the philosopher William Alston (1921–2009) pointed out, any purely *logical* argument that attempts to show that evil is logically

incompatible with the existence of God “is now acknowledged on (almost) all sides” to be completely bankrupt.

Engaging With a Text

In this opening chapter, we have explored some aspects of faith. We have seen how faith has both cognitive and relational aspects. To believe in God is both about accepting that a God exists, and also that this God can be known and trusted. Christians believe certain things about God, while placing their trust in this God. We have already looked at some ideas in the writings of Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther to illustrate these points. Now we are going to try to take things further and interact with a theological text.

Why is it important to engage with primary texts? At some point, you are going to need to begin reading works of theology for yourself. It is therefore important to begin interacting with these in as manageable a way as soon as possible. Each chapter of this book concludes with a section that will help you to engage with a short extract from a leading theologian or theological document. These will be drawn from a variety of Christian traditions, allowing you to reflect on a number of different approaches. You will be guided through this process of reading and reflection. To begin with, the texts will be short – but gradually they will become longer. Initially, you will be given a lot of help – but as you gain in confidence there will be less need for this assistance. We are going to begin this process of engagement with a short but fascinating extract from a leading Protestant writer on the theme of “faith.”

The text in question is 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. Calvin is a very precise and logical theologian, who is generally very easy to read and understand. In what follows, we are going to interact with the definition of faith which he sets out in this major work. Here is the definition:

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.

Take a few moments to read through this short passage, and take in what Calvin is saying. You may find these reflections helpful as you read this passage.

1. Note how Calvin's definition of faith is *trinitarian*. We shall be exploring this aspect of the Christian faith in more detail later (Chapter 7). For the moment, note how Calvin correlates different aspects of faith with each of the three persons of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit. Try to identify each of these aspects. If you are studying this book in a discussion group, spend some time talking about this, making sure that you are happy about the threefold structure of this definition.
2. The first part of this definition declares that faith is a “steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence toward us.” Notice first how 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 a belief that there is a God, or a general “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?
3. The definition now goes on to declare that faith is “founded upon the truth of the gracious promise of God in Christ.” Once more, 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. You might like to compare this idea with

Luther's views on the matter, which we considered earlier in this chapter (p. 12), and notice their similarity at this point. It is important to see how 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.

4. Calvin clearly holds that faith involves both mind and heart. If you are in a discussion group, you might like to explore how he approaches each of these. 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. It is “sealed in our hearts.” Notice how Calvin's language about the “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 a personal transformative knowledge of God made possible by the Holy Spirit.

Having explored the meaning of the term “faith,” we may now turn to explore the content of faith in the remaining nine chapters of this work – beginning with what Christians believe about God.