SUGGESTED READINGS

Niels C. Nielsen, Jr., et al., *Religions of the World*, 1983. Ch. 1 and 2 on symbols in general, their cultural importance, and some concrete examples.

Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By*, 1972. Ch. 2 especially, is an influential work on the emergence of human culture through myths and their enactment in ritual.


CHAPTER ELEVEN

Believing and Knowing

The Interrelations of Faith and Reason

The relation between faith and reason depends partly on what is meant by “faith.” The religious person today is usually convinced that there is a major difference between faith and reason. People think of faith as a basis for belief precisely when reason fails. Faith is a trust, perhaps, in certain symbols, scriptures, leaders, and so forth, that goes beyond the evidence. Or it is a commitment to a religious viewpoint in spite of a lack of rational justification. Faith says, for example, that there really is a life after death even if there is no hard evidence of this. Reason, on the other hand, believes in things like gravity precisely because there is good evidence for it. At least that is how people often think about these matters.

A classic proponent of this notion of faith was the second-century Christian theologian named Tertullian (c.160-c.230). He declared that he believed that Jesus had risen physically from the dead precisely because it was not the kind of thing that was reasonable. If it were reasonable, he would not need faith to accept it. His concluding words are often quoted: “I believe because it is absurd.” He dramatized his position by asking “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”; that is, what does all the rational argumentation of the philosophers and scientists of the intellectual city of Athens have to do with the religious faith that Jerusalem stands for?

Tertullian’s position, however, is not the only one. First of all, while most people do think that faith is what a person relies on just where reason fails short, they nonetheless usually like to think that their faith is at least somewhat reasonable rather than totally disconnected from reason. Secondly, Tertullian treats faith as a mode of belief. Many centuries later, Martin Luther (1485-1546) will treat faith more as loving trust in God. Specific beliefs were still important to Luther, but now only in relation to this more basic and general trust. Where a Christian would speak of faith, a Muslim would speak precisely of “Islam,” that is, of submission to the will of God, and a Jew would
speak of covenant and of conformity to the Law of Moses. Some current theological writers even argue that the most basic faith, one that appears in all religions, is a fundamental trust in life, especially in the value of human life.

Many things in life are based on some sort of faith. We have faith in our parents and our spouses and our friends. We trust that the air traffic control systems of the world will guide our planes to safe landings. Some argue that even science is based on faith. There are ways in which this is true (though the word “confidence” may be more appropriate than “faith”). Chapter Twelve will describe the nature of science. This chapter deals with the place of reason in religious faith.

The question for a religious believer is whether religious faith should also be reasonable, or whether it can legitimately be unreasonable or even anti-reasonable? In this chapter we will first have to sort out some of the things that this might mean by looking at ways in which religious thinkers have tried to establish the reasonableness of religion. When we have looked at various ways this can be done, it will be easier to judge whether indeed you think that it should be done. In general any process of reflecting rationally on religious faith by those who believe in it is called theology. (When rational reflection on a religious tradition is done from a nonreligious viewpoint it is then often called philosophy of religion. But religious believers sometimes take a philosophical viewpoint about their own beliefs, so the use of labels here gets confusing.)

THEOLOGY

The Primitive and Archaic Traditions

No one knows how many thousands of years human beings have had religious symbols and rituals and stories. Graves that are twenty-five thousand years old have been found with stone implements buried next to the bones, as though to provide tools for the dead in a next life. This is a clue that for those twenty-five thousand years, perhaps, human beings have been conscious of the mysteries of life and have tried to make sense of them and deal with them.

Through most of those years people have eagerly thought about the many numerous beings and powers. They have wondered about the names and characteristics of the spirits, about techniques for controlling man and divining the future. They have celebrated the reality of the powers and spirits in ritual; they have told the stories of the numerous in countless folktales and grand myths. Over and over again, religious beliefs have made sense of an otherwise mysterious reality.

But a new stage in religiousness came into power in human history in the axial age, when some people went beyond the beliefs they had used up to this point to make sense of reality, and tried to make sense of the beliefs themselves. Everywhere there had been people who had questioned one belief or another, who had doubted the power of a certain magic stone or the presence of a particular spirit; but these were not the systematic kind of doubts and questions and analysis about beliefs that finally appeared when historic religion began. At that point some people raised very basic questions about why anyone should believe anything at all.

Historic Religion Produces Theology

Historic culture in general is a stage in human development in which the culture begins to produce individuals who seek a logically coherent and fully unified way of understanding all aspects of reality at once. That is obviously an extremely ambitious goal. But it is also an implicit faith that reality ultimately makes sense, that in the end it really all does hang together. This faith took the human adventure of development and self-discovery in a new direction.

This faith in the ultimate intelligibility of reality manifests itself in three major ways. The first is philosophy. That is a name first given by ancient Greeks to their “love of wisdom” which expressed itself in the all-embracing theories about the whole universe proposed by people like Plato and Aristotle. The Stoics and the Epicureans added their versions. Similar schools of thought arose during comparable centuries in China and India.

The second way that faith in the ultimate intelligibility of reality manifests itself is in science. This was originally not distinct from philosophy. If you are seeking to make sense of everything at once you cannot easily divide your knowledge into separate packages called philosophy and science, because all knowledge must fit together in the end. But in recent centuries we have come to think of science as a distinct set of fields of study. It shares with philosophy the faith that we should treat reality as intelligible and keep on learning ever more how things fit together, though the scientists tend to settle for one thing at a time rather than take on the whole universe of all possible knowledge at once the way philosophy has often tried to do.

The third way that faith in the ultimate intelligibility of things has manifested itself is in the body of religious reflection called theology. This is work done by those who believe in a religious tradition, to show the intelligibility and reasonableness of that tradition. Theologians strive to provide a coherent account of their beliefs and rituals and moral codes and so on, in relation to each other and to all other things. (At least this is what theology has meant to people in historic cultures. In modern times some theologians have given up on this and like Tortullian are willing to separate religious belief from rationality, as it exists in science especially. Postmodern theology has yet another approach. We will see more about this in later chapters.)

What theology has done, as is true also for philosophy and science, is to
look at all of existence and try to capture it in one master "story," as theologians now often call it, but a "story" that is really a thoroughgoing and usually abstract analysis, that includes the final and overall truth, meaning, and meaningfulness of everything. In the process of doing this the theologians measured all the partial folktales and grand myths against each other to see which could fit together and which could not. They threw out those that did not fit well with each other or with other kinds of evidence and logic. The ones that did all fit together in a single coherent story were translated into a more abstract language so that the logical unity and reasonableness of this story could be presented with precision.

From the beginning of this project one of the most troublesome, though also creative, aspects is that there have often been many conflicting master stories in the world. This has been true even within a single cultural tradition. The Taoists of China did not see the same overall unity as the Confucians; the Hindus of India disagreed with the Buddhists; in the West Jews, Christians, and Muslims have variant master stories. The contrasts among the cultures of China, India, and the West are even greater. Even if a given religious tradition has one all-embracing interpretation of life and reality, one in which all the beliefs, rituals, symbols, etc., fit together in a coherent entity, it still may have great difficulty trying to establish that its interpretation is the right one. In the next town or just across the ocean or over the mountains there is another all-embracing interpretation that is quite different.

Today many people are used to allowing everyone to believe what she or he chooses, so people do not always worry very much about the fact that the Hindu interpretation of life conflicts with the Taoist, and that both conflict with the Christian. But historic religions have tended to take themselves rather seriously. This makes sense if ultimate salvation is at stake, especially if that salvation consists in something like getting to heaven and avoiding hell or avoiding endless rebirth into suffering. Moreover, if one of the historic universalizing traditions is true, that implies that the others are at least in some way false.

In defense of their own beliefs people will sometimes try to show that the other religions are false. In contemporary times there are those who attack all religious belief. If you have faith in some religious tradition, sooner or later someone will raise questions about your beliefs. If someone attacks your religion by saying that it is unreasonable or contrary to the evidence, you may want to have a way of responding. Theology has tried to provide help here.

Theology, in sum, is a name for rational reflection about religious beliefs and all the other religious symbols. It has two goals in mind. The first is to develop and maintain an overall inner rational consistency among the aspects of the present form of the religious tradition. This applies the criterion of "fit" to religious thought. The second is to show that belief in those basic aspects is sufficiently wise or reasonable that even outsiders should respect that religious tradition. This asks how well the beliefs "fit" with evidence from life and the world. To say it even more succinctly: theology is the attempt to establish 1) the coherence and 2) the truth of a religious tradition. When a theology accepts from the outset a certain religious tradition, revelation, or some inspired writings as a valid source of truth and seeks to show the coherence of ideas and practices, the theology is called systematic or doctrinal theology. When a theology looks to the book of nature, as it were, to evidence available even to nonbelievers, to show the reasonableness of belief, the theology is called natural theology or philosophical theology. We can look at these two types of theology one at a time.

**SYSTEMATIC OR DOCTRINAL THEOLOGY**

**Faith Seeking Understanding**

Systematic theology is the name often given to the kind of theology that first presupposes that the religious beliefs of its traditions are true, and then seeks to deepen the understanding of their truth by analyzing, comparing, and integrating them with one another. This establishes the inner coherence of the beliefs. Because systematic theology takes for granted the truth and value of the religious tradition and its doctrines, it is "faith seeking understanding," a classic Christian expression used by St. Augustine of Hippo in the early fifth century CE and echoed by St. Anselm of Canterbury in the late eleventh century.

The task of systematic theology is a very difficult one. There is always some degree of uncertainty about the message of the tradition. People interpret scriptures differently, and the doctrines are not always clear and simple. This is inevitable. Religion brushes up against the fringes of infinite mystery. It always has to struggle to deal with that mystery. It is hard to make sense out of life in a coherent way. If this can be done well, it provides an indirect argument in favor of the truth of those beliefs. Any belief system that manages to do so is bound to seem insightful and reasonable. Yet it is also very difficult to do, precisely because the project is to achieve a total coherence of ideas in relation to an infinite mystery. That is a daunting task, as some examples here can illustrate.

**An Example: God and Evil, the Problem of Theodicy**

A dramatic example of this search for overall logical coherence is the Western analysis of the problem of evil discussed in Chapter Three. We have seen that originally Zoroastrian thought may have been held back from a full monotheism by its inability to account for the existence of evil in a world created by an all-powerful and all-good God. One Zoroastrian answer was to
diminish the divine power of Ahura Mazda. Evil exists, they sometimes explained, because Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, cannot easily and quickly conquer Ahriman, Father of Lies. As Chapter Three noted, any theological explanation of the presence of evil in a world made by an omnipotent and all-good God is called a "theodicy," the word invented by Leibniz about 1710. (Leibniz was not doing "systematic theology," however, but "natural" or philosophical theology, to be described later here.)

The great Western monotheists have had a difficult time on this topic. In the West belief in God has included the claims that God is all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing. The basic theological problem of evil is to show how these three attributes of God are logically compatible with the existence of human suffering. Theology cannot say that suffering exists because God lacks the power to eliminate it. To say that would be contrary to traditional belief in God's omnipotence. Some have suggested that suffering is an illusion. What we call suffering is not really suffering: pain is an illusion, or we exaggerate our difficulties to ourselves. Western religious tradition has rejected this idea, though. We humans do suffer, tradition says. And most of us would insist from direct experience that at least some suffering is real.

If God is truly omnipotent, it seems that God could eliminate suffering, but does not. No theologian has seriously entertained the idea that God is callous, indifferent, or evil. God is all-good, the traditional doctrines assert. Nor could suffering exist because God overlooks it for a while until someone's prayers call attention to it, because God is all-knowing, the traditions affirm. The all-good God must allow suffering, therefore, for some good reason. An explanation of what that reason is would constitute a successful theodicy.

That reason might be found in another belief, that we humans were born with the power of free choice, able to choose good or evil. Without this conscious freedom we would not be human. Without it we could not freely choose good or choose to love. Freedom is so valuable, one common theodicy says, that God finds its sometimes evil consequences worth the price. Augustine put it more precisely, that God allows evil so that an even greater good could be achieved than would otherwise be possible. In this case, God allows suffering as the inevitable by-product of creating free beings. It is this human freedom, not God, that is the cause of hatred and murder and war and other forms of suffering.

The problem of evil is not so easily solved, though. Much suffering has been caused not by human freedom but by the forces of nature, by drought, flood, earthquake, and disease. Children are killed and crippled by events that no human choice could have prevented or avoided. There are theological responses to this also. One of them is the traditional Christian belief in original sin, based on an interpretation of the book of Genesis in the Hebrew scriptures.

At the beginning of things, God created the universe and placed humankind at its peak. Then the whole universe was orderly and good. But the original man and woman used their freedom to choose to sin, thereby disrupting the right order of things, perhaps so drastically that the earth itself became unbalanced. Later Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature added the claim that at the end of the world, God will make all things right again. Then all evil will be destroyed and perfect justice will prevail. Anyone who suffered on earth without deserving it will be repaid, with happiness and glory. Anyone who did evil without suffering for it will be repaid with punishment. The suffering of millions of people has been caused by original sin, but it will all make sense in the end. This is a fairly comprehensive theodicy.

Even this traditional answer has sometimes seemed awkward, though. An all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good God might just have found a way to prevent the suffering of millions down through the ages for sins they did not commit. But everyone has committed personal sins also, the tradition replied to this objection. So everyone has also personally earned suffering. Yet those who say this have been hard-pressed to explain the suffering of infants, who presumably have not deserved their suffering.

Other ideas have proved helpful at this point. One is that God sends suffering at times even when it is undeserved, as a means of testing and testing people, to allow them to become stronger and learn how to deserve even greater rewards. If this all seems a little harsh on little children who suffer, there is the final answer that Job arrived at: that suffering is a mystery. The story of Job in the Hebrew scriptures is one of the great treasures of Western tradition. It is a very human story of a good man who suffered much. His initial response to the loss of his children, his wealth, and his health, is a well-known response. "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." But relentless questioning by his friends finally moved him to challenge the heavens. Make sense of this to me, Job cried out to God. God responded: Were you there, Job, when I laid the foundations of the earth and made the creatures of the deep? Can you possibly understand? Accept that the divine ways are a mystery, Job. In response Job accepted, even though he did not understand, and trusted in God.

That brief telling does not do justice to the complexities of the story of Job. The theology written about the problem of evil since the time of the story (perhaps 400 BC) is even more complex. We do not have to solve the problem of evil here, fortunately. But it is a good example of how great a task historic theology has taken on in its attempt to show the reasonableness, the logical coherence, of the system of beliefs.

Polytheism has an easier time of it. It does not suppose there is any final unity of reality, so it does not have to figure out how everything relates to
everything else in its portrayal of that reality. But if historic religion fails to do this, it will be attacked as inadequate or internally contradictory. It will lose plausibility for the inquiring mind. By default the religious tradition will appear internally incoherent and therefore unreasonable.

Making the Implausible into the Plausible

Some beliefs present a special problem in that they might not by themselves seem reasonably plausible at all. Yet as part of a larger coherent system they can gain plausibility. Most Westerners, for example, find it hard to see how some people in India could believe that the universe is not truly real. The Hindu who follows Shankara finds this belief plausible partly because it is part of sacred tradition, and partly because the Hindu is used to the idea as part of the cultural context. But the unreality of the world is plausible also because it is a belief that fits coherently with other ideas. The Hindu faces the problem of evil: Why do we suffer? Is there a way to overcome suffering? To believe that our worldly existence is maya, an insubstantial shadow, puts suffering in its place by portraying it as part of the passing insubstantiality of worldly existence. The belief in the unreality of the universe thereby helps to make a kind of sense, a coherent explanation of the human condition.

Among the various beliefs of Western religions, the Christian belief in the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth is one that Muslims and Jews find highly implausible. How can the absolutely infinite and eternal God possibly become human, finite, and time-bound, in any way whatsoever? One classic attempt of Christian theology to explain this is that of Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury, in his late eleventh-century work, Cur Deus Homo? (Why God Human? or, more usually Why Did God Become Human?).

We have seen that systematic theology integrates and justifies beliefs by working within a belief context, by accepting certain basic beliefs as already true. From the earliest times of historic religion, however, another challenge to belief has existed: how do the believers know that their basic beliefs are true? How can the believer show that the symbols of the tradition are correct? Why should anyone trust that its revelation is true? Confronted by doubters, those who have believed have tried to do another kind of theologizing, one that has been called by many names including “philosophy of religion” or “philosophical theology.” Here we will call it by another of its names, “natural theology.”

**Natural Theology**

**By Reason Alone**

Natural theology tries to rely only on the natural human powers of reasoning and not at all on prior belief or doctrines. In practice, natural theology usually
ends up confirming many traditional beliefs. Every human mind is inclined to see as reasonable what is already customary. Religion is no exception. In principle, however, natural theology defends itself against doubts or attacks by using reasoning alone. It cannot support its conclusions by quoting a sacred authority or text. It assigns itself the job of making sense to people on the basis of reasoning and experience, not on the basis of beliefs already accepted.

Natural theology has been very influential in Western civilization. Beginning with the ancient Greeks of the axial age, Western thinkers have tried to use reason to uncover the ultimate secrets of the universe, to discover the universal power, patterns, and stuff of things by reflection and logical analysis. We have seen one such attempt in the example of Aristotle’s argument concluding that there is an Unmoved Mover, a perfect self-thinking thought that accounts for all the motion and activity in the whole universe. By rational analysis alone, Socrates and Plato concluded that the human soul is immortal. These are but two instances of a much larger tradition of philosophical reflection. As it happened, the thought of those ancient Greeks spread around the Mediterranean world until Jew, Christian, and Muslim began to see in such thought the possibility of proving by reason much of what they also believed by faith.

A major purpose of natural theology has always been “apologetics.” This is not an apology in the modern sense of expressing regret for having done something wrong. The Greek word it is based on means to offer an account or explanation of something, often to defend or justify it. Christian apologists consists of attempts to show the reasonableness of Christian belief and practice. Some early Christians argued that the events of Jesus’ life and death were clearly predicted in the Hebrew scriptures, and that Jesus obviously had divine power because he could work miracles. Similarly, Muslims have argued that the poetic beauty of the Qur’an shows that it could not have been produced by any human person, certainly not Muhammad who for all his genius was nonetheless illiterate. But philosophically-minded skeptics have not been ready to believe in miracles. So both Christians and Muslims, for example, have appealed to the high moral quality of the lives of the earliest disciples of Jesus and Muhammad respectively. Yet skeptics have argued that being good and being right are not the same thing. A noble soul can nonetheless believe in fake ideas.

As a result, there is a long tradition of apologetics that appeals to criteria that even a skeptic can respect, the criteria of evidence and rational argument, of the sort that science also uses (though not with the rules of public, long-term, and open-ended empirical testing used in science). The most common instance of this is in the proofs for the existence of God.

Proving God’s Existence by Human Reason

There are three major kinds of proofs. They are called the argument from design, the ontological argument, and the cosmological argument. The names are not important. The last two have lost much of their original meaning. But philosophers still use them, so we might as well also.

The Argument from Design

The word “argument” is a little misleading; it is not a two-person verbal dispute but a methodological analysis of reasons for and against an idea. In this case the idea that there must be a supreme and universal Designer of the universe. Probably the most popular argument for the existence of God, this begins with observations about the orderliness of nature.

There is an extraordinarily complex set of interrelated patterns to nature. The ecological patterns of even a small pond in the middle of summer are complex enough to test the capability of even a major computer to keep track of and analyze. Likewise the workings of the eye and hand in coordination is a marvelously intricate and balanced interplay. The eye catches the light rays of those certain wave lengths we call visible as they reflect on the surface of a baseball in swift curving flight. Signals from the eye guide the movements of body, shoulder, hand, and fingers in incredible coordination to capture the ball in flight in a smooth motion. Life forms, planets in orbits, the evolution of the stars in accordance with basic laws of nature—all seem to show a detailed pattern that could not be accidental or random. Order such as this could only be the result of an ordering Power. Both Taoist and Western monotheists agree on this.

Western theology carries the argument a step further and says that the Power that orders the entire universe must be a conscious and intelligent being, not a mere Force. It is the order of things that makes them intelligible. Without order there would be only irregularity and unpredictability, only chaos and nonsense. But the awesome fact is that the universe is the opposite. It is as though the universe were consciously planned and intelligently ordered. No unliving and unthinking Force or Power could account for such great intelligibility. Therefore, there must be an intelligent orderer such as Westerners call “God.” Because such order seems to imply a purpose or goal, this argument is also called the “teleological argument” after the Greek word telos, meaning “goal.”

This very popular line of reasoning is, unfortunately, greatly disputed. Astronomers, evolutionary biologists, and other scientists have theories about the universe that appear to be able to explain the ordered patterns of the universe as the result of a few mechanical laws of nature operating aimlessly over billions of years. We will hear more about these scientific thoughts in a subsequent chapter. Such scientific doubts have made other
arguments in favor of God’s existence more significant.

The Argument by Definition and Logic

A second argument is fascinating for its logical simplicity. It was first developed by Anselm of Canterbury and came to be known as the “ontological” argument. There is a neat modern form of it synthesized by the contemporary philosopher Charles Hartshorne. In its most condensed form it goes something like this:

A. Just by definition “God” is the label for the Most Perfect Being—M.P.B. (that than which nothing greater can be conceived; that which cannot be second to anything in any way, the totally unsurpassable Being).

B. Concerning the existence of M.P.B., there are four and only four logical possibilities. One of them must be true because there are no other possibilities.

1. The M.P.B. is logically impossible, i.e., is a self-contradictory notion like a square circle.

2. The M.P.B. is possible but does not exist.

3. The M.P.B. does exist but could cease to exist.

4. The M.P.B. exists necessarily, could not not-exist.

C. Statement 1 must be rejected. There is nothing self-contradictory in the idea of a M.P.B. (Hartshorne has written whole books in support of this.)

D. Statements 2 and 3 must be rejected because each statement is intrinsically self-contradictory: a being that does not exist or could cease to exist is unsurpassable and therefore is not a M.P.B. The possibility of not existing is incompatible logically with the definition of Most Perfect as given in this argument.

E. Therefore, statement 4 must logically be true, because one and only one of the four statements must be true, and 1, 2, and 3 are all false.

This argument does not appear to have the logical simplicity promised; it looks rather complicated instead. But it does not require a great deal of information about the world. It does not depend upon evidence about evolution or cosmic order. It simply argues that a being that is called Most Perfect must be defined as one that necessarily exists (cannot not be), otherwise it is not truly a definition of a most perfect being.

Critics of this argument, however, claim that Anselm and Hartshorne have only shown how to define the word “God” in a self-consistent way. That is not the same thing as showing that there is a reality that fits the definition. Thus, many philosophical theologians rely on a further argument.

The Argument for an Uncaused Cause

One of those who rejected Anselm’s ontological argument was the thirteenth-century theologian, Thomas Aquinas, perhaps the most influential of all the great medieval Christian theologians. He offered five basic arguments. The first three of these converge on a line of argumentation partly borrowed from Aristotle. Often called the cosmological argument, it claims that the fundamental facts of the cosmos, its activity, causal order, and even its very existence, can only be accounted for finally if there is an ultimate explanation of the kind that people know as God. Here is a paraphrase of the underlying ideas.

A. Every event that takes place has a cause or set of causes that accounts for it. This means that every event is intelligible, explainable by what caused it.

B. Every event depends on what caused it. Those causes depend on whatever caused them. These further causes are dependent on still other causes, and so on endlessly. Everything is contingent on something else. This means there is no ultimate intelligibility or explanation for events.

C. It does not make sense to suppose that the overwhelming intelligibility of things (as in A above) can come out of ultimate unintelligibility (as in B above).

D. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that the conclusion of B is not correct. It is reasonable to assume instead that there must be an ultimate reality which causes everything else and thereby explains why everything else exists.

E. For this to be the truly ultimate explanation, it cannot require any cause which explains it. It would therefore have to be the sole reality that is uncaused: the Uncaused Cause of all things. This is what all people call “God,” says Aquinas.

This rather abstract and bare bones summary contains a lot of ideas. It takes a common sense approach in asserting that reality is intelligible. We find it practical to assume that events do follow from their causes, that red dye makes red cloth and not blue, that loud bangs are produced by some cause and not by nothing at all, and so on. Science operates quite successfully on the premise that reality is intelligible. But it is hard to prove that reality is truly ultimately intelligible. Yet it is part of the basic faith of many, especially those raised in a Western tradition, that reality is intelligible after all.

A striking aspect of the cosmological argument for the existence of God is the thorough-going contingency it attributes to the universe. Every aspect and every event of the universe, it seems, could have been other than it is. There is no “necessity” to anything; all is contingent upon other conditions.
or causes. So a person can even ask about the universe, "why is there something rather than nothing?" Even if the universe never had a beginning, philosophers speculate, even if there has been an infinitely endless series of events preceding current conditions, we might still have to ask how it is that the universe has been existing at all. If the universe were itself a necessary existent—something that could not not exist—we could stop questioning why it is here. But a universe in which all the events are contingent on other events does not seem to be the kind of reality that exists necessarily.

This implies that even now the universe is being kept in existence, not by its own power but by the power of the Necessary Being, the Uncaused Cause. If this universe does not have its own power of existence, then there is a need for a divine "concursus," as it used to be called, a divine ongoing empowerment of the universe to sustain it in existence. In this perspective God creates the universe constantly.

In traditional Christian thought, God creates and sustains a universe with its own order of "secondary causality." God is the primary cause of the whole universe. It runs by the natural laws with which God endowed the universe. The laws are the "secondary" causes. Tradition has usually added that because God is above nature (super-natural in the strict sense), God can also intervene miraculously in this secondary causal order. But a common interpretation in Islamic thought extends the idea of the divine "concursus" to a full "occasionalism." Each and every occasion that takes place in the universe is specially and specifically created by God, so that everything does indeed happen exactly as God wills. Every event is a miracle, in a sense, done directly by God.

The Philosophers' God

The trickiest thing about the cosmological argument is that it claims only that the ultimate explanation known as God does exist. It does not claim that people can fully understand that explanation. To put it another way, the cosmological argument concludes that there must be an ultimate Uncaused Cause of all else. It does not say that we human beings can really comprehend what an Uncaused Cause is like. Just the opposite is the case. Aquinas argued something like this:

An Uncaused Cause is a cause which, just by being defined as uncaused, does not have or need anything that explains its existence or what it is like. Nothing accounts for it in any way. If anything could even possibly account for its existing or its way of existing, it too would be contingent in some way on an outside cause. Then it would no longer be the final answer to things. So, by definition, it must be the unique exception to the rule that everything is explained by its causes. The Uncaused Cause is self-explanatory. It necessarily exists. It is self-causing, if you like.

Therefore, the argument goes, the Uncaused Cause must be absolutely infinite. Any finite reality is this and not that (red and not blue, living and not dead, and so on). Every finite reality therefore could become other than it is (could turn blue and die). So a person can demand further explanation of why it is still red and living or why it has turned blue and died. The state of finite things is contingent, dependent on causes, in need of further explanation. Inasmuch as the Uncaused Cause by definition cannot depend on anything or require anything to explain it at all, it must therefore not be finite in any way at all.

This conclusion implies further that the Uncaused Cause is changeless. To change, a thing must first not be what it is to change into. It cannot turn blue if it is already blue. It must first be not-blue. But to be not something involves a finiteness, an aspect of non-being or limitation. Furthermore, a changeless reality is outside of time, because time is just the process of change. The word "eternal" stands for timelessness. As was said, this is not a mere everlastingness through all time. It is eternity outside time without any before, during, or after.

There are other logical implications, Aquinas thought, of the fact that God is the infinite and eternal Uncaused Cause. There can only be one Uncaused Cause. There cannot be two absolutely infinite realities, because then each would not be what the other was, and would therefore be limited. The Uncaused Cause must always be totally simple (without any inner differentiations) because otherwise there would be internal limits differentiating one aspect from another.

As is apparent by now, the Uncaused Cause is incomprehensible. The attributes of infinity, immutability, eternity, unity, and simplicity are all really negative ideas: no limit, no change, no time, and so on. They are not really descriptions of the Uncaused Cause so much as they are admissions that this cause must lie beyond the limits of what human minds can comprehend.

This clearly is a philosopher's God, the absolutely infinite and incomprehensible Uncaused Cause. It is also, however, the God of many philosophical theologians, those who try to argue that belief in God can be shown to be a reasonable option for an intelligent and reflective person. The problem is that the conclusion of all this intelligent reflection is very abstract and distant. Or to use a better word, the conclusion is Mystery.

When human beings seek ultimate intelligibility, final all-encompassing answers, they have set themselves on the path to the infinite. It is no wonder they find that the ultimate is Mystery. Yet to draw back from the ultimate is to settle for the finite powers again, a god or other limited forces, in order to express or explain the realities of life. There is no easy choice here.
The God of Natural Theology as Personal

If natural theology stopped at saying that the Uncaused Cause is the eternal and infinite incomprehensible One, it might fit the Brahmanistic views of Shankara but not those of Western theology. The natural theology described here comes out of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions. In these traditions the Uncaused Cause is a God that is also in some sense a personal God. As chapter three indicated, the word "personal" can have unusual meaning when applied to God. Natural theology tries to explain why the word can be used at all and what it must mean in this case.

God is infinite, the argument goes. Existing without limit, God is therefore totally perfect, the limitless fullness of being. Out of this infinite fullness, God has somehow produced a world (without any change in God, however). In this world there are various limited perfections. A limited perfection is something good that is real, but in a limited way. Whatever is good and real is a result of God's unlimited perfection. So whatever perfections exist in the world must somehow exist first "in" God in some way (a way incomprehensible to us).

The greatest perfections we know are those of reflective consciousness and moral freedom, the theologians go on to say. Reflective consciousness is an open-ended capability of absorbing things into the mind, an openness to the infinity of being. Likewise, moral freedom is an endless capacity to perceive the potential for good, to be continuously open to ever greater good. It is also a capacity to choose a positive relation to Infinite Good—to God. As consciousness and freedom are the most open to the infinite, they must be the best clues to the infinite perfection of God. Consciousness and freedom are the core attributes of personness as we know it. We are therefore closest to speaking accurately when we say that God is somehow personal or at least that God is the fullness of what we know as personness in our limited way.

Symbols of the Divine

The Western natural theology that leads to the infinite incomprehensible Ultimate parallels the Eastern beliefs in the infinity and incomprehensibility of the Ultimate. Theologians, philosophers, and mystics all find that the human quest leads them, into endless mystery. With the exception of some branches of Buddhism, however, it is not a mystery of endless emptiness, but a mystery known to be fullness and perfection, a numinous reality whose existence brings salvation of some kind.

Natural theology leads to the double conclusion that the Ultimate is Mystery but is simultaneously somehow the fullness of being and perfection. That is why symbols for the divine are both necessary and legitimate. Symbols are necessary because the divine or ultimate exceeds human grasp. Only symbols can represent it. Symbols are legitimate because there is a divine reality there to be symbolized. Whatever a culture understands to be the most real and most perfect of all finite things is a symbol for the infinite fullness of being and perfection. Personness, the flow of nature, or ritual power are the primary symbols in the great historic religions (and for some Buddhists, silence or emptiness).

Many of the great religious traditions say that in whatever manner of existence follows our final death, we will all be mystics, contemplating the eternally of the ultimate or being dissolved into it. Until then, those who are not yet mystics will have to relate to the divine or ultimate reality via finite representations of this ultimate—by symbols.

But is this truly religious? To most people, religion is a relation to some specific personal Being or beings, to spirits or gods or to God conceived somewhat anthropomorphically. People seek a divine being they can talk to and who will respond to them, perhaps even through special interventions. They want more than just One in whose presence they are reduced (or elevated) to a speechlessness awareness of infinite and sustaining Mystery. The answer to this, of course, lies in what a person means by "religion." The philosopher's God provides a basis for a sense of an ever-present sustaining power of God in all things, allows a person to give reverence to others and to all creation as symbols of the divine, and affirms the ultimate meaningfulness of life. Whether this is adequately "religious" depends on the person.

FAITH AND REASON

The Danger of Reason

Religious people are often uneasy about theology. Faith and reason do not marry and live happily ever after. On the face of it, all the reasoning done by theologians seems to support faith by showing it to be quite reasonable. If the symbols of faith all fit together in a coherent unity, and if basic beliefs can be supported by rational arguments, this strengthens the religious tradition's claim to be a good and valid interpretation of life and its mysteries. By being so reasonable, though, the enterprise of theology suggests that reasonableness is a requirement religion should live up to; it accustoms people to expect that all the religious beliefs be reasonable. Many believers reject this idea.

When Anselm set out to show how reasonable it is to believe that God exists or that God became incarnate in Jesus and died for human sins, he discovered many critics. Faith is precisely faith and not reason, the critics said and accused Anselm of trying to accustom people to expect that the ideas of sacred scriptures and holy tradition should be subjected to rational analysis by mere human minds. They cautioned Anselm to spend more time in humble prayer accepting God's truths, and less time relying on weak human
thought to understand the mysteries of faith.

The critics were correct in recognizing the issue: Should religious beliefs have to live up to the criterion of reasonableness? Does the believing head have to submit to the inquiring mind? As we have noted, few people will say that they will believe in something that is logically incoherent and unreasonable. Yet, once the mind begins to analyze and argue in order to show the coherence and reasonableness of a tradition, there is no easy way to halt the questioning and critical analyses at some safe point. There are various ideas about the relationship between faith and reason.

Faith without Reasoning

The most straightforward way to eliminate the problems caused by rational analysis of religious beliefs is to avoid such analysis. This may never be fully possible, but there are some close approximations.

There is first of all what we can call extrinsic or artificial faith. This may not deserve the name "faith" at all, but it needs to be included in order to cover all the possibilities. Such "faith" could be a taboo compulsion to uphold certain doctrines even though the doctrines mean little or nothing to the person. A person can be taught as a child that belief in the existence of God, for example, is something that God demands of people; God will punish anyone who fails to believe. Out of sheer fear of punishment, then, a person may grow up feeling it necessary to believe that God exists, and might feel a kind of taboo motivation to defend belief in God even if he or she does not understand or value the belief at all and may even actively doubt it. This kind of faith could also be an empty dedication to certain traditional words, whether the words mean anything to the person or not. This is a kind of legalism of belief.

The same could be true of someone who clings to certain beliefs out of a feeling that that is the only way to maintain acceptance by the community, to preserve an identification with the group. This kind of motivation is more likely to lead a person to understand the beliefs in order to talk about them with others in the community group and thus strengthen acceptance. This kind of faith is liable even to be a rather intense external support for the doctrines the group shares. In this case it is really the group-belonging and not the doctrines and other symbols that are important. A person who fails to achieve acceptance by a group may readily begin to look about for other groups and other beliefs. In all of this the reasonableness of the beliefs is irrelevant; in fact, even the intrinsic meaning of the beliefs is irrelevant.

In contrast to extrinsic or artificial faith, these beliefs and practices have intrinsic meaning to most religious people. The beliefs and practices are cherished for their own sake. An intrinsic type of faith is not necessarily a reasoned faith. Intrinsic faith can exist without theological reflection, with-
sign that they are closer to the infinite Mystery which is beyond reason. This is exactly Tertullian’s position. Blind faith might therefore be truer faith than reasoned faith.

Perhaps the only valid way to know the Infinite may be by the power of the infinite itself. It has been a common idea in Christian tradition, in fact, that faith can never come from the human mind or from human effort, but instead is a gift of God. God reveals truths beyond human reasoning and simultaneously provides the mind with the inner conviction that these are indeed true. It is not human reasoning therefore but the grace of God that empowers people to know the truth about God. Blind faith is therefore correct to trust in God, this logic says, in spite of any human reason that challenges it.

There is a second and different kind of logic at work in blind faith, a more hidden logic. This is the logic of practicality. The average religious believer lives for years by a religious interpretation of life’s meaning and structure in the face of the various threatening mysteries of life, its suffering, confusion, and injustice. The religious interpretation makes sense of it all, offering a theology to explain the pains of life, and promising some form of salvation. Estrangement is under control; identity and values and belonging are clear and strong. Somehow the whole religious interpretation of life works well for the believer, even if that person cannot give a good theological or philosophical or scientific analysis to justify that interpretation. The believer can ask whether it is truly reasonable to abandon a faith perspective that makes such helpful practical sense out of life. The person of blind faith cannot often articulate this argument in a reasoned way, but may feel it in a hidden way nonetheless. It would be foolish to give up a faith that guides and enlightens and encourages a person just because of all the rationalistic doubts raised by others. That, at least, is the second and hidden logic of blind faith.

Faith as a Reasonable Commitment

The existence of a logical basis to blind faith is a clue that we have a hard time divorcing our lives utterly from reason. To do so, we would have to divorce ourselves, after all, from our own inner nature as the peculiar beings with reflective consciousness. Ignorance and irrationality represent a partial loss of our own humanity, which is a very high price to pay for the sake of religious faith.

We have seen two major examples of the application of the power of reason to religious reflection; these are systematic and natural theology. In the past they have often represented immensely ambitious attempts to achieve perfect logical coherence and intellectually compelling arguments in favor of certain beliefs. Historic religions reflect the ambition of historic post-axial culture to make ideal, coherent sense out of everything at once.

In modern times a more modest goal has gained prominence. Instead of seeking perfect logic and fully compelling arguments, many theologians today are happy to achieve a position of reasonableness. They maintain the basic faith that life is intelligible and worthwhile. They assume that the same ultimate God is the source of all the universe, consciously reflective human beings included, so that the intelligibility of the universe and the intelligence of our minds should fit together. The reasonableness they expect of their faith, however, is not quite the perfect logic that historic religions have usually sought.

The theologians of modern culture are highly conscious that there is no compelling rational proof that the world is real and not maya, or that the Mystery is divine and not everlasting chaos, or that life really and finally is intelligible in spite of all the uncertainties that hover about us. No interpretation of life, including the religious ones, can be shown to be absolutely reasonable and guaranteed to be true.

As a result, many people now cautiously abstain from religious interpretations and settle for an agnosticism that seeks only to make do as they go. But such pragmatic caution comes close to denying that there is any basic value or direction to life we can rely on. (We will see more about agnostic pragmatism in a later chapter.) If a person still seeks some clear and basic direction to life, but also agrees that no one can finally prove the truth of one interpretation over another, one religion or philosophy in preference to all others, there is still a way to be reasonable about it. The American philosopher William James (1842-1910) recommended a faith of this sort. He criticized a famous earlier attempt made by the French Catholic philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) to play the odds and wager that there is a God. Pascal had argued that if there is a God, the positive payoff for belief is eternal reward. In relation to so great an outcome it would be silly not to place one's bet where it counts. Pascal acknowledged that this was not true faith (we could label it extrinsic faith), but he claimed that if a person began to live as though he or she had faith, true faith would then develop.

James thought this wager was a bit too cold and calculating to count as real faith. Like Pascal he thought a person still might make a reasonable choice to believe, but he took a different tack. James recommended stepping back for a moment from any specific religious tradition such as Catholicism or Islam, and defining faith in a more general way. He calls it “the religious hypothesis,” by which he meant that the best and final things in life have an eternal quality to them. Unfortunately, James is not very clear what he means by this. We have to imagine that he means that basic values like love and truthfulness have an ultimate or eternal validity.

James also claims that we will be better off even now in life if we believe that such values are of eternal worth. We have the option to believe this or
not. But we do not have to make cold calculations. James argues that this is a live option, of real and intrinsic appeal to many people. It is also a momentous option because it can transform a life. It is finally a forced option, because even to decide to do nothing is to make a choice. We should not allow ourselves to be held back from making this live, momentous, and forced option in favor of the religious hypothesis out of fear of being wrong, says James. We choose our friends and our marriage partner even though we cannot be certain we are correct. Life would be poorer without friends and family. So these are choices well worth making in spite of a lack of certitude.

If the religious hypothesis is a live one, intrinsically attractive to a person and clearly beneficial in life, it is well worth choosing also.

It is not necessary to use James’s particular analysis to see that it is possible to make a reasonable commitment to a religious interpretation of human existence in the universe, even though that interpretation is not provable. A person can reflect on the human condition, on life’s possibilities and limitations. As actually lived, life can be set side by side with a religious interpretation for conscious and explicit comparison and correlation. As in the case with the hidden logic of blind faith, there is a kind of practical test, but now done deliberately and reflectively.

The test is to ask whether the religious interpretation really makes some overall sense of who we are and what the meaning of our lives might be. Does it offer an understanding of where we come from and where we are going, an understanding that is at least reasonably possible even if not provable? Does it produce a moral vision that helps instead of hinders? Can it be lived, celebrated in ritual, symbolized effectively, all in a way that fits life’s experiences and gives extra meaning to life? If it can do all this, then it can be reasonable for a person to consciously choose it as his or her religious faith.

This has been called a “theology of correlation” by the theologian Paul Tillich. We correlate our experiences of life and our understanding of the basic questions about life’s meaning with the interpretation of life offered by a religious tradition. When we find that this match-up produces a coherent and intelligible vision that in practice resolves our feelings of estrangement, then it can be reasonable to accept the religious symbols expressing that vision as our own faith. The act of faith for Tillich is therefore a choice, an act of making a reasonable commitment to a religious vision. It can be difficult to go through such a process of reflection. But it offers a way to reconcile faith and reason.

**The Tensions of the Human Quest**

Faith and reason are part of the human quest to see life as coherent and meaningful. Sometimes they can work in harmony, but there is an underlying tension that is unavoidable in the long run.

A particular faith perspective gives security to our lives by providing a way to deal with threatening mysteries. It gives the security of identity and belonging and the hope of overcoming all estrangement. It is reasonable to seek such security, at least in the hope that it can be found and maintained.

But what is the basic choice or commitment that a person wants to make: to personal security or to reasonableness? Is it legitimate to give up being reasonable entirely in order to preserve the security which religious faith can provide? Which is a person more committed to, maintaining a reasoned honesty about reality, or maintaining a sense of security even if that involves some self-deception or illusions?

We human beings are still on the great adventure of becoming ourselves. We grow in knowledge through searching and questioning, exercising our capacity for reflective consciousness in new ways. Each time we do this, we run the risk of breaking some symbol that has been our guide to life’s meaning so far. The tension exists every time we begin to doubt some traditional belief. Even to continue to be fervently religious can place us in the tension between security and questioning, if the religiousness itself seems to call us to some new interpretation of beliefs. In the presence of Mystery, the religious symbols that interpret existence are always in tension between security and adventure, between past and future.

**Summary**

This chapter has been about theology and faith. Theology is conscious and reasoned reflection on religious beliefs and other symbols. Faith is a name for the act of commitment to the reality represented by a given religious symbol system. Theology attempts to show the reasonableness of a set of religious symbols, both in terms of their logical coherence with one another and also in terms of the rational plausibility of the basic beliefs. A person’s act of faith might or might not be a reasonable one, however. Some people care little for rationality in religious matters; others care a great deal.

**END OF PART III**

The heritage of human cultural development and of our own individual development provides us with a mixture of beliefs and other symbols, some of them primitive in style, others archaic, and still others historic. The interplay among these styles and symbols can be very complex, but we can identify some dominant themes that each style tends to impose in the overall pattern of religiousness. Each style a guide to life, in its turn influencing the specific guides provided by moral codes, leaders, texts, rituals, reason, and faith. There is one more dominant style that guides people’s religiousness: the modern style. The next part describes modern religiousness.
FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. To what extent do you think it is good for people to be unreasoning about their religious beliefs and practices?
2. What would be the most important purpose for reasoning about one’s own beliefs and religious practices? To support them? To understand them more deeply? To disprove the claims of others?
3. How much should religious people be consciously reflective about the overall coherence of all beliefs with each other and with other human experiences? Why?
4. We usually say that people have a right to believe whatever they want. What limits would you set to this right, if any? Not to practice human sacrifice? Not to contradict science?
5. Which in fact is closest to how you would describe your own faith: blind faith or reasoned faith? Which do you think is better and why?

SUGGESTED READINGS

José Ignacio Cabeza, Scholasticism: Cross-Cultural and Comparative Perspectives, 1998. Identifies rational theologies in seven different major religious traditions of the world.
Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Part I, question 2, article 3. The five arguments for God’s existence.

Different people mean different things by the word “modern.” For most of us it means whatever has happened in our own lifetimes. Historians say that the modern era in Western civilization began about four hundred years ago because it was then that a number of ideas that are still influential today began to gain acceptance in Western culture. Because what is usually meant by “modernity” was originally a development in Western culture, the following chapters will focus mostly on Western developments in religious thought and practices.

During these last four hundred years, a new form of religiousness has slowly developed as part of the overall cultural transformation that makes up “modernity.” Some aspects of it grew comfortably from within traditional religion. Other aspects of modern religiousness originated first in opposition to certain religious beliefs or practices. This opposition sometimes ended up changing religion, to the point where ideas that were once considered unreligious or even antireligious eventually came to be part of some peoples’ religion.