THINKING THROUGH MATTERS OF FAITH
“Born of the Virgin Mary”:
*Toward a Sprachregelung on a Delicate Point of Doctrine*

This essay offers an interpretation of the traditional Catholic teaching that “Jesus Christ, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, was born of the Virgin Mary.” It will be attempted to do so in such a way as to positively acknowledge three blocks of non-theological knowledge: (1) the critical difference between tacit, unspoken meaning-elements in speech and the invisible, unwritten meaning-elements discoverable in texts; (2) the account of the anatomical and physiological “facts” involved in human fertilization and conception as they were widely understood in the classical and medieval periods, and thus, presumably, at the place and time of the composition of the infancy narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and (3) the modern, scientific account of these same “facts,” now generally understood and accepted. Indirectly, the contrasts treated in (1) and between (2) and (3) will raise issues in the field of the hermeneutics of Christian doctrine. For all this, the author’s chief purpose in writing is *systematic-theological*, but in such a way as to emphasize linguistic, and hence, pastoral elements as well. After all, the accepted, shared language of faith must never be totally severed from the live speech of the people professing it, and silence is a strangely telling part of live speech.

Happily, the Great Tradition’s constant teaching on this point is now being studied in many places. Unhappily, some of the scrutiny, often allegedly academic, is mixed with scorn; still, scrutinizing (as against doubting) Christian doctrine is the birthright of Christians; if they do not take advantage of this privilege, non-Christians will. For Christian thinkers and teachers, intellectual integrity in believing is part of the Christian project; for them, the pursuit of genuine theological questions is an outright moral and professional duty.
Unhappily yet again, legitimate questioning of the virgin birth is quite often poorly met and managed in the churches. Insinuations of heresy, not to mention overt charges, are quite common;¹ but the only thing these may succeed in doing is silencing questioners. This is apt to breed subliminal doubt and even practical denial. The same can be said for magisterial answers so forceful as to raise suspicions of fear and anxiety on the part of the teaching officers. Habitual avoidance of the issue is even worse. Such passivity, in hopes of burying this delicate issue in Christian teaching in silence, will allow doubt and denial to enter by the back door, unacknowledged. Unstated embarrassment with regard to the Catholic doctrine of the Virgin Birth will infect the household.

What we need is neither a neighborhood search by the magisterial police, nor proclamations broadcast, to flares of triumphalist trumpets, from the front balcony, nor whispers of mutual reassurance with the back door unattended in hopes of getting the unacknowledged, unwelcome visitor to leave. This essay is an effort to write a script for an orderly, informed, open conversation where it counts: in the living room. After all, even in living rooms intelligence has its part to play, at least occasionally. Non scholae sed vitae discimus.

I. Introduction: A Quick Essay on Speech and Text

In a fully literate culture like our own, an enormous amount of information and explanation goes on between and among people who do not know one another, and who in fact do not need to know one another. Wherever and whenever this happens, we completely depend on text, and specifically, text deliberately composed “on a need-to-know basis.” Nothing must be implicit; every detail counts; nothing must be left to the imagination; there is nothing to be read in between the lines; the sole idea is to “get it right.” Do this, and thou wilt be the author of a user’s guide to a software program or a scanning machine. Nobody will read your writing except the poor secretaries and technicians who must use the programmed machines, and in the end, there will be little to enjoy except the “it-works!” experience and the paycheck, yours and theirs.

It would never have entered the mind of the great logical positivist thinker Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) to compose the previous paragraph,
although he might have found it worth writing. Yet in essence a software user’s guide is the result of what he thought about the true nature of language. For this is what he wrote:

_The essential business of language is to assert or deny facts_. Given the syntax of a language, the meaning of a sentence is determined as soon as the meaning of the component words is known.²

Russell was wrong. For if the essential business of language is to assert or deny facts and nothing else—how about live speech—conversation, argument, _tête-à-tête_, and all those other ways of oral communication? We all know that in a strictly-business conversation we have to focus on the matter in hand, without going all over the place, and we are amazed at the merchants in the Eastern Mediterranean, who (or so we are regularly told) talk for hours about everything and nothing and then decide they have a deal. But to the extent that the story about the merchants is true, we understand the issue quite well: in live speech, there is a lot that is not purely factual: tone, pitch, force, rhythm, voice and its opposite, whisper, self-control and lack thereof, self-discipline and lack thereof, and even more, metaphors and turns of phrase galore. All these “figures of speech” keep us affectively involved, whether we want to express ourselves or not; unlike the bland software user’s guides that some of us write, we human beings cannot not-communicate ourselves as long as we are speaking or participating in a conversation.

How, then, about our practices of writing and reading? First of all, we know that there is always more than strict denotation in what we say, write, or read; in fact, we know that connotation is practically everywhere, not only in live speech, but also in written texts. Of course there are differences between a carefully prepared speech and an unprepared or ill-prepared one; the latter is apt to offer more connotation than the former. In either case, though, listening is interpreting, which enables us to ask a friend, “What’s your take on what she read to us?” or (perhaps more importantly) “What’s your take on what the piece she read to us didn’t say?” Let us put this differently. Even prepared language, written to be read out loud for others to hear, leaves room for ambiguity. Still, ambiguity is not the same as total incomprehension.
For, in the case of the prepared speech, standard idioms are expected. Insiders, who know the “family language” or the “company talk,” recognize the idioms; that is to say, they know whether the truths spoken are to be taken as strictly factual or metaphorical. At issue here is the participants’ sense of belonging: “a word to the wise is enough.”

In the context of faith and theology, the issue of interpretation occurs regularly, especially when we touch on bodies of religious texts of great antiquity and religious authority. Here is an example. Once, in Israel, on my way down on foot from Mount Tabor, I fell in with a group of teenagers on their way home after school. One of them explained to me that I could not possibly have read the Qur’an, since I did not know Arabic. I said that I had read it in a carefully annotated translation, but she persisted: I had not read the Qur’an. However, this did not keep her from inviting me home to supper with her family, who treated me as an important guest and invited me to say grace before the meal. (After their Amen, they added grace in Arabic.) In this case, the acoustical elements of the prayer were obviously more relevant than the precise meaning of the words, mine and theirs; when we come to the Holy Book, those acoustical elements are obviously central to believing Arabs. We know the same phenomenon when we meet people whose respect for God’s Word is almost inseparable from the King James Bible—its cadences, its idioms, its odd past tenses, its tone, never mind the Hebrew and Greek originals.

Now if we recall that all biblical texts were originally written to be publicly read or “performed,” our comparison with prepared speech delivered in “company language” comes further alive. How so? Detached scholarly treatment of scriptures as written and printed texts—and-no-more-than-that runs considerable risks; it just may miss the unstated meaning-ingredients—the ones which it takes a good and sympathetic ear to pick up. Put differently, tone-deaf scholarship may end up supplying statements of alleged fact to fill the exasperating void left by the unstated meaning-ingredients present in any written text (except software user guides and its equivalents, where denotation reigns supreme).

What has been explained here is immediately relevant to Jane Schaberg’s The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives. Coming from a (former?) Catholic, this is a plainly unorthodox book, in the doctrinal and theological sense; still,
what is of present interest is the author’s apparent lack of interest in the theoretical possibility of a “family language factor” in the Infancy Narratives, especially in Matthew’s gospel, but also in Luke’s. From the outset, Schaberg treats Jesus’ illegitimacy as a plain, factual fact—though one that chiefly women are apt to detect in the gospels. For as a matter of both fact and hermeneutical principle, women will suffer at the hands of men, whether by willing subjection, fornication, or rape. Only women, therefore, are apt to appreciate Jesus’ illegitimacy; they “know the story,” even if the (male) gospel writers and redactors and the (male-dominated) ecclesiastical tradition have done their best to conceal it.

Further on in this essay, we will need a good sense of what has been (somewhat ramblingly) explained so far. For in the understanding of such texts, momentous silence may be part of the total meaning.

II. The Texts: Various Important Preliminaries

1. Over more than two centuries, Christian (and post-Christian) biblical interpretation has been dominated by historical-critical method; North American scripture scholars of every stripe joined the fray about a hundred years ago. After vigorous initial participation, temporarily defeated by the anti-modernist movement, Roman Catholics have been making a distinguished contribution—a story well told by Gerald Fogarty. But pride in recent discovery has a way of making us unduly surprised at past insight. Thus, it may amaze us that pre-modern but far from uncritical readers of the New Testament could intuit long ago, without benefit of historical-critical method, that the infancy narratives are the result of inspiration, not recollection. Saint John Chrysostom is an example. In a commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, he notes that the account of the choice of Mathias is guided by Peter’s proposition that only eyewitnesses would be able to credibly testify to Jesus’ life “from John’s baptism on” to his crucifixion and resurrection (Acts 1, 21-22). So what was needed were people who could testify: “This man, who ate and drank and was crucified, he was raised.” But why the pointed reference to John’s baptism? Chrysostom explains:

none [of the disciples] knew from observation what happened before it; in fact, they were taught [about that] in the Spirit.
In other words, eyewitnesses to what had preceded Jesus’ Baptism were not needed. That is to say, behind the narratives of the virgin birth lies inspiration, not recall.

2. The late Raymond Brown dealt with the question at length, in two books: *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* and *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*. John P. Meier has followed suit, less elaborately, in *A Marginal Jew*. After painstaking analysis, Brown concludes that judging by their literary form, the infancy stories are best read as renditions of the Christian Gospel in narrative form, patterned on Jewish models—a conclusion he has repeated in the more recent, updated edition of the book. In the latter, Brown, faithful as always to the *magisterium* of the Catholic Church, also reviews the “Debate over the Historicity over the Virginal Conception”; here again, he repeats the conclusion of his first treatment: “the *scientifically controllable* biblical evidence leaves the question of the historicity of the virginal conception unresolved.” Yet he also warns his readers not to jump to conclusions; the biblical evidence in favor of historicity is stronger than the evidence to the contrary. Thus he can state that in his opinion Matthew and Luke “regarded the virginal conception as historical,” yet also caution that “the modern intensity about historicity was not theirs.” Meier has broadly agreed with this. So will this essay.

Meier’s purpose in writing is different from Brown’s. He sets out to separate objective historical fact in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ origins from faith interpretation or theological truth—an enterprise somewhat questionable on hermeneutical grounds. Still, on the question treated here, Meier comes to the following conclusion:

During the reign of King Herod the Great . . . a Jew named Jēshūa‘ (=Jesus) was born . . . somewhere within the confines of Herod’s kingdom. Jesus’ mother was named Miryam (=Mary), his (putative) father Yōsēf (=Joseph) . . . . the many diverse traditions in the NT about his Davidic descent argue well for his being known during his lifetime as a descendant of King David, *whatever the biological truth may have been*—a truth probably not accessible even to Jesus’ contemporaries.
Presumably, the pointer to “biological truth” in this quotation is at least partly connected with Meier’s parenthetic designation of Joseph as Jesus’ “putative” father.

3. The treatment offered here intends, among other things, to construct two related arguments.

Firstly, it intends to distance itself from the hypothesis—often implicit—that the two synoptic narratives are adequately interpreted only if their sole point (or at least their sole essential point) is taken to be the statement of a fact, whether “historical” or “biological.” Authors making this case can be divided into three categories. Some, surprisingly, will construe the silence of the New Testament outside the Matthean and Lukan accounts as an affirmation of the historicity of the virgin birth; others will appeal undiscerningly to scriptural inerrancy; others will postulate sources for which no historical evidence exists, such as the availability to Matthew and Luke of local oral traditions or family traditions.

Secondly, this essay will call into question a second, subtler hypothesis, which lies at the root of the accounts offered by most exegetes, including Raymond Brown and John Meier, viz., that Jesus’ conception and the manner of his birth are valid historical questions. In the case of the virginal-conception narratives, so Raymond Brown and John Meier suggest, the problem is that no historically valid answers are in fact available to these otherwise valid historical inquiries. On this exact point, the present essay will demur. It will do so by arguing, on hermeneutical grounds, that the questions are not properly historical questions. This argument will yield two related theological conclusions: (1) the unavailability of answers to these particular questions poses no fundamental intellectual obstacles to the profession of the Christian faith, and (2) since the questions, when actually asked, are likely to have a hidden theological agenda, they must be answered accordingly—i.e., with the help of theological, not historical, hermeneutics.

In mounting this second argument, therefore, this essay will also take its distance from efforts to interpret the two gospel accounts of Jesus’ virginal conception as “purely symbolic” (“pure legend”)—i.e., as having no basis in fact whatsoever. There are good reasons to suspect that the oft-heard dilemma “either historical or theological” (which fosters the polarized positions reviewed by Raymond Brown) is the result of a cultural impasse.
At the core of this impasse lies our inability to live with living truths that are neither wholly factual nor wholly reducible to verifiable certainties. The culture we are part of tends to insist that non-verifiable truths are unreal; they have no “cash value.” As a result, when we find ourselves encountering apparent “factlessness” in biblical texts, we will experience a “truth void” that will turn the biblical text into a Rorschach inkblot; when this happens, horror vacui is apt to push us into needless denials, unwarranted projections, or both.

4. Finally, with Raymond Brown, this essay will distance itself from interpretations based on extrinsic claims, viz. that the genuine sources of the profession of the virginal conception as an historical fact are the anxieties brought on by the psycho-sexual immaturity allegedly prevalent among an all-male clergy, the hidden prejudices against rape victims, or the abject submission allegedly exacted by the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching office.17

5. For reasons of clarity of exposition, the present essay will limit itself to Mary’s virginity before the birth of Jesus (“ante partum”) and (albeit in passing) during the birth of Jesus (“in partu”).

6. What are the data?

a. The Church’s indubitable teaching in this matter can be reliably worded as follows: the Lord Jesus, whom Christians acknowledge, in the Holy Spirit, as the Christ of God by virtue of resurrection of the dead (cf. Rom 1, 3), was “conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.”

b. Note that an early Coptic creed specifies “without male ‘sperma.’ ”18

c. Note likewise that the fairly authoritative regional synod of Toledo (400 or 405 A.D.) expressly teaches that the Son of God, born from the Father as God before every beginning, . . . has assumed from her [=the Virgin Mary] a true human being, generated without a man’s seed.19
d. The Latin phrase *absque semine* (“without seed”) also occurs in the third canon of the Synod at the Lateran (649 A.D.).

e. Earlier, in 521 A.D., Pope Hormisdas had written to the Emperor Justin that

the One who was Son of God before all time became Son of Man, and was born, in time yet beyond expectation, in the way human beings are born, by opening, at birth, his mother’s birth canal, yet, by virtue of his divinity, without undoing his mother’s virginity.

f. Finally, a synod held in Toledo in 675 A.D. used age-old Eastern language, but emphasized the novelty and uniqueness of the event:

[The Son was born] by a new (type of?) birth: untouched virginity did not know relations with a man, yet furnished the material (i.e., the flesh) made fertile by the Holy Spirit. This virgin birth can be neither grasped by reason nor evidenced by [another] instance; if it is grasped by reason it is not miraculous; if it is evidenced by [another] instance, its uniqueness will be gone.

g. Conclusion: it is theologically irresponsible to state that the Great Tradition leaves the issue of “Mary’s physical virginity” open. Conclusion from this conclusion: those who state, as if it were a positive fact, that Jesus was conceived by ordinary sexual intercourse must not expect to be accepted as orthodox Christians. But, as always in the Catholic tradition, this does not imply that the door to theological reflection and interpretation is closed.

7. The Tradition’s unconditional affirmation of the virginal conception and birth of Jesus raises enormous problems, of course. Unlike many so-called “pre-modern” people, sophisticated, physiology-conscious, contemporary people will find the virgin birth most implausible. By way of rationalization, they are apt to protest that it calls into question the genuine humanity of Jesus—a reasonable observation. Miraculous events are hard to accept any day, but to postulate
an outright cosmological miracle to vouch for the true humanity of Jesus strains the ability to believe of most, including serious Christians. Why? Modern Christians know the anatomical and physiological facts of fertilization and conception; while most of them do somehow allow room for marvels and even miracles, they find it worrisome that the truth of the Word Incarnate—part of the doctrinal heart of the Christian faith—should be based on a cosmological miracle, especially since the virginal conception of Jesus was not properly considered a natural (“cosmological”) miracle until just over three centuries ago.

8. There is a final complicating factor. The doctrine of Jesus’ virginal conception is founded on two single-tradition, mutually independent gospel passages, viz., the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives. At first blush, this seems to favor the conclusion that we are dealing not with history but with a theologoumenon in narrative shape—an interpretation also favored by the fact that the literary genre of both narratives is legendary. Besides, this interpretation is supported by the fact that the oldest writings of the New Testament appear to be unaware of any virgin birth.

But then again, there is the fact that the two accounts have no fewer than eleven features in common; this suggests that the oral traditions behind each of them are of a fairly early date. This creates a wide field of possible interpretations—a field day both for the imaginative of every kind and for those urging caution.

9. Like any mystery of the Christian faith, the topic of Mary’s virginity invites (besides affective contemplation) frank and respectful theological reflection. The catholic tradition has considered faith a virtue; it has not encouraged credulousness. Asking keen questions and testing new interpretations of the virgin birth are not a sign of “liberalism,” let alone unbelief. Banning or maligning this kind of inquiry is a sign not of faith but of lack of faith.

10. The purpose of this essay is: hermeneutical-theological reflection. Still, sound theological reflection somehow presumes a context of ministry. Accordingly, some academic theologians calling certain sorts of theological language “pastoral” just may be damning by faint praise; at worst, they are guilty of academic complacency. By virtue of
Baptism, the so-called “simple faithful” are entitled to the full truth, at least as they can understand it, and it is not up to academic theologians to decide in advance just how much the faithful can understand. Since the early Renaissance (when a new, often thematically humanistic understanding of the university arose), sophisticated “Nicodemites” have been suggesting that there are two versions of the Christian faith, one for themselves and one for common people. The catholic tradition has long recognized the problem, but handled it in a very different way. It has recognized how right Greek philosophers were when they taught that it takes “spiritual exercises” to attain to true knowledge, as Pierre Hadot has reminded us. Also, in the footsteps of Paul and the authors of the Johannine letters, the Tradition has put a heavy burden of accountability on those who have claimed, implicitly or in so many words, to be “knowledgeable” (γνωστικοί): they are traditionally expected to verify their claims to higher understanding (or γνῶσις) by the practice of certain forms of asceticism, prayer and contemplation, and other-regarding love.

III. Essentially a Cosmological Miracle?

1. This essay will end up arguing that neither the New Testament nor the Church’s magisterium teach that Jesus’ virginal conception is a cosmological miracle. Put differently, it will be argued that calling the virginal conception and birth a miracle is a conclusion from the data of the faith, not an article of faith in and of itself.

Still, this does not imply that thinking or even saying (preferably modestly) that the virgin birth is a cosmological (“physical,” “natural,” “biological,” “physiological”) miracle is irresponsible. Still, those who think or speak in this manner will do well to add that this is a responsible theological opinion, not the stated teaching of the Great Tradition. Why is this important? Answer: it is a mistake to think that the relevant passages in Matthew (1, 18-25) and Luke (1, 26-38) have one, and only one, perfectly certain point to make, namely, the physical virginity of the Virgin Mary. Why?

Faith-affirmations never have only one single, unequivocal point to make; their meaning is “always fuller”; like Godself, “the things of God” are “always greater.” In our case, over-affirmation runs the risk of reducing a mystery to one, and only one, simple, factual truth;
accordingly, overstating the virginal conception and birth of Christ runs the risk of stripping it of any fuller meaning.

It is, of course, far from irresponsible to say: “I (along with many others) cannot come up with a better interpretation; I am content to regard the virgin birth basically as a natural miracle.” All right, but (it will now be argued) theologically unsatisfactory. In other words, those among us who still wish, in today’s world, to treat the virginal conception as “simply, basically a cosmological miracle” must sit down and count the cost.

2. To begin with, “miracles” have long been known to happen, but it is wrong to regard them as common occurrences, let alone as incontrovertible ones. Besides, those who have decided to interpret the virginal conception and birth of Jesus as an obvious miracle should realize the following.

3. Firstly, they are dealing not with one miracle but with three:

a. Worldwide human experience teaches us that no pregnancy occurs without previous sexual intercourse (or one of the prosaic modern alternatives to it). This is ample reason to consider a virgin birth—any virgin birth—a miracle, in and of itself.

b. Question: can the conception of Jesus be accounted for by regarding it as a case of “parthenogenesis”? Did the Virgin produce a fertile ovum formed without meiosis? Answers: (1) in “explaining” miracles, we must take care not to explain them away;28 (2) parthenogenesis, while passable as a biological hypothesis, has never been observed in the human species. Conclusion: human parthenogenesis is rare enough to qualify as a (cosmological) miracle, but only if properly attested to.

c. But there is something else here as well. A parthenogenetically conceived Jesus would be female. Why? The sex of a fetus is a function of the fact that (theoretically) half the gametes in any human male’s sperm carry the Y-chromosome, whose presence in a fertilized ovum causes the ovum to develop as a male, almost from the beginning of the embryo’s process of development on; the other half carry
the X-chromosome necessary for the fetus to turn out female. The
parthenogenesis hypothesis implies that the Virgin produced a Y-chrom-
some which, being female, she did not naturally possess, thus
enabling Jesus to be born male. This would have to be called another
miracle, of the cosmological kind.29

4. Secondly, even a quick look at Wendy Cotter’s recently
published Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook for the
Study of New Testament Miracle Stories will suffice to show that far from
regarding wondrous phenomena as puzzling, the ancient world posi-
tively anticipated them in connection with persons and situations in
which the supernatural and the superhuman were involved—an atti-
tude both the synoptics and the fourth gospel depict Jesus as being
critical of (cf. Mk 8, 11-12; Mt 12, 38-39; 16, 1-4; Lk 11, 16. 29-32;
Jn 2, 18; 6, 30).30 Accordingly, medieval Christianity both East and
West were inclined not to demand miracles, yet if and when they
occurred or were said to have occurred they knew how to welcome and
interpret them.

Only just over three or four centuries ago did the notion of natu-
ral (“cosmological”) miracle take shape, slowly. This development was
the result of the scientific understanding of exceptional occurrences as
events in which the “laws of nature” are suspended by virtue of a direct
intervention by the omnipotent God in the course of cosmic events.
The far-sighted Pope Benedict XIV canonized this definition in the
mid eighteenth century.31

However, modern theory of science (Wissenschaftstheorie) is a great
deal more modest about the truth status of so-called “laws of nature.”
Modern scientists agree that even our best scientific knowledge of natu-
ral regularities is substantially statistical; accordingly, freak occurrences
can never be excluded in the cosmos. Thus modern science is far more
conscious of its ignorance than the scientists of even a century ago.
Modern scientists (as against many engineers) are far less surprised by
“miracles.”

5. But, thirdly, it takes more than a freak event to make a miracle;
freak events do occur and they are puzzling, yet by themselves they
mean relatively little. Why? To call an unusual cosmic event a miracle,
we must establish not only the absence of “natural” explanations for the
event, but also the presence of the event’s appeal to the faith of certain believers. In other words, miracles are established by a combination of objective investigation/diagnosis and discerning personal or shared faith-interpretation.32

6. The final point, fairly abstract and perhaps unsettling, but it has to be made: the virgin birth cannot be a necessary precondition for the divinity of Christ. Let me speak like a fool. God the Father could have been as fully the Father of Jesus if Joseph (or anyone else for that matter) had been Jesus’ human Father. Why? Because God is “omnipotent.” God is “the God of the powers.”33 In dealing with creation, God has no competitors to wrestle down or stand-in-the-ways to push aside. Augustine, a newly ordained presbyter speaking at the Synod of Carthage in 393 A.D. explains this as follows:

I am confident that those who understand things spiritually will recognize that nothing can be the opposite of God. God is the One who is, and only of God can this verb be properly predicated. (For what truly is, remains without change, since what is subject to change was at one time what it no longer is, and will be some time what it is not yet.) But if this is so, then God has nothing opposite to him. If we should be asked what is opposite to white, we would answer, black. If we should be asked what is opposite to hot, we would answer, cold. If we should be asked what is opposite to quick, we would answer, slow, and thus we could go on and on. However, when it is asked what is opposite to what is, the right answer is that it is not.34

Accordingly, suggesting that the biological paternity of Saint Joseph would have excluded the possibility of the Father’s paternity implies that the Father is not truly God Almighty.35

7. One notable Church Father, Gregory of Nyssa, appears to support the natural-miracle theory. In his Great Catechetical Oration, he first explains that all things have been created good; only evil is incompatible with God. But there is nothing evil in a human being’s birth, upbringing, growth, natural advance to maturity, experience of death, and return from death.36 Then he goes on:
but what preceded his birth and followed his death eludes the nature we share. When we look at the two limits of our human life, we know from where we begin and where we go to meet our end. Having begun existence as the result of involuntary passion [ἐκ πάθους], man involuntarily and passively [πάθει] brings his life to an end. But in this [=the Incarnate Logos’s] case, neither did birth originate in involuntary passion [ἀπὸ πάθους], nor did death run into involuntary passivity [εἰς πάθος]. For neither did lust precede the birth, nor decomposition follow the death.

You do not believe in this astounding thing [τὸ θαύμα]? I am happy with your unbelief! For in the very act of finding what I have just said too much to believe you are acknowledging that these astounding things are above nature.37

What to make of this text? Two things jump off the page. Firstly, Gregory sees a double miracle: the virgin womb has a counterpart in the tidy tomb and must be interpreted accordingly.38 Secondly, the “astounding thing” (miracle?) is the absence not of so much of sperm as of πάθος [Lat. passio].

What does πάθος mean? A contemporary theological author explains:

The Greek noun pathos, especially in its plural form pathe (“passions”), generally denotes all those affections by which an experiencing subject is unavoidably, and far from voluntarily, implicated in, and involved with, the object of the affection. This gives the noun apatheia (“passionlessness”) a broad, fairly imprecise range of significations: impassibility, incapability of suffering, incapacity for change, insensibility, freedom from emotion, freedom from self-interest, freedom from sin. Specifically in reference to human persons (and thus, eventually, in the idiom of Christian asceticism and mysticism), it conveys the (originally Stoic) ideal of “mastery over the passions, detachment, tranquillity, imperturbability, insensitivity to suffering”; it also denotes the Christian ideal of “contemplative peace.”
There is more here than meets the eye. Accordingly, our author goes on to explain not only how pathos is part of human life, but also just what it means to say, with the Great Tradition, that “there is no pathos in God”:

Our real capacity for spontaneous self-disclosure is tempered by at least some degree of dependence on the influence of outside agents. Much as we may be poised for spontaneity, whether for good or for ill, we also have to be “moved” into action. . . . No matter how much we are inclined, for better, for worse, to take initiatives, both in regard to ourselves and to our world, not even the most spontaneous and creative among us ever completely lose their dependence on change thrust upon them from outside.

Apatheia, when applied to God, conveys that God is wholly different in this regard. God is not waiting, whether impotently or impassively, for inducements to action in order to manifest the divine nature. God is transcendentally free to be self-communicating. So if God does create, this is neither God’s predictable, conditioned response to the provocation of chaos, nor an enigmatic production, by an inscrutable God, of a collection of distant objects; it is the free self-expression of the divine goodness in meaningful and purposeful realities that are not God. And if God, having created, does show mercy, this is not a concession extorted from a feeble deity unable to face the misery of humanity and the world; nor is it an indulgence nonchalantly thrown at humanity and the world by a cryptic deity that remains impervious. For if and whenever God does self-manifest and self-communicate, God freely initiates, and freely allows those who receive the gift of the divine self-communication a glimpse of what is—must be—at the heart of God: transcendentally free self-giving.39

So this is how Gregory interprets the virgin womb and the tidy tomb: not as hard facts that prove some truth, but as “marvels” that betoken the wholly gracious freedom with which God’s Word goes in and out among us as he pleases. In writing this, Gregory is taking us back to Irenaeus, who explains that what the Word accomplished was
truly just. He came into the world without breaking and entering, because he came into what was his own in the first place, from the beginning: “all things were made through him, and nothing at all was made apart from him,” even though when “he came into his own,” “his own did not receive him” (Jn 1, 3. 11).

8. We have moved from Gregory’s catechism to the fourth gospel. Hard on the heels of the lines just quoted, the author of this gospel avails himself of what was common knowledge about fertilization and conception. He does so in order to compare and contrast that knowledge with the Christians’ spiritual rebirth by God’s free gift of faith in Christ—the very thing he has Jesus tell Nicodemus later on (Jn 3, 3-6):

But all those who did receive him, to them he gave the freedom-and-power [ἐξουσίαν] to become God’s children—those who believe in his [=the Logos’s] name, and they were born, not out of a mass of blood [ἐξ αἵματων], nor from [a woman’s?] craving of the flesh [ἐκ θελήματος σαρκός], nor from a man’s craving [ἐκ θελήματος ἄνδρός], but from God.” (Jn 1, 12-13)

These references, right in the Prologue to the fourth Gospel, to physiological conditions associated with conception and to the passions involved in the acts that lead up to it invite a brief excursus into the ancient world’s interpretation of the process of conception.

IV. A Few Remarks on Ancient Physiology

1. Before we proceed any further, we must remember two things. First, there is no progress to report (and thus, no ever-shifting “state of the art” to admire) in anatomical and physiological knowledge between, say, the late-second century A.D. and the mid-sixteenth century. Anatomy as we understand it today developed very slowly, as an art rather than as a form of knowledge, in the West as in the East. Only about the year 1300 A.D. did a native of Bologna, with its proud medical school, Raimondo (“Mondino”) de’ Liuzzi (c. 1260-1326) dare open and inspect human cadavers (chiefly of criminals executed by beheading or hanging), but, oddly, the accounts of what he claims to
have found are riddled with error. How so? Understandably, Mondino had not properly looked. He had not been able yet to get away from Hippocrates and especially Galen, whose treatise Περὶ χρείας μορίων (“On the functioning of the body parts”) was to remain the authoritative medical text till well into the Renaissance.

Second, the first modern anatomical atlas, De humani corporis fabrica (“The Makeup of the Human Body”), by Andreas Vesalius (1514-64), appeared in 1543—five years after his fairly crude Tabulae anatomicae sex (“Six Anatomical Plates”). It was the first anatomical atlas based on actual inspection. In the priceless phrase of J. H. van den Berg, before Vesalius, the anatomists’ and physiologists’ chief instrument had been not the scalpel but the pen; even a few of Vesalius’ discoveries, not just in the Tabulae but also in the Fabrica, came from not from ocular observation, but from books. Anatomists took their time becoming sufficiently objective (and irreverent) to cut, look, and see.

2. Still, the ancients were far from naive. From common experience they knew that blood comes in two kinds: the dark red, heavy, trickling type, and the bright red, foaming, pulsating type. The former came out of veins, the latter out of arteries. Loss of the former rarely led to death, except if help was very slow in coming; in the case of the latter, there was no time to lose, so most of the time help arrived too late even to try to stop the bleeding. The slow type of blood was connected with the liver; butchers had long known that in the abdomen of animals tissues full of veins, and especially one large vessel known as the “portal vein,” linked the small intestine to the liver. One good look sufficed to reveal that the food in the intestine surrendered its most refined elements to the blood in those veins, which took them to the liver.

The conclusion was easy: the liver was the body’s nutrition center. In the liver, heavy, plodding, “cold” blood (alive only in the vegetative sense of the word) was loaded with nutrients and sent out to every part of the body to deliver its goods. By contrast, the heart was clearly the body’s life center: in the throbbing furnace of the heart (you could feel the hot exhaust fumes by breathing on the back of your hand!) some of the blood deriving from the intestine was filled with fresh, clean air from the lungs (hence the foam!), heated up, and especially, filled with
sentient, hot, passionate life, for the arteries to transport to every part of the body.\textsuperscript{50}

3. Besides the blood carrying vital spirit and nutriment to all parts of the body, to keep it alive and fed, the body had at its disposal blood with a more specialized mission: reproduction. In women, some highly refined blood was turned into a mass of fresh, non-sentient blood, stored in the womb; it stayed fresh only while its vegetative life lasted—one lunar cycle; left alone, it spoiled and had to be evacuated, to be replaced by a new mass. In men, leftover blood was turned into semen, which carried not just vegetative but properly sentient life—a quality derived not just from the male’s inherent vitality but also from the sun, plainly the origin of life and heat. Like the slow blood in the womb, it did not keep well, so it had to be regularly evacuated; yet unlike the woman’s blood mass (which was “cold,” given its affinity with the moon), it was periodically discharged with a passion, often in dreams.\textsuperscript{51}

4. Now to beget a child, it was thought, it was the male’s function to actualize the woman’s \textit{inherent} potential for motherhood, by enlivening, ordinarily by repeated (and preferably energetic) coital interventions, the refined but barely living blood passively waiting in the woman’s womb to be spurred into growth and development as an individual living being, and (in the case of human beings) a living being yet to be ensouled, in due time, by God. That is to say, until the mid-seventeenth century, Western medicine regarded the man as only the \textit{catalyst} of conception, and not as a \textit{contributor} to the physical make-up of the fetus.\textsuperscript{52}

5. The question was, of course, What makes the sperm capable of initiating the development of a human being? Thomas Aquinas, who came by almost all his physiological knowledge through Aristotle’s writings, devotes two careful questions in the third part of the \textit{Summa theologiae} to this problem (qq. 118-19)—one he had treated many times before. He states, reflecting on experiences as old as humankind, that the male sperm is merely instrumental:

\begin{quote}
\textit{a saw or an ax does not actively possess the \textit{forma} of a bed, but only some kind of “move” in the direction of that \textit{forma}. In}\
\end{quote}
the same way, the active power [that will bring about conception] does not need an actual bodily organ to be effective; instead, this power resides in the [vital] spirit contained in the semen, which is frothy, as is apparent from the fact that it is white; this spirit partly consists of heat coming from celestial bodies, by whose power inferior [cosmic] agents are brought to bear upon the formation of specific living beings. And because in such a [vital] “spirit” the power of [vital] soul combines with heavenly power, it is said: “man is born from man and sun.” Now elemental heat is related to vital power by way of instrumental causality . . .

. . . in the higher animals, which reproduce by intercourse, the active power resides in the male’s semen, as the Philosopher says . . . ; by contrast, the matter of the fetus is furnished by the female. In this matter [=“embryonic mass”], there resides, right from the beginning, a vegetative soul, not in full actuality, of course, but inchoatively, just as a soul resides in those who are asleep. But when it starts to attract nourishment, the [vegetative] soul is actually at work. Thus the mass undergoes a transmutation due to the power contained in the male’s semen . . . . Now as soon as, by the power of the active principle resident in the semen, the sentient soul arises in the mass (or [at least] in the chief part of it), then the sentient soul of the offspring starts to be active, so as to fashion a finished body of its own, by way of nutrition and growth. By contrast, the active power that once was in the semen ceases to exist: the semen dissolves and its [vital] spirit evaporates. And this is not inappropriate, in that the [vital] power is not an independent agent, but an instrumental one; and the work of an instrument ceases once the effect is achieved.53

In other words, the only thing any father ever contributes to the conception of the fetus is “vital spirit” suspended in a viscous fluid; this spirit is needed to raise the merely vegetative blood in the mother’s womb to the level of sentient life.54 Small wonder that whatever materials the husband, at the time of intercourse, has contributed to the development of “his” child simply cease to exist. How could Aquinas have made it more apparent that he was of the opinion, along with the
entire pre-scientific Western world, that physically speaking we are the children of our mothers.\textsuperscript{55}

6. But this leaves something unsaid. Aquinas does not spell it out, but it is implicit in his reasoning. If we receive our bodies exclusively from our mothers, and if God is the creator of our spiritual souls, then we are truly no different from the man Jesus as far as humanity is concerned. The difference between Jesus and other human beings turns out to lie neither in their bodies (they owe them to their mothers) nor in their souls (they are immediately created by God).\textsuperscript{56} This very much diminishes the “human distance” (so to speak) between Jesus and all other human beings, at least to us moderns. We will have to come back to this.

7. What, then, is the vital role of the male in the lore of the premodern world? Answer: any father is responsible for the legitimation of his children; a father must “own up” to having initiated this child, which must now be a manifest individual with its own identity.\textsuperscript{57} Fathers achieve this legitimation by publicly naming the child.\textsuperscript{58}

8. With this, we are at last ready to interpret the only two sources on which the Great Tradition relies for the doctrine of Jesus’ virginal conception and birth: the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke. By now, the question to be answered has become: What would Matthew and Luke have been able to mean in the infancy narratives, given the commonly available understanding of the physiological processes leading to conception in their day?

V. The Virgin Birth: A Theological Interpretation

1. Like any other story in the New Testament, the narratives of Jesus’ virginal conception are first and foremost matters of faith. If these source narratives are to be understood at all, we are to understand them by interpreting them as they desire and deserve to be understood. This means we must interpret them theologically before insisting on making sense of them as (would-be?) historians. In order to do so, we must begin by firmly suspending our modern scientific pre-judgment, whose chief element is that conception occurs only by the fusion of two genetically co-equal half-cells.
Matthew and Luke tell their virgin-birth stories not as miracle stories but as what might be called “missionary theophanies.” This is vital to our interpretation. The two angelic annunciations are met with confusion and awe on the part of Joseph and Mary (cf. Mt 1, 20; Lk 1, 29-30); this is only proper at an encounter with the Living God by way of one of his messengers. Still, in neither narrative do we find even the slightest trace of amazement on the part of any third parties. That is to say, from the point of view of audience or reader response, whether real or presumed, we must say that the virginal conception regarded as a physiological event hardly raises an eyebrow: Jesus is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, period. A few decades later, Ignatius of Antioch will agree, and write that Mary’s virginity is one of the “resounding mysteries, such as were wrought in God’s silence.”

The two annunciation stories are as different as the two “genealogies” of Jesus associated with them (Mt. 1, 1-17; Lk 3, 23-38). Matthew’s point of view is largely Jewish: Mary’s husband, Joseph, is of the House of David, so Jesus is entitled to the (messianic) title “Son of David.” Luke’s perspective is universalistic: by the time we get to his genealogy we know already that Gabriel has conveyed to Mary that Jesus “will be called holy, Son of God” (Lk 1, 35); no wonder he is called “Son of Adam, Son of God” (Lk 3, 38): he will be the fulfillment of the promises, even from the world’s origin forward.

Raymond Brown lists the details the two stories have in common. But, uncharacteristically, he does not point out that there is one feature which these two otherwise very diverse stories literally—in the sense of textually—have in common, viz. the semitism, “You shall call his name Jesus” (καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν: Mt 1, 21 = Lk 1, 31). That is, the Name Jesus comes from God.

Could this be the cue to the interpretation of both passages? Matthew gives Mary’s legitimate husband, Joseph, the authority to name the Child, but in a dream he is told by an angel to name him Jesus. In the Lukan account of the annunciation to Mary, too, the name Jesus comes from God (Lk 1, 31), and the actual naming is narrated in the passive voice: “He was named (ἐκλήθη) Jesus” (Lk 2, 21)—conceivably a subtle pointer to an act of obedience to divine command.
5. We are ready to offer our conclusion. The infancy narratives employ the assumptions of ancient physiology as well of ancient legitimation practices. They propose that Jesus is truly the Son of God, who gives him his name and in so doing identifies himself as the (sole) true initiator of this child, who is the world’s Savior. Jesus is also truly a member of (the Jewish and) the human race; this he is by virtue of his human conception in Mary’s womb, without human initiative, by sheer divine initiative, without passion (and in that sense, “without seed”).

VI. Some Typically Modern Difficulties

1. It is often argued that the infancy narratives cannot be interpreted “literally,” since such an interpretation would concede that Jesus is not fully human. This approach to hermeneutics of any kind is misleading, for two reasons:

   a. Using the word “literally” is nonsensical if we do not make an effort to find out what the “literal” meaning of the narratives may have been in the culture that produced the texts.

   b. When interpreted “literally” in this sense, the texts precisely affirm Jesus’ full humanity, by squarely making him the child of his mother, Mary.

2. Citing parallels of promised children in the Jewish Scriptures (e.g., Isaac, Jacob, Samson) and in the New Testament (John the Baptist), in order to argue that Jesus, too, “must have been” conceived by sexual intercourse is intellectually dishonest. Such an interpretation disregards the obvious and distinctive difference between the parallels and the infancy narratives.

   Still, there are contemporary Hellenistic parallels, which show that virgin births were neither unheard-of nor wholly unthinkable in the first century, as Raymond Brown (who lists a few of them) would seem to imply. Thus we have Plutarch’s story of Romulus, who was said to have been conceived as a result of Zeus’s relations with a Vestal Virgin. There are the legends of Heracles: his mother Alcmene had refused to consummate her marriage until her husband had helped avenge the
murder of her brother, and how she had conceived Heracles from Zeus while her husband was away fighting the wars. Finally, there is Pseudo-Callisthenes’ account of the birth of Alexander the Great (who had claimed descent from Heracles himself) from his mother Olympias, after she had relations with Zeus. It is, therefore, not foolish to imagine that in the towns and cities of the Greco-Roman world narratives about unique individuals having been born “virginally” may well have enjoyed a prima facie plausibility, if only “in the streets.”

3. To argue, on the basis of modern anatomy and physiology, that Joseph and Mary “must have had intercourse” to produce Jesus is intolerable; it flies in the face of the only sources we have; it amounts to making assertions unsupported by verified data, and in the teeth of the only data we do have.

Things are slightly different with the oft-heard opinion that Jesus “must have been” illegitimate. For one thing, Matthew’s narrative drops a broad hint in this direction when it relates how Joseph, being a just man, decided not to take Mary to court on account of her pregnancy. The later Jewish charge that Jesus was illegitimate, therefore, does more justice to the data that we have than the claim that Jesus was simply the natural child of Joseph and Mary. This charge of illegitimacy was aimed, of course, at challenging the Christians’ faith in Jesus Christ’s uniqueness; but, as explained above, this overlooks the fact that nothing created can defeat God and God’s purposes. Thus, theologically speaking, even a Jesus conceived out of wedlock (or worse, by rape) could be the Son of God.

4. It is better, therefore, and more honest, to say simply that the Gospels provide us with no answer to our specific historical-physiological questions about the origin of Jesus beyond the fact that Mary was his mother. Still, this is precisely the point at which we must read the texts properly hermeneutically (i.e., realistically as well as in an urbane, well-educated manner), as follows.

Is it really true that the issue of Jesus’ physiological provenance is an historical question? It would seem it is not, as John Meier’s phrase “a truth probably not accessible even to Jesus’ contemporaries” would appear to imply. In actual life, paternity questions are forensic, legal, judicial questions, raised only if paternity is doubtful.
Thus, no historical biography of a celebrated person begins with conception (let alone with parental intercourse). At the earliest, biographies start with family backgrounds and with conditions attending their subjects’ births.70

5. Why, then, should anybody wish to insist on having “historical” (here meaning “biological”) information about Jesus’ origins?

Answer: we live in a historicist, rationalist culture, which tends to equate truth with factual truth and to associate figurative language with non-reality. This is an honest problem, so it deserves articulate correctives, e.g., pointing out that we use metaphors to deal with realities so real that we cannot quite handle them.

Yet there is a second answer to the question, too: demanding historical certainty about Jesus’ biological origin is a loaded move, with a theological agenda that is typically unacknowledged, even though it is part and parcel of the agenda that prompted the gospel narratives in the first place. This hidden agenda often represents a wholly justified concern about the genuineness of Jesus’ humanity. Far more often, however, while purporting to be an unassuming question, it is an effort to cast doubt on the truth of Jesus’ divine sonship, and so, indirectly, on the credibility of the Christian faith as such—an understandable move in its own right. But this kind of inquiry is best met not with overstatements but with a non-arrogant, friendly smile, a quiet eye-to-eye, and a pregnant, reverent silence.71

After all, being the setting of every kind of significant speech, it is unsurprising that *eloquent silence* has a part to play, too, in Christian Sprachregelung. Hence:

**VII. Afterword: Rules of Speech for Ministry**

1. Those of us who think of the virgin birth as a cosmological miracle act wisely if they honestly say so; in matters of faith, nothing is more unsettling than evasive language. However, they do well to add that the Gospel passages have a deeper meaning: in his loving mercy, God, and God alone, takes the initiative in having his Power and Wisdom dwell among us as one of us. To use an idiom of the Greek Church Fathers: in the person of Jesus, God’s Creative Word takes on
not just one among us, but all of us—the entire “lump of dough” (φύραµα)—to renew us all, together. 

2. It is wise to explain the parallel between the gospel accounts of the virginal conception and the Baptism and Transfiguration narratives: the Father identifies his Son by naming him, just as human fathers in the not-too-distant past proudly went to city hall to register their children by name, the very day they were born.

3. It may well be a good idea to explain the idiom “born of woman” (Gal 4, 4; cf. Mt 11, 11 par. Lk 7, 28; Job 14, 1; 15, 14; 25, 4).

4. Let me end by acknowledging that it has taken me over twenty-five years of reflection to put all the bits and pieces (for that is what they are) of this essay together. While the limits of my intellectual powers have a lot to do with this, I do not think that the underlying attitude—an intellectual appreciation of mystery rooted in faith and fed by contemplation—is easy to acquire. Accordingly, part of reading and understanding this essay is, well, patience and habits of reverent, affective reflection. The pieces may fall in place. Or, to borrow an idiom of Ian Ramsey’s, “the penny may drop.” A “fuller meaning” may well emerge.

Notes


3. These few paragraphs could have been written in the technical, terminological language of language theory, starting with Fernand de Saussure’s
distinction between langue and langage (in English, “language” and “speech”). In the present context, however, it seems better to explain the matter in natural langue, as biblical interpretation is now a major issue for all Christians.

4. In the Baha’i House of Worship in Wilmette, IL, the inspiring texts at the top of the bays of the polygon, which have nothing to do with the Christian Bible, are in the language of the King James Bible. This makes them sound sacred, presumably to Baha’i worshippers, but also to non-Baha’i ears. Connotation is as important here as the meaning of the printed words.


7. *Hom. in Act. Apost. iii, 1.2.3 (PG 60, 38; cf. the Office of Readings on the feast of St. Mathias, May 14).* The crucial quotation: Τὰ γὰρ πρὸ τούτου οὐδὲς ἤδει μαθὼν, ἀλλὰ Πνεύματι ἐμάνθανον.


12. *BM*, 517. My hunch is that Bernard Lonergan might have called this a case of “undifferentiated consciousness.” See *BM2*, 698, where Brown writes he shares the common presumption about the theological note of the virginal conception: the doctrine is irreformable by reason of its having been consistently taught by the ordinary magisterium of the Catholic Church. The treatment offered here shares this presumption, as a matter of course.


15. I am in full agreement with the first part (698-700) of the treatment accorded to the historicity of Jesus’ virginal conception by Raymond Brown in Appendix iv of *BM2*, 697-712.

16. The genuinely historical question as to whether Jesus died on a cross is a different matter, of course; here, a negative answer would simply put an end to all Christian faith and theology.

17. See *BM2*, 700-08.

19. *DS*, 189: “Filium Dei, Deum, natum a Patre ante omni omnino principium . . . ex ea verum hominem, sine viri [virili?] generatum semine suscepsisse.”

20. See *DS*, 503. The Greek equivalent is ἄσπόρος.

21. *DS*, 368: “ut qui ante tempora erat Filius Dei, fieret Filius hominis et nasceretur ex tempore hominis more, matris vulvam natus aperiens et virginitatem matris deitatis virtute non solvens.” Note the phrase *hominis more, matris vulvam natus aperiens;* Jesus’ birth should make us wary of insisting on the Virgin’s physical virginity (i.e., the condition of the hymen) *in partu*. On this subject, see also Willemien Otten, “Christ’s Birth of a Virgin Who Became a Wife,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997): 247-60.

22. *DS*, 533: “nova autem nativitate est genitus, quia intacta virginitas virilem coitum nescivit et foecundatam per Spiritum Sanctum carnis materiam ministravit. Qui partus Virginis nec ratione colligitur nec exemplo monstratur; quod si ratione colligitur, non est mirabile; si exemplo monstratur, non erit singulare.”

23. Raymond Brown offers the following list: (1) Jesus’ parents, Mary and Joseph, are legally married but have not cohabited; (2) Joseph is of David’s stock; (3) Jesus’ birth is announced by an angel; (4) Jesus’ birth is not due to Mary having intercourse with her husband; (5) Jesus’ conception is due to the Holy Spirit; (6) Jesus’ name derives from an angelic directive; (7) Jesus is called Savior by the angel; (8) Jesus is born after his parents have started to live together; (9) Jesus is born in Bethlehem; (10) Jesus is born in the reign of Herod the Great; (11) Jesus is brought up in Nazareth (*BM*, 34-35)

24. On the bazaarful of “theological” and “historical” conclusions from these literary facts, see, once again, *BM*, 697-712.

25. Recall that the extraordinary claims that the Christian faith involves invite, justify, and indeed demand, the utmost efforts of the honestly inquiring mind. Note, too, that the catholic theological tradition has insisted on making available to all, without exception or partiality, “the entire counsel of God” (*Acts* 20, 27).


28. An example. It is tempting to explain the multiplications of the loaves and fishes in the gospels as follows. Everyone in the crowd had brought food but was loath to show it, lest they might have to share it. When they saw that Jesus and the apostles started sharing what little food they had, all produced
theirs. Thus it became clear that there was more than enough to go round; worry had been unnecessary. An ingenious interpretation, but at best no more than a moral fable.

29. Raymond Brown writes, too casually in my judgment: “I see nothing contradictory in believing that Jesus was fully a man even when there was only one human parent—the issue of chromosomes can be left to the creator Spirit who brought him into human existence” (MB2, 702, n. 316). This is an example of the sort of reasoning this essay opposes. Why? What we have before us are two redactionally diverse stories—both involving an identifiable woman, Jesus’ mother, said to be a virgin. Now we are to establish the meaning of these narratives; it is not our task to find a philosophical-theological theorem of universal application that will account for one-parent children’s factual existence. The texts deserve a more careful treatment. So does God’s omnipotence.


31. The man who developed the (then up-to-date) definition was Prospero Lorenzo Lambertini (1675-1758), a high curial official in Rome, in his massive work De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Beatorum Canonizatione (1734-38). It became the manual of the Congregation of Rites when Lambertini became Pope Benedict XIV in 1740.


34. De fide et symbolo, 7 (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, 41, 11).

35. I know of only one place where Aquinas comes close to implying this. He writes (In III Sent., d. 12, q. 3, a. 2, q. 2, sol. 1) that one reason why Jesus was conceived without sexual intercourse is that “it would not have been fitting in any way, in view of the Father’s dignity, for someone else to have been the father of his Son” (“nullo modo congruebat quod per commixtionem sexuum carnem asumeret . . . propter dignitatem Patris, ut non esset alius pater sui Filii”). “Not fitting” and “dignity” are not the same as “impossible” and “omnipotence.”
37. Cat. Or., 13 (Srawley, 60; English translation, 89).
41. We find this hard to imagine, witness a modern encyclopedia article on Galen (c. 130-c. 200), which informs us that “[h]is virtually undisputed authority discouraged original investigation and hampered medical progress until the 16th century.”
43. Mondino’s Anatomia was first printed at Padova in 1475, and saw about forty reprints in sundry places. See Ernest Wickersheimer, Anatomies de Mondino dei Luzzi et de Guido de Vigevano, 1-64; see also Luigi Firpo, Medicina medievale (Torino: UTET, 1972), 20-22; Sebastiano Manilio’s Italian translation (1494) is on 167-204.
44. Galen, born in Asia Minor, lived chiefly in Rome and was physician to several emperors. He is credited with some 500 treatises—the principal available in Teubner editions. Galen correlated earlier medical knowledge with his own findings, based on experiments and dissection of animals. See G.E.R. Lloyd’s Greek Science After Aristotle (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1973), 136-53.
46. The classic instance are the meatus visum fugientes (“pores eluding sight”) in the heart’s interventricular wall, which Vesalius claimed to have found. Since they are invisible, he must have found them in a book rather than the heart. Galen is the prime suspect here, and in fact the guilty party; see G.E.R. Lloyd, Greek Science After Aristotle, 147-50. For a precise account, cf. my Christ Proclaimed: Christology as Rhetoric (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 523-34.
47. Anatomy professors always had “prosectors” to assist them; they prepared the cadaver for the anatomical lesson, and did the actual dissecting during the demonstration, enabling professors to keep their hands clean. Many ancient physicians used prosectores—professional torturers (cf. Tertullian, De
anima 25, 5)—to help them perform demonstrations on living people, usually criminals; cf. G.E.R. Lloyd, *Greek Science After Aristotle*, 76-77. One way to gauge the distance between ancient culture and the Christian Middle Ages is to note that the latter had considerable reluctance and resistance to overcome before they dared dissect human corpses. The frontispiece of J.H. van den Berg’s *Het menselijk lichaam: Een metabletisch onderzoek* (vol. 1; Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1965) is a color reproduction of a plate found in the manuscript anatomy codex (cod. 569, Musée Condé, Chantilly) of Mondino’s student Guido da Vigevano (c. 1270-135?); Wickersheimer offers a black-and-white reproduction. It shows what was known as “the first anatomical incision”—a *sterno ad pubem*. On the left, a youthful anatomist in academic attire has his friendly left arm around a large, naked, blueish corpse, standing (!) to his left and obviously not drawn from observation; the left hand is just visible on the far side of the dead man’s waist. With his right hand he holds a scalpel; with it, he is making the incision—furtively, as it were: his eyes are not on what he is doing, but on the closed eyes of the corpse, as if he were apologizing to the dead man for opening his abdomen, or asking his permission to do it.

48. The foaming was taken as a sign that besides heat there was air in the arterial blood—air being the “vital” element; its natural movement was upward. Thus it was clear the blood coming from the heart was carrying life to every member in the body, enabling it to keep itself alive, “up on its feet.”

49. For Galen’s ideas on this, see G.E.R. Lloyd, *Greek Science After Aristotle*, 140.

50. The cardio-pulmonary circulatory system was discovered around 1550, by the Spanish physician-theologian Michael Servet (1511-53), imprisoned by the Inquisition by reason of his denial of the Trinity. (After escaping to Geneva, he was put at the stake at the orders of the City Council of Geneva, without the consent of John Calvin.) Not until 1616 did William Harvey (1578-1657) conduct the experiments that proved how blood circulates in the whole body. He published his discovery in *De moto cordis et sanguinis in animalibus* (“The Movement of the Heart and the Blood in Living Beings”; Frankfurt am Main, 1628).

51. This is why Aquinas, following Aristotle, can explain that very large animals, which need a great deal of food, have relatively little semen, and that the same is true of *hominis pingues*—fat people (*S. Th.* I, 119, 2, i.c.). An autobiographical detail?

52. Needless to say, there never was one single theoretical account of how these processes took place and why, as a quick reading of Aristotle’s *De anima* will show. The modern physiological account of fertilization began to take shape in the early to mid nineteenth century.

53. *S. Th.* I, 118, 1, *ad 3* and *ad 4*.
54. Galen treats these matters in Book xiv of Περὶ χρείας μωρίων; see Galeni De usu partium (Leipzig: Teubner, 1909), 284-336. Conceptions like Galen’s have been preserved, delicately, in the Qur’an. Cf. Sura 19 (16-22) and Sura 66 (12).

55. Thus the woman accounts for the child’s being a member of the human race, of the tribe, etc.; cf. “born of woman” (Gk. γενόµενος ἐκ γυναικός: Gal 4, 4; Mt 11, 11 par. Lk 7, 28—equivalents of Heb. נולדו: Job 14, 1; 15, 14; 25, 4). The idiom’s meaning is “human individual,” with connotations of transience and mortality.

56. Recall that it is part of the integrity of Christ’s humanity that he possesses a spiritual soul, as Gregory Nazianzen argued, against Apollinarius.

57. Consequently, those unfortunate enough not to be legitimised by a father—mere mother’s children—have no public identity.

58. Which is exactly what Zachary does when he names his son John in the Lukan infancy narrative (Lk 1, 63).

59. In fact, one sharp contrast between the Lukan stories of John the Baptist’s birth and Jesus’ is that the former causes amazement (Lk 1, 65-66); the latter does not.


61. Matthew calls his genealogy a “book of origin” (βίβλος γενέσεως; cf. Gen 2, 4; 5, 1). It corresponds to Heb. ה valeurs, which is a cognate of the root דל, “to bear.”

62. The phrase raises the question, Called Son of God by whom? We do well to realize that the passive voice suggests that the chief answer to the question is “by God.” This is the very point the pericopes of Jesus’ Baptism and Transfiguration are making, each in their own way.

63. See above, n. 20.

64. See Leo the Great’s letter to the Empress Pulcheria: being consubstantial with his Father, [the Lord] deigned to be consubstantial with his mother as well (“[ut] consubstantialis Patri, consubstantialis esse dignaretur et matri”: Litt. 31, PL 54, 792B).


66. See BM, 534-42; BM2, 705-08.

67. See supra, II, 6.

68. MJ, 229; see n. 11 supra.

69. In fact, this is also implied in Matthew’s account: Joseph does not wish to expose Mary to the rigors of the Law. Conceptions are historical facts only in the sense that men and women of historic significance must have been conceived.
70. At the earliest, they will start with the mother’s premonitions during pregnancy, but here we are passing from history to legend or hagiography. One instance among many is the life of the pious eleventh-century crusader Godfrey of Bouillon.

71. Incidentally, this is not a piece of “pastoral advice.” In two antiphons of great antiquity (second quarter of the fifth century), *O admirabile commercium* and *Quando natus es*, sung for centuries in the Latin West on the eve of the Feast of the Mother of God (January 1), the phrases *sine semine* (“without seed”) and *ineffabiliter* (“beyond words”) occur as parallels, suggesting dynamic equivalence and hence, a reverent silence.

72. On the notion of humanity as the “lump” (Gk. φύραµα, Lat. massa) assumed in its entirety by the Word, see *God Encountered*, vol. II/3 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), §115, 8, [h]. See also St. Andrew of Crete’s sermon on Palm Sunday: [Christ is on his way to heaven] “by way of the first batch of our lump of dough (PG 97, col. 993A). In 1 Cor 5, 7, φύραµα refers to the whole community.

73. See n. 52. Very much depending on situations, it might even be wise to explain a less proper, exclusively male analogue to “one born of woman”: “one passing water at the wall” (Heb. מַשְׁחַט בֵּעֲקָר: cf. 1 Kings 14, 10; 21, 21; 2 Kings 9, 8).

Theologia: On Not “Dropping Out of the Trinity”

In memory of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, and in support of his Common-Ground Initiative

This essay is divided into seven parts. Its subject-matter is the nature of theology. It will also suggest, chiefly indirectly, that the faithful, the clergy, and the bishops of the Catholic Church in North America today, together with the faithful and the leadership of all Christian churches, could do worse than letting themselves be taught and indeed enlightened by the confused and confusing sixty-year period between the Councils of Nicaea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.). In those decades, ruling families everywhere were learning, conservatively of course, how to live with an increasingly Christian (yet equally imperial) politico-religious establishment. Thus, the underlying proposal of this essay is to show that the chief merit of the Cappadocian Fathers is to have shown, on grounds both reasonable and scriptural, that the deity can be the True and Living God only if it is triune. Let us start with a quick historical sketch.

Christian Churches in an Age of Confusion

In the aftermath of Jesus’ ministry, execution and Resurrection, the New Testament writings show that Christian communities in various places around the Mediterranean began to move in the direction of an appreciation of what was ultimately implied in membership in the Christian Church—cosmically, anthropologically, and especially theologically. One of the bolder signs of this occurs in a late arrival to the New Testament canon known as Peter’s second letter: Christians “share in the divine nature.”¹ John’s Gospel puts this as boldly whenever it suggests that knowing the Son is knowing the Father—an understanding
not unknown in the Synoptics nor even in Paul, who reminded Christians that they were members of Christ’s body. In this, the Church was showing its understanding of its own life, and interpreting it as a life of actual participation in the life of the Triune God, Father, Son (or Logos), and Holy Spirit. It also began to term this life theologia, meaning “thinking, acting, and indeed existing in light of the One God Living and True.” This implies that theologia is holistic. While a matter of articulate learning, it means an integrated life whose integral elements (“moments”) are worship, conduct, and teaching.2

Quite importantly for present purposes, Yves Congar’s comprehensive article Théologie, intended for publication in the Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique, became available in an English translation under the title A History of Theology.3 Unsurprisingly, theologia is a pre-Christian Greek word, and the translation includes a brief account of the pre-Christian usage of theologia. But this observation leads to another, far more significant one. The history of the word “theology” is part of the substance of Catholic theology. For this reason, it makes little sense to give any account of the development, say, of christological doctrine in the wake of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, without first walking down an important side street. In other words, if we professional theologians guided by the Great Tradition are to understand what we are doing in the catholic Church today, we may have to hold back and listen to fresh old, proven teachers first.

To make our restraint more fruitful, we must also quickly visit various topics: tradition and interpretation, and the representative capacity of single words4—one of the many issues implied in Newman’s observation that Christian Revelation must not be reduced to truths that are entirely manifest and thus, completely manageable.5

Fifteen centuries before Newman, a young bishop named Gregory, known as “Nazianzen” after his birthplace Karbala near Nazianzus in Cappadocia (329-89 A.D.), was invited to Constantinople to preach, with a pulpit of his own. He was a poetic, introspective, monkish man who had studied philosophy in Athens, along with his friend Basil—a man as monkish but quite ambitious and forceful as well, who after a falling-out with Gregory after seven years of study left Athens in pursuit of the monastic life.6 By 361 A.D., Gregory had found himself reluctantly ordained a priest by his father, a man of local influence, who had converted from a unitarian sect to the Catholic Church at the insistence
of his wife Nonna in the year of Nicaea (325 A.D.), only to be ordained bishop of Nazianzus three or four years later. After eleven years at home in Nazianzus trying to make peace between the local monks and his father, the local bishop, and on the road for a number of other conciliatory errands, Gregory found himself appointed bishop of Sasima and ordained by his difficult friend Basil in 372 A.D., but settled in Nazianzus as his elderly father’s auxiliary; but his thirst for the life of prayer and study drew him back into seclusion, in faraway Seleucia this time, where he sojourned at St. Thecla’s convent for a full three years (375-78 A.D.). Finally, in 379 A.D., he was invited to Constantinople as the “missionary bishop” for the small Nicene community in “the City.” Gregory had found himself involuntarily involved in every controversy of the day and thus propelled into public life. Small wonder he was elected bishop of Constantinople late in the year before the first Council of that name (381 A.D.), at which he presided for three months, only to find himself pressured into retirement once again after six months in office, and taking shelter on his estate, near his home town. A gentle soul not made for politics or big-city life, he availed himself of his position to think and teach long enough to give the definition of “theology” a lot of thought, as his early nickname “the Theologian” demonstrates. He became what Newman was to be in his day: a private, hypersensitive, philosophic, literate Christian man very much in touch with the religious confusions of his age. What were they?

By the second half of the fourth century, the Christian Churches had become, so to speak, the victims of their own success. Politically, they had a future; under imperial warrant, the network of local churches pretty much retained the structures of the old empire. Bishops were generally influential politically, even if the emperors’ favor could be counted on to remain fickle; theologically, their Logos doctrine, both high-minded and neighborly, promised height and breadth of vision. The proclamation of the one universe created by God Omnipotent through Christ, God’s consubstantial Word Incarnate, and forever to be unified in Him, the Crucified and Risen One, was not just a message for martyrs to die for, but also a summons for thoughtful men and women to live for. The regula fidei was unifying them in a flexible way. So did a thankful appreciation of the cultural fruits already gathered in the pre-Christian past, supported by the efforts of the civilized
(invariably, “us here”) to draw even the insufferably heterogeneous savages “out there” into a common horizon by dint of imperial protection, letters, travel, and hospitality. Transcultural consensus was as yet unthinkable, let alone advocacy of “multiculturalism,” but the Greek poets and thinkers were widely accepted—also on biblical grounds—as an authoritative beginning. No wonder Christians respected them, as Paul had done in his letters, especially in ethical matters.

Still, it took well over a half-century for three talented bishops finally to accomplish the task that Athanasius of Alexandria had left undone in the aftermath of Nicaea, except by suffering exile for its sake: forging an intellectually coherent account of the Christian faith as the accepted spiritual platform of the empire. Right in the teeth of the sophisticated doubletalk in the Greco-Roman academies (instanced by the multifarious disquisitions of Eunomius, the elusive bishop of Cyzicus, and his various followers), Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil (known as “the Great”) kept thinking and teaching. To them, class and good taste came naturally. Their cultural aim was wide-ranging peace and unity commending themselves by good taste. They intimated that if we want to believe as Christians, we must cultivate intellectual integrity. If we are to live and die as reasonable, considerate living beings, “deriving our nobility from above,” we must allow ourselves to be directed by the truth, not by deft quotation or opinion.

Why rehearse this today? Does it apply to us, and if so, how? It would appear it does.

In North America, the United States was the first country ever to adopt as its civil religion a modern, rational unitarian Deism of Scottish extraction. Without nominating René Descartes, John Locke, and David Hume for sainthood, we can say that faith in the existence of an omniscient and benevolent Creator-God has emancipated, thank heavens, the state-and-church-controlled social and individual conscience by dint of fairness and free speech. This Deism (and the equal dignity of each human individual which it implies) has by no means conquered the world, though it has been challenging existing religions everywhere. It is still helping us to today’s blessed (if slow) growth in tolerance, and to the principles of human rights. Besides, the mechanization of the world picture implicit in modern, rationality-governed science and technology has been delivering to humanity countless life-enhancing benefits, despite the continuing global injustices.
More locally, even Catholics are now undeniably citizens of the United States. They became loyal citizens by serving in World War II and the Korean war; in the wake of the former, the G.I. Bill of Rights helped them ahead in their emancipation into the mainstream by at least a generation. Especially since the pontificate of Blessed Pope John XXIII and John F. Kennedy’s election to the Presidency they have been significant participants in the American way and indeed, contributors to it—a development that is apt (but by no means certain) to continue, given the recent influx of the mostly Catholic Latin Americans.

But there is a limit to all good things—even the most rational. In fact, the rational approach to things and people produces moral and spiritual confusions all its own. The Austrian genius Ludwig Wittgenstein is a good case in point. He found himself forced to the conclusion that whenever rational logic is pushed to the limit it will lead to either meaningless action or a sense of mystery as irresistible as it is disarming. Beyond rationality, he showed, lies revelatory silence. But this is never assured; true reason and logic of the far-sighted sort are not always welcome in a busy society relying on clever artifice and on opinionate debate about truths that “work” and favor “progress.”

In this context, it is part of the Catholic theologian’s task to observe that a similar wave of busy, opinionate rationality occurred before, even if the world was pre-technological and the scale considerably smaller. In fact, it just might be the task of the Catholic theological tradition to make it memorable. For it was Gregory Nazianzen who saw that in times of politico-religious equivocation and trendy twaddle, any understanding of God must be rooted in silence. He made the point in the first of his five Theological Discourses—delivered in the late summer of 380 A.D. and one of the classic (i.e., Catholic) accounts of the Christian faith.

Yet before hearing Gregory, we, people of the twenty-first century, must take ourselves through a few (admittedly impressionistic) sets of learned preliminaries. They concern issues in cultural history.

So the next question is, What is theology today?

“Theologia”

Cross’s Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church gives a dispassionate, accurate Catholic description and definition of “theology”: 

"Theologia"
Theology (Gk. θεολογία). In its Christian sense it is the science of the Divinely revealed religious truths. Its theme is the Being and Nature of God and His creatures and the whole complex of the Divine dispensation from the Fall of Adam to the Redemption through Christ and its mediation to men by His Church, including the so-called natural truths of God, the soul, the moral law, &c., which are accessible to mere reason. Its purpose is the investigation of the contents of belief by means of reason enlightened by faith (fides quaerens intellectum) and the promotion of its deeper understanding. In the course of time theology has developed into several branches, among them dogmatic, historical, and practical theology. The methods of classification of the sub-disciplines, however, fluctuate in different theological systems.

Plainly, Cross’s text is accurate. It opens with a nominal definition of theology, also known to Aquinas. It goes on to explain it as “the science of the Divinely revealed religious truths God” and detail it by recourse to the classical Christian topics; Aquinas might have called it sacra doctrina but explained it in the same way. Appropriately, the entry goes on to recognize Anselm’s classical definition of the underlying dynamic and purpose of theology: “faith seeking understanding.” It ends up by explaining that Christian theology has developed over time. It plainly has. Yet at this point there is a snake hiding in Cross’s well-trimmed grass. Theology has changed indeed, but not just by virtue of development “into several branches, among them dogmatic, historical, and practical theology.” In the past four centuries what has profoundly changed is the standing of theology as a discipline. Aquinas’s functional definitions and descriptions of theology in the opening quæstio of the Summa theologiae would not meet with general assent today.

That quæstio includes treatments of theology’s necessity, scholarliness, unity, practicality, excellence, sapientiality, its relationship to God as “object,” and its reliance on argument, imagery, and Scripture. Clearly, Aquinas approves of what he describes. Cross’s description, careful as it is, avoids even the semblance of approval or partiality in regard to the value of Christian theology and its practice. But most of all it stays away from the issue of the epistemological status of theology:
(i) how true are theological statements, and even more, (ii) just how can they be true, and in what context?

Here if anywhere, Cross’s “objectivity” betrays the influence of modernity’s scholarly—i.e., impartial—approach to the truth-claims implied in any theology. Put more pointedly, Cross is reticent on the relationship between theology and any form of faith-commitment. Ecumenically sound as it may look, it fails to ask today’s overwhelming religious question, never mind answering it.

To tackle this point, let us go back to Aquinas. He is an epistemological realist; he thinks he “knows what he knows.” Yet this does not make him “mediaeval” in the sense of “naive” by a long shot.14 Why not? Answer: Aquinas shows evidence of being aware of what he is doing when he finds himself knowing something. In other words, his treatment of the nature of theology in the Summa shows that he has given himself an epistemological account not only of the nature and function of theology, but also of its limits. This enables him to write:

When we believe something and formulate our belief, the target (terminus) we have in mind is not what we say but the reality we are addressing. For in formulating propositions, we aim at reality [Lat. rem], and this applies in both science and faith.15

Precisely here lies Aquinas’s realism: the point of what we say or write lies not so much in what we say as in what we mean. After all, the reality-out-there (which, so he implies, has induced us in the first place to think whatever it is we think and whatever it is we are saying about it) is the proper target of our effort to understand. Put differently, the intentionality on our part and the intelligible object’s being-there-for-us-to-know-it jointly account for our mutual actuation, even if our understanding (which is not necessarily wholly mutual) remains less than wholly comprehensive.16 Is this a prejudice? Well, Yes and No. It does show, of course, that Aquinas is a man of the Middle Ages, and this means that he deems both faith and theology to lie inside the one realm of true knowledge—an assumption not widely held today, and for good reason.

What has just been explained implies that for us human beings times and places are characterized by shifts and changes in culture, including next-to-normative horizons of human understanding and
next-to-normative methods to give shape to that understanding. For example, in the century after Aquinas (when Europe’s dominant vernaculars were only just beginning to emerge as “polite” languages) the philosophical question *de significatione verborum* became a controlling issue: What do words mean, and how do they do it?

But here it must be recalled that this question was first discussed orally, in the schools, i.e., only in Latin. In due course, though, it got increasingly applied, again, to written Latin texts. No wonder nominalism became the normative climate of the life of learning, propped up by church and university Latin, often with scant reference to meaning-in-context, including faith-contexts.¹⁷

Thus, the almost purely notional type of learned theology exemplified by, e.g., Luther’s teacher Gabriel Biel (c. 1420-95) well illustrates the gap between late-mediaeval theology and Christian faith-cum-life. So do Erasmus’s (1469-1536) irritated dismissal of scholasticism and his insistence on the Greek and Hebrew originals of the Bible. So do Luther’s (1483-1546) attacks on scholasticism and his determination in regard to both Bible translations in the vernacular and his *sola scriptura*. Both are different-looking but equally tart fruits from the quaint old tree of Latin learning in need of existential renewal.

But the issue did not stop there. In the early sixteenth century, the printing press helped cause a veritable quantum leap in the normative intellectual climate, as the late Walter Ong has explained so well. At this point in our argument it suffices to repeat that the sixteenth century experienced the beginnings of *print literacy*. It helped create the impression that truth was real only if it was perpetual, stable, objective, and a potential object of acquisition; at the same time, knowledge looked real only if it meant the possession of at least some formulable truths. Besides, the unspoken assumption became that truths are best guaranteed when precisely formulated. Memory, understood as a bank full of distinct memorable assets, replaced the mind viewed as the distinctively human ability to understand what is both true and real.

In the park of theology this climate created what the French have called *la théologie savante*. It favored debate (and, usually, acrid mutual polemics) among the (mostly clerical) theologians. New forms of popular faith, often full of spiritual affect but not in every case inspired by the Great Tradition, came to be associated with pious religious associations encouraged or at least tolerated by ecclesiastical and political authorities;
by contrast, in the mostly militant seminaries, universities, or courts, theology was often practiced as a function of politics. This became especially the case in the seventeenth century, as the Roman Church increasingly defined itself and especially its unity by appeals to the Papacy as a monarchy as real as the “great monarchies,” and as the manifold offspring of the original Reformation were fanning out across a broad political and theological spectrum. By the century’s mid point, an exhausted Western and Central Europe, sick of religious warfare—yet often riled by calls for holy war, especially on paper—settled for an uneasy armistice, in which literalist dogmatic theologians, ranging from hedgerow preachers to professors of high repute, remained vociferous, quoting proof-texts, slogans, and extracts from printed “sources.” No wonder George Fox and his Quakers got tired, left, and quietly put their trust in God’s Spirit alone; and the amiable, conciliatory Puritan Richard Baxter (1615-91) stood alone—a tragic symbol of the failure of good intentions.

Thus, tragically, religious diligence in the framing and reading of texts as sources of authoritative unity in faith led to an accelerating theological languor. The seventeenth century became the epoch of a vastly overrated “freedom of theological opinion,” as distinct from the profession of faith. In the Protestant world, this bad habit became only worse as synodal agreements of great authority were revised to stem the tide of insufficiently acceptable tenets; as a result, synods themselves became increasingly divisive. By contrast, in the Catholic world, theology decayed into systems of doctrines taught by sixteenth-century commentators and upheld by the various recognized “schools” of theological learning—Augustinian, Franciscan, Dominican, even Jesuit—all of them theoretically (and even practically) subject to Roman arbitration, but rarely taking the spiritual measure of their faith.

Unsurprisingly, these opinionate and specious theological debates increasingly favored a Deism both practical and obstinate, which in turn encouraged theological rationalism and “useful knowledge.” Theology fed by living Catholic Faith and living Tradition receded—nightmares of past warfare. But another nightmare, Pascal’s, refused to go away; in retrospect, his prospect of the esprit de finesse getting lost in quantity of knowledge had become prophetic, even in theology. No wonder Yves Congar came to treat the seventeenth century as the effective low point in the history of Catholic theology.
Contemporary Nominalism: Technical Terminology

All this shows that nominalism and scrutiny of the meaning of precise words has never entirely become a thing of the past. In fact, the opposite is true. For, over the centuries, the modern culture of learning has availed itself increasingly of such dominant vernaculars as have become usable, first regionally and now internationally. No longer is the international language of learning dependent on Latin (except for the dying cohort of those who dream of Latin as a living language). Instead, learning has come to rely on the artificial language of terminology—i.e., on cold, systemically interrelated, technical terms. But taken by itself, technical terminology creates only the presumption of thought; it does not guarantee it. Having been designed and understood only by experts capable of analyzing and diagnosing problems, terminology cannot be counted on to equip experts with the judgment, discernment, and especially the wisdom needed to bridge the widening gap between, on the one hand, technological learning and technical skills, and on the other hand, the requirements of humane, considerate interpersonal living.

Let us sum up. What late-mediaeval nominalism and modern scientism have largely overlooked is that language is a matter of distinctively human communicatory behavior before it ever becomes a relatively free-standing instrument of thought. True, what lies at the basis of thought is a fascinating phenomenon. It is called the “representative capacity of words”—i.e., their ability to “mean the same” regardless of immediate communicatory situations. Words of all kinds—let us say, “exceedingly,” “appear,” “broken,” “bulk,” “soft,” “and,” “despite,” “no”—can be actually used in a multitude of possible contexts, but we also “know” somehow what they “mean” in and of themselves, regardless of any actual contexts. This captivating property of words-out-of-context tempts us to treat single words as if they somehow were stable objects. In fully human contexts, though, they never are.

Now it is not difficult to imagine how the arts of writing (which came first) and reading (with which all of us now start) have amplified our sense of the representative capacity of words. Over the past half-century, the public (as well as far too many teachers at every level) have accepted dictionary definitions and entries in thesauruses as authoritative words, as if we could reliably use dictionaries without knowing the
language. If languages could be learned from vocabulary alone we would be able to be literate with encyclopedias alone. But what with the modern emphasis on “info” rather than thought, modern people will feel inadequate whenever they have to understand (never mind translate) what they read, or write down what they think. Thoughtless literacy is with us. And from a fully human perspective, thoughtless literacy is increasingly apt to cease being the gate to the palace of truth, and to become the discount store of quick opinion and not-so-hidden persuasion, concretized by that garrulous but amiable morning visitor requiring almost no attention, the newspaper. Nowadays his only competitors are the various “today” TV shows, but the competition is hardly serious. What do words mean any more, printed or not, moving or still, loud or silent? Are we to conclude that mindless, moody powers have become our rule of thumb?

Yet it would be historically shortsighted to stop here and despond. For in fact, the opposite of thoughtless literacy is with us, too. In the nineteen-fifties, in which the neopositivists were declaring religious language to be devoid of any identifiable reference, a sharp little volume appeared, written by a mixed circle of believers and unbelievers. We were also reminded that there are such things as religious situations—all too long overlooked since the fourteenth century; this in turn reminds us that language is at bottom a matter of behavior (“performance”) not concepts; soon after, it was shown that no speaker can stay entirely outside of what she or he says. Even theoretical physicists have been pointing out that the apparent victory of objectivity had been turned into defeat: Descartes’ atoms, Leibniz’s monads, and Newton’s unbreakable natural laws have become a thing of the past.25

A Secular Prophet and Precursor: Ludwig Wittgenstein

Yet even more interestingly, at least theologically speaking, the most radical modern contributor to logic as the sole reliable way of thinking is also the discoverer of its defeat. His name was Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), an infrequent associate of an erudite group that made a point of living intelligently by logic alone: the Vienna Circle.26 The son of a family recognized for wealth and talent, he set out to be an engineer; turned into a logician, he soon found himself irresistibly waylaid by his own thinking, exploring the limits of logic in his
Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, and facing the same rating of academic philosophy as Horatio got to hear from his friend Hamlet:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

In his preface to the first English edition of the Tractatus (1922), Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), a friend of Wittgenstein’s and the star of logical positivism, sums up his attempt in one brisk paragraph:

The essential business of language is to assert or deny facts. Given the syntax of a language, the meaning of a sentence is determined as soon as the meaning of the component words is known. In order that a certain sentence should assert a certain fact there must, however the language may be constructed, be something in common between the sentence and the fact. This is perhaps the most fundamental thesis of Mr Wittgenstein’s theory. That which is to be in common between the sentence and the fact, so he contends, cannot be itself in turn said in language. It can, in his phraseology, only be shown, not said, for whatever we may say will still need to have the same structure.

In his own preface, Wittgenstein gives his own, rather more colloquial-sounding summary, the latter half of which will return with a vengeance, at the very end of the book (as we will see in a moment):

The whole point of the book might be summarized as follows: Anything that allows itself to be said at all can be said clearly, and whatever one cannot speak of one has to be silent about.

Put differently, verbal statements of fact, whether spoken or written, cannot be verified by means of other verbal statements, whether spoken or written. That is why in both speaking and writing (but especially in the latter) Wittgenstein would stress the importance of “hitting the nail on the head,” lest the inaccuracy of anything that has been said or written should prompt the need for further explanation in words; and don’t we know from experience that the latter is apt to be an exercise
in futility, and one sure way to lead to yet another lis de voce—a wrangle about the meaning of a word?

So even mere “statements of fact” depend on human acts of “zeigen”; that is, their actual meaning is a practical matter. “Points” are “made,” manifested, shown, pointed out. Thus, the language of alleged objectivity remains dependent on the kind of human—i.e., intersubjective—behavior that cannot be adequately captured by statements in language. No wonder that Wittgenstein was a stickler for words, who could write, in a letter to a friend:

> Just one thing. If it you are going to write something, be ready to have it put you to a lot of trouble. Then there will be something to it for sure. And otherwise nothing, for sure.

At first blush, this is no more than a teacher’s warning to students learning how to write compositions. Yet Wittgenstein, that genius in logic, means more. He has found—precisely because he is so meticulous a logician—that no mere words will ever unmistakably state a matter of fact, and that words about words will make things not clearer but murkier. In other words, the very logician in him has become aware that what can be stated in words is necessarily deficient in relation to the unstatable that meets us everywhere. By dint of hunting for butterflies he has discovered that at the end of the day what he will be able to pin down for his collection is not the world of butterflies, but just a few samples, “wriggling on the wall” for a moment or two, then dead. There is more to what we have to say than what we can say. So, in writing anything at all, count on it to be laborious, for there is always more to anything put in words. So, true to form, Wittgenstein can conclude his Tractatus with the single, marvelously ambiguous sentence, oft-quoted but just as often only half-understood: “What one cannot speak of one can only be silent about.” Almost denotatively, he had written earlier on in the Tractatus: “Actually, there exists such a thing as the inexpressible. This reveals itself, it is the mystical.”

Wittgenstein was an acculturated Austrian Jew—that is to say, his sensibility was shaped by the cultural Catholicism of his native country. A Catholic from birth, he remained one all his life, though he never became a “practicing” one. But he understood the believer’s mind-set, and in articulating it, he could “hit the nail on the head”: 
If the person who believes in God looks around & asks “Where does everything I see come from?” “Where does all this come from?”, he is expecting no (causal) explanation; and the funny part of his question is that it is the very expression of this expectation. He is expressing, then, a posture toward any and all explanations.—But in what way is this expressed in his life?

It is the posture that will take a particular matter seriously, but then at a particular point in time not take it seriously after all, & declare that something else is still more serious.

For instance, someone can say it is grievous that So & So died before he could finish a particular piece of work; & taken in another sense, there is no matter at all. This is a case of using the [same] words “in a deeper sense.”

What I would actually like to say is this: here too what is decisive is not the words we use or what we think while saying them, but the difference they make at different points in life. How can I tell that two people mean the same when each says he believes in God? And just the same thing holds for the 3 persons. Theology that insists on certain particular words & phrases & prohibits others makes nothing clearer (Karl Barth).

It [i.e., theology] gesticulates by means of words, as it were, because it wants to say something & does not know how to express it. Its words make points by virtue of practice.41

In other words, to borrow a term from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception, doctrine is fundamentally gestural.

With this, we are ready at last to hear Gregory Nazianzen. He knows that the connection between teaching and faith depends on the manner in which the former is practiced.

Gregory Nazianzen on θεολογία

On the context in which Gregory wrote we can be brief. He is writing in opposition to fellow bishops, Eunomius (c. 330-94 A.D.) and his followers, most of them half-coherent Neo-Arians, yet conscious of their importance. Yet in the last resort Gregory is worried not about his fellow-Christians he so firmly disagrees with, but about the idolaters
still practicing their superstitious polytheistic busyness, and the polite, educated unbelievers—Platonists and Stoics alike. Why? To polytheists and (what we might call) “non-theists” alike, Christians fighting theological battles among each other are an amusing as well as perplexing spectacle. It is also a convenient one: it permits both ignorant idolators and mature, thinking human beings to hold themselves excused from proper inquiry—content to stay this side of the knowledge and love of the Living God.42 For Catholics fighting prove by the very thing they do that they are not talking of God. So Gregory says:

Gentlemen out there: Not just anybody—I repeat, not just anybody—is able to philosophize about God. Plainly, it is not something that comes cheap; it is not for those who hold on to what is down below. And, let me add, it is not something for just any moment, for just any people, and about just any theme, but rather, it is for certain moments, for certain people, and about certain definite themes. For what is most worthy of consideration is not just anybody’s taste, but only of those practiced and advanced in spirituality [metamorphosis: “contemplation”]—that is, those who have got (or have been getting) themselves purified in both soul and body. The reason for this is the fact that for the impure to touch Purity Itself is neither a matter of course nor even a prudent thing to do—think of ailing eyes being exposed to direct sunlight.

So which moments? [Answer:] When we take time away from the impurity and confusion outside us, and when our higher faculties are not submerged in wretched and misleading images—think of elegant handwriting mixed up with ugly scrawls, or of the fragrance of perfume mixed up with the smell of the sewer. For we must really slow down and get to know God, and when we get the right moment, come to a just decision (cf. Ps 75, 3) regarding what is involved in the simple, straightforward knowledge of God [metamorphosis].

So for whom? [Answer:] For those who take the matter seriously, and not as one thing among many, and as a matter for small talk, say, after the horse races, the shows in the theater, the song festivals, the full bellies, and after what happens further down, below the belly. Think, too, of people who revel
[in theology] as a matter of banter or as a chance to show their valor in argument.

So what to philosophize about and to what extent? [Answer:] About what we succeed in comprehending, and to the extent the listeners’ attitude and ability will allow them to comprehend. Careful now! Heavy noise or heavy foods have a way of harming the hearing or the body, or if you will, heavy burdens will bring down those who carry them, or heavy rains will ruin the land. In the same way there are those who will be brought down and overburdened by certain kinds of discourse that is hard to digest, so to speak; indeed, they might discover that such ability as they once had has been disabled.

Now I am not at all saying that we need not be mindful of God all the time—I do not care to be badgered again by the gentlemen who simply make a point of being facile and ready to talk! For obviously, we do have to be mindful of God more often than we need to draw a breath; and, in a sense, we have nothing else to do except just that! I am one of those who approve of the saying that recommends that we “meditate [on God] day and night” (Ps 1, 2), that we “dwell [on God] at nightfall, early in the morning, and at noon” (Ps 55, 17), and that we are to “bless the Lord at all times” (Ps 34, 1). We can also quote Moses where he says “when you lie down, when you get up, when you are on your way” (cf. Deut 6, 7). Mindfulness [of God] is exactly what stamps us on our way to purity. So I am not condemning unremitting mindfulness, but [unremitting] talk about God; nor am I criticizing talk about God as something irreverent, but its being done out of season; nor [am I criticizing] teaching [about God], but lack of appropriate restraint [in it]. A glut of honey to the point of surfeit will cause vomiting (cf. Prov 25, 27) even though it is genuine honey; and according to Solomon—and to me as well—there is a time for everything (cf. Eccles 3, 1). Also, something good is not good whenever it is done at the wrong time, and flowers are completely out of season in winter, and what suits men does not suit women and the other way round. Also, a death no more calls for mathematics than a drinking party calls for tears.
And really, are we likely to pass up a good time only when the perfect opportunity offers itself?

Of course not, my friends and brothers—note I am still calling you brothers, even though you do not act as brothers. Please let us not think this way of each other, and let us not, like hot and hard-to-handle horses that have thrown off their riders (which is Reason) and have spit out the bridle that rightly restrains them, rush on and on, only to run past the winning-pole by a long distance. No, let our philosophizing keep within our limits. Let us not get carried away to Egypt, nor let us get dragged off to Assyria, nor let us sing “the Lord’s song in a foreign land” (Ps 136, 4)—I mean, making it heard regardless, to audiences both foreign and our own, hostile and congenial, reflective and inconsiderate. [I am thinking of audiences] watching very carefully what is going on among us, and keen on seeing the spark of our iniquities burst into flame; in fact, they light it, they rekindle it, and raise it up to high heaven by their furtive blowing, and prompt the ever-mounting fire of Babylon to consume everything around (cf. Dan 3, 25 lxx). For since they are short of vigor in their own teachings, they attempt to acquire it by using our weaknesses as a foil, and for that reason, like flies on open wounds, they take advantage of what we have to call either our misfortunes or our sins.

But from now on, the least we can do is to stop doing an injustice to ourselves, and forsake our decorum in regard to these matters. At the same time, if it should be impossible to put an end to hostility, let us in any case agree with each other to be loud and clear in treating things mystical in a mystical manner, and holy things in a holy manner, and to stop throwing around, for all to hear, the things that are better not bandied about. And let us not create the impression that those who worship spirits and observe loathsome myths and practices are more honorable than ourselves—I mean the folks who had rather shed their blood than share secret lore with non-initiates. Instead, let us remember that just as there is such a thing as decorum in matters of dress, food, life style, laughing, and walking, there is in matters of speaking and
keeping silent as well. After all, we pay special reverence to the Word along with God’s other titles and powers; our taste for contentiousness should stay within limits, too. 43

If any conclusion can be drawn out of R.P.C. Hanson’s treatment of Eunomius and Eunomianism, it is that their literary remains are both clever and “fluid and almost chatty.” In fact, Hanson’s summary is worth quoting in full:

Finally we must classify Eunomius as an individualist, philosophically eclectic theologian, as many theologians of his day were philosophically eclectic. He was indeed enough of a child of his day to be soaked in Neo-Platonic thought. But his spirit and many of his doctrines were far from Neo-Platonic. He used Aristotelian logic to deploy his peculiar brand of rationalist Unitarianism. He took some of the ideas of what might be called mainstream Arianism and developed them in an eccentric and untypical direction. He is interesting for his own sake, but not because he was representative of the thought of the church of his day. It was no doubt the apparently strict logic of his arguments and the high-minded consistency of his conduct which attracted those who accepted his doctrine. 44

Still, where Hanson sees “doctrine,” “rationalist Unitarianism” and “eclecticism,” could “persuasive resourcefulness in answering each and every question” be a more practical diagnosis of the theological problem posed by Eunomius? After all, he is apt to quote from the Scriptures as dexterously as from Plato. He is irresistibly eclectic and versatile. He has a patch for every scratch, a text to fit any tune. Coherence, who needs it? Who can argue with a good, engaging bishop who is perhaps only a bit trendier (or loyal) than Thou? Why not let him talk as he can so he can half-agree with all and keep the Christian show on the road?

In this predicament, Gregory Nazianzen finds, first of all, that “having all the answers and giving them” is clearly a most sterile posture for Christian bishops to adopt. Equally clearly, he regards expert garrulousness as an affront to God’s Mystery, and thinks that the details of the Christian faith, delicate as they are, can wait. For now, he says, let
us try, in our habits of speech, to act as friends of God—first in how and when we speak up, and in front of whom.

Accordingly, Gregory uses the entire first *Theological Oration* to demonstrate the need for conversion in speech. Only after that will he spend the remaining four *Orations* explaining the fundamentals of the Catholic faith, implicitly offsetting them against the lack of integrity of the opinionated bishops, operating mainly politically. Quite interestingly, nowhere does he call for obedience to teaching authority, say, by referring to episcopal or even patriarchal authority or to the Council of Nicaea, or to the various rules of faith current in the early church. His argument is both philosophic and scriptural; that is to say, it is pastoral and theological, not disciplinary.

So, I wish to suggest, whether we are cardinals (whether in Rome or locally), bishops, priests, lay folk, concerned dilettantes or theological experts, our first common issue is: steeped as we are in the modern North American media culture, we do not sound like people who know the living God—the One who has from eternity taken pleasure in being present to humanity, ever so subtly and unemphatically, but also ever so vulnerably, incarnately. Could this lead to “practical conclusions”? Let us start with the media—hypothesizing they are the contemporary analogue of the common culture and its bishops in the mid fourth century.

**Intermezzo: A Twin Bill of Particulars for Today**

“The connection between teaching and faith depends on the manner in which the former is practiced.” “Catholics fighting prove by the very thing they do that they are not talking of God.”

So let’s leave it to the media to be clever and fluid and chatty and inconsistent. Using the media in the service of Catholic orthodoxy or conduct or both (or even against alleged “dissent”) amounts to forgetting that the media—not always enemies—are unreliable and often false friends. They are powers—ignorant of God’s ways, often superciliously so. Something follows from this. Using the media to fight so-called “dissent” in the Church is ignoring the faith of the voiceless, who look to the bishops for pastoral guidance, not power. Besides, at least since the Donatist crisis, bishops (Augustine is one example) have insisted on treating opponents mercifully, as “brothers,” and encouraged their people not to shut them out as “dissenters.”
Here in the United States, a first misstep happened in the aftermath of *Humanae vitae* (1968): instead of showing pastoral care for the married, some bishops publicly suspended “dissenting” priests—celibates! A second *faux pas* was the attempt by “senior East coast prelates” to stifle “dissent” and thwart dialogue of the use of condoms in Africa by counting on newspaper headlines to publish their rejection. Then there was the undiscerning hurry, first in Rome, then in Dallas, to meet the media’s demands for justice, for crying out loud! Misled by at most a dozen influential but pastorally and theologically inept figures, the bishops failed the married once again—this time by omission. Were they pressured into forced solidarity by some of their own, who had become criminally complicit with a tiny minority of pathological priests? In any case, in the end quite a few priests, accused of having taken sinful (but non-criminal) liberties in the past, were facing serious ecclesiastical punishments forced on the bishops by an unforgiving, zero-tolerance blackmailer—the media, conceivably aided by lawyers taking advantage of them and opening courtrooms to mere grudges. Worst of all, all this ended up further eroding the credibility of the bishops’ pastoral authority in sexual matters.

In 1992, Cardinal Bernardin put into place a plan to which (courtesy of the media) he was the first to have to submit. He did so without suspending himself while the investigation was going on. By the time he was cleared he sounded like a man who knew God and had let himself be known by God. But he got the common reward of virtue: “senior prelates,” making use of the media to oppose “dissent,” publicly disavowed his last pastoral effort, the Common Ground Project.

Another rather more different case in point. Protestations of loyalty are not always acts of faith. We have had a copious pontificate, and now Pope John Paul II is dead. But the Vatican courtiers have access to the media and have him speak; so do many others, among them an army of bishops, biographers, and experts. Yet none of those who employ the media to speak for (or against) the pope or interpret him deserve the faith of any of us; in the general confusion, they too plainly speak mainly to be heard. But the dead pope needs no admiration, no approval, no victory. He is still giving all he has left to give. He has largely become an author suffering the fate of authors: being half-understood by others with an ax to grind. And most of all, he himself still has met the Truth. None of us turn canonical till we die.
Finally, before returning to our theme, some food for meditation. Ever thought about the well-worn portrayal of Almighty God as a little old bearded guy in an outsized T-shirt on a cloud, with a halo overhead—“the man upstairs”? By contrast, ever thought of Gregory of Nyssa’s definition of Christianity as the “portrayal of God’s nature”?49

“Not Dropping Out of the Trinity”

Unlike some modern deconstructionists fascinated by the many “fissures” in any text, the Cappadocians are not interested in silence for its own sake.50 This holds for Gregory of Nyssa and his brother Basil the Great. By the time Gregory Nazianzen has set fort, in the extensive second Theological Oration, how God transcends any and all definitions, he has also gone, unsurprisingly, through a long list of particular created wonders baffling the human mind, witness not only the Scriptures of both Testaments, but also the writings of Greek philosophers, cosmographers, and mathematicians.51

The third and fourth Orations are both titled “Of the Son.” Gregory starts by insisting that we have the mysterious order in the universe to account for—a given not explained by either atheism or polytheism, for either would have resulted into chaos. So if God is, God is One. Passages from Plato and Plotinus suggest that this One God is a transcendent fount of divinity, irresistibly overflowing into the universe. Bold as this image is, Gregory explains, it lacks the sovereign freedom that we cannot but attribute to the Divine. The sole remaining possibility, therefore, lies in what Nicaea saw: the everlasting God, the Father Almighty, has begotten the coeternal, ordering Logos, timelessly, and so has been creating the world of time. A series of eloquent philosophic consequences and clarifications follows, and the discourse is brought to a conclusion with dispatch, with appeals to christological proof texts in the New Testament. The fourth Oration is (to use a modern term) more soteriological; it takes the shape of a review of the titles of Jesus Christ, and leads to an obvious theological conclusion:

You have the Son’s titles. Travel by all of them—by the transcendent in a godlike way, by the corporeal in a compassionate way. Or rather, go in a way altogether divine, so as to become God as you go up from down here, by the same way as the
One who for us came down here. Make a point of doing so in all things and above all things, and you are unlikely to get lost on your way by either the sublimer or the humbler titles—[for the way is] “Jesus Christ, yesterday and tomorrow,” in the Body “the same” as in the Spirit, and for ever and ever [cf. Heb 13, 8]. Amen.52

Still, in many ways, Gregory does not show his hand till he is speaking, in the fifth Oration, of the Spirit. In every patristic textbook, we are told that the Cappadocians “proved the divinity of the Holy Spirit”—a fact as true as it is jejune. What they did was much more far-reaching. Let us read before we comment.

We, however, have so much confidence in the divinity of the Spirit we venerate that we will even start the theologia with it, and apply the same words to the Trinity—even if some may find this a bit much to take. “He always was the true light, which enlightens every human being coming into the world”—the Father [Jn 1, 9]. “He always was the true light, which enlightens every human being coming into the world”—the Son. “He always was the true light, which enlightens every human being coming into the world”—the other Advocate [Jn 14, 16. 26]. Always “was,” and “was,” and “was”; but what “was” “was” One.53 Light, and Light, and Light; but One Light, and One God. That is what David intuited of old, in the words: “In your light we shall see light” [Ps 35, 10]. And now, we, too, have seen, and we, too, proclaim: from the Light-Father we grasp the Light-Son in the Light-Spirit—how’s that for a short and plain theologia of the Trinity! Say No, all who want to say No! Do wrong, all those who want to do wrong [cf. Rev 22, 11]. We proclaim what we have come to understand! We will “go up a high mountain and shout” even if nobody down below should hear us! We will exalt the Spirit “without fear” [Is 40, 9]. And even if we should let ourselves be frightened, we will rest assured, without proclaiming!

If there was a time when He—the Father—was not, then there was a time when He—the Son—was not. If there was a
time when He—the Son—was not, then there was a time when the Spirit was not. If the One [to he] was “from the beginning” [1 Jn 1, 1], then the three [ta tria] were, too. If you take down the One, let me be bold and tell you not to exalt the Two. For what is the use of an imperfect deity? Or rather, what is deity if not perfect? And how can anything be perfect if it lacks the thing that makes it so? And something would be missing if there were nothing holy to It [i.e., to the deity].

In other words,

Hold nothing of the Trinity to be of your stature, lest you should drop out of the Trinity.

Of this maxim, our common culture can make no substantial sense. Most unbelievers and agnostics put up with God-the-Father talk; they appreciate the historical Jesus; yet Holy-Spirit talk smells of pious self-justification and hypocrisy—i.e., it refers not to so much to God as to human religiosity. By contrast, regular Orthodox, Catholics, and numerous Protestants think of God and Jesus Christ as somehow inseparable, yet are at least slightly embarrassed by fervent idioms like “gifts of the Spirit”: they sound like “Pentecostal,” evangelical, individual or prayer-group professions of piety, moral aspiration, or religious experience—alleged but unverifiable and worse, without appeal. That is to say, “we hold it to be of our [human] stature”; we put the things of God the Spirit at our level. To most, it conveys little of Godself. Might Gregory Nazianzen say that we—both non-Christians and Christians have “dropped out of the Trinity”?

How about Gregory’s observation, “Something would be missing if there were nothing holy to It”? First of all, this is the exact point where modern Catholic commentators will get nervous. For Catholics and most classical Protestants, to think of God as not holy is impossible. Of course the Father is Holy. Of course the Son is holy. And the Spirit is the Holy Spirit. The Trinity as a whole is Holy. The Western preference for safe, objective, conceptual Sabellian Monarchianism is alive and well.

By contrast, for Gregory Nazianzen, the Spirit is precisely what drives God’s Holiness home, in actuality, and the human awareness of
Holiness Present is a “responsory direct-act phenomenon.” If creation, and especially humanity and its works, are sublime, God is—only absolutely more so. That is to say, wherever and whenever we human beings find ourselves grasped by an unmistakable, affective sense of Mystery out of proportion with the particular things or human beings that encounter us, making it impossible for us to put a finger on it, we must stop and notice what reveals itself. Then we may conclude—usually in eloquent silence—that we are being touched by a Present Holiness which we do not manage, possess, evoke at will, or control; rather, if anything, It manages, possesses, calls to attention, compels us. And oddly, we are apt to feel all the freer for the discovery.

Still, “for practical purposes”—and their name is Legion—we can dismiss it, at least “for now.” On one occasion, the late Vice-President Spiro Agnew prophesied, “Let it never be said that there was something Americans could do, and they didn’t do it!” In North America, we will do whatever we can indeed; in fact, dismissing keeps us too busy for our own good as well as the world’s. We are not living thoughtfully—i.e., slowly—enough to notice God’s Spirit advising us to live by the long run. Even our charismatics, never in doubt about the Spirit, are too busy getting to experiencing now, in alleged fullness. In this regard, they resemble the huge commercial enterprises dealing in both goods and money: driven by quarterly—i.e., short-term profit, they cannot persuade themselves to meet any real future, marked by fairness to the environment, not to mention fairness to the exploited everywhere in the world. Justice takes time. To all leaders in the Churches, and in the interest of those still driven by either superstition or current philosophy, Gregory advises silence, and in that context, measured speech, at least “for now.” That’s how the Christian Church can show the world the way to go.

But how about the “forever” part? The simple Catholic answer is: Jesus Christ tells it all. Put descriptively, Christians claim that “Christ is risen” tells it all. Fair enough. But saying “Christ is risen” is an eschatological blessing exchanged between and among Christians before it is ever a substantive truth claim. So, apparently unaware that Christ is “only” the first-fruits of the dead-and-risen, Orthodox, Catholics, and impatient Protestants of every stripe (including the fundamentalist evangelizers), suffer from measurement problems; in practice, our affirmed truths have a way of sounding overstated and impatient.
Surely the substance of the message “Christ is risen” is a matter of hope as against final possession? And so, it is imprudent to overstate the Catholic claim in the encounter with either Jews or Gentiles. Besides, are the Jews really unaware of the Holy Spirit, given that It appears together with God and God’s Creative Word at the head of the Torah? And as for Gentiles, is it so sure that they have been positively unresponsive to God’s Spirit?

So, all Christians have a lot to hear and see yet. If the Logos is to be discerned in Socrates and Heraclitus (as Justin Martyr saw), then we should not be surprised by the news that God’s Spirit has has been felt to fill the world “from the beginning.” In other words, we Catholics are liable to drop out of the Trinity by claiming too much too fast on behalf of the Son; and if we conclude that the great religions have never felt God’s threefold encompassing Presence, we might find ourselves implying that we can put conditions on God’s universal salvific design. In fact, are we letting our trinitarian faith blind us to the possibility that the face of the earth is already being renewed, mysteriously because humanely, gently, gracefully, because “that’s the way it is”? If this should be true, then our bishops must learn the confidence to speak up in praise of God—i.e., also, the fine art of piping down, and leaving it to the media to be intemperate. And so must all of us.

Published here for the first time—a finger exercise for a new installment, to be devoted to christology and trinitarian theology, of the author’s systematic theology-in-process, God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997-2001); henceforth GE, followed by volume and section numbers).

The following developments are not argued, but supposed. The high-mediaeval teaching that God’s Trinity is a matter of revelation (as distinguished, but not separated, from natural reason) goes back to Aquinas’s Summa contra Gentiles, written to equip Dominicans, sent out into the world of North African Islam, with a missionary strategy for peaceful dialogue on common ground: faith in the true God, and intellectual and practical acceptance of human nature. In the Summa theologiae, reason and revelation are again treated sequentially but not contrasted (S. Th. I, qq. 2-26; 27-43). Only by the end of the sixteenth century does a strictly philosophical approach to God
arise. This begets a separation between itself and the treatment of God in Christian faith and theology. In the mid-seventeenth century, with Leibniz as the chief intellectual agent, revelation and natural reason begin to be treated as adversaries. In the age of Enlightenment, with Christian Wolff as the typical instance, natural reason effectively becomes the norm of what can (and cannot) be believed. In the nineteenth-century Catholic philosophy and theology begin to converge again. Transcendental thinking (Blondel), transcendental neo-scholasticism (Rousselot, Maréchal, K. Rahner), and existential-phenomenological social theory (Plessner, Scheler, Jaspers) lead to a reintegration, which helps produce phenomenological personalism as a coherent intellectual climate. (Of this, Pope John Paul II is a key modern exponent.) Final thesis: Only in the force field created by conditioned and wounded human freedom and openness to God and a pliant but stubborn universe can humanity responsibly shape itself—in hope, i.e., with no definite end in view, short of the coming of Jesus Christ in glory to do justice to the living and the dead.

1. 2 Pet 1, 4: θείας κοινωνοὶ φόσεως.
4. See GE, II/i, §56; II/3, §124, 3 [x].
5. See John Henry Newman, Essays Critical and Historical, (London, Basil Montagu Pickering, 1877), I, 40-42: “A Revelation is religious doctrine viewed on its illuminated side; a Mystery is the selfsame doctrine viewed on the side unilluminated. Thus Religious Truth is neither light nor darkness, but both together; it is like the dim view of a country seen in the twilight, with forms half extricated from the darkness, with broken lines and isolated masses. Revelation, in this way of considering it, is not a revealed system, but consists of a number of detached and incomplete truths belonging to a vast system unrevealed, of doctrines and injunctions mysteriously connected together; that is, connected by unknown media, and bearing upon unknown portions of the system.”
6. A fine autobiographical account of the friendship between these two almost-incompatible characters can be found as “On his Life” in Gregory of Nazianzus, Autobiographical Poems (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). It is no longer possible to speak or write on Gregory Nazianzen without studying John McGuckin’s formidable Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001). In the present account, I am relying on vii-xi.
7. In the West, Rome was known simply as urbs: “the city.” In the East, the inhabitants of ancient Byzantium, renamed Constantinople by the emperor Constantine, would say they lived stenpolin: “in the city.” On Turkish lips, this became “Istanbul.”

8. Hanson’s careful account of Athanasius’s doctrine (The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 417-48) rightly emphasizes that in Athanasius’ mind God needs no bridge to creation in order to be present to humanity. What Hanson might have profitably added is that Athanasius is here dependent on the understanding of God found throughout the Jewish Scriptures. For Nicaea implies that the Incarnation of the Logos took place not because the Logos is inferior enough to become Incarnate, but because Godself has from eternity taken pleasure in being with humanity (Prov 8, 31).


12. S.Th. I, q. 1, a. 7 (Sed contra): “Sed in hac scientia principaliter fit sermo de Deo (dicitur enim theologia, quasi sermo de Deo).”

13. See inter alia, S.Th. I, q. 1, a. 1-10.

14. I find that my American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language lists an “informal” meaning of “mediaeval”: “old-fashioned; unenlightened,” with the silly example: “parents with a medieval attitude toward dating.” By contrast, all the Oxford English Dictionary’s definitions of “mediaeval” are strictly historical.

15. S.Th. II-II, 1, 2, ad 2: “Actus . . . credentis non terminatur ad enuntiable, sed ad rem. Non enim formamus enuntiabilia, nisi ut per ea de rebus cognitionem habeamus, sicut in scientia, ita et in fide.”

16. See GE §8, 3-5; §142, 1.

17. I would suggest that the earliest expository prose works in a language other than Latin are the commentaries with which Dante (whose language of learned discourse was Latin) linked the sonnets of La vita nuova, composed in 1292-93 A.D.


19. The underlying cultural tendencies have been instanced in splendid historical detail in two recent books by my friend Robert L. Bireley: The Refashioning of Catholicism, 1450-1700: A Reassessment of the Counter
20. See GE, II, §72, 4, c.

21. Yves Congar, *A History of Theology*, esp. 170-82. Still, it is worth observing that without the work of “positive theologians” like the French Maurini, who prepared one reliable set of patristic texts after another, the nineteenth-century revivals of Catholic theology in Germany and France would have lacked a solid foundation.

22. It is the undying merit of Jürgen Habermas to have systematically elaborated this proposition, regardless of his rather more ideological conclusions from it.

23. Thus, Thomists have long agreed that truth resides in “judgments,” not in single words. Hans-Georg Gadamer has persuasively and wisely retrieved this in *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); originally published as *Über die Verborgenheit der Gesundheit: Aufsätze und Vorträge* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993).

24. Let us use an example. When my friend looks up from his book, simply says to me “if,” and leaves it at that, I will be perplexed. But when in conversation he says “That’s a big ‘if,’” I will be pretty much in the picture. How so? Because even a conjunction (“if”) can be used as a noun (“if”), because the meaning of “if” is clear, if only somehow. Somehow? Yes! For by itself, “if” has no point to make!


29. This prejudgment is Russell’s. Wittgenstein discovered its incoherence.


31. “Man könnte den ganzen Sinn des Buches etwas in die Worte fassen: Was sich überhaupt sagen läßt, läßt sich klar sagen; und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muß man schweigen” (*Tractatus*, 2-3). On the translation
of this famous quotation (see *Tractatus*, 150-51 [7]) offered here, two remarks may be useful. (a) German “Sinn” is here rendered, slightly more colloquially, by “point.” (b) Unlike German “soll,” “muß” implies natural ability or inability, not moral duty. Accordingly, in the second part of the second full sentence, “has to be,” not “should be.”

32. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* §144, 26: “How a word is understood words alone will not tell.” (Gm. “Wie ein Wort verstanden wird, das sagen Worte allein nicht.”)


34. See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 50-51 [4.1212]: “Was gezeigt werden kann, kann nicht gesagt werden” (“What can be pointed out cannot be said”).

35. Elsewhere I have elaborated the observation that language use in speech, but especially in writing and reading, is behavior, and thus, a moral issue. See GE §132.

36. In this regard, the rhetorical effect of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is reminiscent of Evagrius Ponticus’s “Chapters” on prayer and monasticism: see GE §143, 1-2; 5, a, [Il]; see §67, 2, [d]; §111, 5, a; §118, 2; §124, 13, a; §125, 5, [tt]; §139, 1, a.


40. See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 150-51 [6.522]: “Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische.” Note: The present treatment of Wittgenstein focuses on his step from logic to mysticism. The issue arises, of course, Where is the realm of ethics? Alas, that is a story for another day.


42. Times have changed a lot; human proclivities a lot less. Today’s media love to treat the “interesting” world of catholic Christianity (or indeed of any kind of “orthodoxy”) as an endless opportunity to engage in (a) both entertainment and public indignation, (b) offering free advice, approval, and censure, (c) indulging in self-justification, and (d) concealing the extent of their ignorance.

43. *Hom.* 27, 3-5; *MG* 36, 15C-17C; *Sources chrétiennes* (henceforth SC) 250 (Paris: Cerf, 1978), 76-85.

44. See R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381*, 611-36; cited at 619. For a detailed statement of
Eunomius’s Unitarianism, see Gregor von Nazianz, Orationes theologicae: Theologische Reden (Fontes Christiani, 22), ed. Hermann Joseph Sieben; Freiburg: Herder, 1996), 30-44.

45. In a lucid essay, “Legalize Same-Sex Marriage: Why Law and Morality Can Part Company,” Commonweal cxxx, no. 18 (October 24, 2003): 10-14), Paul Griffiths has argued that the United States culture is now pagan, as against Catholic/Christian. I would add that this is the case because the prominent culture-shaping factors, viz., the media, are de facto unaccountable and unchecked, and impossible to balance.

46. By the way, “dissent” is not part of the Catholic family language, but a seventeenth-century term of abuse, pregnant with established-church connotations. Used today, especially by prelates exercising authority through the media, the word suggests not so much sound teaching as episcopal worry (and to the media, fodder).

47. I have argued that Humanae vitae upholds the “plurisecular tradition” according to which enjoyment of sexual intimacy outside committed marriage is mortal sin in principle (i.e., in and of itself, apart from agents’ deliberation and freedom). It also upholds the modern tradition according to which contraception within marriage is (a) not a neutral issue (i.e., a matter of convenience) but a fully moral one, and so, (b) an “intrinsically dishonorable” practice within committed marriage. That is to say, Humanae vitae refuses to regard contraception as “a morally good thing to do.” Still, it stops short of calling its practice in Catholic marriage mortally sinful in principle. Various episcopal conferences, therefore, at once decided to refer the married to their consciences in this important pastoral matter. See GE II, §170.

48. So, theologically speaking, there is not much to be learned from cardinals quoting the Holy Father, bishops quoting a saying of his in support of canonical measures, political commentators doubling as theologians (and vice versa), incurable priests or church ladies and ditto gentlemen—many of them authoritatively telling us, by book or by crook, where we are to stand if we are to obey Pope John Paul II. Do their ever-partial opinions—whether considered or ill-considered—add to the Pope’s shown word and work? Logic suggests they don’t. They make the media, though.

49. See GE, II, §75.


51. A quick count reveals over 140 scriptural allusions and quotations, and over a dozen allusions to Plato, the Stoics, Aristophanes, and other ancient authors.

52. PG 36, 133A (SC 250, 274-75). In taking the New Testament titles of Jesus as the guide to Christian living, Gregory Nazianzen is doing what

53. Gk. ἐν (“was”). Unlike the past tense in English, the past tense in Greek connotes continued duration: hence, “always was.”

54. Note that “the One” and “the Three” are neuter. Gregory is speaking formally. Note also that Gregory is pinning his argument to the one of Arius’ earliest statements: “There was a time when he [= the Logos] was not” (Gk. ἐν οὐκ ἦν).

55. PG 36, 136B-137B (SC 250, 278-83).

56. PG 36, 148A (SC 250, 300-01).

57. See, for example, Paul Gallay’s notes in SC 250, 282-83, 300-01, 304, and Joseph Barbel’s in Gregorius von Nazianz, *Die fünf theologischen Reden*, in *Testimonia* iii (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1963), 224-25, 234-37.


60. See *Christ Proclaimed: Christology as Rhetoric*, 189-96.


for Tom Jacobs, S.J.

This essay proposes, in twelve consecutive steps, to outline, in a systematic fashion, a theologically responsible Christian posture in regard to the religions. It differs from many other approaches in that it develops this posture entirely from within the Christian tradition; it makes no claims about the religions. It also operates in a distinctively Catholic manner: it combines dogmatic-theological themes and approaches with fundamental-theological ones. The central contention of this essay is identified in section VI; it is that the attitude to be termed “receptiveness” has a squarely theological import all its own, so much so that no Christian posture in relation to the religions can afford to overlook it, let alone to belittle it. This is argued by showing that in this posture, fundamental-theological intuitions of the most radical kind turn out to coincide with christological intuitions of the most radical kind.

I

The Church pre-exists all Christians. Accordingly, all Christians profess a faith they have received. The matrix in which this reception occurs, which also determines the manner in which it occurs, is called “the Tradition.” In the transmission and reception of the faith there is an important element of stability: traditional affirmations, ranging from precise statements of doctrine (“articles of faith,” conciliar definitions), to fairly standardized catechetical forms of teaching and explanation, often of the homiletic kind. From the practical and strictly theological points of view, however, doctrinal and catechetical affirmations, while
meaningful elements of the Christian faith-experience, are derivative, on the following grounds.

Viewed from the angle of praxis, the doctrinal and catechetical affirmations occur only as part of a wider idiom—a shared usage. An idiom is the linguistic condensation of a community’s shared commitments, as well as their continuing support; therefore, using the Christian idiom is always an act of implicit, habitual, presumably considered, and (at least ideally) deepening fidelity to a lived (and hence, authoritative) tradition of Christian conduct—a tradition radically warranted by Jesus’ endorsement of Israel’s legacy of active and patient faith and, ultimately, by his own call to faith and discipleship. Only against the backdrop of such fidelity can the use of catechetical affirmations represent a credible intellectual assent to truth. Thus Christian praxis—the lived life undertaken as imitation of Christ—is the proximate verification of any Christian truth-claims. Accordingly, any interreligious discussion of the latter without reference to the former is a mistake, both methodologically and practically.

From the strictly theological angle, doctrinal and catechetical affirmations are rooted in the shared usage of a liturgical community. This community most distinctively comes into its identity in direct acts of praise, thanksgiving, and supplication offered to God through and in Jesus Christ risen, in Spirited celebration and observance, in which rehearsal of the old and the tested combines with discovery of the new and the untested to awaken the sense of the divine presence and keep it alive, in awe and intimacy, in utterance and silence. (Incidentally, in worship Christians also find themselves both called and empowered to embrace the community’s shared commitments as a way of life both divinely mandated and divinely endorsed in Jesus Christ’s Resurrection.) Since the original point of doctrinal and catechetical affirmations is doxological, identifying one’s convictions and commitments (and thus, indirectly, oneself) by the use of them is believable only to the extent that it in some way conveys intimacy with the God worshiped by the Christian community (or at least a familiarity with this God), supported, presumably, by the habitual practice of worship. In other words, the affirmation of, say, the articles of faith is plausible (or, alternatively, appropriately intriguing or infuriating) only if it echoes in some way the living tradition of Christian prayer.
Thus, interreligious discussion of the Christian faith-affirmations without reference to worship is a mistake, both methodologically and theologically.

II

Not surprisingly, relatively few Christians and Christian communities live in full appreciation of their privileged condition. In many cases, though, they are growing in it; but then again, in many other cases, they are downright sluggish; in almost all cases, they mean well. In any case, as a result of immature faith, the Tradition is liable to show signs of degeneracy. The form of degeneracy most germane to the present argument consists in living by habit and clinging to custom—a problem not unknown in the early Church. While those devoted to custom are usually sincere when they appeal to (what they take to be) the tradition, the shortage of deeper resonance in their declarations causes such appeals to sound less than confident, and hence, not too convincing. Frequently, this lack of deep confidence is not lost on observers and listeners, both the interested and the skeptical. In such cases, concerned lest they profess too little, Christians are apt, on the rebound, to compensate for lack of substance by excess of emphasis; they will overstate their case. In this way, professing becomes protesting; and protesting is apt to become protesting too much. The implicit agenda of protesting too much is (not faith but) self-maintenance. Neither theology nor theologians are necessarily exempt from this.

III

Christians must pursue both effectiveness and integrity in professing Christ; accordingly, while boldly professing their faith, they must take care not to protest too much. Faced with this delicate task, the great Tradition has tacitly (but quite often explicitly, too) regarded itself as a tradition of ongoing faith-discernment, guided by the Holy Spirit. Discernment characterizes the Christian approach to the world of human culture, and of religious culture in particular. Christians must give an account of themselves in a variety of situations; familiarity with, and critical appreciation of, the convictions and manners current among their non-Christian neighbors, but also in the culture at large, must enable Christians to overcome defensiveness in testifying; to the extent they succeed, they are likely to offer credible witness.
One example is Gregory of Nyssa’s *Great Catechetical Oration* (c. 390 A.D.); it offers, without a hint of either apology or overstatement, a firmly catholic catechism reliably informed by a fair and articulate understanding of the notions about God, gods, the divine, and the human prevalent in the surrounding religious culture. Accordingly, John Henry Newman can explain, about 1450 years later, in the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1844 A.D.), that the organic integration (often combined with subtle, mostly tacit transformation) of foreign elements is the indication of living Tradition.6

Accordingly, Christians and Christian communities cannot come into their true selves without embracing the world in a discerning manner.

IV

The foregoing implies that discernment in professing the Christian faith, and hence, the tradition itself, are a matter of *mutuality*. Accordingly, the structure of the discernment process is hermeneutical. Even as they interpret what is “other,” interpreters will find themselves interpreted to themselves; familiarity with the unfamiliar other turns out to be inseparable from familiarization with a yet-unfamiliar self; discovery of the other turns out to be an exercise in distortion unless attended by the chastening and often delightful experience of self-discovery.7

Accordingly, Christian discernment will properly proceed (that is, it will genuinely advance the Tradition, as well as those who live by it), only on condition that the cyclical nature of the hermeneutical process (“the hermeneutical circle”) is respected.

Not surprisingly, therefore, discernment is borne on the wings of a dual dynamic—that is, one which combines constructiveness and receptiveness.

V

The element of constructiveness typically manifests itself in positive affirmation. It is dominant whenever and wherever Christians confidently turn their faith in God and Jesus Christ by the gift of the Spirit into an authorization for a discerning, sympathetic appreciation of forms and elements of humanity and religion foreign to the Christian community, to the point of positively commending and even
integrating them. Jesus’ openness to all comers and his vocal appreciation of the occurrence of true faith outside Israel (for which there is some precedent in late-Jewish universalism of the sapiential kind) constitute prototypical warrants for this.

The constructive approach began to be vigorously adopted in the late first and early second centuries, when Christian thinkers first engaged in thoughtful, appreciative encounter with contemporary philosophic thought. In this regard, Justin Martyr’s writings (c. 150 A.D.) are a classical example—the first in a long tradition. They show an uncomplicated familiarity with contemporary thought, and explicitly praise sages living by reason, like “among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus and those like them, and among the foreigners, Abraham, Elijah, Ananias, Azarias, Misaël, and many others,” as manifestations of the Logos, “of whom all humankind has received a share.”

Because of its preference for affirmativeness, constructiveness has a largely unintended side-effect: self-affirmation. Of course, implicit self-affirmation is an inevitable ingredient of every act of affirmation human beings engage in. Still, even implicit self-affirmation is a form of self-affirmation. And while self-affirmation is often both healthy and proper, it can be self-serving; specifically, in regard to things different or strange, it has a capacity for aggression and outright hostility. Not every form or instance of affirmativeness is authorized by faith in God.

Questionable affirmativeness is far from unknown in the New Testament or in the writings produced in the Church of the first few centuries. Still, in fairness it must be noted that much of the inordinate assertiveness in the New Testament and many early Church documents is accounted for by the fact that they are profoundly indebted to the surrounding culture. For all its literacy, Mediterranean intellectual and moral life in late antiquity (as well as long thereafter) continued to live and think by oral performance, which has a tendency towards agonistic expression: it will indulge in extravagant praise and blame, and cherish adversarial rhetoric in polemical defense of truth-cum-loyalty. It is, of course, only a matter of intellectual integrity to observe that this style of encounter with others cannot claim the support of the historical Jesus—a fact whose theological and christological significance is insufficiently appreciated. Still, the fact remains that Jesus’ example did not keep the early Church from embracing the customary vehemence
in argument; the record shows that it came to share and even cherish the surrounding cultures’ rhetorical habits. But then again, vehemence in argument, often at the expense of others, did not keep the Church from embracing much of the wisdom of the cultures whose errors and sinful habits it rejected. All of this suggests that polemical defenses of the Christian faith, while widespread, did little serious harm, either to the Christian conscience or to non-Christians, at least as long as Christians were a minority—an easy target for harassment. Thus, Christian orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and reputation were in no position to set the public climate, intellectually, culturally, and politically.

The developments ushered in by Constantine’s victory at the Milvian bridge (312 A.D.), which over time led to the establishment of the Christian church, are a different matter altogether. In fact, the contemporary Christian experience in the context of both non-Christian and post-Christian civilizations, demands that these early developments be critically reassessed, theologically and ecclesiologically. This judgment is not primarily based on the penitential acknowledgment of the fact that the dominance of Christianity has given rise to sinful excesses. Rather, it is predicated on the realization that much of the doctrinal and theological tradition we continue to live by took shape, roughly, between the fifth and seventeenth centuries—the era that marks the emergence and establishment of Christianity as the normative intellectual, cultural and (eventually also) political climate, especially in the West. While this tradition, at its best, produced fine instances of constructiveness, it suffered from never having to deal, systematically and from a position of equality (let alone subordination), with non-Christian religions as an actual phenomenon. Purely politically and culturally speaking, contemporary Christian thought about non-Christian religiosity and religions cannot afford a posture of highhandedness any more than Christian thought could in the second, third and fourth centuries.

VI

Let us now turn to the element of receptiveness, which typically operates by openness, inquiry, and sympathetic interrogation rather than affirmation. First of all, though, let us observe that receptiveness is not simply antithetical to constructiveness. As already stated, much
theologically sound Christian affirmation rests on a careful, appreciative understanding of theologically valuable ingredients of the culture—the fruit of empathetic inquiry on the part of Christians. Elements of receptiveness, therefore, regularly undergird instances of constructiveness. Yet receptiveness has a theological significance in and of itself. Exploring and clarifying this is the chief aim of this essay.

As often as not (and more often according as the Christian community is less in control of the normative climate), non-Christian conceptions and practices do not lend themselves to easy interpretation and ready affirmation; rather, many of them will strike Christians as alien, hard to understand, intractable, practically unacceptable. No wonder Christians will find their own conceptions and practices, and indeed themselves, treated accordingly by others, whether rightly or wrongly. (But then again, in a pluralistic situation, who decides about right and wrong?) In this predicament of relative mutual incomprehension, it is tempting to jump to affirmation, and to take the risk of an overstatement or two into the bargain. In fact, this may be, at times, the only practical (that is, prudent) solution. It may even be imperative theologically: there are situations—status crisis—where the only practical witness to faith and identity available to Christians is to close ranks and say No to the culture and its religiosity. It stands to reason that such negative stances must not be adopted impulsively or as a matter of course; they are theologically sound only to the extent that, like the affirmative stances, they are gestures of discernment—not of defensiveness, let alone of righteous self-assertion.

This has an important implication. Even if, in particular situations, a Christian community’s response to the culture should have to be negative, its profession of faith is still reinterpreted in the encounter. The dynamics of the hermeneutical process see to it that whenever Christians responsibly engage in interpretative encounters with others, their constitutive identity-experience (which is their faith in God) is tested; that is, it is reinterpreted. A church that says No in a discerning fashion is by that very fact developing a faith-experience (and hence, an identity-experience) substantially deeper than the faith-experience it enjoyed before the test, as (for example) those of us who recall the aftermath of the bekennende Kirche of the nineteen-thirties and ’forties will remember.
But this raises a crucial issue. How to take such a test? How are Christians to interpret theologically an encounter that produces, not a fusion of horizons that turns out constructive (and hence satisfying), but one that reveals a chasm in the landscape or even opens one, thus causing a standoff which, by prevailing standards, sets Christians back? Will they accept the embarrassment or even embrace it? Or will they take it only diffidently, grudgingly, resentfully? To resolve this painful question, we must refine our notion of the hermeneutical process, by exploring its properly theological dimensions.

VII

Constructiveness, with its tacit bias toward self-affirmation, could give the impression that the encounter between church and non-Christian religions, or between church and culture, is just that—a matter of straightforward mutuality. But this overlooks that when Christians offer their constructive faith- affirmations to the non-Christian world, they are not being simply self-affirming. The reason is that ultimately they do not represent themselves or their own faith. Here the doxological and practical roots of doctrinal and catechetical affirmations become crucially important. In the last analysis, Christians present their integral selves to others only to the extent that they succeed in communicating themselves as inseparable from Christ—a privilege (they profess) they owe to God and for which they are answerable to God. In giving an account of itself, therefore, the Church must convey that even its best-discerned doctrinal affirmations and most enlightened norms for conduct, embraced in the context of the most intelligent and appreciative encounter with others, are not authorized by self-possession, let alone by the desire for a comfortable settlement with the world at large. For Christian constructiveness is not an exercise in autonomy; rather, it must convey that the warrant for the Christian welcome extended to the culture lies with the God it worships. In other words, if Christians come into their true identity at all, this happens to them when, in imitation of Christ, they mediate between God and the culture along with its religiosity, dedicated to both and hence, tested by both. Or rather (since the two relationships are asymmetrical), they come into their true selves in the process of being appreciatively and lovingly (and hence, discriminatingly) devoted to the culture by virtue of thankful, loving (that is, exacting) devotion to God.
This has consequences for the practice of Christian discernment. No Christian attempt at discerning encounter with other cultures or religions has ever been quickly productive; understanding and cherishing the world invariably comes at a price; this slows the pace; Christians cannot expect either to understand and appreciate quickly, or to be understood and appreciated quickly, let alone at cut rates. Specifically, in any post-Christian civilization, there is only one way in which Christians can convince others that their responses to non-Christian religions or cultures, whether of the constructive or the disappointing kind, are the fruit of discernment—that is to say, serious: they must leave no doubt about their preparedness to let others test their faith in God—that is, their very identity. Thus, whenever Christians encounter non-Christian religions and cultures, deep receptiveness must be in evidence if offers of Christian constructiveness are to be regarded as credible and thus appreciated as valuable. Consequently, the real danger in standoff situations lies not in the prospect of conflict or of a long, wearying impasse, but in the undisciplined, undiscerning desire to eliminate anxiety, to duck the demand for patience, to force issues, and (especially) to win—the vision of Constantinian Christians accustomed (in the wake of Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History*) to interpreting constructive relationships with the culture and its religiosity as proof positive of the truth of the Christian faith. It is the unchecked human craving for peace assured by victory that is at the heart of the tendency to trade discernment for overstatement. The temptation is always to gain the upper hand and try to settle things in one’s favor, by protesting too much.

Protesting too much takes two forms. The first, accommodation, has affinities with modernism; it amounts to an overstatement of Christian openness. Accommodation occurs when Christians crave for constructive association with non-Christians to the point of jeopardizing the integrity of the faith. This, however, is in the long run bound to diminish, also in the eyes of non-Christians, the intrinsic value of association with Christianity; who cares to compromise sturdy, cherished traditional religious and cultural goods through association with something inclusive and tolerant but not really very distinctive? The second is accommodation’s opposite, isolation; it has affinities with integralism and amounts to an overstatement of Christian identity. It
happens when Christians crave for certainty and assurance in believing to the point of jeopardizing their responsibility to the non-Christian world. This, too, is bound to diminish, in the eyes of non-Christians, the credibility of the Christian faith; who cares to submit sturdy, cherished traditional religious and cultural goods to the tribunal of an intolerant religious ghetto?\textsuperscript{18} Theologically speaking, both accommodation and isolation are forms of self-affirmation in the service of self-maintenance; they are failures in mediation.

In a post-Christian world even more than in a Christian one, therefore, Christians and Christian theologians must systematically rediscover that the Christian faith is measured, not by its success in winning the world over to the Church, but by its ability to mediate between the living God and the world. In all likelihood, mediation will have to take a variety of forms. What these forms will need to have in common is a quiet, unhurried, hopeful, deliberate insistence on symbolizing and conveying God’s encompassing, long-suffering embrace (in christological terms, God’s “assumption”) of all of humanity, along with its burden of inhumanity, in Jesus Christ suffering and rising from the dead. That is, Christians must invite non-Christians to share in their own pursuit of conversion, away from idols, ideals, and ideologies that divide and kill, and toward the God who unites by holding out life to all at the expense of none. In this sense, the work of faith is the work of justice rooted in Transcendence.

Those who pursue this justice operate by faith-discernment. While deeply seeking to test everything in the light of God, with a view to constructive, responsible relations with others, they even more deeply seek to be tested themselves, sustained by faith in God, who tests and judges all. For only the tested are true to God. Here we have the heart of receptiveness.

IX

Thus far, the positions taken in this essay have been largely based on particular, thematically Christian warrants. Yet when interreligious and transcultural encounter is at issue, there usually arises a recurrent, neuralgic theme: the need for common ground.\textsuperscript{19} Few issues in theology nowadays raise this fundamental issue with similar urgency. If the profession of Christian faith in the world is a matter of ongoing mutual discernment about significant particulars, what is the basis for this
discernment? Is it possible to identify a universal condition for the possibility of theological hermeneutics?

This essay wishes to suggest that here if anywhere it is vital to cultivate patience. Let us clarify this by first elaborating patience’s opposite: undiscerning zeal. Current discussion of interreligious encounter yields a steady supply of proposals for “inclusivist” or “pluralist” reinterpretations of the Christian faith. Most of these promise improved relationships between Christianity and other religions and cultures. The improvement is usually obtained, at least theoretically, by purging Christianity of “exclusivism” and placing it, together with all religions and religious cultures, under an attractively universalist umbrella.

One immediate problem with this is that the umbrella is so obviously manufactured in the liberal-Christian and post-Christian West—a West turned penitent and even friendly, but still residually imperialist in spite of itself, witness its tendency to fit other religions into categories that are the fruit of Western reflection. However, the deeper mistake in most of the proposals lies in their gratuitousness. For first of all, in the shade of this liberal umbrella the positive elements of the religions—that is, all the colorful things that make religions “real, vigorous, and definite”—are made to pale into relative insignificance. Vocal participants in this discussion are welcome to discourse, at little cost to themselves, on the affirmations of religions whose inconvenient details of conduct and liturgy they often have no intention of encountering and interpreting at close range, studiously or otherwise. But, secondly and more importantly, the cool, theoretical atmosphere of such parliaments where religions are reconciled free of charge suggests that the discussion is relevant only to an élite privileged “to view the whole world as like unto itself, and to keep its distance, even if it be a sympathetic distance, from the wretched of the earth.” Where, in this type of interreligious understanding, is the work of justice?

Justice demands, not only that we respect the positive elements of non-Christian religions, but also that we curb our eagerness to offer universalist interpretations until we patiently ask basic questions about the work of interpretation itself. Is there such a thing as a fundamental precondition of all interpretation? The answer to this question turns out to be surprisingly simple.

First of all, we know from experience that human beings cannot not communicate. Human beings never cross each other’s paths as
neutral facts; the simple givenness of a human being calls for encounter; 
human beings make moral and intellectual demands on each other by 
their very presence; even when encountering the most bewildering 
strangers, we implicitly recognize that they are in principle interpretable, 
by virtue of their communicative behavior, especially their speech. That 
is, both they and we have already been changed; the naked encounter 
was sufficient. Thus, secondly, we know from experience that the 
hermeneutical situation irresistibly involves the recognition of mutual-
ity: constructive interpretation is reliable according as the interpreters 
allow themselves to be interpreted, both to each other and to them-
selves. Together, these two insights suggest that interpretability is a more 
fundamental feature of humanity than its actual ability to interpret. That 
is, what most deeply characterizes human beings is also what can unite 
them most deeply with others: openness to interpretation. Humanity, it 
turns out, lives more deeply by the grace of receptiveness than by the 
work of constructiveness. This conclusion is hardly surprising if we 
recall the bitter truth that constructive interpretation often divides, 
sometimes unnecessarily, especially when offered prematurely.

The insight just developed would seem to suggest a fresh sense of 
direction in the fundamental theological understanding of interrel-
gious encounter. Remarkably (to turn from fundamental theology to 
positively Christian theology once again), it is reminiscent of two 
profound passages in the New Testament (1 Cor 8, 1-3; 13, 12b):

We know we all have knowledge. Knowledge inflates, but love 
builds up. All those who think they have knowledge do not yet 
know the way they should know. But all those who love, they 
are the ones who are known.23

And:

As of now, my knowledge is partial, but then I shall know as I 
am known.

Here we are. We all dearly seek to understand, but even more 
dearly, we seek to be understood. We are all natively intelligent, but
even more natively, we are intelligible. We all deeply want to interpret, but even more deeply, we are interpretable. The true warrant for our understanding, and hence, its true measure, is our being understood by God; being aware of being thus understood is the mainspring of mature love of others.

Aquinas understood this. He anticipated that the truths accessible to universal reason would create the common ground on which non-Christians could be brought to understand much (but by no means all) of the Christian faith. Yet he could entertain that cheerful anticipation only because he knew that the experience of intelligence in us is an experience, not so much of fullness as of hollowness; not so much of power as of desire; not so much of attainment of actual knowledge as of a affinity with all that is potentially intelligible—that is, with all as it exists in God. This deep-seated affinity, he knew, is beyond our grasp; it is simply there, inescapably—a given ingredient of our sense of identity; yet it is the soul of our attunement to all that is, and in it and beyond it, to God. Its givenness invites our acceptance; it is by free receptiveness (so we discover) that we turn a given receptiveness to all reality and (in and beyond all reality) to God into a gift from God. Intelligence is privilege before it is power. So he wrote:

The human soul, in a way, becomes all things, by virtue of sense and intellect; in this manner, beings that have knowledge approximate, in some way, the likeness of God, in whom all things pre-exist.24

Karl Rahner offers an analogous insight:

Is there anything more familiar and self-evident (whether explicitly or implicitly) to the self-aware human spirit than this: the wordless questioning that extends beyond all the things already conquered and mastered; the humble, loving sense (that sole origin of wisdom) of having more questions than answers? Down deep, there is nothing we know better than this: our knowledge (that is, what in our everyday lives we call knowledge) is but a small island in a measureless ocean of elements not traversed; it is a floating island, and much as we are more familiar with it than with this ocean, in the last
resort it is carried; and only because it is carried can it carry at all. Thus the existential question, put to all those who have knowledge, is this. Which will they love more: the little island of their so-called knowledge, or the sea of measureless mystery?25

Understanding dwells in us, irresistibly; it urges us forward, toward affirmation and legitimate self-affirmation. Yet we understand better and more reliably according as we more deeply acknowledge and appreciate understanding in its hollow, empty form, where knowledge coincides with the consciousness of being known. This assurance will prevent us from being so dependent on actual knowledge that ignorance, incomprehension, and misinterpretation become devastating. In this way, it would appear, interreligious encounter understood as an exercise in mutual interpretability is apt to be more fundamentally theological than acts of mutual interpretation. It can be expected to place those participating in it, not in the shade of a universalist umbrella, but in the quiet clarity of Invisible Light.

Let us conclude. Christians profess their faith in encounter with non-Christian religions and cultures, which they are to interpret with discerning constructiveness. In fact, they are positively called to do so by virtue of the Christian responsibility for the world. But they will do well to reflect on the liabilities of constructiveness—on the self-assertiveness it can mask, on the injustice it can do to other religions and cultures. This reflection will also test their own readiness to pay the price of all reliable interpretation: receptiveness to finding oneself interpreted by non-Christian others. And we know, being interpreted takes the form of construals. Some of them will be misconstruals. Maybe even many.

XI

All of this leads to a final point. The profession of Christian faith is an encounter with others. It obviously demands interpretative moves, of the constructive and especially of the receptive kind; theologically speaking, our explorations have suggested that the latter is the basis of the more radical form of profession of faith. Now receptiveness takes the form of interrogation, and even more of interrogation’s deeper precondition: readiness to be interrogated. Surprisingly perhaps, this last insight suggests a radical leap into New Testament christology.
In places too many to mention in the present context, the New Testament shows that the early Christians, powerless as they were by and large, were keenly aware that their reliance was not on human beings and their judgments and courts of law, nor on cultures, powers that be, or celestial elements with their incessant demands for submission; all of these had been disqualified, since, as Paul puts it, they had failed to recognize Jesus as the Lord of Glory (see 1 Cor 2, 8). In sum, their reliance was not on “this world” and its idols and authorities. Their ultimate (that is, their true) reliance was on God, who had raised Jesus to life, and so freed them from every enslavement. Characteristically, the fourth gospel presents Jesus as the prototype and source of this faith-attitude: Jesus knows enough not to entrust himself to others (Jn 2, 24), and draws his identity, his sense of mission, and the assurance with which he works from the Father alone. But far from isolating him from those around him, this supreme abandon to God—the true source of his identity—opens Jesus unconditionally to others.

Curiously, Mark’s gospel conveys this by means of an interrogation scene, set at its turning point, smack in the middle of the gospel viewed as a dramatic composition. Jesus faces his disciples with the question to which the whole gospel is composed to provide the answer (Mk 8, 29): “But who do you say that I am?” Is it fanciful to suggest that this unconditional invitation to interpret his person is also the ultimate, most universal, most radical form of Jesus’ profession of total abandon to the living God? In this scene as in the gospel as a whole, the invisible God who is the engine of Jesus’ life is the decisive and indeed the only presence that accounts for the Messianic secret—Jesus’ identity and mission. That is, who Jesus is is not revealed through any overt claims to distinction, of the kind that others (demons, disciples, pharisees and scribes, the crowds, high priests, Pilate) constantly dare Jesus to make. Matthew will put this in explicit words: the revelation of Jesus’ identity does not come from “flesh and blood” (Mt 16, 17). It is not even a matter of Jesus making something of himself: “I do not seek my own glory,” as the fourth gospel will put it (Jn 8, 50). The secret of Jesus’ person lies exclusively in what he trusts God to make of him. In the mean time, he himself only agrees to be “delivered up.” That is, he allows others “to make of him whatever they want” (see Mt 17, 12). But for Jesus, in the end, being interpreted means being misinterpreted—“misconstrued to death,” like the new Elijah, John the Baptist, had
been. In this light, it is only natural that Mark should place Jesus’ first prophetic prediction of his execution hard on the heels of Jesus’ question to the disciples. And to drive home the depth of the paradox, Peter, the very one whom the Father had inspired to interpret Jesus’ identity right, becomes the one who finds the way in which that divine identity is exercised humanly impossible to swallow (Mk 8, 31-33).

Touches like these help shed light on the New Testament picture of Jesus. Jesus welcomes all those around him, because he interprets them all as children of the living God, his Father dear, whom he trusts with his whole person. At this Father’s kind mandate, Jesus is to accept all comers as his trust, without letting anyone get lost (see Jn 6, 37-39). In return for this welcome, Jesus suffers total misinterpretation and the worst available mistreatment: death by crucifixion. The Fourth Gospel conveys this dramatically by having Pilate trot Jesus out to face the crowd as the picture of humanity (Jn 19, 5): the Just One mirrors in his person the injustice which a wayward humanity inflicts on itself. Yet the one who can thus silently accept and welcome being misconstrued and mistreated and executed is precisely the one who so trusts God that he can entrust all those who misinterpret him as well as themselves (that is, all who kill him as well as themselves), along with his dying self, to the God of Life. “He in person took our sins up on to the wood, in his own body, so that released from sin we might live for justice” (1 Pet 2, 24). These are the themes summed up in a liturgical hymn old enough to enable Paul to quote it as a piece of Christian tradition and to turn it into an exhortation to self-effacing modesty in dealing with one another (Phil 2, 5-9):

Let this mentality prevail among you
which we also find in Christ Jesus:
He shared the condition of God,
yet did not consider equality with God
a matter of grasping, of seeking advantage.
Instead, he made himself empty—of no account;
he took on the condition of a slave.
Born in human likeness and found in human from,
he went on to lower himself:
he became obedient to the point of death—death on a cross.
That is why God exalted him above all,
and bestowed on him the name above all names. 
Thus, at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend, 
in heaven, on earth, and under the earth; 
and every tongue should confess, 
to the glory of God the Father: 
“Jesus Christ is Lord!”

This is radical mutuality brought to divine perfection. Jesus accepts 
being cast in the role of the other-made-stranger, forced into death by 
dint of human affirmativeness aggressively exercised at the expense of his 
integrity. Yet this fatal affirmativeness finds itself not rejected but 
quenched and absorbed and outsuffered in Jesus’ receptiveness, which 
he patiently exercises on behalf of all others, trusting and glorifying 
God. This means life, for Jesus first, and then also for “the many” whom, 
by sheer receptiveness, he has reconciled with each other, with God and 
in God. The hermeneutical circle both respected and broken wide open.

XII

By way of envoi, an intriguing question, perhaps to stimulate the 
theological imagination. Let us assume we can learn from Origen’s 
Contra Celsum, composed between 246 and 248 A.D., on the eve (as we 
now know) of the establishment of Christianity. By then, the Christian 
faith was a notable influence, yet its predominance was by no means 
assured, for the alternatives were real. In our day, Christianity is still a 
notable influence, but there are real alternatives once again. Origen’s 
book represents the best of Christian thought in encounter with 
respected and confident non-Christian thought, about a century before 
Christianity’s establishment; we live and think about a century after 
Christianity’s disestablishment, at least in the Western world.

Unlike the tracts of, say, Irenaeus and Hippolytus, which had faced 
the painful divisions inside the Christian community, Contra Celsum is 
the ancient Church’s first full-scale, coherent, eloquent, even voluble 
controversy with a total outsider: Celsus was a religious pagan philoso-
pher, an Epicurean who had decided, after serious study, that he 
remained splendidly unimpressed, and who had explained himself in a 
tract entitled Alethes Logos (“True Reason”; c. 175 A.D.).

Incongruously, the preface to Contra Celsum is a commentary on 
the words: “But Jesus kept silence” (Mt 26, 63). The choice of text is
intriguing. Is it an instance of clever rhetorical posturing, or is there substance to it? Origen begins by declaring that these words are as true now as they ever were. Jesus is still keeping silence: present-day Christians evidence the truth of their faith by their lives rather than by word and argument. After that, however, the picture gets complicated, for Origen goes on to define his target audience. Since true Christians will not have been impressed by Celsus, he writes, the only readers he has in mind, besides people wholly unacquainted with Christianity, are Christians weak in the faith. This is an odd reading public. What could Christians, even Christians of dubious caliber, have in common with non-Christians? Could this statement, puzzling as it is, be the clue to the significance of Origen’s choice of text?

Let us recall that Origen had first-hand experience of persecution, both as a youth and in old age. Eusebius relates that as an ardent seventeen-year old he had presumed to write a letter to his father, imprisoned for the faith and about to be martyred in 202 A.D., to implore him to persevere; meanwhile his mother, worried that her son, the eldest of seven, might leave the house to seek martyrdom in the anti-Christian tumults that made the streets of Alexandria unsafe, had found it advisable to hide his clothes. Contra Celsum was written toward the end of Origen’s life, when rumbles of persecution were in the air; he died about five years after completing the work, at the age of sixty-nine, of the effects of torture suffered for the faith in the persecution of Decius (250 A.D.). Origen, if anybody, had a right to commend martyrdom, as he in fact did in his Exhortation to Martyrdom. But he had first-hand experience of ecclesiastical worldliness and mediocrity as well, and he gave vent to his disillusionment with privilege and prelacy by furiously commending the ascetical and mystical life (of which he also had first-hand experience). Did he, on the threshold of protesting at length (and, on more than one occasion in Contra Celsum, protesting a bit much), recall the receptive (that is, ultimately, mystical) nature of the Christian faith-commitment? Did he, perhaps, sense that the Christian faith was on the verge of triumph, as the public, political victory of Christianity just short of a century later, would bear out? And precisely because of that, did he feel compelled to recall the inconvenient truth that Christianity is, in the last analysis, upheld not by protesting, but by the saintly lives of true Christians? Did he, in other words, feel torn between the Christianity
of the martyrs and a lesser type of Christianity, whose witness smacked of overstatement, yet many of whose instincts he shared? Was he, a martyr manqué, appalled at the prospect of success and its consequence—a church marked by crowd and compromise? Yet also, was he, a fastidious, irrepressible genius with a knack for public stances, worldly enough to want to beat the pagans at their own game, giving a sharp public account of the Christian faith? And thus, could the opening moves of *Contra Celsum* be an implicit apology—the gesture of an aspiring Christian ascetic, contemplating the silent Master in front of his judges and repenting in advance for the excessive (and obviously exciting) affirmativeness he was about to embark on in professing the Christian faith before the tribunal of contemporary learning? Did he intuit that the development of a lesser brand of Christianity was inevitable? A Christianity more assertive, yet less persuasive? A Christianity religiously devoted to a tradition of affirmativeness, often very discerning, yet not always very patient, and sometimes quite excessive—of the type his book was to exemplify?

Notes


1. The fact that verbal witness, both of the oral/acoustical and the written kind, is part of Christian *praxis* has consequences for the interpretation of doctrine. See my “Rahner on *Sprachregelung*: Regulation of Language? of Speech?” *Oral Tradition* 2 (1987): 323-36; reprinted in the present volume.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on the primacy of the *actus directus* of faith is relevant here. See my *Christ Proclaimed: Christology as Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist, 1979), esp. 232-47.

3. This is meant to imply that, if, instead of worship, catechetical affirmations echo nothing but, say, the voice of authority or the atmosphere of theological discussion, they are practically and theologically pointless.

4. Even a traditionalist like Tertullian saw this: “Sed Dominus noster Christus ueritatem se, non consuetudinem, cognominavit” (“But our Lord Christ gave himself the title ‘the Truth’ not ‘Custom’”) (*De Virg. Vel.* I, 1).


10. But, it is only fair to add, neither can the sort of tolerance that insists on the avoidance of all confrontation and conflict in order to mask an underlying lack of commitment.

11. One serious blot on the history of the Catholic church in the Western hemisphere deserves specific mention, by way of example. Unlike the slave traders, who made only the feeblest attempts at offering a religious justification for their crimes against humanity, the leadership of the Spanish *Conquista* expressly used Christ’s victory over the demons as the rationale for the brutal treatment of the native Americans and the destruction of their culture. The protests of prophets like the Dominican friar and bishop Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566), the author of *The Only Way to Draw All People to a Living Faith* (New York: Paulist, 1992) and many other splendidly indignant writings, were largely disregarded. The problem, of course, could become so virulent because it was as widespread as Christendom itself. Thus the rise of Christian and post-Christian Deism must, to a significant extent, be laid at the door of the aggressive ecclesiastical triumphalism that once prevailed in Europe. And while it is unfair to exaggerate the links between colonialist imperialism and the Christian missionary endeavor in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is unwise to deny them altogether. The efforts of contemporary scholars like Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and even Paul Knitter to reinterpret the Christian faith and its relationship to other religions in “inclusivist” or “pluralist” terms may well have to be judged theologically unsatisfactory in the end; what cannot be denied is that the blind spots and scandals of the past cry out for the kind of remedial theological reflection they offer.

12. Examples that come to mind are a few early medieval controversial encounters with Islam and contemporary Judaism, and Aquinas’s *Summa contra Gentiles* (see Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* [New York: Corpus;
Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 72-76), which are models of intellectual fairness, and early Jesuit attempts at principled inculturation, such as Matteo Ricci’s in China and Roberto de Nobili’s in India.

13. Aquinas points this out explicitly, and goes on to interpret it as an opportunity to develop a universalist apologetic based on reason (Summa contra Gentiles, i, 2). In the background of this analysis lies, of course, a sad fact: for all its devotion to the Old Testament, Western Christendom and its theology systematically ignored the actual presence of a non-Christian religious community right in its midst: the Jews. Andrew of Saint Victor is the rare exception here; see Beryl Smalley, The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 112-95.

14. In light of fresh study, I am forced to qualify this. It is true that early Christianity was influential only as far as the emperor allowed. Still, public meekness was still far to seek except perhaps among the monks, and even they could be a formidable political force by dint of sheer numbers when displeased. Libido dominandi long prevailed as a norm in imperial days. Men in positions of influence were expected to be self-important, dominating, and intransigent. Accordingly, bragging about “famous men,” usually military commanders, had long been a fact of life, especially in the Roman world, as Suetonius’s and Cornelius Nepos’s writings show; in the mid fourteenth century Petrarch, who dreamed of a new Roman republic, was to imitate the genre in his De viris illustribus. Jerome’s De viris illustribus was written to prove that many Christians were major writers, starting with the apostle Peter and ending with (of course) himself.

15. Readers familiar with the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45) will recall how he ended up quite sharply taking his distance from the bekennende Kirche in which he had been so active, and instead, began to associate with conscientious non-Christians. He did so when he realized that, instead of accepting the testing of its faith at the hands of the Nazis as part of the Christian vocation, the Church resented it, and became chiefly interested in reclaiming its former position of privilege. The most alarming aspect of this quest of self-maintenance was the Confessing Church’s failure to condemn the Nazi treatment of the Jews and to help put an end to it. Not always does the traditional Christian reliance on a position of privilege take so crass a shape. I recently heard a respected Indonesian Jesuit of sixty who has spent his entire adult life teaching at a graduate-level institute of catechetics dedicated to the education of Catholic catechists appeal to the small number of Christians in Indonesia (approximately 8%) to raise the agonizing question: “Could it be that the Christian faith has failed to engage the South East Asian soul?” This disconsolate question overlooks the disturbing fact that to Constantinian Christianity it was increasingly the bodies that counted; the aspirations of souls
were a concern indeed, but one that could wait. So in the post-Christian world, the question invites a counter-question: “Does the Christian faith have to be the dominant cultural force for Christians to have the sense that they are supremely privileged?” The answer is obvious, but we may have to get accustomed both to it and to the question.

16. A phrase about the love of God and the love of neighbor in Jan van Ruusbroec’s writings expresses this dual loyalty to perfection, except that the passage assumes, of course, that the church is set in a Christian society. Writing to motivated Christians (that is, to the effective church in the not-so-Christian culture of the later Middle Ages), Ruusbroec writes: “We must make our home between the love of God and of our fellow-Christian” (“Wi moten woenen tusscen die minne Goods ende ons evenkerstens”); see Van den gheesteliken tabernakel (“The Spiritual Tabernacle”), §liv; Werken (Amsterdam: De Spiegel, 1932-34), ii, 125.

17. Hans Urs von Balthasar calls acceptance of anxiety a mark of catholicity: Das Katholische tilgt nicht, aber verwandelt die Angst (“Catholicity does not cancel anxiety, but transforms it”): Katholisch (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1975), 12; see the English translation, In the Fullness of Faith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 20, where, however, Angst is unhappily translated as “fear.”


19. It did for Aquinas, who saw the solution in “the need to have recourse to natural reason, to which all are forced to give their assent” (necesse est ad naturalem rationem recurrere, cui omnes assentire coguntur; Summa c. Gent. i, 2). Modern scholars like Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and Paul Knitter are on a comparable search: they seek to identify a common ground on which all religions agree (or can be brought to agree).

20. Universalism of the Neo-Hinduist kind (which continues to hold such appeal in the West) is, of course, a product of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India. Still, it arose, not spontaneously, but as a universalist defense against Western pressure embodied in the forceful introduction of Christian churches, with their missionary programs.


23. For verse 3, I am adopting the lectio difficilior found in the third-century papyrus known as P46: ei de tis agapai, houtos egnostai.

24. “anima hominis fit omnia quodammodo secundum sensum et intellectum, in quo cognitionem habentia ad Dei similitudinem quodammodo appropinquant, in quo omnia praexistunt . . .” (S. Th, I, 80, 1, in c.).

25. “Was ist dem Geist, der zu sich selbst gekommen ist, thematisch oder unthematisch vertrauter und selbstverständlicher als das schweigende Fragen über alles schon Eroberte und Beherrschte hinaus, als das demütig liebende Überfragtsein, das allein weise macht? Nichts weiß der Mensch in der letzten Tiefe genauer als daß sein Wissen, d.h. das, was man im Alltag so nennt, nur eine kleine Insel in einem unendlichen Ozean des Undurchfahrenen ist, eine schwimmende Insel, die uns vertrauter sein mag als dieser Ozean, aber im letzten getragen und nur so tragend ist, so daß die existentielle Frage an den Erkennenden die ist, ob er die kleine Insel seines sogenannten Wissens oder das Meer des unendlichen Geheimnisses mehr liebe”; Karl Rahner, Grundkurs des Glaubens (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), 33; see the English translation, Foundations of Christian Faith (New York: Seabury, 1978), 22.

26. Martin Hengel's Crucifixion (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), a book as scholarly as it is unsettling, offers the best explanation of what this means, at least to my knowledge.

27. Note that the Vulgate enhances this picture by adopting, at the end of the previous verse, a varia lectio, as follows: tradebat autem iudicanti se iniuste (“He entrusted himself to one who judged him unjustly”).
