

By Faith and Reason
THE ESSENTIAL
KEITH
WARD

EDITED BY WM. CURTIS HOLTZEN
AND ROBERTO SIRVENT

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WARD**

Edited by

**Wm. Curtis Holtzen and Roberto
Sirvent**

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Introduction

'Philosophy has no equations, predictions, or conclusive confirmations - that is precisely why some of us become philosophers in the first place.'

Keith Ward

It has been said that 'all labels are libels' but philosopher-theologian Keith Ward has successfully eschewed the libel that comes with labels. He has done this not by avoiding labels but embracing them - many of them. Ward is orthodox and radical, constructive and critical, academic and popular, philosophical and theological, evangelical and ecumenical, liberal and born-again, serious and witty, reasonable and faithful. But perhaps the label that fits best is 'scholar'.

This project has grown out of years studying, teaching, and reflecting on life's big questions. Because we teach at a university aimed to simultaneously challenge and affirm our students' faith, we often leave class wondering if we have failed at both. Challenge the students *too much* (whatever that means) and they leave anxious. Affirm their faith too much and *we* leave anxious, questioning our integrity as educators. Yet the students are not alone. We, too, the professors, need affirmation. We, too, need to have our assumptions, presuppositions, and biases challenged. We, too, need that voice in our life, even when - or *especially* when - it is uncomfortable. We, as persons of faith and reason, need and crave that teacher just much as everyone else.

For us, Keith Ward is that teacher. And whether you are a scholar or student, pastor or skeptic, this book is sure to inspire and challenge you. Especially if you share our story.

Keith Ward is one of the most prolific scholars alive, possessing the seamless ability to articulate creative, nuanced, and profound positions on today's most heated philosophical and theological debates. In fact, it is not uncommon to hear his name mentioned

alongside heavyweights like Moltmann, Pannenberg, and Hick. Ward has held posts at several prominent universities, including Cambridge and Oxford, and was honoured to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures in 1993-94. Even after his retirement in 2003, through both writings and lectures, Ward has continued to play a prominent role in advancing discussions about faith, science, religion, and comparative theology.

This collection of essays is arranged into five sections. The first includes a piece written exclusively for this project. In it, Ward offers an insightful personal reflection on how he learned - first-hand - that a 'philosopher can turn into a theologian.' The second essay is drawn from his book *Is Religion Irrational?* and sets out the general assumptions underlying a serious, sympathetic, and critical study of religion. In both of these selections, Ward attempts to show that faith and reason are *not*, as some would suggest, incompatible.

The second section contains works addressing Ward's conception of God. For every theologian the existence and nature of God serves as the crux of his study. It is the hub from which all Christian theology is worked out. Ward's theological writings reflect a faithful engagement with Christian tradition while remaining mindful of modern scholarship. In this section, Ward explores the idea of God as principle, person, and the ground of being. Issues of the triune nature and self-emptying love of God are also included.

In the third section, the reader is invited to rethink the relationship between science and religion. Modern science has posed a number of challenges to religion, and the Christian faith is no exception. Many philosophers, scientists, and theologians have made the claim that science and religion are incompatible. By addressing issues such as the possibility of miracles, the role of evolution, brain science, and the nature of the cosmos, Ward challenges that notion, arguing - rather passionately - that science does not nullify faith. Rather, each informs and illuminates the other.

The fourth section addresses the prominent fundamentalist (and often evangelical) view that the Bible is the inerrant last word on all matters moral and theological. Ward argues that such an assumption

is mistaken. Any proper reading of the Bible, he claims, reveals various internal inconsistencies that disarm fundamentalist claims of absolute authorial unanimity. But this diversity of thought within scripture should not be seen as a threat to faith. Rather, he urges us to take the Bible seriously, not literally; inspired, but not inerrant. The writings in this section include works on the nature of biblical inspiration as well as the use of scripture in moral reasoning.

In the final section, issues pertaining to religious diversity and pluralism are addressed. Although many argue that all religions are the same, and others insist that their truth claims, while different, are not incompatible, Ward rejects such notions, arguing that certain truth claims are necessarily exclusive. By engaging in comparative theology, Ward offers a critical approach where such truth claims are neither exempt from challenge nor placed beyond the realm of inter-faith debate. This section brings the reader to a greater understanding of - and appreciation for - the world's great faiths and the possibility of a shared global ethic.

By Faith and Reason: The Essential Keith Ward is aimed to introduce you to a masterful teacher - our teacher. Although we had never met Ward (that is, until, he and his wife graciously invited us into their home to discuss this project), he fulfilled a need few other professors or mentors could: he addressed the big questions, the same questions we were afraid to voice. These questions include: Why have Christian fundamentalists and the New Atheists held our faith hostage? What does it look like to explore a Christianity unafraid of science? What do we do with biblical texts that portray God as morally troubling? What is the core truth of the gospel? What is the point of prayer? How do we know what matters and what really matters? How can we restore beauty, awe, and wonder to our faith?

It is not just that he entertains these questions; he also reminds us that these questions are worth asking. It is good to ask them, and we are right to ask them. Keith Ward, then, is more than a teacher, for despite his decades of study and lifetime of reflection, he *still* has questions - questions he does not answer for us, but asks *with* us.

Yes, he still has his convictions which he defends passionately. But his work affirms a faith we yearn for, a faith that embraces mystery as an insight into truth, rather than an obstacle. And perhaps that is the best kind of affirmation we can hope for; that when plagued with questions about God, life, and everything in between, we know we are in pretty good company. As a result, it would be wise to see Keith Ward as more than a teacher ... he is a champion of faith and reason.

Wm. Curtis Holtzen and Roberto Sirvent, Spring 2012

Part 1: Faith and Reason

1: Friend or Foe?

Reflections on the Relationship Between Faith and Reason

I have always loved philosophy, even before I knew there was such a subject. I wondered about the ultimate origins of things, and the real nature of things, perhaps hidden from ordinary sight, and about what was truly good, and what goodness was, and about how anyone could really know anything about such things. I was, no doubt, a very odd little boy, asking questions to which no one knew the answer, and which were generally regarded as distinctly peculiar.

When I found out that there really was such a subject as philosophy, and that people like Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume, and Kant were great writers who had discussed such questions in detail, and apparently respectably, the outwardly rather dull but inwardly exciting and adventurous course of my future life was set.

For me philosophy was always about the big questions. And it was not a merely theoretical study. It was about how you should live, what you should aim at, what the important things in human life were, and how you might attain them. It was, in short, an intellectual quest for truth and goodness, and to undertake such a quest, arrogant and over-ambitious as it might seem for any human being, meant beginning to find out what the greatest writers of the past had said, and what conclusions they had come to. I have spent my life doing that, and have ended up as (successively) both a Professor of Philosophy and of Theology.

I have found that some people find that surprising. Is philosophy not very different from theology, they ask? Is philosophy not about always asking questions and letting reason go where it will, meeting all authorities with a skeptical smile, while theology is a matter of faith and accepting beliefs on authority or revelation?

I think such questions misunderstand the place of reasoning in human life. Reason is not some sort of faculty which always comes up with correct answers. When philosophers reason as hard as they can, they almost always disagree with each other. The first lesson you learn from a study of the history of ideas is that reasoning leads to disagreement. Different starting points or axioms seem reasonable to different people, and reasons that seem strong to some people seem weak to others. There is no such thing as completely impartial and universal reason.

Think, for example, of the age-old dispute about whether humans are determined to do whatever they do, either by God or by scientific laws, or whether they can sometimes make free choices that are not so determined. Some people think that scientific laws are so well-established that they must determine everything. But other people think that moral responsibility is so important that humans cannot be completely determined by forces outside their own choice. These differing starting points will be evaluated differently, and very sophisticated arguments can be developed to defend them against objections. Reason alone does not decide the issue.

Nevertheless, beliefs can be held reasonably or unreasonably. What will a reasonably held belief be? It will be one that can state its starting point clearly, see what its implications are, avoid inconsistencies and confusions, be aware of alternative views held by others, consider those views carefully and sympathetically, and be ready to respond to criticisms. By contrast, an unreasonably held belief will be one which is confused about what is meant by terms like 'determination' or 'freedom', which fails to see the implications of the belief, which is inconsistent or confused, which pays no attention to the views of others or fails to state them in a way that would be acceptable to their defenders, which ignores critical objections, and which refuses to try to defend itself by argument, but merely repeats the belief more loudly. An unreasonable belief may also get its facts wrong, or be unaware of them, or it may be unaware of the interpretations of the facts given by fully informed analysts (in this case, various interpretations of Benjamin Libet's experiments, for example).

Reasonably held beliefs will often have to appeal to authorities. A reasonable person in disputes about freedom and determinism will need to learn the relevant concepts, the main arguments and their historical development, and the general practice of good argumentation - all of which are taught by good practitioners. Then the relevant facts must be gleaned from reputable sources, and also the general interpretations of those facts which are accepted by fully informed critics. Most of this information will have to be accepted on authority by most people, and the authority will be of two main sorts - conceptual and factual. You must learn about the concepts, arguments, and interpretations that are relevant; and you must learn about the facts from those in the best position to have discovered them.

I hope it goes without saying that accepting authority does not mean blind or unquestioning acceptance. Nevertheless, there is quite a lot of trust involved. You have to trust that scientists have made careful observations and have reported them honestly, and that philosophers are aware of all relevant arguments and have considered them fully and sympathetically. Where disagreements exist, it is fair (and reasonable) to say that most people will not consider that they can on their own dispute the relevant factual or conceptual claims (I could not, for example, reasonably dispute the Theory of Relativity, whether I like it or not. I am simply not competent to do so). However there are cases where experts disagree, and cases where that might matter a lot to how you live. Experts disagree on freedom and determinism, and that might make a big difference to how you treat criminals. In such cases it is reasonable to adopt a belief on practical grounds, after having done your best to see what arguments there are on either side, and having accepted that no possibility of universal agreement is in sight.

Once you see that, you will no longer be tempted to think that all reasonable people will agree with each other, or that reason is incompatible with accepting many things on authority. You will see that reasonable disagreement must be based on full knowledge of the various relevant options, and that reasonable authority must

be based on either conceptual knowledge and insight, or access to specialised factual knowledge, or preferably on both. But you can choose your authority in the light of your own limited experience and commitments, as long as the issue does not, after full investigation, seem to you to be decisively closed.

I have taken the issue of freedom and determinism as an example of informed and apparently unresolvable disagreement, but there are many other examples. Are mental events different in kind from physical events? Is life after bodily death possible? Are moral truths objective or subjective?

Is the universe basically mind-like or completely impersonal? Is experimental science the only means of discovering truth? In the history of human thought, these are all highly disputed and unresolved issues. Most people have some opinion on all these issues, but it is not the case that all informed and intelligent people agree on any of them. I am persuaded of the truth of some beliefs in these areas - most importantly, that there is a mind-like basis (God) to the physical universe, so that materialism is false.

Like all these issues, reason cannot decide this issue. But it is possible to believe reasonably - being aware of criticisms, seeing implications, and giving relevant if non-conclusive arguments in favour. In the history of philosophy, the vast majority of philosophers have agreed with me about the reasonableness of belief in God. Indeed, the philosophers generally called Rationalists, like Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza, all believed that the universe was rational, that there was a reason why everything was as it was, that this reason must ultimately be founded in a conscious or mind-like reality which provides a reason for everything, and that the reason, formed in the mind of this ultimate reality, must ultimately be that the existence of this cosmos (including the mind-like reality itself) is of great intrinsic value, being worthwhile just for its own sake.

It is odd that people who call themselves Rationalists today usually reject this belief. Interestingly, they tend to use the word 'rational' in quite a different sense, to mean that you should not believe anything unless you have observational, public, testable,

sensory evidence for it. I am not sure that this is a rational belief at all. Even in physics, surely a science if anything is, it is considered reasonable to believe in Higgs' Boson, or Superstrings, or the Multiverse, without sufficient evidence for these things having been found. You can believe in them because they are parts of an elegant explanatory theory, or they follow from such a theory. Of course in physics you hope you will find evidence to confirm your belief, because you are, after all, thinking of physical processes which can in principle be tested by experiment. But hoping for evidence is not the same as having evidence, and if you fail to find the evidence it is not considered unreasonable to continue to maintain the theory (think of Einstein's refusal to accept Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle as a final result in physics. In face of all the evidence, Einstein was not considered unreasonable for maintaining that there must be 'hidden variables' because his theory required it).

There are many factual claims that are not testable in any way we can think of. These range from simple everyday claims like my claim that last night I dreamed that I was in Bermuda, to more complex claims like the claim that every event is completely determined by its physical antecedent causes or the claim that there is a conscious reality (God) which brings the cosmos into being. It is obvious that there can be no direct public physical test of any belief about a non-physical reality. The best we could do would be to devise a conceptual thought-experiment: is the cosmos such that it could be brought about by a conscious reality for the sake of its intrinsic goodness? Some empirical claims will be relevant to such a thought-experiment but it is unlikely that any will be decisive.

Can we be aware of non-physical realities? My philosophical opinion is that we certainly are. We are aware of our own thoughts, feelings, and sensations. We are aware of mathematical and moral truths (if there are such truths, they are not about physical states of affairs). If there is an ultimate non-physical reality (God) we might expect to be aware of it sometimes, and many apparently sane people think they are. There is, then, I would say, as a strictly philosophical opinion, good experiential (though not repeatable or publicly

testable) evidence of non-sensory, non-physical realities. The move to the idea of God is a move to an elegant and integrative hypothesis (rather like those posited in science) which gives a coherent account of how non-physical and physical realities relate to one another in a wider explanatory scheme.

All this is meant to make clear that a philosopher can turn into a theologian, someone who studies the idea of God, quite easily. It is also an autobiographical account of how I, beginning as a conventionally atheistic philosopher, came to believe that the idea of God, as a supreme spiritual (non-physical) reality, provides a much more reasonable account of the world we experience than does the alternative theory that physical realities (whatever exactly they are in our weird quantum world) are the only ultimately real things that exist.

This is only the beginning of the exciting intellectual adventure of exploring what a supreme spiritual reality (God) who creates the universe for the sake of intrinsic goodness is likely to do in that universe, or how much of the divine nature and purpose God is likely to reveal, and in what way, and how humans might be involved in realising goodness. That cannot be a matter simply of abstract speculation, for if God has done anything, there will be traces of divine action and recorded experiences of divine reality throughout human history. And, decisively, there will be the personal impact of divine reality upon the life of those who seek to be receptive to it.

My personal journey has led from reason to faith. Philosophy led me to think that belief in God is reasonable, in fact the most reasonable hypothesis about what the world and what goodness truly is. That led me to ask what traces or alleged apprehensions of God could be found in human experience and history. That led me seriously to consider belief in Jesus Christ as a decisive revelation of God's nature and purpose. And that led to faith - firm commitment to a vision of goodness and love in the person of Jesus and to the hope of final deliverance from moral failure and evil, despite all the moral and intellectual vacillations that characterise human life and thought. As Thomas Aquinas put it, 'Faith is that habit of mind

whereby eternal life begins in us' (*Summa Theologiae* 2a, 2ae, quest. 4, art.1).

Christian theology can be seen as the attempt to work out how God has revealed the divine purpose in and through Jesus, and how deliverance from evil might be achieved through him. But no one works these things out from scratch. Christian churches have thought about these issues for centuries. To do theology is to learn what they have said, why they have said it, why they have often differed from one another, how their thinking has developed, and how their thoughts relate to the wider historical contexts in which they lived. In the contemporary world, the vast increase in knowledge of the world disclosed by the natural sciences, and the greater understanding of other cultures and belief-systems made possible by better communications and travel, provide new opportunities for seeing the revealing and saving work of God in a wider and deeper context. For this reason, much of my work has been concerned to see how Christian ideas of God have developed and changed over the centuries, how Christian faith is best expressed in a scientific age, how we can best read and interpret the Bible in a very different culture from those cultures in which its various 'Books' were written, and how Christian faith relates to other great religious traditions in the world.

These are the topics covered by the readings collected in this book by Roberto Sirvent and William Curtis Holtzen. I am grateful to them for taking the time and trouble to read and select from my published work in such a sensitive and careful way. Taken as a whole, the readings constitute an argument that it is possible to make a firm commitment to Christian revelation while defending to the full the free use of philosophical and critical reasoning. Not only is it possible. It is entirely proper, for reason is, or should be, the friend of faith. Faith in the Christian God is after all, among other things, faith that the world itself, created through the *Logos* (Reason or Wisdom) of God, is rational, and as such it can be rationally understood by those who are created in the image of God.

2: Are Faith and Reason Incompatible?

‘What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?’ With this question the early Christian writer Tertullian tried to distance philosophy from Christian faith. He is also the author of the infamous statement, ‘It is definitely to be believed, because it is absurd.’ One religious attitude is that human reason has nothing to say about religious faith. Faith comes directly by revelation from God, and it may contradict human reason, which may be incapable of thinking properly about God at all.

Many modern atheists agree with this, but assume that it makes religious belief irrational and indefensible. This is one way of thinking about religion, though it may apply in a special way to the Christian faith, which asserts the strange-sounding claims that the eternal God died, and that a dead man rose to life again. Such things, Tertullian thought, could never be thought up by philosophers. If they seem to conflict with philosophy, so much the worse for philosophy.

Some modern atheists agree that the very idea of God is philosophically absurd. But they see this as a reason against religious belief, not in favour of it. How can there be a mind with no brain, that does not exist in any place, and that is able to do anything yet allows gross suffering to exist? Or how could there be a revelation from such a mind when there are a thousand competing revelations in the world, all of them claiming absolute certainty yet none of them having enough evidence to convince all rational observers? The believer may say, ‘Just have faith.’ But when there are a thousand faiths to choose from, which one should we choose? If there are no reasons for our choice, it seems arbitrary. If we say, ‘God will tell us which is true’, then why does God apparently tell different people - Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Hindus, very different things?

Clearly there is a problem. But before I examine it further, I need to stress that Tertullian’s view is not the only one, or even the main one, among Christian theologians. Most early Christian writers

thought that Athens had a great deal to do with Jerusalem, and the early Christian creeds are full of Greek philosophical terms such as 'substance', 'person', and 'nature'. Medieval theologians such as Anselm and Thomas Aquinas believed that Christian faith could be almost wholly justified by reason. They thought they could show that belief in God is reasonable; then that it is reasonable to think God has revealed the divine nature and purpose; and that, given these beliefs, the specific content of Christian faith, while it goes beyond what reason can establish, is deeply consistent with reason.

I have obviously sided more with writers such as Aquinas. I have tried to show that it is reasonable to believe in a self-existent eternal mind as creator of the universe. If you accept that, it is very reasonable to think that such a mind would communicate something of its nature and purpose to human persons. Indeed it would be unreasonable to think that a God who wanted humans to co-operate in achieving a divine purpose for the cosmos had never told them what that purpose was, or how to achieve it. So it is reasonable to look for a revelation or communication from God that says what the divine purpose is, and to take it as a genuine source of new information.

It is very important to see that, when we begin to look for a revelation, none of us starts from a position of complete neutrality, looking around at all alleged revelations and coolly deciding between them. We are born and brought up in a specific culture and at a specific point in history, and we are taught the values and beliefs that are characteristic of that culture and history. This book, for example, is aiming to be as reasonable and impartial as possible. But it is written in English in the twenty-first century and from a Christian, though partly secularised, cultural background. Even in the first chapter when I defended the possibility of a natural knowledge of a personal God, as a matter of autobiographical fact, as I tried to make clear, I knew about that possibility because of my own early education.

[1] Chapter 1, 'Why Does Belief in God Matter', in *Is Religion Irrational?*

Most people will have a story to tell of their own experiences of religion and of their own intellectual approach to the big questions about God, the soul, human freedom, and morality. We cannot escape our upbringing, and we should not pretend that our own beliefs are just obviously true and ought to be obvious to all rational people. We can also see how our beliefs change as we come across new knowledge from science, history or philosophy, or from meeting with people of very different cultures and backgrounds. We hope that this change is a development to a wider and deeper understanding, and not just some sort of arbitrary fluctuation in belief. So we can see the importance of deepening the beliefs we start from by gaining as wide a knowledge as possible of the world.

This leads me to two conclusions. To put them in a slightly grandiose way, the first might be called the principle of historical particularity. We all begin from a background of beliefs and values that we have learned from others, and have either found helpful or reacted against. They shape the way we think and our most basic attitudes to experience - such as whether we find it natural to see our experience as a continuing encounter with a personal God, or whether that does not resonate with us at all, so that we have no feeling for religion. Moreover, we realise that the beliefs and values that were taught to us themselves have a history which is particular, not universal. The beliefs I was taught go back, even though the people who taught me those beliefs did not always realise it, through a number of German Christian scholars such as Harnack and Hegel, to the Protestant Reformation, and before that to great medieval theologians such as Aquinas, then to the early Church Fathers, and to the first disciples of Jesus. You can trace the line further back, through the traditions recorded in the Hebrew Bible, until the origins are lost in prehistory, but probably can be found in the largely unrecorded traditions of an early Middle Eastern group of nomadic tribes.

This leads to the second conclusion, which I will call the principle of historical development. All human beliefs have a history. From their point of origin in history they have developed as they have

incorporated, or sometimes reacted against, new knowledge, new moral beliefs, new experiences, and new critical arguments. We can ask of any human belief at a specific point in history, what did it develop from? Against what did it react? What problems was it seeking to resolve? What are its weaknesses? And what new insights does it embody? So the early beliefs of a Semitic tribal people developed into the sophisticated moral theism of second Isaiah in the fifth century BC, partly under the pressure of encountering new and powerful competing cultures, and having to deal with the problems of defeat by and exile in the Babylonian empire.

If we take Christianity as an example of a religion whose history has been well documented, we can very clearly see how it has developed in many ways over the centuries. Indeed, the history of Christianity could be seen as a series of revolutions in thought, as it has developed from its original Jewish background into the astounding set of different Christian churches in the world today - from very ritualistic Eastern Orthodox liturgies to charismatic mega-churches and silent Quaker meetings.

The first great Christian revolution was its almost complete reinterpretation of the Hebrew scriptures, and of the hope for a coming messiah, an anointed leader who would liberate Israel from its enemies and establish the rule of justice and peace in the world. Of course, as Jews rightly point out, Israel was not liberated by Jesus from Roman occupation, and Jerusalem is still, tragically, one of the most violent places on earth. Justice and peace do not rule in the world. But followers of Jesus insist that he was the messiah, and they do so by reinterpreting the idea of messiah so that it no longer refers to a political reformer. Jesus is, for Christians, a spiritual king and his rule is in the hearts of men and women throughout the world. That is a remarkable revolution in thought, but once it has been made, Christians can plausibly argue, from their point of view, that the Hebrew Bible - what they call the Old Testament - does point toward such a spiritual king who will inaugurate, not a political kingdom, but a new spiritual covenant with God.

A second revolution followed hard on the heels of this one, as Christianity became a predominantly Gentile faith, and actually gave up the Jewish Law, the Torah. Virtually all the first Christians were observant Jews. But within a generation the church had become a largely Gentile organisation, even, disgracefully, becoming anti-Jewish in some ways. More positively, the church took belief in one loving redeemer God to the whole Gentile world. That was a dramatic revolution too.

Then, between the fourth and eighth centuries, Christians took on the vocabulary and thought-forms of Greek philosophy, and developed the orthodox creeds, an intellectually impressive worldview at the cutting edge of the thought of those times. Jesus was seen as the eternal wisdom of God, who became incarnate to reunite humanity and the whole of creation with God. It is not hard to see this as a natural and proper development of what was always implicit in the Gospels. But it is certainly a revolution in thought, transforming Christianity from a small messianic sect into a sophisticated philosophical worldview.

Developments in the understanding of life after death, and doctrines such as transubstantiation followed in the Latin or Roman Catholic Church, but a major revolution occurred at the Reformation, when some of these doctrines, and the church itself, became subject to criticism. This licensed new waves of critical thought and enquiry in Christian thinking, questioned hierarchical authority in matters of faith, and eventually established the essentially liberal idea of freedom of personal belief as central to Christian faith, in both Catholic and Protestant traditions.

Today another revolution is in progress, as new discoveries in science force Christians to reflect very hard about what they think about evolution, about the destiny of the universe, and about the place of human life in this vast universe. Many of these questions are still disputed or unresolved, but there is no doubt that there have been major developments in Christian thinking through the centuries, as the original faith has come into contact with wider social and intellectual forces.

I am not trying to give a mini-history of Christianity as such. My purpose is to show how one tradition of religious thought has developed historically by its response to a succession of political, social, and cultural changes. The same general principle is true of every long-lasting religious tradition. There is no such thing as one unchanging interpretation of the Christian, or of any other, religion. There is instead a story of continual development which divides into a number of diverse streams as differing responses to new situations arise.

Sometimes people think that they would like to return to the original pure Christian faith. But this is much harder to identify than we might think. In all likelihood there were always a number of different responses to Jesus in the early church. In the earliest church there was no New Testament; there were no creeds; and there were no agreed doctrines, such as those of the Trinity and the incarnation, which, three or four hundred years later, were to become tests of orthodoxy. So the earliest form of Christian discipleship might well have been very different from anything we can come up with today, with our long history of scriptures, commentaries, creeds, and interpretations by many different churches from which we select the one that seems best to us - but not, it is clear, to everyone.

It might be easy to misinterpret what I am saying: I am not trying to say anything controversial. In particular, I am not denying that there are some truths of Christian faith, some things which are true whether groups of Christians believe them or not. What I am saying is that human understanding of these truths has, as a matter of demonstrable historical record, varied enormously at different times, and shows a sort of development of understanding (and sometimes, regrettably, a refusal to develop) in the light of new knowledge and experience.

But that simple fact carries an important implication for our own thinking about religion, whether we are generally in favour of religion or against it. Whatever our initial view is, it is important to extend our experience as much as possible, so that our knowledge of the world will be both wide and deep, well-informed and fully aware

of the history, diversity, and fragility of human thought. Armed with an awareness of one's own historical situation, and with a desire to place ourselves in the widest and best-informed context of human understanding, we can then begin to consider our own beliefs both sympathetically and critically, knowing that our understanding of them is unlikely to be absolutely correct just as it stands, even if it contains fundamental insights that should be preserved. So we must move as well as we can toward greater understanding.

An important distinction to make here is the distinction between truth and human understanding of that truth. For instance, it is either true or false that there is a creator God. That truth (whatever it is) is absolute, and not dependent on any human belief. But our knowledge of that truth is far from absolute. It is relative, because it depends on what we have been taught, the experiences we have had, and how we have reacted to those experiences - all of which things are very personal and particular. And our specific interpretation of that truth (what we think God is) is even more relative, because our interpretations fall under the two principles of historical particularity and historical development.

A good example of this is precisely the view of God that I am offering here. I have said that God is eternal in being, but is also changing and temporal in relationship to the world of space-time. I believe that is true. But I am well aware that many traditional believers in God deny that God changes in any respect. Others reject the doctrine of changelessness as a sort of Aristotelian intrusion into theology. So I realise that my view is just one among others, and that I have developed it by meeting and responding to the arguments of many previous thinkers who have wrestled with these problems. It would be wrong to give up and say that, since there are so many disagreements, it is not worth having any opinion. And it would be equally wrong to say that my view is so obviously correct that all who reject it are stupid or wicked. I think my view is the most adequate known to me because I think it resolves some problems that other views do not, and it manages to include both God's

eternity and God's real relationship to creatures in what I think is an adequate and coherent way.

In other words, we can believe there is an absolute truth, and that we ought to pursue it. But there are many cases (and they include almost all religious doctrines) when we cannot be sure that our interpretation of that truth (our particular interpretation of God, for example) is absolutely and finally correct. In fact I would say that it would be much more reasonable to think that, while our own interpretation seems to us to be an improvement on what went before, it should not ever seem even to us to be wholly adequate to its object.

Where does this leave us with the question of the relationship between faith and reason, and with the problem of the many competing revelations of religious truth? I think it rules out Tertullian's extreme view that we should just believe something because it is absurd. There are too many absurd doctrines to choose from, and there is little to choose between them. But we need to put Tertullian's view in historical context. When he thought of philosophers, he was thinking of the many competing and often radically skeptical views of the Greek and Roman philosophers of his day. They were rarely religious and tended to be skeptical about the claims to revelation made by various religious groups. They did often believe in a supreme mind of the universe, as Plato and Aristotle had done. But they tended to see this mind as unchanging or inactive, and in particular they tended to ridicule Christian claims that God had been incarnate in Jesus and that Jesus had risen from the dead. So Tertullian saw the philosophers as idle speculators with no religious commitment who opposed alleged revelations as irrational.

When he spoke of believing absurdities, he obviously did not mean that he believed in stupidities. He meant that he believed in divine revelation in Jesus of things that could not be inferred by rational speculation alone. Moreover, these revealed things were 'absurd' or 'impossible' in a very special way. They were impossible only if there was no God who could act decisively in history, who

might express the divine being in the life of a human being, and who might raise a finite human life to the life of eternity.

If there is a God, we might actually expect that there would be extraordinary events that might show a deeper spiritual reality underlying the ordinary material processes of the physical world. Miracles are only absurd to people who think that there are universal laws of nature which cannot be broken, and that there is no spiritual mind that may, for very good reason, produce real and extraordinary effects in the physical world. For Tertullian, God does what is impossible for nature alone to do - and that shows that it is God who is acting. God unites the natural to the supernatural. That is impossible only for those who think there is no supernatural, or that it cannot affect the natural world of events in space and time in any way.

Tertullian's faith was founded on the testimony of the apostles to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, testimony to a set of historical events that are impossible without God, and cannot be demonstrated by reasoning alone. But, he thinks, those events occurred, the testimony is believable, and so reasoning cannot disprove them.

When it is put like that, Thomas Aquinas's view that divine revelation in Jesus is deeply reasonable is not so different from Tertullian's after all. For Aquinas means that the resurrection of Jesus is reasonable if there is a God who wills resurrection to eternal life for all, and who raises Jesus from death as a vindication of Jesus' divine authority and as an anticipation of the destiny that God wills for all humanity. When you have those background beliefs, the resurrection becomes far from absurd. It becomes a window into the eternal purpose of God.

Faith and reason are not two totally distinct faculties, with completely different modes of operation. Reasoning does not tell us what the world is really like, without any reference to God. Faith does not tell us that God exists and acts, without any appeal to reasoning. Reason has to take all relevant facts into account. These facts might include the existence of God who, as creator, may make

specific differences to what happens in the world of our experience. Because human reason is so weak, it leaves many weighty questions unresolved - including questions about human free will, about materialism and idealism, about the nature of time, about ultimate moral principles, and about the existence of God, a self-existent and eternal consciousness. Faith in God therefore cannot rely on reasoning alone, or it would be perpetually in a state of indecision. Yet we can see that it is possible to have a reasonable belief in a creator God, and I have tried to show that.

A sort of faith, and often a very historically specific sort of faith (whether for or against God), is already present for many people before they even begin to start reasoning. In a sense, we all start from a faith position. We take on trust - and rightly so - what we are taught as children. But it is devoutly to be hoped that we will not stay there forever.

I have heard it argued that we should not teach children religious views when they are young, so that they can make up their own minds later. That seems a very odd statement, which we would not dream of making about scientific or moral views. If children have no knowledge of religion, or no sense that it is important to many people, or of what it means to them, how can they ever make a rational decision about it? We must tell our children what is important in our lives, and that will include giving them a very positive account of religion, if we hold such an account to be important, even though we should also invite them to think about it for themselves as they grow older.

Positive religious faith is not based on abstract speculation about the nature of the universe. It is based on a personal decision to participate consciously in a spiritual reality that is disclosed or revealed to us in our experience. This decision is partly based upon an analysis of our experience as somehow radically imperfect or corrupted. This analysis is common to the great world faiths, and it is the root of the impulse to religious practice. Buddhists take as their first great holy truth that 'all is suffering'. Hindus claim that humans are ignorant of their true spiritual natures. Christians speak of 'sin'

(the Greek word is *hamartia*, which means 'missing the mark') as a radical inability to do what is right. Somehow, millions of people feel, humans are locked into a world of futility, despair, anxiety and fear of others. They are alienated from the world, from their work, from their family and colleagues, and even from themselves.

This sense of alienation is captured perfectly by Jean-Paul Sartre in his 1944 play *Huis Clos*, sometimes translated as 'No Exit', the most famous quotation from which is, 'Hell is other people.' Three characters, sitting locked in a room, are in a claustrophobic relationship, each one trying to seduce, destroy, or judge the others and in turn afraid of their judgment and 'objectifying gaze', in a circle of unending hatred, contempt, and fear. They feel themselves to be trapped in the room, and yet the doors open when they want to leave. They are nevertheless unable to leave, but are psychologically compelled to go on torturing and being tortured by one another forever. This, Sartre suggests, is the real hell, being locked into the gaze of others, an inescapable gaze which judges, condemns, and seduces but never forgives.

As an atheist, Sartre offers no escape from this prison, at least within the play itself. But he reveals its nature very starkly. The major world religions offer means of release from this self-created alienation. But they do not offer some *deus ex machina*, a god descending from on high who can magically free us from this world, from the little room of our self-deception and self-centeredness. There is in fact no 'machine' but the one constructed by our own fears and hatreds. But there is a deeper underlying reality beyond the self and the life of egoistic desire, knowledge of which reveals the illusion for what it is. The disclosure of that reality is 'revelation', the intimation of a real presence of love and power, compassion and creativity, which can lead us to see our world differently and to overcome the crippling sense of alienation. Genuine faith begins when people realise their alienation and commit their lives in trust to such a transforming experience of revelation or disclosure.

If such experiences are among the facts upon which reasoning operates, this will be a powerful motivation for developing a

rationally and morally acceptable idea of what we believe that spiritual reality to be. In my case that disclosure was mediated through a particular Christian tradition which I learned as a child. But it is reasonable to suppose that similar disclosures occur in many different traditions. It is also reasonable to suppose that where children are taught that religion is silly or irrational such disclosures will not occur, or will not be interpreted as disclosures of a higher spiritual reality. Sartre was unable to accept any religious solution to the human problem that he saw so clearly, largely because he took God to be a prying judgmental tyrant. It hardly needs saying that religious believers do not see God that way. They see God as a compassionate source of wisdom and creativity, who gives purpose to human striving without taking away the authentic freedom and autonomy that meant so much to Sartre.

If we apply the principles of historical particularity and historical development what we expect is that there will be many different historical origins for disclosures of spiritual reality. There will be, especially in very different cultures, many different developing reflective interpretations of those originative disclosures. And there will be many people who do not have such disclosures, or do not recognise them as having any objective reality. So it is not surprising that there are many different 'revelations'. The religious situation is not like having a lot of conflicting books set alongside each other that all claim to be full of true propositions, while we, from a position of strict neutrality, are asked to choose which one is really true. It is rather that each of us has already received some religious or non-religious formation, in a particular historical and cultural position. As we develop in reflection and experience we may adapt this formation in various ways, and those ways will be a blend of cultural influence and personal creativity, to a greater or lesser degree. We all have an inadequate grasp of the fundamental beliefs from which we begin, and we all need to grow by widening and deepening our understanding as we adapt or reject those initial beliefs. This is how human beliefs develop, in religion as in morality, philosophy, the arts, history, and science.

What I have tried to do in this chapter is to set out the general assumptions with which we might undertake a serious, sympathetic yet critical, study of religion. We will be looking at a very diverse, continually changing, and historically particular set of alleged disclosures of spiritual reality and human responses to those disclosures, and we are bound to be engaged in this study in a deeply personal and committed way. It seems right to approach the subject in an initially sympathetic way, trying to understand what religious belief means to those who accept it. But of course we must use our critical faculties to the full, and so we will find that some beliefs (and possibly all religious beliefs, in the end) are inadequate to our understanding of the world. One of my complaints against many modern atheists is that they do not adopt such an initially sympathetic yet critical approach. They are thus unable to study religion seriously or in a properly scholarly way, turning discussion of religion into a mere exercise in rhetoric and bombast. To the extent that this is so, much modern atheism is deeply irrational and subversive of scholarship.

Bearing that in mind, in the next chapter I will examine the idea of divine revelation and defend the belief that the self-existent and eternal God of the philosophers does reveal the divine nature and purpose, in rather different ways, in a number of the religious traditions of humanity.

Part 2: Concept of God

3: The Personal Ground of Being

In which the reader will find that God is not a person without a body, and may wonder if God can ride a bicycle or whether God knows if humans will ever land on Mars. The reader will discover why nineteenth-century Germans became more and more depressed, and that the Trinity, though it is indeed three persons in one substance, is not three people sitting in a bowl of soup. Finally the reader will find that evolution need not be the desperate struggle for existence that some pessimistic souls suggest, but may be seen as a striving for higher life and consciousness. God may not ride a bicycle, but God knows plenty of people who can, and will ensure that in the end they will do so exceedingly well.

God as Omnipotent Person

This guide to God may not have delivered what was expected. Not only have I not set forth the doctrine of a supernatural person who can do absolutely anything, who knows absolutely everything, and who would never cause harm to anyone, but I have castigated that doctrine as a travesty of what the best-known philosophers of all ages have written about God.

There are certainly plenty of people who do think God is pretty straightforwardly a supernatural person. They no doubt existed in ancient Greece, and thought that Pallas Athene really would fly down to help when they were in trouble. On the other hand, the fact that she never did was not apparently of great concern to them - which may make you suspect that they were not really concerned about the literal reference of their language, whatever they might have said when asked. There are plenty of people who think God is like that today - but again, they do not seem to be seriously concerned when God never appears, or when God says 'No' to most of their prayers.

Nevertheless, is it really plausible to say that God is not to be conceived of as a person in any sense at all? The great classical writers certainly cause us to qualify the idea of 'person' to an enormous extent, but is there no place in their thought for the personhood of God? And can the idea of God as person not be defended in a sophisticated way?

Of course it can. In America there is a justly renowned school of personalist philosophers, such as Edgar Brightman and Peter Bertocci. And one of the most widely quoted definitions of God in recent philosophy is given by the Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne. God, he writes, is something like 'a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe.' (This is the second sentence of the introduction to *The Coherence of Theism*). His books provide the best exposition and defense available of his own definition, so it would be a total waste of time for me to make up what would only be a less elegant and scholarly version of it here.

It needs to be noted, however, that the idea of 'person' that is being used might be quite different from whatever applies to human persons. For Swinburne, God is eternal, perfectly free and omnipotent, which human persons certainly are not. Swinburne gives these terms a meaning which is more obviously personalistic than the classical tradition, but God still turns out to be very different from human persons.

In Swinburne's interpretation, 'eternal' does not mean, as it does for classical theologians, 'timeless'. It means without beginning or end. 'Free' does not mean that God might do any logically possible thing. On the contrary, it means God will always do something if God knows that doing it would be better than not doing it. God is totally and purely rational, and if we were just as rational, we could predict almost everything that God would or would not do. 'Omnipotent' does not mean that God can bring about any logically possible state. For instance God must do good and avoid evil. So God is not a moral agent, in the sense that God is capable of

doing wrong, and is under obligation to do what is right. Put more generally, on this understanding, an omnipotent being is one who can do anything that falls within the realm of the undetermined or nonnecessitated actions of that being which is the source of all actual and possible powers. As Swinburne himself puts it, 'A being who is perfectly free and omnipotent in my sense has as much control over things as it is logically possible that a being could have' - and we might not know exactly what the bounds of that 'logical possibility' are.

This is a very qualified notion of omnipotence, but (I think) is a perfectly coherent one. We simply do not know how much control over things a perfectly good and rational being would have, what undetermined things there are to be done, or what would necessarily follow from its nature. It is very easy to invent a phrase such as, 'a universe just like this, but without any suffering in it'. But how can we possibly know whether such a universe is really possible? Well, we might say, with God all things must be possible. But it is not so easy. Even if God is the source of everything other than God, and the source of all powers, so that nothing can be more powerful than God, we have not the slightest idea what powers God actually has. 'All powers, of course,' you say. But has God got the power to ride a bicycle or to run a mile in three minutes? If you are tempted to say 'Yes, of course,' remember that God does not have a bicycle, and has no legs either.

'But God can make legs.' This is not totally absurd. Some Christians believe that God did make some divine legs, namely, the legs of Jesus of Nazareth - though Jesus did not have a bicycle. Some people think that God in fact has everybody's legs, if they believe that everything is part of God. It might even be held that a good reason for creating a universe with people and bicycles in it is precisely so that God could experience what it is like to run and ride bicycles.

The real problem, however, comes from our thinking that God must be able to do anything we can think of or imagine. Because we, ignorant as we are, can imagine lots of things which are really