

Thinking about God

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Sooner or later, people who think about *God* have to think about *thinking*.

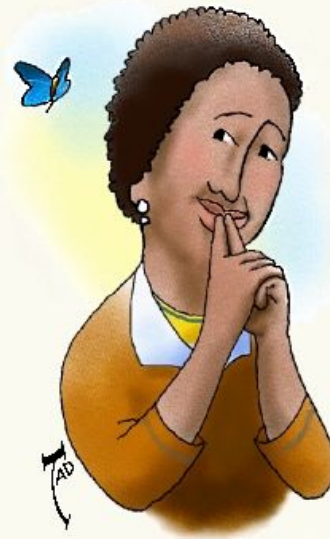
For example, we say that God made everything. But we also say that *evil* is something. So did God make evil too? There must be something wrong in our thinking.

Christians say that Jesus prayed to God. But some also say that he *is* God. Surely he wasn't praying to himself. There must be something wrong in our thinking.

Some people who have "religious experiences" say they experienced an overwhelming *understanding* of everything. Others say they had no understanding at all, but rather a profound *feeling* of God's loving presence. Shouldn't we get them together to settle on precise and shared meanings of words like *experience*, *understanding*, and *feeling*?

Scientists explain our origin as an evolution from primitive matter and energy. But theists explain our origin as coming from God's creative power. But many scientists are also theists. Surely they must think that "explain" has two different meanings.

In the Luke's Gospel, the Holy Spirit first comes upon the apostles 40 days after Easter, but in John's Gospel, the Spirit comes upon them Easter Sunday night. How can inspired authors give different accounts of such a crucial event? They can't both be true. There must be something wrong in our thinking about what "true" means.



How Thinking Developed

Thinking about thinking began long after our first ancestors walked the earth. But once we did, we discovered not only the benefits of understanding how we think but also the many ways in which there can be something wrong in our thinking.

One main thing wrong in our thinking is an assumption that thinking is a lot like looking. We can think that knowledge is like just seeing what's really out there. When someone was confused, we'd say, "Open

your eyes!" But eventually, we learned to distinguish between quite a few different factors that enter into thinking.

A fundamental discovery was that knowing is not just one activity. It's a combination of three quite different activities.

We first *experience* something,

then we conceive some *understanding* of our experience of this something,

and then we make a *judgment* on whether our understanding of our experience is correct or not.

Many ancient philosophers were aware of these three components of thinking¹ as they thought about biology, time, logic, and ethics, but they didn't teach a complete theory about knowing and how it comprises this combination of experience, understanding, and judgment. But since the emergence of modern scientific method, with its three steps of *experiment*, *hypothesis*, and *verification*—corresponding to experience, understanding, and judgment—we have a convincing demonstration that these three elements are essential to all knowing.

In this way, we avoided all sorts of errors regarding religion. For example, we should not assume that a "religious *experience*," all by itself, gives some sort of *knowledge* about God. Knowledge of God depends on how we *understand* our religious experience. Also, what we *understand* about our religious experience does not by itself give us true *knowledge* about what "God" really is or really did, since we often *misunderstand* our experiences. We need to verify—to *judge*—that our understanding of our experience is correct.

So, by paying attention to what we do when we think about God, both believers and skeptics can reach a common ground. They do this by sharing (1) their experiences, then (2) their understanding of these experiences, and then (3) their judgment or verification on why they consider that their understanding adequately explains their experience. In this manner, believers explain how they arrived at their faith beliefs by pointing to experiences overlooked by skeptics. At the same time, skeptics explain why faith-based explanations are unconvincing by pointing to experiences overlooked by believers.

What we humans think about God has never been a fixed set of beliefs. Besides the differences between believers and skeptics, besides even the differences among different believing communities, there have been differences between earlier and later beliefs. That is, the history of religious faith is a history of growth. The growth has been gradual in some cultures and transformative in others.

Historically speaking, the most transformative developments took place mainly in the “Western” world—meaning the civilizations in areas surrounding the Mediterranean and the North Atlantic. Transformative developments in religious thinking among African, South American, and East Asian civilizations have been minimal by comparison. Unlike gradual growth, transformative developments occur in clearly distinct stages. We can describe it as a six-act play. The first act depicts the sort of thinking found in all children and all primitive cultures. Each subsequent act begins with a crisis, and, as we will see, only the first four reach a resolution.

Act I: Primitive commonsense-symbolic thinking.

The thinking of infants is focused on avoiding pain and enjoying pleasure. Before long, children develop practical strategies of crying and behaving to ensure that these needs are met. They also develop self-world images in which their parents, siblings, and friends play certain roles. They assume that knowing is a commonsense matter of just looking at what's out there and of symbolizing in their imagination the practical opportunities and risks that might encounter. God is up in heaven; misbehave and you go down to Hell. This mode characterizes all children, and cultures that have not developed further modes of thinking we name *primitive*.

The ancient Greek poets Homer and Hesiod (10th-8th centuries BCE) used descriptive language to depict the gods—sometimes called the muses—as *seeing* everything. Whatever is so, the gods know, and humans too will know, provided that the gods deign to pass on their godly knowledge of what they see. All human knowledge was understood as some kind of seeing what the gods reveal.

Act II: The Greeks discover the mind

But several centuries later, a crisis appears. The Greek philosophers Xenophanes (d. 480) Hecataeus (d. 476) dismissed this divine origin of human knowledge as nothing but pure imagination. Instead, they insisted that the stories of the past should be judged by everyday experience, and that we gain knowledge not by some sort of *seeing* but by carefully planned inquiries. Inquiring is not looking; it is an effort made *by a mind*.

At the same time, Heraclitus (d. 475) taught that there is a *Universal Intelligence* that the gods possess in full, and humans possess in part. Thus the entire universe is governed by some kind of *mind*.

So what is it? Do we know because (a) the gods let us see what they see, or (b) we learn from our own experience, or (c) there's a Universal Intelligence shared by gods and humans alike?

Socrates (d. 399) and Plato (d. 347) opted for the idea of a Universal Intelligence. As it happened, this fit well with Judeo-Christian religions that regarded all human knowledge as a share in the divine mind of God. This approach dominated Christian philosophy up to the Middle Ages and is still used by many theologians today. But Socrates also asked a new and disturbing question about thinking that no one asked before: "What is bravery?" Everyone could recognize bravery when they saw it, but no one could *define* it. In fact, Socrates and Plato could give a definition neither of bravery nor any of their philosophical terms within a total system where all the terms were defined and interconnected.

It was Plato's student Aristotle (d. 322) who first developed such a *system*, following the more empirical tradition of Xenophanes and Hecataeus. His system allowed him to *define* terms like bravery, justice, and fortitude. Today, everyone is familiar with definitions; people who disagree will spontaneously ask each other to define their terms. But our ability to make definitions is only about 2,300 years old, for which our gratitude is owed to Aristotle. His system also included the science of *logic*, which plays a major role today in testing how coherent and orderly anyone's thinking is.

Act III: Christians rely on Greek philosophical terms

The first Christians were content to preach the gospel to ordinary people and to live exemplary lives. But as more people converted to Christ, philosophers began to ridicule Christian beliefs about God and Christ. So Christians like Tertullian (d.c. 250) and Origen (d. 254) relied on various strands of Greek philosophy to express Christian beliefs in terms that made sense to worldly minds. Later, Athanasius (d. 373) avoided philosophical terms but relied on a Greek *technique* to state the basic beliefs found in Christian creeds.² Later yet, Augustine (d. 440) relied on Plato to express his understanding of God's eternity, power, and three-persons with a single nature.

Gradually, Christians relied on Greek definitions of *nature*, *person*, *natural rights*, *eternity*, and *truth* not only to defend the faith but also to preach it to minds that were thinking in the newer ways introduced by Greek philosophers.

Act IV: Christians reconcile *truth* claims through philosophical system.

The next big crisis appears 700 years later. Abelard (d. 1142) published a disturbing work called "Yes and No" (*Sic et Non*) in which he listed 153 teachings of the Church that were both supported and denied by the Bible and Christian authorities. For the next 130 years, church authorities were completely bewildered. How could they resolve teachings that the Bible itself and many authorities taught as true in one place and as false in another? What was needed was not more technical terms, but an entire *system* of terms useful for explaining how the various teachings hang together.

Enter Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), a Dominican friar. He put to rest practically every apparent contradiction found in the Bible and among Christian authorities. He did so by relying on Aristotle's philosophical system. By introducing *definitions* of terms such as *nature* and *person*, *understand* and *judge*, *good* and *evil*, *why* and *whether*, *natural* and *supernatural*, he provided theologians with a coherent and philosophically defensible account of Christian beliefs. His system dominated Christian philosophy and theology until about 50 years ago.

Act V: Newton discovers a *scientific system* of thinking

Up to the 17th century, *thinking* was regarded as the path to *truth*, and *logic* was its compass. But when Isaac Newton (d. 1727) published his *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (on the laws of motion and universal gravitation), a new goal of thinking appeared, and modern science was launched. The new goal is not *certitude about truth* but rather *progressive understanding of data*. Now the procedure is less *deductive logic* and more *inductive experiments*, which give the basic method of modern science. As we all know, the success of modern science has been phenomenal.

The trouble came when there appeared a need to distinguish between the "natural sciences" and the "human sciences." Today, the human sciences of psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, ethics, and philosophy of religion are conducted using the inductive, experimental method. But many of its practitioners rely almost exclusively on the methods of the natural sciences of physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology, and botany. They have been strongly criticized for treating humans as mere things, without

regard for what makes humans different, namely the *meanings* embedded in our *languages*; our *freedom of choice*; our awareness of the *values* beyond mere sustenance, survival and sex; and our potential for *malice*—or *sin*—which, from a scientific perspective, is our bad habit of doing what nothing in the natural world could ever do—act against our own nature.

So the emergence of scientific thinking created a crisis in religious studies that has yet to be resolved. What is needed is a revolution in the human sciences that takes into account human meaning, values, promises, loves, and the dysfunctions of human bias and the irrationality of acting against our better judgment.

Act VI: Historians discover *historical-critical* thinking

In the 19th century, historians began thinking about their thinking in yet a further radically different way. Prior to this breakthrough, the goal of historians was to give a community a vivid sense of its origins and ways of living. History books described the community's past in ways that celebrated certain events and deplored others. Today, we are quite aware of a double naiveté here. One is that they selected impressive elements in ancient texts without concern for bias—both their own bias toward embellishing the achievements of their communities and a possible bias in the authors of these texts. The other is that they were unconcerned with actually understanding the full story of *what really happened*.³

In the new approach—called *historical-critical*—historians aim to understand what really happened in certain periods of history and to be critical-minded about the possibility of bias toward more favorable views, both in themselves and in the authors of source documents. This has revolutionary effects on the interpretation of Scriptures. Scholars, both believers and unbelievers, now read the Bible first as *evidence of a people's faith* rather than a reliable account of what really happened. They urged both believers and unbelievers to scrutinize all textual evidence to discern the purposes of the authors and to reveal what the faithful at the time understood about their experience. They aimed to deepen readers' understanding of the religious experiences of cultures quite different from their own. And those scholars whose faith is tied to the Bible rely on this historical-critical approach to understand what the teachings and actions of their religious forebears actually meant to the people

of biblical times, so that more reasonable connections may be made to meanings relevant to the present.

It should be no surprise that historians give different accounts of historical trends. Historians using the same resources propose different accounts of what actually happened. Moreover, even among those whose accounts of a given culture are similar, there are disagreements about which events were better and which were worse. For example, is today's huge development of technology real progress? Is our loss of more natural environments real decline? Where historians differ on their evaluations of movements, they soon evaluate each other's perspectives to ensure that there are not hidden agenda or biases at work. But by what criteria can anyone say whether someone else's perspectives are biased?

So the emergence of historical-critical method created a crisis in religious studies that has yet to be resolved. But at least this much seems to be essential: There has to be a forum for exposing improper methods, hidden agenda, or bias—preferably a forum in which scholars participate willingly and openly.

Thinking about Thinking Today

All modes of thinking still go on.

This brings us to the 21st century, in which all of these modes of thinking still go on.

Children imagine God the way Homer and Hesiod imagined the gods. They have vivid images of God up in heaven seeing and knowing everything.

Writers and artists hope that the Muses will visit them. They are acutely aware of the power of descriptions and images to evoke a sense of awe.

Parents and attorneys insist on a fundamental difference between a story that works and a story that is true.

Fundamentalists in all religions focus mainly on securing *truth* against falsehood.⁴

Many *theologians and philosophers* discuss different *concepts* of God in an effort to secure which truths cannot change and are demonstrable to any reasonable person. This focus on logic and concepts is still the approach of many textbooks on the philosophy of religion.⁵

A growing number of *preachers* regularly refer to the biblical scholars to pass on historical insights into the faith of biblical times.

Many *pastoral counselors* aim first to develop a deeper and more critical understanding of their clients' *experiences*, rather than to deliver the "saving truths" of their religious tradition to perplexed believers.

The crisis in thinking about God today

But we have a genuine crisis on our hands. Essentially the crisis is a *lack of a common method for understanding human nature and human behavior*.

Experts in the "human" sciences (mainly psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, political science, economics, ethics, and the philosophy of religion) work on different assumptions of what thinking is and how we inherit and create the meanings and values that constitute a civilization. Unlike physics and chemistry, whose practitioners rely on a common definition of their fields and common procedures, the human sciences head in many different directions at once, with contradictory proposals on how to make life better.



Experts in scholarly disciplines (biographers, historians, students of cultures) not only identify certain trends among certain peoples, they eventually call a trend better or worse. But while they can appeal to common textual and archeological evidence to support their view of a trend, they do not yet agree on how to resolve differences about whether a trend is getting better or worse.

Experts in social-political philosophy rely on different assumptions about what the underlying dynamics of a society

really are. The 18th century Enlightenment and the resulting 19th century belief in "automatic progress" raised the hopes of educated people everywhere that secular thought, liberated from religious myths, can improve the well-being of everyone. They promised that human minds, using scientific methods, are entirely capable of

improving life without any so-called divine help. In the 20th century, this promise entirely evaporated. Two world wars, the Nazi Holocaust, the Korean War, Vietnam, the genocides in Africa, and international terrorism make this evident to everyone. One manifestation of our disappointment in ourselves is the “postmodern” rejection of any “modern” optimism based on science, technology, philosophical systems, or religious fideism. Postmodernism is not a philosophic system with clearly defined categories and procedures. Rather it is a largely popularist, commonsense attitude toward how to live daily life. Its proponents promote the pursuit of peace within one's own community. They reject any universal norms for behavior and any total system that proposes to explain life to us. They are skeptical that life has any ultimate sense that we poor humans can ever discover. It's an unhappy blend of agnosticism and skepticism: We can't really know anything for sure, and what difference does it make anyway?

Our Philosophy of Religion Course

But there are philosophers who are convinced that thinking about thinking makes a huge difference. One prominent figure is the Canadian philosopher and economist Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984).⁶ He and others believe we need to examine what we actually do when we know anything. In particular, they investigate what different kinds of thinking are involved in common sense, in math, in the sciences, in art and literature, in historical investigations, in economics, in philosophy and theology, and in religious experience. By thinking about thinking, their aim is not to develop a new system for philosophy or science or historiography, but rather to first understand the actual methods by which anyone thinks anything, including efforts to think up new systems. They expect to clarify just what scientists, historians, artists, economists, philosophers and theologians can and cannot do.

By focusing on our *methods* for knowing anything, these approaches make it clear that a *philosophy* of religion raises legitimate questions about what we can and cannot know about God and God's attributes, about what we can or cannot prove, and what a reasonable person may be expected to accept.

These method-approaches also distinguish (though not in an entirely rigorous fashion) between a *Philosophy of Religion* and a *Theology of God*. Philosophies of religion aim to understand the phenomena of religions, from the outside, as it were. Theologies of God aim to deepen the understanding of people who already believe in God and are committed to sharing God's love. They

examine what their belief and commitment mean for understanding their faith. They make connections between their religious beliefs and the knowledge that comes from scientists and historians. And they incorporate the concerns addressed by a philosophy of religion, particularly the experience of the question about God that arises from ordinary, non-religious experience.

This is a move from *concepts* to the *method* that produces the concepts. It looks behind philosophical ideas and theories to the mental operations of people who come up with the ideas and theories. Method-based approaches examine the fundamental commitments we all make about knowledge, values, and love. About religion, they assume that everyone experiences a love that transcends the human, even though they may speak of that love in ways that are naïvely imaginary, or highly conceptual, or narrowly scientific. But a method-approach regards both philosophers and theologians as prompted by the same transcendent love. It also assumes that this love prompts *you* to ask some questions that are philosophical and some that are theological.

This is why, in this course, our philosophy of religion will include not only an account of people's various *ideas* about God and how these ideas shaped their lives. It will also include an account of people's *experience* of a love that transcends the human and the questions about God that these experiences prompt.

By tracing ideas, theories, and teachings about God back to their sources in experiences of transcendent love, we will understand more clearly how these views originated and, in many cases, why these views are rejected by many people. We will consider whether the ultimate reason for rejecting any religious teaching will be its failure to align with the experience of transcendent love. On the positive side, we will hope that believers who accept religious teachings will deepen and enrich their understanding by connecting that teaching to the transcendent love they already experience in their hearts.

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1 Aristotle gave clear definitions of three components of anything humans can know: potency, form, and act. These correspond respectively to our awareness of possibilities (potency), our understanding (form), and our grasp that what we understand actually exists (act).

2 A good example is how to understand whether Christ is "divine." Other philosophers used technical terms like *homo-ousios*, to say that Christ had the "same

substance" as God the Father. But Athanasius, concerned that ordinary believers would misunderstand *same substance*, proposed simply that "What is true of the Son is true of the Father, except fatherhood." There was no need, he thought, to explain **how** both Christ and the Father can be divine; to live in faith it is enough to affirm **that** Christ and the Father are distinct yet share absolutely everything.

3 The phrase, "what really happened," attributed to Leopold von Ranke (d. 1886), has become the watchword and critical tool for modern historical methods. For students of religion, it is vitally important to realize that no author of any religious scripture made "what really happened" the goal of his or her writing.

4 A typical fundamentalist position mistakenly assumes that having questions is equivalent to having doubts. But many questions are not about *what* is truly so but *how* to understand what we know is truly so.

5 Logic is no doubt important, but mainly to ensure that our *terms* are clear, our *explanations* are coherent, and our *reasoning* is rigorous. The practical value of logic is to spot errors in our thinking. Logic makes no new discoveries, as scientific method does. Nor does logic help us understand people of different cultures, as historical-critical studies do.

6 For an overview of Lonergan's entire work, see "Bernard Lonergan," an article in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/>. For a summary of his work on method in theology, see "Lonergan - Method in Theology" under Optional Readings in Doc Sharing.