GOD AS REASON
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Philosophy and Christianity are both based on a special relationship to the Logos, that is, Reason, and yet they have often been inimical to each other. The deepest cause is that both have absolute claims to defend, and a plurality of absolute claims inevitably causes difficulties, if they contradict each other. Perhaps it is a wise solution to prevent any such contradiction by identifying what is ontologically absolute with what is epistemologically absolute, Reason, which forms the uncircumventable horizon within which alone any theory, and thus also any theory about God, can claim validity.

The essays collected in this book stem from a philosopher who understands his own systematic work in theoretical as well as practical philosophy as an offshoot of a tradition committed to a strong concept of reason, drawing inspiration especially from Plato, Giambattista Vico, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, on whom he has written some of his major works. This concept of reason entails not only a commitment to semantic as well as performative consistency as necessary conditions of truth, but also the defense of principles of uniformity as synthetic a priori conditions of experience and the trust that preferring simpler systems of concepts to more cumbersome ones, where both render equal justice to experience, is not a subjective idiosyncrasy, but captures the essence of reality. For practical reason, it entails a commitment to a universalist, even if not necessarily a formalist, ethics. To these principles of reason all traditions have to be critically subjected; for as much as reason genetically presupposes traditions, on the level of validity it enjoys autonomy.
At the same time, the author regards himself as a Christian, and the essays here presented, with two exceptions all written from 1997 to 2009 and all forming a consistent whole, are the attempt to find an interpretation of Christianity that is compatible with this commitment to reason. In a time of mindless religious fundamentalism, on the one hand, and aggressive atheism, on the other, perhaps such an attempt deserves some attention; it is at least a more plausible intermediate position than religious indifferentism, which is probably even worse than an atheism that at least shows interest in the question of God. For while the critics of religious fundamentalism are right to point to the forces of ignorance and hatred that drive the latter and that in fact are based more on self-deception than deception of others, the irreligious person seems to have difficulties understanding that religion will stay with us, outliving all grand theories of secularization, and that it will remain one of the most powerful motives in the human soul. It is much wiser to engage it productively with pure reason than to ignore it or even provoke it by silly insults of that dimension in which also the most humiliated person on the planet can cherish her own dignity.

The first part of this book deals with issues of philosophical theology. (The important question of what Christianity’s specific contribution to morals and ethics is is ignored in this volume.) In the first, foundational chapter I discuss some of the challenges that an approach to Christianity committed to reason has to face—the issue of freedom and necessity in God, the problems of grace and miracles, the authority of the church, the figure of Christ. Without denying the obvious tensions, I defend the possibility of interpreting Christianity in such a way that the commitment to God as Reason remains possible. The second chapter addresses how the Darwinian revolution in our understanding of teleology has altered the prospects of theism. It argues that the strongest objections against the argument from design all antedate Charles Darwin and that nothing in Darwinism excludes a teleological interpretation of the world, which is indeed entailed by theism, even if it does not entail the latter. While I reject the argument from design as an independent argument, I insist that on the basis of a priori arguments, such as the ontological and the moral proofs, a teleological vision of the world may well be defended even after Darwin.
The third chapter addresses the main objection to theism—the theodicy problem—and debates three paradigmatic solutions, each of which entails a significantly different concept of God: those of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, G. W. F. Hegel, and Hans Jonas. Despite the phenomenological evidence for Jonas’s position, I suggest that only some form of synthesis of the Leibnizian and Hegelian solutions can work. Indeed, many of the metaphysical tenets defended in these essays are close to Leibniz’s metaphysics, which remains unmatched in its simplicity, while Hegel’s dialectic renders greater justice to the intricacies of the world and the undeniable presence of negativity. The problem of divine omnipotence inevitably leads to that of human freedom, which is discussed in the fourth chapter. It articulates a compatibilist concept of freedom, which, I think, has some advantages for the theological field, too. The commitment to the principle of sufficient reason is connected with some skepticism regarding an intuitionist epistemology, which starts from basic beliefs as ultimate facts. No doubt, such an epistemology can be used to justify religion; but its main problem is that it can be used to prop up almost any religion and even any irreligious view, as long as someone finds it evident and it cannot be shown to be inconsistent. Starting from basic beliefs may be inevitable, but at least as long as these beliefs are not shared by a universal community, it is hard to see how an approach that ultimately rests on them will be more than a dogmatism that can easily be challenged by another dogmatism relying on different basic beliefs. Nothing guarantees that views starting from different basic beliefs will ever converge.

Freedom is a property of the human mind, and thus every theory of freedom, compatibilist or not, has to address the issue of the place of mentality in nature. The fifth chapter outlines my ideas on the mind-body problem, which is obviously central for any philosophy of religion; for already early religion was based on an appreciation of the specific role of mind in nature. To deal with this issue, I deliberately chose the dialogue form also because it allowed me to represent the two positions I find most plausible while leaving where exactly my preference lies open. (The careful reader will probably discover which stance the author is inclined to favor.) My choice of the dialogue form is furthermore based on the conviction that the immanent confutation of the adversaries and the
common discovery of uncircumventable premises is a sounder basis for philosophy in general, and philosophy of religion in particular, than the more Cartesian start from one’s private evidences.

The sixth essay, finally, tries to draw lines between the three different provinces of religion, theology based on authoritative texts, and philosophy. For my enterprise it is crucial to distinguish between philosophical theology based on pure reason and the philosophy of religion and theology as cultural phenomena. These are in truth two very different disciplines that in the Anglo-American world are sometimes confused under the homonymous name of philosophy of religion. For religion is more than a system of thought; it is often based on authoritative texts, the proper exposition of which is the task of theology. Philosophy cannot presuppose the authority of these texts. But it must, first, explain why religion and theology start from such texts and how they have changed their interpretative methods over time. Second, even the philosopher is well advised to recognize that his own enterprise is an outgrowth of a tradition, even if of a tradition dedicated to reason alone. The second part of this volume thus deals with predecessors of a rationalist approach to faith, which in the earlier Christian tradition was more frequent than a theological doctrine based on Thomas Aquinas’s strict demarcation of reason and faith has been willing to recognize. Besides interpretations of these canonical texts, the most fascinating of which are, hardly by chance if what I said before holds, written in dialogue form, I offer some general reflections on how to interpret authoritative religious texts and understand their interpretations.

The seventh chapter begins by sketching the various stances that philosophers have taken with regard to the Bible and traces the complex causes that have led to the rise of modern biblical criticism. Even if we may rightly lament the loss of certain interpretive possibilities that pre-modern hermeneutics had, no honest intellectual should reject modern criticism; it is bad theology that opposes religion to modern science, and it is even worse theology that wants to protect religion from modern historiography. We may, however, learn some lessons from Hans-Georg Gadamer’s complex challenge to the modern hermeneutical tradition. In the eighth chapter I focus on the New Testament concept of pneuma and propose a pneumatological interpretation of Christianity, which can see
in German idealism its legitimate heir. I do not deny that German idealism has given up, perhaps too quickly, three decisive concerns of the Christian tradition, but I argue for both the sincerity and the plausibility of the idealist conviction that their philosophy of mind (Geist) was the only way of continuing the inspiration by the pneuma so characteristic of the New Testament under the conditions of post-Kantian philosophy. We should not forget that Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel were trained as Christian theologians; in their eyes, they remained faithful to this tradition even when transforming it according to the demands of the spirit they felt operating in their age.

Chapter 9, co-authored with Bernd Goebel, and chapter 10 scrutinize the contemporary relevance of some of the most important texts in the history of rationalist Christian thought. Anselm’s Cur Deus homo is shown to integrate pre-Kierkegaardian insights into its rationalist framework; thus it demonstrates that passionate existential commitment is compatible with trust in reason. Peter Abelard’s, Ramon Llull’s, Nicholas of Cusa’s, and Jean Bodin’s unmatched interreligious dialogues are not only in themselves classical texts; they tell a story about the decline of the possibility of interreligious conversation. Nicholas of Cusa’s complex contribution to the genesis of a modern philosophy of mathematics as well as to the foundation of a natural science that has its ultimate justification in a rational theology is the subject of the eleventh chapter. I hesitated to include this essay written in 1988; but I finally decided to do so because Nicholas of Cusa remains the most brilliant exemplification of my thesis that modernity is Christianity’s legitimate child. Both mathematical constructivism, so alien to the ancient world and at the root of Immanuel Kant’s Copernican revolution, as well as the shift in categories that led to the scientific discoveries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are anticipated by Nicholas, whose form of Christianity, even if profoundly inspired by the neo-Platonic tradition, is so much closer to our irredeemably modern sensibilities and insights than Aquinas’s Summa. While I do agree with Hans Blumenberg’s view on the centrality of Nicholas in the genesis of modernity, I do not share his view that Giordano Bruno represents progress compared to Nicholas of Cusa. The legitimacy of modernity consists not in breaking off all links with the
Christian Middle Ages, but in a careful transformation of its legacy. On the one hand, nothing in modern science and in modernity in general entails atheism; on this score, Blumenberg is wrong. Therefore, on the other hand, Christians are well advised not to try to retrieve a pre-scientific form of Christianity.

Even more they should shrink back from a glorification of archaic forms of religion; after all, the overcoming of bloody sacrifices through Jesus’ self-sacrifice is one of the central points of Christianity. The twelfth essay contains a sharp rebuttal of Søren Kierkegaard’s famous account of Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of Isaac, while at the same time recognizing that the triumphalist philosophy of history of the Hegelians indeed misses something crucial. While working toward a rational comprehension of Christianity, Christians have to understand why a secular age became such a tempting possibility. For what the theodicy problem is for rational theology, the rise of atheism is for a philosophical understanding of religion as a historical phenomenon. Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* is one of the most complex attempts to deal with this rise, and thus this book concludes with a detailed analysis of his secularization theory and the sketch of an alternative one, which dares see even atheism in a providential light.

The author of these essays was educated in Germany; five were originally written in German, one in Norwegian, and these six texts were translated by four different people, Benjamin Fairbrother, James Hebbeler, Jason Miller, and Jeremy Neill, into English. I have translated most quotes from classical texts into English myself and given the original in the footnotes, where sometimes original texts have remained untranslated, if they were not crucial for the argument in the main text. Even if I cut the original texts here and there to adjust them to this volume and added some new footnotes, the reader will feel the German origins of these texts, which often refer to secondary literature from Germany. I trust nevertheless that the points they are making will be perceived as worth considering also by readers belonging to different intellectual traditions. It is also worth mentioning that the author, today a Catholic, was in his formative years educated by Lutheran teachers. Probably Catholic readers will find too little submission to the authority of the church, while Protestants will dislike the strong commitment to reason and the downplaying of scriptural authority.
I remember with gratitude Rev. Alois Högerle, who showed me in my childhood lived Catholic faith. A first interest in the theology of the Middle Ages was instilled in me by my teacher at the University of Freiburg Rev. Charles Lohr, SJ. In my time at the Forschungsinstitut für Philosophie in Hannover 1997–99 and, since 1999, at the University of Notre Dame, several people have contributed to directing my reflections more and more to the topic of the philosophy of religion: I feel the need to thank explicitly Rev. David Burrell, Friedrich Hermanni, Jan Hagens, Jennifer Herdt (whose comments on these essays were invaluable), Jonathan Israel, Gerald McKenny, Cyril O’Regan, Alvin Plantinga, Barbara and Mark Roche, H. E. Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, Rev. Richard Schenk, OP, Leopold Stubenberg, Rev. Robert Sullivan, Joseph Wawrykow, and last, but not least, my wife Jieon Kim and our children Johannes, Paul, and hopefully soon Clara Hösle, born philosophical theologians, for many conversations—even if I know that, for very different reasons, each of them will reject many of my statements. And I thank all the editors of earlier volumes, who graciously permitted me to have my texts reprinted, as well as Bernd Goebel, who generously allowed me to include our essay on Anselm in this volume. I dedicate this volume to the memory of my friend Leif Hovelsen (1923–2011), whose paradoxical life as an itinerant Lutheran “monk,” as he was called by his friends, remains awe-inspring whenever he appears to my memory, as he so often does.
The Idea of a Rationalistic Philosophy of Religion and Its Challenges

One of the most important intellectual changes that has occurred within the Catholic Church in the last decades is the shift away from fideism toward rationalism—or, to be more precise, and to use comparative rather than classificatory concepts, a move from a more fideistic to a more rationalistic stance. For there is no sharp demarcation but rather a continuum between the two positions, and certainly not even John Paul II’s encyclical *Fides et ratio* embraced rationalism tout court, even if it recognized its partial right in a quite surprising form. Also, Benedict XVI’s Regensburg speech of September 2006 came astonishingly close to professing reason as the justifying criterion of religion (although this central point was neglected due to the fuss made over Benedict’s perhaps unfortunate quote from Manuel II Paleologus). I use the words “surprising” and “astonishingly” because most strands of neo-scholasticism from the nineteenth century onward had been quite inimical to rationalism. They build on Thomas Aquinas’s distinction between *praeambula ad articulos fidei* and *articuli fidei* and insist that the latter could not, and should not, be
justified by reason. Certainly, Aquinas thought that the existence of God was rationally demonstrable (and thus not an articulus fidei), and still in the nineteenth century, Gregory XVI condemned the doctrine, originally defended by Louis Eugène Bautain, that God’s existence had to be accepted only on the basis of faith. But it is fair enough to say that many theologians of the twentieth century were fideists even with regard to this most basic principle, although this attitude dramatically jeopardized the chances that theology might be taken seriously as a science: after all, why should one respect an alleged revelation from a being whose existence is dubious at best? Without philosophical propaedeutics, dogmatic theology lacks any rational foundation, and the crisis of fundamental theology, with its core discipline of a philosophical theology, cannot leave the rest of theology unchallenged. Radical fideism was particularly held by the theologians influenced by Søren Kierkegaard and the movement of so-called dialectical theology, but also by Catholic theologians, especially those under the spell of Martin Heidegger and his postmodernist successors.

What brought about the aforementioned change? On the one hand, there is the old argument that the appeal to subjective faith does not warrant truth. This situation is not significantly altered by the appeal to a religious tradition shared by millions, for there are several such religious traditions whose truth claims are not logically compatible with each other. Besides, within the same tradition there are radically varying interpretations. On the basis of a universalist ethics there is even something insulting and immoral in the conviction that my religious tradition is superior to others for the simple reason that it happens to be my tradition; for other traditions may just as well use the same words against me. On the other hand, the more seriously the Christian tradition was studied, the more obvious it became that the Thomist position was not the only one. (And the older neo-scholasticism, which focused only on Aquinas, often enough did not even render justice to him.) In Christian (as in Islamic) theology, there had always been a rationalistic alongside the more or less fideistic strand, and some of the greatest Christian theologians clearly had defended the position that the concrete contents of religious truth should be based on reason alone. They were not satisfied with the intermediate position, according to which there were rational (partly his-
arguments for believing in a revelation whose contents could not be accepted on the basis of reason alone. A rationalist position was particularly tempting in times in which there was a clear awareness that a legitimate interpretation of “revelation”—of scripture and tradition—was itself a work of reason. If the last meaning of scripture was allegorical, tropological, and anagogical, then this meaning had to be based on rational arguments, which alone could have the power to transcend literal meaning. Even acknowledging the rules of piety, the church, or scripture, as in the main work by Origen, the founding father of Christian theology,\(^6\) did not mean much if the interpretation of these rules by intellectuals was regarded as superior to that by nonintellectual, ordained priests. There can be little doubt that the young (not the later) Augustine,\(^7\) Johannes Scottus Eriugena, Anselm,\(^8\) Peter Abelard (to a limited degree), the Victorines, Ramon Llull, and Nicholas of Cusa are rationalists in the sense that they acknowledge the authority of reason as the last tribunal of justification regarding the truths of religion. In this respect, they are not too distant from the decisive principle of Enlightenment, and this shows that Christian intellectuals from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages were intellectually far more vivacious and diverse than the often submissive and unoriginal Catholic theologians after the Counter-Reformation. It is hardly accidental that Abelard, Llull, and Nicholas of Cusa are all authors of important interreligious dialogues (the genre being somehow prepared by Anselm’s *Cur Deus homo*) since whoever tries to engage with persons from a different religious background can hardly appeal to his own faith, but must rely on rational arguments. Globalization, with its mixing of people from diverse religious traditions, is probably an important social cause for the resurrection of rationalism in the late twentieth century. In closed communities, the challenge of the other religions may be ignored; in a world in which various traditions interpenetrate each other, however, this is no longer feasible.

An important cause of the fideistic approach to religion was a deflated concept of rationality that identified reason with *scientific* reason, that is, with systematized experience, plus logic and mathematics. Since knowledge of God cannot be achieved by means of science, it was thought to be beyond the reach of reason. But even if some scientists try to monopolize the term “reason” for their own activities, it is not
difficult to see that it is far from rational to submit to this claim. Reason
is more comprehensive than science, as Immanuel Kant, the most im-
portant modern theorist of the complex architecture of reason, has mas-
terfully shown. Ethics, for example, is a rational discipline, even if
valuative claims cannot be reduced to descriptive ones such as those
dealt with by science—this is David Hume’s lasting insight.9 At the same
time, a dualistic theory is unsatisfying if there is no connection between
descriptive and normative sentences, for after all, the Ought has to be
implemented within the Is. But if the Ought does not follow from the Is,
and at the same time the two spheres have to be connected, the Ought
must determine at least some features of the Is. No doubt, the need to
interpret the natural world as a place in which the demands of the Ought
can be realized is one of the strongest arguments for a moral principle
behind nature.10 The argument does not show that all features of Being
derive from the Ought, but at least partially determining powers have to
be ascribed to the latter.

Also within the realm of theoretical reason alone there are argu-
ments for a spiritual principle of all being. Mental states cannot be identi-
fied with physical ones, and while the former seem to supervene on the
latter, it is at the same time inevitable that the ensuing mental states that
grasp an argument are connected logically as much as by the fact that
they are supervenient on ensuing electrochemical processes in a brain.
There must be a correspondence between these two properties, and if we
do not accept a causal force of the mental on the physical, such parallel-
ism cannot be the result of evolutionary forces driven by natural selec-
tion.11 This is, as is known, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s reformulation
of the teleological proof, and it seems to be immune to Hume’s and Kant’s
attacks against that proof, not to speak of Charles Darwin’s destruction
of traditional physico-theology. For the argument, as I have just used
it, in fact presupposes its destruction through the category of natural
selection.12

The status of the ontological proof is still debated, but it is far from
clear that it cannot be formulated in a cogent way. Alvin Plantinga’s re-
construction is the most plausible candidate for a cogent version. It pre-
supposes, as Leibniz already knew;13 the central premise that “indeed
unsurpassable greatness is possibly exemplified.”14 Of course, Plantinga
is aware that this premise has to be granted; and indeed this seems to belong to the nature of all arguments: they start from premises in order to arrive at a conclusion, which one may always reject by denying at least one of the premises. One’s proof may even be the other’s reductio ad absurdum: if someone regards the conclusion as utterly implausible, he will regard the conjugation of those premises that lead to it as confuted.

There are, however, some assumptions that are conditions of possibility of certain mental activities regarded by most people as legitimate. Science, for example, presupposes the constancy of natural laws. This principle is not entailed by logic alone: for there is no contradiction in the assumption of sudden changes of natural laws; nor does it follow from experience. We do not know from experience what will happen in the future, and the distant past, which we did not witness, is reconstructed on the basis of this principle and thus not itself an argument for it. Science therefore presupposes some metaphysical principles that are themselves not grounded in experience or logic. Perhaps, however, they can be made plausible by appealing to some attributes of God, such as his being one and timeless, and/or through the use of teleological arguments—only a nature with constant laws would allow finite rational beings to acquire knowledge and thus act morally responsibly. If the project of science presupposes arguments of this sort, then scientific rationality is not the most basic form of rationality, but is grounded in some antecedent form of reason. This would explain the well-known historical fact that the scientific revolution was due to deeply pious persons such as René Descartes, Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler, and Isaac Newton, who regarded their scientific project as a consequence of their religious convictions.

It would be important for the revival of a rationalist philosophy of religion to show that the project of science becomes far more plausible and rational when certain of its presuppositions are made explicit, namely, those that are connected to classical assumptions of rational theology. Still, a stubborn skeptic could deny the validity of science and thus of its presumed basis, rational theology. But that which not even the skeptic can deny is the existence of truth and its in-principle intelligibility because this is the transcendental presupposition of all claims. The strongest proof of God—because it would not start from a premise open to
doubt—would certainly be one that showed that the ideas of truth and its intelligibility make sense only if the world is an expression of an absolute mind. I myself have argued that our capacity of having a priori knowledge, which at the same time cannot be consistently understood as being a merely subjective knowledge, shows that the world is necessarily structured in a way that corresponds to the conceptual demands of a mind. Since this is a property of the world that our finite minds cannot bestow on it, it must come from a Mind antecedent to the world, that is, from a divine Mind. It is not the purpose of this essay to elaborate the basic arguments and ideas of rational theology. What should already be clear, however, is that any attempt to make sense of religious traditions would be well advised to study carefully the aforementioned arguments. Certainly some disagreements on the divine attributes and God’s relations to the world are inevitable since the divine radically transcends human nature, particularly its temporality, which permeates all our cognitive efforts. Two famous issues concern whether God is omnipotent, and whether divine omnipotence entails human freedom in the compatibilist form or allows for a libertarian form. But it would be intellectual suicide to radicalize this insight to some form of negative theology that denies any intelligibility to God. For such an unintelligible God might well be evil or perhaps identical with matter. The basic properties of God that alone warrant awe for him are his rationality and morality—indeed, he is the standard of all our claims to morality and reason.

The philosophers who have contributed most to the development of rational theology (as distinguished from a theology that takes tradition and revelation into account) are certainly Plato, Leibniz, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. We owe to Plato the insights that our knowledge is not reducible to empirical knowledge (even if he may well err in denying any empirical knowledge) and that we have a knowledge of the Idea of the Good, which transcends the factual world and cannot be identified with our mental acts either. The *Timaeus* (29e ff.) offers a picture of the world as a place in which the Idea of the Good realizes itself—the basic structures of the world are as they are because they realize value; ontology is rooted in axiology. Plato, however, does not yet have a theory of mentality; the only dualism he knows is that between the ideas and the physical world. Leibniz, on the contrary, has an elaborate theory of sub-
jectivity, which is integrated into an axiological worldview. As a good Lutheran, however, he does not have an ontology of universals; and this is a serious threat to axiology, which seems to presuppose that values actually exist. The other great step in Leibniz’s unfolding of the idea of rational theology is his use of a metaphysics of possible worlds, which is indispensable if we want to ascribe choice to God.

There are three reasons Hegel’s philosophy is of enormous importance to every person interested in rational theology, and particularly in a philosophical justification of basic Christian tenets. The first is that Hegel’s complex metaphysics acknowledges three strata of being—ideal, natural, and mental being. This is itself not accepted as mere fact, but connected to a theory of concept formation that is both epistemological and ontological and tries to be a rational transformation of the Christian belief in a Trinitarian God who creates the world according to a triadic pattern. Second, Hegel is the first great philosopher who offers an elaborate metaphysics of history, still alien to both Plato and Leibniz. He is able to make philosophical sense of the historical development of Christianity, which can easily disturb traditional Christians, when they become aware of it. Third, Hegel insists that God is Reason. By doing so, he continues a tradition that begins already with the Gospel of John, but there is little doubt that he alters it profoundly. God is no longer a being external to finite humans; he is grasped through reflection on one’s own true self, one’s own reason. Fundamentally, Hegel identifies the transcendental with the transcendent: what is a condition of possibility of our own thought—the system of basic categories—is something absolute because it cannot be negated. God cannot be different from it. Of course, Hegel recognizes that his reconstruction of our basic categories is not identical with the true set of basic categories, but he rests convinced that the ideal set of categories would be the core of any rational concept of God.

It is this claim that provoked the revolt against Hegel. A further reason was that Hegel’s theism is non-eschatological and does not have place for an immortality of the soul. It speaks, incidentally, for Hegel’s dialectic reconstruction of the history of philosophy that his utmost rationalism in religious matters was followed by one of the most radical forms of fideism, namely, Kierkegaard’s philosophy of religion. In the
following, I discuss some of the objections that are voiced against theological rationalism; I answer them from a rationalist point of view. Probably the most important criticisms are the following. First, rationalism subjects God to reason, divinizes human reason, and does not render justice to our experience of finitude and sinfulness (I). Second, rationalism does not allow us to reconstruct the concept of grace (II). Third, the authority of the church or scripture is inevitably corroded by the project of rationalism (III). While these three objections can also be used by non-Christian theists against their own rationalist philosophies, the fourth and final one is specific to Christianity. It simply states that rationalism cannot render justice to the figure of Christ (IV).

I.

Why is it, despite these objections, so difficult to get rid of rationalism? Before I try to tackle the various objections, let me state that the price of giving up rationalism can be very high. This is best shown by Kierkegaard’s *Frygt og Bæven* (*Fear and Trembling*). If God is not bound by reason and morality, but, as the voluntarist tradition teaches, it is his will that determines what is rational and good, then it may well be moral to kill one’s own innocent son, if God so orders. It is not difficult to see that such an attitude is detrimental to all normal moral convictions: jihadist terrorists can find in it their justification. Certainly, reasonable voluntarists will deny that jihadists are authorized by God, but the point is that they do not have anything more to offer than their subjective conviction against the others’ subjective conviction. For a rationalist, refuting the jihadists’ claim is easy. It is impossible that God may have authorized the jihadists since their acts are against the moral law and the moral law belongs to God’s essence. There are good reasons for seeing in the later doctrine of the *potentia absoluta* and in the breakdown of the essentialist tradition, to which Aquinas still belongs, one of the most dangerous events in the history of philosophical theology—and this not only with regard to religion, but also to public life. For the whole idea of natural law presupposes some form of essentialism, and whoever thinks that it is God’s arbitrary will that makes something good will easily grant human
sovereigns the same capacity. Thomas Hobbes, after all, is deeply rooted in the religious voluntarist tradition. If someone accepts orders from a divine tyrant, he may easily subject himself to human tyrants as well. The refusal of rational scrutiny is not a respectable act of faith, but a betrayal of a faculty that most intensely connects humans with God—this is the rationalists’ viewpoint. Whether the latter is circular or not depends on whether there can be an ultimate foundation of the basic principles of reason, a question that I cannot pursue here, even if I support an affirmative answer.

Of course, the voluntarist is moved by the reflection that binding God by logic or morality means limiting him by something external to him, thus depriving him of absolute omnipotence. The only answer to this objection can be that logical truths, the moral law, and perhaps all the eide and laws of being are not antecedent to God, but are themselves God. This seems, however, to transform God into a set of absolute Truths. One does not see how he can still be something like a person. As we have seen before, in the Platonic tradition true being is conceived after the pattern of ideas. The demiurge in the Timaeus is probably nothing other than the mythical symbolization of the active aspect in the Idea of the Good. I have already conceded that Plato is unable to capture the specific form of being of finite subjectivity, and so it should not come as a surprise that he has difficulty ascribing full-fledged subjectivity to God, even if in the Sophist he struggles with the issue. But whoever recognizes that mentality is an irreducible form of being, and that it is axiologically superior to non-mental being, cannot avoid interpreting God as Mind. Still, it is clear that not only the range, but also the nature, of the divine Mind is quite different from that of the human mind. God is not only non-spatial (and thus not a body); he is, as the overwhelming part of the tradition has recognized, non-temporal as well. And that is the reason it can be an expression of profound religiosity if one hesitates to ascribe personality to God. This became particularly true in the twentieth century since the phenomenological analysis of personhood by Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, and Martin Heidegger insisted so emphatically on the temporal features of human persons that it seemed difficult to attribute personality to an atemporal being. Nevertheless, God’s being must be closer to mental than to physical being. He must be some form
of atemporal Reason in which the various ideas are connected. For if one accepts the idea that the starting point of ultimate foundation is the reflection on what one necessarily presupposes while raising certain claims, then God is not simply Truth, but the Subject that claims and grasps this Truth at the same time. The Christian doctrine of immanent Trinity has tried to render justice to the intuition that in God noesis and noema are two aspects of the same being.

It may be surprising that God’s being combines traits of logical and mental being. Is the distinction between noesis and noema not something basic that cannot be given up? Well, something that is basic for finite beings may not be so for the Absolute. No doubt, any rational theory of God is obliged to respect the principle of non-contradiction. But Georg Cantor’s set theory is consistent, even if for infinite sets certain truths can be proven that would be absurd for finite sets. Our common-day ontology is based on physical objects; it probably does not render justice to mental substances, and it certainly fails to capture the peculiar form of being of the Absolute. Already Augustine avers that God is identical with his properties, even if this contradicts Aristotle’s substance ontology.25

Although the core of God is Reason, God must be ascribed will, for he must be able to equally think all possible worlds—thus what leads to the creation of the real world cannot be an act of thinking, but an act of will. Of course, his will must be informed by reason: if God is a perfectly good and omnipotent Creator (which is not the only reasonable concept of God), he cannot choose among all possible worlds a world that does not have maximal value. But there may well be several worlds with maximal value; nothing guarantees that there is only one such world, as Leibniz and the young Kant26 assumed. In this case God may even exert some form of the liberum arbitrium indifferentiae.27 God furthermore may know emotions—stable mental states of great intensity such as love and happiness, which we experience as the most valuable ones in the complex world of our own mental states. But he cannot know affects since they change in time; it is a crude anthropomorphism to ascribe wrath and jealousy to God, as Lactantius has done.

By interpreting God as Reason, he is no longer conceivable as something external to us, the way a physical object or even another person is. He is not outside us, but is to be found inside our core. We start to grasp

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him by reflecting on what makes us able to raise claims of truth and justice. Although a transcendental interpretation of God seems to violate normal religious feelings, it shows a surprising similarity to one of the most important strands in religious life—mysticism. Both the transcendental philosopher of religion and the mystic see an ultimate convergence between theonomy and autonomy: by obeying God, we gain our true self; and we get to God by trying to capture what forms the core of our self. It is well known that Hegel saw in Meister Eckhart one of his predecessors.28

The idea that God is to be found within the self, however, does not at all entail that the self is identical with God. Whenever we analyze the self, we experience it as a strange mixture of opposite qualities: radical temporality and the capacity to grasp timeless truths, unwillingness or inability to conform to the demands of the moral law and recognition of its unconditional validity. The self is clearly not divine—but there is something divine in it. And it is only because of this divine spark that we are able to acknowledge our distance from the divine. Far from making us forget our finitude, it is the awareness of the divine core of the self that makes us painfully aware of the inappropriateness of our normal mental life with regard to God. But it is also this spark that gives us the hope that our mental life may be rendered more worthy of its core. If mentality is not regarded as identical with its physical substratum, there is also the reasonable possibility that this process of mental and moral growth may be continued after the death of our body. A dualist interpretation of mind is, as Descartes knew,29 probably a necessary, never a sufficient, condition for belief in immortality. According to the aforementioned principles, a sufficient condition could only be found in axiological considerations. And one must recognize that there are axiological arguments that speak against immortality.30 The attitude that regards itself entitled to a reward for one’s moral deeds is not noble; the heroic self-sacrifice has another dignity if it is done without any hope for one’s own advantage, but only out of respect for the moral law. On the other hand, eschatological hope is morally legitimate if it concerns someone else, such as the victims of history. The injustices that we witness in this world are quite monstrous, and even if there are good arguments to believe that without them some important virtues would not come into

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existence—for example, endurance presupposes sufferance, and forgiveness presupposes sin—this consequentialist justification of the sufferings of the innocent for the sake of the whole can hardly be the last word. If God is a Kantian and not a utilitarian, he will hardly be satisfied with the instrumentalization of the less fortunate persons without any form of compensation for them.

II.

Grace is a central concept of religion, and it is often regarded as incompatible with a rationalist theology. For according to such an approach, there are reasons for God’s creating the world as it is; since he is rational, he has to follow these reasons and is not free to reject them. But when we cannot experience the good that we receive from him as a free gift, we are less motivated to accept with humility all that we are and have. The problem of this objection is not only that it implies an enormous pride in one’s own humility, which is modestly opposed to the arrogance of reason in people like Plato and Leibniz. Readers of Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* have probably kept not too affectionate a memory of Uriah Heep’s ostentatious humility, which always smacks of performative contradiction. The more serious flaw is that the objection is based on a complete misunderstanding of the rationalist position. When rationalist theology speaks of God’s necessary creation of the world, it clearly does not mean that the world is logically necessary. Baruch Spinoza may have thought so, but one did not even need Leibniz’s superior logical intelligence to understand that this cannot be the case: other worlds are logically possible. It would be even less appropriate to think of a nomological necessity: in the creation of the world, the choice of the laws of nature is at stake; thus they cannot constrain the Creator. What is meant by necessity in God comes closest to what we experience as moral necessity: the good person cannot really commit a murder; it is her own nature that prevents her from doing so. Analogously, if God is perfectly good, it follows from the goodness of his nature that he has to create a world that could not be better. This necessity is an intrinsic necessity, and thus simultaneously a manifestation of freedom. In his influential book on God...