

ONCE AGAIN, JOHN PAUL II'S *FIDES ET RATIO*

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1. *Introduction*

Roy Clouser's reply to my article on John Paul II's 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (*FR*) is learned, engaging, clear—and, respectfully put, full of errors on many points regarding John Paul's understanding of faith and reason.<sup>1</sup> On this matter, he attacks a straw man. Indeed, at times I wondered whether Clouser and I had read the same encyclical. Despite this, however, let me underscore my genuine appreciation of Clouser for pressing me to be clearer on my view of the encyclical's position on faith and reason.<sup>2</sup>

My reply is organized in two parts. First, I argue that in *FR* (1) faith is a form of knowing; (2) John Paul II is *not* a rationalist; and (3) the impact of the fall into sin on human reason is integral. Second, I defend the view of *FR* that a metaphysical theology is necessary in order to give an account of the intelligibility of the Christian revelation. Indeed, one of the biblical requirements for a "Scriptural philosophy" is a philosophy of a truly metaphysical range, according to John Paul (*FR*, nos. 80-83).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Clouser, "Reason and Belief in God," *Philosophia Reformata* 68, 2003. Eduardo J. Echeverria, "Fides et Ratio, The Catholic and the Calvinist," *Philosophia Reformata* 65, 2000. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Encyclical Letter, September 14, 1998. Instead of the standard English translation of the encyclical, I will be using throughout the following new translation: *Restoring Faith in Reason, A New Translation of the Encyclical Letter Faith and Reason* of Pope John Paul II, together with a commentary and discussion, edited by Laurence Paul Hemming and Susan Frank Parsons (London: SCM Press, 2002). Subsequent references to this encyclical will be cited parenthetically in the text. In addition, references to Clouser's reply will also be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to the editorial board of *Philosophia Reformata* for the opportunity to clarify my position and to reply to some of Clouser's criticisms of *Fides et Ratio*. Since I do not have the space here to reply to Clouser at length, I shall not consider his attempted rebuttal of my critical remarks regarding Herman Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique or the latter's view of faith and knowledge. I do appreciate Clouser's interesting and important remarks on these matters, but I do not have the space here to do justice to them. In addition, I have replied to Clouser's interpretation of John Calvin, St. Thomas Aquinas, and the fourth century Cappadocian Fathers in a longer version of this reply, but I have limited myself in this shorter version to criticizing Clouser's own position on God's nature and metaphysical theology.

<sup>3</sup> A "Scriptural philosophy" requires a philosophy of a truly metaphysical range. This is in addition to two other indispensable biblical requirements for "Scriptural philosophy": (1) recovering a sapiential dimension to intellectual inquiry and (2) affirming a realist sense of truth. "Scriptural philosophy" is shorthand for a philosophy that measures up to "the requirements of the Word of God that may never be neglected" (*FR*, nos. 80-85). It is a philosophy that maintains the primacy of God's Word in philosophical inquiry (*FR*, no. 79).

## 2. *Objections and Replies*

### 2.1. *On the Problematic of Faith and Reason*

(a)

*Objection:* Clouser claims that John Paul regards faith to be *less* than rational, justified, knowledge. Allegedly he, like all good Thomists, restricts knowledge “to whatever is evident to the senses, self-evident, or proven.” “So,” adds Clouser, “references of Bible writers to the ‘knowledge of God’ must be explained as dependent on the (alleged) fact that God’s existence can be proven” (38-39).

*Reply:* Throughout *FR*, John Paul calls *faith a kind of knowledge* (e.g., nos. 7-8, 13, 16-19, 42, 53, 67). He explicitly rejects rationalism’s claim denying faith the epistemic status of knowledge, a view restricting knowledge to the exercise of reason’s natural capacities. With Vatican Council I, John Paul “strongly insist[s] that a knowledge could be found, proper to faith, which is beyond all natural human knowledge” (*FR*, no. 8). Indeed, “The truth Revelation allows us to know,” he adds, “is neither the mature fruit nor the highest reach of the reflections of human reflection” (*FR*, no. 15). “This knowledge [of faith],” moreover, “expresses a truth which finds its foundation in God revealing himself, a truth which is absolutely certain, seeing that God can neither deceive nor be deceived” (*FR*, no. 8). In John Paul’s view, then, “faith” is the gift of “the obedient response to God,” and without it there is no genuine, intimate, saving knowledge of God. It is the grace-enabled “act whereby we commit ourselves to God,” an act “involv[ing] the whole person,” intellect, emotion, will, and all else distinctively human. Thus, the knowledge singular to faith involves giving our *assent* to the totality of truth that God has revealed.

At one and the same time, however, since God is also the source of the credibility of what He reveals, the knowledge that is proper to faith also involves men giving their assent to divine testimony, namely, to *God* who makes Himself known in what He reveals. In this singular faith-knowledge “the intellect and will exercise their spiritual character” by “fully and integrally accept[ing] the truth of things revealed, because *God offers himself* as their guarantee” (*FR*, no. 13; italics added). The believer is certain that the truth made known to us by revelation is true, *because* God is true, faithful, trustworthy, being himself the guarantor of that truth, and not because he naturally sees its truth to be self-evident or can prove its truth. Furthermore, the totally free gift of God’s revealed truth “requires that it be accepted as a declaration of love” (no. 13). For John Paul, *pace* Clouser, faith is neither less than knowledge nor is faith’s knowledge of God dependent on theistic proofs. Rather, faith’s knowledge of God is *personal* knowledge, because God can be salvifically known only in faith and love.

Clouser overlooks the places in *FR* where John Paul speaks about the kind of singular knowledge that is proper to faith. He also overlooks the places in my article where I said that as well (cf. 79, 84-85).

(b)

*Objection:* On the one hand, Clouser claims that John Paul is a rationalist because he identifies *knowing* that the Christian faith is true with *proving* it to be true as a result of theistic arguments. On the other hand, John Paul must then, according to Clouser, regard any position that denies this identification as a version of fideism. Thus, without rational justification of our belief in God, we are irrationalists in holding this belief.

*Reply:* In defining fideism, Clouser latches on to a passage that he wrongly takes to be the hermeneutical key to John Paul's religious epistemology. According to John Paul, fideism "fails to recognize the importance of rational knowledge and philosophical discourse for the understanding of faith, indeed *for the very possibility of belief in God*" (*FR*, no. 55, italics added). Clouser agrees with John Paul that reason is involved in understanding the content of revelation, but he correctly expresses disbelief that John Paul could regard philosophical discourse to be a *necessary* condition "for the very possibility of belief in God." Isn't this the claim of a rationalist?

I have two things to say in reply. First, as the passage stands in English translation, John Paul could have expressed himself more felicitously here. But I think we can press him for clarity without charging him with rationalism. Indeed, considering the *whole* context of *FR* makes clear that Clouser's charge is completely off the mark. For philosophical discourse is, according to John Paul, *sufficient to show* that belief in God is rational but not *necessary* to having a rational belief in God, or for *knowing* that the Christian faith is true. Indeed, I made this very point in my original article, but Clouser completely overlooks it (cf. 86-89, 94-95). The believer does not need philosophical arguments as a necessary precondition for believing in God. "Faith," says John Paul, "the gift of God, in no sense rests upon reason" (*FR*, no. 67). Ultimately, he says, we hold our Christian beliefs to be true on the basis of the Word of God and not on fallible human reasoning. God revealing Himself to us through the gift of faith by the Holy Spirit is sufficient for our knowing Him, and hence to have rational, justified, knowledge.

Second, since Clouser's reply, however, I have looked carefully at the original Latin text and at its German, Italian, French, Spanish, and Dutch translations. The English translation as well as the others is based on the Italian translation of the Latin text rather than the Latin text itself.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, these translations are all inaccurate precisely at that point where Clouser thinks he has found the hermeneutical key to John Paul's theological epistemology. The new translation is more accurate: "There are some who dangerously revert to *fideism*, simply because they fail to recognize the value of rational knowledge and of the discipline of philosophy both for the understanding of faith, and even for the *capacity for believing in God in the first*

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to my Sacred Heart Major Seminary colleagues, Robert Fastiggi, John Hittinger, and Father Daniel Jones, who helped me with the meaning of the original Latin passage in *FR*: "Neque desunt qui in fideismum periculose regrediantur, quippe qui rationalis cognitionis philosophicaeque scientiae pondus ad fidem intellegendam, immo ad ipsam facultatem possidendam in Deum credendi, non agnoscat."

*place.*" For the Augustinian and Thomist traditions, the intellect is the capacity to grasp what is revealed (*FR*, no. 79). This is denied by fideism, according to John Paul. If the human intellect does not have the capacity for intake of objective reality, for a real conforming of our minds to divine truth, then we cannot know whether Christianity is true, and this is what John Paul finds dangerous about fideism. So the capacity in question here is the person's intellect in which he believingly assents to the truth of some proposition, an assent ordered to knowing objective reality. Of course divine faith is more than believing, because at its core faith is trust, commitment, and full submission of the whole man to God. Faith isn't less than believing, however, for to have a belief is to assent, or to be intellectually committed, to the truth of some proposition. Thus, although I think that the English translation as it stands will not bear the weight of Clouser's objection when the *whole* context of *FR* is considered, his objection completely collapses in light of the above argument about the correct translation and its meaning.

(c)

*Objection:* How does John Paul account for believing in God as rational, justified, knowledge? Clouser rightly sees that John Paul holds an "epistemologically defensible position that we can acquire genuine knowledge by being told of the experience of others" (48). John Paul rejects the epistemic policy of believing only what I have independently verified or confirmed to be true for myself (cf. *FR*, no. 31). Clouser's disagreement with him seems to be over "whether this [say-so of others] is an appropriate and adequate ground for belief in *God*." In raising this question he then seems to qualify his initial agreement with John Paul about acquiring genuine knowledge from what we have been taught by others in one way or other. "How I learn of a truth is not the same as the ground on which I hold it to be true" (48). Of course Clouser is right, and John Paul clearly agrees, that we must not run together how we arrive at our beliefs, say, through testimony, with the ground or foundation of our knowledge, which if our beliefs are true is objective reality. His objection to John Paul seems to be that there is no guarantee that what I have been taught by other fallible men and claim to know on their say-so is true. Clouser particularly objects for he believes John Paul to be claiming that "[w]e . . . believe the gospel because we have independent evidence that the messengers themselves can guarantee the truth of their message" (48).

*Reply:* Perhaps I could have been clearer in presenting John Paul's epistemological defense of testimony as a source of what we take for rational, justified, knowledge. I can see that Clouser has misunderstood John Paul, however, because the latter never says that we believe the Gospel message as the truth about God *merely* on the say-so of others. Yet, Clouser's claim that there is no guarantee that what I have been taught by others is true needs to be qualified; for even if there is no guarantee given human fallibility, I may still be justified in holding this belief to be true on the word of another, his testimony or say-so, because of who says it—he is a well-informed person, an expert, insightful,

in a privileged position to know that something is the case, trustworthy, and so forth. To his assertions that something is true, we attach a high credibility *because he speaks authoritatively*.<sup>5</sup> As John Paul says, “To believe means to accept and to acknowledge as true and corresponding to reality the content of what is said, i.e., the content of the words of another person by reason of his credibility. This credibility determines in a given case the particular authority of the person—the authority of truth. So then by saying ‘I believe’, we express at the same a double reference: to the person and to the truth; to the truth in consideration of the person who enjoys special claims to credulity.”<sup>6</sup> Still, let us suppose that fallible men cannot *guarantee* the truth of their message. How would that affect the truth God reveals about Himself? *Surely God who can neither deceive nor be deceived, who is trustworthy and faithful par excellence, can Himself guarantee the truth of the Gospel message.* For “The God who brings about his own recognition because of the authority of his absolute transcendence at the same time makes the content of his revelation credible,” according to John Paul. “By faith,” he adds, “man owes his own *assent* to the divine testimony. This shows that he fully and integrally accepts the truth of things revealed, because God offers himself as their guarantee” (*FR*, no. 13). Furthermore, John Paul’s reply to Clouser’s question regarding our assurance that the biblical message is in fact *God’s* testimony is no different than Clouser’s; it is the biblical answer: “Faith, [which] relies upon the witness of God and uses the help of divine grace, [is] enlightened and guided by the Spirit [to] recognize in the very proclamation of faith ‘the fullness of grace and truth’ (cf. John 1:14). This God decided to declare once and for all through his Son, Jesus Christ (cf. 1 John 5:9; John 5:31-32)” (*FR*, no. 9). I trust this clarifies things for Clouser. He would have discovered for himself what I have tried to say more clearly here if he had turned to *FR* (nos. 31-33).

(d)

*Objection:* Does faith need philosophical reasoning like natural theology in order to be justifiable? Clouser says no, but he assumes that one who does accept natural theology, like John Paul II, must also hold the *necessity* of natural theology as a rational foundation for belief in God without which this belief is irrationally held. Now, he is opposed to the whole enterprise of natural theology because the impact of the fall upon our human reason is such that reasoning about God is subverted, the result is an idol, which is a false god, with such reasoning then being totally untrustworthy. Indeed, if I understand him correctly, he thinks that such reasoning about God is itself a symptom of sin, of our fallen human condition.

*Reply:* Natural theology is, according to John Paul, *sufficient* to show that belief in God is rational but not *necessary* to having a rational belief in God, or

<sup>5</sup> J.L.A. Garcia’s article, “Moral Reasoning & the Catholic Church” *New Oxford Review*, June 1992, 13-17, was very helpful in formulating this point about authoritative testimony.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *A Catechesis on The Creed*, Vol. I, *God, Father and Creator* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1966, 31.

for *knowing* that the Christian faith is true. Yet, although faith's knowledge of God is a gift of His grace, and thus "in no sense rests upon reason," John Paul does indeed hold that "faith ... can never proceed without [reason]" (*FR*, no. 67). Now, what is the nature of that reason which faith needs, and in what sense then does faith need reason?

In answering the first part of this question, I will distinguish, with Aidan Nichols' aid, "absolute reason," "pure reason" and "natural reason." "[1] 'Absolute reason' refuses all revelation, as of set purpose; [2] 'pure reason', beloved of rationalism, belongs only with a state of pure nature which has never, in the concrete, existed; [and 3] 'natural reason', on the other hand, remains open and *disponible* [disposable, available] where revelation is concerned: it is able to enter into a relation with historically realized situation of humankind, whether fallen or renewed."<sup>7</sup>

John Paul II rejects not only [1] (cf. *FR*, nos. 75, 79, 80) but also [2] (cf. *FR*, nos. 22-23). In particular, regarding [2], "pure reason" does not, concretely, exist because the natural reasoning of actual human beings is a religious act, that is, already influenced by the central religious disposition of the heart, whether fallen or renewed, either for or against God. Regarding [3], natural reason includes, I take it, the belief-producing human capacities of intuition, reasoning (i.e., the making of inferences, devising of arguments), sense perception, memory, introspection, testimony, moral intuition, and what Calvin and others call the *sensus divinitatis*. Now, all of these capacities are reliable, because, whether fallen or renewed, natural reason can generate truth. For example, human reasoning can construct valid arguments, one may correctly remember what he had for breakfast this morning, one may see, hear, feel, taste, and smell things like flowers, one may have insight into self-evident truths, and so forth. But since human reasoning can construct valid arguments, there is no reason to take a totally negative stance, as Clouser does, towards theistic arguments. Furthermore, natural reason is not self-sufficient—reason is finite, fallible, and fallen; it has a ministerial, or subsidiary role, and certainly not a magisterial one; by its very nature reason is dependent upon God; submitting to and serving divine revelation, indeed, rejecting "all deception of autonomy" (*FR*, no. 80), as John Paul puts it, and hence it inherently lacks self-sufficiency, not just with respect to divine revelation but in its own sphere.

As to why faith needs reason, especially the philosophical reason of metaphysics, John Paul underscores its importance for upholding the intelligibility and universal truth claims of the Christian revelation (*FR*, nos. 83-84). Also, philosophical arguments could be used by the grace of the Spirit to bring some people to confront the gospel message by *showing* them that there exists "a particular path truly preparatory for faith, which itself leads to the accepting of revelation, without in any way denying [the mind's] own principles or its own autonomy" (*FR*, no. 67). Clouser cannot deny that affirming the truth of God existence on the basis of natural theology has led *some* to be opened to

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<sup>7</sup> Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Epiphany: A Theological Introduction to Catholicism* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 10.

the gospel message. As Christians, we believe that “the *preparation of man* for the reception of grace [in Christ and by the Holy Spirit] is already a work of grace.”<sup>8</sup> Why then can’t the Spirit use natural theology?

Clouser misunderstands the role that natural theology plays in *FR*. John Paul writes, “The First Vatican Council, following the teaching of St. Paul (cf. Romans 1:19-20) has already turned our minds to the existence of truths which can be known naturally, and thus philosophically. Knowledge of these is a necessary prerequisite for receiving divine revelation” (*FR*, no. 67). What does John Paul mean in stating that these naturally knowable truths are a presupposition of faith’s acceptance of God’s revelation? Only that the existence of God is a presupposition for believing in the Trinity of the Godhead, the divinity of Christ, and still others. This passage does *not* say that knowledge of God’s existence, although a naturally knowable truth about God, must *first* be acquired through philosophical argument before accepting God’s revelation. He cannot mean that especially since he has already told us that faith is not based on reason and has argued as well for testimony as a source of rational, justified, knowledge.

Of course John Paul does hold that truths like the existence of God or that God is one are within the capacity of natural reason in itself to grasp through theistic arguments. Furthermore, he also holds that man is a religious being having been created by God and for God, and hence even after the fall into sin “in the deepest recesses of the human heart there has been sown a burning desire for God” (*FR*, no. 24). Thus, at the root of theistic arguments is the fundamental desire for God, and various kinds of experience of the world may be regarded as starting points for such arguments—wonder at its very existence, its transience and contingency, apparent order, and purposiveness, and of ourselves, our finitude, moral obligation, the grandeur and poverty of man, and others. But, again, such arguments while available are not necessary for belief in God, because God reveals *all* the truths that are necessary for salvation, including those that fall within the grasp of reason as well as those truths that wholly surpass the capacity of natural reason to grasp like the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, and others. Even those truths that are in themselves naturally knowable and, additionally, philosophically justifiable and defensible are divinely revealed and hence known in faith by most. Why would God reveal even those truths that man’s mind can in principle know on its own? Because most men are hampered in actually grasping these truths through theistic arguments due to their ability, time, training, background, or opportunity to understand or evaluate them; and those *few* men that do arrive at the truth that God exists, do so only after a *long time*, and with a *mixture of truth and error*.<sup>9</sup> Thus: “Beneficially, therefore, did the divine Mercy provide that it should instruct us to hold by faith even those truths that the human

<sup>8</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2001.

<sup>9</sup> These are the three reasons Aquinas gives why “It is necessary for man to accept by faith not only those things which are above reason, but also those which can be known by reason.” That is, “in order that men might have knowledge of God, free of doubt and uncertainty, it was necessary for Divine matters to be delivered to them by way of faith, being told to them, as it were, by God Himself Who cannot lie” (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 2, Art. 4).

reason is able to investigate. In this way, all men would easily be able to have a share in the knowledge of God, and this without uncertainty and error.”<sup>10</sup>

(e)

*Objection:* Clouser thinks that John Paul’s acceptance of natural theology assumes that human reason itself has *not* been corrupted by sin and that as such the unregenerate mind *is* able to have true, authentic knowledge of God. He doesn’t deny that John Paul speaks of “a human reason that has been wounded and weakened because of sin” (*FR*, no. 51), but he takes this to “describe the affects of (the rest of) fallen human nature on unfallen reason” (44). So these affects are *extrinsic* to reason itself, according to Clouser. The extent of reason’s wound is such, that it still has of itself the *intrinsic* means to know God, and Clouser rejects this view as biblically unsupportable.

*Reply:* Several things must be said in reply. First, there is no difference between Clouser and John Paul II over whether human reason itself is fallen. Rather, the difference is over the *extent* to which sin has affected its proper functioning. *Pace* Clouser, John Paul holds that the *whole* of human nature is affected by sin, and thus it follows that man’s fall into sin must affect human reason itself. As a consequence of original sin, says John Paul, human nature “is ‘fallen’ since it is deprived of sanctifying grace, and also other gifts, which in the state of original justice constituted the perfection of this nature.” “Here we are dealing not only with immortality and exemption from many sufferings, gifts lost because of sin,” adds John Paul, “but also with interior dispositions of the reason and will . . . [Thus] the whole man, body and soul, has been thrown into confusion . . . a deterioration [that] consists in a darkening of the intellect’s capacity to know the truth, and in a weakening of free will.”<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, owing to man’s solidarity with the primal disobedience of Adam’s sin, John Paul emphasizes that human reason is so gravely wounded by sin that the latter “became an impediment to progress toward the full truth.” But the *roots* of these obstacles are certainly not just factors external to reason itself. Instead, reason itself is fallen. Clouser inexplicably overlooks a relevant passage from *FR* discussed in my original article, “The human capacity [of post-fall man] of knowing the truth” about oneself, others, and God “was obscured by the *repudiation* of him who is the source and origin of truth” (*FR*, no. 22; italics added). Indeed, St. Paul describes not only the source of this sinful inclination that sets us against God, inverting the truth in unrighteousness, but also the resulting corruption of human thought, according to John Paul II. “Again the Apostle [Paul] opens up for us how far the thoughts of man, because of sin, are made ‘vain’, and their very process of reasoning distorted and inclined to falsehood (cf. Romans 1:21-22). The eyes of the mind

<sup>10</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. I, translated, with an Introduction and Notes, by Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), Chapter 4, no. 6.

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, *A Catechesis on The Creed*, Vol. II, *Jesus, Son and Savior* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1996), 51.

were no longer able to see clearly: reason became more and more a prisoner to itself." Thus, since human reason is *not* exempt from the integral effects of sin, it too must be redeemed, according to John Paul. "The coming of Christ was the saving event that liberated reason from its infirmity, setting it free from the shackles in which it had completely imprisoned itself" (*FR*, no. 22). Unfallen reason would have no need for liberation, redemption, and thus Clouser is simply wrong to say that reason itself is unaffected by the fall into sin for John Paul.

Nicholas Wolterstorff is right, "if one is to understand what the pope is saying [about reason's powers], one must constantly keep in mind the distinction between *properly functioning* human reason, and human reason as it *actually functions* in its fallen state."<sup>12</sup> Clouser fails to do so, and thus he misses the point that John Paul's reflections on the powers of human reason precisely express the diverse states in which it is found: *both* the integral state of creation and the fallen state (*FR*, no. 22; cf. also no. 19). Their disagreement regarding the extent to which sin has affected human reason's proper functioning comes to a head over whether the unregenerate mind of man is unable to arrive at *any* truth about God. Several brief points need to be made here.

First, if the noetic effects of sin are such that the fallen intellect's ability prevents man from knowing *any* truths about God, then how can the unbeliever be held accountable for his rebellion against Him? Wouldn't the inability to come to *any* truth about God's reality render men excusable for their unbelief? Clouser assumes that the corrupted human condition prevents man from knowing any truths about God, offering then an intriguing explanation of the sense in which he is still inexcusable (42-43, 45-46). But his explanation skirts the real issue: St. Paul in Romans 1:18-21 is speaking of those men who "*having known God*, do not glorify Him as God." He says: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." This text suffices to show that, according to St. Paul, men are rendered inexcusable precisely because they know God. Without this knowledge, St. Paul's whole doctrine is ruined.

Second, if the mind of man is so fallen that it cannot know any truths about God, and if only the regenerate mind can have such knowledge, as Clouser suggests, then this sets up an *opposition* between faith and reason such that, philosophically speaking, the Christian cannot argue for or against any propositions about God. Indeed, he cannot even argue that the atheist's pure and simple denial of God's existence is false, philosophically speaking. The fallen intellect's *incapacity* to grasp the truth of the God who is there must imply that *whatever* natural reason says about God must be of equal philosophical value. I do not for one moment think Clouser believes this, but that is what his position implies. And if Clouser were to say that philosophical reasoning about God is useful in refuting false views of God, why should we invest any more confidence in this reasoning than in reasoning upholding the legitimacy of natural theology?

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Books & Culture*, July/August 1999, Review of *Fides & Ratio*, 28-29.

Third, equivocation must be avoided regarding what is meant by “true knowledge of God.” There is intellectual knowledge, which is believing *that* God exists, and then there is *saving* knowledge that comes only from the gift of obedient faith, which is believing *in* God—trusting God, accepting His promises, living faithfully by His purposes, and committing ones life to Him, and hence living in fellowship with Him. In this sense, of course, the addressees in St. Paul’s first chapter of Romans do not have such faith-knowledge. So, although the intellect’s capacity to know the truth of God’s reality survives in the fallen state, albeit in a deeply diminished capacity, the limited, partial knowledge of God grasped by the unregenerate mind is incapable of establishing a saving, intimate knowledge of the God who makes Himself known not only in and through the witness of creation but also His special revelation in Jesus Christ, inviting us to Trinitarian communion of the inner love-life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Four, we must strenuously avoid thinking that all that separates the unbeliever, whether or not he is a theist, from Christian faith is the *addition* of some knowledge by faith to the knowledge that he already possesses by reasoning. This kind of *quantitative* view neglects the nature of the unregenerate mind’s suppression of the truth about God and the call to radical conversion to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ through the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.

Fifth, divine revelation and faith in that revelation is both a source of cognition as well as a corrective and guide involving the substantial restoration or renewal of the proper functioning of human reason to its divinely willed destiny, which is the goal and attainment of truth. As a result of the gift of grace penetrating and transforming and perfecting reason’s nature, human reason is *redeemed in its own domain*, which restores the ability of reason, now illuminated by the light of faith, to recognize the truth of the gospel: Jesus Christ, the “Word of Wisdom,” says John Paul, is “the rule of truth and of salvation” (*Fr*, no. 23). Grace neither replaces nature nor leaves nature untouched, with the latter resulting in a kind of naturalism. Nor is grace something merely added to nature, as Clouser suggests in typical neo-Calvinist fashion. Rather, grace restores nature in the sense that “the knowledge which man has of him [God in Christ] perfects all the conceptions which the mind can attain concerning the meaning of its own existence” (*FR*, no. 7). Faith is reason’s way, enabling reason to exercise its power, now transfigured and substantially freed from sin, pursuing “new ends which it could not arrive at by itself” (*FR*, no. 67). More precisely, “Reason, bereft of Revelation, runs into devious paths which deprives it of the ability of discovering its ultimate goal” (*FR*, no. 48). I said all this and more in my original article (84-88), but Clouser completely overlooks it.

## 2.2. *On the Necessity of Metaphysical Theology*

John Paul II laments hearing about “the end of metaphysics” (*FR*, no. 55). He regards an “anti-metaphysical” philosophy to be inconsistent with one of the

three indispensable requirements of the Word of God for a truly Christian philosophy. In other words, a Scriptural philosophy requires a “*truly metaphysical* philosophy” in order to provide “the metaphysical interpretation of things: in truth and beauty, in moral good, and in other people, in being, and in God” (*FR*, no. 83). In particular, Christian theology requires a metaphysical theology “to give appropriate expression to the universal and transcendent force of revealed truth” like the mystery of the Triune God or any other substantive supernatural mystery (*FR*, no. 83). Although I cannot argue the point here, let me make it plain that John Paul II’s metaphysical theology, indeed all the classic theologies of the Church, avoids “conceptual idolatry” in view of the mystery that is the Triune God. Yet, that “is not to say that they have wished to sever the bond between human language, in its referring power, and what God is.”<sup>13</sup> His metaphysical theology is entirely consistent with affirming the limits of human reason, and hence the true religious attitude towards the infinite mystery of God. In this connection, I need also to stress that divine revelation, i.e., the Word of God, is the foundational biblical source of our knowledge of God, including metaphysical theology, according to John Paul (*FR*, nos. 14, 65-69). I now turn to reply to two objections to the mediating role that metaphysical theology plays for comprehending revelation, according to John Paul II.

(a)

*Objection:* Clouser follows Dooyeweerd in being against metaphysical theology.<sup>14</sup> In what specific sense is this so? Dooyeweerd’s position is anti-metaphysical in rejecting metaphysical theology, meaning thereby “a theory that includes the nature of *all* reality[,] God included” (58). Fundamental to Dooyeweerd’s thought on this matter is the metaphor of a boundary: “the *universal boundary (which cannot be transgressed)* between the *Being* of God and the *meaning* of His creation.”<sup>15</sup> He holds that the mark of a truly critical, Calvinistic, indeed, Christian philosophy and theology is the rejection of speculative metaphysics, especially metaphysical theology, which allegedly “elevates human reason to the throne of God,” and, alternatively, the acceptance of “the limits of human reason set for it by God in His temporal world-order.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the *Being* of God is beyond our human capacity to conceptualize.

<sup>13</sup> Aidan Nichols, O.P., “Relaunching Christian Philosophy,” in *Christendom Awake: On Re-energizing the Church in Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 53-69, and this quote, 60.

<sup>14</sup> One of the clearest statements of Dooyeweerd’s opposition to a metaphysical theology because of its alleged incompatibility with God’s self-revelation in Holy Scripture is found in his contribution (“Cornelius van Til and the Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought”) to the Cornelius van Til *Festschrift, Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius van Til* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), 74-89, especially 86-88.

<sup>15</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, Vol. I, *The Necessary Presuppositions of Philosophy*, translated by David H. Freeman and William S. Young (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969), 99.

<sup>16</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 93.

*Reply:* The rejection of a metaphysical theology is not only alien to the classical Christian doctrinal tradition but also a theology “destitute of a metaphysical outlook,” says John Paul, “will be quite incapable and unfit to perform its mediating role for comprehending Revelation” (*FR*, no. 83). Why exactly? Because the theological totality of the Christian faith speaks about being as well as meaning and about eternity as well as time and about the infinite as well as the finite, and the relation between them (*FR*, nos. 11-12).<sup>17</sup> Take, for instance, the question regarding divine predication, especially of the Triune God. How would John Paul understand the terms *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit*? Do they refer to the immanent Trinity—i.e., the intradivine relationship between the persons of the Trinity—or are they merely accommodations of God’s unaccommodated and unknowable being to our weak human mode of understanding, in short, just “economic” language, as Clouser suggests? Put differently, how should we understand the relation between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity? Briefly, only three possible positions can be taken on this question.<sup>18</sup>

First, there is the position expressed by Karl Rahner’s axiom: “the Trinity of the economy of salvation *is* the immanent Trinity and vice versa.”<sup>19</sup> The first part of Rahner’s statement is true for any orthodox Christian. Indeed, as Francis Martin rightly notes, the “New Testament, the early creeds, and the ante-Nicene Fathers all spoke of the Trinity as it is manifested in the work of salvation, and yet the Trinity they spoke of *is* the One Triune God.” The “vice versa” portion of Rahner’s axiom is, however, seriously contested. Martin adds, “The immanent Trinity is not completely revealed in the economy of salvation. The mystery of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as they exist in themselves remains unattainable to any created intellect, even in the light of glory.” In other words, we cannot know or understand God as he understands himself. Yet, the “economic” Trinity is the “immanent” Trinity. For God truly and completely gives Himself in and for humanity, and since what is given in the divine economy *is* God as such, we may come to share in the inner love life of the Trinity.

There is the second position of those like Clouser who hold that “all the language of the New Testament is ‘economic’.” “We can know nothing of the internal relations of the Trinity but only their economic or enacted relations.” Of course John Paul does affirm that the Word of God communicates truth about God in human language that reflects God’s amazing ‘condescension’ to our human understanding (*FR*, no. 94). Yet, unlike Clouser, in no way does he conclude that we must *reduce* the statements of Holy Scripture and the

<sup>17</sup> On this, see Aidan Nichols, O.P., *The Shape of Catholic Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 315, 346.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 284-289. All the citations from Fr. Martin are found on 284-287 of this magisterial study. Regarding the second position, Father Martin expresses some of the same problems as those I consider in the second part of this paper.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, Translated by Joseph Donceel, with an Introduction, Index, and Glossary by Catherine Mowry LaCugna (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 22.

subsequent creedal and doctrinal tradition to speech only about God's activity in the world.

The third position understands these terms "as both correct and inadequate analogical assertions about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." It is the position of the Catholic tradition, and I will take as its representative John Paul II who writes: "For faith clearly requires that human speech should in some universal way give expression—even though voiced analogically, but no less meaningfully—to divine, transcendent reality. Deprived of this assumption, the Word of God, which despite its use of human language remains divine, could signify nothing of God. The interpretation of this Word cannot merely keep tossing us from one interpretation to another, never directing us to a statement that is simple and true: were that the case there could be no revelation of God, but instead only the expression of human concepts about God and of the things it is presumed he thinks about us" (*FR*, no. 84). Thus our language about God is inadequate, imperfect, but it is *not* false. It is the principle of analogy that enables us to speak of both the *theologia* and the *oikonomia*: of being and meaning, of eternity and time, of the infinite and the finite, and the relation between them.

Against this background, we can understand why the loss of a metaphysical outlook renders incomprehensible many New Testament texts, according to John Paul. "We can find [NT] passages and affirmations of genuinely ontological content. The sacred authors were capable of producing statements of a truly objective character" (*FR*, no. 82). For example, in the Gospel of John we read not only that the Son exists eternally in relation to the Father but also that in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, we know God as he is in his own inner being: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God . . . No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made him known" (1:1-2, 18).<sup>20</sup> A certain metaphysical weight is also unmistakable in such texts as Matthew 11:27, 1 John 1: 2, 5, Philippians 2:6-7, Colossians 1:15-20. Additionally, in Hebrews 1:3, the sacred author uses the timeless present participle in describing the Son as "*being* the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." In sum, then, says John Paul, "It cannot be said that the Catholic tradition was in any way in error in treating the words of St. John and St. Paul as statements about the very being of Christ" (*FR*, no. 82). Furthermore, in 1 John 1:5 and 4:8 we read of God's very nature or essence: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. God is love." Again, in 1 Timothy 6:21 we read, "God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see." And in Titus 1:3 we read that God cannot lie. These attributes and others are part of God's essential nature, indeed non-relational powers or attributes, because necessary to him, needing nothing other than God himself in order for them to be true.

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<sup>20</sup> On this, see Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Epiphany: A Theological Introduction to Catholicism*, 151-168.

(b)

*Objection:* The unaccommodated being of God has no properties. The attributes, actions, and intradivine Trinitarian relations that we predicate of God are all *merely* relations he freely took on *for us* in the divine economy of salvation history. God only happens to be good, just, merciful, powerful, faithful, wise, and the like, in relation to us, *for us*, rather than essentially so. Even the Trinity that is revealed in the divine economy is only true of God *for us*, and not true of God *in se*, that is, apart from salvation history. Nonetheless, divine predication is neither impossible nor self-referentially incoherent even if God *in se* is beyond human ability to conceptualize. We can predicate attributes of God that he has revealed to us, of God's accommodated nature, and not as God is in himself (62-63).

*Reply:* Clearly, on the view Clouser represents the referent for the attributes, actions, and intradivine relations predicated of God is not "God *in se*" or "God's essence as it is in itself." The only available referent is God's accommodated nature of himself revealed to us in his Word. *But in this accommodation has God revealed to us who He is?* It would seem not. For Clouser all biblical and theological language is "economic": the divine economy is the only realm in which God exists as just, good, merciful, powerful, wise, and the like because it is the only realm in which we can predicate attributes of God. It is also the only realm in which the "Trinity" exists for the same reason: only within the divine economy can we conceptualize God as a trinity of persons.

The implication of thinking that biblical language is merely economic is all too clear—and fatally flawed. In the economic language of the NT, God speaks about himself in trinitarian terms, which does not mean that the Trinity exists ontologically distinct from the divine economy. Since we cannot know anything of the intradivine relations of the Trinity but only of their economic relations, it follows that we cannot know whether God exists as Trinity apart from his trinitarian expression in the divine economy. This then implies that we cannot be called to a true fellowship with the ontologically distinct communion of Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, as the New Testament teaches (1 John 1:3; Ephesians 2:18). For this teaching presupposes that this communion must exist independently of the divine economy because it is to the eternal Trinitarian love of Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit into which God out of sheer goodness calls us to share. Similarly, how could we think of Jesus the Son as an eternal divine person who is God with us in the flesh (Matthew 1:23) existing apart from the divine economy of salvation history if all biblical language is economic? What about the biblical witness in Galatians 4:4 to two "sendings," the sending of the Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit? There had to be a Son and a Spirit existing ontologically distinct prior to the "sending" and apart from their expression in the divine economy. For the Son and the Spirit that are sent in the divine economy must be one and the same Son and Spirit that exist in themselves prior to their sending.

Significantly, if all theological language is economic, as Clouser holds, how then could we make sense of the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) and the Nicene Creed that proclaimed the Son to be *homoousios* with the Father? Thomas

Weinandy correctly reports that in this proclamation, “Nicea compelled theology to speculate about the intradivine trinity of persons separate from the economy, rather than grasp that ‘the Trinity’ is entirely God’s expression of himself within the economy.” “Nicea forges,” adds Weinandy, “the unbreakable ontological link between the economic and the immanent Trinity and it does so by declaring that the one who is *wholly within* the economy is the same one who is *wholly other than* the economy. The Son who is *homoousios* with the Father, and thus wholly God as the Father is God in all his wholly ontologically distinct otherness, is the same Son who became man, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.”<sup>21</sup> Notwithstanding Clouser’s protest to the contrary, his view posits a chasm “between God’s uncreated, unaccommodated, unknowable being and his knowable accommodations to humanity” (63), between God and us, which is unbreachable.

Clouser insists, however, that God’s accommodated nature revealed to us in human language is not merely verbal as if the “real” nature of God is hidden. He writes, “It is not that the ‘real’ nature of God is unknown so that what we do know is something other than God. No, what God reveals is what he has really become and promised to be forever. God has no other nature than the one he has revealed, the one now everlastingly embodied in Jesus Christ” (63-64).

Since God has no nature prior to His-relation-to-us, according to Clouser, it makes sense that he should take his position to have eliminated the gap between the “real” God and us. But his position has the cost of conflating the existence of the Trinity into the divine economy. To quote Weinandy one last time, “The economy is no longer the realm in which the Trinity acts, but the only realm in which the ‘Trinity’ *is*. The *oikonomia* is no longer the realm in which the trinity of persons as they exist, in all their otherness, act, and so relate to us in all their otherness as distinct divine subjects, but only the realm in which the Trinity of ‘persons’ actually exist. The Trinity does not exist ontologically distinct from the economy. ‘The Trinity’ ontologically is the economy. Thus the Trinity is not the persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit acting in time and relating to us in history as they are in themselves.”<sup>22</sup> It follows then that there is no measure at all in which “God in Himself” has revealed who He is to us. Jesus says, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). And St. Paul writes, “For in Him [Christ] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Colossians 2: 9). In these New Testament verses and others the doctrinal tradition of orthodox Christianity roots the teaching, “as God reveals himself, so he is in his eternal deity.”<sup>23</sup> But it would only be a *self*-communication of the eternal God if what is true of God-in-relation-to-us, the divine economy of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, is true of God in himself.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, O.F.M. Cap., “The Immanent and the Economic Trinity,” *The Thomist* 57/4 (1993): 655-666, and for all the quotes in this paragraph, 665. On this, see also Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Volume III (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 11-18.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, O.F.M. Cap., “The Immanent and the Economic Trinity,” 661.

<sup>23</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 330.