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On the Priority of Tradition: An Exercise in Analytic Theology

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Abstract: This essay discusses the nature and relative priority of the sources for analytic theology with an eye to the manner in which the analytic theologian ought to orient herself to them. Of Tradition, Scripture, and (analytic) philosophy, the Tradition of the Church has ultimate priority as analytic-theological source insofar as it infallibly mediates the genuine, divinely revealed content of Scripture and justifies the utilization of analytic philosophy for theological purposes. The argument proposes a fundamental gap between the biblical text, which can be held in the hands and read, and Scripture, which is the revealed content communicated by the former and grasped by the intellect of the reader. Because of this gap, it is possible to be quite familiar with the biblical text and yet remain ignorant of Scripture, of the revealed truth of God. The Tradition of the Church functions as the bridge by which this “grand canyon” becomes crossable by offering normative interpretations of the biblical text. Consequently, the analytic theologian ought to be a committed adherent of this Tradition above all, making it the measure of all other things. This same Tradition also provides the theoretical justification for the appeal to (analytic) philosophy in the performance of the analytic theologian’s task through its teaching about the fundamental openness of the world to God, i.e. the world’s capacity to serve as medium for the divine-human dialog.

Keywords: Scripture and Tradition, sola scriptura, Origen, analytic theology, Dumitru Stăniloae

1 Introductory remarks

What is analytic theology, and what are its sources? In the judgment of Oliver Crisp, “analytic theology is about redeploying tools already in the service of philosophy to theological ends.”¹ Generally speaking, these tools include “a certain method used by [analytic] philosophers, characterized by a logical rigour, clarity, and parsimony of expression.”² A specific and notable example might include “the use made of speech-act theory in contemporary biblical hermeneutics.”³ Analytic theology is thus a species within the genus of philosophical theology, and philosophy, as analytic-theological source, serves theology. Understood in this way, analytic theology largely amounts to a contemporary, Anglophone instantiation of the timeless vision for philosophical theology proposed by Origen in his *Letter to Gregory*.⁴ In this particular piece of correspondence, the Alexandrian commends (the man who would later become) St. Gregory Thaumaturgus for his natural talents and abilities which, with some training and development, could make him a fine

1 Crisp, “On Analytic Theology,” 38.

2 Ibid., 35.

3 Ibid., “On Analytic Theology,” 39.

4 Compare Arcadi, “Analytic Theology as Declarative Theology,” 5: “Although analytic theology as a named entity is relatively fresh on the theological scene, yet I see it as another instance of a longstanding practice within the Christian theological tradition of viewing philosophy as a handmaiden to theology.”

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Roman lawyer or a Greek philosopher of one of the reputable schools. Nevertheless, it would be preferable for him to apply his efforts towards Christianity, gleaned only those elements of philosophical and secular learning which are useful to this end (*Letter to Gregory* §1). In this manner, Origen proposes, he would be following the example of the Hebrews, who, during their Exodus out of Egypt, took various vessels of silver and gold from their neighbors. These vessels would later be used in the worship of God (§2). Gregory is warned not to tarry too long with the Egyptians, lest he begin to imitate Hadad the Idumaeon, who became an “Egyptian” in the worst way possible by bringing back idols to the people of Israel.⁵ This is the danger of philosophical study: the introduction of idols into the house of God through the misinterpretation of the Scriptures (§3). For that reason, Scripture must be the future Wonderworker’s principal object of the study. Moreover, his study must be prayerful, for prayer is “most necessary for understanding divine matters” (§4). With respect to sources for philosophical (analytic) theology, then, both Oliver Crisp and Origen seem to be agreed, in broad strokes, about the status and role of philosophy: it is a potential theological source, though its contribution is subordinated to the prior sources of theology more generally.

This naturally invites further questions that are essential for any systematic treatment of the sources of analytic theology. First, what are these anterior theological sources, by reference to which the potential contribution of philosophy to the theological task is to be measured? Second, do they really permit the use of philosophy in the first place? These two questions will guide the discussion to follow. It begins with a treatment of theological sources more generally, which spans the next two sections of this paper, and ends, in the fourth section, with a justification of the appeal to (analytic) philosophy as the specific difference of analytic theology. In response to the first question about the prior sources for theology, it will prove helpful to note the account provided by Michael Sudduth, who expresses what appears to be a paradigmatically Reformed Protestant opinion when he writes:

Scripture is typically regarded as the primary if not exclusive source for Christian theology. Tradition, though, has often been considered a supplemental source for theological beliefs, or at least as constituting an important framework for the interpretation of the text of scripture, for example by imposing various constraints on its interpretation.⁶

A significant portion of this essay is dedicated to arguing for the conclusion that such a rendering of the relation between Tradition and Scripture is fundamentally wrongheaded. Certainly, Scripture is an essential source for theology, but the sharp, ontological distinction or separation between Scripture and Tradition implicitly suggested by Sudduth’s language is conceptually mistaken. Rather, Scripture and Tradition are simply the one “deposit of the word of God” (*Dei Verbum* II, §10) which is approached by different means. The Reformed “separatist” opinion perhaps arises out of an identification of Scripture with the biblical text, i.e., that which a person can hold in her hands and read. Because the Tradition is encountered outside of the biblical text, Scripture is taken to be separate from Tradition. However, this identification would be mistaken. There is, in fact, a gap, though not between Scripture and Tradition so much as between Scripture and the biblical text. A person can be quite familiar with the biblical text without thereby having any knowledge of Scripture. The bridge which makes this gap traversable is the Tradition of the Church, a fact which illustrates the priority of Tradition as theological source since the gap between Scripture and the biblical text makes the former unreliably accessible exclusively through the latter. From this account of the sources for theology — responding now to the second question enumerated above — it further follows that if distinctly *analytic* theology is to be possible at all (that is, theology which utilizes analytic philosophy as a source), it must be permitted by this Tradition. It is true that philosophical theology more generally has an ancient pedigree in Christian intellectual history, but it will still be necessary to justify the practice by the content of the teaching of the Tradition itself. This can be done by appeal to the way in which the Tradition understands the world and human nature, the principal objects of philosophical investigation, as the medium by which the divine-human dialog is undertaken. These issues will be discussed and further elaborated throughout the course of the present article.

⁵ Trigg, *Origen*, 210, 271 n. 3 notes the “uncharacteristic error” which Origen makes here by confusing Hadad and Jeroboam.

⁶ Sudduth, “The Contribution of Religious Experience,” 214.

In brief, then, the central thesis of the essay is this: Of Tradition, Scripture, and (analytic) philosophy, the Tradition of the Church has ultimate priority as analytic-theological source insofar as it reliably mediates the genuine, divinely revealed content of Scripture and justifies the utilization of analytic philosophy for theological purposes. The substance of the following pages thus consists in a reflection on analytic-theological methodology through an analysis of the nature and interrelations of Tradition, Scripture, and (analytic) philosophy as analytic-theological sources. Insofar as it utilizes arguments which draw from Tradition, Scripture, and analytic philosophy, the essay itself constitutes an exercise in analytic theology, attempting to demonstrate by example the very method which it proposes. The first section of the body of this paper elucidates the crucial distinction and gap between Scripture, on the one hand, and the biblical text, on the other. The second section describes the function of the Tradition of the Church as the means by which this “grand canyon” can be crossed, attempting to demonstrate the essential priority of Tradition relative to the other theological sources. Finally, in the third section, it expounds a particular theological-metaphysical commitment of the Tradition, one found in sources as diverse as Origen and Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, which justifies the analytic-theological appeal to philosophy through an understanding of the world as the medium for the divine-human dialog.

2 The distinction between the biblical text and Scripture

The Sadducees approached Jesus with a thought experiment about a woman married to seven different brothers, intending to demonstrate the absurdity of the doctrine of the Resurrection. In His reply, Christ attributes their error to ignorance of the Scriptures (Matt 22:29).⁷ This rejoinder is remarkable for the fact that it implicitly distinguishes the Sadducees’ indisputable familiarity with the biblical text, on the one hand, from genuine knowledge of the Scriptures, on the other. It is worth elaborating in greater detail, particularly for its significant implications with respect to the authority and priority of Tradition as theological source. This dominical saying allows that a person be profoundly familiar with the biblical text — able to recite long passages from memory, capable of citing the *loci classici* of various theological disputes chapter and verse, and so on — without *ipso facto* having genuine knowledge of the Scriptures. How can this be possible? What does this distinction amount to?

Essentially, the distinction between the biblical text and Scripture is described by St. Hilary of Poitiers: *Scripturae enim non in legendo sunt, sed in intelligendo* — “The Scriptures are not in the reading, but in the understanding.”⁸ At this juncture, it may be helpful to consider some phenomenological reflections on the experience of reading the biblical text. When a person engages in reading, she opens herself up to “hear the voice” of its author.⁹ This is a part of the phenomenology of reading; it is experientially similar to the listening portion of a dialog, in which the “voice” of a personality different from that of the reader is heard.¹⁰ This experience of the “voice” of the author is a constant in every instance of reading. However, it sometimes happens that the “voice” of one and the same text “speaks” variously to different persons reading it, differently even to the same person over the course of time. This certainly happens for persons who frequently read the biblical texts, especially if they take up the study of some theological tradition or other concurrently with their divine readings. The Pentecostal Christian who does not pray the Rosary will not discern the same prophecy in the words of Mary’s *Magnificat* as the Roman Catholic: “Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:48). The resurrection of the dead man who touched Elisha’s bones (2 Kgs 13:20-1) or the healing of the sick through contact with various articles that Paul had touched (Acts 19:11-12) will not be similarly significant for the Eastern Orthodox, who venerates the relics of the saints, and the Reformed Presbyterian, who does not. The crushing of the Suffering Servant “for

⁷ All subsequent citations are from the NRSV.

⁸ Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, 17, 75.

⁹ Knapp and Michaels, “Against Theory,” 726 note that the very act of interpretation assumes the supposition of an author who intends to communicate a message in some language.

¹⁰ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning*, 234 writes that “meaning, mediated by text, is the communicative activity of a genuine ‘other.’”

our iniquities” (Isa 53:5) clearly, for Origen, referred to Christ, though for his learned Jewish interlocutors it spoke rather of the sufferings of Israel, considered as a single person (*Contra Celsum* I, §§54-5). When Douglas Moo and Douglas Campbell read Paul say that the righteousness of God has now been revealed apart from the Law (Rom 3:21), they “hear” the same “voice” of Paul, but not as communicating the same message.¹¹ Indeed, the quincentenary of the Reformation invites reflection on the profound multiplication of theological opinions¹² among contemporary Protestants about such important matters as Trinity and Incarnation,¹³ justification by faith (a doctrine with respect to which disagreement called for anathema: Gal 1:6-9),¹⁴ the nature of hell and future punishment,¹⁵ the legitimacy of the ordination of women,¹⁶ the relationship of Christianity to other religious traditions,¹⁷ and the moral-spiritual quality of erotic same-sex relationships. Irrespective of the opinion being proposed, there is some person to be found maintaining that her position is the teaching of the Scriptures. And it is further possible — indeed, it is the case for many — that a single person can “hear” the “voice” of the biblical text affirming contradictory things as she traverses the length and breadth of the Christian theological landscape in the course of a lifetime. There are, further, the more mundane experiences of variety in biblical readings: inexplicably, by some hermeneutical magic and apart from the voluntary control of the reader, certain passages go from being clear to obscure and *vice versa*, at one time saying one thing and at another, saying something else.

It is obvious, then, that the experience of reading the Bible can be impressively varied, even for a single person. Of course, the biblical text itself may remain unchanged during this entire process — suppose that a person only ever reads one version of it — and the Christian doctrine of God plausibly rules out the option that the divinity intends to communicate one thing to a certain person and something contradictory to another, or even to transmit mutually exclusive doctrinal messages to a single person over time. It follows that all these changes are taking place solely within the consciousness of the reader herself, where the “dialog” takes place and the “voice” of God in the biblical text is really to be encountered. These reflections illustrate the fundamental difference (and distance) between the biblical text and the Scriptures. What is held in the hands is one thing, and what is encountered or “created” in the consciousness of the reader as she interprets the text is (or at least can be) quite another.¹⁸ The biblical texts, considered in themselves as pages with various ink markings on them, are intrinsically meaningless, existing as human artifacts

¹¹ See Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*; Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*. Moo, in his 2010 review of Campbell's book, raises various objections to Campbell's *The Deliverance of God*.

¹² Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible* discusses the problem of “pervasive interpretive pluralism” within the American evangelical context. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel* proposes a vision for a genuinely catholic “mere Protestant Christianity” that might not be hopelessly susceptible to endless schism.

¹³ Dale Tuggy is an important contributor to the Christological and Trinitarian discussions from a unitarian perspective. An example of his work: Tuggy, “Divine Deception and Monotheism.”

¹⁴ See Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction* for an overview of the contemporary manifestation of this controversy. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* helpfully distinguishes three distinct paradigms for interpreting Pauline soteriology and proposes a particular sort of reading, one which is developed in greater detail in Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*. See <http://www.thepaulpage.com/new-perspective/bibliography/> for a long bibliography of notable contributions to this debate.

¹⁵ Citing only voices from within the evangelical Protestant community: MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* argues for a universalist doctrine; *Rethinking Hell* presents various readings in defense of a “conditionalist” or annihilationist picture; and Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* presents one popular defense of the traditionalist conception of hell.

¹⁶ One particularly important contribution to this debate which addresses traditional perspectives and arguments is Jewett, *The Ordination of Women*.

¹⁷ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* and Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions* provide good introductions to the complex terrain of the theology of religions.

¹⁸ A reviewer suggested helpful parallels to the proposed distinction between the biblical text and Scripture. Alston, *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning*, for instance, distinguishes between the sentential act, the uttering of some sentence in conformity with grammatical rules, and the illocutionary act, which carries a particular content (2). The biblical text, considered in itself, can be likened to an embodied, physical sentential act, similar to the way in which Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* interprets texts along the lines of speech acts.

without a substantial existence of their own.¹⁹ They only have meaning when approached with reference to the intention and understanding of their authors (including the divine Author Who inspired their composition: 2 Tim 3:16).²⁰ When they are read aright, the texts mediate the divine message and the consciousness of the reader comes into contact with Scripture, the essence of which is “not the letter, but the meaning,” according to St. Jerome (*Dialogue against the Luciferians* §28). In an important sense, too, the biblical texts are intended to become embodiments of the minds of their authors, so that some particular understanding of the world and of God can be communicated and taken up by others. As Vanhoozer says, “human authors are indeed ‘incarnate’ in their texts... A text is an extension of one’s self into the world, through communicative action.”²¹ Therefore, to the extent that the experience of these texts is the same as that which the authors would themselves have of them, the biblical texts are being encountered as Scriptures,²² whereas if the reader understands the “voice” of the text to be saying something unrecognizable to its author (most importantly, to its divine Author), then the Scriptures are not being encountered in the consciousness of the reader at all but rather something else.

Now, because the experience of the “voice” of the text remains a constant, regardless of the locutionary content being discerned by the reader, and because a person discerns this “voice” to be emerging somehow from the biblical text she holds in her hands, a person forms the mistaken impression that the biblical text and the Scriptures are one and the same thing. Moreover, because she does not encounter the Tradition in the text but outside of it, she comes to think of Scripture and Tradition as separate theological sources, of which one must be subordinated to the other. But it is possible to be intimately acquainted with the minutest details of the biblical text and yet have never encountered (not to have genuine knowledge of) the Scriptures, which demonstrates their fundamental difference.

A text which intends sincerely to communicate some message is composed as a kind of embodiment of the mind of its author (or an extension of the self of the author, as Vanhoozer phrases it), and so the validity of a particular reader’s interpretation of the text is judged with reference to this prior authorial mind. To the extent that the reader has a different mind than that of the author — suppose she does not have a good grasp of the author’s language, or she has a different understanding of the nature of the world — she will inevitably misread the text in various ways, all the while hearing the “voice” of the text suggesting her misreading. Since mindlessly reading a text is clearly neither possible nor desirable, it follows that a responsible reader, one who demonstrates sincere concern to understand that which is being communicated, ought to assume the mind of the author of the text.²³ But how can this assumption be accomplished? Though there are certainly a variety of ways, the most straightforward and sure method is through posing the author various questions about what she meant by saying this or that. Insofar as this method is impossible to implement (short of recourse to mediums and telepathy) in the case

¹⁹ Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 13-14 rejects the notion that the meaning of the text is intrinsic, independent of authorial intention, on the grounds that the text considered abstractly in itself has no determinate meaning. See Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 164ff. for a discussion of artifacts and accidental form. It seems evident enough that a text is an artifact with an only accidental form, and consequently its “meaning” or “characteristic behavior” is not intrinsic but relative to the use to which it is put by its author. This distinguishes them from natural substances whose “meaning” or “characteristic behavior” is intrinsic to their being.

²⁰ The supposition of a divine Author permits a meaning of the text which is beyond that understood or grasped or intended by its proximate human author (cf. 1 Pet 1:10-12).

²¹ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning*, 229.

²² This is intended to be understood with respect to those biblical texts which try to communicate some content or message. It is obvious that a threat is not supposed to be experienced by the reader in entirely the same way that it is experienced by its author except with respect to the content about the world which is implicitly being communicated by the threat (e.g., the danger of damnation if a person does not repent).

²³ This talk of “assuming the author’s mind” is not as obscure or as mystical as it might initially seem. The idea is that a person ought to approach a text with the same dispositions, commitments, beliefs, background, and so on as the text’s author, to the extent that this is possible. These things, which can be shared by multiple persons and thus are capable of multiple instantiation, constitute roughly what is meant by “mind” in this context; they are what are being embodied in the text, whether intentionally or not, since “communicative agents [e.g. authors] are not disembodied minds but embodied persons who form part of a language community” (Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning*, 231).

of authors who are no longer among the living, such as Vergil or Shakespeare or Laozi, it follows that the interpretations of their works are only ever probable, dependent on the extent to which we can assume their minds and approach their works as they would. Thus, a sort of hermeneutical pragmatism is probably reasonable with respect to the interpretation of such texts: a particular reading is valuable to the extent that it makes sense of the data, but should not be held with religious fervor and fidelity against all objections and future developments.

Notice what follows from this: if the biblical texts only had human authors who are now long dead, inaccessible as such to those who do not consort with witches, it would follow that the interpretation of the biblical texts is also at best only ever probable and thus subject to the same kind of fundamentally non-religious hermeneutical pragmatism. No reading of the text could justifiably motivate a willingness to die for one's faith. However, there is undeniably no hermeneutical pragmatism present in the injunction of Jude: "Contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). If a faith has been entrusted once for all to a particular body of persons, it follows that it is not endlessly subject to interpretation and re-interpretation according to the trends and findings of the present day. Rather, it was entirely received and must be kept essentially whole in perpetuity.²⁴ And since the faith which saves is connected with the Scriptures — "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3) — it is evident that Christ's Incarnation becomes in part an intervention in the hermeneutical activities of the community of God's people. Their endless misreading, attributable to the lack of a godly mind among them, had to be refuted and set right by the true Author of the Scriptures Himself, and this what Christ does when He corrects the Sadducees and Pharisees on so many instances. Indeed, it might have seemed that the requirement imposed on the reader to assume the mind of the author asked an impossibility in the case of the God-breathed Writings: "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" (Rom 11:34; 1 Cor 2:16). But "what is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27), specifically through the Incarnation: Jesus is a human being with mind of God,²⁵ and since what one person thinks can be thought by another, He demonstrates at the same time that this mind can be shared by others who learn from Him. As Paul says, "we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). The dominical teaching which was handed down by Jesus becomes a bridge that allows the apostles to encounter the genuine Scriptures when they pick up the biblical texts and read.

Of course, reading the biblical texts is an intrinsically uncertain and dangerous thing. It is uncertain because a person can devote her life to their profound study and yet not genuinely know the Scriptures, as the Sadducees and Pharisees prove.²⁶ But it is dangerous because, in contradistinction to other texts, the "voice" encountered in the reading of the biblical texts is taken to be God's own voice, so that whatever a devout person discerns it to be saying is taken at face value, even if the message is very sorely mistaken and confused. The "voice" which the Pharisees encountered in the biblical texts told them that doing good was not permitted on the Sabbath, and because Christ acted contrary to the "voice" they heard, they were willing to kill him for disobeying its commandment (Mark 3:1-6). Likewise, Paul's enemies heard the "voice" of the biblical text — perhaps that text which calls the circumcision of the household of Abraham an "everlasting covenant" (Gen 17:13) — telling them that the Gentiles had to be circumcised and to take up obedience to the Mosaic Law, a message which the apostle considered to "nullify the grace of God" and to make the death of Christ "for nothing" (Gal 2:21). Seeing this danger, the Incarnation of the Son of God constitutes a significant authorial intervention in the hermeneutical activity of the people of Israel. Christ sees the inability of the biblical text to speak for itself and determines to come to earth, to teach humans how they can encounter the Scriptures in their biblical readings, "interpreting to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27).

²⁴ "[T]he Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes" (*Dei Verbum* II, §8). This does not, however, exclude the further, natural development and organic elaboration of the faith once-for-all received. Growth and development is one thing, but revision and reinterpretation, quite another. The faith "develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit ... through the contemplation and study of made by believers."

²⁵ Do not interpret this along the lines of Apollinarism.

²⁶ These persons were also closer in time and context to the original biblical authors than any contemporary scholars are, yet they *still* did not "get it right."

The direction of the dialectic until this point naturally leads to the following question: given the intrinsic uncertainty and danger of reading the biblical texts, what “mechanism” has Christ established for the perpetuation of the true teachings of the Scriptures? What abiding bridge has He constructed for enabling readers to traverse the gap between the biblical text and the Scriptures? Certainly, Christ is not present in such a manner as to permit being asked directly about this or that matter, and while prayer is undoubtedly an essential for Christian study of the biblical text, nevertheless very many people, all of whom claim to pray to Jesus, come up with different readings of the same biblical texts. Similar considerations apply to the suggestion of some kind of inward activity of the Holy Spirit: so long as no objective means by which the Spirit leads the interpretation of the Church is specified, anybody with any proposed interpretation can claim the Holy Spirit as her guide. To suppose that the texts of the New Testament themselves serve this purpose is an obvious nonstarter, since they are as much subject to interpretation as the Old Testament texts; there are things in the letters of “our beloved brother Paul” which are “hard to understand” and “which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction” (2 Pet 3:15-16). In their case, too, there is a gap to be crossed between the text and Scripture. In fact, no canon of texts can serve this function: as William J. Abraham notes, the establishment of the canon by itself proved insufficient to preserve the purity of the Church’s teaching against the creative “interpretations” of the Gnostics in keeping with their goals and commitments; there was need of the *regula fidei*.²⁷ Indeed, what is needed is the continued presence of the Authorial mind of the Scriptures in the community of the Church, embodied in some person (or persons) outside of the text, by reference to whom the true meaning of the biblical text can be determined and the Scriptures genuinely read and encountered — *quod omnes dicunt Traditionem*.

3 On the priority of Tradition

The establishment of Tradition as the “mechanism” put in place by Christ for the perpetuation of the true teaching, as well as the ultimate priority of Tradition as analytic-theological source, can be fruitfully considered from the following angle. St. Thomas Aquinas addresses the fascinating question of whether Christ should have committed His doctrine to writing. Among the various arguments *pro* that he introduces into the discussion is the following:

To Christ, who came to enlighten them that sit in darkness (Lk. 1:79), it belonged to remove occasions of error, and to open out the road to faith. Now He would have done this by putting His teaching into writing: for Augustine says (*De Consensu Evang.* i) that “some there are who wonder why our Lord wrote nothing, so that we have to believe what others have written about Him. Especially do those pagans ask this question who dare not blame or blaspheme Christ, and who ascribe to Him most excellent, but merely human, wisdom. These say that the disciples made out the Master to be more than He really was when they said that He was the Son of God and the Word of God, by whom all things were made.” And farther on he adds: “It seems as though they were prepared to believe whatever He might have written of Himself, but not what others at their discretion published about Him.” Therefore it seems that Christ should have Himself committed His doctrine to writing.²⁸

The purpose of Christ’s advent was “to enlighten them that sit in darkness,” “to remove occasions of error,” and “to open out the road to faith,” but it appears that the method He has chosen to communicate His gospel (namely, through the mediation of His apostles) fundamentally undermines this. St. Augustine noted the pagan argument that Christ’s own words about Himself would have been credible, but the apostles’ words are not since they seem to ascribe too much to Him in calling him the Son and Word of God. Implicit in this objection may be a worry about interpretation, since there is no better authority for confirming the meaning of a person’s statements and teachings than the person herself; the interpretation of another, however, can be inappropriately affected by admiration, by idolization, and so on. In a similar spirit, a contemporary version of the objection to Christ’s decision not to commit His doctrines to writing might be offered, one which considers this problem of interpretation from the perspective of Christian experience in the present, an issue which was illustrated in the previous section of this paper. Would it not have been far preferable

²⁷ Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 36.

²⁸ ST III, q. 42, a. 4.

for Christ to have written a Gospel of His own, making use of terms carefully chosen in His omniscience to communicate the essentials of His teaching, with as little ambiguity and “room for interpretation” as possible?

The response given by St. Thomas begins as follows:

It was fitting that Christ should not commit His doctrine to writing. First, on account of His dignity: for the more excellent the teacher, the more excellent should be his manner of teaching. Consequently it was fitting that Christ, as the most excellent of teachers, should adopt that manner of teaching whereby His doctrine is imprinted on the hearts of His hearers; wherefore it is written (Mt. 7:29) that “He was teaching them as one having power.” And so it was that among the Gentiles, Pythagoras and Socrates, who were teachers of great excellence, were unwilling to write anything. For writings are ordained, as to an end, unto the imprinting of doctrine in the hearts of the hearers.²⁹

It is evident that Christ has chosen to communicate the Gospel principally through His apostles, a decision which proved to be a stumbling block for non-Christians in the time of St. Augustine. A person has access to Christ in no other way (with the exception of miraculous visitation) than through the apostolic testimony. Here St. Thomas justifies the decision on the grounds that it demonstrates a commitment to teach in a more excellent manner, namely by imprinting His teaching onto the hearts of His listeners. Christ’s object was to instruct by changing the person as a whole, and not merely by communicating some message in an objective manner, to be approached by the curious as an object of study. This truly does constitute a more excellent manner of teaching since, if successfully implemented, it guarantees the faithful transmission of teaching to subsequent generations: the mind of the teacher has been recreated within the student, who in turn operates and teaches in keeping with it, recreating within herself the experience of the teacher in her own approach of the texts and doctrines, perhaps even developing previously unspecified ideas in greater detail, naturally and organically, in conformity with the essence or foundation of the teaching originally received as she “treasures these things in her heart” (*Dei Verbum* II, §8; cf. Luke 2:19, 51). The testimony and teaching of the apostles is trustworthy for this reason: they have “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16) and their experience of the biblical texts is the same as His.

Much follows from this of significance for the problem of interpretation implicit in the objections considered above. From the beginning, in having chosen to communicate His Gospel to the world through the apostles, Jesus becomes inseparable from them, being “with them always” (cf. Matt 28:18-20). Thus He can say that the acceptance or rejection of His apostles is altogether equal to the acceptance or rejection of Christ and of God the Father Himself (Matt 10:40; Luke 10:16; John 13:20). A person consequently cannot become a disciple of Christ except by becoming a disciple of the apostles and welcoming them into her life, a lesson which the first generation of Christians appreciated well: upon conversion and baptism, they devoted themselves to the teaching and fellowship of the apostles (Acts 2:42), being taught by them and spending time with them. It follows, furthermore, that Christ Himself teaches through His apostles, by the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt 10:19-20), so that there is not an unhappy distance between the apostolic preacher and the Object of his preaching, as Augustine’s pagan objectors reckoned. Through them, the presence of the Authorial Mind behind the Scriptures is preserved, and the hermeneutical pragmatism and uncertainty described in the previous section are avoided. Indeed, it is evident from the testimony of the New Testament itself that the apostles exercised an authority apart in their approach to teaching within the context of the Church on the basis of their unique relationship to Jesus, their teacher (cf. Matt 23:8-11). There is the obvious example of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), whose decisions were enforced through personal visitations of the apostles going “from town to town” (Acts 16:4). Peter and John’s visit to Samaria upon hearing of conversions in that place (Acts 8:14) demonstrates the concern of the Church to maintain a certain uniformity of teaching and practice. First John 4:6 offers an even more striking example: “We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” This is the same “we” that introduces the epistle with an appeal to the authority of an empirical witness: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the

²⁹ Ibid.

word of life” (1:1). It is evident that teaching authority is at stake in the epistle, since it was written in light of “those who would deceive” its target audience (2:26). The apostolic community and its teaching authority, therefore, is proposed as a definitive measure of truth and falsity as regards doctrines about Jesus, and this because they learned from Christ Himself, Whose teaching is imprinted upon their hearts.

The apostles’ goal was the same as that of their Master: to see the image of Christ formed in their disciples (cf. Gal 4:19), a process to which they contributed as much by the apostolic teaching as also by personal example (cf. 1 Cor 11:1). But if Christ sent the apostles because He had taught them and because His teaching was imprinted upon their hearts, the apostles also knew to establish teaching authorities within their churches to keep their place. Such a person, entrusted with the *episkopê* shared by the apostles as teachers (cf. Acts 1:20), had to be himself “an apt teacher” (1 Tim 3:2). This means, certainly, that the doctrine of Christ had to be imprinted on his heart as much as it was on that of the apostles, so that Christ would again be present in the “pastors and teachers” whom He established “for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:12-13). The presence of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, as Teacher of the Church, is therefore extended through the apostles to those who would succeed them, who in turn would exercise a particular authority in the presentation and interpretation of that doctrine which is imprinted on their hearts. Or, as St. Ignatius of Antioch put it, the bishops are the mind of Christ throughout the world, just as Christ is to Christians the mind of the Father (*Letter to the Ephesians* 3:2). Finally, this teaching of Christ would later become embodied or instanced in the New Testament, and the latter would always have to be interpreted in conformity with the teaching antecedently received through the apostles and teachers.

These brief considerations will help to elucidate the nature of the priority of Tradition as theological source, especially its priority to the biblical text. It would be well, first, to provide summary definitions of the theological sources as they have been discussed here. By “Tradition” is meant *that extra-textual (and thus extra-biblical) structure of doctrines and practices, beliefs, perspectives, and commitments which are passed on from teacher to student concretely, in person, through direct instruction and personal example, embodied in the Christian community.*³⁰ Thus, the Christian Tradition is the same as genuine Christianity, lived and believed and taught as it was by Jesus to the apostles, and then by the apostles to those who would believe through them. As Rahner says, the first generation of the apostolic Church (or at least the apostles and those closest to them) was “nothing other than the really heard and absorbed *traditio Jesu Christi* to humanity.”³¹ On the other hand, the “biblical texts” are *the texts of the Old and New Testaments themselves, understood as mere ink on paper, things which can be held in the hands.* These are distinct from the “Scriptures” or “Scripture,” which are what is encountered in the consciousness of the reader who rightly interprets the biblical texts, whose mind comes to match the mind of the text’s author (or Author).

There are at least the following two senses in which Tradition is prior to the biblical texts. In the first place, distinctly Christian Tradition is obviously chronologically prior to the New Testament texts inasmuch

³⁰ The definition of Tradition here offered, as well as much of the subsequent argumentation, follows Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*. It is evident, too, that the argument intends to discuss Tradition, as opposed to the multiple traditions found in various places. A reviewer asked why Tradition must be “extra-textual.” Can’t a text be a part of a tradition? No, because a text considered in itself doesn’t mean anything; it is just pages marked with ink. Considered as a speech act *per* Vanhoozer, it has a particular meaning which its author attempts to communicate to others through the mediation of the textual artifact, but it would be more accurate to say that the text embodies its tradition — it expresses its fundamental commitments in a manner conforming to its particular style, etc. — rather than being itself constitutive of that tradition. A tradition is a “world” of ideas and practices that can come to be manifested or shared with others in a text. MacIntyre, for instance, says that “all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought” (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222). Thus, a text, as an artefactual concretization of some bit of reasoning, is strictly speaking an embodiment or instantiation of a tradition, rather than constitutive of it.

³¹ Rahner, “Scripture and Tradition,” 102. A reviewer suggested that this definition excludes fundamentalists, evangelicals, Pentecostals, etc. from the domain of Christianity, since they do not share the conception of Tradition being proposed here. That doesn’t follow, however, since they can still embody the Tradition, however imperfectly, even without doing so consciously. To the extent that they embody the Tradition, they are Christians, and many do embody it to a considerable extent — they pray, they believe in Jesus, etc.

as Jesus' teachings and the practices and structures of the Christian Church preexisted the composition of any of the gospels or of the epistles. In this way, the New Testament was never, at any point in its early history, supposed to be read or interpreted independently of the apostolic Tradition. But, going further, Tradition is logically or epistemically or hermeneutically prior to the New Testament text for the reason that it provides the proper context in which it can be interpreted as a concrete communicative act. John Meyendorff expresses the point as follows: "Scripture ... presupposes Tradition ... as a *milieu* in which it becomes understandable and meaningful."³² Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae notes texts such as 1 Cor 11:2 — "I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you" (see also 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Thess 2:15; 3:16) — as instances in which "The Holy Apostle Paul, in order that his epistles be understood, refers back to his oral preaching, which, it appears, has remained in the community as Tradition and through Tradition."³³ That the biblical text in many places anticipates a readership familiar with and situated within the context of its Tradition is also evident from the manner in which it is written. For instance, the first mention of Mary Magdalene in the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and John occurs at the scene of the crucifixion, where she is not given a detailed introduction as in Luke's Gospel (Luke 8:2). This introduction-*sans*-introduction into the narrative anticipates that the reader will know who this person is without being told, evidently expecting a Christian audience belonging to the Tradition. Arguments of this sort can be repeated endlessly about various persons mentioned in the biblical texts (e.g. the first biblical mention of Joshua at Exod 17:9-10 in comparison with Exod 24:13; Alexander and Rufus in Mark 15:21; etc.). Moreover, Lydia McGrew has recently illustrated a great number of undesigned coincidences between the gospels and other New Testament texts, many of which demonstrate the presupposition on the part of the gospel writer of a readership already familiar with the Christian Tradition. For instance, McGrew argues that the mention of Christ's flesh and blood in John 6 is almost certainly a reference to the institution of the Lord's Supper, though only John contains the prior discourse and only the Synoptics contain the words of institution.³⁴ This demonstrates that John anticipated a readership already familiar with the words of institution and the Eucharistic practices and interpretation of the Church, since the matter of eating Christ's flesh and blood is not explained in any greater detail later on in his gospel. In all these ways and more, the New Testament is quite obviously an instantiation or embodiment of the antecedently existent Christian Tradition, a "mode of tradition and objectification of tradition,"³⁵ in the same way that Paul's letters to the Galatians or the Romans are intended to be instantiations or embodiments of his thought on the topic of justification by faith (among other things). What exists in Paul's mind and what he taught to others is prior to what was printed on paper and, more generally, what existed in the Church, most especially the apostles and teachers, is prior to what was eventually concretized in the New Testament. Thus, in order properly to be understood, they must be read with the "mind" of their authors, i.e., by the Tradition,³⁶ just as another person's thoughts, intentions, and the rest must be known in order for her communicative acts to be intelligible and properly interpreted.

It also emerges from this discussion that the Christian Tradition, though chronologically posterior to the Old Testament texts, is nevertheless prior to them in this other sense. This is an idea which, in the present context, it will only be possible to develop briefly but is nevertheless worth mentioning. The Christian Tradition is a continuation and further embodiment of the "mind of Christ," who interprets the Old Testament with a unique authority (Matt 7:28-9). Christ interprets in a manner distinct from that of the scribes because He alone is in a position to know the intending meaning of their divine Author, whereas every scribe and rabbi until Him interpreted the text from a position of considerable distance from their Author. Christ knows that the Scriptures testify on His behalf (John 5:39) because He is the God Who

³² Meyendorff, *Living Tradition*, 16. The point may be phrased more precisely, in keeping with the terminology of this essay, as follows: Tradition is the proper context in light of which the reading of the biblical text becomes a contact with Scripture (in Meyendorff's terms, Scripture is intelligible and meaningful).

³³ Stăniloae, *Teologia*, 59. All quotations from this work are my own translation.

³⁴ McGrew, *Hidden*, 41-8.

³⁵ Rahner, "Scripture and Tradition," 103.

³⁶ Cf. Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, 83: "The [Patristic] appeal to Tradition was actually an appeal to the mind of the Church."

inspired them (cf. John 1:1-2, 14; 2 Tim 3:16). Consequently, when Christ teaches His apostles and disciples how the Scriptures ought to be interpreted (Luke 24:27), He is transforming them into His likeness as their Author, sharing a bit of His mind and understanding, so that they can comprehend what He intended to communicate through them in the proper spirit. In this way is the Christian Tradition hermeneutically prior to the Old Testament biblical texts, even if chronologically posterior, because it reads them with the mind of Christ, Who as their Author is prior to them.

The priority of Christian Tradition for the interpretation of the biblical texts is evidenced in various parts of the New Testament, especially those which have already been cited above. In an important way, the biblical texts are subtly replaced as the center of Christian theological activity, so that the apostolic testimony becomes the measure and guide for their interpretation. In other words, Scripture is encountered in the biblical text only through the Tradition. No matter what the biblical “voice” might seem to a person to be teaching — suppose someone is impressed by the description the circumcision of every boy within the household of Abraham as an “everlasting covenant” according to divine decree (Gen 17:13) — Gentile converts to Christianity are not to be compelled to be circumcised and they are still equal children of Abraham, whereas whatever Gentile does circumcise himself or compel others to do the same is effectively renouncing Christianity (Gal 2:21; 5:2-4). Likewise, despite every possible appearance to the contrary motivated by whatever considerations conceivable, whether scriptural or philosophical, any person who denies that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” is not from God (1 John 4:2-3). Indeed, the basis for discerning the spirit of truth from the spirit of error is agreement with the apostolic community (4:6), and this, again, because it embodies the mind of Christ. Any interpretation of the biblical text which contradicts this Tradition, however apparently justified, is to be rejected.

Various questions arise at this juncture. The argument thus far has demonstrated the priority of Tradition to the biblical text and its indispensability for their interpretation. What relation does it bear to Scripture? The opinion of *Dei Verbum* seems plausible:

Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence. Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God (*Dei Verbum* §§9-10).

In a sense, Tradition and Scripture are the same thing — the infallible saving truth of God — which is accessed in different modes: Scripture is encountered through the biblical texts, and Tradition, outside of them. Neither one enjoys any ontological nor authoritative priority to the other, since they are not ultimately separate things. But there is nevertheless a kind of methodological priority relevant for the task of the theologian: in order to be sure that Scripture is encountered in the reading of the biblical text and not something else, the theologian has need of Tradition. This point was well made by St. Vincent of Lérins, who appealed to Tradition as a proper authority for controlling the interpretation of various passages:

But here some one perhaps will ask, Since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church’s interpretation? For this reason—because, owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters. For Novatian expounds it one way, Sabellius another, Donatus another, Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, another, Photinus, Apollinaris, Priscillian, another, Iovinian, Pelagius, Celestius, another, lastly, Nestorius another. Therefore, it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the rule for the right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of Ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation (*Commonitorium* §5).

Georges Florovsky comments: “Tradition was not, according to St. Vincent, an independent substance, nor was it a complementary source of faith. ‘Ecclesiastical understanding’ could not add anything to the

Scripture. But it was the only means to ascertain and to disclose the true meaning of Scripture.”³⁷ This line of thinking further shows that the composition of the New Testament cannot mark the replacement of the apostolic Tradition as a source for Christian faith: Scripture and Tradition must both be perpetually present in the Church, since the one is not reliably accessible without the other:

Tradition was in the Early Church, first of all, an hermeneutical principle and method. Scripture could be rightly and fully assessed and understood only in the light and in the context of the living Apostolic Tradition, which was an integral factor of Christian existence. It was so, of course, not because Tradition could add anything to what has been manifested in the Scripture, but because it provided that living context, the comprehensive perspective, in which only the true “intention” and the total “design” of the Holy Writ, of Divine Revelation itself, could be detected and grasped.³⁸

The persistence of the Tradition over time through the bishops performs an essential role in maintaining the purity of the faith of the Church and its access to the Scriptures: just as the teaching of Christ was imprinted on the hearts of His apostles, in virtue of which they were able to teach others the truth about the Scriptures and about the Gospel, and these in turn appointed teachers who had the same teaching imprinted on their own hearts, so also this process has to be repeated again and again until the return of Christ. This is affirmed in the start of the entry on “Tradition” in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*:

God has revealed himself to man, and he has completed and perfected his salutary self-disclosure in the life and teaching of the incarnate Word, so that no new public revelation of God to man is possible till the parousia. In the encounter with Christ, in faith in his word and in allowing his grace to work, man receives his supernatural revelation. But how does the fullness of God’s revelation reach the individual incorrupt and unmixed with error, so that the individual knows that he is really addressed and challenged by the word of God and not by one of the many claims of men?

The Christian answer to this question is: through the tradition of the Church. The word of God and his gift of grace reach man through the preaching handed down in the Church. The mystery of Christ remains present in history because there is a fellowship of believers which in the vital process of life, doctrine and worship preserves the word of God, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, through all the changes of history, and thus hands it on safely to all generations until the Lord comes in glory.³⁹

Of course, the Tradition is “not just a transmission of inherited doctrines ... but rather the continuous life in the truth.”⁴⁰ The whole Church embodies the Tradition in what it does as Church.

It is certain that Christ, as God, was not ignorant of the intrinsic uncertainty and danger of biblical readings. Consequently, His decision not to commit His doctrines to writing demonstrates a fundamental option for the embodied Tradition as the primary and ultimate means by which the Gospel should be communicated, learned, and lived.⁴¹ Because the Tradition is the key to the Scriptures and essentially one with them, it is just as infallible and binding. A person cannot become a Christian except by “clinging” to the apostles and learning from them, just as the crippled beggar from the beautiful gate of the Temple “clung to Peter and John” after being healed (Acts 3:11), and in the same way, the principal task of a theologian — whether she is of an analytic sort or subscribes to another methodology altogether — is to “cling to the apostles” by seeking to imprint this Tradition on the heart, to gain the mind of Christ which is also the mind of the apostles, so as better to understand what they have written. Perhaps it would be fair to say, in light

³⁷ Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, 74-5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 79. There appears to be no *a priori* reason to suppose that everything in the genuine Tradition must be formally or even materially present in the biblical texts, though Florovsky’s summary suggests that the Church Fathers affirmed the material sufficiency of Scripture. Perhaps it is, perhaps it isn’t. See Congar, *Meaning of Tradition*, 40-2. Rahner, “Scripture and Tradition,” 104 suggests that “we cannot find any really clear traditional answer to this precise question” of the material sufficiency of Scripture. A person might raise the question of the value of historical-critical study for the sake of interpreting the biblical text. Whatever else might be said for this method for biblical interpretation, it cannot ultimately be judged better than the one which Christ himself established, viz. Tradition, since Christ is omnipotent and omniscient and could have established any method whatsoever adequate for the task.

³⁹ Weger, “Tradition,” 1728-9.

⁴⁰ Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, 80.

⁴¹ Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos*, 14ff. emphasizes the fact that every person’s faith is always received from somebody else, through the mediation of another person of faith. This demonstrates Tradition as the primary means by which faith is gained.

of the above, that a theologian cannot be genuinely Christian if she is not also Traditional, and deviations from the Tradition, in contradistinction to organic developments and advances, ought to be rejected. The theologian ought to think it a capital crime “to think other than the faith of the Church holds about the divine dogmas” (Origen, *Hom. on Lev. VIII*, 11, 6), whatever she might take the “voice” of the biblical text to be telling her. As much in her abstract reflection as in her approach of the Scriptures, the theologian ought to seek first to gain the mind of the Tradition. How is she to gain this mind? Merely reading the biblical texts themselves is not sufficient, as obviously results from what has been said thus far, because these must be read by the Tradition itself. It is possible to make biblical reading the singular preoccupation of one’s life without understanding them in the light of the Tradition. The mind of the Tradition must be gained by the theologian now in the same way that Christ intended every Christian to gain it: by living allegiance to and committed faith in the Church, by learning from its doctors and teachers who have the doctrine of Christ imprinted on their hearts. It is not difficult to tell these persons apart from others. Consider that the Church recognized the apostolic voice its New Testament canon and did not recognize the voice of other, rejected texts. The apostles, though they are many and diverse personalities, nevertheless all seem to speak the same language – not *koinê* Greek, but the language of Christ. In the same way, there is a discernible “Churchish” accent in those figures that are faithful to this Tradition, one that the Church has recognized and lifted up as an example. Theology ought to be done, in other words, with a special concern to learn from the Church Fathers and Doctors, those “faithful in the land” whom the theologian invites to live with her (cf. Ps 101:6), by always attempting to think in their way when they are embodying the Tradition.⁴²

4 The possibility of analytic theology

The argument thus far has been that Tradition represents the fundamental authority and source for Christian theology in general. Now, if distinctly *analytic* theology is to be a possibility at all, it must be consistent with the Tradition. Analytic theology, the reader will recall, takes (analytic) philosophy as a theological source in addition to Tradition and Scripture. What follows is a justification of the practice of analytic theology through the content of the Tradition and a suggestion for the way in which the theologian ought to understand the relative authority of this source and the appropriate way to utilize it. For this purpose, the discussion in this section of the essay will draw principally from Origen and from Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, though other sources certainly could have been used.⁴³

In a sense, the justification of the practice of philosophical theology (of which genus analytic theology is a species) might seem redundant, inasmuch as there is “a clear tradition of ‘philosophical theology as a way of life’ in the Christian tradition,” of which analytic theology is an authentic development.⁴⁴ This section attempts to outline a particular aspect of the Traditional-theological conceptual framework that allows for this practice, which constitutes a different kind of justification of the practice than an appeal to precedents within the Tradition.⁴⁵

⁴² Georges Florovsky wrote that the Church Fathers are preferable to modern theologians for their realism: they wrote about what God had done for human beings, whereas the moderns were concerned with “what man can believe” (*Bible, Church, Tradition*, 16).

⁴³ Obvious examples include Sts. Augustine, John of Damascus, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, and others who utilized philosophical argumentation in their theological writings.

⁴⁴ Wood, “Analytic Theology as a Way of Life,” 48.

⁴⁵ Of course, Fr. Stăniloae’s authority and prominence as a theologian within the Eastern Orthodox tradition is recognized (Turcescu (ed.), *Dumitru Stăniloae*, 7) but the inclusion of Origen might seem strange at first glance. The opinion of Hans Urs von Balthasar is that Origen’s importance for Christian thought is “all but impossible to overestimate,” his invisible all-presence surpassing that of any other Christian theologian, and that ranking Origen “beside Augustine and Thomas simply accords him his rightful place in this history” (*Origen*, 1-2). This essay assumes without argument the interpretation of such authors as de Lubac, *History and Spirit* (2007), Crouzel, *Origen* (1989), and von Balthasar, *Origen: Spirit & Fire* (1984), according to which Origen was a genuinely Traditional theologian of the Church. Hanson, *Origen’s Doctrine of Tradition* (2004) is more skeptical and Protestant in his evaluation of the Alexandrian. Ilaria Ramelli argues that “Origen, strictly speaking, did not ... suffer any formal expulsion from the church” (*Christian Doctrine*, 737). Let these remarks suffice for this issue.

The Egyptians have gold to which the children of Israel are entitled for use in the worship of God — that is the essential thesis of Origen's *Letter to Gregory* with respect to philosophical theology and communicates the Alexandrian's basic attitude towards philosophy. This also comes out in his *Hom. on Gen. XIII*, where the relationship between Christianity and the philosophical schools is discussed in the interpretation of the disputes between Isaac and the Philistines over Abraham's wells (Gen 26:17-22). Isaac, for Origen, represents Christ, whereas the Philistines more generally represent forces inimical to the truth of Christianity. For instance, Isaac's servants who dig up the wells of Abraham are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as well as Paul, Peter, James, and Jude, who interpret the Old Testament with reference to Christ, whereas their Jewish opponents are the quarreling Philistines (§2). Indeed, Origen writes, "each of us who serves the word of God digs wells and seeks 'living water,' from which he may renew his hearers" (§3), making the preacher into a servant of Isaac. Who, then, might be the quarrelsome Philistines of Origen's day? He writes:

But also if anyone who has a secular education should now hear me preaching, he is perhaps saying: "The things you are saying belong to us, and is the learning of our science. This very eloquence with which you discuss and teach is ours." And, like some Philistine, he stirs up quarrels with me saying: "You dug a well in my soil." And he will seem right to himself to lay claim to those things which are of his own land.

But I shall respond to these things that all the earth has waters, but he who is a Philistine and "minds earthly things" does not know how to find water in all the earth. He does not know how to find rational understanding and the image of God in every soul. He does not know how to discover that there can be faith, piety, and religion in everything. What does it benefit you to have learning and not know how to use it? What do you benefit to have a word and not know how to speak?⁴⁶

The argument seems to suggest that Christianity, on the one hand, and secular intellectual endeavors and domains of study, on the other, are two spheres lacking any tangent or overlap, so that the use of the allegorical method or of pagan rhetorical science is objectionable. Origen's striking response is to propose that "all the earth has waters," that "there can be faith, piety, and religion in everything," and that secular authors do not know how to make proper use of the things of value in their possession. To use the terminology of the *Letter*, the Egyptians do not know how properly to worship the true God with their vessels of silver and gold, and so the Israelites take this up in order to do it properly, in accordance with divine instruction. This saying of Origen communicates a fundamental openness of the world towards God, ascribing to it the intrinsic potential to serve the divine-human relationship. This seems to be justified by Paul's affirmation to the Greeks that God intended humans to "search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him" (Acts 17:27), having nothing at their disposal except the natural world.

What does this "fundamental openness of the world to God" mean, exactly? An echo of this sentiment — or perhaps it would be better to say: a further incarnation of the same Spirit — appears in the reflections of Fr. Stăniloae on the subject of natural revelation, consideration of which may assist in understanding the implications of what was quoted above from Origen. He writes:

The cosmos is organized in a manner corresponding to our capacity for knowledge. The cosmos and human nature, as intimately connected to the cosmos, bear the imprint of rationality, whereas the human being — a creature of God — is further endowed with reason, capable of consciously knowing the rationality of the cosmos and of its own nature.⁴⁷

For Fr. Stăniloae, the rationality of the cosmos, on the one hand, and the rationality of the human person, on the other, complement each other, constituting in this way the very substance of natural revelation. This reciprocity between the intelligibility of being and the rational capacity of the human person to understand the world provides the arena for a "natural" friendship between the Creator and the creature.⁴⁸ The rationality of the cosmos speaks to its origins in the creative activity of a transcendental, personal Creator, whereas

⁴⁶ From Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*.

⁴⁷ Stăniloae, *Teologia*, 10.

⁴⁸ "Natural" (as opposed to supernatural) appears as it does, in quotation marks, because, as Stăniloae emphasizes, "The Orthodox Church does not separate natural revelation from supernatural revelation. Natural revelation is fully known and understood in the light of supernatural revelation; alternatively, natural revelation is given and continually maintained by God through a supernatural act of His. For that reason, St. Maximos the Confessor does not make an essential distinction between natural revelation and supernatural or biblical revelation." *Teologia*, 9.

the cosmos itself would be meaningless, along with its rationality, if there were not given human rationality ordered to understanding it on the basis of its rationality. In our faith, the rationality of the cosmos has a meaning only if it is thought before its creation, as well as throughout its persistence, by a creative, thinking being, which brings it into existence for the sake of being known by a being for whom it was created and, through this, in order to accomplish a dialog between itself and that created rational being through its mediation.⁴⁹

How is this dialog accomplished? The human person, perceiving the rationality of the cosmos, understands that it must have been created by a transcendent intelligence. This is in keeping with the Scriptures: “The Lord *by wisdom* founded the earth; *by understanding* he established the heavens; *by his knowledge* the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew” (Prov 3:19-20; emphasis added). Seeing, furthermore, that the world can be known and utilized for her own ends, whereas the human person is neither known nor used by the world, she concludes that the world exists for her sake.⁵⁰ Here, too, there is a recognition that God has given humankind “dominion over the works of [His] hands; [He has] put all things under their feet” (Ps 8:6; cf. Gen 1:26-8). Going further still: gazing inward and finding a desire “to love and to be loved more and more, tending towards a love that is absolute and endless,” a love which “we cannot find except in relation with an infinite and absolute Person,” the human person realizes her nature “cannot find its fulfillment as person except in communion with a superior personal being.”⁵¹ This Person cannot be a part of the created cosmos, which is entirely finite, but can only be its Creator. In this way, Fr. Stăniloae draws the conclusion that “the world as object is just the medium of a dialog of thoughts and loving actions between the supreme rational Person and human rational persons, just as between these latter themselves.”⁵² Hence the world and everything within it (the impulses of human nature included) have a fundamentally religious character because they are created by God to act as the medium through which He engages in dialog with human beings. The world as such and the nature of the human person are a pathway to God. The world is not to be avoided, nor is it utterly irrelevant for Christian faith and fellowship with God, because God means to approach the human person in friendship, as well as to summon the human person to this friendship, through the world itself. This is why there can be “faith, piety, and religion in everything,” as Origen says, which activities all have the divine-human dialog as their proper setting: all things created by God are ordered to be used to this end, as much the external created order as the impulses of human nature themselves. “All the earth has waters,” and what is made explicit in Fr. Stăniloae’s writings is implicit in Origen’s remark during the homily.

This “fundamental openness of the world to God” might helpfully be further illustrated by a brief excursion into the theology of icons. St. John of Damascus argues against some who held that “God ought only to be apprehended spiritually” (*Three Treatises on the Divine Images* I, §36; II, §32), a way of thinking which intrinsically denies the adequacy of the natural world to mediate the divine-human dialog. An important aspect of the Damascene’s rejoinder consists in the appeal to the bodily existence of the human person: “since I am a human being and wear a body, I long to have communion in a bodily way with what is holy and to see it” depicted in images. The prohibition of depictions of God and earthly things in the Mosaic Law owed to ignorance about the true nature and character of God, ignorance done away with through the advent of Christ (*Three Treatises* I, §§5-8, 22, etc.), and was not an absolute condemnation of the mediation of the divine-human dialog by material means. The iconoclastic position demanded an immaterialization of the divine-human dialog; it looked upon the material world with suspicion and doubted its capacity for the task of mediation.⁵³ Giakalis writes that, apart from the divinization of the Eucharistic bread, the iconoclasts “appear to reject any other possibility of the sanctification of [material] reality.”⁵⁴ On the other hand,

⁴⁹ Stăniloae, *Teologia*, 10-11.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 14, 19. St. Catherine of Siena expresses the sentiment thus: “The soul cannot live without love. She always wants to love something because love is the stuff she is made of, and through love I created her” (*The Dialogue* §51).

⁵² Stăniloae, *Teologia*, 21.

⁵³ Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, 65ff.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 68. This way of thinking might seem to lead to the view that holds Scripture (i.e., the biblical text) to be the sole infallible authority for faith and morals, since it is believed to be supernaturally inspired and it speaks “spiritually” to the mind of the reader rather than to her senses. It is not surprising, then, that many Protestants also reject icons.

St. John of Damascus's iconophile position emphasizes the role of the material in mediating the divine-human dialog, so that the veneration of the icon becomes the veneration of the person depicted within it, a mediation which is appropriate for the embodied condition of the human being. The iconographic tradition of the Church is thus another instantiation of the conviction of the Tradition regarding the "openness" of the world to God, and similar remarks may be made with reference to the Eucharist, as well.⁵⁵

In light of this greater scheme of things, then, it is perfectly possible for the Egyptians to have vessels of silver and gold; in other words, it is possible for philosophical inquiry, which is concerned with the world in which humans live and their experiences within it, to reveal items of religious significance. Much like the theology of icons, this is connected to the embodied existence of humans: as residents of the world, they must be able to know it — as Fr. Stăniloae puts it, the intelligibility of the world complements the rationality of human persons — in order to live within it. Thus, philosophy as investigation into the nature of things can come upon items of religious significance, since the intention from the moment of creation was that the human person could come to God through the mediation of the created order, upon which she reflects as she knows it more deeply. Origen maintains that this has actually happened in *Hom. on Gen. XIV*, where he interprets the pact between Isaac and Abimelech (Gen 26:26-33) along the following lines:

This Abimelech, as I see it, does not always have peace with Isaac, but sometimes he disagrees, at other times he seeks peace. If you remember how, in what preceeds [*sic*], we said of Abimelech that he represents the learned and wise of the world, who have comprehended many things even of the truth through the learning of philosophy, you can understand how he can be neither always in dissension nor always at peace with Isaac who represents the Word of God in the Law. For philosophy is neither opposed to everything in the Law of God nor in harmony with everything.

For many of the philosophers write that there is one God who has created all things. In this they agree with the Law of God. Some also have added this, that God both made and rules all things by his Word and it is the Word of God by which all things are directed. In this they write in harmony not only with the Law, but with the Gospels. Indeed almost the total philosophy which is called moral and natural holds the same views we do. But it disagrees with us when it says matter is coeternal with God. It disagrees when it denies that God is concerned about mortal things but that his providence is confined beyond the spaces of the lunar sphere. They disagree with us when they appraise the lives of those being born by the courses of the stars. They disagree when they say this world is permanent and is to have no end. But there are also many other things in which they either disagree with us or are in harmony.

And, therefore, in accordance with this figure, Abimelech is sometimes described as being at peace with Isaac and sometimes as disagreeing (*Hom. on Gen. XIV*, §3).

There is no room for a naïve rejection of natural theology in the understanding of Origen. The philosophers who affirm the unique existence of God the Creator (and even of his Word, by which all things were made and are directed to their ends) have come upon Him by their reasoning, in however limited a fashion. The idea may be, as Fr. Stăniloae wrote, that there is no *purely* "natural" theology (see n. 48 above), because nature itself has a supernatural cause with respect to its origins, its conservation over time, and its ultimate goal.⁵⁶ Hanson comments: "As with Clement [of Alexandria], so with Origen, the distinction between natural and revealed knowledge which we to-day might draw is far from clear. In their view all truth comes from God through his Word."⁵⁷

Yet at the same time, the philosophers have need of instruction from the Word of God. This is the meaning of the pact between Isaac and Abimelech and his associates:

⁵⁵ See Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* ch. 3, especially the conclusions at the end of the chapter.

⁵⁶ It would appear *prima facie* to result from this that Barth's rejection of natural theology as "trying to know God apart from God's revelation," apart from "God's self-revelation" (Schwöbel, "Theology," 32) is confused and unTraditional. The natural world, appropriately understood, constitutes a self-revelation of God, so that there is no problem. (In any case, God reveals Himself through Christ, Who is a human being and thus a natural object. The role of nature in the mediation of revelation is not avoided.) The Church Fathers followed Origen in their appreciation of the philosophical concept of God of Greek philosophy, a genuinely natural theology. Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (2010) lament this influence of Hellenistic philosophy in the development of the classical theistic tradition, which they judge to be a cause of modern atheism (34; ch. 4). The counterargument of the present essay is that they have departed from the Tradition of the Church, which recognized its God in this philosophical construct, even if "through a glass, darkly."

⁵⁷ Hanson, *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition*, 172.

But also I do not think that this was of idle concern to the Holy Spirit, who writes these things, to relate that two others came with Abimelech, that is “Ochozath his kinsman and Phicol the leader of his army.”

Now *Ochozath* means “containing” and *Phicol* “the mouth of all,” but *Abimelech* himself means “my father is king.” These three, in my opinion, figuratively represent all philosophy, which is divided into three parts among them: logic, physics, ethics, that is, rational, natural, moral. The rational is that which acknowledges God to be father of all, that is, Abimelech. The natural is that which is fixed and contains all things, as depending on the forces of nature itself, which Ochozath, which means “containing,” professes to be. The moral is that which is in the mouth of all and pertains to all and is situated in the mouth of all because of the likeness of the common precepts. That Phicol, which means “the mouth of all,” signifies this.

All these, therefore, come to the Law of God in the learning of instructions of this kind and say: “We certainly saw that the Lord is with you and we said: ‘Let there be an oath between us and you and let us establish a covenant with you, lest you do evil with us, but as we have not cursed you, so also you are blessed by the Lord’” (*Hom. on Gen. XIV, §3*).

This same need for correction is also implicit in the allegory to which Origen appeals in his *Letter to Gregory*: the vessels of silver and gold were used in the worship of God in accordance with the instruction that Moses received from the Lord, not merely in keeping with the Israelites’ intuitions and the habits of the surrounding pagan cultures. From these remarks, it emerges clearly that philosophy is of a relative and secondary value for the theological project as far as Origen is concerned, and its value in some instance or other is to be judged by the independent standard of Christian teaching: Gregory is to accept only those things that are useful as an introduction or adjunct to Christianity, which clearly presupposes a prior grasp of and commitment to the substance of Christian Tradition as a whole.

5 Concluding remarks

The argument of this essay vis-à-vis the sources for analytic theology can thus be summarized as follows. Tradition, being the bridge which makes the “grand canyon” between the biblical text and Scripture reliably traversable, has foremost priority as source for the analytic theological task, as a consequence of which the analytic theologian must be a Christian, a faithful adherent of the Tradition of the Church, who makes wise use of analytic philosophy, rather than an analytic philosopher of sorts trying her hand at Christian theology.⁵⁸ This means that the tools and insights of philosophy serve for the elucidation and defense of the revealed truth of God, which is communicated in Scripture and made accessible through the interpretive key of the Tradition of the Church. Philosophy can serve as a source for theology because the world and human nature, which are the principal objects of philosophical study, are intended by God to mediate the divine-human dialog, as the Tradition teaches. Consequently, truths of religious significance can be discovered by philosophical investigation. But philosophy is a handmaiden to theology, and the “vessels of silver and gold” of the philosophers are taken up by Christian theologians for the sake of the right worship of God, according to revealed truth, rather than in keeping with the rules and interests of the “Egyptians.” Philosophy does not impose external standards on this revelation, to which it must comply to be rationally acceptable.

The attitude of the analytic theologian ought to be one of utter loyalty to the Church. She ought to say, as did Origen, “I hope to be a man of the Church. I hope to be addressed not by the name of some heresiarch, but by the name of Christ. I hope to have his name, which is blessed upon the earth. I desire, both in deed and in thought, both to be and to be called a Christian” (*Hom. on Luke XVI, 6*).⁵⁹ Strange theological proposals ought to be rejected on the grounds that they are “foreign to the Church’s faith” (*Hom. on Gen. III, 2*), even if justified on apparently biblical grounds, and she ought to maintain that “that only is to be believed as the truth which in no way conflicts with the tradition of the church and the apostles” (*On First Principles I, Preface, §2*). Or, in the words of St. Anselm,

⁵⁸ Pereira, “From the Spoils of Egypt,” 224: “Unlike the so-called Gnostics, Origen did not consider himself to be an insider within the schools of Greek philosophy.”

⁵⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar places this passage as the epigraph of his *Origen: Spirit & Fire* (1984). Daley comments in the translator’s preface: “Origen’s faith and biblical theology is radically and profoundly ecclesiastical,” and this passage is “fully typical of his attitude of total adherence to the church.” (xvii).

no Christian ought to argue how things that the Catholic Church sincerely believes and verbally professes are not so, but by always adhering to the same faith without hesitation, by loving it, and by humbly living in accord to it, a Christian ought to argue how they are, inasmuch as one can look for reasons. If one can understand [some doctrine], one should thank God; if one cannot, one should bow one's head in humble veneration rather than sound off trumpets (*On the Incarnation of the Word*, §2).⁶⁰

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⁶⁰ From Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, 235.

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