

FROM BETHLEHEM TO THE VATICAN

From Bethlehem to the Vatican

A very basic introduction
to Catholic tradition and theology

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For Timothy Eugene Geering,
the student whose honest questions inspired
me to write this book.

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INTRODUCTION

Why this book?

Religion is a fascinating beast. It can elevate people, individually and collectively, to transcend their own selfish egocentrism and self-interest and replace these with care and responsibility for the common good. Religious rituals can help people overcome fear or anxiety, process grief, or mark existential moments in life. Religion can stimulate artists to paint, build, carve, and compose the monuments of any given culture. But religion also has the ability to subjugate people, to destroy and to blind, and to stimulate people to commit hideous crimes in the name of a divine entity.

Religion is an interesting phenomenon for sure, worthy of scrutinizing, criticizing, appreciating, discussing, and studying. Many people find themselves, at one point in their lives or another, drawn to this multi-faceted phenomenon. Some have intellectual or historical curiosities to appease, others want to reignite the faith of their youth, or have just embraced their new spirituality. But all those people can feel bewildered, puzzled, or even perplexed when confronted with the labyrinth that is any religion. Entering or being initiated in any religion can be a life-long intellectual and/or religious commitment.

Out of all the minor and major religions and spiritualities in the world, might they be in the present or have once been in the past, Christianity is among the most dominant ones. The Christian religion has more than two billion followers world-wide nowadays, approximately half of them being Roman Catholics, its largest denomination. This is, for one reason amongst many others, because of the historical connection between Christian evangelization and Western imperialism. For better and for worse, the Western colonial powers brought Christianity in their slipstream all over the known world. Christianity showed many faces in this regard: on the one hand, missionaries built hospitals, founded schools and orphanages, and cared in general for the sick and the outcasts, while on the other hand Christians all too often used Bible and tradition to accommodate, justify, and

sometimes even instigate the oppression of, the discrimination against, and the cultural destruction of indigenous populations and cultures.

For all those interested in Christianity and all its intriguing theological nuts and bolts, a huge array of lengthy and intellectually daunting monographs has been written by various theologians, historians, and scholars of religion: enough to fill the legendary library of Alexandria all over again. Also, there are many, *many* short introductions to Christianity, all with their own particularities of course. All well and good, but these kinds of publications do not start at the basics: they still presume some prior knowledge as to who Jesus Christ was, what the Gospels are, or who the pope might be. But what happens when this is beyond your current intellectual grasp?

Of course, Christians have a world-spanning network of church communities. And within the overall majority of those communities, people are more than welcome to join their catechism courses, leading the newly-found believers to one or more initiation rituals. There is nothing wrong with that of course – a fish wants to swim and a monkey wants to climb. Christians want to evangelize; it is in their religious DNA. But what if you are interested in Christianity on a more intellectual note? What if you are seeking a more intellectual initiation instead of a religious one? And don't forget, it has to be basic. Very basic. This book was written for all those searchers. Small in scale, considerable in its goal.

More easily accessible, intellectually sound introductions to Christianity and Christian theology are indeed needed. Many a theology student I have met during my years in Dutch academia and abroad, many a journalist I have given interviews to over the last decades, and many a friend and acquaintance whose sometimes lively, sometimes boring social gatherings I have survived, have all shown me that secularization's most strong-headed child is religious illiteracy. Since the sixties of the 20th century, at least in the Western world, people have turned away, in different ways and degrees, from organized religion, a process described with words like secularization, individualization, de-institutionalization, and liquidation. To put it quite simply: Western people have left the Christian Church in all its denominations.

This has led, in the Western world specifically, not only to a great diminishment in the societal relevance of church organizations and communities, but also to a still greatly increasing decline in church attendance, financial contributions, and church facilities. Church buildings are closing down rapidly, while the remnants of a once powerful Church struggle to maintain structural and spiritual integrity. This has also led to religious illiteracy, that is, a lack of religious and specifically Christian socialization in the generations

raised since the sixties. And this is problematic, I believe, not because the Supreme Being would be in dire need of worship and adoration by the masses, but because the Christian meta-narrative is of incredible historical influence to our modern-day society and culture, and has shown itself to be very persistent indeed.

Our legal system, our ideas about universal human rights, our political parties, our art and craftsmanship, our history, our academic attitude, our ideas of retribution and righteousness, our relation with nature and our planet, the novels we read, the musicals we enjoy, the Netflix series we watch, even the games we play: we cannot understand them without our acknowledgement of their Christian heritage and resonance, and not without at least some basic understanding of that Christian tradition. Again, not because one has to believe in the existence of the Christian God – even though I would not object to such a thing – but because one cannot otherwise understand Western society as it is today.

In my work for the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology (part of Tilburg University, the Netherlands), I have come across many theology students of all ages, types of socialization, religious self-identifications, sexes, genders, and societal backgrounds. Some of my theology students were born and raised as (Roman) Catholics; usually they have a fairly decent idea of the basics of the Christian tradition, even though their relative privilege tends to make them blind towards their own biases. Other students are from different Christian denominations, also providing them with at least a basic understanding of Christianity, but – quite reasonably – leaving them often somewhat lacking in knowledge on the intricacies of (Roman) Catholic tradition; quite a challenge if one is studying *Catholic* theology.

Yet other students have recently converted to Christianity from an atheist, agnostic, or other non-Christian background, providing them with much fervor and enthusiasm no doubt, but also – usually – with quite some disadvantage in socialization too. Then there are students who do not identify as Christian or do not feel religiously inclined; they pursue theology because of an intellectual hunger, a feat that does not necessarily disqualify other, sometimes implicit, kinds of longing. Others may be drawn to a career in religion education or spiritual care. Many face the same momentous challenge before them: how to penetrate a religion intellectually without – sometimes – any prior knowledge of that faith? It is for them and for all the others, that this book was especially written. For those students – in academia or in life in general – who know (almost) nothing, but want to know everything.

This book is a very short and very basic introduction to Christian tradition and theology in general and Catholic tradition and theology specifically. Why Catholicism, you might ask? Not because there is no merit or goodness to be found in other Christian denomina-

tions or other religions and spiritualities. But wanting to write any book, let alone a very short introduction, on Christian tradition and theology in all its various and countless denominations is an impossible task for anyone. One has to choose a focus point, a point of departure, a lens through which one can look at the surrounding world. And my choice is to start from the (Roman) Catholic branch of Christianity. It is the Christian branch that I was born and raised on, the branch of Christianity that I studied and am still studying academically, and the branch where I still work every day.

How to use this book

This book has three parts, a very apt number for one on Catholic theology, as you will understand after finishing it.

The first part is on the Christian tradition in the broadest sense of the word. It covers the history and various traditions, Churches, and denominations of Christianity, with a focus on Roman Catholicism; not because of theological *hubris*, but because no book – how learned and voluminous it may be – can pretend to oversee all the corners and canyons of the Christian Churches, denominations, and movements at a single glance. This part covers topics like: the Bible (and why Christians spell it with a capital letter), the figure and significance of Jesus Christ, the tormented history of Christianity, the liturgical practices, and the sacraments, but also ecclesial ('of the church') structures and key figures. Finally, this part focuses on the relationship between Church and state (seen from the ecclesial perspective), some major topics of Christian ethics (including controversial ones, like abortion and euthanasia), the position of Mary, the Mother of God, and the relationship between Christianity and the other (world) religions (again from an ecclesial position). I will end this part by discussing some of the painful 'dossiers' that are also attached to the Christian tradition and that are very often associated with Christianity by its many internal and external critics: the crusades, the inquisition, its involvement in Western colonialism, its androcentrism, indulgences, and the matter of sexual abuse in pastoral relationships.

The second part is on Catholic theology, again in the broadest sense of the word. It covers the 'classic' theological tracts and it adds some new, contemporary ones. From discussions on God as Creator, Savior, and Whole-Maker (or Father, Son, and Spirit) via those on human nature, the Church, and the sacraments, to those on the other religions, on contemporary culture, and the world's apocalyptic ending. It is inevitable that there is some overlap

between Part 1 and Part 2, but the first is on Christian (Catholic) *tradition*, while the second is on Christian (Catholic) *theology*, the latter being a systematic reflection on the former.

In addition, there are two ‘localized’ appendices, one specifically dedicated to the (modern) history of religion in the Netherlands (and Belgium), and one specifically for aspiring novice students of theology at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology. The latter covers the very basics of theology as an academic discipline at the beginning of the 21st century, including practical matters like reading, interpreting, and creating bibliographical data, using style sheets, and understanding academic genres (from journal articles to edited volumes), but also some pointers on ‘academic hygiene’ concerning the use of quotations and paraphrasing, as well as how to prevent plagiarism and other forms of academic ‘fraud’.

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A note on historical dates

In this book I use the traditional Western calendar designations *Anno Domini* (Latin: ‘in the year of [our] Lord [Jesus Christ]’, abbreviated as AD) and *Before Christ* (abbreviated as BC). These terms have been in use for centuries. In modern academic and interfaith contexts, the alternatives *Common Era* (CE) and *Before Common Era* (BCE) are sometimes preferred because they provide a religiously neutral way to reference the same dates. Although CE/BCE were developed later, both systems refer to the same chronological framework. For

clarity and consistency and because of the explicit Christian theological context of this book, I have chosen to use AD/BC throughout this book.

AI disclaimer

For this book, I have made use of ChatGPT as a conversational partner. This means that I have conversed with ChatGPT to brainstorm on structure, sequences, selections, et cetera, but not to write the texts for me.