

## From the previous lecture

1. To know is to make a judgment based on evidence.

To believe is to make a judgment based on trust

2. Most of what we claim to know we in fact believe.

We have not proved it from our own testing of evidence

3. Objectivity in knowledge requires more than logic

It is the fruit of being an authentic subject

4. Lonergan's five imperatives

- Be attentive
- Be intelligent
- Be reasonable
- Be responsible
- Believe (Love can open up reality that is beyond reason and logic)

5. Criteria for making the choice to believe

## From the previous lecture

‘Faith is our response to God, who reveals Himself and gives Himself to us at the same time bringing us a superabundant light as we search for the ultimate meaning of life’(Catechism n. 26)

‘Human dignity rests above all on the fact that we are called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed to us as soon as we come into being. For if we exist it is because God has created us through love, and through love continues to hold us in existence. We cannot live fully according to truth unless we freely acknowledge that love and entrust ourselves to our Creator’(Vat II, GS n.19)

From the previous lecture

God invites everyone to divine love-communion

Religious Experience in every culture, in every epoch

To believe in God is to believe that genuine religious experience is the experience of being drawn into communion with everything that exists in such a way as to be drawn through everything and beyond everything into communion with the One who is the Source of everything that exists – into communion with the Source, one name for which is ‘God’.

Christianity respects the numinous (Word) and the mystical (Spirit)

## 1 John 1:1-3



‘We declare to you what we have heard,  
what we have seen with our eyes,  
what we have looked at and touched with  
our hands, concerning the word of life —  
this life was revealed, and we have seen it  
and testify to it, and declare to you the  
eternal life that was with the Father and was  
revealed to us. We declare to you what we  
have seen and heard so that you may have  
communion with us;  
and truly our communion is with the Father  
and with his Son Jesus Christ.’

#### 4. Since reality is intelligible, God must exist

The Catechism speaks of ‘converging and convincing arguments’ for the existence of God (n. 31): ‘These can predispose a person to faith and help us see that faith is not opposed to reason’(n. 35). These arguments are not proofs in the mathematical or scientific sense. Nor should we look for such proofs. Most of our human experiences lie outside the range of the empirical sciences. As Karl Rahner says:

‘The natural scientists should constantly accept theology’s reminder that the world view, which is actually a part of their lives and not just something conceived by the monopolistic claims of the natural sciences, is something which cannot be determined by their natural science alone; that spirit, freedom, fidelity, love, the infinite question of existence cannot be “explained” by natural science alone’(Theological Investigations, volume XXI, page 65).

If we examine our experiences we realise that there are many things that we 'know' without being able to demonstrate the truth of what we know in such a way as to convince others, especially if they do not want to be convinced. As the Catechism makes clear (n. 36-38), arguments for the existence of God do not demand consent. Openness to the transcendent requires 'self-surrender' (n. 37). If we are open to mystery and willing to surrender ourselves to love, we can come to see that the world as we know it makes sense only if God exists.

Intelligent inquiry leads to the insight that 'God' exists

It is time to make a point that is of the most profound significance. Over and over again we learn that our inquiring mind is connecting us with reality. Again and again we find answers to our questions. If something is happening it must be able to happen, and we hope to be able to understand the processes that account for it happening. Sometimes we manage to work out the reason. At other times the explanation evades us. But we never doubt that there is an explanation. In other words we take it for granted that reality is intelligible. In other words we take it for granted that reality is intelligible. The whole of our life experience (including the marvellous success of science) reinforces the correctness of approaching reality as ultimately intelligible.

However, when we ask the big question ('How come this being exists?'), the beings that we experience (including ourselves) do not provide a satisfactory answer. I know that you exist. With the help of some knowledge of your history plus some elementary biology, I can come to know why you came into being. But when I ask how it is that you are now existing, I don't find the answer by knowing you. It is a fact that you are. But there was a time when you weren't. You do not have within yourself a satisfactory explanation of your being. If you did you would exist, not just in fact, but necessarily. If I want a fully satisfying explanation of your existing I have to look outside you. However, wherever I look I come up against the same problem. Everything I know exists, like you, in fact but not necessarily. It is – to use the technical word – contingent. I have learned to trust that my inquiring mind does connect me with reality. You are, so there must exist an explanation. Something accounts for you existing now. What is it?



The only conclusion we can draw is that there must exist here and now a Being that lies outside the limits of my experience and knowledge, a Being that does not require an explanation outside itself for its existence, a Being that exists, not only in fact, but necessarily, since it contains within itself a fully satisfactory explanation of its existence. The ultimate explanation for the existence of contingent being is the existence of a necessarily existing Being. It is this necessarily existing Being that we call 'God'.

That 'God' exists is something we know. The ultimate intelligibility of being, reason and logic requires it. However, 'God' is not an object of direct experience or knowledge. We cannot form comprehensive concepts of 'God', for the Being that must exist if what we know has meaning, this Being transcends the capacity of the human mind to know, and, in that sense, remains absolutely 'mysterious'.

## 5. how we conceive God is a matter of belief, not knowledge

As a child I believed many things that I outgrew. I believed, for example, in the existence of Santa Claus. However, when I came to the point of asking my parents whether Santa Claus actually exists, they knew I was ready to leave the magical world of childhood and hear the truth. I also believed that Adam and Eve were real people who started off the human race. It wasn't till much later that I came to realise that the account in the Bible is a story, not a factual record. The truths conveyed by the story are profound, but they are not on the level of fact. As for 'God' it wasn't till I became aware of the existence of atheists, and of the many ways in which different cultures imagine 'God' that I had to question whether there is a 'God', and if so, how should I think of this 'God'. As a child I never asked such questions, for 'God' was central to the view of life into which I was socialised, acculturated, educated, in our family and in the life of our local parish and school.

When in my late teens I looked into the question of 'God' I realised that to deny the existence of a Being that is the ultimate cause of everything that exists (an idea expressed in the notion of 'Creator') is to conclude that everything I know, including myself, is ultimately meaningless. This struck me, and still strikes me, as a rejection of what I know about myself as an inquiring being, and the partial, but obvious, success of sustained inquiry. Science is a standout example of successful inquiry and discovery of the truth, and we are forever growing in our knowledge of the human psyche and of communities thanks to advances in psychology and the social sciences. Since the process outlined above continues to connect me with what is real, and since the spontaneous drive to inquire knows no limit, surely there are answers to my questions even if they lie beyond my ability to comprehend. Since the world, as far as I am able to ascertain, is fundamentally meaningful, surely things must ultimately make sense.

I came to the conclusion that 'God', in the sense of a necessarily existing Being that explains the existence of the world that I know, must exist. In drawing this conclusion I am supported by others who have reached the same conclusion, and my conclusion is reinforced by my experience, but ultimately it is based on the demands of intelligence and reason.

Other people (atheists) choose differently. To my mind in opting for atheism they are conceding that the spontaneous, dynamic, drive of intelligence and everything we come to know as real are ultimately meaningless. Sometimes they appear to be rejecting a 'God' that I, too, reject: a 'God' that is too small, a 'God' that is conceived in ways that offend reason. I will come back to shortly. Still others (agnostics) find the topic too difficult and choose to live their life without exploring the question of the existence of 'God'. It seems to me that they can do this only by leaving aside too much of what makes life worthwhile, and by not putting enough trust in the dynamism of the human spirit in its questioning and in its quest for truth.

## 6. Faulty concepts of 'God'

There are many concepts of 'God' that are handed down in the intimacy of the family and in the public life of most cultures. These concepts arise from our desire to make sense of experience. Some concepts express true insight and stand up to careful investigation; others are the result of oversight, and express a misunderstanding that upon careful reflection should be rejected. If we find accurate and inaccurate concepts in all other areas of human thinking, we should not be surprised to find that concepts of 'God' not only vary from culture to culture and from person to person, but that they represent a mixture of insights and oversights, of understanding and misunderstanding. After all, our concepts of 'God' aim to express our most profound insights into what reality ultimately is.

No human concept can encompass 'God' (see Catechism n. 42). The best we can do is to choose between contrary concepts the one that expresses better our experience, and so points us better towards the Reality that, necessarily, lies beyond our comprehension.

People differ markedly in the meanings and values that they associate with the term 'God'. Because 'God' is not just another thing or the sum of all things, certain forms of Buddhism rightly conceive of 'God' as 'No thing'. Because of the experience of relating to 'God' in personal ways, Jews, Hindus, Christians, Moslems and many others conceive of 'God' in personal terms.

In recent centuries, every concept of 'God' has come under increasing suspicion. There was a time when the existence of lightning was taken as proof of the existence of the sky-'God' Zeus, and when the powerful, irrational feelings that seem to take over our psyche were judged to be the result of the action of vengeful supernatural beings. There was a time when victory in war was understood as proof of divine approval, while defeat demonstrated divine disapproval. For good reasons such misconceptions have been rejected. The rejection, however, has gone so far that today 'God' appears to some to be nothing more than a category invented to cover whatever we do not yet understand. With the methodical and cumulative acquisition of knowledge in many areas, some argue that the very idea of 'God' is a leftover from a now unacceptable naïveté.

There is no doubt that certain conceptions of 'God' are clearly erroneous. People rightly reject a 'God' who is envisaged as an extra, existing outside our world and history and experience, who controls things from the outside, as it were, and is directly responsible for whatever happens, intervening in our history at will, or in answer to prayer understood as a magical power requiring a divine response. The history of religious practice, in earlier times and still in our own day, frequently reveals a so-called 'God' who is glorified at the expense of humanity. Some people seem to feel the need to put humanity down in order to raise 'God' up. What is more, this 'God' seems in large measure to be a projection of human need and human wishful thinking, or human avoidance of the harshness of reality.



Rather than face up to reality, we seem to want to invent the kind of 'God' to whom we can escape. Rather than face the here and now and do what we can about it, we seem to want to escape to a hereafter where everything will be as we wish things were here.

There is no point in speaking of a 'God' who does not require of us that we face the whole truth of our real limits, but also of the real greatness of being human. Any serious inquiry about 'God' must be one that leads to a better understanding of and communion with our actual selves and our real world.

We are rightly suspicious of a 'God' who serves to support vested interests. We still hear 'God' being used to support the ideology of military and economic victors over the vanquished. We still experience the rich and learned, and those in possession of power of all kinds, speaking and acting in the name of "God", when they are seen to be propping up their own position. Such a 'God' is constantly being discredited and we have no desire here to carry on the charade. Who can take seriously a 'God' who supports apartheid, or patriarchy, or hypocritical piety, or a refusal to accept tried and tested facts in any sphere? The treatment meted out to Galileo in the name of 'God' is more common than we might dare to admit. If there is value in talking about 'God' at all, it can only be about a 'God' in which everything participates, and therefore a 'God' who supports the intrinsic and inalienable dignity of everything that exists, a 'God' of truth and of justice.

Freud worked with people with seriously dysfunctional psyches. Some of their religious attitudes were little more than a jumble of infantile illusions. His findings alert us to the need to ask ourselves how free we are of such illusions? Let us be committed to name illusions when we are fortunate or diligent enough to discover them. Any claim we might make to relate to 'God' is worthless if our relationship fails to draw us on to maturity by clarifying our identity, deepening our intimacy and enlarging our capacity for generating the love that provides the only environment in which we and others can grow.

It is clear that all our concepts of 'God' are precisely our concepts. They enjoy, therefore, all the strengths of human intelligence and imagination; but they also necessarily suffer from all the weaknesses (see Catechism n. 42). In recent centuries, some have gone beyond criticising incorrect conceptions to reject any and every conception of 'God' as unnecessary, unhelpful and irrelevant to genuine human living and progress in knowledge. Others, while granting the need for constant refinement of our concepts of 'God', hold that the claim that 'God' exists cannot be written off simply as human projection and distortion. They hold that the claim is based on an authentic, if often unreflective, response to real human experience and intelligent inquiry, and that there is a Reality, albeit one upon which we cast our projections and which we distort. They see it as a fundamental and serious error to discard the real 'God' along with our distorted concepts.

Does rejecting the many false conceptions of 'God' justify the rejection of a 'God' who, while transcending every limited being and the whole universe of limited beings, is immanent in everything? Does it justify rejection of a 'God' who is the ultimate Reality in which everything real participates, the Being that is the reason for anything making sense, the One who is constantly sustaining, inspiring, informing and enlivening everything? Teilhard de Chardin speaks of 'God' as 'the Heart and the Beyond of everything'. The 'Heart' – because everything is held in existence by 'God' and is a radiance of 'God's' Being. The 'Beyond' – because the closer we get to the heart of anything, the more we are invited into mystery. Whatever errors are present in the ways in which 'God' is envisaged, the great religions of the world are right to continue to speak of 'God' and to explore ways of relating to this ultimate Reality 'in whom we live and move and have our being'(Acts 17:28).

However we conceive 'God', 'our human words always fall short of the mystery of God' (Catechism n. 42). The Catechism quotes Saint Thomas Aquinas: 'We cannot grasp what God is, but only what God is not, and how other things stand in relation to God'(n. 43). Human concepts are adequate only within the range of our direct empirical experience. They are inadequate when we try to put words on religious experience, for, as Saint John reminds us, 'no one has ever seen God'(John 1:18). Let us listen to Saint Justin, a philosopher-martyr of the second century:

'This very name of God is not His name, for if anyone dares to claim that God has a name, he is mad. These words of Father, God, Creator, Lord and Master, are not names but words to call Him because of His Goodness and works. The word God is not a name but an approximation, which we find natural when we attempt to explain the unexplainable'(I Apologia 61,131).

Saint Gregory of Nyssa, writing towards the close of the fourth century, has the same teaching:

‘The teaching which Scripture gives us is, I think, the following: the person who wants to see God will do so in the very fact of always following Him. The contemplation of His face is an endless walking towards Him ... There is only one way to grasp the power that transcends all intelligence: not to stop, but to keep always searching beyond what has already been grasped’(On The Canticle of Canticles, Homily 2,801).

In the fifth century Augustine writes:

‘If you have understood, then this is not God. If you were able to understand, then you would understand something else instead of God. If you were able to understand even partially, then you have deceived yourself with your own thoughts’(Sermon 52. vi. 16).



All the Christian mystics say the same. Let Saint John of the Cross, the sixteenth century Spanish mystic, speak for them:

‘However elevated God’s communications and the experiences of His presence are, and however sublime a person’s knowledge of Him may be, these are not God essentially, nor are they comparable to God, because, indeed, God is still hidden to the soul’ (Spiritual Canticle Stanza 1.3).

‘Since God is inaccessible, be careful not to concern yourself with all that your faculties can comprehend and your senses feel, so that you do not become satisfied with less and lose the lightness of soul suitable for going to God’(Sayings of Light and Love).

The pursuit of truth in any field will suffer from fundamental distortions if 'God' is overlooked. Only within the perspective of ultimate Reality can we come to a proper understanding of ourselves and of our world, and to a proper way of living in it. The history of human involvement with 'God' has its negative face, as we have already indicated. False conceptions of 'God' continue to wreak havoc in the field of human thinking and human living. The distortions and their effects can scarcely be exaggerated. The positive face is that of the human beings we acknowledge and revere as saints. And there are hosts of them in every country, in every culture, and in every generation.

What we need here, more than anywhere, is a commitment to the quest that incorporates a careful and honest reflection on the lives of those who inspire us by the obvious fruit of their own commitment. We need also to learn from our own and other people's mistakes to purify our concept of 'God' by paring away ideas that have led to a distortion of a truly human life. From the goodness, the love and the overall quality of the humanity of others we can learn to respect the insights into 'God' that inspired them. It is possible to live our daily lives without being engaged in this quest for 'God'. However, admiration for what is beautiful, and commitment to values that demonstrably enhance our experience in the world, invite us to explore the question of 'God'.

We cannot expect to achieve a completely satisfactory answer, for to do that we would need to have complete comprehension of everything that exists. Whenever we have a new experience, whenever someone new comes into our lives, we discover something more about reality, and so about 'God'. However, we can continue to refine our understanding by eliminating error and learning to modify the direction of our thinking and of our choices, inspired by the wonderful people who have gone before us and who accompany us on this most exacting and most fruitful of journeys.

## 7. Yearning to belong : the experience of love

My aim here is not to 'prove' the existence of 'God' the way one might prove the existence of something by providing incontrovertible evidence that must convince anyone willing to attend to the evidence provided. The transcendent 'God' cannot be put under a microscope. My aim is to invite you to attend to aspects of your own experience that might persuade you to continue to explore the mystery and not to dismiss it because it does not deal up the ready evidence that our empirically trained, scientific minds have come to expect.

I find my choice to believe confirmed by my experience of love. I think it is our yearning for love (our yearning to belong) that drives the quest for knowledge upon which we have been reflecting. It is our yearning for communion, the yearning that drives all our connections with reality. Our urge to know is propelled by our longing for communion. We are made for love. Love is the experience of our interconnection, our communion. The other remains other (I am not you), but another to which and to whom I belong. This is because everything we experience is drawn towards the Other in whose being we all participate, the One 'in whom we live and move and have our being'(Acts 17:28).

We are attracted outwards to ever more intimate communion with the world around us, and when we experience love (the word we use for this communion), we are attracted inwards to plumb the depths of the inner world that love discloses. Our experience is that our instinctive desire to be in love (to give and receive love and to enjoy communion) connects us to reality. Our desire, however, is limitless, like our desire to know. Nothing we directly experience can satisfy our longing. If there is no object that can satisfy our limitless desire, the desire is in the final analysis absurd. In the choice between absurdity (meaninglessness) and Mystery, why not choose Mystery: the existence of the infinite One with whom ultimately we long to be in communion – the One we call ‘God’? In the words of Augustine:

‘You have made us for Yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in You’(Confessions I.1).

It is clear that our experience of love never provides full satisfaction, for there are depths to our heart and to the world that remain to be explored. The inner well seems bottomless. Our yearning seems limitless. Our longing for love seems inexhaustible. When the yearning is partially satisfied we rightly conclude that it is not something that is merely subjective. We know that we are not living in a world of fantasy. We know that we are truly in communion with something real.



However, we also know that our yearning is not fully satisfied. We long for a love that is unconditional, unrestricted, and complete. Our limited experience of love gives us reason to trust our yearning. Is it not reasonable, then, to trust that there exists a Reality that accounts for the ultimate longing which we experience, a Reality which is its ultimate object, and which can fully satisfy us? Why would our yearning be real and trustworthy in partial matters, but ultimately be unreal and deceptive? Why would we not explore the direction in which our experiences are pointing just because they point to a Reality that transcends our present experience and so remains mysterious and beyond definition? This is the Reality I am calling 'God'.

Why not remain open to what Rahner speaks of as:

‘the one who in an incomprehensible and improbable outpouring of his love communicates himself with his inmost reality to his creatures, without being consumed in the fire of divinity, are able to receive God’s life, his very glory as their own perfection’(Theological Investigations volume XXI, page 190).

Just as knowledge that comes through love takes us to a deeper appreciation of and connection with reality than knowledge that limits itself to rational logic, so in 'knowing God':

'The human being can draw nigh to the incomprehensible God who remains a mystery only in loving surrender, not with a knowledge which brings the object known before the higher tribunal of knowing'. This is not 'a regrettable remnant of a penetrating knowledge, but rather this experience constitutes the ultimate and original essence of knowledge'(Rahner ib. pages 210-21).

We learn more through love than we can ever learn from the application of logic, critically important though logic and reason are in our search for truth.

## 8. Freedom

The choice to believe in this 'God' has necessary implications. Radically it means that my very being is received. I have nothing that I have not received. It is 'God' who sustains me in existence and inspires everything I am and do. What I in fact do and what I in fact become depends on how I choose to receive or not receive from 'God'. To the extent that I am open to welcome grace my life and my living will demonstrate the creativity of being and acting in accordance with divine inspiration. To the extent that I resist inspiration I remain distracted, out of touch, inauthentic, stunted. I am forever experiencing a being drawn to transcend my present self. I am forever experiencing a resistance, a wanting to hold on to what I perceive myself to be, a fear of the unknown, a complacency, the weight of habit. I am the consequence of the decisions I have made, for good and for ill.

## 9. A 'God' who loves and does not control

One of the key distortions that we find in the history of religions is the projection onto 'God' of the notion of control. Control plays such a big part in society that it is not surprising that those in control and those being controlled have included the concept of control in their concept of 'God'. Jesus saw 'God' as 'love', and as we adults experience it love does not control. The word 'love' though inadequate, points in the right direction. The word 'control' does not. Thinking of 'God' as 'Love' sheds light on many of the things we do know. On one level there is the reality of an expanding universe, and of gravity. People speak of the experience of the 'sacred'. This accounts for polytheism: the sacred sensed in a mountain, a stream, a grove of trees and the star-spangled heavens.

We have come to recognise the fact that everything we know is related, at a profound level, with everything else. Monotheism makes more sense of the world as we know it. There is also the reality of love between persons. If the 'God' required by intelligence and reason is Love, so many of our human experiences of the presence of love, but also of its absence, make sense. It seems to me that it is the introduction of the concept of control that pushes intelligent people in the direction of atheism.

## 10. Jesus: the revelation of God

All this points to the need for constant correction and purification of our concepts of God. Christian tradition does this by focusing on the person and the life of Jesus, drawing on the experience of his contemporaries, who found in him a perfect human expression of God. Their experience has been re-affirmed by the countless millions of those since who have looked to Jesus, and committed themselves to live as his disciples. They have found him to be indeed the 'Way' (John 14:6): the way to connect with their deepest yearnings, and the way to connect with God. Reflection on the person, life and significance of Jesus has been for Christians the richest source for their reflections on the meaning of God, and so for their reflections on the meaning of human experience. The Catechism is a summary of what we have learned by listening to Jesus and living under the guidance of his Spirit

We conclude this lecture by returning to the statement made in the Preface to the Roman Catechism (1566), quoted by the Catholic Catechism (n. 25) and referred to earlier:

‘The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love and have no other objective than to arrive at love.’





## Love changes everything

music: Andrew Lloyd Webber *Aspects of Love*  
lyric written by Charles Hart and Don Black 1991  
*Only Love: The very best of Nana Mouskouri*



Love, love changes everything:  
hands and faces, earth and sky.  
Love, love changes everything:  
how you live and how you die.  
Love can make the summer fly,  
or a night seem like a lifetime.  
Yes, love, love changes everything,  
now I tremble at your name.  
Nothing in the world will ever  
be the same.



Love, love changes everything:  
days are longer, words mean more.  
Love, love changes everything:  
pain is deeper than before.  
Love will turn your world around,  
and that world will last forever.  
Yes, love, love changes everything,  
brings you glory, brings you shame.  
Nothing in the world will ever  
be the same.



Off into the world we go,  
planning futures, shaping years.  
Love bursts in and suddenly  
all our wisdom disappears.  
Love makes fools of everyone:  
all the rules we make are broken.  
Yes, love, love changes everything:  
live or perish, in its flame.  
Love will never ever let you  
be the same.  
Love will never ever let you  
be the same!