

2. HOW DO WE KNOW GOD? THE ROLE OF FAITH

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O Lord, my faith calls on You — that faith which You have imparted to me, which You have breathed into me through the incarnation of Your Son, through the ministry of Your preacher.¹

1. This is St Augustine’s answer to the question “Why Theology?”
 - 1.1. “You have been preached unto us”
 - 1.2. “You have imparted [faith] into me”, “You have breathed [faith] into me through the incarnation of Your Son”
 - 1.3. Only this kind of “faith” can “call God”, is a way of ‘seeking God’
 - 1.4. Calling God [that is worship] already is a way of “seeking God”

2. As a result, “what is theology?”
 - 2.1. First it is an activity which has its primary location in **worship** (‘praise God’, “call God”).
 - 2.2. Then it depends on something which was **preached** to us (it comes from listening).
 - 2.3. It oscillates between the ‘thou’ and the “him/her/they”: theology is done not just by **speaking about God**, but by **speaking to God**.
 - 2.4. The “why theology” is that it is something in which we find delight – but also something on which my identity depends, since we are not just **made by God**, but also **made for God** (‘image of God’).

3. Now, most of the way in which instinctively we understand knowledge presupposes that
 - 3.1. We have to be able to achieve *certainty* about what we know
 - 3.2. And that the ideal position to achieve certainty in knowledge is neutrality, objectivity, and rationality (that is by treating everything as a “it”).
 - 3.3. This works very well for a variety of things – everything which can be reduced to an ‘object’ that is something which I can somehow put in front of me and observe from *my* viewpoint (which we call the viewpoint of ‘reason’) and with some detachment.

4. Anamorphosis:
 - 4.1. Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors* (National Gallery, London, UK)
 - 4.2. Optical phenomenon whereby the viewers can recognize an image *only* if they occupy a specific vantage point
 - i. Crucially for the metaphor, it is not the object which needs to adapt to our viewpoint
 - ii. But we need to adapt to the way in which the object gives itself to be seen, or known, by us.

¹ St Augustine, *Confessions* I.1

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5. When reflecting about faith, this is important because it means that not only with God but also in our everyday experience there are ‘things’ which we can really know only by being displaced from our position of mastery and control.
6. In particular, there are ‘things’ we can know only through *trust*.
7. It is quite interesting to see the pervasiveness of talk about trust in the realm of relationships, business, economy.
8. In the realm of relationships here are few quotations:²
 - “*I trust you* is a better compliment than *I love you* because you may not always trust the person you love but you can always love the person you trust.”
 - “When the trust level gets high enough, people transcend apparent limits, discovering new and awesome abilities of which they were previously unaware.”
 - “Trust is letting go of needing to know all the details before you open your heart.”
 - 8.1. What is the relation between *trusting* a person and *knowing* him/her?
 - 8.2. If you need to *trust* it is because you cannot know everything.
 - 8.3. A level of acquaintance with the other person is needed of course, but at one point one has to decide whether to trust or not.
 - 8.4. More importantly, trust creates a bond, increases proximity, familiarity, involvement – ability to know in a much deeper way the other person.
9. This is important when thinking about *faith* because there are two aspects in it:
 - 9.1. *Faith* can mean the sum of our beliefs, for example the content of the Creed: “I believe *that* the world was created by God, *that* Jesus is the Son of God, *that* there is resurrection from the dead” etc...
 - 9.2. But this is not the most important aspect of faith.
 - 9.3. If you are asked *why* you believe *that* the Church is the community through which we become united to God, for example, what would you answer?
 - 9.4. You would answer that it is because you have faith *in* (as opposed to *that*) God, that you *trust* God.
10. In the same way, if you are asked to say why you believe *that* your best friend is telling the truth about something, you would probably answer that it is because you believe *in* him, that you *trust* him.
11. Trust
 - 11.1. Does not give us *mastery, control, certainty*
 - 11.2. But it gives us *assurance, confidence*
 - 11.3. The greater my trust, the greater the trustworthiness of the other person is - the greater also is the assurance, the confidence.
12. There is however a significant difference between trusting a person and trusting God
 - 12.1. Even though I can never say that I know another person totally (certainty, mastery, control), I can see her, interact with her.
 - 12.2. How is this true in our relation with God?

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² From <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/11-reasons-why-trust-in-a-relationship-is-more-important-than-love/>

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13. “Faith comes by hearing” (Romans 10:17)
 - 13.1. The way God makes himself known to us, reaches us, persuades us, is by talking to us.
 - 13.2. Jesus never wrote anything, the only thing we have from him is the oral, then written *testimony* of those who lived with him – what they share with us is what they experienced:

“That which was from the beginning, which **we have heard**, which we have **seen** with our eyes, which we have **looked at** and our hands have **touched**—this we **proclaim** concerning the Word of life [...]. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have **fellowship** with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete”. (1 John 1:1-4)
14. There is one fundamental reason for this – linked to the very identity of God:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1.1)

 - 14.1. John is not only saying that God speaks, but that he is *speaking*, that is “eager to make himself known by communicating, telling, entreating, persuading” – all things he constantly does in Scripture.
 - 14.2. With Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, what God does is enter into a dialogue with humanity.
15. Significantly, **dialogue** is a mode of speaking which can be initiated even when people still do not know each other and that, if it works, only slowly, progressively builds *trust*.
16. We can see someone, know about him or her, gather information about him or her, but the way in which we come to *trust* that person is chiefly through dialogue.
17. This is apparent in the whole of Scripture, but especially in the Gospel of John, which significantly (and unlike the other gospels) presents God’s way of interacting with us through extensive dialogues between Jesus and a number of characters: Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the blind man, Thomas, Peter, Mary.
18. This is yet another way for John to explain to us the meaning of the beginning of his Gospel, when he says that God is *Word* – it means that God is ‘eager to talk to us’ and this helps us to see how God can reach us today.
 - 18.1. Not all those who *saw* Jesus believed in him – this is why Paul does not say that “faith comes from *seeing*” but that “faith comes from *hearing*”.
 - 18.2. There is a fundamental reason for this: God has no body, is invisible, he encompasses the whole of reality – this means that whatever we might ‘see’ can never be God (the way in which God manifested himself visibly in history -fire, cloud, angels- where signs, but never God himself).
 - 18.3. However, God *is* ‘Word’, that is he can and wants to make himself known to us, he is ‘eager to talk’ to us.
 - 18.4. He does not *touch* us like another human being can because he is incorporeal, but he *touches* us through his words.
19. Touching is one of most multi-layered and textured forms of human interaction.
 - 19.1. Not all kinds of bodily contact though qualify as *touching*.
 - 19.2. There is even a sense in which touching is first of all an emotional or spiritual way of reaching somebody that can *also*, but not always and not necessarily, imply bodily contact.

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- 19.3. In a crowded bus we cannot always avoid accidentally brushing against others in complete indifference to them.
- 19.4. A doctor can inspect our bodies without triggering any of the defence mechanisms constantly on the alert whenever somebody comes too close to us.
- 19.5. At the same time, in our everyday language we say that *words, stories, acts, behaviours* are 'touching' because they move us, have an impact on us, change something in us, even though they do not involve any bodily contact.
20. Physical touch is the irreplaceable way through which our sense of worth and security develops in the first days, months and years of our existence. It remains irreplaceable throughout life to convey feelings, especially love.
 - 20.1. As adults, however, we become increasingly sensitive to non-bodily emotional, spiritual and even metaphorical touch.
 - 20.2. This is confirmed by some fascinating findings in neuroscience: the area of our brain which registers physical touch is also activated when we hear metaphors of touch, as for example in 'a hard truth', 'a solid case', 'an abrasive comment'.
 - 20.3. This means that metaphorical and emotional touch affects us just as physical touch does, and often even more.
21. This equivalence between physical, metaphorical and spiritual touch is constantly at play in our relation with an invisible God, a God 'no one has ever seen' and who has found nevertheless a way of making himself known to us,³ of reaching out to us, of making himself felt by us.
22. The way God 'touches' us, reaches us, is through his words – not any words, but words that can awake, inspire, sustain in us *trust* for him – that is *faith* in him.
23. God starts to speak to us when we are still not believing in him, still not trusting him. This is confirmed by the way we see Jesus interacting with people in John's Gospel. Jesus' dialogues with the Samaritan woman, Mary, Nicodemus, Nathanael, the man born blind, the adulterous woman and Peter are very instructive about our relationship with God. They show that God is perfectly able and willing to speak, listen and answer us even when
 - 23.1. we still mistrust him (like the Samaritan woman and Thomas),
 - 23.2. have wrong ideas about him (like Nathanael and Nicodemus),
 - 23.3. cling to him for the wrong reasons (like Mary after Jesus' resurrection),
 - 23.4. cannot see him (like the man born blind),
 - 23.5. are crushed by guilt (like the adulterous woman) or are still
 - 23.6. full of wishful eagerness in our relationship with him (like Peter).
24. What God wants is *win our trust*, that we should believe *in* him – and only then also believe *that* what he promises to us is true.
25. Faith becomes possible because
 - 25.1. God *adjusts* himself to our need of progressive acquaintance to come to trust someone – and
 - 25.2. helps us to *adjust* ourselves to the way in which he can make himself known – not as an 'object' we can master, but as a 'subject' we have to learn to trust.

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³ Cf. John 1.18.

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26. If we wonder whether *faith* is an authentic, respectable, reliable mode of knowing God, we should ask ourselves this question: is *trust* an authentic, respectable, reliable mode of knowing other people?
 - 26.1. Indeed faith, like trust, does not give 'certainty'
 - 26.2. Also faith, like trust, makes us vulnerable
 - 26.3. But just as with trust, faith gives us *assurance*.
27. With God, we can know him (what theology tries to do) only if we trust him, as St Augustine says:

"Do you wish to understand? Believe. For God has said by the prophet: *Unless you believe, you shall not understand* (Isaiah 7:9). [...] For understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that you may understand. (St Augustine, *Treatises on the Gospel of John*, 29:6).