

theologians. Did Cavadini's "last Christology" in fact have a resurgence in the later middle ages, showing the continued resilience of peculiarly Western insights into Christ? At any rate, even if there is no demonstrable direct connection between Cavadini's authors and the twelfth-century theologians, historians will at the least be emboldened by Cavadini's persuasive rereading of the Spanish adoptionists to bracket Thomas' judgment and to read these later christological opinions on their own (Western) terms.

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## METHOD IN THEOLOGY

The interest group on Method in Theology heard a presentation by Terrence Tilley entitled "Pascal and the 'Practical Theory of Religion': The Validity of the Wager and the Wisdom of Masses and Holy Water." Tilley began with a "practical" theory of religion drawn from the work of James Wm. McClendon, Jr. McClendon's construal of religion as a set of practices distances him from the dominant trend in modern philosophy of religion. That trend has focused our attention on religious beliefs in abstraction from religious life. As a consequence the debates of philosophers of religion have failed to address the practical issues generally faced by an embodied person.

In Tilley's opinion, this habit of abstraction has deformed philosophers' attempts to construct a philosophy of religion. Those who argue over the proofs for God's existence or debate the justifiability of religious beliefs tend to ignore the more important question of the reasonableness or wisdom of participation in the richness and complexity of religious life. Recent developments in epistemology and in the academic study of religion have shown that the modern paradigm cannot accommodate the complexity of religious faith. Religion is not merely a set of beliefs nor even a theological or doctrinal system. It is a matter of living a life shaped by a religious tradition, which is carried by enduring institutions and transmitted through committed communities. Being justified in one's believing is less a matter of having warranted beliefs and more a matter of being able to make and keep a wise commitment to a religious life.

Religious believing entails the practices of embodied persons. However, rationalist and empiricist epistemologies generally fail to demonstrate adequately the conditions under which concretely embodied and socially located persons

come to either knowledge or belief. For example, academic epistemology generally takes for granted that ordinary persons are in a position to know. As a result it neglects the issues of race and class and gender, those realities which make certain kinds of basic knowing a practical impossibility for those marginalized by their society. They ignore the contingent but nonetheless real and extensive social factors which prevent significant numbers of persons from having access to basic information. Feminist epistemologists such as Alison M. Jagar and Lorraine Code can point the way in this area insofar as their stated purpose is to seek a theory of knowledge which contributes to the construction of a world fit for human habitation. They also argue that emotion is as essential to the discovery of meaning in human life as is sensory perception, and so must be taken into account by epistemology.

In this situation Tilley argues that Blaise Pascal's famous "wager" contains epistemologically sound advice and cannot be dismissed as mere "fideism," nor as gross self-interest. "The wager is a very subtle, practical argument which points a way to finding a wise commitment." In the first place, the wager is unavoidable: God is or God is not, and one's life declares which bet one has made. Secondly, Pascal urges that wise persons will bet the conduct of their lives on God, since the benefits of that risk, "a gain greater than which cannot be conceived," infinitely outweigh the benefits of the other risk. Furthermore, in Tilley's view, Pascal's proposal is not invalidated by the suggestion that today the alternatives include not only atheism but the choice of the gods proposed by a variety of religious traditions. The "many gods" problem may be solved by using Anselm's definition of God as "that than which a greater cannot be conceived." The terms of the wager require that the god one chooses must be greater than any other, for only this god holds out the possibility of infinite gain. The wager is not necessarily a fideistic choice; it requires that one seek that than which a greater cannot be conceived.

However, the practical problem is not resolved at this point, for as a really practical problem it requires that one consider *how* to devote oneself to the infinite. At this point it is important to know the purposes and the persons for which Pascal composed the argument. Pascal addressed a situation in which bitter religious divisions and civil warfare had led many to combine a self-protective religious conformity with a jaded skepticism. He is urging that in this enervating situation the jaded person may rediscover a meaningful life only by becoming engaged. The problem is one of loss of meaning, and it cannot be resolved through detached intellectual inquiry. Pascal's therapy is indirect; it does not directly give his interlocutor a belief. Instead it prescribes a set of practices which, properly and dutifully undertaken, will likely bring about belief and the rediscovery of meaning. The "presenting complaint" of the heartsick individual is intellectual, but the real problem is a hidden disease of the passions. Pascal recognizes that this problem is not abstract, but is rather a practical and situated one. Accordingly, he does not offer a disinterested academic solution, nor does

he counsel simple conformity. Instead he offers a practical religious remedy which may point the way for us in a contemporary world where the prevailing question is often: Since practices shape us as persons, into which practices shall we place our bodies, our minds, our selves?

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## MORAL THEOLOGY

### VERITATIS SPLENDOR AND CONTEMPORARY MORAL THEOLOGY

Presenter: John P. Boyle, University of Iowa  
 Respondents: Anne E. Patrick, Carleton College  
 Mary A. Elsbernd, Loyola University Chicago

John Boyle raised a number of hermeneutical questions elicited by *Veritatis Splendor*. Given the variety of literary types (homiletic, discursive, devotional) and sources (Scripture, tradition, conciliar documents) employed in the document, how ought their moral implications (and the magisterial authority of these implications) be understood? Should the fact that the encyclical formally addresses only bishops and not "all men and women of good will" impact one's interpretation of the text? Is the interpretation changed if one reads *Veritatis Splendor* as a papal *cri de coeur* against moral secularism and relativism in the contemporary world?

Boyle also presented several critical questions on the content of *Veritatis Splendor*. Does the text move too quickly from the Christ of the New Testament to concrete moral directives for the contemporary world? Does the encyclical present—from a Thomistic standpoint—a correct notion of "conscience"? Are the explanations of "fundamental option" and "proportionality" accurate? Are the references to moral law and moral virtue properly conjoined? Does the encyclical effectively reduce the moral theologian's "critical function" in the Church?

Anne Patrick likewise noted the "mixed genres" in *Veritatis Splendor* and the hermeneutical problem this raises for moral theology. She thought *cri de coeur* an apt way of understanding the text, adding that concern over sexual