

# Religion & Faith

Is religion the same as faith? Is faith superior to religion? What is a doctrine of religion? Is religion innate to humanity? Does faith always need an object? Is religion always idolatrous? These are some of the questions that need to be considered by Christians in a theology of religion and faith.



In the Garden of Gethsemane  
Jesus prays to the Father while his followers,  
drunk with wine and religion, sleep.

## RELIGION & FAITH

**If religion and faith are not the same thing, what is the difference? Religion is often stereotyped today as formal, restrictive, imposing; faith by comparison is seen as free and easy, personal, unrestricted. Is this so? Is this a fair categorization?**

**Over the last generation there has been a lot of talk about 'New Age' religion, 'pick-and-mix spirituality', 'falling church attendances' - what has this to do with theology or faith?**

## SUBJECT-OBJECT

Religion, faith and spirituality are often seen as a personal decision. "I" decide to believe in God, "I" worship, value, practice towards this belief system, "I" choose this 'god' or this 'idol'. (However, it is always important to remember that religion may not always be theistic - Buddhism has no 'god'; neither does Richard Dawkins, who is one of the most religiously obsessed people in Britain!). Therefore "I" am the subject, this 'god' (whether it exists or not) is the object. This is the wrong way round: God (note the capital "G") is the eternal subject, we are the object.

## WHAT IS FAITH?

If religion in a liberal secular society is whatever people want it to be, because religion is a consumer product, a lifestyle choice, then what is faith? Should faith always have an object, or can faith be in some abstract idea. People may practice religion - go to church on Sunday, forget about it on Monday. Is there a difference? Faith will often seem more real, tangible than religion. Faith is, in general, the persuasion of the mind that a certain statement is true. Faith is often seen as the confident belief or trust in the truth or trustworthiness of a person, idea, or thing - an object. Such faith can be religious in itself or refer to religion in general. Faith relates to trust; faith involves a concept of events and outcomes, meaning and conclusion - in the future. Faith may not necessarily be grounded in what is considered to be material evidence or logical proof (but is what our senses give us all there is to reality, to creation?). Faith in a

theological context generally refers to a belief in a transcendent reality, a Supreme Being. But this is no impersonal 'god' or spiritual force. Revelation teaches us that this God is Trinitarian, cares for us, expects of us, and seeks our response, yet is not bound or tied to us or to creation. Consider this -

*"And therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back - I would have done so myself if I could - and proceed no further with Christianity. An 'impersonal God' - well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads - better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap - best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband - that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion ('Man's search for God!') suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He had found us? So it is a sort of Rubicon. One goes across; or not. But if one does, there is no manner of security against miracles. One may be in for anything."*

C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (1947) p. 114

## CONSIDER AND DISCUSS THESE QUOTATIONS

- // Thomas Erskine of Linlathen commented that those who make 'Religion their god', will not have 'God for their religion'. //
- // Attributed to G.K. Chesterton - 'Those who stop worshipping God don't stop worshipping.' //
- // C.S. Lewis once wrote that what Jesus Christ thinks of us is more important than what we make of Jesus Christ. //
- // Attributed to Thomas Aquinas, 'Faith takes us where our senses cannot go.' //
- // Should not religion always be provisional and subject to the judgement of God? //
- // The Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called for 'religionless Christianity'. What do you think he meant? //

## KARL BARTH ON RELIGION AS A HUMAN INVENTION

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) proposed a severe criticism of religion. Barth's theology of religion, with its heavy emphasis on Christ, is often regarded as the archetype of particularism (that is, an explicitly particular adherence to Christian values and doctrine): Jesus Christ is the decisive, unrepeatable and unsurpassable form of divine revelation, Christ is the ultimate hope and salvation of humanity. So what value is there left to religion in relation to faith. Many would argue that religion is done away with by the Cross.

*“Religion at its best was to be seen as a flawed human response to the self-revelation of the one true living God in Jesus Christ.”*

The answer to Christian particularism is the religion of the philosophers. The religion of the philosophers is to regard all religions as equal and that ultimately all 'gods' are the same and are nothing. Pagan religion, world multi-faith religions, if they have a 'god' propose an immediate relation, an immediate connection with whatever 'god' or 'idol' is believed in or worshipped. However, in Christianity this is different - your relation to God is mediated by

### ***Aufheben***

In his criticism of religion Karl Barth uses the German word "*Aufheben*".

*Aufheben* is a German word with several interrelated meanings, meanings which superficially appear contradictory. *Aufheben* means to lift up, but also to abolish, or to sublimate (to assimilate a smaller entity into a larger one). Barth uses the word in relation to religion, to simultaneously 'abolish,' 'preserve,' and 'transcend.'

Barth is drawing on the nineteenth century philosopher Georg Hegel in his use of *Aufheben*. Hegel used *Aufheben* to explain what happens when a thesis and antithesis (that is two seemingly contradictory things) interact. Barth is essentially using the word in relation to the Cross, and to human religion, where religion is *sublated* by and into the Cross.

Barth is therefore raising up religion as the highest possible human achievement (religion as a worshipful response to the one true God) - yet because of our Fallen human nature we can never get religion right, so Barth raises up religion while simultaneously subjecting it to the severest of criticisms.

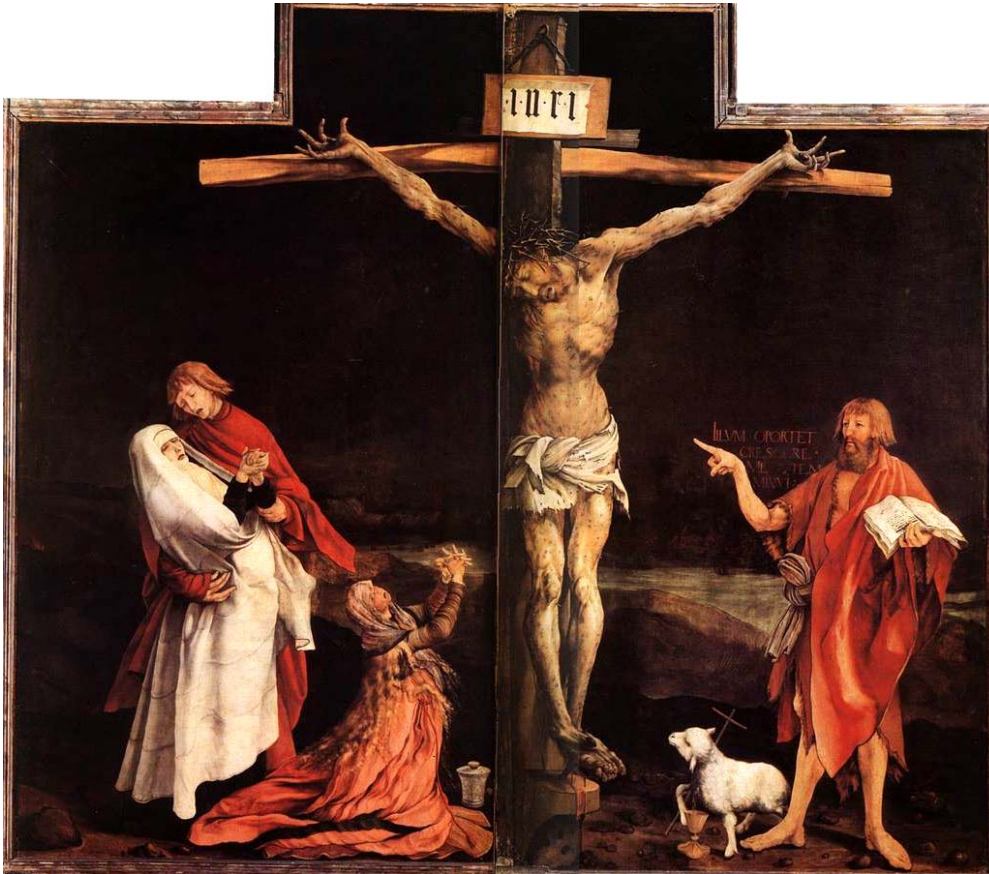
*Faith as ever is the litmus test,  
as God is the judgement.*

Jesus Christ. Faith is the litmus test. When criticized by multi-faith religionists for his heavily Christ-centred approach Barth simply pointed them beyond 'religion': look at Mozart, he said, what Mozart did was not humanly possible, Mozart's music is revelation from God, in Christ.

This raises the question, is what we believe in no more than a projection of our deepest desires and hopes, or in a Freudian context, our deepest sublimated neuroses. In the 19th century the German philosopher and anthropologist Ludwig Feuerbach argued that all religion was merely a projection. Karl Barth's answer as an orthodox Christian theologian was to say yes, all religion is a human creation. Barth distinguished, dialectically, between religion and revelation. In stressing the sovereignty of God Barth denied, to a degree, knowledge of God through human effort. Therefore all religion was a human activity, human generated: for Barth God could only be 'known' by God's self-revealing, through revelation, in Jesus Christ. And the truth of this could only be accepted by faith. Religion at its best was to be seen as a flawed human response to the self-revelation of the one true living God in Jesus Christ. Therefore Barth asserts that we live under the divine judgement, God's judgement on all religion - *'Apart from and without Jesus Christ we can say nothing at all about God and man and their relationship one with another'*. Religion issues from the Fall; prior to the Fall into original sin, humanity was in communion with God the relationship was immediate (Genesis 2:4; 3:8; cf 17:1); religion points to distance and a fractured relationship.

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If, like Barth, we are to regard religion, *per se*, as idolatrous, as unbelief, because it perpetually falls short of the unknowable silence, freedom and hiddenness of the one true living God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, then what do we classify as religion? Is belief in God, or for that matter a 'god' (note the lower case 'g'), an essential axiom of religion? No; for there is the phenomena of religious atheism. By comparison Barth saw the self-revealing of God as the abolition of all religion. This implies that we can never get religion right, even if we claim to be Christian. An underlying concept is that religion may be inadequate, bad, but atheism is worse.



Barth was a famous theologian, professor and Reformed Church Minister. From 1919 until his death in 1968 he hung a reproduction of Grünewald's *Crucifixion* from the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (early 16th century) above his desk as a reminder to himself of the central importance of the Cross in human history, particularly as the Crucifixion both marginalizes and negates human religion, yet leaves space open for a faith response. But it is not just Christians (i.e. people 'in the know') who can respond to the Holy Spirit's intimations.

Spend some time looking at Grünewald's painting of the Crucifixion. What space does the Cross leave for a human response - for faith, or for religion (if there is a difference)? Is Barth too severe in his criticism of religion? The figure on the right is John the Baptist - what religious or faith role can we read from him (the words in Latin behind his hand read, "*illum oportet crescere me autem minui*" ("*He must increase, but I must decrease*", John 3:30) )? On the left is the apostle John and Mary, Jesus' mother - what religious role do they signify? What is the significance of the lamb, the *angus dei*? (Note the figures are scaled in importance and position - Jesus is taller than all the others.)

'Humanity's search for God', or  
'God's search for Humanity'?

*Karl Barth unhesitatingly asserted 'faith' over 'religion'. But would he recognize 'faith' today as no better than 'religion'?*

*Can 'faith' today be in anything, anyone, or nothing at all? Is it sometimes no more than just nice spiritual emotions?*

*Is this a fair assessment?*

A Tale of Two 'Bi shops' - A Modern Parable  
A Tale of Two 'Evangel i cal s' - A Modern Parable

Overleaf are two 'modern' parables which illustrate the difference, the sometimes irreconcilable difficulties, between 'religion' and 'faith'.

In both parables the four main characters are based on real people, and on real events.

Is it possible to be neutral to God?

What do these parables tell you about 'religion', about 'faith', and about 'salvation'?

Can humanity ever get religion right? - Or do we simply have to rest in the forgiveness wrought for us by Jesus Christ on the Cross.

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in these parables?

Do people have to be consciously aware of and have conscious knowledge of the Christ event to be saved?

Is everybody automatically saved by the Cross?

## A Tale of Two 'Bishops' A Modern Parable

Once upon a time there were two bishops: The Right Revd R.T. Smith, the Church of England Bishop of Middletown, and Jason Bishop, an unemployed 22 year old, also from Middletown-on-Beck, a desolate, run down, soul-less industrial wasteland of a city no one wanted to live in. The Right Revd Robert Thaddeus – or Bob as he like to be called – came from a long line of clerics and bishops. He was late-middle-aged, grey, balding, with two grown-up children who still could not grow up and leave home, and a diminutive wife who organised super sherry parties for all the local dignitaries. Jason had gone through several casual jobs – labouring on a building site, working in warehouses – and had served 18 months for ‘burglary with violence’ in a Young Offenders Institution. There he had learned his skills from older criminals – how to hurt people, how to thief and not get caught. He had also joined the BNP – the British National Party – and he was now driven by hate, unemployed as he was, towards anyone ethnic, or East European, whom he claimed had stolen his job many times over. Robert Thaddeus Smith had been groomed through his schooling and education for the role he fulfilled as bishop; Jason was semi-literate and unemployable, and did not want to submit to an employer.

The Right Revd Dr R.T. Smith had drafted and saw policies enacted through General Synod endorsing ‘Inclusive’ guidelines for all churches, whilst also steering through legislation banning clergy from membership of the BNP, legislation of which he was very proud. When he was training for the priesthood at theological college Bob fell in with a progressive, modern, group who saw ‘god’ as no more than an abstract idea in people’s minds, and religion as something people should just grow through to a mature realization that all religions were equal, as equally nothing, peace lay in being prepared to face death as nothingness, the end. He was in effect a religious atheist (secretly!), but he did believe that what he did was beneficial for people, and all acknowledged that he ran a professional, efficient and effective religious business.

One cold winter’s evening as the sleet cut into him Jason wandered the desolate streets, peering into boarded-up houses looking for something to steal. He passed a church – St Muddle’s. He heard singing coming from inside, it was from a Carol Service. He stopped, went into the church yard and sat down on a grave. He felt different; something had been nagging him for weeks, nothing he did could satisfy this something – binge drinking, soft drugs, casual sex, nothing satisfied this nagging hunger in him. As he listened to the voices singing, memories of Christmas at school when he was a child flooded back to him, and he suddenly realized he believed – all that was going on in that church, somehow he knew that Jesus was

important including all that stuff about *Him* having died for our sins. So he got up and went to the door. He peered in; then stepped. He was greeted by a middle-aged woman who said in a firm and superior voice, *‘Oh it’s you! I know you, your Sharon Bishop’s oldest, she had you while she was still at school. I saw you on that BNP rally outside that newsagent’s shop chanting “Go home!” and lots of other horrid things. Well, we don’t want you here, we’re full anyway. And the General Synod have banned your lot, you, you’re racist. We’re inclusive here, the bishop says so!’* St Muddle’s, you see, was an exclusively ‘inclusive’ church. Jason cursed and swore – a mouthful that all in the church could hear (even above the singing!) – and stormed out. Angry with himself for being so weak he went to a garage and robbed the cashier, then ran out straight into two policemen who were checking the tyre pressure on their squad car. Back in prison he was face-to-face with Alex Brown – whom he had swindled on a drugs deal a few months earlier. Jason knew what was coming – he was beaten, badly, in the washroom, his face repeatedly smashed into and against the porcelain as his chest was pummelled.

Bishop Bob, after a celebratory retirement dinner and award ceremony was involved in a serious road accident as he drove home. He died of his injuries before the emergency services could get to him. Jason was cared for in the Prison Hospital by an African nurse. Because of the Holy Spirit that had touched him outside St Muddle’s whilst listening to the carol service he now repented, he now saw how wrong he had been to follow the BNP. That night, all alone, Jason died of his severe injuries.

Robert and Jason found themselves in a sort of purgatory – they had not been decided upon, as yet. Jason could now see how wrong his life had been. He had been drenched in the blood of his crimes, burned-up by the hatred of racism; he had been possessed by loathing and envy; he repented, and the blood of the Lamb washed over him. The Right Revd R.T. found he was wandering, trying to escape something, always wandering, beset on all sides by nightmare visions of things, demons and cruelty, he could not have conceived of when he had been alive. He was convinced he was in a bad dream that he would wake from – but he did not wake. He thought, was he dead? – but no, he laughed to himself, he was not dead because he did not believe in life after death, and he did not believe in heaven and hell, so he could not be dead, could he? Everything that was his religion now mitigated against him, while his faithlessness protected him from the redeeming blood! So he wandered, troubled, alive but not alive, through this very real Hell of his own making, beset for all eternity ... but he was not alone. And the first shall be last and the last shall be first...

# A Tale of Two 'Evangelicals'

## A Modern Parable

Once upon a time there were two Evangelicals. Samuel was the son of an Evangelical Minister; he had learned to play a guitar and wanted to become a famous Christian singer-songwriter. Tracy came from the same town but had no religious background whatsoever. They had attended the same school, but never spoke to each other. Tracy worked in a local cafe. Sam had been sent away to university; his father wanted him to become a Minister. Sam was not very academic; it was with private tuition and much struggle that he got into university – to read Media Studies. Sam obligingly read the Bible every day, his parents checked on him, but did not really take much in. Tracy had no religious background at home, only a mish-mash of confused religious education at school. Also, she wanted nothing to do with Sam at school – he was one of those religious sorts; Tracy had not really been part of any group at school, just tried her hardest to fit in, say the right things, and hope the herd did not pick on her. Indeed, Sam and the “Christians” would tease her because she had nothing to do with boys. Sam’s parents (with help from his grandparents) bought a small terraced house for him to live in while away at university – it should be a sound investment they said. Sam sub-let rooms to help pay for his music – instruments, travelling to gigs, etc. Tracy’s mum had left home, ran off with an estate agent when she was 14. She could not stand living at home with her dad who would not stop trying to peek into the bathroom when she was showering, so she moved out into a bedsit on the other side of town.

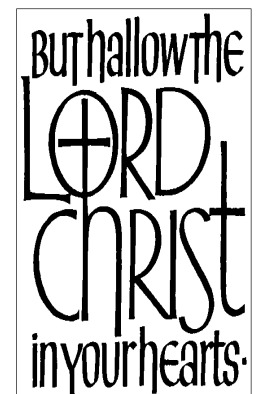
One day Tracy found a leaflet left on the cafe table she was clearing. It was about an Evangelical church that had just opened up. She screwed it up and threw it away. For a fortnight she could not get the memory of that leaflet out of her mind, so on her way home from work she called in the local bookshop and purchased a Bible. She read the Gospels and in the privacy of her rented bedsit, knelt by her bed, and prayed to Jesus that she might be forgiven and become a better person. A week later she started attending the local C of E church on Sunday morning. She sat at the back, spoke politely and kindly to people, but lacked confidence in her new-found faith.

Sam was not doing well at university; he was failing in his studies. Also, he spent a lot of time practising the guitar and singing at Evangelical or Baptist churches, and in writing songs (if you changed the name ‘Jesus’ in his songs to Fred, or Sandra, they would have been ordinary run-of-the-mill pop songs!). His father despaired of him following in his footsteps. And his father never listened to Sam’s songs. One day Sam performed at a weekend conference in a seaside town for mission leaders. Before he started singing he made an announcement –

he had been diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder that he would die from. This changed the response to his songs; the sympathy from his audience was overwhelming, and his popularity spread – on the university chaplaincy circuit. He appeared at churches with a walking stick.

Early one morning in the cafe Tracy was greeted by an elderly lady – Gladys – from the church she attended. Gladys initiated talk about faith, commenting how Tracy had changed, she looked so happy and contented. This was true; Tracy took the Gospel for what it truly was – good news! Still embarrassed by her new found faith Tracy found such conversations difficult. The cafe owner was listening and watching. After Gladys had left he told Tracy off for talking to the customers about religion and for trying to convert the elderly lady; he wasn’t having any of this religion nonsense. Tracy tried to defend herself, saying, she knew the woman by sight from the church she attended. Ranting at her, the cafe owner sacked her on the spot. Upset and distraught she ran out of the cafe; not concentrating she crossed the High Street hastily without looking properly and was knocked down by a van. She died that night from her injuries with Gladys and the Vicar sat by her hospital bedside.

Meanwhile Sam’s father could take no more. He knew of his son’s claim to be ill, dying. When Sam came home for Easter he tried talking with him, tried reasoning with him. By now he had given up thoughts of his son going into ministry. But Sam just avoided the question about his health. To maintain peace his father left off the subject. However, Sam’s fame was spreading; his illness and impending death had boosted downloads of his songs from YouTube. So Sam’s father let it be known that Sam was not dying, he was not ill – he was fit and healthy. What was more, the boy was an inveterate liar; he had been since a child. This was what he needed healing from; this was what prayer for him should be about. The news spread like wild-fire. Sam was too embarrassed to continue at university. He left and got a job in a bookshop in his university town, still singing at some churches, but his bubble of fame had truly burst. And the first shall be last and the last shall be first...



# *analogia entis—analogia fidei*

## ANALOGY, BEING & FAITH

**Many might find the material on this page difficult and obscure. If so, ignore it, concentrate on the other pages. However, it does deal with a concept that is at the heart of theology, at the heart of human understanding, and in consequence at the heart of how we live and treat other people.**

## ANALOGIA ENTIS—ANALOGIA FIDEI

What is the *analogia entis* and the *analogia fidei*?

*analogia entis* = the analogy of being

*analogia fidei* = the analogy of faith

All theology, all talk about God, must inevitably be analogous; that is, through illustrations, through analogy (not allegory), we can say God is like this or like that, what we understand of heaven, hell, creation, life itself, is by analogy - it is like this or that.

The ground, or foundation, or basis, of theology, our talk about God is either based on *being* or on *faith*. What does this mean?

### **Being**

Do we know and understand about God through the world, through nature; does revelation come to us through creation, do we draw conclusions by analogy from our sense perception of the world?

### **Faith**

Does our knowledge and understanding come primarily from faith: do we accept what is revealed about God in Jesus Christ, about the human condition, as the basis, the ground, for our theology, for our God-talk?

If we ground our theologizing in being, in creation and the world (the *analogia entis* - the analogy of being), often this involves seeing God in the processes of nature; the latter is where the primary link between God and humanity is in and through the Christ, this is the *analogia fidei* (the analogy of faith). Many people will assert that we can know from the world - the accident of evolution which is claimed to be the universe; theologians and philosophers who work from the *analogia entis* claim we can know God from the world. However, surely our starting point must be in Christ, therefore the *analogia fidei*? In both instances, whether through 'being' or through 'faith' we know through the role of analogy. The *analogia entis* is attributed to the medieval theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas; the *analogia fidei* is often attributed to the fourth century Patristic theologian and philosopher Augustine. (Aquinas' writings resonates with Augustine's thought.) The idea that we can know

and understand God soundly, securely, primarily, through analogy in God's creation (*analogia entis*) has proved problematic since the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment: observing nature has led many, many, philosophers and scientists to claim atheism. You may read a 'god' from the world, but, equally, you may not; and there are as many different 'gods' upon which to read in the world as there are people to observe and read from creation. Faith in Christ reveals that God is Triune, that we are corrupted by original sin, that Christ's sacrifice was necessary to save us.

The *analogia fidei* relates closely to the rule of faith (*regula fidei*), which evaluates theological opinion and the life of the church by measuring against what has been firmly established and believed from the early church and the evolved church tradition. This rule of faith was rooted in Scripture: in Paul's comments in Romans, where all is to be seen in proportion to faith: in the Greek New Testament, ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως, ('analogian tēs pisteōs'), literally, the '*analogy of faith*' (Romans 12:6).

## CONSIDER AND DISCUSS THESE QUESTIONS & PROBLEMS

- // What role does imagination and intimations of the Holy Spirit (within the *analogia fidei*) have over and above our sense perception (within the *analogia entis*)? //
- // Is there a difference between society and the world on one hand, and the church on the other; are world events and social norms ever the result of the will of God? //
- // If the Psalms are correct and creation sings of the glory of God, what value does this give to the *analogia entis*? //
- // Is faith immutable - or can it be as corrupt as any human system of belief? //
- // Church history is littered with examples of Christians trying to accommodate world and social developments from the Inquisition to the Holocaust (churches in Germany were under enormous pressure in the 1930s to see National Socialism as the will of a 'god'). How can Christians be in the world but not contaminated by it? //
- // Can Christians, even with the best intention, read falsely from Christ (the *analogia fidei*) and behave like Pagans in brutalizing and exploiting their fellow Christians? //
- // If God (the second person of the Trinity) was incarnated in human form, what value does this give to creation and therefore to the *analogia entis*? //