

Faith, Reason, and Incarnation in Irenaeus of Lyons

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Introduction

IN HIS REGENSBURG LECTURE on “Faith, Reason, and the University,” Pope Benedict surveys some of the decisive fluctuations in the relation of faith and reason within the Christian tradition. In the course of this broad overview, he presents the early Church’s performance of this relation as paradigmatic and normative, indeed as “part of faith itself.” But he contrasts this exemplary synthesis with later developments within the Christian tradition in which this synthesis is distorted through either a conception of faith that abstracts entirely from human reason or a conception of reason that precludes any positive continuity with faith. He identifies the former relation with the voluntarism of the medieval theologian Duns Scotus, in which God’s transcendence and otherness are affirmed at the expense of any analogical reflection in human reason. On the other hand, he diagnoses in modern theology, going back at least to the liberal Protestantism of Adolf von Harnack, a reduction of the scope of reason to the apprehension of the mathematical structure of matter and to experimental verification. This “reduction of the radius of science and reason” not only excludes the question of God from the scope of rational enquiry but also precludes the possibility of rational enquiry into the most fundamental questions of human origin, destiny, and meaning. Pope Benedict concludes his lecture with a call for a renewal of the synthesis of faith and reason in the modern context, a renewal in which the decisive element would be the enlargement of the scope of reason itself.

It would stand to reason, in terms of the logic of Pope Benedict's Regensburg lecture, that the Christian renewal of the proper synthesis of faith and reason should draw upon the resources of the paradigmatic and normative instantiations of this synthesis in the early Church. In this essay, I would like to implement this strategy by reflecting on one significant example of this synthesis in the theology of the great second-century bishop and theologian Irenaeus of Lyons. There are strong grounds for identifying Irenaeus as the first Christian systematic theologian, the first Christian thinker who explicitly conceived of Christian faith as a coherent body of truth whose very coherence and consistency should be the object of disciplined reflection. Irenaeus's attentiveness to the systematic wholeness of the Christian proclamation was provoked in reaction to what he considered to be the false doctrine of the heretical "gnostics." Irenaeus attacked the gnostics both for their misuse and neglect of human reason and for their mischaracterization of both the material contents and the formal character of Christian faith. He derided what he called their "knowledge falsely so-called" as a perversion of both faith and reason. In opposition to this gnostic system, Irenaeus elaborated a conception of authentic Christian knowledge as a synthesis of faith and reason that is grounded in the simultaneous difference and relation between the Creator and the creation and comes to full maturity in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

In attempting to retrace the synthesis of faith and reason in Irenaeus's theology, this paper will proceed in three main parts. First, I will attempt to draw out some main elements of Irenaeus's critique of the gnostics on rational grounds. Second, I will demonstrate how Irenaeus's construal of the God-world relation determines his own characterization of the proper capacities and limits of human reason. And, third, I will show that Irenaeus's understanding of authentic Christian knowledge presumes that the synthesis of faith and reason is consummated only through the Incarnation of Divine Reason in the person of Jesus Christ and is authentically proclaimed only within the communion of the visible and hierarchical Church.

Irenaeus's Rational Critique of the Gnostics

Irenaeus often criticizes his opponents for not making sense. But, at the beginning of his five-book treatise *Against the Heresies*, he also seems to suggest that previous defenders of Christian doctrine against the gnostics did not succeed precisely because they precipitously dismissed

gnostic teaching without probing its *seeming* intelligibility and plausibility, and without acknowledging its demonstrable attractiveness and appeal, even to many Christians.¹ For his part, Irenaeus intends to show that the gnostics do not make sense by directly engaging and refuting the sense they seem to make. Therefore, he spends the entire first book of his five-book treatise on the narration of gnostic doctrine. There, he tells us that the particular group of gnostics with whom he was most directly in conflict, called the Valentinians, conceived of a divine realm called the “fullness,” or *pleroma*, in Greek. There are thirty beings, called *aeons*, within the *pleroma*, arranged in male and female pairings that emanate from the first principle, one of whose names is the “Primal Father.” At the center of the gnostic narrative is the account of the misadventures of the youngest member of the *pleroma*, who is called Sophia (Wisdom). Sophia succumbs to an inordinate desire to know the incomprehensible nature of the Primal Father, and this disordered passion results in the generation of a formless substance called “Achamoth.” Achamoth is expelled from the *pleroma*, but is eventually healed and restored to the divine sphere. For the gnostics, the constitution and arrangement of this world is directly the result of the drama of Achamoth’s passion and restoration. Achamoth’s fear, grief, and anxiety during her exile from the *pleroma* give rise to material substances. Her repentance resulted in the formation of the Demiurge, who is the creator of the intermediate “soul” element within the world, and her post-restoration ecstasy brought forth spiritual substances. Corresponding to this threefold ontological hierarchy are the three different kinds of human beings: the material, who are inescapably destined for corruption; the “soul-ly” (*psychic*), whom the gnostics identify as ordinary Christians and who are capable of ascending to an “intermediate space” between this world and the *pleroma*; and the “spiritual” (*pneumatics*), who contain a divine element that is destined to be awakened by knowledge of its true origin and end and that ultimately will be restored to the *pleroma*. Despite variations in detail, a fundamental common ground between various gnostic accounts is that, as a whole, this world is not the direct product of the true and highest god within the *pleroma*. Rather, its creator is the “Demiurge,” who was produced from Sophia’s delinquent passion.

Having outlined, in prodigious detail, the particularities of the various versions of gnostic lore in his first book, Irenaeus proceeds in

¹ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* [AH] 1.preface.1–2.

the second book to criticize gnostic teaching on predominantly rational grounds before moving on to a positive exposition of Christian faith in the succeeding books. Among the many criticisms Irenaeus directs against the cogency and plausibility of gnostic teaching, we can discern three major critiques that characterize gnostic teaching as simply lacking the form of rational discourse. Each of these critiques presses the point that gnostic doctrine is irrational and nonsensical, and each of them is correlated with a comparative statement of the superior cogency and rational plausibility of Catholic Christian faith. A brief exposition of each of these critiques and their corrective correlate in Christian faith will thus afford us with a preliminary view of Irenaeus's presentation of the rationality of Christian faith.

(1) The criticism we should take to be foundational for Irenaeus's program of presenting gnostic doctrine as irrational is that there is simply no evidence for their god in this world. Now, in making this criticism, Irenaeus's complaint is *not* that the gnostic "god" cannot be proved on the basis of reason alone. His complaint is that the content of the gnostic belief system precludes a priori any knowledge of God through creation simply because this creation is not considered to be the work of the true God. Consequently, there can be no epistemological ascent from the apprehension of created reality to any kind of knowledge of the true God. The criterion of rationality that Irenaeus posits in making this argument is that of "witness" or "testimony" (μαρτυρία/*testimonium*). The god of the gnostics simply cannot provide any testimony on his own behalf because, in their account, there is an ontological disjunction between the realm of creaturely testimony and the realm of the true god. For Irenaeus, this account of the God-world relation necessarily makes gnostic doctrine pervasively and irredeemably irrational. To speak rationally of the true God requires that we ascribe a certain truth to creation as providing evidentiary testimony to the God whose very act of creation inscribes a certain knowledge of himself within the very being of creation. To say that God is the creator of this world, for Irenaeus, means to say that "the universe shows forth the One who formed it, and the handiwork suggests its Maker, and the world manifests the One who arranged it."² On the other hand, the gnostic god "has no witnesses"

² AH 2.9.1: "Ipsa enim conditio ostendit eum qui condidit eam, et ipsa factura suggerit eum qui fecit, et mundus manifestat eum qui se disposuit" (Irenaeus of Lyon, *Contre les heresies Livre II*, critical text and trans. [French] Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, S.J., Sources chretiennes [SC] 294 [Paris:

in the realm of creation. Therefore, he concludes, “it is completely irrational [*irrationale*] to set aside the one who is truly God, to whom all things render testimony, in order to inquire whether there is above him another one who does not actually exist and has never been proclaimed by any one.”³

In weighing the import of this criticism, we should consider well that the force of its refutation extends beyond the distinctly gnostic belief that this material world is not the product of the true God. Whenever the analogy of being between this created world and the true God is denied, whenever divinity is construed as disclosed only in the realm of individual interiority or depicted in strictly negative terms as simply other than creation, then the essential force of Irenaeus’s criticism retains all its power. The discourse that posits such a divinity, insofar as it categorically abstracts from seeking evidentiary testimony for the divine from the realm of creaturely being, is, in Irenaeus’s terms, foundationally irrational. By positive contrast, for Irenaeus, authentic Christian faith is “reasonable,” in the first place, because it seeks to discern creation’s testimony to the God who created it. For the second century bishop of Lyons, we cannot speak rationally of God without speaking of God primarily as “Creator” and as the one who implants into his creation, and then solicits from it, testimony to himself.

(2) A second critique through which Irenaeus seeks to manifest the unreasonableness of gnostic doctrine is contained in his complaint that the gnostics simply make things up. He attributes the proliferation of the maddening variety of detail within gnostic accounts to a fundamental epistemological disposition that makes a virtue out of inventiveness of doctrine: “Since they differ so widely among themselves both as respects doctrine and tradition, and since those of them who are recognized as being most modern make it their effort daily to invent some new opinion, and to bring out what no one ever before thought of, it is a difficult matter to describe all their opinions.”⁴ Irenaeus reiterates this complaint several times in the course of

Édition du Cerf, 2011], 84; when SC 294 is specifically cited, English translation is my own from the Latin there; otherwise, I use the English translation from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* [ANF], vol. 1 [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994], 309–567).

³ AH 2.10.1: “Perquam itaque irrationale est, praetermittentes eum qui vere est Deus et qui ab omnibus habet testimonium, quaerere si est super eum is qui non est et qui a nemine umquam adnuntiatus est” (SC, 294:86).

⁴ AH 1.21.5 (ANF, 1:347); cf. 1.28.1.

his narration of gnostic doctrine, saying in another place, “every one of them generates something new, day by day, according to his ability; for no one is deemed perfect who does not develop among them some mighty fictions.”⁵ The irrationality of this attitude resides in its lack of external and objective accountability, its sheer arbitrariness. It seems that a person can propose as revealed truth just whatever one can dream up. To demonstrate the inherent irrationality of this license to generate doctrine, Irenaeus takes up the mantle of a gnostic teacher himself and mockingly suggest the following doctrine:

There is a certain “pre-beginning,” royal, surpassing all thought, a power existing before every other substance, and extended into space in every direction. But along with [this pre-original power] there exists another power which I term a *Pumpkin* and along with this Pumpkin there exists a power which I call *Utter-Emptiness*. This Pumpkin and Emptiness, since they are one, produced . . . a fruit, everywhere visible, eatable, and delicious, which fruit-language calls a *Cucumber*. Along with this Cucumber exists a power of the same essence, which again I call a *Melon*. These powers, the Pumpkin, Utter-Emptiness, the Cucumber, and the Melon, brought forth the remaining multitude of the delirious melons of Valentinus. For . . . if any one can assign these names at his pleasure, who shall prevent us from adopting these names?⁶

We can, I think, discern a logical consistency between Irenaeus’s first and second critiques. His first criticism was that the gnostic system claimed access to a revealed teaching that dispensed with any evidentiary testimony from the realm of creation. His second criticism is really a transposition of the first criticism from the level of ontology and metaphysics to that of human community. Just as the gnostics are happy to dispense with the universal testimony of creation to their claimed revelation, so they put little stock on the value of a universal testimony to that revelation on the part of the community of faith, the Church. By contrast, the reasonableness of Catholic faith is manifest in the correspondence between positing the universal witness of creation to its Creator and performing a universal witness to that revelation in the communion of the Church.

⁵ AH 1.18.1 (ANF, 1:343).

⁶ AH 1.11.4 (ANF, 332–33; translation slightly altered).

The fundamental contrast can be further reduced to that between positing “hiddenness” as the essential formal characteristic of truth, both in the realms of faith and reason, and identifying the essential character of truth with openness, transparency, and communicability. Catholic faith manifests the openness and accessibility and communicability that characterize all truth through the universality and unanimity and consistency of its witness to revealed truth. That is why the continuity of Catholic faith across time and space is, for Irenaeus, an indispensable sign of the cogency and reasonableness of that faith. Faith knowledge shares with reason the formal characteristic of generating universal attestation. Thus, for Irenaeus, authentic and perfect knowledge, *gnosis*, can be found only in the universal witness of the Church that can demonstrate its continuity with the Old and New Testaments and with the apostolic preaching and that enacts this universal witness in the communion of all the Churches and their common reference to the bishop of Rome. Communion is thus a constitutive characteristic of rationality and truth.⁷ It is universal (catholic) communion, a communion that is generated and safeguarded by love rather than by mere inventiveness, which is the hallmark of the true knowledge of the Catholic faith:

True knowledge is [that which consists in] the doctrine of the apostles, and the ancient constitution of the Church throughout all the world, and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to the successions of the bishops, by which they have handed down that Church which exists in every place, and has reached even to us, being guarded and preserved without any forging of Scriptures, by a very complete system of doctrine, and neither receiving addition nor [suffering] curtailment [in the truths which she believes]; and [it consists in] reading [the word of God] without falsification, and a lawful and diligent exposition in harmony with the Scriptures, both without danger and without blasphemy; and [above all, it consists in] the pre-eminent gift of love (2 Cor 8:1; 1 Cor 13)

⁷ For a modern treatment of this theme from an Orthodox Christian perspective, see John Zizioulas, “Truth and Communion,” in *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 67–122. Zizioulas presents some cursory reflections on Patristic resonances of this theme, including some comments on Irenaeus, but does not attend to Irenaeus’s concrete ecclesiology.

which is more precious than knowledge, more glorious than prophecy, and which excels all the other gifts [of God].⁸

As with Irenaeus's first critique, it is not hard to see the relevance of his critique of gnostic sensibilities for our own times. Ultimately, the question comes down to whether there is such a thing as an objective truth that can transcend the differences between individual subjectivities, not by negating them but by gathering them into communion. If there is not such an objective truth that enfolds individual subjectivities, then inventiveness, in the mode of concoctions of narratives and explanations that reflect and generate subjective experiences, becomes the primary epistemological virtue and the animating principle of discourse. But if there is such a communion-forming objective truth, then it would naturally manifest itself through a universal witness that transcends the limitless multiplicity of narratives and explanations that individual subjects inevitably project onto reality. Such a universal witness is objectively caused by the self-disclosure of truth, and it is subjectively maintained through love, which binds together all those who bind themselves to the truth. Irenaeus presumes that a self-standing objectivity is essential to truth and rationality and that such objectivity manifests itself subjectively in the mode of communion and unanimity of witness. Therefore, the rationality of authentic Catholic faith is bound up with the universal witness of the Church.

(3) A third critique through which Irenaeus seeks to press his characterization of the gnostics as only seeming to make sense is his complaint that their accounts of the sordid goings-on in the realm of the divine *pleroma*, or fullness, are clearly projections of human experiences onto the divine sphere. The story of Sophia's inordinate desire to know her father, her giving birth without her male companion, and her grief, fear, and perplexity are indeed compelling. If this story seems to make sense, if it seems to carry a certain plausibility, Irenaeus intimates, it is only because it mirrors human experiences and projects them onto the divine. Irenaeus is surely right that much of the popularity of gnostic lore, then and now, is due to its success in projecting onto a transcendent scale primal human experiences of unrequited desire, alienation, escape, and reconciliation. It is a great story line: Sophia is a single mother with an absent father who gives

⁸ AH 4.33.8 (ANF, 1:508).

birth to a delinquent son but then finds her way back to the divine suburbs of the *pleroma*.

The gnostic strategy of making sense out of human experiences of suffering and alienation by projecting them directly onto the realm of the divine is arguably also operative in some strands of modern Christian theology that follow the Hegelian program of making human suffering and alienation constitutive of a dramatic unfolding of divine life. Against this impulse as manifested in its original gnostic form, Irenaeus insists that the perception of God that is innate in human reason gives testimony to the indefectible integrity of divine transcendence: "His invisible reality, being powerful, bestows on all a great mental intuition and perception of His sovereign and all-powerful supereminence."⁹ Irenaeus thus distinguishes between the seeming sense, the pseudo-rationality of mythology, which projects human psychodrama onto the divine sphere, and the authentic rationality of metaphysical insight, which always factors in the radical difference between God and creation, even as it ascends from knowledge of creation to acknowledgment of the Creator. Genuinely rational metaphysical insight ascends from created to uncreated reality precisely by seeing divine being as the transcendent ground of creation and not merely a part of creation. Consequently, Irenaeus not only insists that creation discloses God but also protests that creation does not mirror God. Created things, he says, are not the direct and symmetrical images of divine things; otherwise, God would be corporeal and simply part of creation, rather than its transcendent ground. It is because the gnostics ignore this fundamental principle that they end up projecting the drama of human flux and suffering onto the divine sphere:

These things may properly be said to apply to human beings, since they are compound by nature, and consist of a body and a soul. . . . They are thus describing the affections, and passions, and mental tendencies of human beings, while being ignorant of God. By their manner of speaking, they ascribe those things which apply to human beings to the Father of all . . . while, at the same time, they endow Him with human affections and passions. But if they had known the Scriptures, and been taught by the truth, they would have known, beyond doubt

⁹ AH 2.6.1 (SC, 294:60).

that God is not as human beings are; and that His thoughts are not like human thoughts (Isa 55:8). For the Father of all is at a vast distance from those affections and passions which operate among human beings. He is a simple, uncompounded Being, without diverse members, and altogether like, and equal to Himself, since He is wholly understanding, and wholly spirit, and wholly thought, and wholly intelligence, and wholly reason, and wholly hearing, and wholly seeing, and wholly light, and the whole source of all that is good.¹⁰

Let us now briefly summarize the three features of the rationality of Christian faith that Irenaeus posits as counterpoints to the irrationality of gnostic lore. Christian faith is rational in the first place because it seeks and finds the testimony of the real world, as we know and experience it, on behalf of the God who is its Creator. To dispense a priori with such testimony, says Irenaeus, is to preclude the possibility of any kind of evidence for one's claims, which is fundamentally irrational. Secondly, Christian faith is rational because it also refers to the testimony of a universal community that manifests a unanimity across space and time. Again, to dispense a priori with such a community of witness is to disavow the essential character of Truth as a reality that transcends individual subjectivities and brings them into a communion of knowledge, speech, and action. Thirdly, Christian faith is rational because it apprehends created realities as revelatory of their transcendent ground without making that ground simply a mirror of these created realities, whereas the conflation of the ground of being with the contingent realities brought forth from that ground bears the character of mythology rather than rationality.

It might seem, however, that there is a certain tension, if not outright contradiction, between Irenaeus's insistence that creation gives witness to God and his caveat that creation does not mirror the Creator. But, for Irenaeus, this tension simply coincides with the structure of rationality itself, which is determined by the real relation between divine and created being. Let us now look more closely at Irenaeus's understanding of this ontological relation—which he presumes to be determinative for the possibilities and limits of human knowledge—and at its intrinsic openness to divine revelation.

¹⁰ *AH* 2.13.3 (*ANF*, 1:373–74).

The God–World Relation and the Structure of Human Reason

For Irenaeus, the most exalted conception of divine transcendence dictates that God is both intimately present to creation and irreducibly other than creation.¹¹ Irenaeus's equally emphatic insistence on both aspects of this dialectic was not directed only against the Gnostics; it was also antithetical to some fundamental principles of the Greek philosophy of his time. Though the lavish mythological veneer of gnostic lore can seem far removed from the rigorous dialectical exercises of Greek philosophy, one important tenet of Greek philosophy that was foundational for the gnostic systems was the belief that the highest divinity is not directly involved with the affairs of this world. Aristotle concluded that it was strictly rational to posit a transcendent ground for contingent being but also that this divine being, who was the Unmoved Mover and Self-thinking Thought, can preserve its perfection only by not attending to any realities inferior to it.¹² In the course of his polemic against the gnostics, Irenaeus tirelessly belittles this kind of conception of divine transcendence. Such a so-called "God," whose transcendence is defined as sheer otherness and lack of involvement with the world, would be "a feeble, worthless, and negligent being."¹³ For his part, Plato had maintained that divine goodness is generous and does not begrudge sharing its perfections with lesser beings.¹⁴ Irenaeus evokes this Platonic principle in order to insist that a conception of divine transcendence, conceived most radically as goodness, must entail God's direct engagement with the world. Such divine goodness remains transcendent not by being distant from the world, but by containing the world and enfolding it within divine agency. Irenaeus presents this understanding of divine transcendence as self-evident on strictly rational grounds: "That which contains is greater than that which is contained. But then that which is greater is also stronger, and in a greater degree Lord; and that which is greater, and stronger, and in a greater degree Lord—must be God."¹⁵ That God contains all things means, for Irenaeus, that God made creation some-

¹¹ I have dealt with the structural importance of this theme and its formative influence on the theology of Athanasius in my *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 18–24.

¹² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1072b14.

¹³ *AH* 5.4.1 (*ANF*, 1:530).

¹⁴ Plato, *Timaeus* 29E–30A.

¹⁵ *AH* 2.1.2 (*ANF*, 1:360).

how “in himself.”¹⁶ This does not mean that creation alters divine being in any way, but rather that the ultimate forms and intelligible identities of created things have their ground in God’s own life: “This God, the Creator, who formed the world, is the only God, and there is no other God besides Him—He Himself receiving from Himself the model and figure of those things that have been made.”¹⁷ It is because of this unfathomably intrinsic relation of created things to God that creation reveals God and gives testimony to his intelligence, power, and goodness.¹⁸

Yet, for Irenaeus, this grounding and containment of creation in God can never annul the irreducible difference between contingent created being and the transcendent being of the Creator. In fact, the two aspects of the relation between God and creation are not at all in competition, but are strictly correlative. The difference between God and creation is entirely constituted by God’s positive relation to creation as its ground and the source of its ontological sustenance:

The things established are distinct from Him who has established them, and what have been made from Him who has made them. For He is Himself uncreated, both without beginning and end, and lacking nothing. He is Himself sufficient for Himself; and still further, He grants to all others this very thing, existence; but the things which have been made by Him have received a beginning. But whatever things had a beginning, and are liable to dissolution, and are subject to and stand in need of Him who made them, must necessarily in all respects have a different term [applied to them].¹⁹

It stands to reason, for Irenaeus, that this ontological difference must have epistemological consequences. Indeed, he maintains that the proportion of difference between created and uncreated being must always persist in any creaturely effort to come to knowledge of God: “In the same proportion as he who was formed but today, and received the beginning of his creation, is inferior to Him who is uncreated, and who is always the same, in that proportion is he, as

¹⁶ AH 2.3.1: “He himself created it who formed it beforehand in himself” (*ANF*, 1:362).

¹⁷ AH 2.16.3 (*ANF*, 1:380).

¹⁸ AH 2.9.1.

¹⁹ AH 3.8.3 (*ANF*, 1:422).

respects knowledge and the faculty of investigating the causes of all things, inferior to Him who made him. For you, O human being, are not an uncreated being.”²⁰ Not only that, but since the ultimate truth about created things resides within the divine life itself, human beings cannot of themselves attain to a full understanding of even created being:

Inasmuch as we are inferior to, and later in existence than the Word of God and His Spirit, we are on that very account destitute of the knowledge of His mysteries. And there is no cause for wonder if this is the case with us as respects things spiritual and heavenly, and such as require to be made known to us by revelation, since many even of those things which lie at our very feet (I mean such as belong to this world, which we handle, and see, and are in close contact with) transcend our knowledge, so that even these we must leave to God. . . . On all these points we may indeed say a great deal while we search into their causes, but God alone who made them can declare the truth regarding them.²¹

Thus, given the simultaneity of positive relation and difference between God and the world, human reason also exhibits a capacity for discerning the presence and activity of God through creation but falls short of the vision of God that it naturally seeks. Moreover, it must always be on its guard against a false similitude of this vision concocted by presuming that created realities directly mirror divine reality. But the good news of Christian faith is that this vision is finally attained when the Word and Reason of God, the Son of the Father, who fully shares in the being of God, becomes human and thus reveals to humanity both God and creation, as well as the relation between them.

Perfect Knowledge and the Incarnation of the Word

As one would expect, Irenaeus and his gnostic opponents offered very different interpretations of the prologue of the Gospel of John.²²

²⁰ AH 2.25.3 (ANF, 1:397; translation slightly altered).

²¹ AH 2.28.2 (ANF, 1:398–99).

²² For a thorough treatment of Irenaeus’s treatment of the Gospel of John, see Bernard Mutschler, *Irenäus als johanneischer Theologe*, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 21 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004). For an analysis of the Valentinian interpretation of the prologue of John’s Gospel, see Tuomas

The gnostics, with their penchant for projecting multiplicity onto the divine realm, take the different divine titles in the prologue as designating different beings: God, Beginning, Word, Only-begotten, Life, Light, Grace, and Truth are all different beings in the gnostic system. Moreover, gnostic Christologies typically distinguished between an earthly Jesus, who is created by the Demiurge, and a divine being, called Christ or the Savior, who descends upon Jesus from the *pleroma* and then returns to the *pleroma*. According to different gnostic accounts, this divine being descended on Jesus during his baptism or during the crucifixion; in some accounts, he is laughing at the side of the Cross while the earthly Jesus is being crucified.

For Irenaeus, however, the key disclosure of the Johannine prologue is that the divine Word and Reason, who always coexists with the Father, has consummated the union of Creator and creation in his becoming flesh. Irenaeus is well aware of the variations in the various gnostic systems, but for him, the key touchstone of orthodoxy, whose denial makes them all equidistant from authentic Christian revelation, is to be found in John's prologue. After outlining the variations in gnostic Christologies, he concludes: "But according to the opinion of no one of the heretics was the Word of God made flesh."²³ The epistemological consequences of the Word becoming flesh are central to Irenaeus's concern. We have seen that, for him, the difference between God and creation means that human beings can never attain to knowledge of God by their own efforts; they cannot even fully comprehend created realities. At the same time, for Irenaeus, humanity has never simply been left to its own devices in its efforts to know the truth of God and creation. On the one hand, Irenaeus contends that "God cannot be known without God."²⁴ On the other hand, throughout human history, God has been making himself known through God, according to the Trinitarian pattern of divine self-disclosure. And Irenaeus finds the foundations for this Trinitarian structure of divine self-communication in the prologue of John, which identifies Jesus as the divine Logos or Intelligence. Irenaeus presumes this identification as indicating the fullness of the

Rasimus, "Ptolemaeus and the Valentinian Exegesis of John's Prologue," in *The Legacy of John: Second-century Reception of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Tuomas Rasimus (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 145–71.

²³ AH 3.11.3 (ANF, 1:427).

²⁴ AH 4.6.4 (ANF, 1:468).

Word's divinity, since "God is all intelligence, all Word."²⁵ John's prologue says: "No one has seen God. The only-begotten Son has made him known" (John 1:18). Irenaeus seems to be merely paraphrasing this Johannine verse when he declares: "Since it was impossible, without God, to come to knowledge of God, He teaches human beings through his Word to know God."²⁶ For Irenaeus, the Son's pedagogy of divine self-disclosure reaches its apex when the Word becomes flesh: "For in no other way could we have learned the things of God, unless our Master, existing as the Word, had become human."²⁷ Going beyond the prologue of John, and with special reference to the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at his baptism, Irenaeus explains that, through the Incarnation, the Son receives the Spirit humanly on our behalf and, in this way, the Spirit of God becomes "accustomed to" dwell in human beings. Thus, the Trinitarian self-communication is complete when the Spirit "furnishes us with the knowledge of the Truth."²⁸

While the Incarnation brings about the fullness of divine disclosure, it also simultaneously validates creation itself. Against the gnostic claim that this material world is the product of a delinquent semi-divine being, Irenaeus's persistent argument is that creation's capacity to be the bearer of spirit, truth, and salvation is fulfilled and demonstrated through the Incarnation. Only if this world bore the direct imprint of its divine Creator could it bear the full personal presence of divinity in the Incarnation of the divine Word and Reason, the Logos of the Father. If creation in general gives testimony to the presence and activity of God, we can say that God also, in the Incarnation, gives testimony and proof of creation's capacity to carry and communicate the divine presence:

How could that creation which was concealed from the Father, and far removed from Him, have sustained His Word? . . . How, again, could that creation which is beyond the Pleroma have contained Him who contains the entire Pleroma? Inasmuch, then, as all these things are impossible and incapable of proof, that preaching of the Church is alone true [which proclaims]

²⁵ *AH* 2.13.8: "Illum totum sensum et totum Verbum" (SC, 294:124); cf. *AH* 2.28.5.

²⁶ *AH* 4.5.1 (*ANF*, 1:466; translation slightly altered).

²⁷ *AH* 5.1.1 (*ANF*, 1:526).

²⁸ *AH* 4.33.7 (*ANF*, 1:508).

that His own creation bore Him, which subsists by the power, the skill, and the wisdom of God; which is sustained, indeed, after an invisible manner by the Father, but, on the contrary, after a visible manner it bore His Word.²⁹

Irenaeus's interpretation of the Johannine prologue is thus foundational for his conception of the relation between faith and reason. He interprets the Johannine prologue as identifying Jesus to be the intelligence of God, and thus, in keeping with Jesus's own words, as the Truth itself (see John 14:6). This identification enables him to apply the Johannine proclamation of the Incarnation to the psalmist's exclamation that "truth has sprung from the earth" (see Ps 85:11).³⁰ But if truth has sprung from the earth, this means that the divine ground of creation is now intelligible in a new way, since this ground has become manifest within creation itself. Moreover, if truth can spring up from the earth, this also means that the earth is a carrier of truth. Faith in the Incarnation, then, validates human rationality while also expanding it beyond its natural limits.

Conclusion

Irenaeus never reflected thematically on the relation between faith and reason in the way that Pope Benedict did in his Regensburg address. But, motivated by Pope Benedict's valorization of the synthesis of faith and reason in the theology of the early Church, I have tried to show how Irenaeus performed this synthesis in a way that is exemplary and indeed normative, as Pope Benedict claimed. In conclusion, I would like to suggest that a foundational category in Irenaeus's performance of this synthesis is that of "testimony." We have seen that Irenaeus derides the gnostic god as devoid of the "testimony" of reality as we know it. On the other hand, he sees the Catholic doctrine of creation as an embracing of creation's testimony to its Creator and the doctrine of the Incarnation as indicating the Creator's testimony to his creation.

If I may be allowed to follow the trajectory of the letter of Irenaeus's theology into the horizon of the spirit that animates it, I would propose that, at its heart, his theological vision presumes that the element of "testimony" or "witness" is intrinsic and even constitutive of rationality and truth, whether in the mode of faith or that of reason. Intelligence, understanding, reason—however we want to speak of

²⁹ AH 5.18.1 (ANF, 1:546).

³⁰ AH 4.5.1.

the mystery of the encounter with truth—all of this is, for Irenaeus, bound up with testimony and witness bearing. This fundamental intuition is distinctly Christian because it is ultimately Trinitarian. There is no element of testimony or witness that is constitutive of the conception of ultimate Intelligence as self-thinking Thought, which is Aristotle's understanding. But the Christian affirmation of Jesus's ultimate identity as the Logos or Reason of the Father who eternally exists with the Father and eternally "exegetes" the Father posits Divine Intelligence as intrinsically and constitutively and eternally a communion of testimony or "bearing witness." The Christian God is not merely Intelligence, but a communion in which the Son eternally bears witness to the Intelligence of the Father. As the Reason of the Father, the Son does not make the Father rational or intelligent; rather, his very person is testimony to the perfection of the Father's Intelligence, and the Son's generation from the Father is coextensive with that testimony.³¹ The Spirit too is called the "Spirit of Truth" in the Gospel of John, not because he makes the Son to be the truth and not because he makes the Father generate the truth of the Son, but because he bears witness to the Father's generation of the Son as his self-testimony and to the Son's responsive testimony to the Father, bearing witness also to the mutual love of Father and Son in their mutual testimony. This Trinitarian inter-activity of mutual witness is wonderfully expressed in the *troparion* for the Byzantine liturgy of Theophany that commemorates the baptism of Jesus: "When you were baptized in the Jordan, O Lord, the worship of the Trinity was revealed. For the Father's voice bore witness to you by calling you his Beloved Son, and the Spirit, in a form of a dove, confirmed the truth of these words. O Christ God, who has appeared to us and enlightened the world, Glory to You!" Many religions and thought systems envision the divine as intelligent or as intelligence itself. But only the Trinitarian faith of Christianity posits an inter-activity of testimony and mutual witness as *constitutive* of divine intelligence.

This emphasis on intra-Trinitarian testimony is, of course, deeply Johannine. It is in John's Gospel that Jesus declares that the Father testifies on his behalf (John 5:37) and that the Holy Spirit will also

³¹ In saying that the Son does not make the Father rational or intelligent, I am essentially reiterating St. Augustine's clarification that the Father is not just wise though begetting wisdom, but is himself Wisdom that begets Wisdom, such that the Father is begetting Wisdom and the Son is begotten Wisdom (see *De Trinitate* 4.1.2).

give witness to him (John 15:26). Irenaeus does not systematically explicate a theology of testimony based on the exegesis of these Johannine texts, but it seems to me that he presumes this Johannine grammar and that this presumption grounds and permeates his distinctive performance of the synthesis of faith and reason. Ultimately, the most radical differentiation he makes between Catholic Christians and the gnostics is that the god posited by the latter lacks universal testimony. Catholic faith, on the other hand, is not only a faith in a God who is “all Intelligence,” and thus the ground of all rationality, but it is faith in the God to whose intelligence and rationality witness is borne extensively throughout creation and intensively in the Church. The *true* God, for Irenaeus, is the God who can evoke this universal witness. We can further add that this true God can evoke this universal witness precisely because witness is eternally constitutive of divine intelligence and divine rationality. Both faith and reason bear witness to this God, and this witness is only a participation in the witness that God gives to himself, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As the Evangelist John tells us, “this testimony is true,” and in communion with Irenaeus, we can add: “this testimony *is Truth*.”

N.V.