

DISCERNMENT WITHIN A MUTUAL LOVE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD: A NEW THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

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Theologians disagree on whether Christians can know what in particular God wills. Appropriate decisions often conflict with decisions God seems to want us humans to make. Methods of discernment are numerous and fallible. Spiritual writers depict discerners as passively receiving God's will or discovering God's predetermined plan. As an alternative, this article proposes that an illuminating, mutual love relationship with God requires humans to codetermine God's will for themselves and others. They respond to the Spirit who frees and leads by attraction.

TALK OF DISCERNMENT is commonplace in Christianity, but expositions of discernment typically gloss over several fundamental theological problems. Here I do not intend to examine the “how-to” of discernment.¹ Rather I want to raise up some perplexing, underlying theological issues. My goal is to relocate discernment within a mutual love relationship as an alternative to two common theological settings, namely, the divine command and the natural law methodologies for morality. My alternative derives from a relational-responsibility methodology, whose distinctively religious version I will describe as a mutual love relationship with God.²

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¹ Elsewhere I have sketched one method for how to discern a particular decision: “Divorce: Making a Moral Decision,” *Anglican Theological Review* 70 (1988) 310–22.

² Edward Collins Vacek, S.J., “Divine-Command, Natural-Law, and Mutual-Love Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 633–53.

While all models limp, especially when they refer to God, they nevertheless help walk us through difficult issues. Let me offer a brief illustration. Why is it wrong to visit a prostitute? Divine command morality might say it is forbidden because it is against God's commandment on adultery. The natural law tradition might say that prostitution is a violation of God's design for sex, or that it is a violation of the person who engages in it. But mutual love ethics, while taking account of the other two methodologies, focuses on the responsibilities that flow from our covenantal relationship in Christ. Thus the surprising reason that Paul gives against this sin is that it would "take members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute" (1 Cor 6:15). As he explains, "You are not your own" (1 Cor 6:19). In other words, decisions are made as a member of a community and in terms of how they affect that community.

I will use the following text from *Gaudium et spes*, Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, to explore this mutual relationship.

The People of God believes that it is led by the Lord's Spirit, Who fills the earth. Motivated by this faith, it labors to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age. For faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for man's total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human.³

This text raises the following questions: (1) Does God have a knowable "purpose"? (2) How can we understand God's purpose when these "happenings, needs, and desires" are so often conflicted? (3) If God is leading us, why must we "labor to decipher"? (4) What is our "total vocation"? (5) How does faith fit with "fully human" solutions? (6) How are we "led by the Lord's Spirit"?

DOES GOD HAVE A KNOWABLE PURPOSE?

There is a wide spectrum of theological views on whether religious discernment is even possible. Perhaps out of a sense of reverence, humility, or skepticism, many Christians deny that we can know what God wants us to do in any particular decision—for example, to pay our taxes or to select a college. Some hold that God's will for us is unknowable; others that it is definitely knowable; and still others that in some aspects of situations, God's will is sometimes clear, but that for the most part God leaves decisions to us.

First, consider scriptural testimony to the difficulty of knowing the mind of God: Paul exclaims, "How unsearchable are his judgments and how

³ *Gaudium et spes* no. 11, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J., trans. Joseph Gallagher (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord?" (Rom 11:33–34 NRSV). Proverbs 25:2 tells us that "it is the glory of God to conceal things." Isaiah 55:9 observes that God's ways are above our ways. Much more difficult than these texts, however, is the ethical conundrum that God's will seems contrary to the moral values that guide our earthly decisions. The wisdom of the world is foolishness in God's sight (1 Cor 3:18). God's utter sovereignty means that for no apparent reason, God can reject Cain's offering and accept Abel's (Gen 4:3–5). God commands the murder of innocent women and children (Josh 6:21, 8:24–26; 1 Sam 15:3, 15; see Deut 32:39), which the church considers intrinsically evil, that is, never permitted.

Furthermore, the descriptions of God given by many of our most original theologians usually seem to have little connection with the particular decisions we must make. If Jack wants to know whether to marry Jill, he will find little direct help in Rahner's description of God as the never graspable Whither of our transcendence or in Tillich's "ground of being" or in Thomas Aquinas's Absolute *Esse*. Nor will Jack get much specific guidance from Luther's experience of God as either silent or threatening or Otto's as the terrifyingly Holy or Schleiermacher's feeling of absolute dependence or the mystic's dark night.⁴ God's transcendence seems to rebuff any attempt to connect God with any particular decision.⁵ Less metaphysical theologians, such as Richard Gula, observe that efforts to discover God's particular plan for us seem tantamount to playing "Guess what number is in my mind."⁶ Or, as David Lonsdale discouragingly puts it, we are supposed to be able to find "that small corner of the immense celestial blueprint" that pertains to us.⁷

⁴ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1978) 65; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967) 1:110; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981) 1, q. 9, a. 1; q. 105, a. 5; Denis Janz, *Westminster Handbook to Martin Luther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) 1–5; Rudolf Otto, *Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford, 1958) 5–41; Robert Roberts, "The Feeling of Absolute Dependence," *Journal of Religion* 57 (1977) 252–66; John Bramann, "Heidegger: Nothingness and Authentic Existence," in *Educating Rita and Other Philosophical Movies* (Cumberland, MD: Nightsun, 2009); Roger Haight, S.J., "Expanding the Spiritual Exercises," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 42 (Summer 2010) 7–9.

⁵ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston, 1980) 256–57. By "us" in this paper, I mean to include, as appropriate, an individual person, group, community, institution, etc.

⁶ Richard Gula, S.S., *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (New York: Paulist, 1989) 318.

⁷ David Lonsdale, S.J., *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola University, 1990) 65; Philip Shano, S.J., *La volonté*

Second, however, there seems to be quite clear, particular choices that God wants us to make. Jesus tells the rich man but not others, “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor” (Mk 10:21). Paul has no doubt that God wills that “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26). Straightforward cases occur when we are tempted to do something obviously sinful. Occasionally, as Edward Schillebeeckx has observed, certain particular evils evoke a strong “This should not be!”, which the religious person hears as a protest coming from God.⁸ Positively, most mothers have no doubt that God wants them to comfort their sick children. In short, there are particular decisions that seem rather clearly to be what God wants of us. At an extreme, no theologian could be stronger than Karl Barth who claimed: “The command of God . . . wills us precisely the one thing and nothing else, and measures and judges us precisely by whether we do or do not do with the same precision the one thing that he so precisely wills.”⁹

Third, in the zone between no knowledge and sure knowledge of God’s particular plan, most Christians ascertain some broad content that accords with God. If it “is the glory of God to conceal things, . . . the glory of kings is to search things out” (Prov 25:2). Although Thomas Aquinas asserts that “we know not what God wills in particular: and in this respect we are not bound to conform our will to the Divine will,” he adds that we accord with God when we choose under the aspect of the good.¹⁰ Most Christians, including Aquinas, go further. They read the Scriptures to discover what God at least generally wants and does not want. Paul names vices that are not fitting to our life in Christ (1 Cor 3:3, 5:9–10, 6:9–11). Catholics typically look to church teaching as a fairly reliable guide on how to live in conformity with God. Theologians of this intermediate position hold

particulère de Dieu, trans. Ernest Richer, S.J. (Sainte-Foy, Québec: Cahiers de Spiritualité Ignatienne, 1996) 19–24; Jules Toner, S.J., *Discerning God’s Will: Ignatius of Loyola’s Teaching on Christian Decision Making* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991) 28; Roger Haight, S.J., *Christian Spirituality for Seekers: Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012) 223.

⁸ Patricia McAuliffe, *Fundamental Ethics: A Liberationist Approach* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1993) 1–19.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957) 2/2:664; see also Mark O’Keefe, O.S.B., *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy: On the Relationship of Christian Ethics and Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1995) 125–26; Michael Panicola, “Discernment in the Neonatal Context,” *Theological Studies* 60 (1999) 723–47, at 734.

¹⁰ *ST* 1–2, q. 19, a. 10; and 1–2, q. 8, a. 1. Since even sinners almost always choose under some “aspect of the good,” this principle is not very helpful.

that God usually reveals only relatively high-level designs, such as that we do good, avoid evil, and practice justice, but that God does not clearly reveal whether justice requires us to help this person rather than that person. Aquinas famously held that as we descend to particulars, we lose certainty.¹¹ In this intermediate position, then, we see “through a glass darkly” when it comes to knowing in particular what God wants us to do.¹² I will argue that, because God loves us, it is ordinarily left to us to decide what is to be done in the intermediate area between agnosticism and Barthian determinism.

The testimony of John Dunne, an esteemed spiritual writer, is probably close to that of most of us. He writes that when in prayer he seeks what to do, he hears no answer. He does, however, receive from the prayerful experience of God’s presence the courage and freedom to make his own agonizing decision.¹³ Is God only a support, but not a guide? Or is the kind of support we receive from God itself a guide? To this question I will argue yes.

CONFLICTED “HAPPENINGS, NEEDS, AND DESIRES”

The classic problem of the one and the many is not only an epistemological issue. It is a pressing ethical and theological issue. The common good and the good of individuals often are not harmonious—as sacrifice in wars and choices in health care costs make so evident. Similar conflicts occur between what God universally wills and what we in particular have to decide. Aquinas holds that we can appropriately choose to act in a way that does *not* cohere with what God *universally* wills. In general God wills the universal good of justice and the natural order; but this requires—to use Aquinas’s own example—both that a magistrate act to execute a thief and that the thief’s wife act to get her husband spared. This suggests that God wants them, respectively, to direct their efforts to contradictory goals.¹⁴ Recognizing the problem,

¹¹ *ST* 1–2, q. 94, a. 4.

¹² Roger Haight, S.J., “Foundational Issues in Jesuit Spirituality,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 19 (September 1987) 31–45; Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith* 319; Witness Lee, “Knowing the Will of God,” *Affirmation and Critique* 5.3 (2000) 27–38; Roberts, “Feeling of Absolute Dependence” 253.

¹³ John Dunne, *Love’s Mind: An Essay on Contemplative Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University, 1993) 41.

¹⁴ Aquinas’s actual example refers to wifely piety (*ST* 1–2, q. 19, a.10; and q. 26, a.7); more fitting for our time would be a wife who marshals considerable resources to secure her husband’s release. See Eugene Rogers Jr., “The Narrative of Natural Law in Aquinas’s Commentary on Romans 1,” *Theological Studies* 59 (1998) 254–77, at 263, 273–75.

Aquinas puts forth a realistic but unsatisfying ethical and theological solution: "It suffices for man to will the upholding of God's justice and of the natural order."¹⁵

The ethical problem for those who love God arises if God wills not only the universal good but also the good of the individual persons themselves.¹⁶ The wife's love for God involves her in affirming God's love not only for herself but also for the rest of creation.¹⁷ She should, of course, love her husband. But she should also affirm the civic order that forbids her to kill the magistrate, and she should even affirm God's affirmation of the magistrate in his role. That means she should want the magistrate to do the exact opposite of what she as a wife wants.¹⁸ The unfortunate ethical result for her is "uncertainty about the value of what one is doing"; this undercuts "wholehearted action."¹⁹

This conflict between the magistrate and the thief's wife is but a token for life in general. Contrary to a common Catholic theological irenic optimism, it is clear in evolution and history that God achieves God's goals partly through conflict. It is not only due to sin that the "fight for justice in society will always be a fight."²⁰ Harmony and unity may be God's future goal, but it is achieved through struggle not only within individual persons but also between persons and within all of creation. Individual winners and losers are a standard feature of this process. Ecological balance requires some lions to eat antelope and some antelope to outrun lions. Likewise, according to Luke, it was "necessary" for the messiah to suffer (Lk 24:26), for Paul to clash with Peter (Gal 2:11-13), for innovative theologians to provoke other theologians into creating better formulations (e.g., Chalcedon), and so on. God sometimes brings about the development of the kingdom through eristic and dialectical conflict.

¹⁵ *ST* 1-2, q. 19, a. 10.

¹⁶ *Summa contra gentiles* (hereafter *SCG*) (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1975) 3, chaps. 112-13.

¹⁷ Edward Collins Vacek, S.J., *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1994) 116-56.

¹⁸ Similarly, for St. Ignatius: "The same Divine Spirit is able to move me to that action for certain reasons, and for other reasons to move others to the contrary action" (cited in William Meissner, S.J., *To the Greater Glory: A Psychological Study of Ignatian Spirituality* [Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1999] 397); see Toner, *Discerning God's Will* 53, 69. Such a view can lead to a dispiriting image of God. For example, what kind of God might inspire John to go for a drive in the park, when this leads to a car accident that kills ten innocent people, one of whom was on the verge of discovering a cure for cancer?

¹⁹ Toner, *Discerning God's Will* 289.

²⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Love and Justice: Selections* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992) 38.

In the face of this complexity and conflict, we should be faithful to our respective roles, responsibilities, and insights; at the same time we should affirm, to the degree that we can honestly do so, the roles, responsibilities, and insights of others. Our cooperation with God's love involves paying particular attention to our special relationships, including our own selves. But it also requires keeping God's wider concerns in mind. When we love God, we become involved in God's involvement in the world. Still, doing our part to shape history must always be tentative. It is impossible for us to know the whole of what God knows or wills at any moment. It is even more impossible to determine what to do so as to produce the best outcome in the future. Indeed, it is inevitable that we will always fail to do what would lead to the best possible outcome.

We have to settle for Aquinas's wisdom: "it suffices." The ethics Aquinas offers is not one in which we should do the best act possible, but one in which we do what is "good enough." It "suffices" for us to take account of what we can reasonably predict about the future, even though we can be sure that any choice we make will always be imperfect.²¹ Similarly, Aquinas offers a theological understanding of God as one who also acts in a way that is "good-enough." For Aquinas, this is not the best of all worlds that God could have created. In fact, God created a world whose own perfection requires things that will fail.²²

In an era prior to the anthropological and historical turns, it was common to imagine that there was a preset, divine plan into which we simply had to fit.²³ We now realize we are partially responsible for the shape and direction of both evolution and history. In addition to looking back to the Garden of Eden, as Pope John Paul II and the theological tradition of natural law so often have done, we must look forward to the future.²⁴ We are responsible for that part of the evolutionary and historical process that lives in us. For example, the present era of genetics opens up possibilities for refashioning not only the world about us but also our own bodily and spiritual capabilities. Whatever bad or good choices we make, God's particular will must then adapt.²⁵

Accordingly, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote, "God does not have a fixed plan that he must carry out; on the contrary he has many ways of finding man and even turning his wrong ways into right ways."²⁶ This

²¹ Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear* 65; Toner, *Discerning God's Will* 226–27.

²² *ST* 1, q. 25, aa. 5–6; *SCG* 3, chap. 71.3.

²³ Shano, *La volonté particulière de Dieu* 23; Meissner, *To the Greater Glory* 219.

²⁴ John O'Malley, S.J., "The Hermeneutic of Reform': A Historical Analysis," *Theological Studies* 73 (2012) 517–46, at 533–38.

²⁵ Toner, *Discerning God's Will* 28.

²⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Co-Workers of the Truth* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992) 377.

position reflects the way Scripture depicts God as repenting and revising plans in light of the decisions people made (Gen 6:6; 1 Sam 15:11). In other words, God's changing plan depends on the contingency of chance and on our free decisions.²⁷ Hence we can only hesitantly discern what God will want from us tomorrow. Ignatius of Loyola, considered a master of discernment, more than once made bad judgments in planning for the future.²⁸ All of us proceed *humano modo*.

"LABORS TO DECIPHER"

We must discern how we will discern. Various methods have theological standing. One ancient method is to cast lots. The early church rolled the dice to choose Matthias (Acts 1:26). Augustine thought we should decide which strangers to help through casting of lots.²⁹ John Wesley cast lots to decide whether God wanted him to marry (the lot said no, and he ended the engagement).³⁰ If God's ways are inscrutable (Isa 40:28), casting lots seems as good a way to decide as any other. It has the advantage of eliminating bias or selfishness. In making decisions, there is an appropriate time to flip a coin—and there are vastly more inappropriate times.

Second, many people take chance occurrences as signs of God's will. Augustine heard a child's voice as a "divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find."³¹ While this method may

²⁷ John Thiel, "Creation, Contingency, and Sacramentality," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theology Society of America* 67 (2012) 46–58, at 46–56; Toner, *Discerning God's Will* 28; Shano, *La volonté particulière de Dieu* 110, 118.

²⁸ Toner accepts that we cannot know what God wants to happen in the world. But, he argues, that is not relevant for Ignatian discernment. When we properly go through a process of discernment, he claims, we achieve certitude that God wants us to make a particular decision, even when that decision is, in fact, to accomplish the opposite of what God actually wants to happen in the world. In ethics, this sort of thinking resembles a "sincerity ethic"; that is, the relevant issue is not what one does but only that one sincerely chooses. Toner claims that spiritual discernment is personal and need not take into account what other people are deciding, that it refers only to the present moment and not to history, that the limits of our knowledge are irrelevant, and that bad consequences do not count against the rectitude of our decision (*Discerning God's Will* 287–315; Meissner, *To the Greater Glory* 225).

²⁹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.28 (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library); *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 18.4, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701118.htm>.

³⁰ Journal entry of March 4, 1737, in John Wesley and Nehemiah Curnock, *Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols. (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2006) 1:325.

³¹ Augustine, *Confessions* 8.11, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford, 1992) 152–53.

seem arbitrary, something more is often at work. The chance event was revelatory but not because God “caused” the child to chant at that moment or “made” a pertinent page of Scripture fall open. Rather, those who live in the context of an active personal relationship with God are drawn to connect with God what may in itself be an unrelated occurrence.

Third, a standard and praiseworthy Christian method for discerning God’s plan has been to do whatever legitimate authorities demand. There are at least three versions of this method. First, we think that God simply wants us to obey an earthly authority, irrespective of the content demanded. Second, we think what an authority commands reveals what is in God’s mind. This view presupposes, often implausibly, that the authority knows the mind of God. Third, more plausibly, we think that what an authority decides itself determines the content of God’s will. “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven” (Mt 16:19, 18:18). Reliance on authority, of course, is not unproblematic. On the personal level, Jesus condemned the Pharisees who minutely observe the Law but “neglect justice and the love of God” (Lk 11:42). On the theological level, almost all of the Christian tradition has decided that at least two of God’s Ten Commandments should not be obeyed (Sabbath and images); the Vatican has rejected its own authoritative approval of slavery and sexism; and the church has altered the criteria for priestly ordination. “Whatever you loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19, 18:18).

Fourth, philosophers and theologians, when doing discernment, typically turn to natural law and “right reason.” The watchword for this approach might be Jesus’ exhortation: “why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?” (Lk 12:57). God gives us the power of reason, so we should use it. Depending on the seriousness of the issue, we should collect data, consider alternatives, consult others, refer to the relevant rules, and so forth. Needless to say, this method, like the others, fails in practice. The “best and the brightest” too often provide disastrous solutions to life’s problems; for example, theologians who explain why all contraception is wrong are matched by scientists who explain that in the future all conceptions should take place in the laboratory. Hence, reliance on reason is itself a matter for discernment.

Fifth, most of us, implicitly or explicitly, rely on our affective intuitions when we are engaged in a decision.³² Our social roles, cultural upbringing, and moral character do a great amount of the sorting that goes on in all our judgments. So formed, our affections resist or confirm a possible decision. Like our more reasoned reflections, our educated emotions

³² Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012) 44–47.

often lead us right to what needs to be done. Indeed, they are essential to good discernment. As Rahner noted, reliance on pure reason is a deficient mode of discerning.³³ Similarly, Aquinas, who was an unflinching proponent of the centrality of reason, emphasized that charity is itself a higher norm than that of right reason.³⁴ The central thesis of this article is that charity or friendship with God should be the basis of religious discernment.

“TOTAL VOCATION”: ILLUMINATING, MUTUAL LOVE

Love, as I have argued elsewhere, is an emotional, affirmative participation in the goodness of the beloved.³⁵ Like other emotions, it is a cognition of value. Without our emotions we would not experience anything to be valuable. Love enables us both to feel the goodness of the beloved and to intuit the direction of what would, where possible, enhance that goodness. Thus love can be a practical virtue insofar as it inclines us to see the real and the possible good as well as to discover ways to actualize that good. For these reasons, love is central in decision making. Like other ways of knowing, love is educable. Children learn from their parents not only ideas and behaviors but also emotions such as love. Paul urges us to “be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love” (Eph 5:1–2). Love can be encouraged, redirected, or resisted by our freedom, and vice versa. Our loves may be primarily bodily, psychic, spiritual, or religious.

Religious Emotions

Religious emotions attach and attune us to God. According to David Lonsdale, they are religious “not because they exist in some area of our personal life that is nonmaterial, . . . but rather because . . . they are associated with or evoked by God and things that have to do with God.”³⁶ This religious connection is not made through an intellectual deduction that, since God is good, a particular good choice must be connected to God. Rather, the connection is made by a distinctive emotion that has a divine referent. Contrary to popular expression, love for neighbor is not itself love for God, but neighbor-love can be affectively connected with

³³ Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1964) 103, 108.

³⁴ *ST* 1–2, q. 65, a. 2; *ST* 2–2, q. 23, q. 3; q. 24, a. 1; q. 27, q. 6.

³⁵ Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine* 34.

³⁶ David Lonsdale, S.J., *Listening to the Music of the Spirit: The Art of Discernment* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1993) 71–72; Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotions* (New York: Oxford, 2010) 54.

love for God.³⁷ Since God is not a being like or among other beings, there is a radical difference between our nonreligious and our religious emotions.³⁸ The love we have for our good and gracious God frequently includes a dialectical aspect of awe-filled terror before the divine Otherness.³⁹ Religious emotions relate us to the transcendent-immanent God who is experienced in varying ways and intensities as both distant and near.

God is transcendent, beyond all beings. This otherness is usually tacit in all religious experience. It is experienced in a purer form in apophatic union with God. God, properly speaking, is no “object” of our consciousness, because engagement with God escapes the subject-object structure of daily consciousness.⁴⁰ Speaking of this God, Rahner writes: “The absence of object in question is utter receptivity to the inexpressible, non-conceptual experience of the love of the God who is raised transcendent above all that is individual, . . . of God as God. There is . . . the drawing of the whole person . . . into love . . . , into the infinity of God as God.”⁴¹ Thus, in some forms of apophatic religious experience, we transcend ourselves toward a “Horizon” that is beyond all horizons. In other forms of this experience, we go within ourselves to a still point or dark place where we “disappear” in the Nameless. In still other forms, we may experience ourselves as enveloped in featureless, yet positive, Mystery, such that all creation feels as one with the One—a unity that seems to obliterate differences.⁴² Such experiences, therefore, are not in themselves suitable for discernment. For without difference, there will be no decision.

God is also immanent to the self. Emotions such as religious bliss, religious peace, or religious joy function more like pervasive moods than emotions directed to a particular object. They are like instrumental music that moves us without “saying” anything.⁴³ Thus, like apophatic affections, these moods are not directed to specific choices. But unlike purely undifferentiated experiences of God, these moods make present the self in relation to God. Such experience is suggested when Peter says

³⁷ The opposite is frequently held; see, e.g., Bernard Brady, *Christian Love* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2003) 72. See Edward Collins Vacek, S.J., “The Eclipse of Love for God,” *America* 174.8 (March 9, 1996) 13–16; Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 23, a. 5.

³⁸ Brian Robinette, “The Difference Nothing Makes: *Creatio ex nihilo*, Resurrection, and Divine Gratuity,” *Theological Studies* 72 (2011) 525–57, at 533–38.

³⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 1:110.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 112; Haight, “Expanding the Spiritual Exercises” 14.

⁴¹ Rahner, *Dynamic Element* 135.

⁴² Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 1:108; Haight, “Expanding the Spiritual Exercises” 9–15; Brady, *Christian Love* 119–20, 134.

⁴³ Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University, 2003) 119–32; Rahner, *Dynamic Element* 158.

during the transfiguration, “Lord it is good for us to be here” (Mt 17:4). Extending an interpretation by Rahner, we might describe such positive moods as consolation without previous earthly cause. That is, we have a direct experience of an immediate relation between God and ourselves, without some further object.⁴⁴ Discernment may subsequently take place when a particular decision is introduced into this experience—for example, when testing to see how the decision affects the self in its relationship to God. Questions are asked such as, does this decision confirm my peace or upset my joy? Or is this alternative consistent with who I am when in this affective relation with God? The focus is on the self—the self in its union with God. As always, mistakes occur. Peter’s impetuous desire to create three booths interjects discord into his experience of the transfigured Christ. He does not discern well the next step.

God is also immanent in our world. Ignatius proposes a fuller kataphatic ideal: “There is no created thing on the face of the earth that we love in itself, but we love it only in the Creator of all things.”⁴⁵ The condition for realizing this ideal, Ignatius says, is that we are inflamed with love of God. Our religious emotions transform our ordinary loves of creatures by connecting them with God.⁴⁶ The person before us, whether rich or poor, attractive or loathsome, is felt to be someone for whom Christ died (1 Cor 8:11; Jas 2:1–5). The kataphatic encounter with God in the world is especially prominent in the sacraments or other explicitly religious symbols, which are socially designated loci for encountering God.⁴⁷ Christians, of course, do not limit their religious affections to such specific symbols. They can “find God in all things.” Teilhard de Chardin’s “Divine Milieu” updates the Ignatian ideal to include the evolving and historical world.⁴⁸ All creatures belong to an ever-changing process whose Alpha and Omega is Christ. Thus discernment includes more than coherence with the self in its relating to God. Christians discern the next step needed in our evolving world where God is constantly inviting this world to new and higher ways of being.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ma. Christina A. Astorga, “Ignatian Discernment: A Critical Contemporary Reading for Christian Decision Making,” *Horizons* 32 (2005) 72–99, at 90.

⁴⁵ Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A New Translation Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, S.J. (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1951) no. 316.

⁴⁶ Rahner, *Dynamic Element* 108.

⁴⁷ Riis and Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotions* 118–19.

⁴⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

⁴⁹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1969) 161.

Differentiation in Unity

Religious discernment requires us to be united with God. As a form of participation in God, love creates a unity-in-difference.⁵⁰ First, love unites. When we love someone, we affectively share in who they are, what they do, and what they feel. Since we are concerned about them, we are also concerned about what they want. When we love God, we affectively participate in God's own life. We want to be united, in our limited way, with God's desires, projects, and friends. Second, love differentiates. The difference between ourselves and the beloved becomes clearer. Love also differentiates by developing the lover. The exercise of a capacity increases the capacity, as both virtue ethicists and weight-trainers attest. Less obviously, love also changes the beloved. God's love marks us as related to God.⁵¹ In relational metaphysics, where relations are real, whether or not we know of or accept God's love for us, it is part of our identity. We fulfill this identity both by accepting the love offered and by returning love.

When God loves us, who we are and what we do make a difference to God. This claim is, of course, controversial. The substance-based metaphysical tradition of the immutability of God denies that we can make any difference to God. As Aquinas wrote, "In God there is no real relation to creatures."⁵² A real relationship would mean that God is affected and thus changed by God's beloveds. This substance-based tradition in effect holds that God not only is not but cannot be moved by Christ's crucifixion or by the joys and sorrows or the sins and successes of human beings. This tradition contrasts with the tradition of relational metaphysics, which holds that God created us out of love for us and is affected by us, so much so that this God did not cling to divinity, but humbled God's self, even becoming obedient to death (Phil 2:8).⁵³ In this tradition, a God who is not able to have real relations with creatures is less than perfect, since relationship is a perfection. God really and not just notionally is a creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. We live in Christ, and he lives in us (Jn 15:5). Indeed, according to 1 John 4:12, God's own love is itself perfected in our loving.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 262.

⁵¹ *ST* 1, q. 45, a. 3.

⁵² *ST* 1, q. 9, a. 1; q. 13, a. 7; q. 45, a. 3.

⁵³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner, 1964) 2:92; Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine* 87–106; Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 1:61. Of course, we depend on God for our existence, a dependency God does not have.

⁵⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *Epistles of John: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1982) 256–58, 521.

Types of Love

There is currently no commonly accepted vocabulary for discussing emotions; the same is true for types of love. For Plato, “eros” brought people to the divine; for some contemporary authors, “eros” brings people to the brothel. Elsewhere I have discussed three kinds of love: agape, eros, and philia,⁵⁵ all three of which may be involved in religious discernment. The philia tradition, which is central to this essay, locates agape and eros within a mutual relationship between God and ourselves.

Agape is cardinal in Christian life, even though it is often wrongly said to be the only properly Christian love. Karl Rahner describes this love:

The love of God . . . is what it must be only when God is loved for his own sake—when love for him is produced and experienced not with a view to human self-assertion and interior self-fulfillment. . . . When human beings, ultimately without self-seeking, go out of themselves, forget themselves because of God, and really lose themselves in the ineffable mystery to which they willingly surrender.⁵⁶

Broadly speaking, the agapic tradition has emphasized seeking God’s will in order to please, appease, or otherwise surrender to God as sovereign. Religious discernment, then, is usually described deontologically in terms of obedience to God. The underlying implicit relationship is that of faithful service of servant/slave to Lord/Master.

An eros love is directed to creatures and God in terms of how they fulfill us. This eros is a genuine love, an affective affirmation of the beloved, but it is conditional on whether the beloved enhances our self. Probably this is the most common kind of love for God, a love that affirms God for all the ways that God blesses and fulfills us. With Augustine, our hearts quest until they are completely fulfilled by possession of God. With Aquinas, we desire our own happiness, and God is our beatitude. The eros tradition has emphasized love as a way of attaining our own personal perfection. Religious discernment is about being faithful to one’s own self or to one’s own commitment to God. It is usually described teleologically in terms of personal fulfillment and authenticity.⁵⁷ Rahner slides from the agapic approach into the eros tradition when he writes, “The operative principle of choice will be God, or, more precisely, that concrete, unique, intrinsic orientation towards God which constitutes the innermost essence of man.”⁵⁸ The human essence in its self-transcendence is the criterion.

⁵⁵ Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine* chaps. 5–8.

⁵⁶ Karl Rahner, *Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 70; see also 41–42, 52–53.

⁵⁷ O’Keefe, *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy* 117, 121, but see 120 for the larger context; and Rahner, *Dynamic Element* 166.

⁵⁸ Rahner, *Dynamic Element* 160–61.

Theologians tend to overlook or exclude a third kind of love for God, *philia*, a mutual communion of the sort that occurs in friendships.⁵⁹ This article proposes that *philia* should be the matrix of Christian discernment. Beyond deontological and teleological ethics, it adds relational-responsible ethics.⁶⁰ *Philia* exists when one loves not primarily for the sake of the beloved nor for the sake of the lover, but for the sake of their mutual relationship. This affective affirming relationship is itself the ground for the decisions and interactions of the participants. *Philia* relationships occur in diverse forms such as family, a team, or the body of Christ. Using familial language, Jesus says, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (Jn 14:11). He announces that he and his Father also make their home with us (Jn 14:23). Jesus speaks of our abiding in him and him in us (Jn 15:4; 1 Jn 2:24). Similarly, he affirms that the Spirit lives in us and will be with us, and so we abide in God and God in us (Jn 14:17; 1 Jn 4:13). We are not independent but belong to the kingdom either of the devil or of God (Mt 12:24-28; 1 Jn 3:10; Rom 7:17, 14:7-8).

A *philia* relationship is wonderfully convoluted. An interpersonal scenario might go something like this: I love you who love me, and I love you as loving me; and you do the same; I accept and welcome you, and I let your love affect me; and you do the same; this interaction of hearts has been going on over time; so I now love you as having on many past occasions engaged my life, and vice versa; such that, having often shared in various worthwhile or enjoyable activities and having freely worked together through obstacles, we have formed a relationship that is itself important to us; and we now act out of and for the sake of that relationship.⁶¹ This *philia* love requires more than one person being in right relation to another. It involves more than two separate loves, as might occur when I love someone who, unbeknown to me, loves me. It also requires receptivity, which the standard model of God rejects.

A *philia* love is an emotion that forms its members into a “we” that acts as a community, with each member playing his or her own appropriate role. Our friendship with God begins in a real but incomplete way from the moment of our creation. God creates us in order to love us as God’s “children,” a point that is obscured in the common catechetical

⁵⁹ See, however, Aquinas, *ST* 2-2, q. 23, a. 1. Still, his sense of friendship with God is not mutual in the sense of this article.

⁶⁰ Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith* 21.

⁶¹ Jules Toner, *Love and Friendship*, bk. 1 (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University, 2005) 170. Toner excels at providing the most extensive and careful description of love.

claim that God made us to praise, reverence, and serve God.⁶² Rather, God makes us to form a community with us. As we grow capable of a free response, we should increasingly learn about, gain a feel for, and consent to our membership in God's family. Through our responses we increasingly fulfill the incipient covenant. We can also be oblivious to this communion. We can even reject it, much as children can reject being members of their own family without ceasing to be members. Even when rejected, *philia* remains as a real but unfulfilled relationship. The covenant is permanent, abiding as an invitation to repent, to grow into it, but also to modify it by our participation.

Mutuality

Living out this *philia* involves at least five aspects that are essential in religious discernment. First, the members love one another, each in their own way and subject to any limits they may have. They affectively enter into and thereby are affected by lives of the other members. While the "Father" did not suffer on the cross (patripassianism), the "Father" suffered in unity with Jesus crucified (therefore, no divine apathy). If God loves us, then God is affected by what fills our lives. If we love God, we share in God's life, including the sufferings of Christ, but also God's glory.

Second, in principle what is important to the beloved becomes important to the lover. Since God loves not only God's own self but also the incarnate Christ, humans, and the rest of creation, each of these to some degree becomes important to those who love God. Since we cannot love all that God loves, we unite with at least some of God's loves. We do so focally by uniting with the mind and heart of Jesus Christ, which is the basis of *imitatio Christi*. Our union with God also leads us, where possible, to share in God's works of creation, redemption, and sanctification. Correlatively, what is important to us, as long as it is good, is important to God. It is important to God not just as God's own creation but also because of its connection to us (and all others whom God loves). Thus, a mutual relationship also means that God wants, where possible, that we do what we want. This affirmation of human desires is often neglected or denied, such as when Christians say that people should do God's will and not their own. Jesus tells us to ask for what we want (Lk 11:9). To be sure, at one crucial moment Jesus exclaimed, "Not my

⁶² The ambivalence is present in nos. 293–94 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Chicago: Loyola University, 1994); compare William A. Barry, S.J., *Finding God in All Things: A Companion to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1991) 132.

will but yours be done"; but even then, before he did so, he made clear his own desire: "Remove this cup from me" (Lk 22:42). His prayer was answered in the resurrection.

Third, an often-neglected point is that members of a *philia* relationship allow themselves to be loved, thereby receiving the self-gift of others. This willingness to accept refers not only to our acceptance of God's self-gift but also to God's acceptance of our return self-gift. Such acceptance changes the life of those who receive. It is not enough that they love and are loved. They must also accept the loving presence of others in their lives. On God's part, the story of Jesus' resurrection highlights God's acceptance of Jesus' love into God's own life. On the part of Christians, the creedal theme that Jesus lived and died for us (however difficult a theology of the cross might be) indicates that Christians accept into their own lives the death of Jesus as in some sense an expression of God's love for them.

Fourth, the God with whom we are involved in a mutual love can actually be experienced as interiorly active in us, that is, as loving us into existence and toward our own fullness. God "is above all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:6). The way of God's continued creative affirmation is suggested when, postresurrection, the first Christians experienced the crucified Jesus raised into a new way of being in their lives. Similarly, when we love ourselves, we can experience God's creative and affirming love within us. If, as we have seen, God dwells in us and we in God, then God can experience our own love as active in God.

Finally and most centrally, each party acts out of and in terms of this mutual love relationship. Affirmed and affirming as diversely involved members of the relationship, they act to sustain and promote the relationship and its members. When Christians live out of this relationship, the religious question is not primarily, what does God want? or what is good for me?, but rather what should we (God and I) do? or what is appropriate to our mutual love relationship? While God is the ontological originator, sustainer, and inspirer of this relationship, we also have a contribution to make to its development and fulfillment.

Normally, a *philia* relationship is not the object of our direct attention. Rather, it is the wordless source and goal of our activity. The relationship will be explicitly central in activities such as prayer or worship, but normally this *philia* guides our daily decisions in an unthematic way. Still, it must be at least implicitly present if we are to be practicing religious discernment. While this relationship is frequently tacit, it should become explicit when we are faced with significant choices. We then seriously decide in terms of how such decisions might impact this relationship. Overall, other loves must either be brought within this relationship or given up for it. The extreme example of such a choice occurs in

martyrdom. Jesus gave up his earthly relationships with his disciples, friends, mother, and his own life in order to be faithful to his relationship with his “Father.”

Shared Religious World

Because we are at all moments claimed by our covenant with God, religious discernment is appropriate for ordinary daily activity, not just for special decisions. John Futrell, well-known expositor of Ignatian discernment, argued that we must translate for our times Ignatius’s expression, “Find the will of God,” into “Respond to the word of God”; Futrell went on to describe the word of God as the everyday events of life. Futrell claimed that there will not be any new content given to us in prayer, but only the content we already bring.⁶³ Missing, however, from Futrell’s description is another frequent experience in prayer; that something new is given in prayer. This may occur in a sudden inspiration, a topic to which I will return. More commonly, when the data of life come into a relationship, its content alters. A baseball game watched with one’s son is a different event from a solitary viewing. These data become part of a shared world that has its own shared history. Similarly, ordinary experiences are themselves transposed when they are part of our life with God. This narrative includes our relationship with Jesus as well as our engagement in the sacraments and other prayers. The holy affections evoked in these explicitly religious practices draw from and feed back into the *philia* union. As Aquinas writes, “this sympathy or connaturality for Divine things is the result of charity, which unites us to God.”⁶⁴

But these socially sanctioned, sacred activities are not the main part of the world we share with God. Rather, that world chiefly consists of all the “authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires” of daily life to which my keynote text from *Gaudium et spes* refers. In the ordinary course of a day, we can connect any event to God in a way that makes it part of our shared world. We may experience each new thing as God’s way of communicating with us. We might, for example, hear a critical comment from an enemy as a helpfully challenging word from God. Haight insightfully observes, “The basic structure of religious knowing” is that “the things of this world and the words and concepts that we use to describe them mediate or make present to us and our consciousness the God that transcends us.”⁶⁵

⁶³ John Carroll Futrell, S.J., “Ignatian Discernment,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 2.2 (April 1970) 48, 60.

⁶⁴ *ST* 2–2, q. 45, aa. 2, 4.

⁶⁵ Haight, “Expanding the Spiritual Exercises” 14.

I must add that this revelation of God occurs within an already existing *philia* with God. We would not connect things with God if God had not first found and bound us in a covenant. These “things” and “words” and “concepts” to which Haight refers arise as part of our shared world.

Needless to say, we limited human beings do not find God at all times and in all things. But the ideal of religious experience is to grow in this finding. As we become more attuned to this spiritual seeking, the things of this world and the events that occur in our lives are then experienced as consistent with, against, or optional in our relationship with God. A patient’s bleeding ulcer becomes, to a religious physician, an invitation to cooperate with God in overcoming this particular evil in their world. The patient herself, as a member of the body of Christ, may experience her current pain as “sharing Christ’s sufferings” (1 Pet 4:13; Rom 8:17). For both the doctor and patient, this illness has a new meaning or content. Similarly, respect for the environment is not merely a prudent matter for the survival of the race, nor is it merely a matter of respect for living things. It also promotes the world we share with God.

“FULLY HUMAN”: OUR CONTRIBUTION

Standard depictions of religious discernment suggest that the task is to discover what God, quite independently of us, has already decided. God’s command or plan is out there like a note on some wall. We may fail to find it, or we may misread the message. At best, we discover and follow it exactly. I want to argue that friendship, even a friendship with God, is not like that. Such depictions fail to indicate how discernment itself is a collaborative process.

Cooperation with God

Christians usually describe this collaboration in one-sided ways. On the one hand, a traditional maxim for this is found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 2834: “Pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on you.” The parallel for discernment might be that we should pray as if God inspired our thoughts, but then we should proceed as if we have to figure out all by ourselves what decisions we should make.⁶⁶ On the other hand, religious people usually speak as if God alone does all the work. After fighting and winning a furious battle, the Israelites write that it was God and not their efforts that won the battle (Ps 44:3; Deut 2:36, 20–24; Josh 8:1, 9:9–10). This is a salutary rhetorical religious claim. A secular

⁶⁶ Toner, *Discerning God’s Will* 38–39.

historian, observing the battle, would doubtless write that God was nowhere to be found on the battlefield, but that the Israelite fighting force was fierce. Similarly, Christians, perhaps worried about Pelagianism, regularly warn, for example, that it is God and not they themselves who accomplish any good deeds. As Paul writes, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Usually unnoticed is that Paul immediately adds that he still lives, though now with faith. Elsewhere, he writes that we are the ones who plant and water before God gives the growth; accordingly, we are coworkers with God (1 Cor 3:7). Further, Paul comments that he can do all things in Christ who strengthens him (Phil 4:13). Similarly, Jesus says that he can do nothing on his own, but he then does great things with his Father (Jn 5:19, 30). Each way of describing the process of collaboration is a half-truth; it omits the *philia* relationship.

From a metaphysical point of view, every action is 100 percent God's action and 100 percent the creature's action, as both Aquinas and Calvin argued.⁶⁷ This means that without God nothing can happen. But it also means that, without our contribution, nothing can happen that God wants to do through us. Contrary to Augustine and, more complexly, Aquinas, the Christian life is not a matter of God's action *in nobis sine nobis*.⁶⁸ Rather, God acts *in nobis cum nobis*. To extend the metaphor of the body of Christ, even Christ the head cannot say he has no need for the know-how of the feet (1 Cor 12:12–21). If we say God simply reveals to us what is to be done, our report conceals the contributions of our own personal freedom, intelligence, and heart. Absent these, there is no "revelation." Of course, our discernment is not simply an autonomous decision, figuring out what to do quite independently of God. But it is also not simply a theonomous discernment, following God's plan quite apart from our personal intelligence and heart. Rather, it is, to coin an awkward neologism, a theanthroponomous discernment. That is, our decision is cocreated within the relationship between God and us. We are, to use John Paul II's tensive expression, "partners of the Absolute."⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Edward Vacek, S.J., "Inquiring after God When Working," in *Inquiring after God: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Ellen T. Charry (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000) 89–107.

⁶⁸ *ST* 1–2, q. 55, a. 4; q. 63, a. 2. The early Jesuits also spoke this way; see Toner, *Discerning God's Will* 41–42.

⁶⁹ John Paul II, *Original Unity of Man and Woman* (Boston: St. Paul, 1981) 51. John Paul also uses the term "participated theonomy," which well asserts "that human reason and human will participate in God's wisdom and providence" (*Veritatis splendor* [1993] no. 41). An even more awkward neologism would be "theanthropocosmonomous," whose only merit is that it includes the rest of creation as participating in the decision.

Our Own Counsel

As members of a love relationship, we must contribute to the discernment process. This requirement is not opposed to God's primacy, but rather flows from God's love for us. If God loves us, then God wants us to figure out what we are to do. God gives to Adam the task of naming the animals, and God abides by Adam's decision (Gen 2:19). What we discern depends on our historical moment and on the capacities we have at the time. God's communication with us will have to be in the language, the concepts, the intuitions, the values, the affections, etc., that we have or are capable of developing at the time. Just as God must "use" our arms to comfort our newborn infant, so also God must "use" our own thinking and feeling to be involved in our decisions. In this vein, Vatican II and the *Catechism* both cite Sirach 15:14: "God willed that man should be 'left in the hand of his own counsel.'"⁷⁰ Still, contrary to Sirach, we are not left alone. Aware of our dependence on God, we should decide in light of our ongoing relationship with God.

Aquinas similarly affirms our obligation to be responsible for ordering our lives: "The rational creature participates in divine providence, not only by being governed passively, but also by governing actively, for he governs himself in his personal acts."⁷¹ That is, this governance is not merely a matter of passively learning God's will and then obeying it. Rather we are to exercise real governance, and that requires the exercise of our own mind and heart to decide what is appropriate. Hence, as Aquinas argues, the very exercise of our own reason is itself doing what God wants.⁷² To abdicate using our own capacities for deciding in favor of following the ideas or dictates of others can be to fail our *philia* relationship with God. Aquinas argued that God wills that we provide for ourselves.⁷³ God needs our arms to build a house, but God also needs our minds to figure out whether and how to build the house. To say that we must decide for ourselves does not, of course, mean either that we should not think with others, including God, or that we are concerned only about ourselves. In this sense, religious discernment is radically different from secular prudence.⁷⁴ Making our own decisions is, in fact, an activity in which we cooperate with God. Conscience is *coknowing*. Above all, it is knowing in a love relationship with God, which is the theme of this article.

This emphasis, that discernment necessarily involves the engagement of the human heart and mind and will, should not be taken to mean that

⁷⁰ *Gaudium et spes* no. 17; *Catechism* no. 1730.

⁷¹ *SCG* 3, chaps. 113, 114.

⁷² *ST* 1, q. 22, a. 3; *SCG* 3, chap. 71.4.

⁷³ *SCG* 3, chap. 112.

⁷⁴ Futrell, "Ignatian Discernment" 48.

the very common desire to do God's will is mistaken. We often want to do the bidding of persons we love.⁷⁵ Still, this is not and should not be the exclusive or even normal pattern of our decision making. An analogy with parenthood might clarify this point. In general, parents can make objectively better decisions than their children. But, within limits, parents properly encourage their children to make their own decisions, even when this will lead to mistakes. Making decisions is a capacity that grows through its exercise. Freedom likewise is not simply a given; it increases through its exercise.⁷⁶ It can also decrease through nonexercise, as happens when people blindly submit to authority. Thus, ordinarily, it would be morally wrong, that is, a failure in responsibility, for us simply to forgo making our own decisions. It would not be—to use the words of my keynote text from *Gaudium et spes*—“fully human.” Rather, since God loves us, then, like a parent, God wants for us the growth that can happen only when we develop our own insights and freely determine our own decisions.

Making one's own choices is itself a value, a point that is rightly underscored in the prochoice camp of the abortion debate. Prolife advocates often fail to persuade, because they fail to give due acknowledgment to the humanly important value of the exercise of freedom. (And, of course, vice versa, as is typical in a debate. Prochoice rhetoric often fails to acknowledge that human freedom is degraded when it is taken to mean we can do whatever we want.) Wanting to make our own decisions is not willfulness or arrogance, as the tradition often asserted, but rather a form of fulfilling the love that God has for us humans. Unlike the aggressive assertion of a “right to choose,” we have a responsibility to choose that itself flows from our *philia* with God.

Discernment is not, as is so often stated, a matter of seeking “God's will rather than one's own.”⁷⁷ A mutual love relationship requires that the hearts and minds of all be taken into account. The language of abandonment of self to God's will should not be understood to mean that we cease collaborating. Rather, we actively yield to the dynamism of the relationship or to serving the beloved. It also obscures the difference

⁷⁵ O'Keefe, *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy* 135; Vacek, “Divine-Command, Natural-Law, and Mutual-Love Ethics” 633–53; James Keenan, S.J., “Moral Argumentation of *Evangelium Vitae*,” in *Choosing Life: A Dialogue on Evangelium Vitae*, ed. Kevin Wm. Wildes, S.J. and Alan C. Mitchell (Washington: Georgetown University, 1997) 46–62; John H. Wright, S.J., “God,” *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1993) 423–36, at 435.

⁷⁶ Robert C. Roberts, “Will Power and the Virtues,” *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life: Introductory Readings in Ethics*, 3rd ed., ed. Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993) 266–88.

⁷⁷ O'Keefe, *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy* 118.

between giving up our selfishness and a proper self-love. Thus the position taken here faults the spiritual tradition that describes Christian life as merely a matter of seeking God's plan for us and then carrying it out. This conception is detrimental to adult faith life. It reduces freedom simply to the ability to assent or dissent to what God proposes. It neglects or negates our creative capacities of mind and heart to discover and fashion what is to be done.⁷⁸ As Aquinas writes, "Human action is conformed to the Divine, in so far as it is becoming to the agent" or "proportionate to its own nature."⁷⁹ It is our nature to be emotional, intelligent, and free embodied creatures who must exercise and grow in these capacities.

"LED BY THE LORD'S SPIRIT"

Even though religious discernment typically requires us to use our various cognitive capacities to determine what we should be and do, it also requires God's involvement. What does it mean to be inspired by God's Spirit? Put simply, we are attracted to choose what is appropriate to our *philia* communion with God. The religious dimension of decision making modifies what would otherwise be only secular choices. As my keynote text put it, "Faith throws a new light on everything" that we share "with other men of our age." Religious awareness contributes to moral judgment a dimension that is necessarily absent from what a hypothetical atheist might experience. Born of God's Spirit of love, we make judgments as persons who participate in the loving reign of God (Jn 3:3–7; 1 Cor 2:7–15). This relationship frees, forms, and informs us.

Freedom

In at least five ways, this Spirit sets us free (Gal 5:1, 5, 18). First, religious discernment is not confined to inner worldly objects. Freedom involves the ability to detach ourselves from our current concerns and to switch to or add different concerns. When discernment is an exercise of our love for God, we become aware that we are not confined to the finite.

Second, since our ordinarily good preoccupations and healthy attachments can prevent consideration of new alternatives, placing ourselves affectively within our relationship with God can detach us as we evaluate them and all else in terms of how they fit this relationship. Christian detachment is not a Stoic indifference to creatures, since we should be lovingly attached to many creatures. However, we share with Stoicism a detachment

⁷⁸ Roger Haight, S.J., "A Theology for the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola," *Spiritus* 10 (2010) 158–72; Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear* 65.

⁷⁹ *ST* 1–2, q. 19, aa. 9–10.

from all things, including ourselves, in the sense of attending to an ultimate allegiance in terms of which all else is evaluated.

Third, whatever particular decision we make does not in itself bear the weight of absolute significance. Aquinas argues that it is better to make the wrong choice out of love for God than to make the right choice not out of love for God.⁸⁰ Thus, even when we do not properly grasp what should be done, we can be relatively confident that we remain centered in God and thus are able to face our mistakes with patience and peace (2 Cor 5:5–7; 1 Jn 3:19–22; Gal 5:22–23). One reason for failure in decision making is fear of making a mistake. A *philia* relationship can contain and override fear because of the security it provides (1 Jn 4:13–18).⁸¹

Fourth, the experience of being loved affirms our selves and thus fosters the free exercise of our senses, bodies, minds, unconscious, dreams, and so forth in considering what we should do.

Fifth and finally, if we have the sense that we are engaged with God in the coming of God's kingdom (Lk 10:8–9; 11:20), then the activity of discernment itself becomes more attractive and energized as our part in a noble task.

Formal and Final, Not Efficient Causality

How should we understand “the promptings of the Holy Spirit whose voice speaks from within”?⁸² We need not imagine, as Francis de Sales did, that such inspirations come as the direct result of the Spirit implanting a solution in our heads that otherwise would not be there.⁸³ When asked whether, in that most solemn setting of prayerful discernment over electing a new pope, the Holy Spirit dictates to the cardinals who is the best candidate, Joseph Ratzinger answered no. He observed wryly that there have been too many bad popes. Even in this papal decision—which is so central to the church and affects the salvation of so many—God is not that kind of intervening God.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ ST 1–2, q. 19, a. 10; Toner, *Discerning God's Will* 291.

⁸¹ Toner, *Discerning God's Will* 288–91.

⁸² O'Keefe, *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy* 143.

⁸³ Francis writes that the inspiration “is truly effected in us but not by us. It comes unexpectedly before we have thought of it or even been able to think of it” (*Treatise on the Love of God* [Charlotte, NC: Tan, 1997] 2.9). Neurological science shows that this is a natural event; see Marc D. Hauser, *Moral Minds: The Nature of Right and Wrong* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006) 25–31; and Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1998) 55–67.

⁸⁴ John Allen, “A Quick Course in ‘Conclave 101,’” *National Catholic Reporter*, February 15, 2013, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/quick-course-conclave-101>; Haight, “Expanding the Spiritual Exercises” 12.

Inspiration is a common experience apart from any religious context. Most authors learn something new when they try to set down their thoughts. They may have accumulated much data that suddenly crystallizes into a new insight. Contemporary psychology has shown that most of our mental processing takes place outside our explicit consciousness.⁸⁵ When inspirations seem to come from out of nowhere or to be without preceding cause, it is likely that these inspirations well up from our subconscious and unconscious. Thus, our inspired moments have finite causes.

But religious persons may also correctly connect these insights with God. The connection may be either external or internal. On the one hand, it may happen that we recognize that an insight has a finite origin, but we subsequently offer thanks to God as the giver of all gifts. An internal connection, on the other hand, occurs when this inspiration is experienced as flowing from our *philia*. We are *formed* by this love. When we “have the mind of Christ” (Phil 2:15; 1 Cor 2:16), what we primarily have is not his biblical teaching. Rather, through our affection of love for him, we are inspired by uniting with his heart. The “form” of his heart forms our heart. That is, we *cofeel* his affections, so that his affections form the *ordo amoris* of our own heart (1 Cor 2:9–16; Jn 14:7, 26; 1 Jn 3:24). To use an older term, his virtues are “infused” in us.⁸⁶ Still, we also retain our own distinctive heart, and so we can creatively feel and do what the historical Jesus could not feel and do (Jn 14:12).

We are also *informed* by the Spirit. What we experience is itself selected and shaped by the concerns we have developed through this relationship. Just as parents of a handicapped child likely become sensitized to and concerned about what might affect their child and their family, so we who are in a friendship with God become sensitized to what will enhance or threaten our shared world. The outstretched hand of the homeless child moves us. The child does not *make* us feel desire, but rather evokes our desire to help. When we are adequately disposed, we are pulled out of ourselves to what is important to our friendship.

In specifically religious emotion, we experience Ultimate Reality evoking and codetermining our selves and our actions. The hungry child is experienced as an invitation from God to cooperate with God in overcoming the child’s emptiness. Some of the Christian worry about Pelagianism and “good works” would be alleviated if more attention were paid to the dependence we experience in all attractions to a good that is to-be-realized or to an evil to-be-removed. Margaret Farley observes that love is “called

⁸⁵ Haidt, *Righteous Mind* xiv, 44–47; David Brooks, *Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement* (New York: Random House, 2011) x–xi; Haight, *Christian Spirituality for Seekers* 224.

⁸⁶ Haight, *Christian Spirituality for Seekers* 214–15; see *ST* 1–2, q. 55, a. 4.

forth and measured by the reality of the one loved.”⁸⁷ We have a predisposition to respond to a creature’s actual and potential good. If the good already exists, we are moved to delight in it. If the good is experienced as to-be-realized, then the good draws us toward its actualization.⁸⁸ If we experience an evil, we may try to remedy it. That is, our religious response to a victim is experienced as being drawn to the person God wants to redeem. In other words, the Spirit leads by way of attraction or final causality, whether that good is already present, is to be realized, or is in need of rescue.⁸⁹

In common religious discourse, it is often said that God “calls” us or that we have a “vocation.” These expressions aptly suggest that God acts not through efficient causality, but through invitation or attraction. This invitation depends on an important feature of human consciousness. The future, as a reality, does not exist, and so it cannot be said to efficiently cause us to do anything. But, as phenomenologists have insisted, the future plays a major role in our consciousness. If good, it attracts; if evil, either it repels or it invites remedy. Thus, when we religiously see a potential good, we may experience God as enabling and calling us to act to achieve it. Correlatively, we may religiously experience an evil also as a vocation from God to share God’s resistance or God’s redemptive power.

Attunement: The Criterion of the Fitting

I have argued that the criterion for our religious decisions is how they impact our *philia* with God. When all is well, we go with the flow of that relationship, much as partners do in a dance. We intuitively or explicitly discern what choices belong to that relationship. This determination will largely depend on a sense of affective attunement with the forming and informing presence of God in our lives.⁹⁰ As Richard Gula writes, “Moral actions are judged wrong not because of harms they cause to self or others, or because they violate rational rules of conduct. Actions are wrong because they are not properly responsive to what God enables and requires.”⁹¹ The theme of my article adds that what God most fundamentally enables and requires is a *philia* relationship. Our more concrete

⁸⁷ Margaret A. Farley, R.S.M., “New Patterns of Relationship: Beginnings of a Moral Revolution,” *Theological Studies* 36 (1975) 627–46, at 632.

⁸⁸ Russell Connors Jr., “The Grace of Indirection and the Moral Imagination” *Theological Studies* 72 (2011) 345–68, at 361.

⁸⁹ Haight, *Christian Spirituality for Seekers* 61.

⁹⁰ Boyd Taylor Coolman, “*Gestimmtheit*: Attunement as a Description of the Nature-Grace Relationship in Rahner’s Theology,” *Theological Studies* 70 (2009) 782–800.

⁹¹ Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith* 45.

experiences of being enabled and required arise from this relationship with God and are not experienced as a requirement from an outside agent. Thus, a decision is religiously right or wrong depending on whether it is appropriate to our relationship with God. Otherwise we might make a seemingly reasonable choice of a proximate end, for example, to get married and still sin, if this decision is inconsonant with our own unique relationship with God.⁹² We invert this process when we decide to marry and then, thinking that marriage is morally good, conclude that our marriage must therefore be appropriate to our covenant with God. Even when we have rightly decided to get married, this moral discernment, if it is to be religious, must still be brought within our relationship with God. Put briefly, we can either go from our experience of communion with God to a concrete decision, or we can go from the moral goodness of a decision to testing it and locating it within our friendship with God. The former reflects the centrality of God in our lives, while the latter reflects a relationship that is still not the original motivating source of the activity of our minds and hearts.

A revelatory ethics such as proposed by Rowan Williams makes a kindred contribution. In this ethic, “behavior is not, for the Christian, ‘good’ or ‘bad’; it is transparent or opaque, truthful or illusory . . . in the sense that it is assessed in relation to its response to God’s ‘wishing-to-be-in-us,’” such that God’s life is visible in us.⁹³ For a Christian, Williams argues, proper action is what “inscribes” in time the character of God. My theme is that God’s wishing to be in us is better understood as part of a mutual love. God not only wants to be revealed in us; God also first wants to be with us and through us.

When religiously discerning, the ultimate question then is, How will the present choice fit my relationship with God? Will it harm, preserve, or promote the relationship that God and I have? On rare occasions, this *philia* may demand some radical change. As in Jesus’s life, it might even require the foolishness of self-sacrificial death as a way of fidelity to one’s *philia* (1 Cor 1:17–25; 2:14). Normally, however, we face few such dramatic decisions. For us situated historical beings, daily life offers rather routine choices. Ordinarily we do not even think of options that are out of character or that do not fit our roles, responsibilities, and relationships. Accordingly, our choices are usually to continue life in the accustomed ways that have sustained our mutual love with God. Still, we must

⁹² William F. Murphy Jr., “A Reading of Aquinas in Support of *Veritatis Splendor* on the Moral Object,” *Logos* 11 (2008) 100–126, at 115.

⁹³ Rowan Williams, “Afterword,” *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 494–98.

be open to new and unexpected adventures that will arise as we journey through life with and toward God.

In the theology of discernment proposed here, we select among options by asking whether they affectively fit the friendship we have with God within the world. This world consists of all those creatures, including ourselves, to which we are related and for which we share some responsibility. As an enactment of this relationship, we cooperate with God's love and action in the world. Since God loves us, God also wants to foster our love and action. When we mutually act with God, we grow in God-intimacy. The outgoing quality of this love is experienced as entering into God's life. The incoming quality is experienced as God in us affirming us (Phil 2:13). These feelings of intimacy are part of the attunement that occurs in *philia*. This *philia* is the matrix of our discernment.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ I am grateful to Margaret Causey, R.S.C.J., and to Allison Derrick for their helpful comments on and criticisms of earlier versions of this article.

Correction: In the article by Steven B. Bevans, "Revisiting Mission at Vatican II," in the previous issue, June 2013, on p. 266, in the paragraph under the subhead, "The Decrees and Declarations," the second sentence should read (corrections underscored):

The Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio* (*UR*), begins with the ecumenical movement's conviction that the disunity of the church is not only against the will of Christ, but also "inflicts damage on the most holy cause of proclaiming the good news to every creature" (*UR* no. 1).