

# Introduction

## From Where Shall We Start and How Shall We Proceed?

Some years ago an American boy boarded an airplane in New York. He thought he knew where he was going. After an unusually long flight the plane finally landed, but upon entering the airport the boy was totally confused. Things didn't seem quite right. And things were not quite right. The boy had expected to be in Oakland, California. He was, however, in Auckland, New Zealand. He had boarded the wrong airplane. Call it a journey gone awry, a perfect example of the Chinese proverb, "A slight error in the beginning results in a big mistake in the end."

Starting a theological journey of exploration with the wrong question is like heading to Oakland on the wrong airplane. In either case, you're unlikely to reach your destination.

## What's the Wrong Question? God

How, then, should we go about the exploration of religious faith? What are the questions to be addressed and in what order should they be asked if our journey of exploration is not to go awry? For most Christian faith traditions and schools of Christian theology, the question of God is the beginning point. And yet, when we think of the whole

matter more deeply, we may realize that this time-honored way of doing theology parts company with the methods of science and technology. Science seeks to discover what is presently unknown by the study of what is known. God is a great unknown. To begin with God, therefore, is to attempt to explain what is known by way of what is not known, quite the opposite of how science proceeds. Rather we should begin where we are with what can be known through our experience in the world and see where it takes us.

We will begin in each chapter, therefore, by approaching the ultimate with questions, problems, and concerns that arise from our experience of penultimate things. We will start with what we know, or imagine we know, from our experience and the questions our experience gives rise to. We will then dip into narratives from within—and from without—the Christian tradition. We will want to know whether and how these narratives, drawn from the panhuman quest for religious/spiritual understanding, shed light on our own questions. Each chapter will contain several questions for further thought that attempt to reframe the question, problem, or concern we started with in such a way that we are encouraged to keep asking questions.

And we will pay attention to Jesus of Nazareth whose life and teaching, death, and resurrection are, as it were, a window onto the God we are seeking to know, understand, and experience. In so doing, we hope to share in Jesus' deep God-consciousness. As the reality of who and how we are encounters the reality of who and how Jesus was, our perception and understanding of God continually deepen and our questions, consequently, continually change.

German poet Rainer Marie Rilke's advice to a young poet is good advice for a young (or even an old) theologian as well: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign

tongue. . . . Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

Here, then, are the questions that we will love—and hopefully learn to live—as we move through the chapters of this book:

1. What about Beginnings and Endings?
2. Did Jesus Rise from the Dead and Does It Matter?
3. Healing or Saved? Or Both?
4. All Roads Lead to Rome?
5. How Can We Know God and What God Wants?
6. What Is the Church?
7. What Is Christian Mission?
8. What Is Spirituality?
9. What Do You Say God Is?

With these questions we set out on a journey that will take us through the heart of the world we inhabit into an encounter with God—a journey that will lead us to a vision of the God who is beyond our life and history but who, at the same time, is at work in our life and history.

Keep in mind as you set out on this journey that the purpose of our exercise is not to come up with *correct* answers to the issues posed and the questions raised. As a matter of fact, we may not find neat and elegant answers to many of them. It is our hope that as we wrestle with them honestly, we may be led to a deeper understanding of who we are and to a personal encounter with that loving power we call God—from whose eternity we came and to whose eternity we return.