complete system, suffered some serious setbacks in the late eighteenth century and beyond. Most writers sympathetic to the ideas of the Enlightenment made an appeal to Euclid’s five principles of geometry. On the basis of his five principles, Euclid was able to construct an entire geometrical system, which had seemed to be an example of a universal and necessarily true system based upon reason alone. Philosophers, such as Baruch Spinoza (1632–77), argued that the same method could be applied in philosophy. A secure edifice of philosophy and ethics could be erected on the basis of a secure and universal rational foundation, as in Euclid’s geometry. The discovery of non-Euclidian geometry during the nineteenth century destroyed the appeal of this analogy. It turned out that there were other ways of doing geometry, each just as internally consistent as Euclid’s. But which is right? The question cannot be answered. They are all different, each with its own special merits and problems.

Much the same observation is now made concerning rationalism itself. Where once it was argued that there was one single rational principle, it is increasingly conceded that there are—and always have been—many different “rationalities.” In his penetrating historical analysis of rationalist approaches to truth and meaning in Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (1988), the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (born 1929) drew the conclusion that the Enlightenment seemed to demand criteria of justification that simply could not be met in practice.

Both the thinkers of the Enlightenment and their successors proved unable to agree as to precisely what those principles were which would be found undeniable by all rational persons. One kind of answer was given by the authors of the *Encyclopédie*, a second by Rousseau, a third by Bentham, a fourth by Kant, a fifth by the Scottish philosophers of common sense and their French and American disciples. Nor has subsequent history diminished the extent of such disagreement. Consequently, the legacy of the Enlightenment has been the provision of an ideal of rational justification which it has proved impossible to attain.

Reason promises much, yet fails to deliver its benefits. It is for such reasons that the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) wrote scathingly of the “Robinson Crusoe dream of the historical Enlightenment, as artificial as Crusoe himself.” Gadamer himself was deeply concerned about the question of whether it was possible to transcend history and culture, in order to find a truly objective position from which to critique society and its ideas. The Enlightenment, in his view, failed to deliver on its promises. The notion of “universal rationality” is today viewed by many as little more than a fiction. Postmodernism has argued that there exists a variety of “rationalities,” each of which has to be respected in its own right; there is no privileged vantage point, no universal concept of “reason,” which can pass judgment upon them.

Having considered some aspects of reason as a theological resource, we may now turn to consider the place of religious experience in theology.

**RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

“Experience” is an imprecise term. The origins of the word are relatively well understood: it derives from the Latin term *experientia*, which could be interpreted as “that which arises out of traveling through life.” In this broad sense, it means “an accumulated body of knowledge, arising through first-hand encounter with life.” When one speaks of “an experienced teacher” or “an experienced doctor,” the implication is that they have learned their craft through first-hand application.

Yet the term has developed an acquired meaning, which particularly concerns us here. It has come to refer to the inner life of individuals, in which those individuals become aware of their own subjective feelings and emotions. It relates to the inward and subjective world of experience, as opposed to the outward world of everyday life. An emphasis on the importance of religious experience was characteristic of early Methodism, and the term “the Wesleyan quadrilateral” is sometime used to refer to the grouping of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The first three
elements of this quadrilateral reflect John Wesley's insistence that the task of interpreting the Bible was to be illuminated by the collective Christian wisdom of other ages and cultures between the apostolic age and our own, as well as being protected from obscurantism by means of the disciplines of critical reason. Most importantly, for Wesley, the message of Scripture must be received in the heart by a living faith, which experienced God as present. The fourth element of the quadrilateral reflects this distinctive Wesleyan emphasis, characteristic of Pietism (see p. 54).

Wesley is not on his own in stressing the importance of experience. In his celebrated study The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), the Harvard psychologist William James (1842–1910) stressed the importance of the subjective aspects of religion in general, and Christianity in particular. In developing his account of religious experience, James drew extensively on a wide range of published works and personal testimonies, engaging with religious experience on its own terms, and taking accounts of such experiences at face value. James identified four characteristics of such religious experience:

1. **Ineffability:** The experience "defies expression"; it cannot be described adequately in words. "Its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others."

2. **Noetic quality:** Such an experience is seen to possess authority, giving insight and knowledge into deep truths, which are sustained over time. These "states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect" are understood to be "illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain."

3. **Transiency:** "Mystical states cannot be sustained for long." Usually, they last from a few seconds to minutes and their quality cannot be accurately remembered, though the experience is recognized if it recurs. "When faded, their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory."

4. **Passivity:** "Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations," once they have begun, the mystic feels out of control as if he or she "were grasped and held by a superior power."

While James notes that the second and third characteristics are "less marked" than the others, he considers them to be integral to any phenomenology of religious experience.

James's research demonstrates that Christianity is not simply about ideas (as our discussion of Scripture, reason, and tradition might suggest); it is about the interpretation and transformation of the inner life of the individual. This concern with human experience is particularly associated with the movement generally known as existentialism, which we may consider briefly, before moving on.

**Existentialism: a philosophy of human experience**

In what way do human beings differ from other forms of life? Humans have always been aware of some basic distinction between themselves, on the one hand, and all other forms of life, on the other. But what is this difference? And what does it mean to exist? Perhaps the most important thing which distinguishes human beings from other forms of life is the fact that they are aware of their own existence, and ask questions about it.

The rise of existentialist philosophy is ultimately a response to this crucial insight. We not only exist: we understand, we are aware that we exist, and we are aware that our existence will one day be terminated by death. The sheer fact of our existence is important to us, and we find it difficult, probably impossible, to adopt a totally detached attitude to it. Existentialism is basically a protest against the view that human beings are "things," and a demand that we take the personal existence of the individual with full seriousness.

The term "existentialism" can bear two meanings. At its most basic level, it means an attitude toward human life which places special emphasis upon the immediate, real-life experience of individuals. It is concerned with the way in which individuals encounter others, and gain an
understanding of their finitude. In a more developed sense, the term refers to a movement, which probably reached its zenith in the period 1938–68, the origins of which lie primarily in the writings of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55). Kierkegaard stressed the importance of individual decision and an awareness of the limits of human existence. In terms of the history of modern theology, the most important contribution to the development of existentialism was made by Martin Heidegger (1888–1976), particularly in his *Being and Time* (1927). This work provided Rudolf Bultmann with the basic ideas and vocabulary he required to develop a Christian existentialist account of human existence, and the manner in which this is illuminated and transformed by the gospel.

Of fundamental importance is Heidegger’s distinction between “inauthentic existence” and “authentic existence,” which Bultmann creatively reinterprets in the light of the New Testament. According to Bultmann, the New Testament recognizes two types of human existence. First, there is unbelieving, unredeemed existence, which is an inauthentic form of existence. Here, individuals refuse to recognize themselves for what they really are: creatures who are dependent upon God for their well-being and salvation. Such individuals seek to justify themselves by trying to secure existence through moral actions or material prosperity. This attempt at self-sufficiency on the part of humanity is designated by both the Old and New Testaments as “sin.”

Against this inauthentic mode of human existence, the New Testament sets the mode of believing, redeemed existence, in which we abandon all security created by ourselves, and trust in God. We recognize the illusion of our self-sufficiency, and trust instead in the sufficiency of God. Instead of denying that we are God’s creatures, we recognize and exult in this fact, and base our existence upon it. Instead of clinging to transitory things for security, we learn to abandon faith in this transitory world in order that we may place our trust in God himself. Instead of trying to justify ourselves, we learn to recognize that God offers us our justification as a free gift. Instead of denying the reality of our human finitude and the inevitability of death, we recognize that these have been faced and conquered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whose victory becomes our victory through faith.

The rise of existentialism is a reflection of the importance attached to the inner world of human experience in the modern period. Nevertheless, it must be appreciated that this concern with human experience is not something new; it can arguably be discerned in both Old and New Testaments, and it permeates the writings of Augustine of Hippo. Martin Luther declared that “experience makes a theologian,” and argued that it was impossible to be a proper theologian without an experience of the searing and terrifying judgment of God upon human sin. As we noted earlier, the literary movement known as Romanticism (see pp. 69–70) gave considerable importance to the role of “feeling,” and opened the way for a new interest in this aspect of Christian life.

**Experience and theology: two approaches**

Two main approaches to the question of the relation of experience to theology may be discerned within Christian theology:

1. Experience provides a foundational resource for Christian theology.
2. Christian theology provides a framework within which human experience may be interpreted.

We shall consider each of these approaches in what follows.

*Experience as the basis of theology*

The idea that human religious experience can act as a foundational resource for Christian theology has obvious attractions. It suggests that Christian theology is concerned with human experience –
something which is common to all humanity, rather than the exclusive preserve of a small group. This approach is often seen as useful when responding to the "scandal of particularity" — the concern that the specific historical location of Jesus of Nazareth denies direct knowledge of him to other historical situations. It suggests that all the world religions are basically human responses to the same religious experience — often referred to as "a core experience of the transcendent." Theology is thus the Christian attempt to reflect upon this common human experience, in the knowledge that the same experience underlies the other world religions. We shall return to this point later in dealing with the question of the relation of Christianity to the other religions.

This approach also has considerable attractions for Christian apologetics, as the writings of Paul Tillich (1886–1965) and David Tracy make clear. If humans share a common experience, whether they choose to regard it as "religious" or not, Christian theology can address that experience. The problem of agreeing upon a common starting-point is thus avoided; the starting-point is already provided, in human experience. Apologetics can demonstrate that the Christian gospel makes sense of common human experience. This approach is probably seen at its best in Paul Tillich’s volume of sermons The Courage to Be, which attracted considerable attention after its publication in 1952. It seemed to many observers that Tillich had succeeded in correlating the Christian proclamation with common human experience.

But there are difficulties here. The most obvious is that there is actually very little empirical evidence for a "common core experience" throughout human history and culture. The idea is easily postulated and virtually impossible to verify. This criticism has found its most mature and sophisticated expression in the "experiential-expressive theory of doctrine," to use a term employed by the distinguished Yale theologian George Lindbeck. In his volume The Nature of Doctrine (1984), Lindbeck provided an important analysis of the nature of Christian doctrine (see pp. 154–5), which was critical of those models appealing to common human experience.

**Theology as the interpreter of experience**

This approach regards experience as something that needs to be interpreted. Christian theology is here understood to provide a framework by which the ambiguities of experience may be interpreted. Theology aims to interpret experience. It is like a net which we can cast over experience, in order to capture its meaning. Experience is seen as something which is to be interpreted, rather than something which is itself capable of interpreting.

For example, the dialectic between the Christian doctrines of creation and sin can be deployed to provide an interpretation of a common human experience — an awareness of dissatisfaction, or a curious sense of longing for something undefined. To illustrate the relation between theology and experience, we may consider Augustine’s analysis of the implications for experience of the Christian doctrine of creation.

According to Augustine, our feeling of dissatisfaction is a consequence of the Christian doctrine of creation—that we are made in the image of God. There is thus an inbuilt capacity within human nature to relate to God. Yet, on account of the fallenness of human nature, this potential is frustrated. There is now a natural tendency to try to make other things fulfill this need. Created things thus come to be substituted for God. Yet they do not satisfy. Human beings are thus left with a feeling of longing—longing for something indefinable.

This phenomenon has been recognized since the dawn of human civilization. In his dialogue Gorgias, Plato compares human beings to leaky jars. Somehow, human beings are always unfulfilled. Perhaps the greatest statement of this feeling, and its most famous theological interpretation, may be found in the famous words of Augustine: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Throughout Augustine’s reflections, especially in his autobiographical Confessions, the same theme recurs. Humanity is destined to remain incomplete in its present existence. Its hopes and deepest longings will remain nothing but hopes and longings. The themes of creation and redemption are brought together by Augustine, to provide
an interpretation of the human experience of "longing." Because humanity is created in the image of God, it desires to relate to God, even if it cannot recognize that desire for what it is. Yet on account of human sin, humanity cannot satisfy that desire unaided. And so a real sense of frustration, of dissatisfaction, develops. And that dissatisfaction—though not its theological interpretation—is part of common human experience. Augustine expresses this feeling when he states that he "is groaning with inexpressible groanings on my wanderer's path, and remembering Jerusalem with my heart lifted up toward it—Jerusalem my home land, Jerusalem my mother."

Augustine's approach was echoed by the twentieth-century Oxford literary critic and theologian C. S. Lewis (1898–1963). Like Augustine, Lewis was aware of certain deep human emotions which pointed to a dimension of our existence beyond time and space. There is, Lewis suggested, a deep and intense feeling of longing within human beings, which no earthly object or experience can satisfy. Lewis terms this sense "joy," and argues that it points to God as its source and goal (hence the title of his celebrated 1955 autobiography, Surprised by Joy). Joy, according to Lewis, is "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction [...] anyone who has experienced it will want it again."

Lewis addressed this question further in a sermon entitled "The Weight of Glory," preached at the University of Oxford on June 8, 1941. Lewis spoke of "a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy," "a desire, still wandering and uncertain of its object and still largely unable to see that object in the direction where it really lies." There is something self-defeating about human desire, in that what is desired, when achieved, seems to leave the desire unsatisfied. Lewis illustrates this from the age-old quest for beauty, using recognizably Augustinian imagery:

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.

The basic point being emphasized is thoroughly Augustinian: the creation creates a sense of longing for its creator, which it cannot satisfy by itself. In this way, an essentially Augustinian framework is applied to common human experience, to provide a plausible theological interpretation.

Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of experience-based theologies

As noted above, many theologians regarded experience-based theologies as providing an escape from the impasse of Enlightenment rationalism, or from difficulties relating to the alleged particularity of Christian revelation. F. D. E. Schleiermacher is an excellent instance of a theologian concerned to use human experience as a starting-point for Christian theology. In particular, Schleiermacher drew attention to the importance for theology of "a feeling of absolute dependence." By exploring the nature and origins of this feeling, it was possible to trace it back to its origins with God. This approach has enormous attractions. However, as the atheist German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) demonstrated, it is also enormously problematical.

In the foreword to the first edition of his highly influential Essence of Christianity (1841), Ludwig Feuerbach states that the "supernatural mysteries of religion are based upon quite simple natural truths." Human beings, Feuerbach argues, have created the gods, who embody their own idealized conception of their aspirations, needs, and fears. Human "feeling" has nothing to do with God; it is of purely human origin, misunderstood by an overactive human imagination. "If feeling is the essential instrumentality or organ of religion, then God's nature is nothing other than an expression of the nature of feeling.
The divine essence, which is comprehended by feeling, is actually nothing other than the essence of feeling, enraptured and delighted with itself — nothing but self-intoxicated, self-contented feeling."

For Schleiermacher, the nature of the religious self-consciousness was such that the existence of the redeemer could be inferred from it; for Feuerbach, this was nothing more and nothing less than human beings' self-awareness. It is experience of oneself, not of God. "God-consciousness" is merely human self-awareness, not a distinct category of human experience.

Feuerbach's analysis continues to be influential in western liberal Christianity. The existence of God is held to be grounded in human experience. But, as Feuerbach emphasizes, human experience might be nothing other than experience of ourselves, rather than of God. We might simply be projecting our own experiences, and calling the result "God," where we ought to realize that they are simply experiences of our own very human natures. Feuerbach's approach represents a devastating critique of humanity-centered ideas of Christianity.

It may be noted that Feuerbach's critique of religion loses much of its force when dealing with nontheistic religions, or theologies (such as that of Karl Barth) which claim to deal with a divine encounter with humanity from outside. However, when it is applied to a theistic construction or interpretation of human emotional or psychological states, it is in its element. Has anyone really spoken about God or Christ? Or have we simply projected our longings and fears onto an imaginary transcendent plane, or onto a distant historical figure about whom we know so little?

The growing conviction that Christology must be objectively grounded in the history of Jesus of Nazareth (especially prominent, for example, in the writings of Wolfhart Pannenberg) is due at least in part to Feuerbach's critique of religion.

The very idea of "God" was, according to Feuerbach, an illusion which we could in principle avoid, and, with sufficient progress in self-knowledge, discard altogether. It is, of course, a small — and perhaps an inevitable — step from this assumption to the Marxist view that religious feeling is itself the product of an alienated social existence.

This chapter has provided a brief exploration of the resources available to Christian theology, and some of the debates concerning their potential and their limitations. In the chapter that follows, we shall consider the notion of revelation, which plays a leading role in much Christian thought.

QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 6

1. Why did narrative theology become so attractive to many theologians in the late twentieth century?
2. "The Bible alone is the religion of Protestants" (William Chillingworth). Do you agree with this famous statement?
3. How would you distinguish between a "rational" and a "rationalist" approach to theology?
4. Why has the Enlightenment approach to human reason come under criticism?
5. Why did Irenaeus find tradition such an important resource for his arguments against his Gnostic critics?
6. Outline the teaching of the Council of Trent on the relation of Scripture and tradition.
7. Outline Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of experience-based theologies. How persuasive do you find his argument? What theologies do you think are most vulnerable to his critique?