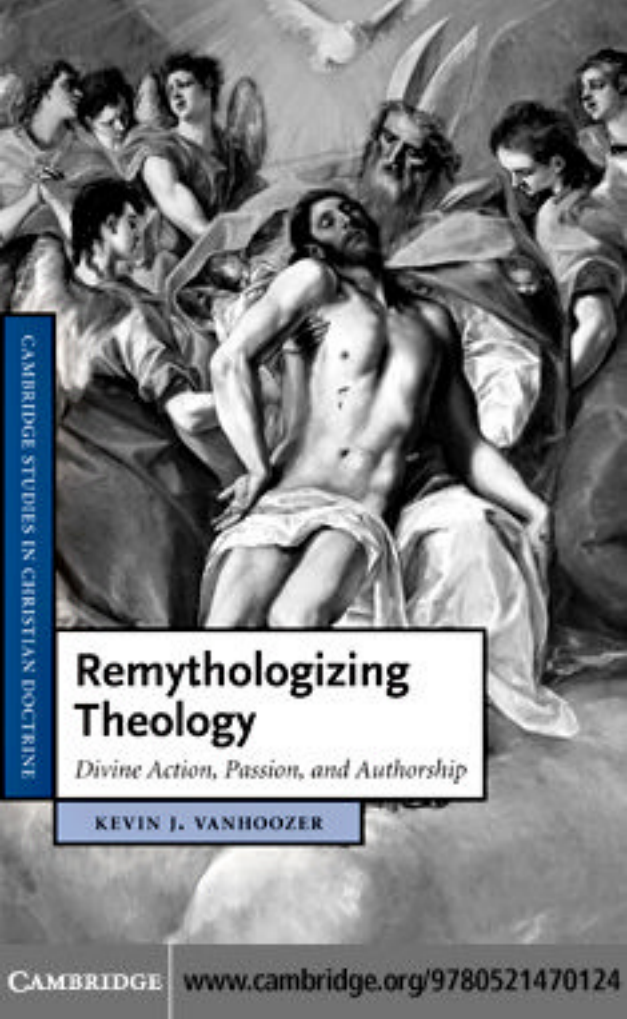




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Remythologizing Theology

Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER

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Remythologizing Theology

The rise of modern science and the proclaimed “death” of God in the nineteenth century led to a radical questioning of divine action and authorship – Bultmann’s celebrated “demythologizing”. *Remythologizing Theology* moves in another direction that begins by taking seriously the biblical accounts of God’s speaking. It establishes divine communicative action as the formal and material principle of theology, and suggests that interpersonal dialogue, rather than impersonal causality, is the keystone of God’s relationship with the world.

This original contribution to the theology of divine action and authorship develops a new vision of Christian theism. It also revisits several long-standing controversies such as the relations of God’s sovereignty to human freedom, time to eternity, and suffering to love. Groundbreaking and thought-provoking, it brings theology into fruitful dialogue with philosophy, literary theory, and biblical studies.

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Authorship

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The deist represents this being [God] merely as a cause of the world ... the theist as the Author of the world.

– Immanuel Kant

Today's theologians, while they are aware of the traditional axiom of God's unchangeability, and notwithstanding the danger of falling back into mythology, seem to have no qualms about speaking of the pain of God.

– Hans Urs von Balthasar, Theo-Drama vol. v, pp. 213–14

Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not; As thou hast been thou for ever wilt be.

– Thomas O. Chisholm, "Great is thy Faithfulness"

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Preface

God's still in his heaven, but (with apologies to Robert Browning) all's not yet right with the world. Moreover, in modern times the *doctrine* of God has been in a deep funk; this despite encouraging signs that a number of theologians have finally cleared their throats (to use Jeffrey Stout's metaphor for mucking about in methodology) and begun to speak of God. And just in time, for as Jürgen Moltmann observes: "It is simple, but true, to say that theology has only one, single problem: *God*."¹ God is "the future of theology,"² just as he is its past and present. While God transcends time, however, the doctrine of God does not.

There is no more powerful name to drop than that of God, especially in the midst of discussion concerning proper social values. "God" is the ultimate ideological warrant. But what is God's name and what does "God" mean? There are theologies "of" hope, art, literature, music, work, marriage, sex, play, liberation, etc. in which the theme in question overshadows God. The adjective "theological" is similarly promiscuous: ethics, method, imagination, science, education, etc. are all "theological" yet, here too, God typically remains off-stage, a notional rather than operative concept.³ I am as guilty as anyone of procrastinating in the prolegomenal fields. In *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*⁴ I tilled the textual ground with small conceptual

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and the Future of the Modern World* (Pittsburgh: ATS, 1995), p. 1.

2. Miroslav Volf, "Introduction," in Miroslav Volf (ed.), *The Future of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), p. xvii.

3. I am indebted to Mark Bowald for this way of framing the problem.

4. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998).

tools (e.g., speech acts) and heavy hermeneutical equipment (e.g., Paul Ricoeur). I buttressed my hermeneutical approach by calling it “theological,” but the appeal was too cavalier.

The present work, an essay in aid of the development of the doctrine of God, puts metaphysical muscle behind my adjectival qualifier by explicating what to this point has been only implicit: who/what God is. We speak well of God, however, only because God has first spoken to us, given us his name. The interpersonal dialogue between God and human beings that the Bible not only depicts but instantiates is the privileged starting point for Christian theology.⁵ My project thus begins with what Rudolf Bultmann’s demythologizing too hastily dismisses: God’s speaking, self-naming, and acting communicatively in the covenant history and Scripture of Israel that culminates in Jesus Christ and his church.

“Authorship” – a convenient shorthand for the notion of verbal communicative action – thus serves as a controlling metaphor whose conceptual elaboration makes the theological way straight. Three further observations support this hunch. First, the concept of *communicatio* shows up in diverse doctrinal places: theology proper (e.g., the so-called “communicable” vs. “incommunicable” divine attributes), christology (e.g., the *communicatio idiomatum*), and ecclesiology (i.e., “communicants,” in the context of participants in the Lord’s Supper). Second, Western theologians as diverse as Thomas Aquinas, John Owen, Karl Rahner, and Karl Barth freely employ the notions of communication and self-communication in the contexts of divine revelation and/or redemption, yet usually without explicit analysis. Finally, few theologians have made use of the available linguistic, philosophical, literary, and rhetorical resources conceptually to elaborate the nature of God’s communicative action.

I made some initial forays along these lines in my *First Theology*.⁶ Whereas Aristotle identified metaphysics as “first philosophy,” I dubbed theological hermeneutics – that complex problematic involving the intersection of God, Scripture, and human understanding – “first theology.” The Bible is God’s instrument for doing revelatory

5. See ch. 1 for some examples. Cf. W. Norris Clarke, who takes interpersonal dialogue as the privileged starting point of metaphysics. See his *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being – God – Person* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), ch. 2.

6. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

and redemptive things with words in the context of the church. It is one thing to say that the doctrine of God is implicated in one's hermeneutic, however, and quite another to explicate it. The recent interest in theological hermeneutics, together with the church's recovery of the practice of interpreting the Bible in the context of God's triune activity, welcome though these be, must be matched by an equal attention to the nature of the God of whose communicative activity the Bible is an ingredient.

In *The Drama of Doctrine* I sought to match the method of theology more closely to its matter.⁷ Christianity is fundamentally neither a philosophy nor a system of morality but a theodrama, a *doing* in which God gets the most important speaking and acting part. Here too, my gestures towards the notion of God as "triune communicative agent" stopped short of unpacking its implicit ontology. It was nevertheless encouraging to see just how well the notion of communicative action fit in a theodramatic model, for "the particular vocation of the theatre is to explore the consequences of this intuition that 'to say is to do' and 'to do is to say'."⁸ Doctrine gives direction for right participation in the theodrama, but ultimately doctrine is not a matter of what works but of what *befits* the way things – God, the world, oneself – are. To define doctrine in terms of fitting participation in the drama of redemption is already to locate theology in the borderlands of ontology.

Ontology is "the sustained attempt to provide a systematic account of the concepts used in discussion concerning any subject-matter."⁹ At the heart of Christian theology, says Donald MacKinnon, "there lies the continual interpenetration of dramatic and ontological."¹⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr concurs: "The Bible conceives life as a drama in which human and divine actions create the dramatic whole. There are ontological presuppositions for this drama, but they are not spelled out."¹¹ The task of the present work is to explore the ontology of the one whose speech and acts propel the theodrama forward.

7. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

8. Ross Chambers, "Le Masque et le Miroir: Vers une théorie relationnelle du théâtre," *Études littéraires* 13 (1980), p. 402.

9. Peter Geach, as cited by Donald M. MacKinnon, *Themes in Theology: The Three-Fold Cord* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), p. 73.

10. MacKinnon, *Themes in Theology*, p. 234.

11. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Biblical Thought and Ontological Speculation in Tillich's Theology," in Charles Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (eds.), *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, vol. I (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 216–29; here, 216.

This volume sets forth a communicative ontology (i.e., a set of concepts with which to speak of God-in-communicative-action) and sketches the contours of a theodramatic metaphysics (i.e., a biblically derived set of concepts with which to speak of the whole of created reality). Its deepest wish is to complete Paul Ricoeur's "second Copernican Revolution" that dethrones the autonomous knowing subject in order to hearken to the one whose creative word forms, informs, and transforms us. As others have noted, Ricoeur's work opens up new possibilities for hermeneutics, biblical interpretation, and theological method.¹² Yet neither Ricoeur nor those who stand on his shoulders have given much attention to the doctrine of God, either to the question of divine action in general or to the doctrine of the Trinity in particular. The present work sets out to remove the phenomenological brackets (to the divine things themselves!), take off the hermeneutical gloves, and engage in bare-handed (but not, I trust, ham-fisted) theo-ontology.¹³ The result: a communicative theism that stakes a claim to the mantle of Trinitarian theology picked up by certain relational theists and panentheists after Karl Barth set it down.

Some readers will no doubt regard this entire project as a retrograde development: theology has been there, done that. One of the most explosive theological proposals of the twentieth century, Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God*, argued that theism must go, for "there is no room for [God], not merely in the inn, but in the entire universe."¹⁴ The ideas that God is "up there" or "out there" are to Robinson's mind equally idolatrous, for God is not a supernatural entity or "highest person" that can be said to exist as do other items in the universe.¹⁵

12. See Dan R. Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

13. I use the term "ontology" in reference to the being of particular things, and "metaphysics" in reference to systems of categories that may be applied to things in general. Accordingly, ontology comes to resemble the project of the "exegesis" of being, and metaphysics appears as the discipline that provides hermeneutical schemes for such exegesis. Whether or not a given "metaphysics" is oppressive or reductionist depends on whether it is serving a ministerial (i.e., descriptive) or magisterial (i.e., legislative) purpose. The present book attempts a ministerial metaphysics that serves faith's search for understanding the self-presentation of the triune God.

14. John A. T. Robinson, *Honest To God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 13–14.

15. Robinson approvingly cites Tillich's claim that "the protest of atheism against such a highest person is correct" (*Honest to God*, p. 41).

Those who would be honest to God must strive to avoid both pride and sloth in their God-talk. Theological pride overestimates the adequacy of human language and thought; theological sloth underestimates the importance of responding to the provocations of God's self-revelation. The one goes before destruction; the other pre-empts instruction. Yet it is hard to miss the recurring biblical theme that God wills to communicate and make himself known: "The word of the Lord came to ..."; "the Lord said ...". Theology is ultimately irresponsible if it fails either to attend to what God says or to think about the nature of the one who addresses us.

Three years after the publication of *Honest to God* Donald MacKinnon weighed in with an essay of his own: "Can a Divinity Professor Be Honest?"¹⁶ Christian pilgrims emerging from the valley of the shadow of deconstruction are more aware than ever of how one's situatedness can distort one's speech, regardless of one's sincerity. MacKinnon's humility is in this light brave and bracing, especially when it leads him to interrogate his own metaphysical machinations by confronting them with the stubborn particularity of tragedy and evil. Self-inspection is nowhere near as effective, however, as exposing oneself to the rigors of honest conversation. The shortest route to dishonesty is that which avoids dialogue. Being honest to God ultimately requires humility and boldness, the antidotes to theological pride and theological sloth respectively and the necessary prerequisites for entering into constructive conversation.

To proceed with bold and humble honesty to God is to charge with a theological light brigade: theisms to right of them, theisms to left of them, into the valley of ideological warfare, into the jaws of church historians and other academicians, ride the 144,000 ... The present book indicates a constructive way forward for the doctrine of God that thinks on whatever is true and pure in classical theism, Thomism, open theism, and various forms of panentheism. It avoids altogether, however, the broad North American highway that Christian Smith has dubbed Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.¹⁷

16. Donald M. MacKinnon, "Can a Divinity Professor Be Honest?" *The Cambridge Review* 12 (1966), pp. 94-6.

17. Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

My wager is that we will come to a better understanding of God's being by examining biblical accounts of God's communicative action (i.e., naming, promising, declaring, etc.). *The focal point in what follows is the nature of the relationship established by the dialogical interaction between God and humanity and its implications for the doctrine of God.* The notion of communicative action throws new light on a host of theological issues, including the relation of divine sovereignty and human freedom, divine eternity and human time, divine immutability and human change. The divine-human dialogical relation raises questions that penetrate into the heart of the doctrine of God: Is God solely an agent or can God be affected by human discourse and, if so, how? If Jesus is the Word of God whose own people received him not (Jn. 1:11), is triune communicative action consequently at the mercy of human communicative respondents? Can human obtuseness frustrate God? In the light of these questions, the present book may be viewed as working a communicative variation on the doctrine of divine impassibility.¹⁸ The issue of God's suffering – whether, what, when, and how – is an excellent litmus test for where a theologian stands when he or she is being honest to God.

Can *this* divinity professor be honest? To attend to MacKinnon's interrogative voice is to be reminded that one tell tale sign of dishonest theology is an incapacity for conversation.¹⁹ Conversely, to admit the provisionality of one's own monological musings is to acknowledge the need for dialogue, and for keeping silent in order to hear what is being said.²⁰ The present work is consequently all about voices – literal and metaphorical, biblical and theological, human and divine – and their ongoing interaction.

The primary voice I strain to hear is that of the triune God, discerned above all through the self-attestation of the living Word in the polyphonic Scriptures, aided and abetted by the antiphonal ecclesial choirs from East and West, as well as the occasional theological soloist. The rumor of angels is nothing next to the clamor

18. The doctrine of divine impassibility, an important part of the orthodox tradition, asserts that God does not suffer the effects of time or creaturely causation.

19. So John McDowell, "Donald MacKinnon on Why an Honest Theology Cannot Stand Still," http://www.geocities.com/johnnymcdowell/An_Honest_Theology_MacKinnon.htm.

20. On the importance of silence for a proper understanding of communicative action, see Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). I return to this point in ch. 9.

of the academics, however, and a number of voices from different disciplines and traditions have duly elbowed their way into the conversation. These voices too, from alternative perspectives, help keep the theologian honest to God. I have benefited from imagining conversations between thinkers whose divergent disciplines or theological traditions typically make for dialogues of the deaf. What original contribution this book might make stems, in the final analysis, from my following that still but persistent voice that has for some years now impressed upon me the formal and material importance for Christian theology of triune communicative action: God's voice, God's word, God's breath.

I am grateful for communication with the following persons whose voices, present or recalled, frequently interrupted me throughout the process of writing to interrogate, encourage, and correct. Thanks to Gary Badcock, Bruce McCormack, John Webster, and Stephen Williams for their valued electronic correspondence at key moments in the argument's development. Conversations with Graham Cole and Michael Allen were also of great value in the formative and concluding stages of the project respectively. Cole brought the important work of W. Norris Clarke to my attention and so helped me respond to my friend Philip Clayton's shrewd query with regard to *The Drama of Doctrine* concerning the location of its "metaphysical beef." I owe a special word of thanks to Dan Treier for his willingness to read and make valuable comments on every chapter, and for phrasing his harshest criticisms with delicate pastoral tact.

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tedious task of proof-reading and critiquing a first draft during a six-week period of house arrest (i.e., summer vacation).

A word of special thanks must go to Kate Brett and Gillian Dadd of Cambridge University Press. They exemplified the patient endurance of God that is the subject of the present book as they waited for it and seasoned our e-mail correspondence with such down-to-earth matters as gardening and impending motherhood. I am also very grateful to David Ford for his concise yet insightful comments on an earlier draft. His interaction with my text exemplified Christian wisdom and charity and enabled me to improve the manuscript in places that I might have otherwise overlooked. I, of course, am solely responsible for all remaining faults.

Among the many voices that continue to echo over the years, those of one's best teachers figure most prominently. It is therefore fitting that I dedicate the present work to John Frame, my first graduate school theology professor, a master-pedagogue and triangulator extraordinaire, whose multi-perspectival approach to the doctrine of God has been a source of continuing inspiration. As a scholar, he exemplifies sanctified erudition in engaging other positions with charitable criticism; as a saint, he personifies a compelling model of how to do theology with creative fidelity while remaining boldly yet humbly honest to God.

Introduction: What is remythologizing?

At the heart of Christian theology, as an intellectual activity, there lies the continual interpenetration of dramatic and ontological.¹

The apostle Peter distinguishes the gospel from “cleverly devised myths” by rooting the former in eyewitness testimony (2 Pet. 1:16). He bases his case for the majesty of Jesus on the “voice borne from heaven” that accompanied Jesus’ transfiguration: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (2 Pet. 1:17). *Ear-witness* testimony thus figures prominently too: “we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word made more sure” (2 Pet. 1:18–19).²

In combining the prophecies of Isaiah 42:1 and Psalm 2:7, the voice from heaven identifies Jesus by referring to his ordination as Suffering Servant and coronation as Son of God. Peter explains this remarkable piece of theologizing that links suffering to sovereignty by noting that “no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:21). The passage thus alludes, in a pericope-sized nutshell, to the work of Father, Son, and Spirit in the history of redemption from Israel to Jesus Christ. Yet what stands out is the voice from heaven.³

1. MacKinnon, *Themes in Theology*, p. 234.

2. See also R. H. Gundry’s suggestion that the Word christology of the Fourth Gospel is a variation on the Synoptic accounts of the transfiguration. The glory associated with Jesus’ face in those accounts is reworked into Jesus as the “heard Word” (“How the Word in John’s Prologue Pervades the Rest of the Fourth Gospel. Addendum I: The Transfiguration of Jesus According to John: Jesus as the Heard Word,” in *The Old Is Better: New Testament Essays in Support of Traditional Interpretations* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005], p. 360).

3. The critical dispute over the place of 2 Peter in the canon does not affect my argument, as the accounts of the voice from heaven occur in Matthew 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, and Luke 9:28–36 as well.

Is there a speaking subject up there? If those to whom electrical switches and elective surgery are a matter of course find it hard to believe in miracles, how much more difficult is it for those who have explored space and mapped the human genome to believe in a voice from heaven? Hans Urs von Balthasar identifies the key question: “whether God *can* enter a drama that takes place in the world, and play a part in it, without becoming mythological.”⁴ In the light of the prevailing twenty-first-century Western plausibility structures, many may be tempted to view the story of Jesus as a *poorly* designed myth.

Human beings are inveterate producers and consumers of myths. Inasmuch as stories help order and provide meaning to human life, myths – and other forms of the imagination, including narratives and metaphors – are the currency we live by.⁵ Some myths die hard. John Robinson would no doubt view biblical language about a voice from heaven as contributing to the (for him) idolatrous notion that God is “up there” or “out there.” Is theism necessarily mythological?

Paul Tillich contrasted God as a supreme being with the notion of God as Being-itself. To think of God as one being, albeit the highest, among many is to espouse a mythological, supernatural picture of the God-world relation. Both Robinson and Tillich consider the idea that God is a supreme being – like us, only much, much bigger and better – a bogey to scare young theologians. James Morrow’s novel, *Towing Jehovah*,⁶ illustrates what they fear is the consequence of taking biblical language too literally. The story begins with the angel Gabriel (feathers and all) appearing to a sea captain in 1992, announcing the death of God and the subsequent fall of his two-mile-long corpse into the ocean. The captain receives an angelic commission to tow God to the Arctic, where the frozen body will float at rest inside a hollowed-out iceberg. The captain’s ship, an Ultra Large Crude Carrier chartered by the Vatican, is an apt and ironic choice: it takes a supertanker to tow the supreme being.

The various characters in the book respond differently to the news of God’s demise. Father Ockham, a Jesuit delegated to represent the

4. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. III: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 505.

5. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

6. (New York/London: Harvest Book, 1994).

Vatican in the flotilla, initially ponders the cosmological implications: "Was He truly gone, or had His spirit merely vacated some gratuitous husk? ... Did heaven still exist? ... What of the Son and the Ghost?"⁷ Later he forms a theory as to why God died: "In my gut I feel it was an empathic death. He died from a bad case of the twentieth century."⁸ Towards the end of the book, however, he formulates a different hypothesis, arguing that God willed himself out of existence out of love for humanity: "He realized our continued belief in Him was constraining us, holding us back" – a theory to which a Cardinal sneeringly responds, "Oh, *that* old argument."⁹

A perennial problem: myth, *mythos*, and metaphysics

To speak well of God one must first let God present himself. To move from faith to understanding, however, one must think through the implications of God's self-presentation. What must God be like in order to do what the Bible depicts him as doing with words: creating, commanding, promising, consoling?

Myth

The term "myth" typically inspires no more confidence today than it did in New Testament times, not least because it is notoriously difficult to define.¹⁰ The term oscillates uneasily between "foolish delusion" and "vehicle of higher truth." It often carries pejorative connotations, especially among those who are looking for some form of scientific rationality or historical truth. The *Concise OED*, for example, lists as its first definition "a traditional narrative usu. involving supernatural or imaginary persons and embodying popular ideas on natural or social phenomena." George Caird notes that

7. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 362. By "that old argument," the Cardinal is referring to positions similar to that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who claims that God "allows himself to be edged out of the world" in order to teach us "that we must live as men who can get along very well without him" (cited in Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 39).

10. Raymond Williams traces two twentieth-century streams of usage, positive and negative, and concludes that the term "is now both a very significant and a very difficult word" (*Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. edn. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1983], p. 212).

the sense of myth as sheer fiction always lurks in the background of the discussion, and that this is “the only sense the word has in the New Testament.”¹¹

Myths are “sacred stories” or “stories of the gods” that characteristically take place in sacred space-time (i.e., apart from the realm of ordinary history) and typically involve superhuman speech and acts.¹² Early modern anthropologists saw myth as “primitive” – “a prescientific attempt to explain natural phenomena.”¹³ Yet ancient myths, such as Plato’s famous myth of the cave, also serve as vehicles of universal truth. From yet another perspective, Carl Jung argues that myths articulate archetypal patterns that have a social function, expressing the collective unconscious. Myths may therefore have an explanatory function (as stand-in for science), an illustrative function (as stand-in for philosophy), or a communal function (as foundation narrative that shapes a group’s identity).

Rudolf Bultmann distinguishes between three senses of myth in the New Testament’s message concerning the event of Jesus Christ: (1) a cosmological sense that attempts to explain the cosmos in terms of a triple-decker picture, with the heavens “above” and hell “below”; (2) an existential sense that communicates universal truths concerning human being; and (3) a kerygmatic sense that announces an act of God: “Bultmann speaks in turn as a man of science, an existential philosopher, and a hearer of the word.”¹⁴

Bultmann believed that men and women who accept modern science *cannot* also accept the biblical accounts of God’s acts. The biblical reports of divine action cannot literally mean what they say if the scientific account of nature is true. While some theologians and scientists are currently busy trying to demonstrate the compatibility of science and religion, others agree with Bultmann and sharply

11. G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. 219.

12. C. S. Lewis, however, defines myth as stories that *might have happened* and that have value independent of their embodiment in any literary work (*An Experiment in Criticism* [Cambridge University Press, 1961], ch. 5).

13. E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (1871), as referenced by Caird in *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, p. 220.

14. Paul Ricoeur, “Preface to Bultmann,” in Don Ihde (ed.), *The Conflict of Interpretations*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 393. Roger Johnson describes these three senses as the Enlightenment, existentialist formulations and *Religionsgeschichtliche* respectively, (*The Origins of Demythologizing* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974], p. 30). Johnson argues that the first and third senses dominate Bultmann’s work after 1934 (p. 35).

distinguish between scientific and mythic (religious) thought.¹⁵ Neither option, however, does justice to biblical descriptions of divine action or to the idea that God is not merely a cause but a purposive agent. The kerygma is good news about what God has done, not a poetic way of expressing existential self-understanding. Between the theoretical rationality of science and the existential understanding of myth, then, lies the practical reason of personal agents.¹⁶ The latter is the special province of *mythos*.

Mythos

It is important to distinguish what Aristotle calls *mythos* from the aforementioned modern senses of “myth.” Remythologizing pertains first and foremost to *mythos*, not myth. *Mythos* is Aristotle’s term for dramatic plot: a unified course of action that includes a beginning, middle, and end. Drama “is essentially an imitation not of persons but of actions and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain activity, not a quality.”¹⁷ *Mythos* concerns what people do and what happens to them; it is a story that concerns doers (agents) and the done-to (sufferers).

Myth and *mythos* diverge in at least two important respects, with regard to both content and form. First, as to content, *mythos* pertains to this-worldly rather than other-worldly events, to ordinary as well as heroic stories and histories. Second, the meaning and truth of *mythos* are linked to the way the action is rendered. Unlike myths that hide kerygmatic kernels under disposable literary husks, the

15. As an example of the latter tendency, see Donald Wiebe, *The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991). William Schweiker rightly criticizes Wiebe’s dichotomy thesis (borrowed from Lévy-Bruhl) for failing to provide a place for practical reason and its distinctive truth claims: “Practical reasoning, it seems, is reducible for him to a subset of mythic thinking, or it must be identified with scientific rationality as he understands it” (Review of Wiebe in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60 [1992], p. 763).

16. Practical reason (Aristotle’s *phronesis*) pertains to deliberating well about what to do in particular situations. Practical reason concerns right (i.e., fitting) action. I shall argue below that remythologizing is precisely a matter of thinking according to the manifold forms of biblical discourse (i.e., *communicative* action), forms that cannot always be easily translated into one kind of discourse or one kind of rationality (i.e., scientific).

17. Aristotle, *Poetics*, in Richard McKeon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 1461.

form and content of *mythos* are integrally linked.¹⁸ It is precisely for this reason that Ricoeur seizes upon *mythos* as the unique means for depicting or “configuring” personal identity, for who we are as persons (content) is inseparable from what we say and do – from how we realize our potential for communicative agency (form). The following account of *mythos* builds on several of Ricoeur’s seminal insights that modify Aristotle’s traditional understanding.

In the first place, Ricoeur calls attention to the way in which *mythos* and *mimesis* work together in Aristotle to make sense of what persons do in time. In Plato, *mimesis* (imitation) had a more meta-physical sense whereby things imitate Ideas as works of art imitate things. In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, however, what gets imitated is a matter not of being but of *doing*: action. *Mythos* is a mode of discourse that configures human action so as to create a form of wholeness (i.e., a unified action) out of a multiplicity of incidents. “Poetics” refers to how authors create meaningful wholes (viz., stories) that allow one to make sense of what would otherwise be a chaotic jumble of unrelated events. A dramatic plot or *mythos* thus “configures” a totality of time out of a succession of events. Indeed, Ricoeur suggests that the *mythos* of drama is to time what the icon of painting is to space.¹⁹ Whereas Ricoeur focuses on the way in which *mythos* configures human action, however, the present work deploys the notion in order to understand divine action.²⁰

Second, Ricoeur treats *mythos* primarily as an operation – emplotment – rather than as a literary genre or structure.²¹ Specifically, he calls attention to *mythos* as a cognitive instrument. Emplotment is a unique and indispensable means of making sense of a phenomenon – a course of human action; human freedom – before which scientific explanation can only shrug its shoulders. As such, *mythos* offers an “intelligibility appropriate to the field of *praxis*, not

18. This is similar to the point that Hans Frei makes about the irreducibility of the narrative form. See his *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

19. Ricoeur, “Pour une théorie du discours narratif,” in D. Tiffeneau (ed.), *La Narrativité* (Paris: Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, 1980), p. 54.

20. I suggested in an earlier work that the Gospel narratives of Jesus’ life are schemas not only of time but of eternity. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 8.

21. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, tr. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 31.

that of *theoria*.”²² The present work develops Ricoeur’s suggestion in a communicative direction: the *mythos* of Jesus Christ renders intelligible the field of triune communicative praxis.

Third, and perhaps most controversially, whereas Ricoeur tends to associate *mythos* with the narrative form only, I shall use the term more broadly to refer to *all the ways in which diverse forms of biblical literature represent, and render, the divine drama*. Here I take up Martha Nussbaum’s point that the forms – the *how* of poetic discourse – contribute to the content or *what* of discourse. What Nussbaum says of novels and philosophy applies to the Bible and theology as well: “The very qualities that make the novels so unlike dogmatic abstract treatises are, for us, the source of their *philosophical* interest.”²³ *Mythos* in its broadest sense therefore stands for all those forms of discourse that may be employed in the course of a story or drama to render an agent or patient, a unified action or a unified passion.

Mythos is thus a form of what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls, in the context of aesthetics, a means of “world-projection.”²⁴ In the hands of an author or artist, *mythos* serves as a cognitive tool to project a sense of the world as an ordered whole. While Ricoeur’s focus is on narrative and Wolterstorff’s on the work of art, the focus of the present work is on the various ways in which the biblical *mythos* renders human and divine reality by depicting persons in act and at rest, speaking and silent. To speak of the biblical *mythos* is to indicate that complex dramatic whole that renders not only the action but also reality of God. As such, *mythos* has theo-ontological significance. God, like being, may be said in many ways.²⁵

The biblical *mythos* is both one and many. There is one overall plot, namely, the story of God’s self-presentation in the history of Israel and Jesus Christ. Yet God’s unified self-presentation is rendered by many voices speaking in diverse (literary) registers. The many literary forms of the Bible are theologically significant both for what they say (content) and how they say it (discourse). To anticipate: the various voices that make up the canon constitute a dialogue that

22. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

23. Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 29.

24. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 122–55.

25. As we shall see in ch. 4, this is even more the case when “being” is conceived in terms not of static substance but of dynamic activity.

is itself a key ingredient in the triune economy of communicative action. Stated differently: the biblical *mythos* is the written form of God's self-presentation. As such, the Bible is the plumb line for right Christian speech about God.

Metaphysics

Can one by doing metaphysics find out God? Not if by metaphysics one means speculation that begins "from below," with human experience, and seeks through a process of incremental and inferential reasoning to arrive at conclusions about what God "above" must be like. The problem with "totalizing" metaphysics is the underlying assumption that there is one set of categories, accessible to unaided human reason, which applies both to the world and to God, created and uncreated reality. This invariably leads to ontotheology, a unified system of thought that employs concepts such as Supreme Being or Unmoved Mover as conceptual stopgaps to prevent infinite metaphysical regress.²⁶ Call it "bad" metaphysics: bad, because it imposes a system of categories on God without attending to God's own self-communication.²⁷

Metaphysics, understood as the study of reality beyond mere appearances, has in modern times more the fragrance of *logos* than of *mythos* about it; its privileged forms are conceptual, not dramatic. To be sure, some thinkers have broached the "dividing wall of hostility" that for centuries has separated poets (and dramatists) from philosophers.²⁸ Philosophers of science have acknowledged the reality-depicting capacity of metaphors.²⁹ And the recent rediscovery of narrative is one of the signal contributions of late twentieth-century theology. Still, in some quarters (e.g., analytic theism), proper (i.e., metaphysically robust) God-talk remains a metaphor-free zone,

26. See Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), chs. 1 and 13.

27. The present work employs a "good" metaphysics: good, because it derives its system of categories from the train of God's own communicative action (i.e., theodrama). A "good" metaphysics is thus a descriptive metaphysics – descriptive of the biblical *mythos*, together with its presuppositions and implications.

28. See especially, Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, ch. 1, and, from a different angle, the works of the later Heidegger and Jacques Derrida.

29. See, for example, Mary Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1966).

while other neighborhoods, especially those influenced by postmodern Continental philosophy, routinely prohibit metaphysics. By and large, *mythos* and *logos* remain segregated.

Matthew Levering's *Scripture and Metaphysics* sets out to overturn the opposition "between scriptural and metaphysical modes of articulating truth,"³⁰ not least because metaphysics is often required if faith is to attain understanding of the implications of biblical texts, particularly when these concern the reality of God. Unfortunately, the opposition between *mythos* and *logos* has been exacerbated by recent Trinitarian theologians who see more discontinuity than continuity between the metaphysical attempt to lay bare the ontological and causal joints of reality and the scriptural account of God in dramatic and narrative form.³¹ Some among these theologians have repudiated Greek metaphysics; some have espoused modern forms of metaphysics (e.g., relationality); others have rejected metaphysics altogether; and still others try to reform metaphysics along biblical lines, as does the theodramatic version set forth in these pages.

An interesting case in point of the first tendency is Jack Miles's Pulitzer prize-winning book, *God: A Biography*.³² Miles sets out to write the life of God the protagonist – the *protos agonistes* or "first actor" – of the Hebrew Bible. The result is a "theography."³³ Miles attends to the development of the *mythos*, a dramatic plot that includes narrative, speech spoken by God, speeches addressed to and about God, and silence. Though he distinguishes (literary) criticism from (historical) scholarship and proposes to focus on the first, he ends up suggesting that "God" is in fact an amalgam of several divine personas: "The equation is creator (*Yahweh/’elohim*) + cosmic destroyer (*Tiamat*) + personal god (*god of . . .*) + warrior (*Baal*) = GOD, the composite protagonist

30. Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 1.

31. For an earlier statement of a similar problem, see Brian Wicker, *The Story-Shaped World. Fiction and Metaphysics: Some Variations on a Theme* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1975). Wicker undermines the strict dichotomy between story (*mythos*) and religious belief by suggesting that there is a metaphysics of *mythos* as well as a rhetoric of belief (p. 214). Thomas Aquinas and other theists "had a highly developed sense of the *analogical*, but a corresponding underdeveloped sense of the *metaphorical* uses of words" (p. 8). Levering similarly believes that a healthy Trinitarian theology requires "that theologians reject the alleged opposition between scriptural and metaphysical modes of reflection, without conflating the two modes" (*Scripture and Metaphysics*, p. 2).

32. (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

33. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

of the Tanakh.”³⁴ According to Miles, then, the protagonist of the Hebrew Bible is a God with multiple personalities.

Theology must go further than geography: theology must explore the *logos* of the *graphe* or *mythos* of God. Miles’s biography of God illustrates the *formal* (i.e., hermeneutical) problem posed by the apparently mythical elements in the biblical narrative (e.g., the divine voice coming from heaven): how to move from the setting forth in speech to the ordering of reason, from the literary rendering to the reality rendered, from “myth” to metaphysics. At its best, the practice of metaphysical questioning is a work of faith seeking understanding and “constitutes a spiritual exercise that purifies from idolatry those who would contemplate the self-revealing God.”³⁵ Be that as it may, given the complex relations between myth, *mythos*, and metaphysics, the question still stands: how may we think and speak well of God?

Whether we are analyzing the concept of *ens perfectissimum* or narrating the story of Jesus, we must rely on what MacKinnon calls a “system of projection” in order to speak of what transcends space-time human experience.³⁶ Theologians have employed numerous conceptual schemes to speak of God (e.g., Platonism, existentialism); the nagging worry is that such schemes simply foist our categories and interests onto the subject matter, thus revealing more about the cultural-historical conditioning of humanity than about divinity.

MacKinnon wonders whether Christian theology may be “much more than it realizes the victim of the victory won in the person of Plato by the philosophers over the poets, and in particular the tragedians.”³⁷ Yet Christianity is less about philosophies and systems of moralities than it is about how God’s particular words and acts in the history of Israel converged climactically in the history of Jesus Christ. This book conducts a MacKinnon-inspired thought experiment, adopting as its system of projection the biblical *mythos*, together with the concrete forms of discourse that comprise it, as well as the categories implicit in the theodramatic action to which

34. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

35. Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, pp. 9–10.

36. MacKinnon, “The problem of the ‘system of projection’ appropriate to Christian theological statements,” *Explorations in Theology* 5 (London: SCM Press, 1979), pp. 70–89.

37. MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1968), p. 100.

these forms attest (and in which, as we shall see, they also participate). If God's activity is best construed in terms of triune communicative agency, then it behooves us to attend to the concrete manner in which God "projects" his own story. Hence my thesis: the *mythos* of the Bible – the christological content and canonical form – is the written means of God's triune self-presentation. In a word, the *mythos* is the medium (and the message).

To confront the biblical *mythos* with the requirements of metaphysics is to ask whether indeed God, like Being, may be said in many ways, or whether there is a single set of categories, vocabulary, or conceptual scheme into which all other forms of God-talk must be translated. If there is a single scheme, is "Being" that conceptuality? The present study takes its initial orientation from Ricoeur's suggestion that "there are modes of thought other than those based on Greek, Cartesian, Kantian, Hegelian, etc. philosophy."³⁸ In particular, it pursues Ricoeur's idea that the literary forms of the Bible are forms not only of writing, but also of thinking and naming God.³⁹

Emplotment (*mythos*) is a way of providing intelligibility (e.g., order, unification) for a course of human action. Yet there are other ways to speak of action, Being, and even the name of God. Not just any theology can be bound to the narrative form, or for that matter, to the prophetic and apocalyptic: "Through all these discourses, God appears differently each time."⁴⁰ And, going beyond Ricoeur, we can say that God also speaks and acts in and through all these discourses differently as well. Consequently, this work derives a doctrine of God's being from an analysis of God's speaking, something Ricoeur never attempted. He does, however, examine the various ways that the Bible names God – in prophecy, laws, wisdom, and psalms as well as narratives – and notes that the term "God" belongs first and foremost to these forms of *mythos*-discourse rather than to the secondary (and speculative) forms of *logos*-discourse (e.g., "God is the Unmoved

38. Paul Ricoeur and André LaCocque, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. xvi.

39. See Ricoeur, "Naming God," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 217–35. I depart from Ricoeur, however, in viewing these forms as, in a sense to be developed below, types of *divine* authorial discourse.

40. Ricoeur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics," in François Bovon (ed.), *Exegesis* (Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series #21 [Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1978], p. 325).

Mover”).⁴¹ The biblical polyphony that names God takes a certain precedence over its parsimonious metaphysical counterpart.

Adam named the animals because he was superior to them in a certain respect. The names reflected not only their natures but also, to some extent, those distinctions that Adam considered noteworthy. Who, however, is in a position to name God? Ricoeur points out that “God” is not only “the index of the mutual belonging together of the originary forms of the discourse of faith. It is also the index of their incompleteness.”⁴² Ricoeur rightly cautions against the danger of idolatry, but fails to consider the possibility that the Bible as a unified canonical whole may itself ultimately count as a divine communicative work, in which case the self-naming of God would not be limited merely to one or two instances, such as the burning bush of Exodus 3, but would comprise the entire length and breadth of the canon.⁴³ God would therefore be not only the subject of the biblical *mythos*, but also in some sense its author. When Ricoeur suggests that the various forms of biblical discourse represent “schemas” (e.g., rules or procedures for creating figures) of the name of God, we may therefore go further and understand these schemas ultimately to be not mere human projections “from below” but elements of a divine system of projection, as it were, “from above.”⁴⁴

To speak of *mythos*, then, is to call attention to the diverse ways in which dramatic forms render their dramatic matter, opening up aspects of reality – in particular, God’s self-communicative activity – that would otherwise be sealed off from human inspection. God, as author of the cosmos, the covenant history with Israel, and the canon, is “Lord of projection.” This latter claim is not another human projection onto God but rather an acknowledgment of the incarnation as the capstone of a whole divine system of projection,

41. Ricoeur, “Naming God,” p. 223.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

43. Cf. Wolterstorff’s suggestion that the unity of the canon is not “within” but “behind” it: “The issue is whether someone *authorized* this totality as a work” (Wolterstorff, “The Unity Behind the Canon,” in Christine Helmer and Christof Landmesser (eds.), *One Scripture or Many? Canon from Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Perspectives* [Oxford University Press, 2004], p. 224). “Authoring” may be one means of “authorizing” a totality of discourse as a work.

44. I am not suggesting that the Bible only appears to be produced by human beings, but that humanly authored works are ultimately to be seen as coordinated by the divine playwright and hence as a means of God’s

a “system” that includes the various types of human discourse that comprise the Old and New Testaments.⁴⁵

The concept of divine discourse gives rise to the central *material* (i.e., theological) problem of the present volume: *what must we say about the being of God if God is a communicative agent?* Specifically, what follows for God’s being from biblical passages that describe divine–human communicative interaction, particularly when human dialogical activity appears in some way to affect God? Must we ascribe not only action, but passion and compassion as well, to God and, if so, what are the implications for the nature of God’s being?⁴⁶ Contemporary theologians are torn on this issue: though there is a tendency to dismiss those who believe the Bible’s “literal” truth, there is also a move to salvage the language of “repenting” and “grieving” and “suffering” from the dustbin of discarded metaphors and rehabilitate them as privileged literal, even univocal, divine predicates.⁴⁷

A modern solution: demythologizing

Bultmann’s well-known demythologizing approach to biblical interpretation is the quintessential example of the distinctly modern first theology that characterizes much twentieth-century Protestant liberalism.⁴⁸ Again, “first theology” refers to that coordinated construal of God, Scripture, and hermeneutics that distinguishes

self-presentation, self-naming, and self-projection. The self-naming of the triune God enriches the central question of ontology, namely, the question of Being (so Stanley Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being: A Trinitarian Theo-Ontology* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005], p. 7).

45. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

46. William Alston asks a similar question from the point of view of philosophical theology: “what God must be like if divine–human dialogue is to be possible” (“Divine–Human Dialogue and the Nature of God,” in *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* [Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989], p. 147).

47. For a similar statement of the problem illustrated by *Towing Jehovah*, but this time from a biblical scholar rather than a novelist, see Kari Latvus, *God, Anger, and Ideology: The Anger of God in Joshua and Judges* (Sheffield Academic, 1998): “The God that deuteronomistic theologians created in their own image was the God of strict dogmatism, intolerance and fundamentalism – and, of course, the God of anger ... The God of the crucified and powerless Jesus cannot be the same as the deuteronomistic God of anger” (p. 91).

48. See esp. Rudolf Bultmann, “The New Testament and Mythology,” in Hans Werner Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, tr. R. H. Fuller, 2nd

one theological approach from another.⁴⁹ The strengths of the remythologizing approach advocated in these pages are best approached through its contrast with Bultmann's strategy for negotiating the relationship between myth, *mythos*, and metaphysics.

Deobjectifying God

Demythologizing is the hermeneutic pole of Bultmann's first theology and, as such, is inextricably tied up with his view of God. For Bultmann, it is a post-Kantian given that God is neither an object that can be known nor a being that can be experienced in space-time. God does not act in the sphere of the worldly (i.e., the cause and effect realm of nature); neither is God susceptible of determination in terms of worldly concepts and categories. The Bible's portrayal of God as a supernatural agent that intervenes in the world is, for Bultmann, *mythical*: "myths give worldly objectivity to that which is unworldly."⁵⁰

Bultmann's position raises a general theological concern: to what extent can we interpret biblical language about God's acts in the world literally, that is, as meaning what they say?⁵¹ The problem with myth, when taken literally, is not simply that it is pre-scientific but that it "objectifies" God. Myth speaks of the other-worldly in terms of this world. Bultmann insists that God is not a datum that can be examined from some external standpoint, not an "object-at-hand" that we can talk about. Human subjects do not "grasp" God as they do other objects.⁵²

The "de-" of demythologizing signals the removal of myth in the very act of interpreting it.⁵³ This is the negative, deobjectifying

edn., vol. I (London: SPCK, 1964), pp. 1–16, and *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

49. David Kelsey's *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999) is a good example of a work that analyzes first theologies by exposing the ways in which theologians imaginatively construe God and Scripture together.

50. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 19.

51. A non-literal interpretation is one that locates the meaning, reference, or truth of what is said elsewhere – elsewhere, that is, than what the language is apparently about. Bultmann, for example, interprets the resurrection accounts non-literally when he says that they are "about" the disciples' coming to faith rather than the embodied life of the risen Christ.

52. See Walter Schmithals, *An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*, tr. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1968), ch. 2, "Theology as Talk of God."

53. So Robert Morgan, "Rudolf Bultmann," in David F. Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians*, 2nd edn. (Blackwell, 1997), p. 78.

moment in biblical interpretation.⁵⁴ Yet demythologizing is not merely a negative but a positive (“existentializing”) hermeneutical gesture.⁵⁵ For the cosmology that Bultmann takes away with his left hand returns as human ontology in his right: “The question of God and the question of myself are identical.”⁵⁶ Demythologizing is best viewed as a strategy for translating biblical statements about God into existential statements about human being.⁵⁷

Dedramatizing the cross

According to Bultmann, the New Testament stories about Jesus are myths: not descriptions of historical or other-worldly realities but expressions of “a certain understanding of human existence.”⁵⁸ The New Testament kerygma concerns the possibility of authentic human existence, a possibility that depends upon an encounter with God in the event of hearing the preaching of Christ’s cross. For example, to believe in the cross has nothing to do “with an objective

54. H. P. Owen suggests that “Demythologizing would be more accurately called deobjectifying” (*Revelation and Existence: A Study in the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* [Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1957], p. 15). While I think Owen is right, it would be a mistake to conceive remythologizing in terms of reobjectifying. Demythologizing may also be conceived in terms of dedramatization, hence the better counterpart in remythologizing is *redramatization*.

55. Demythologizing is ultimately a form of theological interpretation of the Bible even for Bultmann insofar as he relocates God’s act from the sphere of worldly objectivity to that of existential subjectivity.

56. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 53.

57. Interestingly enough, at least one scholar views even Calvin as an ad hoc demythologizer. Despite his literal interpretation of Jesus’ miracles and resurrection, Calvin refuses to attribute mere human qualities or activities to God: “Whenever he comes to a verse which attributes such things to God, he takes pains to make unmistakably clear that the language is improper and that the author doesn’t really mean what he says, but that the Holy Spirit is here accommodating his language to our low capacity. Thus he treats all references to God’s remembering, resting, repenting, returning, sleeping, yearning, smelling, seeing, wondering, laughing, speaking . . . In all these instances he tells what the particular activity or sensation attributed to God really means, and he does so in each case in such a way as to protect the immutability and wholly otherness of God . . . Calvin did ‘demythologize’ the language about God in the Bible” (Jackson H. Forstman, *Word and Spirit: Calvin’s Doctrine of Biblical Authority* [Stanford University Press, 1962], pp. 113–16). In fairness to Calvin, it is not a matter of his demythologizing so much as his interpretation of anthropomorphisms. We shall return to this point below.

58. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 19. Cf. Roger Johnson’s helpful gloss on the objective–existential dichotomy underlying demythologizing: “the dichotomy is between all that is objective . . . and the present reality of the particular lived existence of *Dasein*” (*The Origins of Demythologizing*, p. 20, n. 3).

event turned by God to our advantage, but rather to make the cross of Christ our own.”⁵⁹

In the final analysis, the kerygma (i.e., the message of God’s decisive act in Christ) that Bultmann distills through demythologizing is neither a system of timeless truths nor a theodramatic account of the words and acts of God. The end of the world – the judgment of God – that Jesus preached and anticipated on his cross is rather a mythical way of confronting human beings with the divine demand to abandon their attempt at making their existence secure and to turn toward God in radical insecurity or faith.⁶⁰ The kerygma is less declaration of what God has done than demand, a non-cognitive divine address: a call to be transformed by the renewing of one’s self-understanding. Even this is not the whole story, for Bultmann is reluctant to abandon all talk about God as acting. Though God may not cause events in history, he nevertheless “encounters” us through preaching – through Jesus the word – in the depths of our subjectivity. Nothing decisive happens in public; the drama is removed from the stage of world history, only to be relocated in the individual’s inner life (i.e., the event of hearing the word of God).

Demythologizing Bultmann

It is precisely here that Bultmann’s critics protest the arbitrary limit he sets on demythologizing: “He puts forward a view of theology which calls for radical demythologizing, and the translation of all transcendent statements into statements about the understanding of the self. Yet at the same time he believes that God has acted decisively in Christ, and he does not appear to realize the incompatibility of the two positions.”⁶¹ Indeed, to the extent that Bultmann refuses to demythologize the word-event of Jesus Christ, he is guilty of “falling back into mythology.”⁶² Why, these critics want to know, doesn’t demythologizing “anthropologize” all the way down?⁶³ In

59. Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” p. 36.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

61. John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann* (London: SCM Press, 1960), p. 243.

62. Fritz Buri, as cited in Schubert Ogden, *Christ without Myth: A Study Based on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 107.

63. Bultmann insists that the dividing line between theology and philosophy is precisely the affirmation that authentic existence is not a universal human

what sense can a consistent demythologizer continue to speak of God *acting*?

Bultmann does appear to be caught in an inconsistency: he is unwilling to accept the “objective” speech act of God recorded in the Bible, yet he has no problem affirming “that God acts on me, speaks to me, here and now.”⁶⁴ Once again, Ricoeur gets to the heart of the problem: “It is striking that Bultmann makes hardly any demands on this language of faith, whereas he was so suspicious about the language of myth.”⁶⁵ Put in terms of the present work: Bultmann is critical of the *mythos* or system of projection employed by the biblical authors for speaking of God’s acts but uncritical of his own.

Demythologizing aims to distill the kerygmatic content at the core of Christian faith from the mythical forms of biblical discourse that articulate it. But Bultmann fails to see that his own articulation of God’s acts simply substitutes one system of projection for another. He ignores the biblical *mythos* in his haste to reach the existential *logos* and, in so doing, fails to recognize the forms of biblical discourse as themselves indispensable means for articulating and thinking the reality of God. Demythologizing consequently de-narrativizes and generally de-forms the biblical rendering of God and his acts. Bultmann’s repackaging of objectifying language into existential terms thus dedramatizes the theodrama, rendering it literally unthinkable. His modernist first theology sides with the philosophers over the poets, thus denying God a speaking part.⁶⁶ A *theos* without *logos*, however, yields only a faith without understanding.

“Soft” vs. “hard” demythologizing: Feuerbachian slips

To the extent that Bultmann stops short of a consistent application of his method, he is a “soft” demythologizer. Though he rejects the notion that God literally intervenes in the finite chain of space-time events, he nevertheless acknowledges that God “acts” in events of human subjective existence (e.g., to bring about the

possibility but one that is conditional on encountering the word of God – faith comes by preaching. For more on the so-called “enigma” of demythologizing, see Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, ch. 1.

64. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 64.

65. Ricoeur, “Preface to Bultmann,” in *Conflict of Interpretations*, p. 395.

66. For a contrasting approach, see William P. Alston, “Can We Speak Literally of God?” in A. D. Steuer and J. W. McLendon (eds.), *Is God God?* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1981), pp. 146–75.

self-understanding of faith). If we would speak of God, we must speak of ourselves.⁶⁷ The affirmation that God is creator, for example, cannot be a metaphysical assertion but only “a personal confession that I understand myself to be a creature which owes its existence to God.”⁶⁸

Projecting “God”

Ludwig Feuerbach, in contrast, is an exemplar of a “hard” or consistent demythologizing which insists that it is anthropology all the way down.⁶⁹ Feuerbach applies the same hermeneutics of suspicion to the languages of myth and faith alike. However, like the other so-called “masters of suspicion” – Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche – Feuerbach offers what is ultimately a reductionist account of religious belief. Indeed, his explanation so thoroughly dispenses with the God hypothesis that it is no exaggeration to label Feuerbach the “grand master” of suspicion.⁷⁰

Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, and Feuerbach agree at least on this: god-talk is an “objectification” or “externalization” or “reification” of some internal, subjective trait onto a superhuman figure that is then (mistakenly) taken to be real. While these masters of suspicion may differ as to their explanations of how these projections have been generated – is it the Oedipus complex or class conflict? – each nevertheless believes that his “system” explains religion without remainder.

“Projection” is still the operative term.⁷¹ According to Feuerbach, god-talk is a matter of externalizing – throwing *up* or *out* there – some aspect or aspects of the self, and then objectifying this externalization. The self throws or casts images of itself onto a heavenly screen

67. See Bultmann, “What Does it Mean to Speak of God?” in *Faith and Understanding* (London: SCM Press, 1969), ch. 2.

68. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 69.

69. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, tr. George Eliot (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989). For an alternate interpretation of Feuerbach’s later theory, see Van Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

70. Cf. Harvey’s interesting discussion as to the reasons why Ricoeur did not include Feuerbach on his list of masters of suspicion (*Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 4–14).

71. Harvey notes that though Feuerbach rarely used the German term *Projektion*, his translator, George Eliot, regularly chose to render a variety of terms, including *vergegenständlichen* (“to objectify”), by the English “to project”

(i.e., makes myths). In an important passage, Feuerbach likens our imaginative projections to dreaming: “In dreaming, the active is the passive, the passive the active; in dreaming, I take the spontaneous action of my own mind for an action upon me from without, my emotions for events, my conceptions and sensations for true existences apart from myself. I suffer what I also perform.”⁷² Religion is thus “a dream, in which our own conceptions and emotions appear to us as separate existences, beings out of ourselves.”⁷³

At the center of Feuerbach’s own system of projection, then, stands the “secret” that theology is really only anthropology, that the essence of all religion, including Christianity, is the belief in the divinity of human nature.⁷⁴ All the qualities we predicate of God are in fact “qualities in which he [sic.] in truth only images and projects himself.”⁷⁵ In Harvey’s words: “God is the notion of the species transformed by the imagination into a perfect exemplar of the species, a conscious being with perfect knowledge, will, and above all, feeling.”⁷⁶ The Trinity, for example, results from the projection of the three essential predicates of the human species – reason, will, and feeling – onto God.⁷⁷ God is thus humanity writ large: “God is the idea of humanity made into an individual being.”⁷⁸ Unlike the other masters of suspicion, however, Feuerbach sought to decode the major symbols of the faith in order to demonstrate their “only human” truth, namely, that religion is “the self-discovery by the finite of its own infinite nature.”⁷⁹

Feuerbach’s “hard” demythologizing is a minimalist first theology, a strategy for reducing Scripture, and God, to a system of anthropological projection (theology as anthropomorphism). While Feuerbach himself proposed a hermeneutic that would expose what

(Harvey, *Feuerbach*, p. 32). Harvey further observes that “The elegance of *The Essence of Christianity* was, of course, largely a function of the dominating idea of the book, the notion of projection” (*Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*, p. 231).

72. Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, p. 140.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 336.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

76. Harvey, *Feuerbach*, p. 39.

77. See Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, ch. 6.

78. Harvey, *Feuerbach*, p. 23.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 27. Feuerbach accepted Hegel’s axiom that the possibility of self-consciousness is the consciousness of another: “the I only comes into existence as a self-reflexive being over against a Thou for which it is an object” (Harvey, *Feuerbach*, p. 35).

he took to be the truth of Scripture and theology, his postmodern successors have evinced a suspicion of hermeneutics itself, thus radicalizing his system of projection.⁸⁰ On this view, the secret of reading is authoring: what appears to be the creation of an author – meaning – is actually the invention (projection) of the reader. These children of Feuerbach contend that the methods of biblical interpretation are themselves systems of projection, though what these systems project are not human qualities but ideological and political interests: “Today, it is not our biblical texts that need demythologizing so much as our ways of reading them.”⁸¹

Ja and nein

Feuerbach’s account of Christianity as a system of projection is a strong and sobering reminder that the religious impulse is easily put to work in the idol industries – the very reason why Barth encouraged his students to begin their theological studies by reading Feuerbach.⁸² Barth saw Feuerbach’s analysis to be the definitive refutation of the modern liberal project, begun by Schleiermacher, which took its theological bearings from human religious experience. Feuerbach exposed no more than a postulate of human experience: an idol, not the living God.⁸³

Barth is ever conscious of Feuerbach peeking over the theologian’s shoulder. For we have no choice but to project concepts drawn from human experience onto God. At the same time, God’s “wholly otherness” reminds us that one-sided conceptualizations do not tell the whole story.⁸⁴ Barth’s solution to this dilemma is well known: God

80. In part this has to do with the problematization of the relation between author, text, and reader, as well as the subject-object relation. See Elizabeth A. Castelli, Stephen D. Moore, Gary A. Phillips, and Regina M. Schwartz (eds.), *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 51.

81. Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 66.

82. So Trevor Hart, “Revelation,” in John Webster (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 40.

83. Cf. the related critique of “role-model theology” according to which a proper theology “is one that expresses proper social values ... whose god is worthy of emulation by human beings” (Garrett Green, “The Gender of God and the Theology of Metaphor,” in Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. [ed.], *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992], p. 48).

84. Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), p. 400.

must find a way to us. *God*, that is to say, *employs his own "system of projection"*: God reveals or communicates himself on his own terms. Indeed, one way to view Barth's doctrine of the Word of God is to see it as an attempt to give pride of theological place to the self-projecting God.

Barth was insisting as early as his *Göttingen Dogmatics* that "if we are not to fall into the arms of Feuerbach at the very first step ... we must think of God as the subject."⁸⁵ He also identifies "God's own speaking" as the central problem of dogmatics.⁸⁶ The present work takes its lead from Barth rather than Feuerbach, even if it acknowledges that one must go through rather than around the latter. For the ultimate purpose in exposing false systems of projection is to enable the divine system of projection to appear.

Which system? Whose projection?

A fundamental issue in the doctrine of God concerns the direction of what we have called the system of projection: is divinity merely humanity writ large? Can we know God according to his true nature or are we sentenced to think of God only in terms of human ideals, in which case, to paraphrase Feuerbach, man, not God, will be our last thought? Can theologians do better than to create God in their own image?

Feuerbach got it partly right: everything depends on discerning the proper relationship between theology and anthropology. However, whereas Feuerbach affirms the deity of man, Barth asserts the humanity of God. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the out-working in time of God's eternal decree not to be who/what God is without us.⁸⁷ God is the active subject of the incarnation, projecting himself into humanity. In the final analysis, Barth takes issue with Feuerbach's anthropology as well, for only in Jesus Christ do we see true humanity ("Real Man").⁸⁸

85. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

86. *Ibid.* Note that Feuerbach continues to hover in the shadows. Revelation, he says, "is determined by the human nature" to the extent that God must accommodate himself to the kind of beings we are to make himself known (*Essence*, p. 206).

87. See Karl Barth, *Humanity of God* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1960), pp. 37–65.

88. Barth criticizes Feuerbach for attributing divinity to a fictitious abstraction – man in general, "generalized man" (Barth, *Protestant Theology in the*

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, it is Barth, not Bultmann, who dominates the theological scene. The proof: the improbable recovery of the doctrine of the Trinity. Though a remnant of modern liberal theologians remains, it is more common to see contemporary theologians focused on the system of divine projection: the “missions” of the Son and Spirit. An observer might therefore be forgiven for thinking that both types of demythologizing, hard and soft, have largely run their course. This would nevertheless be a perfunctory reading of the current situation; as we shall see, even Trinitarian theology is susceptible of anthropological projection.

Even though God chooses to project himself into the human condition, and while we have no alternative but to employ human language and categories to understand God, it remains illegitimate to make the human condition the measure of God’s being.⁸⁹ Paul Molnar echoes Barth when he laments the tendency among contemporary theologians to construct images of the Trinity “based on our ideas and experiences of relationality, temporality” and so forth.⁹⁰ When this happens, categories that characterize the human drama are illegitimately projected onto, or imported into, the life of the triune God: “They have in fact made the immanent Trinity nothing more than a description of our own experiences within the economy of salvation.”⁹¹

While the preferred images or concepts may have changed, the question remains whether the *system* of projection typical of much contemporary theology is essentially the same as that practiced by Bultmann and described by Feuerbach. If so, then what Barth called the “fundamental error which dominated the doctrine of God

Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002], p. 526).

89. C. S. Lewis sees the Gospel as *mythos* made fact, and Christianity as a matter of “God expressing Himself through what we call ‘real things’” (cited in Walter Hooper [ed.], *C. S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide* [New York: HarperCollins, 1996], p. 569). Nevertheless, “The ‘doctrines’ we get out of the true myth are of course less true: they are translations into our *concepts* and *ideas* of that which God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely, the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection” (p. 583).

90. Molnar, “Trinity and the Freedom of God,” *Journal for Christian Theological Research* 8 (2003), p. 59. See also his *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London and New York: T & T Clark and Continuum, 2002) for an elaboration and defense of this provocative thesis.

91. Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, p. 259.

within older theology”⁹² – the error of making something other than the act of God’s self-presentation one’s first theology – also threatens to dominate the newer theology. Unless we accord priority to God’s own self-presentation in theodramatic activity, Christian theology is but smoke and mirrors – a human projection of religious affections and special effects.

An alternative approach: remythologizing

“Remythologizing” theology is not a call to fall back into mythology. The approach to be set forth in these pages does not require that one turn one’s back on contemporary science; neither does it seek to project our best thoughts onto a superhuman being or re-populate the world with red devils and shopping demons.⁹³ It has rather to do with going back to the scene of the hermeneutical crime: Bultmann’s twin denial of God as speech agent and of Scripture as divine discourse. Remythologizing is therefore best defined in contrast to demythologizing, and this in two senses.

As an alternative proposal for first theology, remythologizing involves a hermeneutical and methodological strategy tied to a particular view of God (i.e., as triune communicative agency). As such, it addresses the formal problem of theology by proposing guidelines for biblical interpretation (i.e., how to move from *mythos* to metaphysics in order to speak of God). Second, and more importantly, remythologizing addresses the material principle at the heart of first theology (i.e., what must God be like if he is actually the speaking and acting agent depicted in the Bible?). It is therefore a concrete proposal for understanding God and God’s relation to the world that follows not the five speculative “ways” of Aquinas (i.e., the five proofs for God’s existence) but the biblical account of the “ways” of God (Ps. 103:7), “ways” that lead not only into the far country but ultimately to the cross of Jesus Christ.⁹⁴

92. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 261.

93. “Shopping demon”: an invisible entity that was the professed cause of the tele-evangelist Tammy Faye Baker’s irresistible impulse to buy cosmetic products, dresses, and shoes.

94. It is worth pointing out that a theology that attends to the biblical *mythos* and its depiction of God must always be a theology of the cross. Indeed, the reflex that leads some to project moral and social values onto God leads to what Luther called theologies of glory (see Green, “The Gender of God,” p. 55).

The basic premise: triune authorship

Only God can make God known. Moreover, we could know nothing of God or his purposes at all if God were not a speech agent, for only speaking disambiguates behavior: "Incorporeal agents who do not speak are like invisible men who are dumb."⁹⁵ There would be an "obvious gap in a form of theism in which God, having made a world of rational creatures able to love and worship him, did not in any way communicate with them."⁹⁶ Christian theology begins in the wake of God's communicative activity or theodrama (*drao* = "I do") in which God's speaking is a doing and God's doing is more often than not a matter of speaking.

The proper starting point for the doctrine of God is thus the biblical depiction of God as a speaking subject whose breathed ("Spirited") voice is expressed supremely in the christological Word made flesh and secondarily in the canonical polyphony that in turn presents Jesus Christ.⁹⁷ God thus makes himself known as a triune communicative agent, and what he communicates is not merely information (truth) but energy (life) and purpose (the way) – in a word, himself: the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. The Bible is a product of God's triune communicative work and that not only transmits information but also, and more importantly, conveys life.

The Bible's depiction of God is more than a projection of the best human thoughts about the divine.⁹⁸ The Bible is the means whereby God projects his own voice onto the stage of world history. The central wager in the present project is that both the transcendence and immanence of God are best viewed in terms of communicative agency rather than motional causality: "Action is the self-revelation

95. William Abraham, *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 23.

96. Basil Mitchell, "Does Christianity Need a Revelation?" *Theology* 83 (1980), p. 108. Cf. Robert H. King: "Without an identifying word of some sort, it would not be meaningful to speak of God active in the world" (*The Meaning of God* [London: SCM Press, 1974], p. 107).

97. Remythologizing sides with Barth over Bultmann but also modifies Barth in important ways, in particular with regard to the status of Scripture as divine discourse. See Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* and my "Triune Discourse: Theological Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks," in David Lauber and Daniel Treier (eds.), *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), pp. 23–78.

98. Sallie McFague speaks of "remythologizing" the God-world relation, though what she does with the idea takes it in the opposite direction from what I am doing here (*Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987], p. xi). Instead of letting the biblical

of being; every being, insofar as it is in act, is self-communicative.”⁹⁹ Accordingly, the book relocates metaphysics from its traditional home in ancient Athens to Jerusalem in order to bring reflection about God’s being closer to the gospel and its theodramatic context.

Metaphysics, we may recall, is the systematic effort to articulate a conceptual vision of the whole that lays out “the great general laws and principles governing all beings and rendering them intelligible, including what it means to be real at all.”¹⁰⁰ The Christian vision of the whole as set forth in the biblical *mythos* is theodramatic, focusing on what God is doing in relation to the world as its creator and redeemer. A metaphysics of the Christian theodrama will therefore give pride of place to the speech and action of the divine *dramatis personae*. For the triune God in communicative action is the touchstone of reality according to this theodramatic vision of the whole. God is a “who” before he is a “what” – there is no prior category for God prior to his self-communication – but that does not mean that there is no place for metaphysics. Rather, metaphysics becomes the attempt to reflect on subjects, human and divine, “actively engaged, through dialogue, in the process of mutual self-communication.”¹⁰¹ The notion of dialogical interaction with God through language consequently assumes prime importance, though in a broader sense “communication” embraces “every interaction in which there is change and exchange.”¹⁰² For our purposes, communication takes place “about a matter, in a situation, between persons and by means of action.”¹⁰³

metaphors (and *mythos*) discipline her theology, she creates new metaphors more appropriate for our “ecological, nuclear age.” Her brand of remythologizing serves the ends of a Feuerbachian system of projection whereby one names God with metaphors that express contemporary social values.

99. Clarke, *Explorations in Metaphysics*, p. 37.

100. W. Norris Clarke, “Fifty Years of Metaphysical Reflection: The Universe as Journey,” in Gerald A. McCool (ed.), *The Universe as Journey: Conversations with W. Norris Clarke, S. J.* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988), p. 56.

101. Gerald A. McCool, “An Alert and Independent Thomist: William Norris Clarke, S. J.,” in *The Universe as Journey*, p. 22. See especially Clarke, “The ‘We Are’ of Interpersonal Dialogue as the Starting Point of Metaphysics,” in *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being – God – Person*, pp. 31–44. On one level, my account resembles that of W. Norris Clarke. However, my primary resources (e.g., Calvin, Bakhtin, and Ricoeur) are significantly different from his (e.g., Aquinas, Buber, and Whitehead).

102. Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 7.

103. Niels Thomassen, *Communicative Ethics in Theory and Practice* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. ix.

The shorthand term for the basic premise of this first theology – that God is the one who makes communicative initiatives – is *authorship*. To be precise, *triune* authorship will serve as our main model for understanding the God/world distinction and relation. “Authoring” covers what God does as creator, reconciler, redeemer, and perfecter, and so serves as a metaphor for the economic Trinity as well: *the Father “authors” in Christ through the Spirit*. Triune authorship, I submit, presents a fruitful way forward for a version of theism that preserves whatever is true and commendable in the classical, modified, and revised (e.g., panentheist) models while avoiding their defects.¹⁰⁴ Specifically, the rubric of authorship enables us better to conceive (1) the absolute distinction between Creator and creation; (2) the triune God whose being is a being-in-communicative action; and (3) God’s relation to the world, and to Scripture, in terms of an “economy of communication.”

With regard to this latter point, it is important to keep in mind that the substance (subject matter; *Sache*) and form of Scripture are equally theodramatic. The Bible both describes and participates in the economy of triune communicative action. The Bible is both a unified (one *mythos*) and many-voiced (i.e., polyphonic) discourse whose form is theologically significant. As opposed to monologic epics – comprehensive stories told by an omniscient narrator with a single set of concepts and categories – the Bible communicates its theodramatic story dialogically. To speak of *mythos* is to remember both that there is a unifying plot and that no one voice, perspective, or set of categories alone articulates it. Rather, the divine playwright employs a plurality of human voices to communicate what he was doing in Christ to reconcile the world to himself.¹⁰⁵

Ten theses on remythologizing

To de- or not to de-(mythologize): that is the methodological question. Demythologizing (which amounts to the process of de-*mythos*-izing Scripture) invariably falls prey to Feuerbach’s charge that theology is actually a system of human self-projection. The

104. The categories “modified” and “revised” theism come from John Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers. From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), p. 17.

105. See Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, pp. 227–8.

primary thrust of “remythologizing” is to be found just here, in its contrast to demythologizing. The latter errs with regard to both the form and content of the biblical *mythos*. As concerns form, Bultmann tends to translate narrative and other forms of biblical discourse into statements concerning existential self-understanding. With regard to content, he transforms statements about God’s saying and doing things into statements of human self-understanding. In overlooking the significance of God’s communicative action, then, he fails to do justice either to the subject matter or the forms of the biblical *mythos*. By contrast, remythologizing theology treats the biblical *mythos* as a medium of God’s self-presentation. What we have in Scripture are not cleverly devised myths (i.e., merely human projections) but divine discourse about divine deeds (i.e., divine “projections” into language and history that become the stuff of the biblical *mythos*). Remythologizing shines brightest precisely where Bultmann’s demythologizing falls short, namely, in taking seriously the biblical depictions of God’s speaking and the Scriptures as a species of divine dialogical action.

Herewith are some initial theses:

- (1) *Remythologizing is not a “fall back into myth” but a spring forward into metaphysics.* It seeks not to take every thought captive to ancient myth but to recover the biblical *mythos*, its theodramatic sense together with its theodramatic referent, and to provide a coherent and appropriate conceptual elaboration of the ontology of the divine *dramatis personae* in terms of communicative agency.¹⁰⁶ As such, it is, first, imaginative, “that is, bounded by the forms of the biblical stories; and second, metaphysical, that is, exalted by the splendor and truth of those stories.”¹⁰⁷

106. My use of the term “remythologizing” differs radically from that of Sallie McFague, who creates new mythologies drawn from contemporary science as a way of reconceiving the God-world relation. I call this “re-mythizing”: the construction of “cleverly devised myths” (2 Pet. 1:16) that project our own best thoughts onto God rather than focusing on what God has projected to us, namely, God’s self-communication in Christ and canon. Instead of elaborating the biblical metaphors and *mythos* that set forth the history of Jesus Christ as the climax of God’s self-presentation, she adopts an organic model that draws on experiences of motherhood and friendship in order to conceive of God as the “womb” of the world. See McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 81. Molnar’s verdict is apt: “All that is really known are our experiences, and our supposed knowledge of God is nothing more than projection” (*Divine Freedom*, p. 7).

107. Francesca Murphy, *Christ the Form of Beauty* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), p. 182.

- (2) *Remythologizing means recovering the “who” of biblical discourse.* The focus is on the divine protagonist whose words and deeds the Bible depicts. God renders his identity through his communicative action.¹⁰⁸ Remythologizing means thinking about the being and attributes of God on the basis of God’s own (theodramatic) system of projection, namely, his self-presentation in words, Word, and Spirit.
- (3) *Remythologizing means attending to the triune “who” of communicative action.* After sustained reflection on the biblical discourse, the church concluded that the speaking and acting divine subject of the theodrama is triune. Father, Son, and Spirit may be expressed in terms of tripersonal communication: voice (speaker; author); word/discourse (formed sound/content); breath (medium; channel; power).
- (4) *Remythologizing conceives the God–world relation in primarily communicative rather than causal terms.*¹⁰⁹ Better: it scrutinizes language about causality in order to bring out a communicative sense to which the church has not sufficiently attended. The category of communication applies analogically to God’s relation to the natural world but comes into its own in God’s relation to humanity whose paradigm is the God-man, Jesus Christ.¹¹⁰ It is in part for *communicative* freedom that Christ has set us free. Along these lines, we may recall the 1989 Manila Declaration of the World Association for Christian Communication which affirmed communication to be a human right and need every bit as fundamental as food and shelter.¹¹¹ All this to say that the category of communicative action, which stands at the heart of the biblical *mythos*, contributes to the development of a number of doctrines to the extent that it helps us conceive the nature of the God–world relation.

108. “Action is the very centre of communication. Action is what realizes it” (Thomassen, *Communicative Ethics*, p. 64).

109. It is important to think conjunctively rather than disjunctively at this point. As will become clear in subsequent chapters, the concern is not to do away with the concept of causality so much as to avoid de-personalizing it.

110. Trinitarian authorship also proves helpful in conceiving divine providence in terms of God’s sustaining, cooperating with, and governing the world through, the properly *communicative* means of Word and Spirit (see Part III below).

111. “Communication is God’s unique gift to humankind, through which individuals and societies can become more truly human. Genuine communication is as essential to the quality of life as food, shelter and health care” (cited in Michael Traber and Kaarle Nordenstreng, *Few Voices, Many Worlds: Towards a Media Reform Movement* [London: World Association for Christian Communication, 1992], p. 33).

- (5) *Remythologizing means rethinking metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics alike in theodramatic terms.* To remythologize theology is to reverse what Hans Frei called the “great reversal,” that fateful moment when theologians began to see their task as fitting the biblical story of God and the gospel into the world as understood by modern science and philosophy. Remythologizing proceeds in the opposite direction, taking what God was doing in and through Christ as the “metadrama” in whose light we come to understand everything else. To remythologize theology thus means according metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical primacy to the gospel *mythos*. The criterion of truth, goodness, and beauty alike is “theodramatic fittingness” to the dynamic form (i.e., the *mythos*) of Jesus Christ, the communicative activity of God made flesh.¹¹²
- (6) *Remythologizing means faith seeking, and demonstrating, theodramatic understanding through fitting participation in the triune communicative action.* “Fitting participation” is the operative concept: we come to know and love God when we participate fittingly in the communications of Word and Spirit.¹¹³ Theology is an aid to situating, and hence finding, oneself in the biblical *mythos*.
- (7) *Remythologizing means taking Christ, together with the Spirit-breathed canon that the living Word commissions, as the chief means of God’s self-presentation and communication.* “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1–2). The divine author pursues both direct and indirect communication via the many forms of biblical discourse and the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Remythologizing acknowledges the supreme authority of *mythos*, the overarching theodramatic plot of Scripture that depicts the whole and complete self-communicative action of the triune God as well as its diverse forms of discourse that not only report the action but also carry it forward.
- (8) *Remythologizing is a form of biblical reasoning, a matter of thinking about the subject matter along the various forms of biblical discourse that present it.*¹¹⁴ Remythologizing extends recent insights into the

112. On the notion of theodramatic fittingness, see my *Drama of Doctrine*, pp. 256–8.

113. This requires good judgment as much if not more than it does sound methodological procedures. See my “Once more into the Borderlands: The Way of Wisdom in Philosophy and Theology after the ‘Turn to Drama’,” in Vanhoozer and Martin Warner (eds.), *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology: Reason, Meaning, and Experience* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 31–54.

114. Cf. C. S. Lewis, “Meditations in a Toolshed,” in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 212–15. Note that

indispensable cognitive contribution of metaphor and narrative to all forms of biblical discourse: “there is *thought* in biblical writings. That means that thought is not exhausted by Greek philosophy.”¹¹⁵ Remythologizing involves relearning the modes of “biblical reasoning,” the manners of “biblical reality-depicting.”

- (9) *Remythologizing means attending to biblical polyphony and recognizing the dialogical nature of theodramatic testimony and theological truth.* It takes many voices, literary forms, and conceptual schemes fully to articulate the reality of God and the truth of the gospel. Remythologizing attends to the diverse points of view that together articulate the divine discourse. Specifically, this means being alert to at least three “world perspectives” (viz., historical; ontological; eschatological) and three “subject perspectives” (viz., the divine; the human; the powers and principalities). The result: a dialogical rather than monological systematics that does justice to each voice in Scripture.
- (10) *In sum, remythologizing is best defined in contrast to demythologizing as a type of first theology.* It is a proposal for integrating exegesis, biblical theology, and systematic theology by attending to God’s self-communication in the history and literature of Israel and the church and above all in the person and history of Jesus Christ. It is a way of viewing God, Scripture, and hermeneutics in terms of their mutual implications, all coordinated by the notion of communicative action: the triune God is the ultimate communicative agent of Scripture; Scripture is an element in the triune God’s communicative action; interpretation is the way the church demonstrates her understanding of what God is saying and doing in and through Scripture by right theodramatic participation.

The argument: a brief summary

Part I is exploratory and evaluative. It begins by sampling representative biblical texts and by highlighting key issues in interpreting

“biblical reasoning” has a different focus than “Scriptural reasoning.” The latter refers to the practice of Jews, Christians, and Muslims interpreting their respective Scriptures in conversation with one another. See David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold (eds.), *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).
 115. Ricoeur, “Comments on Werner Jeanrond’s ‘Hermeneutics and Revelation,’” in Maureen Junker-Kenny and Peter Kenny (eds.), *Memory, Narrativity, Self and the Challenge to Think God* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), p. 58.

statements about the voice and acts of God, particularly those that depict God's dialogical interaction with human persons (ch. 1). There follows a survey of the main ways in which Western theology has sought to conceptualize this biblical material, ranging from various forms of theism to more recent forms of panentheism (ch. 2). Part I concludes by identifying an emerging contemporary consensus – a “new orthodoxy,” as it were – under the rubric of “kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology” and proceeding to interrogate it from the vantage point of a more traditional theism (ch. 3).

Readers more interested in my constructive proposals than in my interpretation of the contemporary scene may wish to proceed directly to Part II, which proposes a “retooling” of classical theism that deploys communicative rather than causal categories to do the heavy conceptual lifting. It begins by returning to Barth's unfinished task of rethinking God's being on the basis of his revelation in “word” and “act” and sets forth the central notion of God's being-in-communicative-act (ch. 4). There follows an account of the communicative agency of the three divine persons. The triune God who is light, life, and love *ad intra* also communicates this light, life, and love *ad extra* to creation (ch. 5).

Part III examines key implications of this triune communicative theism. It sets forth a new model for conceiving the God-world relation – as “authored dialogue” – by appropriating Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky's polyphonic authorship (ch. 6). The notion of dialogical interaction leads to a reconsideration of how the paradigm of divine communicative action might advance age-old discussions concerning divine sovereignty, human freedom, evil, and prayer (ch. 7). This discussion generates the major question of the sub-plot that runs throughout this work: whether, and how, human interlocutors may affect God. Remythologizing is pushed to the limit in its quest to understand the biblical depiction of God's suffering, both as this is manifested in the cross (ch. 8) and as it appears as an implication of divine compassion in general (ch. 9). The goal is to set forth an understanding of the loving compassion of God in terms of communicative action oriented to communion.

Clearly, any work on the doctrine of God will be less than exhaustive, and this study is no exception. Like the celebrated Dickensian ghosts, I shall lead the reader past visions of Christian Past, Present, and (possibly) Future, often staying long enough only for brief comment. Those scenes are not the site of our central concern, which is

rather to redress the surprising gap between, on the one hand, recent philosophical accounts of divine being and action that pay only passing attention to speaking as a form of divine action, and theologies that enshrine the notion of the word of God without recourse to analyses of communicative action or authorship on the other.

The argument works a communicative variation on a theistic theme. The result, a Trinitarian dialogical theism, views God's being as a being-in-communicative-act, the God/world relation primarily in terms of a distinct communicative causality, Scripture as ingredient in an economy of triune discourse, and biblical interpretation in the church as a form of participation in God's communicative acts. Focusing on divine authorship – God's capacity to make communicative initiatives and to bring about communicative results – yields a fresh account of divine transcendence and immanence (i.e., God's distinction from and relation to the world). The present work sets forth the ontology of God implied by our focus on the rubric of divine authorship (i.e., communicative agency). Stated differently: the goal is to lay out the contours of a theodramatic metaphysics whose categories derive from descriptions of God's word-acts, and to bring this account into dialogue with other forms of theism.

A full-orbed doctrine of God is beyond the scope of the present project. There is, however, one particular theme – divine passibility – that serves as an apt touchstone for evaluating proposals in first theology, not least because there has been a sea change in contemporary theology on this point. If God is a communicative agent who interacts dialogically with the world, can the world act on God in return? Does God suffer change as a result of his dialogical interaction with the world, in which case is God also a communicative *patient*? Far from being an eccentric query, these questions strike at the heart of our understanding of God's being as interpersonal communicative agency or, in a word, love. Accordingly, we shall inquire whether, and how, divine compassion itself might also be a shape of divine communicative action. This distinctly dialogical variation on the theme of divine passibility is a recurring sub-plot. But it is with divine dialogue that we must begin.

PART I

“God” in Scripture and theology

Neither does the agent suffer
Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
In an eternal action, an eternal patience
To which all must consent that it may be willed
And which all must suffer that they may will it ...

–T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us ... no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God.

– A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*

Biblical representation (*Vorstellung*): divine communicative action and passion

Coping with God and his generosity is the central task of Christian faith.¹

If demythologizing had a patron saint, it might well be Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.² It was Hegel who perfected the translation of biblical representations into philosophical conceptualizations – *Vorstellung* into *Begriff*, *mythos* into *logos* – without remainder.³ In so doing, however, Hegel fails adequately to attend to the way in which biblical forms of discourse are themselves forms of reasoning, thus diluting the wine of theodrama into the water of abstract theoretical truth. By contrast, this chapter sets the stage for remythologizing by sampling a variety of biblical passages that (1) occur at key points in the theodrama that focus on God in communicative action and (2) represent a variety of types of divine-human dialogical interaction. These are the passages with which theologians must come to grips when formulating a doctrine of God in order to do justice to the biblical *mythos*, itself a means of God's self-presentation. The second part of the chapter culls out several key issues that emerge from a consideration of these passages and which have proved decisive in distinguishing one theism from another.

1. Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Praising and Knowing God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 7.

2. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A. V. Miller (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), esp. "The Revealed Religion," paragraphs 748–87. Feuerbach is well known for his inversion of Hegel: "If Hegel had argued that the cosmos is the 'objectification' of the Absolute Spirit, then Feuerbach and his friends could argue that God could be shown to be the objectification of human spirit" (Harvey, *Feuerbach*, p. 11; see also pp. 26–7).

3. See Stephen Crites, "The Gospel According to Hegel," *Journal of Religion* 46, no. 2 (1966), pp. 246–63.

A gallery of canonical exhibits

The purpose of this brief survey is to concentrate our attention on the biblical material upon which theology must reflect in order to formulate a theodramatic metaphysic: a categorial analysis of God's mighty (and occasionally meek) communicative acts. The key assumption is that theology must think God according to God's self-presentation, which effectively means attending to what God does, not least by means of speaking.

Genesis 1:1–3

In the beginning ... darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

As these opening verses show, the Bible begins with some demythologizing of its own. In ancient Near Eastern myths, the "waters" symbolize the chaos with which the deities had to struggle in order to bring order into the world. Some of these myths personified the chaotic waters as sea-monsters or dragons (Leviathan). It is therefore significant that the biblical *mythos* stipulates that "God created the great sea creatures" too (Gen. 1:21). As the darkness that was upon the face of the deep is no match for God's saying that brings forth light, so the waters that parted for Israel's delivery from Egypt pose no problem to God's word (Ex. 14:26–9). As God makes sport with the sea monster (Ps. 104:26), so the Word of God will defeat the dragon in the last battle (Rev. 19:11–20:10).⁴ Genesis 1 anticipates the end in the beginning, thereby providing a dramatic rendering of God's absolute sovereignty over all.

Nowhere in the seven-day creation scheme of Genesis does it explicitly say, however, that God created the waters.⁵ According to Jon Levenson, God *struggles* to create and to control chaos. Levenson detects signs elsewhere in the canon of Israel's belief that creation is not the display of God's absolute sovereignty but of God's victorious struggle (*Chaoskampf*) over the dark forces.⁶

4. Note, too, that in the new heaven and new earth "the sea was no more" (Rev. 21:1).

5. Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 5.

6. For example, Ps. 74:12–17 attests to God's combat with Leviathan that is followed by a triumphant act of world-ordering. See also Mary Wakeman, *God's*

In what sense, then, may God be said to be the Author of creation? On Levenson's view, the language of combat and divine victory that figures prominently in many biblical creation texts is not given its due unless the "darkness" or "nothingness" with which God fights is more than a non-entity.⁷ Apparently, even the author of creation can suffer writer's block. Levenson's reading challenges traditional theistic doctrines of creation, according to which God has merely to speak in order to create. There is theodrama, to be sure, but this is because (as he insists in his subtitle) creation is not a *fait accompli* so much as a "drama of divine omnipotence."⁸

The drama of creation is, on Levenson's reading, ongoing. Chaos continues to assault God's order; Israel (and now the church) continues to await the divine enthronement at the last day. Meanwhile, it is important to call upon the name of the Lord in order to rouse him to action, for Leviathans abound: "What this biblical theology of dramatic omnipotence shares with the theology of the limited God is a frank recognition of God's setbacks, in contrast to the classical theodicies with their exaggerated commitment to divine impassibility."⁹

This first case study encapsulates many of the core concerns of the present work: the nature of the Creator/creature distinction; the nature and appropriateness of the dramatic model for conceiving the ongoing God-world relation; the nature of the "powers" that oppose God and God's ability to deal with them; the ability of human communicative activity to affect God. These are the elements of the biblical *mythos* with which remythologizing theologians need to reckon.¹⁰

Genesis 18:22–33

Then [Abraham] said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." [The Lord] answered, "For the

Battle with the Monster (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1973) and John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

7. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. xxv.

8. *Ibid.*, p. xvi. What gave the ancient combat myth staying power in the Hebrew Bible was Israel's oppression "in a world supposedly governed by the God who loves them more than anything else" (p. 49).

9. *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

10. My own constructive alternative to Levenson's position is presented in Part III.

sake of ten I will not destroy it." And the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham ...

This dialogue is not the first such interchange between God and Abraham, but it is one of the most remarkable. Abraham intercedes on behalf of the city of Sodom, pleading with God not to destroy it if there are fifty righteous people within. When the Lord acquiesces, Abraham drives a harder bargain: forty-five; forty; thirty; twenty; ten. What funds Abraham's position is the conviction his rhetorical question presupposes: "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25). It is not the ethical question that concerns us here, however, but the account of the dialogue itself.¹¹

On the so-called "open theist" reading, God genuinely wants Abraham's input before he makes up his mind: "The divine decision was yet open, and God invited Abraham into the decision-making process."¹² Walter Brueggemann goes further, suggesting that Abraham offers himself "as a theological teacher to God so that God may think more clearly and responsibly about his own vocation ... Abraham disputes with God about the meaning of Godness."¹³ Such a reading prompts the question: whose voice, YHWH's or Abraham's, should be recognized as the authentic voice of God?

Others suggest that Genesis 18 depicts an instance of prophetic intercession. Abraham is made privy to the Lord's plans precisely so that he can intercede for Sodom (Gen. 18:17–19). Abraham is but the first of many such intercessors. Indeed, what was reserved for the prophets in the Old Testament gets democratized in the New Testament: through petitionary prayer any Christian believer, a true child of Abraham, may seek to persuade God. This relationship of divine-human reciprocity "is nowhere more evident than in the dialogue of prayer."¹⁴

For Levenson, this relative human autonomy explains "one of the most remarkable features of the Hebrew Bible, the possibility

11. The passage raises other issues for the theological interpretation of Scripture as well. See E. Ben Zvi, "The Dialogue Between Abraham and YHWH in Gen. 18:23–32: A Historical Analysis," *JSOT* 53 (1992), pp. 27–46.

12. John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 53. For a critique of open theism, see Steven C. Roy, *How Much Does God Foreknow? A Comprehensive Biblical Study* (Downers Grove, IL and Nottingham: IVP Academic and Apollos, 2006).

13. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), p. 176.

14. Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), p. 262.

that people can argue with God and win.”¹⁵ Walter Moberly makes a similar point, though less provocatively: “I suggest that Abraham in Genesis 18 be viewed as an exemplar of the person who in some way makes a difference to God in God’s relationship with the world.”¹⁶ A third scholarly witness concurs: “It is a consistent aspect of the biblical portrayal of the relationship between God and human beings that human response is crucial.”¹⁷ Yes, but crucial for what, and how? What difference do humans make for God?¹⁸

The theological challenge, for remythologizers and others, is to characterize the nature of the divine-human dialogue such as that represented in Genesis 18. Can humans bargain with God? Does God haggle? Haggling is a particular type of communicative interaction that has several distinguishable generic features.¹⁹ There is an asymmetry of knowledge between buyer and seller from which the seller hopes to profit; there is bidding on the price from each side. What is striking about the dialogue in Genesis 18, however, is that though the speakers alternate, the bids do not. Perhaps this is why Abraham breaks off his negotiations at the figure of ten; it takes two to haggle.

What is God doing in his speech and what is the significance of Abraham’s response? The words tell only half the story. Besides agreeing explicitly with Abraham’s conditions, God implicitly asserts his unconditional freedom from those same conditions; he is under no obligation to accede to Abraham’s request. He also tests Abraham’s resolve, and very possibly his theology as well. This latter point suggests another possibility for interpreting the dialogue that casts YHWH, not Abraham, as the teacher. For the dialogue itself is instructive. Abraham learns that YHWH is “far more merciful than

15. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 149.

16. R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 159.

17. Nathan MacDonald, “Listening to Abraham – Listening to YHWH: Divine Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18:16–33,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66 (2004), p. 41.

18. Both Levenson and Moberly note the contrasting perspectives on the divine-human relationship in Genesis 18 and 22. Abraham takes issue with God over the morality of what God proposes in the first passage, but submits without protest to God’s command to sacrifice his son in the second. Whereas Levenson speaks of two contrasting theological perspectives, Moberly appeals to canonical shaping in support of the ultimate finality of Genesis 22, not least in light of its connections to the story of Jesus (see Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, pp. 152–3; Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, pp. 157–60).

19. For the material in this paragraph, I am indebted to the discussion in MacDonald, “Listening to Abraham – Listening to YHWH,” esp. pp. 30–5.

Abraham imagines.”²⁰ Though the text positions God as the respondent to Abraham’s questions, YHWH is in fact the superior interlocutor. Indeed, the dialogue taken as a whole is a divine “educative” – an instance of God’s edifying discourse – thanks to which Abraham, and we, learn something of the expanse of God’s mercy.

Still, the fate of Sodom does seem to be genuinely at stake. Even if the dialogue is ultimately an example of divine pedagogy, must we rule out the possibility that human communicative acts make a difference to God? I think not. For what Abraham learns is “the kind of response expected from YHWH’s elect so that the divine blessing may be mediated to the nations.”²¹ Abraham does not argue and win, but argues and learns: about God and how to participate rightly in the drama of redemption. It is not that God needs humans to do what is right. It is rather that God has decided not to execute his plan apart from human participation in it, just as he has decided not to be God without humanity.²²

Exodus 3:13–15

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I am has sent me to you.’”

God’s speaking to Moses out of the burning bush contains its own form of demythologizing: in contrast to the pagan belief that to know and use the name of a deity is to be able to control him, the very content of YHWH’s name, problematic though its meaning is, forestalls any thought that the Lord can be manipulated by simply invoking his name.²³ Most commentators think the name “YHWH” (‘ehyeh ‘a’ser ‘ehyeh) is etymologically derived from the Hebrew verb *hayah* (“to be”) – though it is not entirely clear whether it should be translated “I am who I am,” “I am he who is,” “I will be what I will

20. MacDonald, “Listening to Abraham – Listening to YHWH,” p. 40. Cf. my discussion of “soteric” dialogues in the Conclusion.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

22. That God freely decides not to be God without his human covenant partner is the basic thrust of Barth, *Humanity of God*, pp. 37–65.

23. Brevard S. Childs comments that the formula God uses for his name “is paradoxically both an answer and a refusal of an answer” (*The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974], p. 76).

be,” or even “I/He causes to be.” Nevertheless, each of these possibilities conveys the distinct impression that God is very much his own person.²⁴

Possible derivations aside, “YHWH” is God’s proper (i.e., personal) name, in contrast to the many generic names for deity based on the Hebrew word *‘el*. Moses wants to know, on behalf of the people, more about God’s intention in his new relationship to them. The name YHWH demonstrates that God is a “who,” not simply a “what.”²⁵ The real meaning of the name – its denotation and associated connotations – is thus tied to what the agent so denominated has done, is doing, and will do.²⁶ YHWH is the covenant name of the redeemer who will soon act to deliver Israel from Egypt. The connotation of (necessary?) existence in the etymology of the name, however, proved too tempting for early church theologians to resist; consequently, the history of its interpretation is largely tied up with attempts to relate God’s special name to Greek philosophical ideas of Being.

The translations of the divine name into Greek and Latin gave rise to a tradition of philosophical speculation that Etienne Gilson has dubbed the “metaphysic of the Exodus.”²⁷ The Septuagint, for example, translates the divine name by *ego eimi ho ôn* (“I am the one who is”), a rendering that Ricoeur calls “a veritable event in thinking.”²⁸ The present tense of the Greek expresses a stable reality, whereas the Hebrew tense indicates an incomplete action. It fell to Philo explicitly to connect the God of Exodus to the Being of Greek philosophy by interpreting the divine name through the lens of Platonism and paraphrasing God as saying: “First say to them ‘I am the one who is,’ so that they may learn the difference between being

24. “I am who I am” is perhaps to be preferred, not least because of Jesus’ self-designation as “I am” (Jn. 8:58). Cf. Childs’s discussion of the New Testament context of Exodus 3 (*Exodus*, pp. 80–4).

25. Cf. Martin Buber’s claim that the syntax of Moses’ question suggests that he is primarily interested in the character of the person revealed by the name, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 39–55, esp. p. 48.

26. So Walter Eichrodt: “In Israel there was less interest in the etymological significance of the divine name than in the concrete content which it conveyed, and which was to be deduced from quite a different source, namely the demonstrations in history of the power of its owner” (*Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. I, tr. J. A. Baker [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961], p. 187).

27. Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1936), pp. 50–2.

28. Ricoeur, “From Interpretation to Translation,” in Paul Ricoeur and André Lacocque, *Thinking Biblically*, p. 331.

and non-being.”²⁹ God is less interested here in revealing his name than in saying he exists.

Christian interpreters followed suit, with most church fathers similarly working from the Septuagint translation. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, argues that “he who is” is the name not of the Father alone but of the common divine being shared by Father and Son.³⁰ For Augustine, the Latin translation of God’s name (*ego sum qui sum*) is closely related to the *esse* of metaphysics. Indeed, God is Being itself, and “I am that I am” expresses the eternal and immutable nature of the divine essence.³¹ When Thomas Aquinas interprets God’s proper name in ontological terms – “He who is ... being itself” – he is only following a well-established tradition.³² God’s self-designation to Moses is in Gilson’s view the cornerstone of the Christian philosophy that came to fruition in medieval scholasticism: “From this moment it is understood once and for all that the proper name of God is being and that ... this name denotes His very essence.”³³ Ricoeur agrees: “Without the book of Exodus, philosophers would have never reached the idea that Being is the proper name of God and that this name designates God’s very essence.”³⁴

The ontological “I am” does not exhaust all possible readings of God’s name. There is another tradition of interpretation that focuses more on the biblical *mythos* itself. Here, the spotlight shines on the narrative context, where God’s naming is part of a longer dialogue between God and Moses, which in turn is an episode in the story of Moses’ call and, beyond that, a key scene in the even larger story of God’s covenant with Abraham. This covenanted “I am” gives rise to a different “metaphysics of the Exodus” where what is at issue is not simply God’s existence but covenant faithfulness. Oliver Davies looks back to rabbinic readings in order to contest what he calls the “Athenian” reading of Exodus 3:14 (i.e., one which privileges

29. Philo, *Life of Moses*, I:74–5, cited in Joseph W. Trigg, “Selections from Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Moses*,” in Stephen E. Fowl (ed.), *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p.106.

30. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* I.8.

31. See Augustine *De Trinitate* V.2.3 and Lewis Ayres, “Being (*esse/essentia*),” in Allan D. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), p. 98.

32. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 13, 11. See also Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 80–2.

33. Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, p. 51.

34. Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, p. 353.

God's aseity) with an alternative ontology that views Being as "the medium of relation between self and other."³⁵ On this alternate reading, God's name is less a proposition than a promise: "I am as I shall show myself."³⁶ In this sense, the divine name is "performative."³⁷ God will "prove" – that is, correspond or measure up to – himself by the way he acts in the future.

This second line of interpretation counters the metaphysics of presence with what we might call a metaphysics of *presentation*.³⁸ The focus of the latter is on *doing*, not being – hence the centrality of *theodrama*. Drama involves self-presentations and embodied relationships. Here we may recall Maimonides' statement that God is not a being with an essence but an agent with a purpose: God is as God does.³⁹ God presents himself on his own terms; revelation is not a given of nature (ontology) but a gift of grace (eschatology). At the same time, the gift calls for thought, thus engendering what for lack of a better term we could call "theo-ontology" or the "theodramatic of the exodus."

Theater happens when someone offers something – word or deed – to another. Exodus 3 is a paradigmatic instance of such an offer, for what God reveals to Moses is something at once ultimate and intimate. As such, the account reminds us of the gift-like nature of all dramatic self-presentations. Note, too, that this more dramatic sense of self-presentation fits well with what many commentators think the divine name expresses: not God's pure or abstract being (e.g., absoluteness) but his active being or being-in-activity.⁴⁰

Does the divine name indicate something about God's eternal being or his promised activity in Israel's historical affairs? Is it a

35. Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. xxi.

36. Hartmut Gese, "Der Name Gottes," cited in Lacocque, *Thinking Biblically*, p. 312.

37. So Lacocque, *Thinking Biblically*, p. 325. Cf. Richard Kearney: "The formulation is performative rather than predicative, appellative rather than attributive, conative rather than constative" ("The God Who May Be," in John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.), *Questioning God* [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001, p. 162].

38. "Presentation" is "the umbrella term for theater, drama, and all other socioaesthetic practices through which human beings present themselves to one another" (William Doan and Terry Giles, *Prophets, Performance, and Power: Performance Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* [New York and London: T & T Clark International, 2005], p. 172).

39. Maimonides, *Guide* 1.54–8, as cited in Ricoeur and LaCocque, *Thinking Biblically*, p. 327.

40. So J. Philip Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1971), pp. 75–6. I shall return to the theme of God's being-in-act in ch. 4.

matter of ontological or eschatological presence, or both? Again, it is important to keep the broader theodramatic context in view. God associates his name with his relationship to the patriarchs and, just as importantly, with what he promises to do for Israel with regard to Egypt. God's self-naming thus "defines his being in terms of his redemptive work."⁴¹ Sure enough, in Israel's subsequent history God would be known as the one "who brought you [Israel] out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2).⁴² The ongoing drama of redemption that began with Abraham and will eventually culminate in the work of Christ and the Spirit "becomes the theater in which the name – and hence the character – of Yahweh unfolds."⁴³

Exodus 33:7–17

Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.

Here is a striking new feature of intercessory dialogue: God speaks to Moses "as a man speaks to his friend." The topic of the dialogue – God's presence – is also noteworthy, not least because it takes up the previously examined story of the divine name. Moses wants to be sure that God will not absent himself from his people in the aftermath of their violation of the newly given Law by worshipping the golden calf. What is lacking in Moses' logical consistency is made up for in emotional pitch.⁴⁴

Moses speaks to God but is unable to see God's face, only his back (Ex. 33:20–3). The Lord of the covenant is as ultimate as he is intimate. Yet Moses successfully dissuades YHWH from punishing his people, prompting YHWH to "repent of the evil" that he had purposed against Israel (Ex. 32:14). Moses makes bold demands of God,

41. Childs, *Exodus*, p. 87.

42. The exodus is used elsewhere in Scripture as the paradigm of God's saving act. Jesus even speaks of his death (his "departure from Jerusalem") as an *exodos* in Luke 9:31. The exodus theme is also linked with the new creation; there is a connection between God's dividing the primordial waters into heaven and earth (Gen. 1:6–7) and his dividing the waters of the Red Sea in order to liberate Israel from Pharaoh (Ex. 14:16). See Peter Enns, "Exodus/New Exodus," in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids and London: Baker and SPCK, 2005), pp. 216–18.

43. Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being*, p. 150.

44. So Childs, *Exodus*, p. 594.

also as a man might speak to his friend.⁴⁵ God is the superior partner in the relationship, but that need not disqualify it from being a species of friendship – a covenantal friendship “in which questioning, cajoling, and demanding, sometimes in anger, are part of a normal, corporate friendship with God that makes covenant faithfulness possible.”⁴⁶

As in Genesis 18, here too the human intercession is a vital part of the drama. Moses’ vocation as covenant mediator is “to plead God’s own mercy on the basis of his former promise.”⁴⁷ Moses thus becomes a participant in God’s plan of communicative action.⁴⁸ Yet the actual dialogue recorded in Exodus 33:11–20 complicates facile pictures of casual conversation among peers. Indeed, YHWH and Moses appear at points to be “speaking at cross purposes” for neither party engages what the other actually says, at least not immediately.⁴⁹ Indeed, far from being fully reciprocal, the pattern of the conversation proves to be *asymmetrical*: “initially Moses speaks much and YHWH little; but as the intercession continues, Moses speaks less and YHWH more, until finally YHWH alone speaks and Moses recedes from view.”⁵⁰ God accords Moses what we might term the “dignity of communicative interaction”⁵¹ while leaving no doubt as to who is really in charge.

Exodus 34:5–7

And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness . . .”

Historically, this passage has figured more prominently in Jewish than in Christian theological reflection. It occurs at a key stage in

45. “Self-assertion” is the third of four marks of Moses’ friendship with God according to Jacqueline E. Lapsley, “Friends with God? Moses and the Possibility of Covenantal Friendship,” *Interpretation* 58 (2004), pp. 117–29. The other three marks are habit, reciprocity, and emotion.

46. Lapsley, “Friends with God?” p. 129.

47. Childs, *Exodus*, p. 599.

48. I describe the “economy” of divine communicative action below.

49. William H. Irwin points out Moses’ selective and partial quoting of what YHWH says and YHWH’s “delayed response” in “The Course of the Dialogue between Moses and YHWH in Exodus 33:12–17,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59 (1997), pp. 629–36.

50. R. W. L. Moberly, “Exodus, Book of,” in Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, p. 214.

51. The implied contrast is with Pascal’s notion that God had given humanity the “dignity of causality.”

Israel's history with YHWH that proves to be a defining moment for both. YHWH's response to Israel's sin allows the relationship to continue and reveals more about God than was known before. The declaration that YHWH abounds in love and is filled with compassion is a prominent theological theme throughout the Old Testament.⁵² Other occurrences of this formula occur in Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 86:15, 103:8, 111:4, 116:5, 145:8; Isaiah 54:10; Jeremiah 32:18; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3; and 2 Chronicles 30:9. Brevard Childs observes that these texts, taken together, represent "an eloquent testimony to the centrality of this understanding of God's person."⁵³ Brueggemann's characterization – "a credo of adjectives" – is apt.⁵⁴

Now, to the adjectives themselves. The couplet "merciful/compassionate and gracious" (*rhḡm* and *hnn*) describes a monarchical prerogative – showing grace or favor – though some commentators associate the former with a mother's love as well.⁵⁵ The couplet "steadfast love and faithfulness" (*hesed* and *emeth*) connotes complete trustworthiness and reliability. All are relational adjectives and thus stand in sharp contrast to the "omni's" (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence) of classical theology.⁵⁶

Exodus 34:5–7 is not only a delayed response to Moses' request to see God's glory (Ex. 33:17ff.) but also another instance of God's self-naming. This particular formulation of God's name does not occur in the account of the Mosaic covenant's founding. God's name is now connected not to his bringing Israel out of Egypt, as in Exodus 3:14, but to the Lord's forgiveness of Israel and covenant renewal. It is as if the name in Exodus 34:6 gives material content to the more formal "I am who I am" of Exodus 3:14.⁵⁷ Israel now sees both *who* the Lord

52. There is debate over whose voice is speaking in this passage. I here follow the majority of translations in taking Yahweh as the speaker. For a fuller discussion of the issue, see R. W. L. Moberly, *At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 23–24* JSOT Supl. 22 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983).

53. Childs, *Exodus*, p. 612. See also P. R. House, "God's Character and the Wholeness of Scripture," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 23 (2005), pp. 4–17.

54. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 215.

55. Phyllis Trible notes that *rhḡm* can also mean "womb" (*God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978], pp. 31–71).

56. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 225.

57. Brueggemann notes that Israel's testimony to Yahweh involves not only verbs that refer to God's specific actions, but adjectives that speak to God's character (*Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 213).

is, and *what* he is like: the Lord is one who will remain faithful to Israel in spite of her unfaithfulness.⁵⁸

Brueggemann finds the second part of YHWH's response in Exodus 34:7 ("yet by no means clearing the guilty") to stand in tension, if not contradiction, with divine compassion; he consequently suggests that there is a tension or ambiguity in the divine life and character itself. God is, so to speak, bi-polar. The tension is between YHWH's mercy and justice: between his love and his righteousness, between his being *for Israel* and his being *for himself*.⁵⁹ On this reading, Israel never does fully resolve this tension between YHWH's sovereignty and his capacity for solidarity.⁶⁰ The New Testament, however, presents Jesus as the *hesed* and *emeth* of God made flesh, making Jesus God's "delayed response" as it were to the threat of incoherence in God's name.⁶¹

Job 38:1-4

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"

The book of Job raises what is perhaps the most difficult question for a theodramatic theology that lays stress on the works and words of God: why does God seem inactive and silent in the face of innocent suffering? The creature Job protests his innocence and calls his Creator to account for the "wrongful deprivation" of his goods

58. Brueggemann believes that the Psalmist uses the formula of Exodus 34:6 to rouse God to action by reminding him who he is (*Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 219). Childs's comment on a parallel formulation in Exodus 33:19 is worth pondering: "The name of God, which like his glory and his face are vehicles of his essential nature, is defined in terms of his compassionate acts of mercy" (*Exodus*, p. 596).

59. So Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 227, 268-72. Cf. the traditional Jewish contrast between the so-called Justice Attribute associated with the name *Elohim* and the Mercy Attribute associated with *Yahweh* (as noted in Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, p. 94).

60. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 271. He does posit a "proximate resolution" in the notion of *Yahweh's* righteousness (p. 283).

61. George R. Beasley-Murray notes that *charis* and *aletheia* ("grace and truth") function in John 1:14 as the equivalent in Greek of the Hebrew *hesed* and *emeth*. The gracious constancy of God is thus embodied in the person and work of Jesus Christ (*John, Word Biblical Commentary* [Dallas, TX: Word, 1987], p. 14).

and family, a provocation that elicits two of God's most memorable speeches.

Bishop Lowth, the great eighteenth-century scholar of Hebrew poetry, was reluctant to classify the book of Job as a drama for want of sufficient "action."⁶² More recently, however, philosophers of language have convincingly argued that speech is a form of action too – that we can do things with words.⁶³ While there is no evidence that the book of Job was ever meant to be performed, the bulk of the book consists of alternating poetic speeches, framed by a prose prologue and epilogue. The whole book resembles a courtroom drama in which the action consists largely of discourse: Job's initial complaint leads to cycles of speeches by his friends-cum-attorneys and ultimately God's own cross-examination of Job.⁶⁴

God never directly answers Job's "Why?" question; nor does the voice out of the whirlwind attempt to justify the divine morality in the light of unjust human suffering. Instead, God questions Job as to his whereabouts during the days of creation. God uses creation imagery to assure Job that even chaos – and Leviathan! (Job 41:1–34) – is ultimately under divine control: "This cross-examination is intended to dramatize before the court that a human being cannot assume the original right as creator of ownership over any part of the universe."⁶⁵ The net effect of this questioning is to help Job enlarge his understanding by enabling him to view the world, and his own suffering, from God's perspective (i.e., *sub specie theodramatis*).⁶⁶ At the beginning of YHWH's two speeches, Job lacked wisdom, but by the end he has gained it: he now knows how much he does not know.

Even though Job's specific questions are left unanswered, the more important unasked question – are you still my God and am I

62. For this and other arguments against viewing Job as some kind of play, see Francis I. Anderson, *Job, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1976), pp. 33–5.

63. See the seminal work by J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford University Press, 1962).

64. On the genres in Job, see John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), pp. 37–43.

65. Sylvia Huberman Scholnick, "Poetry in the Courtroom: Job 38–41," in Elaine R. Follis (ed.), *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry JSOT Supple. Series 40* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), p. 190.

66. According to Robert Alter, the creation poetry aids and abets Job's "imaginative realization of revelation" ("The Voice from the Whirlwind," *Commentary* [Jan. 1984], p. 34).

still your servant? – receives an unequivocal divine affirmative: “Job had demanded justice. What he was granted was communion.”⁶⁷ Over and above the content of the speeches is the fact that God has appeared: he is there, speaking comfort.

Hosea 11:8–9

How can I give you up, O Ephraim! ... My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy.

What to do with a wayward child or an unfaithful spouse that one has promised to love for better or for worse? This passage speaks of the “parental pathos in the heart of God.”⁶⁸ The tension ingredient in God’s proclamation of his name is here displayed “existentially” in a deeply moving divine soliloquy that depicts God, like Hamlet, in an “agony (turbulence) of indecision.”⁶⁹ The drama at this point is entirely internal, located in the pained voice of God as he appears to wrestle with himself: the “I am who I am” here asks “to be or not to be?” The tension is resolved, but not without cost: “It is pathos that preserves the covenant in the face of affronted sovereignty.”⁷⁰

John Calvin finds the humanlike qualities with which God is depicted in this passage disturbing: “As to this mode of speaking, it appears indeed at the first glance to be strange that God should make himself like mortals in changing his purposes and in exhibiting himself as wavering.”⁷¹ Calvin takes it for granted that God “is subject to no passions.”⁷² The expressions about God’s heart recoiling and compassion growing warm are “accommodations” to human limitations: “But

67. Samuel E. Balentine, “Job, Book of,” in Watson E. Mills (gen. ed.), *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), p. 456.

68. Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 120.

69. F. Andersen and D. Freedman, *Hosea, Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1980), as cited in Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, p. 54.

70. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 301. Cf. Roy Clements’s suggestion that the divine way out of this apparent dilemma is only fully realized in the cross of Christ (“The Love of God – A Sermon on Hosea 11,” in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001], pp. 211–13).

71. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. I: *Hosea*, tr. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d.), pp. 400–1.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 401.

when he says that his *heart was changed*, and that his *repentings were brought back again*, the same mode of speaking after the manner of men is adopted; for we know that these feelings belong not to God; he cannot be touched with repentance, and his heart cannot undergo changes.”⁷³ Calvin concludes that such language does not deceive, but teaches: “God does not in vain introduce himself as being uncertain; for we hence learn that he is not carried away too suddenly to inflict punishment, even when men in various ways provoke his vengeance.”⁷⁴

Charles Finney, operating with a different set of theological assumptions about the relation of God’s will to human freedom, takes a radically different approach. He first claims that God is a moral agent. He then maintains that God does in fact exercise all the affections and emotions that the Bible ascribes to him: “If this language does not mean what it says, what does it mean?”⁷⁵ Finney here raises a point of first theology, insisting that God, Scripture, and hermeneutics should be three threads in a single garment: “If God be not what the Bible represents him to be, then what is he?”⁷⁶ Finney’s rhetorical question is a good one, but it begs a prior question: what exactly does the Bible represent God *to be*?

Hosea’s own suffering is a human embodiment – a performance – of the divine grief.⁷⁷ The prophets function as theophanies of God’s own pathos. Our survey of Old Testament passages thus ends on as uncertain a note of divine sovereignty as it began: God apparently has not only to struggle against the forces of chaos, but also to suffer the rejection of his covenant people. What must God *be* in order truthfully to be represented as repenting, grieving, compassionate?

Hebrews 1:1–3

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son . . . through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 402.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 401.

75. Charles G. Finney, “Affections and Emotions of God,” Lecture XVIII from *The Oberlin Evangelist* (October 9, 1839).

76. Finney himself denies that God ever changes his mind. Rather, what God knows and feels he has always known and felt, because “all events have been eternally present to him.” With this qualification, it is clear that Finney remains within the parameters of classical theism, on which see ch. 2 below.

77. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, ch. 10.

This important passage takes the idea of mediators embodying the divine discourse to an unprecedented new level. The acknowledgement of a plurality of modes of divine discourse gives way to a resounding statement of the superiority of the Son. While other modes of divine communicative action were serviceable in the past, the Son is the supreme instance of God's self-communication. There is but one divine speaker, and the Son is the summit and summation of his speech.

The Son is superior to all other human (and angelic) mediators, the climax of God's creative and covenantal discourse. Hebrews knows nothing of a general diffused presence of God in nature. On the contrary, the Son's humanity is the ultimate form of God's self-presentation. Jesus is God's definitive word and in his person and history corresponds to what it is that makes God God. The Son is not only spoken by God but speaks as God: he is the Word made flesh, upholding creation with his own word.

The first word God spoke resulted in light (Gen. 1:3). There is some debate among commentators as to whether the Son passively reflects or actively radiates light.⁷⁸ In favor of the latter is a certain parallel with the Son as definitive word: both word and light are means of the Father's expressive presence. Just as the word expresses thought, so radiance expresses light. The Son is not simply the residue of God's self-communication but its substance, as Calvin's gloss on "the very stamp of his nature" makes clear: "The substance of the Father is in some way engraven on Christ."⁷⁹

John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

The Word that became flesh is also the Word that was with God "in the beginning," the Word that was God, and the word that was the

78. See R. McL. Wilson, *Hebrews* New Century Bible Commentary (Basingstoke, Hants and Grand Rapids, MI: Marshall Morgan & Scott and Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), p. 32.

79. Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), p. 8. See also John Webster, "One Who is Son: Theological Reflections on the Exordium to the Epistle to the Hebrews," in Richard Bauckham, Daniel R. Driver, Trevor A. Hart, and Nathan MacDonald (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009).

source of all the other “words of the Lord” that had previously come to the prophets. It is important to locate the enfleshment of God’s word in relation to these earlier revelatory acts. The incarnation of the word – the word embodied in a way that is “how much more” compared to the prophetic type examined above – is, as Hebrews 1:1–3 states, the culmination of God’s creative and redemptive activity alike.

We learn from John 1:1 that there was “word” (*logos*) apart from and before God’s self-presentation to humanity. Westcott is right to call this an “inner” word and to connect it to the immanent Trinity: “Thus the economic Trinity, the Trinity of revelation, is shown to answer to an essential Trinity.”⁸⁰ In short: God’s thought, when set forth historically in what we might term “corporeal discourse,” corresponds to his eternal wisdom. The thrust of this remarkable prologue is that the disciples beheld the glory of God – God in his full self-communicative presence – in the life of the word made flesh. Unlike Moses, the disciples beheld not merely the back side of a glory in part concealed by the walls of the tabernacle, but the glory of God in a human face. The “grace and truth” that characterize Jesus’ actions according to this passage recall the *hesed* and *emeth* of Exodus 34:6.⁸¹ The incarnate Word is more than revelatory, but not less. This Word both represents the Father and *does* things. This Word is God’s thought and God’s act: God in communicative action; God in creative and redemptive activity.⁸²

The author of the Fourth Gospel here “excorporates” the term *logos* from the Stoics: “John’s *Logos* does not show us a God who is serenely detached, but a God who is passionately involved.”⁸³ As we know from later in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus’ glory is most clearly seen in his being “lifted up” (Jn. 12:32–3) on the cross. Jesus is “full

80. Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), p. 5.

81. See the discussion in Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII, The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 2nd edn., 1981), p. 14. For the numerous parallels between John 1 and Exodus 33, see Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John, New International Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 103, n. 87.

82. Goethe depicts Faust trying out various translations for “In the beginning was the *logos*”: word, thought, power, and deed. To this list we add “communicative act.”

83. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 117. “Excorporation” is John Fiske’s term for the way in which people appropriate elements from their surrounding culture and accord them new meaning (*Understanding Popular Culture* [New York: Routledge, 1991], p. 15).

of grace and truth” because it is through his cross that God finally resolves the apparent tension between his justice and mercy.

The presence of God with his people stands at the heart of the covenant blessings: “I will be your God and you shall be my people” (Ex. 6:7; Jer. 11:4). In the incarnate word, God dwells (“tabernacles”; “pitches his tent”) among his people in a new and more marvelous way, granting a degree of intimacy that eventually renders the Temple obsolete (Jn. 2:19–22). By recalling Old Testament themes, the Fourth Gospel introduces Jesus as a startlingly new realization of God’s enduring covenant love. The incarnate Son is the embodied fullness of the communication, and the compassion, of God.⁸⁴ Jesus is, in a word, God’s friendship incarnate: “I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn. 15:15). The marks of friendship are “frank speech” (*parresia*) and laying down one’s life.⁸⁵ It is through such open speech and loving action that Jesus enables his friends to participate in the Father’s drama of redemption.

John 12:27–30

“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.”

Such is the centrality of Jesus as the word of God that there are very few instances of God speaking in the New Testament. The rare occasions on which the divine heavenly voice speaks directly are linked to the Father’s speaking to the Son at key junctures of his ministry, in particular at his baptism (Mk. 1:11) and then, somewhat later, at his transfiguration (Mk. 9:7). John 12:27–30 marks another significant occasion, namely, the end of Jesus’ public ministry and hence the beginning of passion week.

This parallel to the Synoptic account of the agony in Gethsemane (Mt. 26:36–46; Mk. 14:32–42; Lk. 22:39–46) highlights the Son’s

84. On Jesus as the compassion of God, see Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, p. 245.

85. Gail O’Day, “Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John,” *Interpretation* 58 (2004), pp. 144–57.

humanity: “The realization that his time has come overwhelms the Johannine Jesus.”⁸⁶ The soul is “the seat of the human affections.”⁸⁷ The verb *tarasso*, here in the passive voice, expresses acute emotional distress, though commentators disagree over whether the term also connotes terror or fear: “We could translate this, ‘I am troubled’; but when the emotions are involved, ‘soul’ helps to express the sentient aspects of man.”⁸⁸ He whom the Fourth Gospel calls *Logos* shows nothing like the impassiveness in face of imminent suffering with which the notion was associated in the Stoics: “Jesus cannot contemplate the cross as a docetic actor, steeped in dispassionate unconcern.”⁸⁹ In this regard, Jesus’ actual performance as the *Logos* made flesh who suffers under Pontius Pilate departs radically from his conceptual namesake.

The precise cause of the trouble is the proximity of the “hour,” the time of Jesus’ glorification by being “lifted up” on the cross. The hour has come for the key scene in the drama of redemption – the hero’s death – in which God’s name will be proclaimed, and glorified, once and for all: “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies ...” (Jn. 12:24). It is not the prospect of death that troubles Jesus, however, as much as its nature. For the “hour” is also a time of judgment: “Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out” (Jn. 12:31). The term for casting out (*ekballo*) is the same term the Synoptic Gospels use for casting out demons. But Jesus is dealing here with Satan himself, not his minions. The casting out is a dramatic way of signaling a cosmic battle. Jesus’ soul is troubled because he must confront the great sea monster on the prowl once again in the deep.⁹⁰

The action in this key theodramatic scene is largely dialogical: not “to be or not to be” but “to do or not to do” God’s will at the appointed dreaded “hour.”⁹¹ While commentators bicker over whether Jesus’

86. Stephen Voorwinde, *Jesus’ Emotions in the Fourth Gospel: Human or Divine?* (London and New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2005), p. 189.

87. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, p. 124.

88. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, p. 467.

89. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Downers Grove, IL and Leicester: InterVarsity Press and Apollos, 1991), p. 440.

90. See Judith L. Kovacs, “‘Now Shall the Ruler of This World be Driven Out’: Jesus’ Death as Cosmic Battle in John 12:20–36,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995), pp. 227–47.

91. Jo-Ann A. Brant likens Jesus’ speech to a theatrical device employed by Sophocles where a character puts questions to himself (*Dialogue and Drama: Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004], p. 59).

question ("What shall I say?") is hypothetical or actual, the point is that posing it allows Jesus to confirm his commitment to his mission: "Glorify thy name" is the functional equivalent of "Thy will be done."⁹²

Jesus' prayer is immediately answered by a voice from heaven. This is the first time in the Fourth Gospel that the Father speaks from heaven, for there is no voice from the sky in the Johannine account of Jesus' baptism or transfiguration.⁹³ Not everyone in the crowd heard the voice of God, however: "The apprehension of a divine voice depends upon man's capacity for hearing."⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the divine voice assures Jesus that the Father's name has been and will be glorified through the Son, referring to the signs (i.e., miracles) Jesus had performed and to his being "lifted up," first on the cross and then to heaven.

What we earlier termed the "metaphysics of the Exodus" – the idea that God is who he proves to be in his redeeming action (Ex. 3:14) – receives its definitive instantiation in the fate (*exodus* = "departure" [Lk. 9:31]) of Jesus Christ. This metaphysics has less to do with presence than with self-presentation. Jesus will indeed glorify the name of God made known to Moses – "merciful and gracious ... abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6) – but in a dramatic new way. As the creative and covenantal Word of God, Jesus is both the name and nature of God as dramatized in human speech, action, and passion: the *mythos* of God made flesh.

Mark 15:33–4, 37

There was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice ... "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" ... And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last.

What is arguably the climax of the theodrama is played out on a dimly set stage. Darkness at noon over the whole land is an interesting scenic detail. Some commentators hear an allusion to the

92. So Brown, *John*, p. 475.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 476. Brown follows Bultmann's suggestion that John incorporates some of the motifs associated with the transfiguration in the Synoptic Gospels (e.g., Jesus' prediction of his death; the emphasis on glory) into his own account.

94. Westcott, *St. John*, p. 127. As Barth has reminded us, however, the Spirit is the Lord of the hearing. The triune God is Lord of his communicative action.

promised land, and to the darkness over Egypt at the time of the Exodus (see Ex. 10:21ff.). Yet many translations include a marginal note that proposes “the whole earth” as an alternate reading, in which case there may be an allusion to the creation narrative when “darkness covered the face of the deep.” One way or another, the tension that has from a human perspective been building for centuries between divine justice and mercy – what C. H. Dodd called the “two-beat rhythm of history” – is about to be resolved.

Once again, it is the voice that carries the action. Jesus’ cry of dereliction, the only words that Mark and Matthew record as spoken from the cross, is a quotation from Psalm 22, spoken in Aramaic. In David’s mouth, this line from a lament psalm forms part of a plea for deliverance from mortal illness. Given who Jesus is, the line takes on additional significance: how can a loving Father abandon his Son? And if Jesus is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, how can God abandon God?⁹⁵ What we know is that despite Jesus’ loud cry, no voice from heaven this time comes in response. The judgment that engulfs the crucified one is, at least in part, silence: a “real absence” or total lack of the Father’s communicative presence.

A final detail in Jesus’ death scene deserves comment. Just before he “breathed his last” (*exepneusen*), he cried out in a “great voice” (*megalen phonen*). The content of Jesus’ utterance is not mentioned, but that is because it is beside the point: only one who still had life and energy could shout so vigorously. Jesus does not submit to death but *permits* it. Truly, no one takes Jesus’ life from him (Jn. 10:18). Perhaps this is why the centurion, when he saw “that he *thus* breathed his last,” confessed Jesus as the Son of God.

Romans 8:15–16

But you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

The “spirit” that Jesus expired on the cross and then breathed out on his disciples (Jn. 20:22) in turn speaks on behalf of the believers that he unites to Christ, indwells, and enlivens. It is this same Spirit who now prompts believers to cry out to God with the same

95. As we shall see in later chapters, Moltmann views this moment as an intolerable “stress point” in the triune life itself.

term that characterized Jesus' own prayers: "Abba" (cf. Gal. 4:6). *Abba* is the distinctive form of Jesus' address to God the Father. Hence to pray to the Father in the Son through the Spirit is to "share in [Jesus'] own relation to God."⁹⁶ What Paul describes in these verses is the economy of triune communicative interaction with those who are in Christ Jesus. To be "in Christ" is to be the vanguard of a new creation animated by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of realizing – communicating – the image of God in and to the world.⁹⁷ For the work of the Spirit is indeed to communicate, in such a way as to effect communion, symbolized here by adoption.

Those in Christ Jesus participate in his life by entering into the spirit of familial communication, sharing in the Son's great privilege of relating to God as Father each time they pray as he taught them: "Our Father ..." (Mt. 6:9). As to the nature of this participation "in Christ," it is noteworthy that Paul puts the emphasis on communicative action (i.e., the Spirit's witnessing [*summaturei*] with our spirit). What the Spirit ultimately communicates is not simply information but assurance of adoption and, beyond that, new life itself (Rom. 8:11). Life with God – the supreme covenant blessing – involves more than sharing in the triune communicative fellowship, but not less.

A miscellany of theological issues

The biblical passages we have considered come from different places in the canon and represent a variety of literary genres. Yet they share an interest in the modes of God's speech and dialogical interaction with humanity, raising issues in three distinct, though overlapping areas: (1) the nature of God; (2) the God/world relation; (3) the theological interpretation of the Bible. The present section aims primarily to identify rather than resolve these interconnected issues. The following chapter examines classical theism and its rivals, showing how the position one takes on these issues affects the way one interprets the biblical texts.

96. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), p. 461.

97. As the unique "natural" Son of God, Jesus is the paradigmatic image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3).

Active voice

"It begins with a Voice ..." ⁹⁸ Christian theology begins with God's speech-action and self-presentation. It is the Voice that creates, calls Abraham, speaks out of the burning bush and through the prophets, promising steadfast love and covenant loyalty to Moses and Israel. It is the Voice that speaks to Jesus Christ and comes to perfect self-expression in Jesus Christ. Everything therefore depends on how one interprets the biblical depictions of God doing things with words. Whether, and how, one conceives of God as a communicative agent is logically prior to wrestling with the implications of the divine-human dialogue for God's being. If world history is the stage for the drama of redemption, the overriding issue is whether God gets a speaking and acting part.

In grammar, the "active voice" indicates that the subject is the agent of the action that the verb expresses. William Alston argues that we may ascribe action to God in a literal or partially univocal manner, for there is a common core to the concepts of human and divine agency: "In both cases an action can be thought of as a change that is brought about by a volition or intention." ⁹⁹ While it is a contingent fact about human beings that we can only act or bring about changes in the world through some bodily movement, the latter is not a necessary part of the meaning of the concept. ¹⁰⁰ There is therefore no need to consider the movement of vocal chords a necessary component of speech. ¹⁰¹ God may be able to bring about sound, or communicative action, through other, secondary means. Perhaps it would be preferable, then, to predicate "being an agent" and "being a speaker" of God analogically. There is a true but only partial, appropriate but only approximate correspondence between divine and human speaking. ¹⁰² For the Creator/creature distinction

98. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilogue*, tr. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), p. 29.

99. Alston, "Divine and Human Action," in Thomas Morris (ed.), *Divine & Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 273. An event is the result of intentional action if (1) it would not have occurred if not for the action of an agent and (2) the agent had consciously chosen to pursue a particular purpose in acting (Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation* [Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992], p. 36).

100. Alston, "Divine and Human Action," p. 259.

101. Alston argues that bodily movement is only incidental to such basic actions as communicating ("Can We Speak Literally of God?", pp. 164-70).

102. So Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2002), p. 8.

(on which see below) implies a “still greater dissimilarity than similarity” between God and human beings.¹⁰³

Should not a being “than which nothing greater can be conceived” be able to communicate with the most sophisticated tool yet invented for the purpose, namely, words? It is striking how many philosophers of religion, and some theologians, are willing to countenance the notion of divine action, even revealing, but not divine speaking.¹⁰⁴ Those who are unwilling to accept the biblical accounts of God’s speaking face three serious problems. First, speaking is itself a form of action. If God can do anything, why can he not speak? The concept of a speech act is now well known: speakers not only produce sound or speech but, over and above these locutions, do other things as well such as promising, commanding, asserting, and so forth. These are actions or linguistic performances – the technical term is “illocution”: what is done *in* speaking – in their own right that call for description and understanding. Second, apart from such speech acts, it is often impossible to tell what an agent may be up to. Nothing disambiguates an agent’s behavior better than the agent’s discourse. Third, many of the things that Christians ascribe to God are inconceivable apart from concrete instances of divine discourse. Try, for example, to make a promise without using words or without performing some other communicative action. It is difficult to know how to count something in the world (e.g., a rainbow) as a divine promise unless it is accompanied by verbal communicative action that clarifies it.

As with promising, so with calling, commanding, and forgiving. Indeed, a disproportionate number of central Christian doctrines depend on the possibility of divine speech acts. *God cannot be how the Bible (or for that matter, the Christian tradition) says he is if he is not a speaker.* He can neither promise nor command nor forgive without signaling his intention to do so through communicative conventions (e.g., language) and communicative acts (i.e., discourse). Much therefore depends on whether theologians can ascribe communicative agency, and hence authorship, to God.

103. The phrase “still greater dissimilarity than similarity” reflects the language of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1251: “For no similarity can be asserted between creature and creator unless an even greater dissimilarity is included.”

104. It is possible to present divine revelation in terms of a causation or a manifestation model, neither of which appeals to the notion of God *saying* (George Mavrodes, *Revelation in Religious Belief* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988], pp. 36–7).

Anthropomorphism

“Voice” is but one of the many ways in which the Bible portrays God in human (*anthropos*) form (*morphe*). To be sure, not all biblical descriptions are anthropomorphic: the Psalmist says that God is a “rock” (Ps. 31:2–3). Most biblical images for God, however, derive from the human sphere. The Bible attributes a number of human body parts to God, including hands (1 Sam. 5:11), arms (Ps. 89:13), eyes (1 Pet. 3:12), ears, a mouth, a face, and so forth. It also ascribes to God typically human actions such as repenting (Gen. 6:6), remembering (Gen. 8:1), remembering no longer (Ps. 88:5), sleeping (Ps. 44:23), and, of course, speaking.¹⁰⁵

The church fathers were keen to distinguish the living God of Scripture from pagan deities that were simply magnified, larger-than-life versions of human men and women. There is more than a superficial resemblance between the urge to do away with anthropomorphism and the urge to demythologize.¹⁰⁶ Cultured Greeks like Plato and Aristotle had an aversion to anthropomorphism when myths attributed to gods things that were immoral and shameful, such as theft or adultery.¹⁰⁷ The church fathers had their own special device – the axiom of divine immutability – for deciding when to take anthropomorphisms literally and when to spiritualize them.

One common Jewish and early Christian strategy for dealing with anthropomorphic language was to distinguish God as depicted in the Bible from God as he actually is. The procedure assumes, of course, that one already knows what God is like (e.g., the most perfect being). Subsequent biblical interpreters too tended to downplay anthropomorphic language as a mere figure of speech or *façon de parler*. William Tyndale’s marginal note to 1 Samuel 15 is representative: “The repentance of God is . . . attributed to God after the manner of speech . . . for men cannot otherwise speak of God.”¹⁰⁸ To assume

105. For a more complete catalogue of biblical anthropomorphisms, see Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible*, ch. 10, pp. 172–82.

106. Anthony Thiselton remarks that the ancient Greek philosophers’ use of anthropomorphic language in religious myths “anticipated” Bultmann (*New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* [Grand Rapids, MI and Carlisle, U.K.: Zondervan and Paternoster, 1992], p. 161).

107. See Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Perennial Classics, HarperCollins, 2001), p. 344.

108. William Tyndale, *Tyndale Old Testament: Being the Pentateuch of 1530, Joshua to 2 Chronicles of 1537, and Jonah*, ed. David Daniell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 400.

that God repents as we repent – to predicate “repenting” of God literally and univocally – risks bringing God down to the level of the creature. On the other hand, to write the term off as a mere manner of speaking that does not truly apply fails to explain what is being said about God by means of these figures.

Some see anthropomorphism as prime evidence of what we earlier called “Feuerbachian slips.” We may recall that, for Feuerbach, religion is a system of projection whereby some aspect or image of the human self is magnified and then externalized onto a god-figure. He thought this tendency most pronounced in Christianity, not least because of the centrality of the Incarnation. The idea of the God-man is the externalization and absolutization of the human attributes of reason, will, and feeling. Interestingly, Feuerbach believed there to be “an inherent contradiction between the metaphysical predicates of God derived from reason and the anthropomorphic predicates derived from feeling.”¹⁰⁹

Those who equate anthropomorphism with the system of Feuerbachian projection overlook the extent to which the former is a legitimate cognitive instrument.¹¹⁰ Anthropomorphism is a species of the genus metaphor, a particular instance of describing one thing in terms of language more directly appropriate for another. Metaphors work by an “absurd predication” (e.g., man is a wolf; God is a rock) that enables us to describe the less familiar in terms of the more familiar, and to make real discoveries in the process, all the while maintaining a dynamic tension between “is” and “is not.”¹¹¹ Even those who appreciate the cognitive value of biblical metaphors, however, differ over the criteria for discerning what truly, though partially, describes God’s reality (“is”) and what belongs to the merely figurative dross (“is not”).

Fretheim distinguishes three types of “anthropomorphic metaphors”: (1) human forms and functions (e.g., mouth, speaking); (2) human mental, volitional, and emotional states (e.g., reasoning, willing,

109. Harvey, *Feuerbach*, p. 45.

110. Stewart Guthrie defines religion as the attribution of humanlike qualities to the non-human world and claims that, as such, it represents the perfectly normal attempt to bring order and meaning to human experience. The language of faith is a mode of cognizing the world. See the discussion in Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 281–2.

111. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, tr. R. Czerny, K. McLaughlin, and J. Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 7.

loving); (3) human roles and activities (e.g., father, parenting).¹¹² In addition to these, we might add (4) human relationships and (5) personhood itself, a notion that often gets overlooked in discussions of anthropomorphism.¹¹³ This latter slight is regrettable, for to the extent that one's view of anthropomorphism prevents one from seeing God as in some real sense a personal speech agent, it eviscerates what the Bible is primarily about: the words and deeds of the triune God.

Anthropomorphic language confronts theologians with the task of distinguishing the "is" from the "is not." For example, those who wish to consider descriptions of God's bodily parts as mere projection – and hence as ripe fodder for demythologization – must explain why they are unwilling to apply the same approach to passages concerning God's love and mercy. Conversely, those who insist on taking God's relenting or responding at face value must also deal with images that emphasize God's authority and control or that describe an act of divine violence that injures, kills, or otherwise "violates the personhood" of another.¹¹⁴ Fretheim poses the problem: "with remarkable frequency, God is the subject of violent verbs."¹¹⁵

Either we dismiss anthropomorphic language as a mere figure of speech or we ask what it is saying about God. The challenge is to know when, and how far, to take anthropomorphisms, like other metaphors, as "reality depicting."¹¹⁶ What exactly are these anthropomorphic metaphors saying if they are not to be taken literally? It is helpful to keep in mind that metaphors assert both "is" and "is not," and thus may be indicative not of sheer contradiction (A is non-A) but partial description (A is like this in some respects and not like

112. Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, p. 6.

113. Caird lists five metaphors that most commonly express God's relationship with his people: king/subject, judge/litigant, husband/wife, father/child, master/servant (*Language and Imagery of the Bible*, p. 177).

114. Robert McAfee Brown, *Religion and Violence*, 2nd edn. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), p. 7.

115. Terence Fretheim, "God and Violence in the Old Testament," *Word & World* 24 (2004), p. 21. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan obligingly supplies the number of instances of divine violence: about 1,000 (cited in Fretheim, "God and Violence in the Old Testament," p. 21 n.9). Cf. Hans Boersma: "God's hospitality requires violence, just as his love necessitates wrath ... Hospitality bespeaks the very essence of God, while violence is merely one of the ways to safeguard or ensure the future of his hospitality when dealing with the humps and bumps of our lives" (*Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004], p. 49).

116. See Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

this in other respects). Moreover, as metaphors can be reality depicting, so too can *mythos*. The depictions of God's words and acts in the various literary forms in the Bible correspond to the reality of God, though not always in the same way.¹¹⁷ To paraphrase Aristotle: there are many ways that God, like being, may be said.

To acknowledge the legitimacy of anthropomorphic language is to accord a certain poetic license to the biblical authors.¹¹⁸ They may say true things about God – things that are often *partially* literal (remember the “is”) – without necessarily having to be *strictly* literal.¹¹⁹ Anthropomorphism involves an “imaginative literalism,” as it were, that seeks to “adhere tenaciously to the *sensus literalis* of scripture in the faith that only here, in these metaphoric images, does one encounter the Living God.”¹²⁰ Hence the real issue that biblical anthropomorphism raises “is understanding them, not approving or disapproving them.”¹²¹

Interpreting anthropomorphic metaphor requires a combination of the creative and the critical minds. The former refers to the effort “to hold up insights against words,” the latter to the effort “to hold up words against conceptions.”¹²² Heschel makes a similarly helpful distinction between anthropomorphic conceptions and anthropomorphic expressions, noting that the use of the latter does not necessarily prove belief in the former: “The prophets had to use anthropomorphic language in order to convey His nonanthropomorphic Being.”¹²³ Childs's comment on Moses' interaction with God in his capacity as covenant mediator in Genesis 18 is telling: “The Old Testament rather runs the risk of humanizing God through its extreme anthropomorphism – God changes his mind – than undercut the absolute seriousness with which God takes the intercession of his servant.”¹²⁴

117. As there is no one way to map the geographical world – think, for instance, of the difference between a road atlas and a treasure map, not to mention the difference between maps that employ diverse scales, legends, and keys – so too biblical discourse represents the words and acts of God in different ways in order to highlight various aspects of the divine reality.

118. So Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 57.

119. See further the discussion of analogical discourse in ch. 4 below.

120. Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 206.

121. J. C. L. Gibson, *Language and Imagery in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), p. 26.

122. Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 350.

123. *Ibid.*, p. 354.

124. Childs, *Exodus*, p. 599.

Alan Torrance recalls how Athanasius distinguished between the anthropomorphic projections of human concepts onto the divine (*mythologeîn*) and God-talk proper (*theologeîn*) wherein human terms transcend their ordinary context of use in order to refer veridically to God.¹²⁵ Athanasius' *theologeîn* is first cousin to "remythologizing": each involves the taking up of the varieties of biblical discourse into the economy of what is ultimately divine communicative action.¹²⁶ Simply put: *theologeîn* or remythologizing has primary reference to how God co-opts human language and concepts, both in short spurts (e.g., metaphors) and longer stretches of discourse (e.g., narrative; apocalyptic). There is a difference between defining theological categories on the basis of human experience (anthropomorphic projection from below) and defining them on the basis of the role God accords them in service of his word.

While the very term anthropomorphism might seem to acknowledge a system of projection from humans to God, it is important to keep in mind that, according to the Scriptures, God created humanity in *his* image (*contra* Feuerbach).¹²⁷ The human capacities to know, will, and love are themselves theomorphic: "God's unconditional concern for justice is not an anthropomorphism. Rather, man's concern for justice is a theomorphism."¹²⁸ Moreover, the history of anthropomorphism takes a dramatic new turn in the New Testament with the apostolic claim that Jesus is "the exact representation of God's being" (Heb. 1:3), a claim that echoes Jesus' own: "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9; cf. 2 Cor. 4:4). The question,

125. Alan Torrance, "Analogy," in Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, p. 40.

126. Cf. Heschel, who denies that anthropomorphisms are a compromise, a way "of accommodating higher meanings to the lower level of human understanding. They are rather the accommodation of words to higher meanings. Words of psychological denotations are endowed with a theological connotation" (*Prophets*, p. 348).

127. Human forms are analogues to the form of God, not vice versa. It is therefore fallacious "to regard ourselves as the fundamental reference point for ascriptions concerning God" (A. B. Caneday, "Veiled Glory? God's Self-Revelation in Human Likeness: A Biblical Theology of God's Anthropomorphic Self-Disclosure," in John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth (eds.), *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003], p. 153).

128. Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 349. Cf. Barth's idea that the "personalizing" of the Word of God is no anthropomorphism either, for "The doubtful thing is not whether God is person, but whether we are".

then, is who is in the image or *morphe* of whom?¹²⁹ The incarnation both ratifies and corrects all previous anthropomorphism: the New Testament does not speak of God as though he were *like* a human being but rather as a human being: Jesus Christ.¹³⁰

The Creator-creature distinction

If anthropomorphism highlights God's likeness to human beings, the doctrine of creation acts as an important counterbalance, safeguarding God's transcendence.¹³¹ The Bible clearly assumes a Creator-creature distinction in its identity description: the God who brings Israel out of Egypt is the same God who created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1). Indeed, Genesis 14:19 anticipates the opening words of the Apostles' Creed: "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth." The New Testament affirms the creation of the heavens and the earth by the word of God in speaking of God as he "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). To confess God as Creator is to acknowledge him as Author of all that is.

How one draws the Creator-creature distinction will affect one's conception of divine authorship and have a knock-on effect everywhere else in theology as well. Recall Levenson's view of creation as involving God's struggle to fashion order out of something disordered (or at least recalcitrant to ordering) *already there*, rather than as God's making *ex nihilo* ("from nothing"). He interprets "from nothing" as referring not to a lack of being but to a real, active chaotic force (e.g., injustice, disease, death).¹³² This gives rise to a very different notion of divine authorship of the world than the one that will be developed in Part III.

On a more traditional view, creation is "that act of God through which, by his sovereign will, he brought the entire world out of

129. We speak because God first spoke us. It is precisely as beings in the image of God that humans are communicative agents. See also Caneday, "Veiled Glory?" pp. 158–61.

130. So Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, tr. Darrell L. Guder (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983), p. 297.

131. Barth's "rediscovery" of God's deity in his *The Epistle to the Romans* (6th edn., tr. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933) is arguably a recovery of this distinction in all its implications.

132. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. xxi.

nonbeing into a being that is distinct from his own being.”¹³³ The world neither emanates from nor grows into God, and God neither emanates from nor grows into the world. On the contrary, God calls the world into being; the world is not self-authoring. The expression *ex nihilo* thus affirms the aseity, and sovereignty, of God: “The teaching of creation out of nothing maintains that there is a distinction in essence between God and the world.”¹³⁴ Authors (creators) have a different ontological status than characters (creatures) in their work.

Creation *ex nihilo* goes some way towards explaining the second commandment’s absolute prohibition against the making of any graven image (Ex. 20:4). No earthly form can rightly represent God. Calvin sees the universe as a theater of God’s glory, but refuses to confuse creation with the Creator.¹³⁵ No earthly form is entirely worthy of God; hence every form falls short of God’s “worth-ship”. The Creator-creature distinction thus works hand in hand with anthropomorphism to enable talk about God while simultaneously guarding against idolatrous blasphemy.¹³⁶

Every doctrine of God that wishes to avoid idolatry must confront the challenge of saying how God differs from the world. What is ultimately at stake is not only God’s otherness but freedom: is God defined or determined by something besides himself? The Bible depicts God as Creator – author of all that is. This authorial qualifier affects everything else the Bible says about God.

The covenant Lord/servant relation

Creation – even *ex nihilo* – ultimately indicates not only a God-world distinction but a peculiar form of relation. Everything in Christian theology depends, however, on elaborating the nature of this relation rightly, according to the Scriptures. The God whose speech brings everything into existence continues to speak into human existence. To take the divine speech agency seriously is to go

133. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. II: *God and Creation* (tr. John Vriend [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004], p. 416).

134. *Ibid.*, p. 419.

135. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.1.5.

136. Another way of demarcating the creator from creation is in terms of holiness: “God is holy because he is ‘other’ than humankind” (Charles Scobie, *The Ways of our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003], p. 120).

beyond a mere deism that limits God's relation with the world to an initial act of creation only. As our canonical exhibit has made clear, the Creator God does not remain aloof but freely engages human creatures in conversation. Indeed, space and time become media for interpersonal communicative relation. This interaction does not erase the Creator-creature distinction: God is neither contained by nor dispersed through space-time. On the contrary, God's immensity is "at one and the same time the 'otherness' of God over against created space and the divine capacity to stand in relation to space and to act in space without compromise to the divine freedom."¹³⁷

The rubric of divine authorship seeks to maintain both God's distinction from and relation to the world. God is distinct from the world as its Author, the one who originated the world by speaking it into being. Yet God continues to speak via the prophets, Jesus Christ, and on occasion *viva voce*. Divine authorship, either of speech or writing, means that God is the "Lord of the wording of His Word."¹³⁸

Remythologizing theology is a matter of viewing history as a drama in which both God and human beings have speaking parts. The complication in the biblical *mythos* concerns the nature of humanity's participation in the theodrama. According to Augustine and other Christian theologians influenced by Neoplatonism, simply to "be" a creature – to exist – is already to participate in some sense in God, who is "Being" itself.¹³⁹

More recently, Radical Orthodox theologians have returned to Plato's mines with the express purpose of "recovering and extending a fully Christianised ontology."¹⁴⁰ In contrast to the modern secularist "kerygma" that proclaims the radical autonomy of the world, Radical Orthodoxy takes as its central theological framework the Neoplatonic notion of ontological participation.¹⁴¹ On this view, every aspect of created reality ontologically participates in the

137. John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005), p. 96.

138. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, p. 139.

139. See Lewis Ayres, "Being (*esse/essentia*)," in Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine Through the Ages*, pp. 96–8. Augustine acknowledges a higher form of participation in God's being that involves grace, obedience, and growing in wisdom.

140. John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, "Introduction," in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 2.

141. *Ibid.*, p. 3. See also the essays by James K. A. Smith, Michael S. Horton, and Justin S. Holcomb, in James K. A. Smith and James H. Olthius (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

Creator – the Being from which all goodness flows – and is thus saturated with the divine presence.¹⁴²

The biblical depiction of God's dealings with Israel suggests a different relationality based on the community's *doing*, not *being*. God's presence or absence is first and foremost a matter of covenant blessing and cursing – of ethics and eschatology rather than metaphysics and ontology.¹⁴³ The covenantal shape of the biblical *mythos* is arguably the architectonic scheme of the entire theodrama, not simply one biblical or theological theme among others. The God/world distinction and relation alike is ultimately a matter of covenantal drama. For in making a covenant, one who is distinct initiates a relation: the stranger makes himself known, goes out of his way.¹⁴⁴ In the Ancient Near East covenants were between lords (suzerains) and servants (vassals), yet the Bible works an interesting variation on the covenant theme when YHWH makes unconditional promises. The Creator who is other than the world enters into interpersonal relation with it by covenanting with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David.

Barth's account of human participation in God lies somewhere between the ontological account of Radical Orthodoxy and the covenantal account of Reformed theology. For Barth, Jesus Christ is the Word of God because in Christ God reveals himself to be the one who determines himself to be for and with humanity. In the event of Jesus Christ, we see who God is (his self-determination as covenant Lord) and who we are (his determination of humanity as covenant servant). Creation is the external stage for the divine-human (i.e., Christological) covenantal action; conversely, covenant is the inner meaning of creation. Accordingly, it is the name "Jesus Christ," not "Being," that stands for "the event in which man, and in man the whole of creation, is awakened and called and enabled to participate in the being of God."¹⁴⁵ Human creatures participate in God's

142. For a detailed account and critique of Radical Orthodoxy's relation to Platonism, see James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 74–8, 103–7, 197–204.

143. Justin S. Holcomb suggests that *being* replaces crucifixion and resurrection in Radical Orthodoxy ("Being Bound to God: Participation and Covenant Revisited," in Smith and Olthius [eds.], *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, p. 251).

144. See Michael S. Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 11.

145. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 670.

being-in-act because God has determined what humanity is in the history of Jesus Christ, the God-man. The outstanding question for Barth, however, is whether human creatures participate in the covenant simply by virtue of being human.¹⁴⁶ The biblical witness indicates that human creatures participate in God through faith, not DNA.

The challenge that arises from our canonical exhibits is to specify the *sort* of participation in God and union with Christ there depicted. The biblical covenant is “a relationship under sanctions,”¹⁴⁷ “a union based on an oath,”¹⁴⁸ an I-Thou relationship characterized by legal and relational categories alike.¹⁴⁹ At the heart of the covenant lies the promise of covenant blessing, a special union between God and humanity: “I will be your God and you will be my people” (Lev. 26:12). The prophets and apostles compare this special relation to a marriage union (Hos. 1:2; Eph. 5:32). The plot of the divine drama of Scripture turns on divine covenant initiatives and human covenantal responses, and the conflict arises from complications that impede the consummation of the promised union.

Remythologizing theology means elaborating the Creator-creature relation in terms of not general but special ontology, namely, in terms of God’s covenantal self-determinations and the subsequent missions of the Son and Spirit. The burden of Part III will be to formulate a notion of *theodramatic* participation that does justice to ontology and covenant alike under the more-encompassing rubric of Christology.

The economic and immanent Trinity

“Can God appear in the play?”¹⁵⁰ The focus on God’s speech and action in the dramatic *mythos* of redemption as the clue to the

146. The only history that has a bearing on ontology for Barth is that of Jesus Christ: “At the heart of Barth’s theology and ethics there is ... a radical circumscription and specification of human self-determination as secondary and derivative in relation to the divine determination” (Paul T. Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth’s Ethical Vision* [London and New York: T & T Clark, 2007], p. 109).

147. Meredith Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), p. 16.

148. Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant, Analecta Biblica* 21 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute Press, 1963), p. 96.

149. Horton, *Lord and Servant*, p. ix.

150. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. III, p. 506.

meaning or *logos* of God's being raises a central issue in doctrinal development: how to move from narrative to ontological descriptions of God, from descriptions of the way God appears in time to the way God is in eternity, from the divine phenomena to the noumena.

There has been a tendency in Western theology to discuss the divine attributes – the properties or qualities that make God God – in abstraction from the biblical stories about God's speaking and acting in the history of Israel and Jesus Christ: "there seems to be little clarity about how the two are related: how the identity of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relates to the kind of things that have been, and are, said of the kind of being that God is."¹⁵¹ Is the Trinity merely one of many identifying descriptions that Christian monotheists use for God, or is it the framework for understanding all other divine predications?

Those who begin with God's self-presentation in the history of Jesus Christ are Trinitarian from the start. God's saving activity in history, centered on the work of Son and Spirit (the "economic" Trinity), is the basis for knowing the way the eternal God is in himself (the "immanent" Trinity). In response to neo-scholastics who treat the divine unity and nature of God apart from his divine threeness and saving activity, Karl Rahner set forth the following principle: "The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity."¹⁵² "Rahner's Rule"¹⁵³ stipulates that theology must attend to the way God has shown himself to be Father, Son, and Spirit in relation to the world rather than bow the knee to some prior understanding of what the eternal one must be like.

Contemporary theologians divide over the exegesis of Rahner's Rule. More conservative or "right-wing" interpretations view the Rule as making a methodological point: "the order of theological knowledge must adhere to the historical form of God's self-communication in Christ and the Spirit."¹⁵⁴ At the limit, this reading

151. Colin Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), p. 1.

152. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), p. 21.

153. Ted Peters and Roger Olson give one another credit for being the first to coin the term (Fred Sanders, "Entangled in the Trinity: Economic and Immanent Trinity in Recent Theology," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40 [2001], p. 182, n.4).

154. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "Introduction," in Rahner, *The Trinity*, p. xv. Fred Sanders recasts the distinction in terms of "restricters" and "radicalizers" (*The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner's Rule and the Theological Interpretation*

forbids any reflection on God beyond the economy as impious speculation, a prohibition that effectively short-circuits the attempt to think through the metaphysical implications of the theodrama. By contrast, more radical or “left-wing” interpretations view the Rule as making an ontological point: “the relationality God experiences through Christ’s saving relationship to the world is constitutive of Trinitarian relations proper. God’s relations *ad extra* become God’s relations *ad intra*.”¹⁵⁵

It is relatively unproblematic to read the Rule as an axiom of theological epistemology. The same cannot be said for the left-wing or ontological reading, however. For the second half of the rule “risks making God’s actions *ad extra* a necessity of his being rather than a freely willed decision.”¹⁵⁶ The danger in letting the economy define God’s eternal being is that of reducing God to the history of his relation to the world, and hence of making God’s being and identity dependent on world history. The world here becomes an integral part of God’s life, resulting in a loss of the divine freedom, transcendence, and the Creator/creation distinction itself.¹⁵⁷

We can further pinpoint what is at stake by paraphrasing Rahner’s Rule: “The storied God is the substantial God and vice versa.” At issue are both the meaning of the term “is” and the “vice versa.” What type of identity does the Rule posit between the biblical narrative of God and God’s eternal being? To take the “is” as indicating exact sameness (*idem* identity) while affirming the vice versa is to collapse the divine being into the world process. Many theologians are unwilling to go that far. For example, Walter Kasper views the “is” as sacramental: “in the economic self-communication the intra-Trinitarian self-communication is present in the world in a new way, namely, under the veil of historical words, signs, and actions, and ultimately in the figure of the man Jesus of Nazareth.”¹⁵⁸ Balthasar

of Scripture, Issues in Systematic Theology, vol. XII [New York and Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005], chs. 4 and 5). See also Randal Rauser, “Rahner’s Rule? An Emperor without Clothes?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005), pp. 81–94, who distinguishes “strict realist,” “loose realist,” and “anti-realist” readings of the Rule.

155. Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in the Divine Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 96.

156. John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 27.

157. The major burden of Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* is to point out precisely this danger.

158. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, tr. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Crossroad, 2000), p. 276.

suggests that the economic is the “interpretation” of the immanent Trinity.¹⁵⁹ Fred Sanders affirms the “is” as iconic in order to do justice to the notion that Christ is the image of the invisible God: “the economic Trinity is the image of the immanent Trinity.”¹⁶⁰ Finally, Robert Jenson and Wolfhart Pannenberg hold to an eschatological “is”: the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, but only at the *end* of the latter’s history.¹⁶¹

The nature of the economic-immanent distinction poses two fundamental challenges to a Christian doctrine of God: (1) how to conceive the relation between the work of the triune God in the history of redemption (God-for-us) and God’s eternal relations (God-in-himself); (2) how to specify the meaning of the divine attributes traditionally associated with the nature of God in the light of the actual work of the Father, Son, and Spirit in the history of salvation. How theologians articulate the doctrine of God thus depends on their exegesis of Rahner’s Rule: What does the Rule really mean? Does it define God’s life in such a way that it necessarily includes the world? Does it help or hinder the passage from *mythos* (biblical narrative; theodrama) to *logos* (concept; metaphysics)?

Time and eternity

To inquire into the relation between what God does in history and the way God is in himself is to broach one of the most intractable questions in the history of philosophy: the nature of time and eternity. It is easy to pose the question: how can an “eternal” God truly be said to be involved in personal dialogue with such as us, creatures for whom being-in-time is one of the most fundamental features of the human condition? To start from the biblical *mythos* leads to a slightly different question: *given* God’s dialogical interaction with human persons as set forth in the Bible, what must we conclude about God and time?

Nothing speeds an interpretation of biblical *mythos* towards metaphysics faster than the mention of God acting in time. For in order to account for God’s dialogical interaction with human beings, we

159. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. III, p. 508.

160. Sanders, “Entangled in the Trinity,” p. 181. See also Sanders, *The Image of the Immanent Trinity*.

161. See the discussion in Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, pp. 68–81, 149–55.

need to explain how God can act in time, and that requires us to say something about the nature of time itself.¹⁶² In addition to the biblical descriptions of God's speaking to human beings "in" time are affirmations of God's sovereignty "over" time: "You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment ... But you are the same, and your years will have no end" (Heb. 1:10–12). To confess God's "eternality" is to state "that God exists without beginning or end."¹⁶³ At issue, however, is whether God's eternity implies "atemporality" (timeless existence) or "everlastingness" (unending existence). The problem of time and eternity thus raises three issues: the meaning of time, the meaning of eternity, and the nature of their interrelation.

For much of the discussion, there has been a consensus that time involves change: a succession of events that occur "before" and "after." If beings did not change, there would be no basis for distinguishing "earlier than" from "later than." These changes can be measured by other motions, such as that of the sun through the sky. It is from such motions that we derive our concepts of "days," "hours," and "minutes." According to Aristotle, "Time is the numbering of motions according to before and after."¹⁶⁴ On the other hand, we need more than bodily motion in order to answer the question, "What time is it?" We perceive time only because our consciousness is able to hold together the successive phases of a change, keeping in mind the succession of before to after. According to Augustine, real time is present time, the time in which the soul remembers the past (the before) and anticipates the future (the after).¹⁶⁵

Finite creatures are able to remember and anticipate only so much. Moreover, time for them implies not only change but loss. That which grows old invariably suffers decay. Augustine therefore concludes that because God is transcendent and incapable of imperfection, God must also be without time. In the words of Boethius,

162. Cf. the remark by Gregory E. Ganssle: "No theory of God's relation to time will be adequate if it does not allow for genuine interaction between God and his people" ("Introduction," in Ganssle (ed.), *God & Time: Four Views* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001], p. 11).

163. William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), p. 14.

164. *Physics*, Bk. IV.

165. See Augustine, *Confessions*, and John M. Quinn, "Time," in Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine through the Ages*, pp. 832–8.

eternity is “the whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of boundless life.”¹⁶⁶ We human beings, by contrast, do not possess the whole of our lives all at once; on the contrary, we have “lost” our earlier time and do not know how much more time we still have.

Traditionally, Christian theologians understood God’s eternity in terms of timelessness in order (1) to preserve the absolute distinction between Creator and creation, and (2) to safeguard the being of God as perfect, self-sufficient, and unchangeable. On this view, God fully possesses his own life apart from creation; time was created along with the rest of the universe. That which exists in time suffers change and therefore loss. An atemporal or “time-free”¹⁶⁷ God, by contrast, suffers no loss because all times are immediately present to him: “an eternal God is copresent with the whole of time by His life’s being stretched out alongside it.”¹⁶⁸

An increasing number of philosophers, biblical scholars, and theologians believe that we should take the biblical texts more literally, at least on this question. Hence a personal God who truly responds to what humans say and do cannot be timeless but must somehow experience temporal succession.¹⁶⁹ Oscar Cullmann dismisses timelessness as a Greek philosophical idea and argues that the biblical understanding of eternity is that of endless time.¹⁷⁰ Eternity means not that God is free from duration (temporal succession) but that God has *everlasting* duration.¹⁷¹

There are several issues with which an account of God’s dialogical interaction with human beings must come to grips if it is to speak well of God’s being in relation to time. Among the most important for the atemporalist: if God is timeless, how can he respond to questions or prayers in time? From a timeless God’s point of view, time is tenseless, so when God surveys the whole of time, there is no one moment that is “now” because they all are. In order for God to respond appropriately, however, he must know what is happening

166. *Consolation of Philosophy* V,6.

167. So Paul Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 36.

168. Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 117.

169. So Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken, 1970).

170. Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time*, 3rd edn. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964).

171. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” in Steven M. Cahn and David Shatz (eds.), *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 77–98.

“now” and that means that he must be in time.¹⁷² Among the most pressing for the temporalist: if God is everlasting but in time, how can he know, and guarantee, the future?¹⁷³ It would seem that the best God could do under temporal conditions is to declare his own future intentions, extrapolate from the present, and then anticipate what everyone else will do: “A temporal God cannot know the future if it contains choices which are free in the libertarian sense.”¹⁷⁴ The Bible, however, depicts God both as genuinely responding to persons and as knowing and guaranteeing the future, but defines neither time nor eternity, thus leaving the matter underdetermined.

From the standpoint of remythologizing theology, the danger in affirming God’s timelessness is that it tends to dedramatize or demythosize the biblical accounts of God’s dialogical action. Wolterstorff may exaggerate but he nevertheless has a point: “An eternalist God is necessarily a deistlike God.”¹⁷⁵ Conversely, the danger in saying that God has a history, albeit an everlasting one, is that it tends to remythize the biblical accounts of God’s dialogical action. To view God as developing in and through time, in real temporal relation to creatures, is to turn God into a mythological entity. If we put God and creatures onto the same ontological plane and thus into a competitive relationship, then we are no longer worshipping the one true God. Moreover, if God and creatures were already on the same plane of being, then there would be no need for the Incarnation.¹⁷⁶

In subsequent chapters I shall suggest a possible way forward through the conceptual thickets pertaining to the acts of the eternal God in human time. The way will not be easy; the territory is now

172. The temporalist objects that a timeless God could never know “now” as a privileged temporal location, namely, the present (see Ganssle, “Introduction,” pp. 14–15). Katherin A. Rogers argues that this objection arises from those who suffer from NOPS: “‘the-Now-is-Ontologically-Privileged’ Syndrome” (*Perfect Being Theology* [Edinburgh University Press, 2000], p. 61).

173. John Feinberg is a rare temporalist who believes that God is in time but knows the future because he decrees it (*No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001], p. 435).

174. Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* p. 57.

175. Wolterstorff, “Response to Paul Helm,” in Ganssle (ed.), *God & Time*, p. 76. Elsewhere he says: “Responsiveness would require tensed knowledge on God’s part; and were God to have tensed knowledge of what happens in human affairs, God would perforce have a history” (“Unqualified Divine Temporality,” in Ganssle [ed.], *God & Time*, p. 206).

176. See D. Stephen Long, “Aquinas on God’s Sovereignty,” in Long and George Kalantzis (eds.), *The Sovereignty of God Debate* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), pp. 53–4, 58.

largely occupied by analytic philosophers who do not suffer theological fools lightly. Nevertheless, we shall propose a way of thinking about time that starts not from bodies in motion (change) but persons in dialogue (communication). We do this in order to think about eternity not only in terms of the one God but also of the three persons. To anticipate: the doctrine of the Trinity contains precious resources for rethinking the nature of time and eternity.¹⁷⁷

Passive voice

All of the above concerns converge in the question: does the God of Israel and Jesus Christ “suffer” the actions of his creatures? Given the theodramatic framework of the biblical *mythos*, I am especially interested in the communicative variation on this question: does God *suffer* the rejection or distortion of his word – the word that orders creation, administers the covenant; the Word that becomes flesh and dwells among us – and, if so, what are the implications, if any, for the life or being of God?

In the context of grammar, “voice” indicates the relation of a subject to the action of a verb.¹⁷⁸ The passive voice indicates that the subject is not an agent but a patient or recipient who undergoes the action of the verb (e.g., *the ball* [subject] *was thrown* [action]). In the context of theology, the question is whether God’s voice is ever passive, whether another ever acts upon the speaking and acting God. Is the God who hears prayers active or passive (or both)?¹⁷⁹ To affirm divine passibility is to acknowledge that God “suffers” change or action. For example, the Bible appears to ascribe certain emotions to God – “movements” in God’s affective life provoked by something outside God. *Can* something outside God “move” or act upon God so as to produce an emotion?¹⁸⁰ In particular, *can human dialogical action move God*? Call it the question of divine communicative passibility.¹⁸¹

177. Both Barth and Balthasar developed Trinitarian accounts of time and eternity. Most philosophers – atemporalists and temporalists alike – routinely ignore them, however.

178. I explore the theological possibilities of the “middle voice” in ch. 8.

179. The silence that accompanies hearing is typically assumed to be passive, the quiet counterpart of active speaking. For a creative theological reworking of these categories, especially as they pertain to God’s listening, see Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*.

180. See Robert M. Gordon, “The Passivity of Emotions,” *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986), pp. 371–92. We shall investigate the nature of emotions further in ch. 8.

181. Note that “passive” and “passion” are etymologically linked, both deriving from the Latin *passio* or *pati* (“suffer”).

Classical theologians tend to assume that God's being is what it is apart from his speech and action in redemptive history. Many contemporary theologians disagree and attempt "to reconceive the relationship between time and eternity so that what happens in the history of salvation becomes constitutive of the content of eternal life."¹⁸² Indeed, an increasing number of theologians find themselves unable to make sense of the economy without positing divine passibility: the mission of the Son in time not only corresponds to but *affects* the eternal God. The issue of divine suffering has therefore become inescapable for all who take seriously the God-world relation that unfolds in the triune economy.

The formal and material problems at the heart of remythologizing converge in the notion of anthropopathism (*anthropos* "human" + *pathos* "feeling"): the ascription of feelings or emotions, a mixture of activity and passivity, to God. The issue, of first theological importance, concerns how to interpret such language when predicated of God. Does God truly grieve, for example, as Genesis 6:6 suggests and, if so, what does such grieving imply with regard to God's being? The weight of traditional theological wisdom is on the side of the nay-sayers: nothing that happens in the world, say classical theists like Aquinas, can affect God's emotional life, much less his knowledge and will. Yet many contemporary theologians believe that the biblical depiction of a loving and responsive God demands a relational metaphysic that can do justice to God's emotional motility. Wolterstorff proffers the following hermeneutical principle: "an implication of accepting Scripture as canonical is that one affirm, as literally true, Scripture's representation of God unless, on some point, one has good reason not to do so."¹⁸³

There is a sense in which the prophet, as the bearer and embodiment of the word of God, is also the bearer and embodiment of the divine suffering entailed by that word's rejection: "They [Jeremiah's Confessions] are not to be understood as laments representative of the people, but rather, reflective of the life of God."¹⁸⁴ In the light of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, then, perhaps the Bible's depiction

182. Peters, *God as Trinity*, p. 102.

183. Wolterstorff, "Could God Not Sorrow If We Do?" in Christopher I. Wilkins (ed.), *The Papers of the Henry Luce III Fellows in Theology*, vol. V (Pittsburgh: The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, 2002), p. 140.

184. Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, p. 157.

of divine suffering is less a matter of anthropopathic projection than it is a case of human suffering being theopathic (God-like).¹⁸⁵

"In being given to the world, the word is made vulnerable."¹⁸⁶ If the prophets' suffering on behalf of the word may be God-like, how much more the suffering of the Son of God who embodies (because he is) the word of God. B. B. Warfield's essay "On the emotional life of our Lord" gives a comprehensive survey that decisively refutes the tendency among some in the early church to attribute the Stoics' ethical ideal of *apatheia* to Jesus as the perfect man.¹⁸⁷ Warfield discovers that the emotion most frequently attributed to the one whose whole life is a divine mission of mercy is compassion – the very notion that figures so prominently, we may recall, in God's proclamation of his divine name (Ex. 34:6).¹⁸⁸ This is entirely fitting, for there is a sense in which the cross of Christ – the act/passion of the one full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14) – is similarly a proclamation of this same divine name. What remains to be thought, however, is how, and to what the extent, the suffering of Jesus, including his emotional life, is equally an event in the life of God.¹⁸⁹

Scripture, hermeneutics, and metaphysics

The seven issues we have here examined are all aspects of a single question: how do we move from the biblical depiction of God's speech action (and apparent passion) to theo-ontology? The task of theology is to understand who God is, what God is like, and how God relates to the world. In the light of the biblical passages we have considered, the task extends to determining whether what happens in the world affects God and, if so, in what manner. Hence the challenge is to understand not only the metaphysics of the Exodus in which God names himself but also the metaphysics of the gospel of Jesus Christ – the *mythos* of the crucified God.¹⁹⁰

185. So Graham Cole, "The Living God: Anthropomorphic or Anthropathic?" *The Reformed Theological Review* 59 (2000), p. 24.

186. Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, p. 99.

187. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 93–145.

188. See Warfield, "Emotional Life of our Lord," p. 96 for a list of references to "compassion" in the Synoptic Gospels.

189. See Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions in the Fourth Gospel*.

190. "Metaphysics of the gospel" indicates those categories needed conceptually to elaborate the biblical account of what the Father does in Christ

As our canonical exhibits make clear, “He who is” is none other than “He who speaks”: “in fact it is the Bible, not supposedly substantialist metaphysics, that encourages the thought of God as an entity.”¹⁹¹ The challenge in formulating doctrine is precisely that of negotiating the shift from biblical narrative to theological concept: “This involves a shift in modes of discourse and patterns of thinking, in that two quite different genres – narrative and metaphysics – require correlation.”¹⁹² This correlation takes place in the present work thanks to a theodramatic metaphysics in which the categories employed describe a level of reality (i.e., what God was doing in Christ) without which our descriptions of the world would be too thin (i.e., reductionist).

In fact, the move to metaphysics involves more than two discourses: the biblical theodrama employs many literary forms, not just narrative, in order to render the divine “desire to be” with and for others.¹⁹³ A theodramatic metaphysics begins with the speech and acts of God, inquiring what God must *be* to have *said* and *done that*. Remythologizing theology is thus “an effort of revisionary metaphysics, aimed at allowing one to say things about God that scripture seems to require but that inherited metaphysics inhibits.”¹⁹⁴ It is a matter of putting to work what for lack of a better term we could call the biblical-ontological imagination. A theodramatic metaphysics provides categories for understanding what God has said and done to renew all things in Christ through the Spirit.¹⁹⁵

Fully to articulate the metaphysics of the gospel requires that one attend to Christ and canon alike inasmuch as both are means of God’s voiced self-presentation. The human statements about God’s

through the Spirit. Such a metaphysics gives an account not simply of “what is,” then, but of “what happened” and “who did” it.

191. Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*, p. 77.

192. Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* (Vancouver and Grand Rapids, MI: Regent College Publishing and Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. 62.

193. Ricoeur describes human existence in terms of the “desire to be” and the “effort to exist,” arguing that we attain human ontology only by interpreting concrete signs of this desire and effort (*Conflict of Interpretations*, pp. 451–2). My project applies the same strategy to the *divine* ontology by viewing God’s “desire to be” and “will to speak” (i.e., the desire to make himself known) as the stuff of theodrama.

194. Robert Jenson, “Response to Watson and Hunsinger,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002), p. 230.

195. See my “Once More into the Borderlands,” pp. 49–51.

action and passion are not accommodations of a rich reality to poor words, but rather an elevation of human words to divine discourse: these human texts have been set apart as sanctified servants of divine revelation.¹⁹⁶ The voices of the prophets and the apostles in and through whom the divine playwright speaks co-opt everyday language for holy service.

Readers, too, have a role to play. To interpret the Bible theologically is to recognize “that Scripture is both from and about an extratextual and extracomunal reality known as God.”¹⁹⁷ It is the divine voice speaking not from the whirlwind but from Scripture that beckons – nay, summons – the reader to understand, and respond: “the interpretation of Scripture is the means by which human discourse *participates in* the ‘strange new world of the Bible’ – the divine discourse of the blessed Trinity.”¹⁹⁸ We therefore come to know God and ourselves simultaneously as we respond to God’s word; divine and human communicative agents are both related and distinct. To reason biblically about this relation and distinction is the sum of theological wisdom.

196. See John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 26.

197. MacDonald, “Listening to Abraham – Listening to YHWH,” p. 26 n.4.

198. Justin Holcomb, “Being Bound to God,” in *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, p. 262.

Theological conceptualization (*Begriff*): varieties of theism and panentheism

At the heart of Christian theology, as an intellectual activity, there lies the continual interpenetration of dramatic and ontological.
(Donald MacKinnon)¹

The development of doctrine proceeds in fits and starts. One key period, according to Martin Hengel, was the twenty years after the death of Jesus: “More happened (in christology) in this period of less than two decades than in the whole of the next seven centuries.”² Others refer to this fecund theological period as the “Big Bang” of Christian origins.³ If there is a Big Bang in theology proper, however, it may pertain less to the origins of the doctrine than to the bombshell dropped in the early twentieth century by Karl Barth on the playground of the modern theologians. For better or for worse, the shaking of the foundations of classical theism has provoked a massive rethinking and has led many to propose new, revolutionary paradigms for the doctrine of God.

This chapter explores some of the major theological approaches for dealing with the canonical texts and thematic issues examined in the previous chapter. Where the previous chapter focused on biblical representations, the spotlight here is on theological conceptualization. More specifically, the focus is on theological *isms*: comprehensive systems of ideas – conceptual schemes – that account for the way in which God both relates to and differs from everything else. Accordingly, we shall examine the pedigree of classical theism, the

1. *Themes in Theology*, p. 234.

2. Martin Hengel, *Son of God* (London and Philadelphia: SCM and Fortress Press, 1976), p. 2.

3. John Bowden, *Jesus: the Unanswered Questions* (London: SCM, 1988), p. 204.

rise of analytic theism in early modern philosophy, the return of Trinitarian theology in the twentieth century, and the more recent turn to relationality, especially as evidenced in panentheism. Of particular interest is the way in which each of these conceptual schemes construe (1) God's personhood, (2) God's love, and (3) God's suffering.

On the very idea of a "classical" theism

Those who narrate the story of God clearly wield no little authority. The same can be said for those who narrate the story of the *doctrine* of God. It is important to tell the truth in both cases. While history without story is only names and dates, stories of the development of doctrine without the backing of history are only propaganda. Most narrators agree that the so-called "classic" doctrine of God formulated in the early centuries and refined over the successive centuries by theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin borrowed from Greco-Roman philosophy to interpret the biblical text. According to one increasingly popular contemporary version of this story, the result of such biblical-philosophical alchemy was not a golden but a "leaden" synthesis that has weighed down the discipline and must now be undone. We shall examine this view as well as that of an articulate minority that dissents from this view and proposes a countervailing account.

A pagan inheritance?

Theism is the "belief in one God, the Creator, who is infinite, self-existent, incorporeal, eternal, immutable, impassible, simple, perfect, omniscient and omnipotent."⁴ While these divine properties may be implicit in the Bible, their explicit clarification and amplification required the conceptual midwifery of Greek philosophy. Before any New Testament book was written, Philo, a Jew residing in Alexandria, already sought to commend his faith to its cultured Hellenistic despisers by demonstrating its compatibility with Plato: "Diasporate Jews found it necessary to reformulate the Scriptural view of God philosophically in order first to make it fully

4. H. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), p. 1.

intelligible to themselves, secondly to communicate with Gentiles, and thirdly to show that the idea of God contained in their Scriptures was fully compatible with the best non-Jewish thought of their day. For the same reasons Christian theologians from the beginning of the second century wrote of God in terms designed to satisfy the demands of philosophical speculation.”⁵ Western Christian theism therefore has “a double origin: the Bible and Greek philosophy”⁶ – hence the qualifying adjective “classical.”

Whereas some church fathers regarded Greek philosophy as a “divine preparation” for the gospel,⁷ some contemporary theologians offer a more negative appraisal, arguing that the categories of Greek ontology corrupted the narrative purity of the gospel and its rendering of a God who relates to the world in love. On this telling, the growth of the doctrine of God out of the soil of classical culture means that the biblical picture “was given its main conceptual shape with the help first of Platonism and Stoicism and then, during the High Middle Ages, of Aristotelianism.”⁸ Classical theism, in the eyes of its critics, is therefore something of a theological Trojan horse to which the only appropriate response is: “Fear the Greeks even when they bring gifts.”⁹

This fear of things Greek was already at work in Harnack’s history of dogma but today borders on the paranoid and near hysterical, leading one observer of the contemporary theological scene to speak of “The Theory of Theology’s Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy.”¹⁰ It is commonplace to read accounts of the patristic doctrine of God that judge it unbiblical in light of its indebtedness to Greek philosophical categories.¹¹ John Yoder, for example, speaks of the “fall of the

5. *Ibid.* For a defense of Philo as a theological interpreter of the Bible, see Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 42–6.

6. *Ibid.*

7. See Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 30.

8. Langdon Gilkey, “God,” in Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (eds.), *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, rev. and enlarged edn. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 93.

9. Virgil, *Aeneid*, ii.48.

10. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, pp. 1–5. See also Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 7 vols. (New York: Dover, 1961), 1:227–8, and Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 2nd edn. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

11. Gerald Bray observes that the catch-all phrase “Greek philosophy” obscures rather than clarifies the true nature of the diverse philosophical currents that influenced Christian theologians in ancient and medieval times (Gerald L. Bray, “Has the Christian Doctrine of God Been Corrupted by Greek

church” and the “betrayal of the Jewishness of the early church.”¹² Juan Luis Segundo dismisses the supreme being of classical theism as an absolute abstraction that bears little resemblance to the biblical story of a God deeply engaged in the history of his people.¹³ Elizabeth Johnson, alluding to the influence of Aristotle’s notion of the Unmoved Mover, claims that “Classical theism models its notion of divine being on the root metaphor of motion adapted primarily from the nonpersonal, physical world.”¹⁴ Even some North American evangelicals, hitherto solidly in the classical theist camp, lament that the Greek metaphysical focus “has made it difficult to speak meaningfully of a God who covenants with humanity ... and actively loves all creation.”¹⁵

Nowhere do contemporary theologians detect Greek fingerprints on theology more than in the concept of divine impassibility. This doctrine constitutes irrefutable evidence, they maintain, of the contrast between the passionate and passible God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jesus and the immutable God of the Greek philosophers: “the Augustinian God turns out to be remarkably like the Stoic sage: devoid of passions, unfamiliar with longing, foreign to suffering, dwelling in steady bliss.”¹⁶ William Temple wrote as early as 1924 that “we have to recognize that Aristotle’s ‘apathetic God’ was enthroned in men’s minds, and no idol has been so hard to destroy.”¹⁷

Where did Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin get the criterion that enabled them to provide non-literal interpretations of biblical passages about God changing and suffering? According to the Theory of Theology’s Fall, they got it from Greek ideas of perfection: “By

Philosophy?” in Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson [eds.], *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), p. 107, n.4).

12. See Craig A. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), p. 167.

13. Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974), pp. 178–9.

14. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), p. 265.

15. Barry L. Callen, *Discerning the Divine: God in Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 76. See also the essays in Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL and Carlisle, UK: InterVarsity and Paternoster Press, 1994).

16. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Suffering Love,” in Thomas Morris (ed.), *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 210.

17. William Temple, *Christus Veritas* (London: Macmillan, 1924), p. 269.

the time of Augustine Philo's belief in the utter unchangeability of God had been crystallized into infallible, unquestioned dogma."¹⁸ Moltmann offers a blunt assessment of this Greek inheritance: the God of classical theism is "a God of the pagans."¹⁹ His basic complaint is that, to paraphrase Luther, a theology of metaphysical glory is unable to do justice to the divine suffering that is part and parcel of the theology of the cross.²⁰ Moltmann is representative of many contemporary theologians in his concern that Greek philosophy has become a hermeneutical master, enslaving Jewish and Christian texts alike.

And works of art? The cover of the present book is from El Greco's painting *The Holy Trinity*. "El Greco," of course, means "the Greek." Painter and painting thus pose the key issue of the present section: must "Greek" representations of God necessarily distort the biblical account? The painting depicts the Father and not Mary as the one who cradles the body of the dead Son. It also features expressions of shared grief on the part of the six angels who witness the scene. Are such representations biblical? And what concepts, "Greek" or not, are adequate to the task of rendering such representations intelligible?

"Being" as a conceptual scheme: Christian religion within the limits of Greek reason alone?

A comprehensive examination of the charge that Christian theologians have exchanged their theological birthright (i.e., the scriptural *mythos*) for a mess of philosophical pottage is beyond the scope of the present chapter. Yet the accusation that classical theism – the idea that God, as perfect being, is eternal, immutable, and impassible – is the misbegotten offspring of a shotgun marriage between biblical representations and philosophical conceptualization is too important simply to pass by. We therefore need to examine the extent to which classical theism has "not only equated this

18. R. B. Edwards, "The Pagan Dogma of the Absolute Unchangeableness of God," *Religious Studies* 14 (1978), p. 308.

19. Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 215.

20. See the Appendix in Gavrilyuk, *Suffering of God*, pp. 176–9, for additional evidence for the prevalence of the Theory of Theology's Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy.

concept [Being] with the God of the Bible but in so doing has claimed that the ontological category of Being provides the conceptuality in the context of which the biblical God is to be understood.”²¹

It is true that Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine linked the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the God of the classical philosophers via the “I am” of Exodus 3:14, thanks in part to Philo’s translation of the divine name as “that which is” (*to on*).²² Other church fathers connected God’s distinct New Testament name – “Father” – with the unoriginating source of all reality: “The Apologists took advantage of the fact that the word Father had been used as early as Plato to characterize the supreme being in whom everything has its origin.”²³ “Father” was therefore well suited, alongside “that which is,” to serve as a point of contact between the philosophical notion of the ground of all reality and the biblical story of creation and redemption.²⁴ The identification of God with Being set theology’s agenda for centuries, for which Anselm provided a schema by insisting that God is that being “than which nothing greater can be conceived.”²⁵ Thus was born the attempt to think about the nature and attributes of God with the aid of ontology (the study of being) as a generative conceptual scheme.

Thomas Aquinas represents either the “greatest attempt” or the “greatest temptation” to develop the doctrine of God in terms of the concepts of being and substance, depending on one’s reading of the evidence. He appeals to Exodus 3:14 to argue that God’s “proper” name is “He who is,” a name that means “nothing other than being itself.”²⁶ God, as the fullness of being, lacks for nothing. He is always what he is: his divine nature or essence (*what* God is) is existence (*that* God is). It follows that God is eternal and immutable; there is no shadow, either of turning or becoming, in his being. God is neither “a” being nor does he “have” being. Rather, God “is” being: God is

21. Grenz, *Named God*, pp. 5–6.

22. For a fuller account of this process, see Grenz, *Named God*, ch. 1, “From *To On* to the *Ipsium Esse*: The Christianization of Being,” pp. 15–50.

23. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, p. 145.

24. Because God is the source of being itself in all its fullness and perfection, Augustine thought that Moses and Philo were saying the same thing (*City of God*, viii, 11). Interestingly, Bonaventure describes the Father as *auctor* (author) of the Godhead itself (Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, p. 146).

25. We shall return later in this chapter to consider whether “greater than” applies to the logic of infinity or perfection (or both).

26. *Summa Theologica*, I, 3, 11.

ipsum esse subsistens, “subsistent being itself, in whose being all other existing things share.”²⁷ Because all other things derive their being from “He who is,” God is the cause of the world.

What has become the “standard account” of late faults Aquinas and other classical theists for employing Aristotle’s metaphysics as an interpretative framework with which to interpret the Bible.²⁸ On this view, the Aristotelian metaphysical categories of substance and properties, existence and essence, apply to God too. God’s being is an immutable and spiritual substance that knows all, loves freely, and is able to do what he wills. The God of classical theism relates to the world in ways that do not affect the divine being. Aquinas likened God to a stone column to which observers stand, on the left or right, closer or farther. Such relations, however, are only in the observers, not the column itself. It may appear to grow larger or smaller but in fact this change is relative to the motion of the observer, not the column: “The immunity of God to all ‘real relationship’ with creation will become axiomatic in scholastic theology.”²⁹ As we shall see, however, his contemporary critics routinely mistake what Aquinas means by “real relationship.”

Proponents of the Theory of Theology’s Fall maintain that even the Reformers, despite their emphasis on the story of salvation, are in thrall to Greek metaphysics. Calvin, for example, refuses to make God’s will or knowledge dependent on what humans do, so much so that, according to Emil Brunner, “the personal relation between God and Man became a causal relation: God the cause, faith the effect.”³⁰ Critics judge Calvin’s post-Reformation Protestant successors to have fared no better; they are just as indebted to Aristotle as were their Roman Catholic medieval ancestors. In the words of

27. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, p. 149.

28. Fergus Kerr describes such “standard accounts” in *After Aquinas*, pp. 181–2. Recent studies have led to a conflict of interpretations over the deepest intent of Thomas’s theological interpretation of Scripture. The standard account portrays Aquinas as a philosopher who, with a few exceptions, reads the Bible much as Aristotle might have. However, a minority opposition argues that Thomas was first and foremost a theologian, a doctor of the church, who thoroughly reworked Aristotle’s categories in light of the Bible (see, for example, D. Stephen Long, “Aquinas and God’s Sovereignty,” in Long and Kalantzis [eds.], *The Sovereignty of God Debate*, pp. 42–60).

29. Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 87.

30. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, vol. I of *Dogmatics*, tr. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1949), p. 315.

one twentieth-century textbook: "The doctrine of God in the early Church, in the Middle Ages, and in orthodoxy is a curious mixture of Greek, especially Neo-Platonic, and biblical ideas. Since the Reformation showed little interest in the traditional doctrine of God, it survived the fiery ordeal of the Reformation's reworking of all tradition far more unscathed than was really good. For this reason, Protestant Orthodoxy on the whole maintained the traditional mixture of non-Christian and biblical statements."³¹

The order of topics in the post-Reformation Protestant doctrine of God – treating the unity and nature of God before the biblical names for God and doctrine of the Trinity – merits special comment, not least because Brunner identifies this move with "the metaphysical, speculative perversion of the doctrine of God."³² Brunner's "J'accuse" charges these sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologians with "falling" into rationalism and natural theology – of subordinating God's revelation in history and in Jesus Christ to the conceptual demands of substance metaphysics. Karl Barth harbors a similar concern, wondering whether these theologians are really thinking about the God of Jesus Christ: "It is hard to see how what is distinctive for this God can be made clear if ... the question who God is, which it is the business of the doctrine of the Trinity to answer, is held in reserve, and the first question to be treated is that of the That and What of God, as though these could be defined otherwise than on the presupposition of the Who."³³ Treating *De Deo Uno* apart from the history of salvation and the mystery of the Trinity ultimately means that "the one divine essence as a whole is spoken about in isolation from God's own intrinsic personal relationality."³⁴

Objections to classical theism cover much more than its provenance. Some object that monotheism undergirds notions of earthly monarchy, and hence encourages political oppression. Perhaps what critics find most objectionable about classical theism, however, is its notion that God is "that which infinitely transcends change, time, matter, flesh, and history."³⁵ For what is immutable and impassible

31. Otto Weber, *Foundations in Dogmatics*, vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1981) pp. 397–8. See Richard Muller's three-point rebuttal in *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. III: *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), pp. 95–6.

32. Brunner, *Christian Doctrine of God; Dogmatics*, vol. I, p. 293.

33. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 300–1.

34. Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 224. We shall return to this objection below.

35. Langdon Gilkey, "God," in Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (eds.), *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, p. 93.

is also impassive: changeless, unrelated, and aloof. Once God was defined in terms of “pure actuality” and “eternal being” and characterized by immutability, “it became virtually impossible, if not contradictory, to express intelligibly the obvious relatedness and mutuality of God to the changing world necessitated by the scriptural witness.”³⁶ According to Elizabeth Johnson, “it is essential to God’s deity that ‘he’ (the theistic God is always referred to in male terms) be essentially unrelated to this world and unaffected by what happens in it so as to remain independent from it.”³⁷ John Cobb and David Ray Griffin had connected the dots years earlier, observing that what is unacceptable about classical theism is its making God “the archetype of the dominant, inflexible, unemotional, completely independent (read ‘strong’) male.”³⁸

According to the Theory of Theology’s Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy, then, classical theism is no innocent conceptual scheme, but a Procrustean bed that short sheets the biblical testimony, making it difficult in the extreme to do justice to the notion of a loving, personal God who enters into reciprocal relations with his finite, fragile human creatures. What Moltmann dubs the “apathy axiom” has prevailed in the early church down to the present day and has left “a deeper impress on ... the doctrine of God than has the history of Christ’s passion.”³⁹ That the God of classical theism is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but the God of Greek metaphysics has become the “new orthodoxy”: something everywhere believed by (almost) everyone.

Was there a historical “Fall”? Towards the retrieval of a biblical-theological classical theism

Those who narrate the story of theology’s fall into Hellenistic philosophy proceed too fast, conflating the development of the doctrine of God in the church during the patristic, medieval, and Reformation eras with the more modern approach, characteristic of natural theology or analytic theism, that begins with the concept of the one God rather than the story of the triune God.⁴⁰ The fear

36. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

37. Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 19.

38. Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, p. 10.

39. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 22.

40. For one example of such conflation, see Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 19.

of Greek-think must not be allowed to cloud the discussion as to the origins of classical theism or to overshadow a careful analysis of what patristic, medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation theologians actually said.

Several studies have exposed serious weaknesses in the Theory of Theology's Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy. Paul Gavriluk, for example, argues that the sharp distinction between the impassible, uninvolved God of the philosophers and the passionate God of the Bible has no basis: "Patristic theology did not face a choice between the apathetic deity of the philosophers and the suffering God of the Bible, because the views of God represent questionable scholarly constructs, rather than the actual theological options available to the theologians of late antiquity."⁴¹ There was a variety of opinions on the subject of divine emotions and divine passibility even among the Hellenistic philosophers themselves: "Enlightenment deism should not be read into the philosophical climate of late antiquity."⁴²

Patristic theology was in the first instance a missionary theology, an attempt to contextualize the gospel in a way that made sense in the Hellenistic world.⁴³ Early church theologians turned to philosophical categories as part of faith's attempt to seek, and promote, understanding. What Etienne Gilson calls the "spirit of medieval philosophy" describes not Greek philosophy taking possession of the gospel but "the spirit of Christianity penetrating the Greek tradition."⁴⁴ If "classical" means putting ancient Greek and Roman philosophy above the Scriptures, then not only did the early church fathers and Reformers not know they were classical theists but, if presented with the concept, they would no doubt have repudiated it. As Thomas Weinandy notes, they "were not philosophical

41. Paul Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, p. 172.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 35. See the extended discussion of this point in Gavriluk, pp. 21–36.

43. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), p. 81. There is a sense in which patristic theology may be interpreted as an instance of "local" theology, that is, an attempt not to universalize but to *contextualize* the faith. The early theologians "excorporate" concepts such as "logos," "substance," and "nature" from various Greek philosophical currents and put them to new use. Cf. Christopher Stead's argument that terms like *ousia* and *hypostasis* had no fixed meaning (*Divine Substance* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1977]). On contextualization as "vernacular translation", see my *Drama of Doctrine*, pp. 310–24.

44. Cited in Kerr, *After Aquinas*, pp. 80–1.

innovators. They were theological innovators and their innovation was founded upon the Bible.”⁴⁵

Something similar must be said about medieval theology and Thomas Aquinas in particular. While Aquinas worked hard to synthesize philosophical wisdom (Neo-Platonist, Aristotelian) with Scripture and patristic tradition, he did not simply cede the keys of the biblical-theological kingdom to some philosophical scheme. Neither did he accord supreme hermeneutical and theological authority to the science of being, such that while the Bible says this and that about God, philosophy ultimately decides what it means. A case in point: Aquinas’s conception of divine causality owes less to mechanistic conceptions (as modern thinkers influenced by Newtonian physics thought) than to the conception of personal agency.⁴⁶

Thomas’s conception of God as “substance” is similarly distinct from the modern notion, best expressed by John Locke in terms of an unknowable inert substratum (an “I know not what”). His view of substance is less atomistic than “animistic”: “Far from being inert self-enclosed entities like rocks and bedsteads, substances, for Thomas, are always already about to impinge on something else.”⁴⁷ God’s existing – the unity of the divine nature – is *actus purus*, not a static being at all but an active *doing*: “God is nothing other than ceaseless and total actualizations of being, knowing, and loving.”⁴⁸ In Kerr’s words: “Thomas’s ‘supreme being’, far from being the static deity of substantialist metaphysics, is the subsistent (i.e., underived) sheer Act of existence, identically Intelligence and Will.”⁴⁹

All is not yet lost for the Theory of Theology’s Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy. Surely the post-Reformation Protestant scholastic theologians are indentured servants of an ontology-based conceptual scheme? Not according to Richard Muller. Muller discerns an essential continuity between patristic, medieval, Reformation and

45. Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 108.

46. See the discussion in Kerr, *After Aquinas*, pp. 46–8. Furthermore, Thomas’s decision to discuss *De Deo Uno* before considering the Trinity indicates not a privileging of philosophy over theology so much as a concern to secure the utter difference of the Creator from the creaturely in his talk about the Father, Son, and Spirit (i.e., to guarantee that the Trinity is *God*).

47. Kerr, *After Aquinas*, p. 48 (see also p. 190). We will return to the notion of God as an active substance in relation in the next chapter.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

post-Reformation eras based more on an exegetical tradition than a philosophical framework.⁵⁰ What discontinuity there is between the theology of the Reformers and their successors pertains not to different theological norms and sources so much as to differences of literary genre (i.e., the difference between the catechetical, homiletical, polemical, and scholastic). The predominance of deductive logic in post-Reformation orthodox formulations signals not a new philosophical allegiance, but a new way of setting forth the results and implications of biblical exegesis.⁵¹

Turning from method to matter, Muller disputes the suggestion that the traditional dogmatic order in the doctrine of God implies a subordination of revealed to natural (i.e., extra-biblical) theology, or that it relegates the Trinity to the margins of theological discourse: “the issue addressed by this order is not a movement from an extended philosophical or speculative discussion of ‘what’ God is to a biblicistic, trinitarian definition of ‘who’ God is, but the movement from a statement of ‘what’ (or ‘who’) the existent One is, namely, God, to a lengthy discussion in terms of attributes and Trinity.”⁵² The traditional order begins with the primary datum of biblical revelation (“Hear O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord” [Dt. 6:4]) and then moves on to the mystery of how the one God is also three: “the entire traditional discussion of essence, attributes, and Trinity is devoted to answering the question of ‘who’ (or ‘what’) God is, not merely the presentation of the Trinity.”⁵³ Indeed, the contemporary tendency to restrict the “who” question to the Trinity would be “a major error in theology” from the perspective of post-Reformation orthodoxy, for all of the divine attributes belong equally to each of the divine persons in light of their essential oneness.⁵⁴ To say, then, that natural theology deals with the divine essence and attributes while revealed theology deals with the Trinity “is a major misunderstanding of the Reformed orthodox theology.”⁵⁵

To take stock: to explain classical theism in terms of a “fall” into Hellenistic philosophy is too simplistic. Such a theory overlooks

50. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. III, pp. 30–1.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 158–9.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 159. Among those who commit such misunderstanding, Muller names Barth, Otto Weber, and T. F. Torrance.

the significance of the properly biblical and theological reasons for the tradition's trajectory. Indeed, Robert Wilken sets forth a de-de-Hellenization thesis, claiming that it is closer to the mark to think in terms of a "Christianization of Hellenism": "The notion that the development of early Christian thought represented a hellenization of Christianity has outlived its usefulness."⁵⁶ From another angle, Janet Martin Soskice notes that "Those who insist that Christianity never had, properly, its own doctrine of God and simply 'baptized' the God of Aristotle have not given sufficient attention to the wholly un-Hellenic teaching of *creatio ex nihilo*."⁵⁷ There are other doctrinal examples as well of earlier theologians going against the prevailing metaphysical grain (e.g., the notion that the Logos, which the Stoics believed was the rational principle governing the universe, was made flesh and died). Greek philosophy affirmed "that which is," but church theology affirmed "he who is" and discovered "who he is" and "what he is like" thanks to "what he has done" in Israel and in Jesus Christ. The God of what we may call biblical-theological classical theism is neither indifferent nor apathetic but "with us" and "for us."

We must conclude, then, that the legacy of patristic, medieval, and post-Reformation Protestant theology is not as captive to Greek philosophy as the "standard account" suggests. We should therefore feel free to draw upon what these theologians actually said – about divine personhood, the love of God, and divine suffering – as we navigate our way through current debates.

The critique of ontotheology: why are they saying such awful things about perfect being?

It is one thing conceptually to elaborate the biblical testimony to God's speech and action, and quite another to begin one's theology with the concept of God as perfect being. The Theory of Theology's Fall into Philosophy looks stronger when one examines what happened in modern rather than ancient times. For the so-called "perfect

56. Robert Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. xvi.

57. Soskice, "Athens and Jerusalem, Alexandria and Edessa: Is there a Metaphysics of Scripture?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006), p. 153.

being” theology associated with Anselm had a second coming as it were with Descartes, with one important difference: the Anselmian approach deployed the concept in a ministerial way and with an intratextual aim, with an intention to exposit the logic of the biblical account of God. It may therefore be helpful to distinguish the biblical-theological theism of the patristic, medieval, and Reformation eras from the more properly philosophical theism of the modern era during which the concept of a being “than which nothing greater can be thought” sets out on a career of its own, independent of the biblical narrative and the three-personed God of the gospel. Modern philosophical theism takes its marching orders not from the canon but from the concept of a being of infinite perfection.

A neoclassical theism? Thinking infinite perfection

The history of modern philosophical theology “is a story of how the two major strands of premodern thought about the divine – the divine as infinite, and the divine as perfect – became entwined ... in a form known as ‘ontotheology’.”⁵⁸ The story begins with Descartes’ intuition of his own finitude and the concomitant notion of God as the infinite ground for all finite subjects.⁵⁹ The concepts of infinity and perfection are intrinsically connected: the infinite has none of the imperfections of the finite, and the perfect has goodness without limit.⁶⁰

“Perfect being” theology sets out to reflect on the concept of God as a being “than which nothing greater can be conceived” (Anselm).⁶¹ Perfect being theology is an intellectual strategy for establishing the existence, nature, and attributes of God apart from, though not necessarily against, appeals to special revelation. Specifically, the strategy involves stretching terms/concepts that apply to created beings (the “way of eminence”), denying terms/concepts that apply to created

58. Philip D. Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), p. xii.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

60. Some thinkers from Anselm onwards favored perfection, others infinity. See the discussion in Clayton, *The Problem of God*, pp. 130–82.

61. Clayton notes that perfect being could just as well be called “Cartesian” as “Anselmian,” for Descartes set out to think God as an infinite substance, “a substance having all real and true perfections that are actually infinite and immense” (cited in Clayton, *Problem of God*, p. 132). However, it probably could not be called “infinite being theology” because, with few exceptions, the concept of infinity played a subservient role in doctrines of God until Duns Scotus (see the discussion in Clayton, *Problem of God*, pp. 143–48).

beings (the “way of negation”), and inferring something from terms/concepts that apply to created beings (the “way of causation”).

Is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – not to mention the God of Moses, Paul, and Jesus – the *same* as the God of infinite perfection? If not, does one serve as the interpretative framework or corrective lens for the other and, if so, which one? More pointedly: does God’s revelation in Jesus Christ – the Son who makes the Father known – add or take away anything of significance from the attributes derived from thinking through the concept of infinite perfection? Perfect being theology is a strategy for speaking well of God that moves not from narrative (*mythos*) to metaphysics (*logos*), or from faith to faith, but rather from concept to concept. A distinctly Christian concept of God must derive its content “not simply from general metaphysical intuitions, however, but from unique, contingent things that God has done in history and, in particular, in Jesus Christ.”⁶²

Contemporary advocates of perfect being theology combine the best of medieval theology with the best of contemporary philosophy. The result – call it “analytic” or “neoclassical” theism – is not a golden but a titanium synthesis, and combines the ontological resources of the tradition with the analytic resources of present-day philosophy.⁶³ Most analytic philosophers of religion agree that God is a maximally perfect or greatest possible being; what differences arise between them over the divine attributes have “merely registered differences in what perfection has been thought to require.”⁶⁴ For this task, the biblical representations of God, while relevant, are ultimately underdetermined and hence call for extra-biblical concepts in order to speak well (i.e., clearly and cogently) of God.⁶⁵ Surely

62. Jay Wesley Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity, and Immutability* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 30. Richards states that a Christian concept of God must adhere to three principles: biblical normativity; the “Principle of Perfection,” and the “Sovereignty-Aseity Conviction” (pp. 32–3). It is interesting to note, parenthetically, that most so-called perfect being theologians are, in fact, philosophers. In this regard, see Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*, whose bibliography is made up almost exclusively of contemporary analytic philosophers of religion.

63. “Neoclassical” signals the seventeenth-century origins of the perfect being philosophical theism that we are presently examining.

64. Thomas Morris, “Introduction,” to Morris (ed.), *The Concept of God* (Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 7).

65. Cf. Rogers’s comment: “without interpretation Scripture . . . presents a variety of images of God, sometimes jumbled or even contradictory” (*Perfect Being Theology*, p. 2).

the God who created the universe, brought Israel out of Egypt, and raised Jesus from the dead is not *less* than the most perfect being? Of course – yet as we shall see, everything depends on where one obtains one's concept of perfection: its meaning is often a function of its provenance and pedigree.

Perfect being theology is the “systematic analysis of the divine attributes beginning with the concept of God as limitless perfection.”⁶⁶ The concept of perfection serves as a “control” on thinking about God and, by extension, on biblical interpretation. So: what must a perfect being be like? There is a broad consensus among analytic theists that (1) God is infinite, for a perfect being has none of the limitations that characterize everything else in creation; (2) God is perfect or maximally great, pure Being, since a maximally perfect being has no need to become greater than it already is; (3) God exists *a se* (from himself), for his nature and attributes depend on nothing outside himself.⁶⁷ Two corollaries follow: (4) God is personal, for he possesses perfections such as love and knowledge that imply, at the very least, that God is not less than personal; (5) God creates the world *ex nihilo* and stands in a transcendent relation to it, for as has already been established God is in need of no thing or relationship outside himself to be fully himself.

It is one thing to begin with the concept of a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, another to spell out the positive content of perfection. Intuitions about perfection differ, a fact that is arguably the Achilles heel of perfect being theology: “The debate about divine attributes contains widely divergent voices, and it would be incorrect to claim that the appeal to perfection has led to widespread consensus.”⁶⁸ For example: some analytic theists hold that a perfect being must be atemporal while others argue that a perfect being must be everlasting. This internecine debate pales in comparison with Charles Hartshorne's suggestion, also based on his intuition of perfection, that immutability is *not* a great-making property of a perfect being.⁶⁹ Hartshorne thinks that a perfect being will

66. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*, p. 4.

67. So Owen, *Concepts of Deity*, pp. 142–3, and Richards, *Untamed God*, p. 33.

68. Clayton, *Problem of God in Modern Thought*, p. 134.

69. See Charles Hartshorne *The Logic of Perfection* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1962). For a defense of Hartshorne as an analytic theist who wished not to reject but

not lack, but conspicuously display, the ability to relate and to react to – and hence in some respects be changed by – the world. For Hartshorne, God must *become* in order to *be* perfect.

Back to Descartes. The father of modern philosophy believed that we need only form the idea of a supremely perfect being in order to arrive at a correct conception of God.⁷⁰ That an idea comes from the seventeenth century is, of course, no reason to disparage it, no more than if had it come from the twelfth, twentieth, or twenty-first. Nevertheless, neoclassical theism differs from its classical predecessor in one especially important respect: Descartes focused not on the triune God but on a perfect *generic* deity. We may therefore compare the God of analytic theism, with its generic conceptual core, to certain works of “abstract” art of the early twentieth century (e.g., Mondrian). In each case, this theoretical impulse of early modern analytic theism renders its subject matter in a way that steers clear of figures, stories, or historical experiences referring to something particular: “It is supposed to be God with those elements that are specific to any one faith tradition carefully subtracted. It is an approach to God that is characteristically Modernist.”⁷¹

Early modern analytic theism is thus the study of generic deity – most perfect being – by apparently generic human beings.⁷² Yet human beings are never simply generic: one cannot step out of one’s faith tradition or strip off the particularities of one’s gender, ethnicity, culture, or social class.⁷³ This is surely one reason why intuitions of perfection differ, and why perfect being theology may be particularly susceptible to the Feuerbachian critique that concepts

to reform the tradition, see Daniel A. Dombrowski, *Analytic Theism, Hartshorne, and the Concept of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).
70. *Meditations*, VII, 138.

71. Giles Fraser, “Modernism and the Minimal God: On the Empty Spirituality of the God of the Philosophers,” in Harriet A. Harris and Christopher J. Insole (eds.), *Faith and Philosophical Analysis: The Impact of Analytic Philosophy on the Philosophy of Religion* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2005), p. 150.

72. I am referring primarily to early modern philosophical theology. The discipline of analytic philosophy of religion experienced a distinctly Christian renaissance in the late twentieth century that deployed analytical techniques and categories conceptually to expand upon what the Scriptures say about God. This later analytic theism set out to clarify the concept not merely of perfect being but of the God presupposed in the Bible. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Introduction: Inquiring about God, selected essays, Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

73. So Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Travail of Theology in the Modern Academy,” in Volf (ed.), *The Future of Theology*, p. 38.

of God (i.e., infinite perfection) are human projections: “that than which nothing greater can be thought” may be nothing more than “our greatest thoughts” unmasked.⁷⁴ Kasper lodges a similar complaint: modern thinkers have abandoned the God of Scripture and tradition “in favor of the abstract theism of a unipersonal God who stands over against man as the perfect Thou or over man as imperial ruler and judge.”⁷⁵ Whenever God is imagined as the otherworldly counterpart of the world, however, it becomes difficult not to conceive of God as over against us – which is to say, *over and against* us. For when we oppose God to the world in this perfect-imperfect fashion, then “we must either conceive God at the expense of man and the world, or conceive the world at the expense of God, thus limiting God in deistic fashion.”⁷⁶ The attempt to think God as perfect being ironically ends up conceiving God as the sort of entity who enters into conflict with finite reality – in short, as another finite reality.

It is important not to tar all perfect being theologians with the same Feuerbachian brush. Just as not all classical theists sold out to Hellenistic philosophy, so not all perfect being theologians have sold out to *a priori* conceptions of perfection. Here it may be useful to contrast “Cartesian” analytic theists who employ the concept of infinite perfection magisterially (i.e., as a hermeneutical framework with which to interpret and, if need be, correct the Bible’s depiction of God) from “Anselmian” analytic theists who employ the concept ministerially in order to achieve clarity about the being of the God depicted in Scripture. We shall return to this Anselmian approach in due course; our immediate concern is to trace the fate of the Cartesian approach to its bitter end.

Against ontotheology: smashing the conceptual idols

While Anselmian analytic theism is ultimately a form of biblical reasoning, Cartesian analytic theism owes more to metaphysical speculation. The concept of perfect being only makes sense within a theory of being as such. Conversely, metaphysics – whether Aristotelian, Cartesian, or Hegelian – only achieves closure as a

74. See Clayton’s discussion of “perfection and projection” and “Feuerbach’s Dilemma” in his *Problem of God*, pp. 171–7.

75. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, p. 294.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 295.

system thanks to the notion of a “highest” being: the Unmoved Mover; “God”; *Geist*. This, at least, was Martin Heidegger’s concern in his essay “The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics.”⁷⁷ On Heidegger’s view, if the God of infinite perfection did not exist, he would have to be invented – not because humans have a psychological need for God, but because philosophers who work with theories of being have a metaphysical need.⁷⁸ The Supreme Being is a God of the metaphysical gaps: “The deity can come into philosophy only insofar as philosophy, of its own accord and by its own nature, requires and determines that and how the deity enters into it.”⁷⁹ The “God” of ontotheology is the necessary “explanation” for the whole system of beings.

What is wrong with this ontotheological picture? Heidegger charges metaphysics with so focusing on its system of beings (including God as Highest Being) that it forgets the more basic question, and mystery, of Being. Here we may recall Gabriel Marcel’s distinction between “problem” and “mystery”: a problem admits of a concrete solution; a mystery is inexhaustible no matter how long one thinks about it.⁸⁰ In Heidegger’s view, metaphysics, as the “science of being”, is a strategy for problem solving, not deepening mysteries. Hence the fundamental problem: the Supreme Being of the metaphysical gaps is not the God to whom Christians personally relate: “Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god.”⁸¹

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is, by way of contrast, *more or other* than other beings, *more or other* even than the God of infinite metaphysical perfection. To speak of God as “a” being wrongly assumes that human concepts are adequate for the task, that God is essentially the same sort of entity to which all our other metaphysical categories apply. Heidegger avers that an authentic theology

77. *Identity and Difference*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969). See also Grenz, *The Named God*, pp. 110–20. Merold Westphal’s observation that Heidegger’s critique of ontology is aimed at Aristotle and Hegel, not Augustine and Aquinas, corroborates my claim that we are dealing with “Cartesian” rather than “Anselmian” theism (*Overcoming Onto-theology*, p. xv).

78. Jean-Luc Marion defines metaphysics as the science concerned with “what is universal in ‘common being’” (“Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Summary for Theologians,” in Graham Ward [ed.], *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1997], p. 281).

79. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, pp. 55–6.

80. See Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. I: *Reflection and Mystery* (London: The Harvill Press, 1950), pp. 204–19.

81. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, p. 72.

would not include the word “Being,” the prime category of metaphysics, for metaphysics is “both calculative and representational thinking.”⁸² Theology is not a matter of theoretical knowledge of God (reason), but of “letting ourselves be seized by the things we do not see” (Luther).⁸³ The challenge, then, is to learn to speak of God “without betraying the object of speech, giving it up and delivering it over to be manhandled by the interlocutor as something present-at-hand.”⁸⁴ The challenge is to “overcome” metaphysics and hence to think of God “as the mystery that exceeds the wisdom of the Greeks.”⁸⁵

Emmanuel Levinas’s critique of ontology is to anthropology what Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology is to theology. The parallel is instructive. For Levinas, human being is the “other” that always exceeds conceptualization. Theoretical conceptualizations can never do justice to the irreducible uniqueness of the human face or to the singularity of our obligation towards it. Our present concern is not the human face, however, but the divine Voice. Yet face and voice converge in human communicative action: “The face speaks.”⁸⁶ Conversely, we may say that the voice of God has a face: Jesus Christ. God’s speech *faces* us: God’s voice confronts us through speech acts as calling, commanding, and promising, and it is precisely as an interlocutor that God “overcomes” metaphysics.⁸⁷

The characteristic gesture of the modern knowing and speaking subject, however, is not being-spoken-to but *grasping* and

82. Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology*, p. 11. Westphal depicts Heidegger as the latest in a long tradition of those who criticize philosophical conceptions of God, a tradition that includes Luther, Pascal, and Kierkegaard among others.

83. Heidegger, “Phenomenology and Theology,” in *The Piety of Thinking*, tr. James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 10–11.

84. James K. A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of the Incarnation* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.

85. Westphal, p. 261. Overcoming metaphysics has nothing to do with promoting atheism: “What is necessary to overcome onto-theology is not the abandonment of theistic belief but the avoidance of this temptation to have God at our disposal, conceptually speaking” (*Overcoming Onto-theology*, p. 23).

86. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 66.

87. Westphal: “We must think God as the voice that exceeds vision so as to establish a relation irreducible to comprehension” (*Overcoming Onto-theology*, p. 266, *italics his*). The main burden of my constructive proposal in Parts II and III is that God indeed appears in language, not as the object of human representation, but precisely as a speaking subject: one who *does* things with language.

naming: taking phenomena captive to metaphysical thought; naming God by means of concepts. While unaided human reason may be capable of thinking perfect being, however, it is not capable of presenting God. Jean-Luc Marion consequently orders his own critique of ontotheology around two poles – the idol and the icon – that represent two contrasting ways of apprehending the divine. The perfect being of ontotheology is a conceptual idol that pertains more to the scope of human conception than to God: “the idol consigns the divine to the measure of a human gaze.”⁸⁸ Ontotheology equates God with “that which we have seen with our theoretical eyes; which we have touched with our conceptual grasp” (cf. 1 Jn. 1).⁸⁹ This is precisely the “violence” of metaphysical concepts when employed magisterially: to “cut-down-to-size.”⁹⁰

If we are to continue using concepts in theology, then, we must reverse the direction of flow, or else concede Feuerbach’s point that our concepts merely reflect the interests (or ignorance) of their users. We must “cross out” God’s name as highest being and admit “that the unthinkable enters into the field of our thought only by rendering itself unthinkable there by excess, that is, by criticizing our thought.”⁹¹ Concepts do not grasp what God literally is but serve rather as non-reductive “icons” that signal transcendence without doing violence to it.⁹² Whereas the idol is the terminus of the human gaze, the icon *presents*: not an object to be seen (and mastered) but a face – a personal presence – to be received, venerated, and answered. Whereas modern philosophy’s concepts aim at mastering being (the given; nature), theology deploys its concepts in the service of God’s self-presentation (the gift; grace) in order to think God’s thought – Christ, “the image [*eikon*] of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) – after him.

88. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, tr. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 14. Marion judges Aquinas “not guilty” of falling into ontotheology in his “Saint Thomas d’Aquin et l’onto-théologie,” *Revue Thomiste* 102 (2003), pp. 31–66. Though Thomas uses the language of being, he is clear that God’s “being” as Creator is of a wholly different order than the “being” that characterizes creation.

89. Marion notes that the so-called “death” of God “concerns the failure of the metaphysical concept of ‘God’” (*God without Being*, p. xxi). See also Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida & Marion on Modern Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 188–200.

90. Smith, *Speech and Theology*, p. 5.

91. Marion, *God without Being*, p. 46.

92. Smith, *Speech and Theology*, p. 12. We shall return to this point in later chapters in connection with analogy.

From being to gift: towards a postmetaphysical theology

But the “good news of Jesus Christ” exceeds every metaphysic.⁹³

Can revelation be thought? In a controversial move, Marion appeals to phenomenology as the way forward for theology.⁹⁴ While acknowledging that the modern knowing subject tends to distort phenomena with its own intentions, Marion develops “an account of the phenomenon as it gives itself by and from itself without any interference from a human agent.”⁹⁵ To paraphrase Karl Barth: *the phenomenon has found a way to us*.

The key phenomenological principle is that consciousness intuits or receives – not processes or determines – what is given: “Thus phenomenology goes unambiguously beyond metaphysics to the strict extent that it rids itself of any *a priori* principle ... insofar as it renounces the transcendental project [viz., correlating reality to the operations of consciousness] to allow an ultimately radical empiricism to unfold.”⁹⁶ Theological intuition is “radical” because God does not appear on our own terms but reveals himself on his own terms. Instead of the knowing subject going out and getting the world, as it were, consciousness awaits a “donation.” Metaphysics seeks to master the phenomenon; phenomenology is content to wait for it.

The self-revealing God “gives” himself to be known in the cross of Christ, an event that, strictly speaking, did not have to “be.” The cross thus “crosses out” the concept of God in the sense that it marks the spot where the unthinkable, non-deducible, and hyper-ethical gift of Jesus’ death enters history, and consciousness, even though thought is not able fully to comprehend it. God reveals himself as incalculable love that we do not deserve, a love excelling and excessive of metaphysical necessity: “Only love does not have to be.”⁹⁷

93. Marion, *God without Being*, p. 163.

94. See the various essays in Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: the French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000). Milbank comments that Marion correlates the twentieth-century theology of the word with a radicalized phenomenology as if he were “both Barth and Heidegger at once” (*The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1997], p. 37). Moreover, Marion is first and foremost a philosopher, hence the danger that phenomenology becomes in his hands simply the latest extratextual scheme with which to correlate theology.

95. Joeri Schrijvers, “On Doing Theology ‘After’ Ontotheology: Notes on a French Debate,” *New Blackfriars* 87 (2006), p. 307.

96. Marion, “Metaphysics and Phenomenology,” p. 286.

97. Marion, *God without Being*, p. 138.

Revelation is not about the “presence” (that way metaphysics lies) but the “present” (in the sense of gift) of God. To confess with Marion that God is “without being,” then, is not to say that there is no God, but rather that God, as absolute love, remains beyond all rational and metaphysical determination. We intuit God as a “saturated phenomenon” that arises “when what we experience is beyond our understanding.”⁹⁸ God “gives” more to be intuited than can be conceptualized and is therefore in “excess” of metaphysics.

In Marion’s view, the pre-eminent saturated phenomenon and site of God’s self-giving presence is not the *logos* but the Eucharist: the *presence* and *practice* of communing love. Like the disciples on the Emmaus road, we only “see” the Word made flesh when the bread is broken, at which point we do not “master” the *logos* but gratefully receive it. *Contra* Marion, however, the “real presence” of the Eucharist depends not only on iconic items and gestures but also on the words of institution (“This is my body. Do this in remembrance of me.”), not to mention the whole Old Testament background. The personalizing of the divine self-giving does not mean its deverbaling. The present work contends, by way of contrast, that one of the chief modes in which God gives himself to be known, trusted, and obeyed is verbal: divine speech acts.

What Marion calls the “gift of the name” functions not to capture God’s essence but to signal his presence. Marion here relies on the “divine-names” theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, who argued for a God “without” or “beyond” names.⁹⁹ God is “beyond” every affirmation and every negation, hence *predication must yield to praise*. We cannot access God’s nature but we may adore it. The proper response to God’s gift of himself, whether in Name, Word, or Eucharist, must

98. Marion, “God and the Gift: A Continental Perspective,” in Rupert Shortt (ed.), *God’s Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), p. 151. See also Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon,” in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn,”* pp. 176–216.

99. Marion’s technical term for this way of speaking about God is *dé-nomination*: a way of speaking that avoids making either affirmations or negations concerning God. Interestingly enough, Derrida expresses doubt as to whether apophatic or negative theology is really able to speak of God “without being,” for the purpose of such theology is to posit an inconceivable and ineffable mode of being for God, a “superessentiality” (“How to Avoid Speaking,” in Ward [ed.], *The Postmodern God*, pp. 167–90). See also the debate between Marion and Derrida over the nature of impossibility and the gift, in John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), esp. chs. 1, 2, and 7.

ultimately draw from *liturgical* rather than metaphysical language. Modern metaphysics establishes the limits of what is possible, but faith seeks to understand the “impossible” God.¹⁰⁰

Here then, in a nutshell, is the agenda for a postmetaphysical theology:

We must think God as the mystery that exceeds the wisdom of the Greeks.

We must think God as the voice that exceeds vision so as to establish a relation irreducible to comprehension.

*We must think God as the gift of love who exceeds not merely the images but also the concepts with which we aim at God.*¹⁰¹

Can this mystery, voice, and gift be thought? Is it really possible, or desirable, for theologians to go “beyond metaphysics”? Yes and no. Yes, if by metaphysics we mean the science of “being in general” in which God’s nature and attributes are derived from an analysis of the concept of perfect being.¹⁰² This way Feuerbach lies. No, because “[t]he danger of God without being is that of an alterity so ‘other’ that it becomes impossible to distinguish it from monstrosity – mystical or sublime.”¹⁰³ If metaphysics is simply the *study* of being, then Christian theologians may use concepts associated with “being” in a non-totalizing manner in order to clarify the divine ontology implied by the words and acts of the triune God.¹⁰⁴ The character, and fate, of theism depends on how one relates biblical representations (the dramatic *mythos*) to metaphysical conceptualizations (*logos*). Metaphysics plays a magisterial role (i.e., system-building) in ontotheology (i.e., perfect being analysis). By contrast, a *theo-ontology* that hearkens first of all to God’s self-naming in the biblical record

100. Cf. Marion: “To think [metaphysically] amounts to foreseeing the possible” (“On the Gift,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, p. 74). Faith knows, however, that with God all things are possible. See also Hugh Rayment-Pickard, *Impossible God: Derrida’s Theology* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2003).

101. Westphal, “Divine Excess: the God who comes after,” in *Overcoming Onto-theology*, p. 270, italics his. See also Thomas Carlson, “Postmetaphysical Theology,” in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 58–75.

102. This is the distinguishing mark of what in the Introduction I called “bad metaphysics.” To summarize: a bad metaphysics imposes an *a priori* set of categories and concepts on everything that it thinks without adequately attending to God’s self-presentation.

103. Richard Kearney, “The God Who May Be,” in John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.), *Questioning God* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 167.

104. Cf. Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I: *The Triune God* (Oxford University Press, 1997), ch. 13, “The Being of the One God,” esp. pp. 210–12.

(i.e., *mythos*) accords metaphysics the more modest, ministerial role of conceptual elaboration.¹⁰⁵

In sum: early modern philosophical theism projects human conceptions of perfection onto God as “highest being” and makes the fatal Feuerbachian slip, thus amounting to nothing more than conceptual idolatry, a chasing after wind. This is the project that Kasper describes as “Christianity half under the influence of the Enlightenment” – the “heresy of theism.”¹⁰⁶ The proof: philosophical theism – whether neoclassical or analytic, metaphysical or postmetaphysical – falls short of Christian orthodoxy to the extent that its God is generic and unipersonal rather than richly triune. With this thought, we turn to the other “Big Bang” in theology, namely, Karl Barth’s rediscovery of the Trinity.

The recovery of Trinitarian theology

To recover the doctrine of the Trinity is to recover the God of the gospel: the personal and compassionate love of the Father made known in Christ through the Spirit. It is to show that these Three – Father, Son, and Spirit – are also One. And it is to understand that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not simply the way God appears to be but rather the way God truly is.

A Trinitarian revolution

Barth’s conceptual analysis of the Word of God in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity (viz., Revealer, revelation, and revealedness) instigated a Copernican revolution in relation to the knowledge of God. Whereas Kant proposed that objects of knowledge conformed themselves to the mind rather than the mind to objects, Barth proposed that God is not the object but instead the subject of human knowledge about him. The story of Barth’s revolution is well known and need not be rehearsed here. What is noteworthy, however, is the effect of this revolution on the notion of God’s being. For the

105. The difference is between an “exegesis” of being that is attentive to what is there (good metaphysics) and a “hermeneutics” of being that imposes the same conceptual scheme on all phenomena, created and uncreated alike (bad metaphysics).

106. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, pp. 294–5.

net result of beginning one's theology with the Trinity is to rethink being in terms other than substance and to exchange categories that pertain to God's unitary nature for ones like act, person, and relation that better account for God's threeness. Trinitarian theology corrects the tendency to speak of God's nature and attributes apart from the work of what Irenaeus calls his "two hands" (i.e., the Son and Spirit).¹⁰⁷

If Barth recovered the doctrine of the Trinity, who originally lost it? Perhaps those who prized off the concept of God from the specific story of what the Father was doing in Jesus Christ and attached it instead to the concept of perfect being. Moltmann, however, points to Aquinas's decision to treat the unity of God before the Trinity: "ever since Thomas Aquinas, the article on God has been divided into the treatise *De Deo uno* and the treatise *De Deo trino*" with the unfortunate result that the three persons are represented as "a homogenous divine substance."¹⁰⁸

Other accusatory fingers point to Augustine: "Augustine makes divine substance rather than the tripersonal God the highest ontological principle."¹⁰⁹ The following judgment is typical: "In regard to trinitarian developments, Greco-Roman philosophical ontology was less successful than it was in the defense of monotheism."¹¹⁰ The charge is that classical theists lapsed into a generic monotheism by conceptually deregulating the essence of God from God's life as Father, Son, and Spirit narrated in Scripture, thus separating the divine oneness from the threeness and making the oneness an autonomous subject of its own discourse. Some accuse even Barth's account of relapsing into a monism owing to his continued use of a psychological rather than a truly social analogy for the Trinity. "In

107. The doctrine of the Trinity has achieved a prominence in the twentieth century not seen in the West for hundreds of years. See Gerald O'Collins, "The Holy Trinity: The State of the Questions," in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (eds.), *The Trinity* (Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 1–25. For a contrary view, see Bruce Marshall, "The Trinity," ch. 12 in Gareth Jones (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

108. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 17. For a contrary, and more positive, view see Gilles Emery, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in St. Thomas Aquinas," in Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating and John Yocum (eds.), *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), pp. 45–66.

109. John Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, p. 84.

110. Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 121.

any strong sense of *person* Karl Barth appears to have only one person in God – a person perennially existent in the three modes of his being.”¹¹¹

The Trinity in history and narrative

Late twentieth-century Trinitarian revolutionaries typically make three claims, the first of which – that God’s life be more closely identified through the events of salvation history – has already been adumbrated in the previous chapter under the rubric of “Rahner’s Rule.” Barth and his successors have closed the gap between God as he is in himself and God as he is in Jesus Christ. The second claim is that the doctrine of God is best viewed as the answer to a “who” rather than a “what” question, in personal terms rather than in terms of “rational causative substance.”¹¹² Barth complained that Roman Catholic and Protestant dogmatics tended to hold the question of God’s identity in reserve, as though “the That and the What of God ... could be defined otherwise than on the presupposition of the Who.”¹¹³ The third claim is that no single event answers the “who” question better than the death and resurrection of Jesus.

According to Robert Jenson, the primary task of the doctrine of God is to answer the question “Who?” by analyzing the events in which God identifies himself. Paramount among these events is the story of Jesus. The identity of God is a matter not of metaphysics but of narrative: not a discourse on God’s being apart from the contingencies of time but precisely a discourse about the events of Jesus’ life. Jenson thus “radicalizes” Rahner’s Rule.¹¹⁴ Christian theology identifies God with the supreme being to its peril, for “being” is first and foremost “immunity to time,” and that which is immune to time has no history and cannot be narrated.¹¹⁵ Jenson therefore proposes to correct the concept of being in light of the gospel, and thus

111. Roland J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., in their introduction to a book they also co-edited, *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p. 5.

112. The term is from F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), p. 9.

113. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, p. 301.

114. The term “radicalizer” comes from Sanders’s typology of approaches to Rahner’s Rule in *The Image of the Immanent Trinity*, pp. 6–7.

115. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1:209–10.

to formulate his doctrine of God along the lines of a “revisionary metaphysics.”¹¹⁶

Theology fulfills its remit for Jenson only by attending to the narrative by which God identifies himself: “the phrase ‘Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’ is simultaneously a very compressed telling of the total narrative by which scripture identifies God and a personal name for the God so specified.”¹¹⁷ The various biblical texts cohere because “they have seen one chief agent throughout.”¹¹⁸ God is the one who brings Israel out of Egypt and Jesus out of the grave. Jenson here makes a crucial conceptual move “from the biblical God’s self-identification by events in time to his identification *with* those events” and acknowledges that “the whole argument of the work depends on this move.”¹¹⁹ If God were identified *by* the resurrection without being identified *with* it, Jenson reasons, the event would be a clue to God but not a revelation: “God is what happens between Jesus and his Father in their Spirit.”¹²⁰ Specifically, God is his dynamic activities, not a static essence. Better, the one God is an event with three agencies: “That Christ has the divine nature means that he is one of the three whose mutuality is the divine life, who live the history that God is.”¹²¹

The God of the gospel is a history, not a perduring essence that is immune to what happens in time. By identifying God *with* the narrative of Jesus Christ, Jenson again radicalizes Rahner’s Rule. Jenson’s revisionary “metaphysics of the gospel” makes Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection constitutive of the being of God. And, because the narrative with which God is identified is ultimately about his history with humanity, God ultimately identifies himself in relation to his people (Israel; the church). In this event of God’s being is love: God’s choice not to be who he is without us.¹²²

116. Jenson “A Reply” [to Paul Molnar] *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52 (1999), p. 132.

117. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1:46. Fred Sanders notes that Jenson admits the possibility of the counterfactual hypothetical – “What if God had not created?” – and hence the possibility that God would still be who he is without the world, but then goes on to ignore it (Sanders, *Image of the Immanent Trinity*, p. 110).

118. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1:58.

119. *Ibid.*, p. 59. Jenson criticizes Eastern Orthodoxy, and especially Palamas, for suggesting that God himself is “above the biblical narrative, which applies only to his activities” (p. 153).

120. *Ibid.*

121. *Ibid.*, p. 138. The deity of Christ is for Jenson not a timeless proposition but an (eschatological) outcome of Jesus’ narrative, and only so “eternal.”

122. For a sympathetic and critical appraisal of this point, see David B. Hart, “The Lively God of Robert Jenson,” *First Things*, no. 156 (Oct. 2005), pp. 28–34.

The result of Jenson's fateful move – reducing the immanent to the economic Trinity – is that it compromises God's freedom to be himself apart from his creating and saving work.¹²³ In this regard, it is telling that Jenson rejects the notion of the *logos asarkos*, that is, the idea that there exists an eternal Son of God apart from the history of Jesus.¹²⁴ It follows that Jenson cannot say "that Jesus as such is one of the trinitarian hypostases without blurring the distinction between God *in se* and God acting for us *ad extra*."¹²⁵ The question, then, is whether and to what extent events in history – in particular the death of Jesus – effectively determine God's nature and identity, the What and the Who.

The crucified Trinity?

Jürgen Moltmann turns the soteriological question upside down in *The Crucified God* by asking not "what does the cross mean for us?" but rather "what does the cross mean for God?"¹²⁶ His answer is now well known; it means that Christ's death is an inner-trinitarian event in which the Father suffers the death of his Son: "In the cross, Father and Son are most deeply separated in forsakenness and at the same time are most inwardly one in their surrender."¹²⁷ Only such an interpretation can explain how God can be God in the godless, evil present.¹²⁸ Writing in the ashen fallout of Auschwitz, Moltmann wants nothing to do with the all-powerful overlord of Christian theism. God is not an absolute sovereign – monotheism leads to the monarchical all-determining reality whose power makes him responsible for evil too – but a fellow sufferer: "The sole omnipotence which God possesses is the almighty power of suffering love ... This is the essence of divine sovereignty."¹²⁹ God is not a lord over the

123. See Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) p. 115, and esp. Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, pp. 71–3.

124. See Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 138–41.

125. Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, p. 72.

126. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*. Note that Moltmann also figures prominently in the "relational" and "panentheist" sections to follow.

127. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

128. "For a God who lets the innocent suffer and who permits senseless death is not worthy to be called God at all" (Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 47).

129. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 31.

world but a lover alongside it, able to be affected by (but not unilaterally to affect) his creation. To say otherwise – to ascribe omnipotence and impassibility to God – is to make God the opponent of human freedom.¹³⁰

Moltmann continues to criticize the theistic tradition, together with its “apathy” axiom, in *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* by further developing the theme of God’s “passion.”¹³¹ He locates a third position between the alternatives of God’s essential incapacity for suffering and his fateful subjection to suffering: God’s voluntary, *active* suffering.¹³² History is the stage on which Father, Son, and Spirit act and suffer as part of the process of redemption. Only the economic Trinity seems to count for Moltmann: the interpersonal relations of the persons of the Trinity in history *are* the divine essence; the historical event of the crucifixion is God’s eternal being.

What comes into view in the Trinitarian history is nothing less than the kingdom of God. This kingdom has nothing to do with God’s domination of the world but rather with the rule of love. In the passion of the Son and the pouring out of the Spirit, God shows the extent to which his own history is tied up with world history. Indeed, the mutual relationships between Father, Son, and Spirit are so inclusive that the whole of world history gets taken up into the divine life. God incorporates even god-forsakenness – the opposition to God’s kingdom displayed by the cross – in a triune embrace of suffering love. God is a community “open to the world” who experiences the world within his own triune life. It is at this point that Moltmann collapses the distinction between the economic and the immanent Trinity.¹³³ If God truly has a history with and an experience of the world, then his relation to the world becomes part of who God is.

Many theologians who otherwise welcome the return of the doctrine of the Trinity here begin to worry that, while something important has indeed been recovered, something equally important has

130. Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) p. 23.

131. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, ch. 2.

132. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

133. Moltmann is explicit about this: “In order to grasp the death of the Son in its significance for God himself, I found myself bound to surrender the traditional distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity, according to which the cross comes to stand only in the economy of salvation, but not within the immanent Trinity” (Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom of God*, p. 160).

also been lost: "The difficulty with this view is that it ties God to his relationship to the world and makes the world a contributory factor to the ultimate nature of God. God is therefore not Father, Son, and Holy Spirit without this relationship and reciprocity between himself and the world."¹³⁴ If the way God acts in history constitutes God's identity, then the distinction between "God for us" and "God in himself" becomes a moot point. The question then becomes: could God have acted otherwise? What is at stake is nothing less than divine freedom and transcendence.

Moltmann understands the issue, and the stakes, yet he refuses the alternative between necessity and freedom with respect to God's choice. Because God is love, "his liberty cannot consist of loving or of not loving."¹³⁵ On the contrary, God's compassionate involvement in the world is an expression of his nature, and so transcends the freedom/necessity dichotomy itself: "Love *has* to give ..."¹³⁶ This leads Moltmann to contrast his own position with classical theism, and its notion of divine aseity, once more: "The notion of an immanent Trinity in which God is simply by himself, without the love that communicates salvation, brings an arbitrary element into the concept of God which means a break-up of the Christian concept."¹³⁷ According to Moltmann's radical interpretation of Rahner's Rule, the economic Trinity does not simply reveal the immanent Trinity; "it also has a retroactive effect on it."¹³⁸

Moltmann's critics fault his tendency to erode divine transcendence and aseity: "In the case of Moltmann, the immanent Trinity seems to be robbed of reality, becoming a passive product of an historical process. His purpose ... is to preserve the 'openness' of the trinitarian life for man. The result is a Trinity so open as to be threatened with loss of transcendence by being dependent upon the contingencies of history."¹³⁹ One wonders whether the cost of affirming

134. John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 51.

135. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 151.

136. *Ibid.*, p. 33 (my emphasis).

137. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

138. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

139. Roger Olson, "Trinity and Eschatology: The Historical Being of God in Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983), pp. 221–2. For an account of Moltmann's attempts to reframe the issue, and thus escape the critique, in terms of the "doxological Trinity," see the discussion in Sanders, *The Image of the Immanent Trinity*, pp. 95–7.

suffering love is to abandon the notion of God's sovereign love, and whether the cost of affirming God's real relation to the world is to deny his real independence from it. It would be ironic if Moltmann transcends the necessity/freedom dichotomy only to imprison us in a new dichotomy that opposes "God is love" to "God is lord."

What the "second coming" of Trinitarian theology has lost, in short, appears to be the fatherhood of God.¹⁴⁰ It is ironic that, while works on the Trinity have increased, comparable studies on the first person of the Trinity have decreased: "The doctrine of God the Father ... has ceased to be normative across a wide spectrum of Christian theology and in many of our churches."¹⁴¹ What makes the irony tragic is the likelihood that the recovery of Trinitarian theology may well be a causal factor in the demise of God's fatherhood. For, according to the tradition, it is pre-eminently God the Father who has life in himself (Jn. 5:26) and the thrust of the new orthodoxy is to inflate the economic Trinity precisely in order to call into question the aseity and impassibility of God. Instead of being "I am who I am" God becomes the "I am the one you make me to be."¹⁴² This skewed version of the divine name returns us to the question of God's being. Unless we resist collapsing the Father into the work of his two hands, Son and Spirit, it will be difficult to resist what Calvin thought to be the persistent temptation in religion, namely, to blur – or collapse altogether – the distinction between God and the world.¹⁴³

The relational turn

The recovery of the doctrine of the Trinity has sent theologians back to the ontological drawing board, raising anew questions about the extent to which relatedness is as central to God's being as absoluteness. Those who have made the relational turn reject the distinction between "beings" as individual substances for whom relations are incidental in favor of being as "the medium of relation between

140. I owe much of the material in this paragraph to Gary Badcock's "Whatever Happened to God the Father?" *Crux* 36, no. 3 (Sept. 2000), pp. 2–12.

141. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

142. *Ibid.*, p. 5. Badcock observes yet another layer of irony: "there can be no real renewal of the doctrines of the Son or Spirit in our time which is not accompanied by a healthier doctrine of God the Father than we currently possess" (p. 11).

143. Calvin, *Inst.* I.10–11.

self and other.”¹⁴⁴ After the turn to relationality, the universe looks less like a conglomeration of separate substances and more like an interactive community: “In the beginning was relation.”¹⁴⁵

The philosophical categories that dominated medieval and early modern Western theology led to a description of the divine nature as “a rational causative substance.”¹⁴⁶ “Substance” is the core notion; everything else – materiality, immateriality, human, non-human, etc. – is a qualification. For Aristotle, a thing’s relatedness pertains to its being-towards (*pros ti*) something. That *x* is in some relation to *y* is informative, and may even be an important ingredient in our knowledge of *x*, but it does not, for Aristotle and the subsequent tradition of substance metaphysics, tell us anything about what *x* essentially is.¹⁴⁷

The situation in late modernity has changed dramatically. Disciplines from theoretical physics (viz., Einstein’s Theory of Relativity) to popular psychology have replaced substances, rational or otherwise, with relations: “But in reality relationships are just as primal as the things themselves. ‘Thing’ and ‘relation’ are complementary modes of appearance.”¹⁴⁸ The turn to relationality is particularly evident in philosophical anthropology: after pursuing Socrates’ adage “know thyself” for some thirty years, Ricoeur came to the conclusion that there is no knowledge of self without knowledge of the other. Indeed, the “other” belongs to the very structure of selfhood.¹⁴⁹ Late moderns are more inclined to think of wholes rather than separate parts, of communities rather than individuals, of ecosystems rather than single species.

The problem with the concept of individual substances is that they are essentially unrelated to other substances; but this is true neither of organisms nor sub-atomic particles, both of which exist in various

144. Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, p. xvii.

145. Martin Buber, as cited in Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 11.

146. Shults, *Reforming the Doctrine of God*, p. 5.

147. Aristotle included “relation” as one of his ten fundamental categories, that is, as one of the ten types of predication one could make with regard to something (*Categories* 1b25). For a fuller discussion, see Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), pp. 12–21.

148. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 11. Cf. Clark Pinnock: “There has been a shift from substantialist to relational categories in modern times. We now understand the world as an interrelated process” (Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001], p. 120).

149. See Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, tr. Kathleen Blamey (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

kinds of “fields of force” – everything from the physical and chemical to the familial and political. No entity would be what it is (i.e., a concrete becoming) apart from its relatedness to everything else. It is therefore difficult to maintain the distinction between “internal” or essential relations and “external” or accidental relations.¹⁵⁰ What we may dub the “Relationist’s Rule” turns Rahner’s Trinitarian formula into a generalization: “the economic (i.e., external) relations are the immanent (i.e., internal) relations and the immanent relations are the economic relations.” We shall return to this point in due course. Theology has its own reason for espousing relationality, however, and to this we now turn.

Persons as relations: the social God

In modern Trinitarian theology, the unity of the Trinity consists “not in the identity of an absolute subject but in the living *koinonia*, the community, among three distinct divine persons.”¹⁵¹ Moltmann sets forth a “social doctrine” of the Trinity according to which God’s very being is an inclusive, open fellowship of love.¹⁵² God’s unity is *community*: each of the divine persons is who he is only in relation to the other two. Moltmann claims that he is simply recovering the ancient doctrine of perichoresis, which understands each of the three persons in terms of its interpenetration by and indwelling with the other two: “This trinitarian hermeneutics leads us to think in terms of relationships and communities; it supersedes the subjective thinking which cannot work without the separation and isolation of its objects.”¹⁵³ Both the Aristotelian “substance” and the Cartesian “subject” metaphysics can only be done away with “by means of a relational metaphysics, based on the mutual relativity of human beings and the world.”¹⁵⁴

150. *Internal* relations are those without which an entity would no longer be what it is (e.g., Father/Son), from *external* relations where two entities could each be what it is independently of its relation to the other (e.g., a book would still be a book and a table a table whether or not the former was “lying on” the latter). See G. E. Moore, “External and Internal Relations,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 20 (1919–20), pp. 40–62.

151. Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 207.

152. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 19.

153. *Ibid.*

154. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 50.

Moltmann believes that Western theologians, including Barth, ultimately treat God as a single subject. Such monotheism leads inevitably to a monarchical model where God as supreme subject is over – and in some sense, in opposition to – the world. Perichoresis suggests another way of viewing the God–world relation: if God is as it were an “open society,” then perhaps the world too enters into the divine fellowship? This is precisely what Moltmann believes the gospel – the history of the Trinity as the coming of the kingdom of God into the world (and vice versa) – proclaims.

John Zizioulas’s *Being as Communion* is perhaps the most compelling study of the relational nature of personhood to date. It radically rethinks the nature of persons by starting from the doctrine of the Trinity, particularly as developed in Eastern patristic theology by the Cappadocians: “The creation of this ontology was perhaps the greatest philosophical achievement of patristic thought,” even though it was forgotten.¹⁵⁵ On the traditional Western view, “being” is prior to personhood. “Personal” or “impersonal” are qualifications of something more basic: namely, substance. The Greek Fathers, by contrast, viewed personhood as a basic ontological concept, not a predicate that qualifies something prior (i.e., substance).¹⁵⁶

The person (*hypostasis*) of the Father is thus prior to God’s being; it is the Father’s freedom – begetting the Son; breathing the Spirit – that is “constitutive of His Substance.”¹⁵⁷ The Father is not a solitary individual, however, but the origin of the Godhead inasmuch as he freely wills not to be without his Son and Spirit: “There is no God prior to or apart from or above the Father as person, and there is no Father-person apart from eternal communion between Father and Son and Holy Spirit.”¹⁵⁸ The three persons are related yet distinct; each stands in a unique relation to the others (begetting, begotten, spiration). God’s being is a consequence of his personhood, not the other way around, and personhood is a matter of relationships, not of self-enclosed substances. God “is” not because this is his nature

155. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), p. 16.

156. The Cappadocians strengthened the Greek notion of *prosopon* (the mask worn by actors) and the Latin notion of *persona* (the role a Roman would play in society) by associating them with *hypostasis*, which had previously been a synonym of *ousia* (substance, being).

157. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 46.

158. Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), p. 114.

but because the Father *wills* to be (“I am that I am”). God’s being is the interpersonal relationality – in a word, love, the “event of communion.”¹⁵⁹ Hence the Zizioulas Dictum: “the one substance of God coincides with the communion of the three persons.”¹⁶⁰

An ontology that begins with the doctrine of the Trinity holds that the “one” does not precede the “many” but “requires the ‘many’ from the start in order to exist.”¹⁶¹ A person is therefore more than an individual substance: *to be is to be in relation*. Zizioulas, Moltmann, and other contemporary Trinitarians agree that this relational understanding of personhood has important implications for anthropology (and ecclesiology) given humanity’s creation in the image of God’s own triune being-as-communion. As bearers of God’s image, humans should respond to the injunction “Be as God is!” by participating in mutual, reciprocal, and non-hierarchical relations of giving and self-giving.¹⁶²

God’s being is relational. Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct persons who nevertheless have their particular identity not as isolated individuals but only in relation to one another. Moltmann puts this notion of perichoresis to innovative use, however, when he says that humans participate in God’s nature/being/*koinonia*. The God-world relation, we may recall, is not spatial (above and below) but historical, for the gospel is ultimately about the history of the three divine persons in the world for the sake of the world. Moltmann understands the Trinity in terms of social relations or a fellowship of love and then expands this love to include the world: “we shall try to think *ecologically* about God, man and the world in their relationships and indwellings.”¹⁶³ It follows (for Moltmann, at least) that if there is fellowship between God and the world, then God and the world must be in “mutual perichoresis.”¹⁶⁴

159. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 15. See also Zizioulas, “On Being a Person: Toward an Ontology of Personhood,” in Colin Gunton (ed.), *Persons: Divine and Human* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), pp. 33–46.

160. *Ibid.*, p. 134. The term “Zizioulas Dictum” comes from Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, p. 142.

161. Zizioulas, “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution,” in Christoph Schwöbel (ed.), *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), p. 49.

162. Miroslav Volf, “Being as God is: Trinity and Generosity,” in Volf and Welker, eds. *God’s Life in Trinity*.

163. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 19.

164. Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 327. We shall critically examine this claim in the following chapter.

Relational theism

In light of the preceding, it comes as no surprise that one commentator speaks not simply of the turn to but the *triumph* of relationality in Trinitarian theology.¹⁶⁵ At the end of the twentieth century, theologians awoke (with a groan?) to find their world, and ontology, relational.

Terence Fretheim and Walter Brueggemann And not only theologians. Terence Fretheim, an Old Testament scholar, develops his own understanding of God and world in terms of a relational theology of creation, citing Moltmann's statement that "in reality relationships are just as primal as the things themselves."¹⁶⁶ Relatedness was a central biblical theme long before it showed up in metaphysics, Fretheim argues, recalling the title of the first major chapter in Walter Eichrodt's *Theology of the Old Testament*: "The Covenant Relationship." Fretheim himself thinks that covenant is ultimately an inadequate category with which to characterize the God-Israel relationship and makes the fateful decision to begin instead with the abstract notion of a "real and genuine relationship of integrity": "Covenant language will ultimately be a part of that discussion, but ... studies of relationship must be much more comprehensive."¹⁶⁷

Fretheim discovers three distinct categories of relationality in the Old Testament: the relationality basic to the very nature of God and to all reality; the relationality that characterizes God's interactions with his world; and the relationality that characterizes God's history with Israel in particular. Despite the ambiguity that attends his second category (what *sort* of relationship is it?), he concludes that "God works from *within* a committed relationship with the world and not on the world from without in total freedom."¹⁶⁸

Walter Brueggemann, another Old Testament theologian, further develops this relational theism in an anthropological direction: "the human person is a *person in relation to Yahweh*, who lives in an intense mutuality with Yahweh."¹⁶⁹ Indeed, human beings may "impact Yahweh in ways that cause Yahweh to be different from the way

165. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, ch. 4.

166. Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), p. 298, n. 61.

167. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

168. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

169. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 453.

Yahweh was prior to the contact.”¹⁷⁰ Fretheim and Brueggemann are representative of those who, upon discovering the extent to which God becomes genuinely involved with humanity, find it difficult to go on affirming the classical divine attributes (e.g., omnipotence, immutability, impassibility). God cannot be both love and lord simultaneously, or so the thinking seems to go.

Catherine Mowry LaCugna The recovery of the doctrine of the Trinity, together with the related theme of being as communion, has led some systematic theologians to rethink their most basic categories for conceptualizing God. The trend in much contemporary theology is to suggest that *it is relationality all the way down*: “Relationality – a social-psychological concept – is becoming the key for unlocking newer understandings of the divine life.”¹⁷¹ The crucial question for relational theism, however, is “Which relations?” Is God’s nature, identity, and personhood a function of God’s relations *ad intra* (the interpersonal life of the immanent Trinity), *ad extra* (the interaction of the economic Trinity in and with the world), or both? “Strong” relational theists claim that “the relationality God experiences through Christ’s saving relationship to the world is constitutive of trinitarian relations proper. God’s relations *ad extra* become God’s relations *ad intra*.”¹⁷²

Catherine Mowry LaCugna exemplifies strong relational theism. Her *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* turns away from abstract speculation about the immanent Trinity to pursue a more edifying project: knowing the God who is “for us” in Christ through the Spirit. She dismisses the notion that God in himself (*ad intra*) is “more real” than the God who stoops, shows, and saves in the economy (*ad extra*).¹⁷³ Indeed, it was precisely speculation on the immanent Trinity and God’s inner life – God’s *self-relatedness* – that led the church fathers to become obsessed with notions of divine perfection and impassibility, twin concepts that made it difficult for those at Nicea to conceive how Jesus, given his suffering, could nevertheless be God in the flesh.

LaCugna dismisses divine self-sufficiency as a philosophical myth and defines the love that characterizes God’s being as by

170. *Ibid.*, p. 410.

171. Peters, *God as Trinity*, p. 15.

172. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

173. LaCugna distinguishes between *theologia*, the attempt to speak of God as he is in himself, and *oikonomia*, God as he reveals himself in redemption.

nature “outgoing and self-giving.”¹⁷⁴ God’s being is interpersonal and relational. In the words of one commentator: “Following the Cappadocians, LaCugna argues that relationality and mutuality are at the heart of divine being.”¹⁷⁵ The doctrine of God here becomes inseparable from soteriology. Note, too, that perichoresis now pertains not to an “intradivine communion” but rather to the divine life “as all creatures partake and literally exist in it.”¹⁷⁶

LaCugna forbids theology to “theorize about God as if God were *not* in relationship” with the world.¹⁷⁷ With this move, she in effect rules out all talk of the immanent Trinity: “an ‘immanent’ Trinitarian theology of God is nothing more than a theology of the economy of salvation.”¹⁷⁸ The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately not a teaching about God *per se* but about “God’s life with us and our life with each other.”¹⁷⁹ Note that the turn to relationality here ends up relocating the concept of perichoresis away from its original home – in the immanent Trinity – towards the doctrines of creation and redemption (i.e., the God-world relation broadly conceived).

Elizabeth Johnson Not all relational theists are so quick to abandon the immanent Trinity. Elizabeth Johnson insists that “God’s relation to the world is grounded in God’s own being capable of such relation.”¹⁸⁰ She nevertheless is concerned that the symbol of God function in a liberating way, one that does not exclude women: “the symbol of God functions as the primary symbol of the whole religious system, the ultimate point of reference for understanding experience, life, and the world. Hence the way in which a faith community shapes language about God implicitly represents what it takes to be the highest good.”¹⁸¹ She worries that the traditional symbol of God

174. LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 353.

175. Mark S. Medley, *Imago Trinitatis: Towards a Relational Understanding of Becoming Human* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), p. 40.

176. LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 274.

177. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

178. *Ibid.*, p. 224, her italics. Grenz dubs this moratorium on the concept of the immanent Trinity “the LaCugna corollary” to Rahner’s Rule (Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, p. 152). Fred Sanders observes: “In LaCugna’s theological project, a fully developed polemic against the notion of the immanent Trinity comes to articulation for perhaps the first time in twentieth-century theology” (*The Image of the Immanent Trinity*, p. 117).

179. LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 228, her italics.

180. Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 201.

181. *Ibid.*, p. 4. “The symbol of God functions” is Johnson’s oft-used shorthand way of calling attention to the connection between the way we speak of God

as sovereign is a construction of the patriarchal imagination and, as such, that it is complicit with certain forms of social oppression. We need ways of naming God that highlight the mutuality and relationality at the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity: "The ontological priority of relation in the idea of the triune God has a powerful affinity with women's ownership of relationality as a way of being in the world."¹⁸²

"She who is" is Johnson's proposed translation of God's name disclosed to Moses through the burning bush (Ex. 3:15). The feminine image is drawn from women's experience, to be sure, though Johnson insists that God is neither male nor female. All human attempts to "name" God ultimately depend on and arise from human experience of God's saving activity.¹⁸³

Johnson originally intended to follow the traditional pattern of beginning with *De Deo Uno*, but this intention got "subverted" by "feminist consciousness."¹⁸⁴ She begins instead with the Spirit, "the creative and freeing power of God let loose in the world,"¹⁸⁵ and links "spirit" to "Wisdom," the Hebrew Scriptures' image for the personification of God's active presence in the world. Lady Wisdom is in fact the key to understanding the Trinity, for Jesus is ultimately the incarnation of Sophia, a particular historical manifestation of the loving, creative Spirit of God that is everywhere at work in the world. Instead of "Father" Johnson speaks of Mother-Sophia. This image connects to women's life-giving experience of childbirth. The point of this feminist reimagining of the Trinity is to overturn the traditional picture of a self-enclosed sovereign God.¹⁸⁶ In its place Johnson unfolds a vision of God as the relational, dynamic, mystery of love: "In the end, the Trinity provides a symbolic picture of totally shared life at the heart of the universe ... The Trinity as pure

and the way we treat others (such as women, the poor). *Lex loquendi, lex agendi* one might say (the law of speaking is the law of acting).

182. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

183. Note that relational ontology serves as Johnson's warrant for what is ultimately an experiential theology.

184. Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 121.

185. *Ibid.*, p. 83. See also Geoffrey Lampe's *God as Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), which similarly argues that the biblical concept of the indwelling of God is rooted in universal human experience.

186. Note that this "reimagining" is a far cry from "remythologizing." Whereas Johnson feels free to substitute new images/metaphors for biblical ones, remythologizing seeks understanding precisely by pursuing the ontological implications of the latter.

relationality ... epitomizes the connectedness of all that exists in the universe.”¹⁸⁷

Johnson finds the most helpful human analogy for understanding the triune relationality in the experience of human friendship: “Friendship is the most free, the least possessive, the most mutual of relationships ... Mature friendship is open to the inclusion of others in the circle, assuming an essential stance of hospitality.”¹⁸⁸ Friendship characterizes not only God’s relations *ad intra*, but also his relations *ad extra* with the world: Jesus-Sophia is “the incarnation of divine friendship.”¹⁸⁹ To see the God-world relation through the metaphor of friendship “has deep affinity with women’s experience” and corresponds to several biblical themes.¹⁹⁰

It is difficult to escape the impression that human experience here serves as the interpretative framework for the being of God rather than vice versa. Johnson’s critics, at least, charge her with “naming God from the matrix of women’s experience,” thus collapsing theology into anthropology.¹⁹¹ The remythologizing approach to theology to be developed in Parts II and III moves in the opposite direction, letting the biblical *mythos* specify the meaning of such human experiences of love and relationality rather than letting experience, of women or any other human constituency, serve as a hermeneutic for making sense of God.

“Open” theism The rubric of relational theism also covers the position of several North American evangelical theologians who have expressed dissatisfaction with the classical theistic picture, in part because they subscribe to the theory of theology’s “fall” into Hellenistic philosophy.¹⁹² That pagan metaphysical inheritance makes it impossible, they believe, to do justice to the genuine give-and-take interaction between God and his people depicted throughout the Bible. They single out Aquinas’s aforementioned comparison of God to a stone pillar as proof that he denies God’s “real” relation to creation: “Classical theism’s root metaphor of motion with God

187. Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 222.

188. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

189. *Ibid.*

190. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

191. Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, p. 10.

192. In addition to the essays in Pincock et al., *The Openness of God*, see Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks*.

as the non-relating pillar around which we move makes it difficult to speak of a God who covenants with humanity and who makes humans significant partners in the building of the kingdom.”¹⁹³ The “openness” or “free-will” theist insists, by way of contrast, that God enters into dynamic relationships with human creatures that freely respond, either in accordance with or in opposition to God’s will and gracious initiatives. As to what constitutes a “real” relation, however, openness theologians display no little confusion, misunderstanding what Aquinas is saying.¹⁹⁴

Open theism is the by-product of an evangelical tradition that puts a premium on being biblical. Open theists object to what they see as traditional theism’s imposition of a foreign metaphysical (and hermeneutical) scheme onto the plain sense of biblical texts that pertain to God’s feelings, intentions, actions, and reactions – in short, to God’s responsiveness to all that humans freely say and do. Open theists want to take biblical metaphors that describe God’s give-and-take relationship with the world (e.g., God’s grieving, repenting, and suffering) “more seriously,” neither demythologizing nor literalizing them. They want to take them as anthropomorphic metaphors that mean more or less what they say.¹⁹⁵ What is at stake is the genuineness of God’s loving relation to the world: “God’s openness means that God is open to the changing realities of history.”¹⁹⁶

Two primary convictions drive open theism: (1) love is the most important quality of God; (2) love involves not only caring but responsiveness, not only giving but *receiving*.¹⁹⁷ Love exists in reciprocal relation with another. Furthermore, open theists maintain that God’s love is commensurate with God’s decision to limit himself – “to

193. John Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, p. 87. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 13, 7.

194. Weinandy explains that “real” relations are ontological, based on something real the two relata have in common. In God, only the relations of the three persons to one another are “real” in this sense (*Does God Suffer?* pp. 129–38).

195. Pinnock comments: “I do not take every biblical metaphor literally but I do try to take them all seriously” (*Most Moved Mover*, p. 62). Pinnock avoids both agnosticism and literalism with regard to the biblical anthropomorphisms by affirming a real correspondence between the metaphors and God’s being yet denying a one-to-one correspondence. This is an admirable aim, though in my opinion openness exegesis is regularly subverted by their pre-supposed metaphysics of relationality.

196. Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *Openness of God*, p. 104.

197. Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in Pinnock (ed.), *Openness of God*, p. 15. Much hinges on the question of whether, and to what extent, love is essentially active rather than passive.

limit the exercise of coercive power out of respect for creaturely freedom”¹⁹⁸ and hence “to be conditioned by us.”¹⁹⁹ They further reason that if God does enter into loving relationships, then he “cannot be immutable in every respect, timelessly eternal, impassible ... The conventional attributes rise and fall together.”²⁰⁰ Love is precarious, and if love is God’s very nature, then God is open to being affected, even hurt: “God is unchanging in his nature but changes in his relations with us.”²⁰¹

The key openness assumption is that God’s love necessitates self-limitation: control has no place in genuine interpersonal relationships. Moreover, God’s self-limitation includes his mental life. God limits his knowledge of the future so that he does not know with certainty what human creatures will do with their freedom until they do it; for to know the future with certainty is to determine it.²⁰² God’s self-limitation in regard to creation also leads openness theologians to revise the traditional doctrine of providence, which must henceforth be regarded as “risky” rather than “risk-free.” God limits his power in order not to override human freedom; forcefully to cause or to coerce someone to do something against his or her will is the ultimate violation of genuine personal relationship. Divine sovereignty on the openness view amounts to God’s being extremely resourceful in working out his will, though always in cooperation with (at the mercy of?) human creatures.

Open theists acknowledge a certain asymmetry in the God-world relation: “God’s openness to the world is freely chosen, not compelled.”²⁰³ In this, they depart from process theologians who contend that God and the world are chained together in bonds of metaphysical necessity. The open theist treads a middle way between substance and process metaphysics: the way of voluntary relational

198. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, p. 147.

199. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, p. 280. C. John Collins classifies the openness view as a form of “limited theism,” that is, a view that no longer affirms God’s transcendence over time or his absolute sovereignty. See *The God of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God’s Action in the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), pp. 42–7.

200. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, p. 72; order slightly altered.

201. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

202. God is still omniscient in the sense that he knows all that there is (presently) to know, including future possibilities, but omniscience on the open plan is not as comprehensive as on the traditional model. For a critique of the openness view of divine omniscience, see Roy, *How Much Does God Foreknow?*

203. Pinnock, in *Openness of God*, p. 112.

ontology.²⁰⁴ The open view thus stresses divine sensitivity and vulnerability more than power and control: God “takes risks and jeopardizes his own sovereignty in order to engage in historical interactions with created reality.”²⁰⁵ Open theists insist that God’s glory is that of self-limiting love, not all-controlling power.²⁰⁶

At least one leading open theist, Clark Pinnock, depicts the God-world relationship with the metaphor of divine authorship: God is “the author of history who delights in meaningful interaction with creatures as his purposes for the world are realized.”²⁰⁷ Yet Pinnock takes back in a footnote what he gives in his text, for it becomes clear that the “author” is at best a co-author, a willing co-dependent: “God is not dependent on the world out of necessity but willingly, because he chose to create a world in which there would be mutuality and relational interdependence.”²⁰⁸ It is far from clear, however, that the implied divine ontology – God is both independent and dependent, author and co-author – is coherent.²⁰⁹

The panentheist gambit: children of a greater God

We are all panentheists now.²¹⁰

Relationality has become the key principle not only of personhood but also of a new metaphysical paradigm: panentheism.²¹¹ Whereas pantheism equates God and the world, panentheism stipulates that the world (*pan* = “all”) is *in* God (*en + theos*), even though God is in some sense greater than the world. The distinguishing feature of panentheism – marked by the preposition “in” – has less to do with

204. Pinnock believes this is related to a social trinitarian metaphysics for which God is ontologically other than the world but also ceaselessly relating and responsive to it.

205. Pinnock, *Openness of God*, p. 125.

206. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, p. 183.

207. Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” *Openness of God*, p. 125.

208. *Ibid.*, p. 194, n.49. The context of this comment concerns the distinction of openness from process theology.

209. Or genuinely biblical. See Stephen Williams, “More on Open Theism,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 22 (2004), pp. 32–50, esp. p. 49.

210. Gregory R. Peterson, “Whither Panentheism?” *Zygon* 36 (2002), p. 395.

211. “Panentheism is the result of conceiving ‘being’ in terms of relationship or relatedness” (Michael W. Brierley, “Naming a Quiet Revolution: The Panentheistic Turn in Modern Theology,” in Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke [eds.], *In Whom We Live and Move and Have our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004], p. 11).

literal location than with affirming the interdependence of God and world. Along with classical theism, pantheism and panentheism exhaust the logical possibilities for relating “God” and “world” inasmuch as the universe must be either “external to,” “coincidental with,” or “internal to” God respectively.²¹²

According to David Tracy, panentheism is the “one permanent achievement of modern theologies of God.”²¹³ Panentheism grasps the intrinsic relationality of God and all reality as does no other God-world picture. One critic has recently argued, however, that panentheism, far from being a discovery of modern theologians, is merely the new name for the Neoplatonist view that the universe emanates from and is encompassed by the divine One: “the One emanates the Mind, which emanates the World-Soul, which contains the world.”²¹⁴ If Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover is the “god of the philosophers,” then the panentheist tradition pertains to “the other God of the philosophers.”

Rethinking divine infinity: the “open Trinity”

Where ontotheology proceeds from the idea of perfection, panentheism takes its cue from the idea of infinity, or better, from the idea of the “true Infinite.” The true Infinite cannot be placed in opposition to the finite, for in so doing it would be limited by the finite and hence become something less than truly infinite.²¹⁵ Nicholas of Cusa argued that “a truly infinite (unlimited) being would have no place outside itself.”²¹⁶ True infinity “must include all of reality, for if it did not, some reality would be outside and other than Infinity.

212. See Nancy Frankenberry, “Classical Theism, Panentheism, and Pantheism: On the Relation between God Construction and Gender Construction,” *Zygon* 28 (1993), pp. 29–45.

213. David Tracy, “The Return of God in Contemporary Theology,” in *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics, and Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis and London: SCM, 1994), p. 41. For an evaluation of the diverse forms of contemporary panentheism, including those from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, see the excellent survey by Philip Clayton, “Panentheism Today: A Constructive Systematic Evaluation,” in Clayton and Peacocke, *In Whom We Live and Move*, pp. 249–64.

214. Cooper, *Panentheism*, p. 22. Charles Hartshorne popularized the term “panentheism” in the mid-twentieth century.

215. See Pannenberg, “The Problem of the Absolute,” in *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990) pp. 22–42.

and Clayton, *The Problem of God*, pp. 136–82, esp. p. 177.

216. Clayton, *Problem of God*, p. 168.

But that would limit Infinity, which is impossible by definition.”²¹⁷ Though God is other than all things, he is also their source: “If a being is absolutely infinite, then it can be limited by nothing; everything must be derivative from it (but in this sense also one with it).”²¹⁸ An impulse towards monism thus lies at the very heart of the concept of infinity: “there is no ‘outside God.’”²¹⁹ Only the doctrine of creation guarantees the ontological distinction between God and the world. Yet the idea of the true Infinite leads some to think of the finite not as set against but as “carved out” of the infinite: “God is the true Infinite who both transcends and includes finite reality.”²²⁰ This thought takes us to the very threshold of panentheism, according to which all is “in” God: “*Creatio ex nihilo* really amounts to *creatio ex Deo*.”²²¹ God, as true infinite, is not set over *against* the finite (as its other), but *around* it (as its ground).

A number of contemporary theologians – in particular, feminist, process, and those engaged in dialogue with science – who have recovered the doctrine of the Trinity and made the strong relational turn also subscribe to some form of panentheism.²²² Moltmann is a case in point, appealing to panentheism to unpack his concept of “the open Trinity.”²²³ As triune love, God invites the whole of world history into his perichoretic fellowship. This inclusion of the other into Godself is as free as it is necessary: “For God it is axiomatic to love, for he cannot deny himself.”²²⁴ Perichoresis here shades into panentheism: what began as a technical term for describing the inner-Trinitarian relations here blossoms into a structural principle for all reality.²²⁵

217. Cooper, paraphrasing Nicholas of Cusa, *Panentheism*, p. 53.

218. Clayton, *Problem of God*, p. 150.

219. *Ibid.*, p. 168. In Part II, I contrast the panentheist dismissal of “outside God” with Bakhtin’s notion of “outsideness.”

220. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), pp. 407–8.

221. Cooper, *Panentheism*, p. 63.

222. For example, Johnson, explicitly embraces panentheism as the best model for expressing the mutual indwelling of God and the world, and for preserving the feminist insight into the importance of free mutual relations (*She Who Is*, pp. 230–3).

223. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, pp. 94–6. Cf. Cooper, *Panentheism*, p. 237.

224. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

225. To be precise, Moltmann espouses an *eschatological* panentheism, for it is only at the end of history that God will dwell in the world and the world in God, such that “God will be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).

Moltmann's doctrine of creation follows from his view of the open Trinity as a true infinite. As love, God wants to communicate himself to what is other than himself: "That is why the idea of the world is already inherent in the Father's love for the Son."²²⁶ Creation thus implies self-limitation whereby the infinite God makes room for the world by withdrawing into himself.²²⁷ Moltmann explores the Jewish kabbalistic doctrine of *zimsum* or "contraction."²²⁸ What is fascinating for our purposes is his characterization of this act – a self-withdrawal of God from himself into himself – as *passio*, not *actio*: "every act outwards is preceded by an act inwards which makes the 'outwards' possible ... God acts on himself when he acts creatively ... His action is grounded in his passion."²²⁹

Process panentheism: involuntary metaphysical relationality

The best-known form of panentheism in the twentieth century is process theology. Its philosophical architect, Alfred North Whitehead, sought a comprehensive metaphysical system that made positive use of Darwinian and Einsteinian science, hence focusing on events rather than substances and on becoming rather than being.²³⁰ Whitehead construed the God-world relation as an organic society. God creatively presents actual entities with ideal possibilities that, if chosen, lead to those entities' greater enjoyment. Whitehead's God is "di-polar": God has an eternal nature (the ground of all ideal possibilities) and a temporal existence (the internalized history of all experiences in the world).²³¹ God's temporal existence is both shaped and limited by how worldly entities respond to his invitations to choose some possibilities rather than others.

Whitehead's is an all-embracing relational and evolutionary metaphysics in which both God and world develop. Two points are especially noteworthy. First, the same metaphysical categories that

226. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 108.

227. See Moltmann, "God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World," in John Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), pp. 137–51.

228. Moltmann draws upon the thought of Isaac Luria in particular. See *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, pp. 109–11.

229. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 110.

230. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* corrected edition ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978).

231. In Whitehead's terms: God has a primordial and a consequent nature.

explain events in the world (e.g., becoming; actual occasions) also explain God and his relation to the world. There is a sense, then, in which process philosophy represents a new ontotheology, with “becoming” replacing “being” as the overarching category. Second, God’s relationship with the world is *involuntary*. Indeed, towards the end of his *Process and Reality* Whitehead states: “It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God.”²³² No stone column here, just a cosmic dancing partner.

Many theologians find resources in process thought with which to recover Christian truths in a new philosophical key. As Aquinas both built on and corrected Aristotle’s metaphysics so as to bring it more into line with biblical revelation, so theologians like Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, and David Ray Griffin both borrow from and amend Whitehead’s process categories. They contend that process metaphysics provides a superior conceptual framework to that of classical theism because it makes better sense of the Bible’s depictions of God.²³³

One of the hallmarks of process panentheism is its insistence that all entities have a degree of creativity or power of self-determination. Worldly entities are not passive substances in the hands of an angry God or, for that matter, an *agape* God, but active agents who have the power to frustrate God’s intentions for them. Whereas the God of classical theism is a unilateral do-gooder, the God of process panentheism is di-polar, the source of creativity *and* a subject who responds. In a word, God is creative-responsive love. It is precisely because God’s love is persuasive rather than coercive that there is evil in the world: creatures with a measure of self-determination can resist God’s overtures. No event in the universe is wholly an act of God alone. Even the incarnation of the logos required the cooperation of the humanity of Jesus.

232. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 348.

233. John Cobb writes: “Process theists are deeply concerned to think in a way that is continuous with the Bible. It is the greater continuity of process metaphysics with biblical categories that has attracted them” (“Introduction,” John B. Cobb and Clark H. Pinnock [eds.], *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000], p. xiii). See also David Ray Griffin’s remark that “the issue of this book is whether process theology or classical free will theism provides a better framework for interpreting and defending Christianity’s gospel” (“Process Theology and the Christian Good News: A Response to Classical Free Will Theism,” in Cobb and Pinnock [eds.], *Searching for an Adequate God*, p. 1).

Process theologians believe that classical theism's emphasis on divine sovereignty threatens the reality of human freedom and is unable to account for the existence of evil. Process panentheism, by contrast, lays out an interactive model in which God is the "creative participant and leader" of a cosmic community.²³⁴ Panentheism provides the metaphysical infrastructure that supports the cultural turn to relationality: "fundamental to process thought is a recognition of the ecological interdependence of all entities. Here there is no dualism of soul and body and no sharp separation between the human and the non-human."²³⁵ God is still the "most perfect being" in the process scheme, but perfection is here a function of God's supreme relativity (i.e., God is the greatest entity because God is related to all other entities and is thus able to influence, though not determine, their futures). God's power, similarly, is great, but it is evocative rather than efficacious, influential rather than causal. It follows that process panentheists are unable to confess belief in God's absolute victory over evil; eschatology is hostage to evolutionary history.

As to divine action, process panentheism describes God's work as creator and redeemer "within a single conceptual scheme ... [for creation] and redemption are two aspects of a single continuing divine activity."²³⁶ "Word" and "Spirit" are the biblical designations for God's di-polar nature, namely, the eternal source of possibilities and the consequent experience of God in and with the world: "The Spirit is God working from within both human life and the natural world."²³⁷ Despite this mention of the Spirit, it is significant that process panentheists typically gloss over God the Father, and hence the doctrine of the Trinity as a whole. And this leads to a concern about the necessary safeguards for God's transcendence. To what extent is the "leader" dependent on the cosmic community of which he is ultimately a member? "Are not God and creatures thus both subordinate to an overarching cosmic process so that one ends up with pancosmism, the unity of a cosmic process, rather than panentheism?"²³⁸

234. Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: History and Contemporary Issues* rev. and expanded edn. (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), p. 322.

235. *Ibid.*, p. 324.

236. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

237. *Ibid.*, p. 332.

238. Joseph A. Bracken, "Panentheism from a Trinitarian Perspective," *Horizons* 22/1 (1995), p. 11.

Kenotic panentheism: voluntary metaphysical relationality

If there were one divine act that might qualify as non-relational, it would surely be creation *ex nihilo*. Panentheists disagree. To create, God had to make a space “within” himself and hence retract his being. Moltmann goes further, speaking of creation as a necessary stage in God’s self-communication as love and describing it in terms of divine self-limitation or *kenosis*: “The divine kenosis which begins with the creation of the world reaches its perfected and completed form in the incarnation of the Son . . . The *outward incarnation* presupposes *inward self-humiliation*.”²³⁹ God must decrease, one might say, so that creation can increase (cf. Jn. 3:30).

Theologians who advocate a distinctly Christian version of panentheism find *kenosis* to be a congenial concept, though strictly speaking it belongs in christology, its proper dogmatic home.²⁴⁰ The apostle Paul uses the term in Philippians 2:7 where he speaks of the “self-emptying” (*ekenosen*) of the Son, the key condition of his becoming human and dying on the cross. The crucial point for our purposes is that Christ’s self-emptying was voluntary: for our sakes he became “poor” (2 Cor. 8:9). In similar, though generalized, fashion, panentheists argue that God, in order to create, voluntarily exercised self-restraint, especially in the realm of power and knowledge, in order to accord creatures the “room” to be themselves. This involves respecting both the integrity of the process of nature and the free decisions of human beings.²⁴¹ *Kenosis*, in the context of panentheism, refers to God’s self-contraction and self-limitation, especially with regard to omnipotence and omniscience, in order to create something other than himself. The argument, briefly, is that

239. Moltmann, *Trinity*, p. 118–19.

240. Sarah Coakley observes that contemporary panentheists employ *kenosis* in a “generalized” sense and are somewhat indifferent to its original christological meaning. The early church understood the Logos to take on flesh, incurring for himself the limitations of human life, yet *without* any loss of divine characteristics: “It is the taking on of flesh, rather than the abandonment of any aspects of divinity, that is the hallmark” (“Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” in Polkinghorne [ed.], *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, p. 195).

241. Coakley notes that a gendered notion of human freedom may here be at work. The assumption is that libertarian freedom is a good because it is good to be free from dependency on another. This picture of “adult” independence is, however, actually “an intrinsically ‘male’ fantasy” (“Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” p. 205). Is one truly free just because one gains independence from those who give and sustain life (e.g., mothers; God)?

God voluntarily empties or limits himself out of love for the world so that the world has the space and freedom to be itself.²⁴²

It is important not to miss the significance of this doctrinal migration. As relational theists have lifted the concept of perichoresis out of its original Trinitarian context and made it a general principle, so panentheists have lifted kenosis out of its proper christological context, exalting it into a broader, metaphysical principle. Note, too, that as general principles, kenosis and perichoresis are mutually reinforcing. God limits himself for the sake of relating to the world and a “genuine” relation to the world (i.e., one that requires the twofold respect of nature and freedom) necessarily entails divine self-limitation.

Panentheism provides for many a comprehensive model of the God-world relation that is compatible with contemporary science on the one hand and avoids the perceived weaknesses of classical theism on the other.²⁴³ While maintaining both the transcendence and immanence of God, it emphasizes the latter by making God’s loving relationality a metaphysical (universal) rather than a covenantal (particular) phenomenon. The “in” (Gk: *en*) of panentheism “expresses an intimacy of relation and is clearly not meant in any locative sense ... It refers, rather, to an ontological relation so that the world is conceived as within the Being of God but, nevertheless, with its own distinct ontology.”²⁴⁴ In a metaphor: the world is “in” the *womb* of God: “mammalian females nurture new life within themselves, and this provides a much-needed corrective to the purely masculine image of divine creation.”²⁴⁵

242. See especially the essays in Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*. See also Taede A. Smedes, *Chaos, Complexity, and God: Divine Action and Scientism* (Leuven – Paris – Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004), pp. 64–6. Though Polkinghorne distances himself from panentheism on the grounds that it denies the true otherness of the world from God, his actual position with regard to the God-world relationship is virtually indistinguishable from that of other contemporary panentheists. For further elaboration on this point, see Cooper, *Panentheism*, pp. 315–17.

243. For a winsome introduction to panentheism, see Philip D. Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), esp. chs. 8 and 11.

244. Peacocke, “Articulating God’s Presence in and to the World Unveiled by the Sciences,” in Clayton and Peacocke (eds.), *In Whom We Live and Move*, p. 145.

245. *Ibid.*, p. 147. The notion of creation *ex nihilo* suggests to Moltmann a male procreative act, an act outside of God’s self. Creation as God’s act in God, by contrast, “must rather be called a feminine concept, a bringing forth” (*Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 109). Peacocke goes even further in noting a connection between kenosis and the pain involved in childbirth: “the processes of

With this thought, we come to a theological crossroads. While neither side wants to argue that God is literally male or female, much less to abandon either divine transcendence or immanence, classical theism does seem to favor (masculine) control metaphors whereas panentheism draws upon more (feminine) relational imagery. The former is more likely to say that God *determines* changes in the world, the latter that he *encourages* them. Just where the leading metaphor of the current project – authorship – falls with regard to the determinism/relationalism divide remains to be seen (in Part III). In the meantime, we conclude our survey of contemporary conceptualizations of God with some further thoughts on what panentheists say about divine action and passion.

“Creation is costly to God.”²⁴⁶ According to Arthur Peacocke, if the world is in God, and if there is suffering, pain, and death in the world, then there is suffering, pain, and death “in” God as well. God does not simply observe suffering from the outside but experiences it from the inside. Panentheists in effect add a gloss to the apostle Paul: it is not simply the whole creation that is groaning in travail as it awaits redemptive transformation (Rom. 8:22), but God is groaning too: “Creation is deemed as costly to God not only as a divine self-emptying to Another (the world), but continuously as God experiences the negative elements of that world from its inside.”²⁴⁷ Indeed, divine passibility – that the world affects God – is one of eight themes held in common by most varieties of panentheism: “panentheism entails passibility.”²⁴⁸ Divine self-limitation is painful.

In contrast to their process counterparts, kenotic panentheists insist that God’s dependency-relation to the world is strictly voluntary, not necessary. God is *freely* (voluntarily) dependent on creation

creation are immensely costly to God in a way dimly shadowed by the ordinary human experience of the costliness of creativity in multiple aspects of human existence” (“The Cost of New Life,” in Polkinghorne [ed.], *The Work of Love*, p. 37).

246. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

247. Peacocke, “Introduction,” in Clayton and Peacocke (eds.), *In Whom We Live and Move*, pp. xxi–xxii. See also Gloria L. Schaab, “A Procreative Paradigm of the Creative Suffering of the Triune God: Implications of Arthur Peacocke’s Evolutionary Theology,” *Theological Studies* 67 (2006), pp. 542–66.

248. So Brierley, “Naming a Quiet Revolution,” p. 11. Other common themes include: the cosmos as God’s body and sacrament “in and through” which God comes; the language of inextricable intertwining; the positive value of the cosmos and God’s dependence on it, and degree christology. With regard to this last point, this is because God is “in” the cosmos, and other persons *generally* while also “in” Christ more particularly and more intensely.

but creation is necessarily dependent on God.²⁴⁹ Kenotic pantheists conceive God both as the Ground or principle of creativity of the universe, and as one who responds to entities and events as he experiences them in world history. While God could exist without the cosmos, however, there is nevertheless a certain *consequent necessity* to God's dependence on the world that follows from his decision to create. Why should this be so? Because, says the pantheist, love demands it. For love, if it is to be genuine and interpersonal, must be mutual, reciprocal, and non-coercive.²⁵⁰ Love that forces is not love. On the contrary, love hurts, and never more than when it is unrequited.²⁵¹ But this is precisely the possibility that kenotic pantheism opens up: that God, in creating a world with free creatures, graciously gives the world the power to codetermine at least some aspects of the divine experience, perchance to frustrate God's loving purpose.

Pantheists see God's love generally in God's self-limitation vis-à-vis the cosmos and more particularly in the self-limitation of the incarnate Christ.²⁵² With regard to the cosmos, God limits his power and knowledge so that the diverse systems of the natural world can develop with a degree of autonomy: "Once the world exists, God's experience develops in real interaction with the world."²⁵³ To speak of God's "experience" is to indicate the way in which the joys, pains, and sorrows of created entities affect the divine life. Because of the unavoidable interplay of chance (freedom) and law, God took a risk in creating, making himself vulnerable (open) to the possibility that his influence, overtures, and initiatives might be "despised and rejected" by men (and women). This risk is fatefully realized when, for example, the crowd before Pilate rejects Jesus (Mt. 27:21-3).

249. Hence God and the world are not dependent on one another in the same way. Niels Gregersen dubs this "qualified (Christian) pantheism" ("Three Varieties of Pantheism," in Clayton and Peacocke [eds.], *In Whom We Live and Move*, p. 23).

250. See Vincent Brümmer, *The Model of Love: A Study in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

251. Michael Welker observes, however, that theology has let itself be "captivated by this cultural fixation on 'love' in the mutual emotionally affected communication between two partners which is often termed 'romantic love'" ("Romantic Love, Covenantal Love, Kenotic Love," in Polkinghorne [ed.], *The Work of Love*, p. 128).

252. Note that the appeal to Christ's humiliation is merely illustrative of the love that characterizes God's relation to the world in general.

253. Clayton, "Open Pantheism and Creation as *Kenosis*," in *Adventures in the Spirit*, p. 182.

The panentheist paradigm appears seriously to hobble God's capacity to work his will.²⁵⁴ All panentheists agree that the world affects God. Indeed, the thrust of the concept of kenotic creation is that God makes space within the divine life for others that, like him, are "centers of activity."²⁵⁵ Activity is the operative concept. *The key question for panentheism is whether it can give a coherent account of the types of special divine action – especially communicative action – that the Bible everywhere depicts.* Indeed, it is just here that one might extrapolate Frei's worry about modern christology – that it errs in not treating Jesus as an ascriptive subject of the Gospel narratives – to panentheistic theology proper: *insofar as one's model of God fails to do justice to God as a personal divine agent, it revises what the Bible is primarily about.* Put differently: if God is not an ascriptive agent, then the Bible is no longer about what God has done in creating, reconciling, and redeeming human beings. As to sounding the gospel, then, panentheism is an uncertain trumpet.²⁵⁶

"Can contemporary theologians still affirm that God (literally) does anything?"²⁵⁷ Accounts of special divine action have become difficult in an age of science when even believers typically assume the regularity of nature, which is to say, the validity of physical laws. Special divine action requires a robust notion of agency; God is not a chemical but a personal agent, with intentions and purposes. This raises a second problem for accounts of special divine action: if God *can* intervene, then the question of divine *inactivity* in the face of evil rears its ugly head.²⁵⁸

Panentheists consider the classical theist response – that God intervenes in the world as a substance outside it – to be a dead end. If God were external to the world, his actions in the world would necessarily be interventions and hence unintelligible in terms of this-worldly explanations, assuming that the world is a closed causal nexus.²⁵⁹ On

254. Kenotic panentheists believe that, in order to preserve the autonomy and integrity of creation (and hence the genuineness of the God-world relation), God self-limits his omnipotence and omniscience. See Smedes, *Chaos, Complexity, and God*, p. 64.

255. Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, p. 183.

256. What is the gospel according to panentheism? Perhaps that God "makes room" for us? We shall return to this question in Part III.

257. This is the title of ch. 14 in Clayton's *Adventures in the Spirit*, p. 217.

258. Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 10–11.

259. Panentheists also believe that divine interventionism undermines the ability of science to explain the natural world, for such explanations

the panentheistic view, by contrast, the world is the body of God, so to speak, and God indwells the world as the mind indwells the body: “God is *internally* present to all the world’s entities, structures, and processes in a way analogous to the way we as persons are present and act in our bodies.”²⁶⁰ The beauty of this suggestion – the “panentheistic analogy” – is that the mind-body relation opens the door to thinking about at least one type of cause (i.e., mental causation) that transcends physical laws.²⁶¹

Philip Clayton is the most articulate exponent of the panentheistic analogy, and he uses it to formulate an alternative, non-interventionist model of special divine action. His argument begins by proposing an alternative to a Cartesian mind-body dualism that is as interventionist in its own way, on the level of anthropology, as is classical theism on the level of cosmology. When one thinks of the mind as “outside” the body, the mind-body relation is analogous to theism, not panentheism. Clayton, however, espouses an “emergent monism” with regard to the mind-body question. On this view, “higher” entities and causes (e.g., thought) are dependent on (though not reducible to) the “lower” levels of reality (e.g., biology) from which they emerge.²⁶² This allows him to appeal to mental or psychological causation as a non-mechanistic cause, and thus to secure a new model for conceiving special divine action.²⁶³ As the mental is an emergent phenomenon that is irreducible to the physical yet exercises a “downward” causal effect on the body, so God exercises “downward” causal effects as the “mind” of the world. God and the world exist in a *psychosomatic unity*. This is the heart of the panentheistic analogy.

Clayton admits that the analogy is not perfect: though the mental aspect of human existence emerges from a complex physical system (the brain), God does not emerge from a complex physical system (the universe). Our concept of mental causation “should be controlled by the best theories we have of the relationship of *our* minds

presuppose that nature is a closed, autonomous physical system (Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, p. 219).

260. Peacocke, “Articulating God’s Presence,” p. 150.

261. See Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, Parts 3 and 4. See also the discussion in Cooper, *Panentheism*, pp. 310–14.

262. See Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, ch. 12, and, for a fuller defense of the notion, his *Mind and Emergence: From Quantum to Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

263. Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, p. 195.

to our bodies – and then corrected by the ways in which God's relation to the universe must be *different* from the relation of our mental properties to our brains and bodies."²⁶⁴ Clayton is after nothing less than a "golden synthesis" of science, theology, and metaphysics. What remains to be seen, however, is how he decides which criteria to employ to "correct" the analogy, and where and when to do so in order to do justice to the "difference" of God.

As a panentheist, Clayton holds that God is the Ground of all things. God therefore acts not as one element in a system but at the level of the system as a whole. Indeed, the central insight of panentheism is that "*the whole is not just the sum of all agents but, beyond that, also agent itself.*"²⁶⁵ Clayton appeals to evolution as a test case of "top-down" (i.e., whole to part) rather than "bottom-up" (i.e., part to whole) causality, citing the discovery that environmental information is responsible for affecting the development of cells and organisms. There is a difference between the components that make up an entity (e.g., the parts of a clock; the cells of an organism) and the relationship between that entity and its wider environment (viz., God as immanent Spirit). "Top-down" causation is the prime mode of divine activity in the world: God guides the world process by inputting information that influences development by serving as a "lure."²⁶⁶ This makes it possible, Clayton contends, to speak of divine agency *without having to posit any concrete divine interventions in the universe.*

The key to the analogy, and to the argument, is that special divine action is a matter not of physical but of *psychological* causation: *God does not directly manipulate the physical world but rather introduces thoughts or attitudes into the mental life of individuals.*²⁶⁷ It is here, in the realm of the mind, rather than in chaos or quantum indeterminacy, that

264. Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, p. 233.

265. Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, p. 214.

266. *Ibid.*, p. 202. Whether this is truly "causation," is an interesting point: even Peacocke wonders whether "cause" is the best term for describing the effect on the parts "of being in the interacting, cooperative network of that particular, whole system" (Peacocke, "God's Interaction with the World: the implications of deterministic 'chaos' and of interconnected and interdependent complexity," in Robert J. Russell, Nancey Murphy and Arthur Peacocke, eds., *Chaos and Complexity: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* [Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory and Berkeley, CA: The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1997], p. 272, n. 22).

267. Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp, "Divine Action and the 'Argument from Neglect'," in Nancey Murphy, Robert John Russell, and William R. Stoeger (eds.), *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Natural Evil* (Berkeley, CA, and Vatican City State: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences and Vatican City State, 2007), pp. 191-3.

Clayton locates God's active influence on the world, not least because there are no physical laws that determine human thinking, imagining, or decision-making for God to violate.²⁶⁸ Take, for example, Jesus' prayer "not my will, but thine be done" (Lk. 22:42). Jesus here signals his acceptance of the specific divine recommendation for his life.²⁶⁹ Moreover, when Jesus acts in harmony with the divine will, he *participates* in God; his actions *take part in* the divine act: "It is the divine leading at the level of conscious (or at least semi-conscious) awareness that constitutes the divine act in which Jesus the person participates."²⁷⁰ To describe Jesus' will and act *just is* to describe divine action: "There are not two actions, but one."²⁷¹ Emergentists like Clayton do not see God intervening from the outside on Jesus but locate the famous "causal joint" in shared action and attitude (i.e., Jesus' submission of his will to God's). He describes Jesus' decision to set aside his own natural instincts in order to do God's will as a *kenosis*, and so democratizes the notion in the process. Henceforth, all human beings who submit their wills to God, and not Jesus alone, can become part of the act of God, part of the movement of divine self-manifestation.²⁷² The key point for our purposes, however, is that God acts in the world via human agents who embody the divine intention and will.

While Clayton believes that traditional theism needs to be revised in light of contemporary science, he is also willing to correct, or at least supplement, science by Scripture and tradition: "theologians postulate God as a being of its own and not merely as an emergent set of divine properties."²⁷³ He presents his "open kenotic panentheism" not only as the better account of how divine action is compatible

268. See Clayton, *Mind & Emergence*, pp. 189–92.

269. It is not clear how panentheists recognize a particular thought as deriving from divine rather than demonic influence. It is not easy to discern what the infinite whole that surrounds us is saying! Clayton acknowledges this, noting that Schleiermacher saw the universe as broadcasting messages such as "Live authentically" or "Experience deeply!" (*Adventures in the Spirit*, p. 214). Clayton prefers Whitehead's notion that God offers specific lures for every occasion. Yet the problem of determining just what "vision" God is dangling before one's eyes remains. By contrast, the remythologizing approach begins with the notion that God speaks; only such verbal communicative action disambiguates the divine lures.

270. Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, p. 225. For Clayton's panentheistic-participatory theory of agency, see his *Adventures in the Spirit*, ch. 13.

271. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

272. *Ibid.*, pp. 224–5.

273. Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, p. 260. He also believes that scientific evidence (exegesis) underdetermines our metaphysics (hermeneutical principles by which we interpret our experience).

with contemporary science and its assumption that physical systems are closed to causal interventions from outside but also as the better account of the God revealed in Scripture, who relates personally to and loves others: "We have good reasons to resist any positions in systematic theology that tend to undercut the two-sidedness of the relationship with God that occurs in actual historical moments of encounter."²⁷⁴

This leads us to another argument sometimes offered in favor of panentheism over classical theism, namely, that the former "more accurately expresses ... the basic religious conviction of humanity."²⁷⁵ This is a mixed blessing for those who fear Feuerbach's ghost. It is not clear that the panentheist is helping his case when he says, "Thus the difference between classical theism and panentheism comes back to a difference of human experience, namely, which of these loves experienced by humanity, *agape* or *agape-eros*, is the deeper symbol of the love of God; and this confirms human experience as the prompt for the rise in panentheistic doctrine."²⁷⁶ Suspicions that the panentheistic analogy is in fact a panentheistic projection only become more acute when one pauses to consider that the analogy arises from the all-too-human mind/body relation. Clayton anticipates the objection, pointing out that theology has no other option but to employ human language and concepts to speak of what is otherwise beyond our reach. Furthermore, if humans have indeed been created in the image of God, then it only stands to reason that descriptions of God will be permeated with terms drawn from humans' own experience.²⁷⁷ Still, it is difficult to shake the nagging feeling that Feuerbach's ghost continues to haunt the discussion, or that human conceptions of romantic love continue to color theological thinking about God's love for the world.

274. Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, p. 103.

275. Brierley, "Naming a Quiet Revolution," p. 14.

276. *Ibid.*

277. Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, pp. 96–7, 111–12.

The new kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology: some “classical” concerns

It is time to retrace our steps. Looking back on chapter 2, we see that an “open panentheism” such as Clayton’s has the capacity to weave the recovery of the Trinity and the relational turn into a new meta-physical system – ontotheology in a new key, as it were.¹ Even many who stop short of embracing panentheism are now willing, even eager, to assert God’s self-limitation for the sake of positing genuine relationships between God and finite but free human beings. Indeed, kenotic-relational ontotheology could lay strong claim to representing a “new orthodoxy,” such is its attractiveness to diverse streams of contemporary theology and potential for integration.² The concept of relationality is notoriously ambiguous, however, covering a multitude of conceptual sins.³ Further, it is not altogether clear whether, or to what extent, a kenotic-relational panentheism is appropriately Trinitarian (i.e., able to preserve both the unity of the divine nature and the distinctness of the divine persons). As we have seen, the tendency in contemporary Trinitarian theologies is to inflate the Spirit

1. Clayton describes “open panentheism” as a hybrid of process panentheism and open theism. Essentially, it is a process-like theology with a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (a form of freely willed divine kenosis) thrown in for orthodox measure (*Adventures in the Spirit*, ch. 11). He elsewhere refers to “kenotic Trinitarian panentheism,” citing Joseph Bracken’s work as an example (Clayton, “Kenotic Trinitarian Panentheism,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44 [2005], pp. 250–5).

2. Cooper distinguishes between classical, modified, and revised Christian theism, as well as between Christian and non-Christian panentheism (*Panentheism*, p. 321). The concerns discussed in the present chapter address primarily the revised (i.e., open, relational) theist and Christian panentheist positions.

3. “The degree to which relational thinking has become popular also implies the danger that relationality discourse becomes inflationary and opaque” (Christoph Schwöbel, “God as Conversation,” p. 43).

and marginalize the Father; but this is as sub-orthodox as the early modern tendency to inflate the Father and marginalize the Spirit.

At the outset of the previous chapter I mentioned three issues that serve as touchstones by which to discern the difference between classical theism and alternative models of the God/world relation. What has become of God's personhood, love, and suffering in the new orthodoxy? The short answer: (1) the divine persons are seen in not substantival but *relational* terms; (2) God's love for the world is seen as *perichoretic* relationality; and (3) God's suffering is seen as a necessary consequence of his *kenotic* relatedness. Taken together, these three ideas add up to a *kenotic-perichoretic relational* version of theism and panentheism. Considering how these categories have been removed from their original dogmatic locations, however, a classical theist may well ask whether contemporary revisionist theologians have discovered the promised land of divine ontology or whether they have simply formulated a new "metaphysics of the Exodus," returning to Egypt only to exchange masters, substituting one form of conceptual bondage (substance) for another (relationality).

Persons and/as relations

Theologians conceptualize God in many ways: as a being of infinite perfection, as personal, as a society of three persons, as interpersonal communion. Most of these construals make use, either positively or negatively, of the categories "substance" and "relation." A full-fledged examination of the diverse uses of these concepts is beyond the scope of the present work: even church fathers and professors of theology (myself included) can often do no more than stammer like schoolboys when attempting to articulate the idea of divine personhood.⁴ Some preliminary concerns about the relational turn from the perspective of those who resist making it – classical and modified classical theists – are nevertheless in order. Two questions in particular stand out: (1) are persons *nothing but* relations? (2) *what type* of relations characterize personal being as communion? At stake in these questions is the meaning and significance of

4. For some sense of the variety of concepts of personhood on offer, see Christoph Schwöbel, "Introduction," in Gunton (ed.), *Persons: Divine and Human*.

“trinitarian ontology” – the catch-all term for approaches that view God’s being as a communion of persons.⁵

Nothing but relations?

For Aristotle, individual substances – that which “stands under” (*substare*) or possesses properties – are more basic than either persons or relations: “the basic idea is that an individual substance is that which has properties and stands in relations, rather than being itself a property or a relation of something else.”⁶ While persons may *enter into* relations according to the Aristotelian conceptual scheme, they are not *essentially* relational. In the new relational ontology, however, the older metaphysical claim that “to be is to be a substance” has been replaced: “to be is to be in relation.” This has become clear in particular regarding the being of the Trinity: “The substance of God, ‘God’, has no ontological content, no true being, apart from communion.”⁷ In short: “relation” is the new “substance” as concerns ontological priority.

The new relational ontology takes God’s being – which now refers to the three *hypostases* rather than the one *substantia* – as the first principle of its understanding of being. In particular, it construes human personhood similarly to divine personhood, as relations “all the way down.” The key metaphysical category is no longer substance but relation: to be is to be in relation.

A vocal minority has begun to question this new metaphysical orthodoxy. For it is not altogether clear “whether ‘in relation’ is something that one can ‘be’ in” because “prepositional phrases cannot stand alone, but assume a substantive that governs them.”⁸ The greatest puzzle of the persons-as-relations view pertains to the nature of that we-know-not-what between which relationships form: “Relationship is everywhere but has no separate being. Everywhere, relationships have the character of the relating realities.

5. Levering uses (and criticizes) the notion “trinitarian ontology” as I do “relational ontotheology” (*Scripture and Metaphysics*, pp. 199, 202–12). See also Todd H. Speidell, “A Trinitarian Ontology of Persons in Society,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1994), pp. 283–300.

6. William Alston, “Substance and the Trinity,” in Davis (ed.), *The Trinity*, p. 181.

7. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 17.

8. David Cunningham, “Participation as a Trinitarian Virtue: Challenging the Current ‘Relational’ Consensus,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 14 (1998), pp. 7–25.

Without those elements between or among which relations exist, there would be no relations.”⁹ To say that it is relationship without remainder is to fall into an infinite regress. Better, then, to stick with the old orthodoxy: “The persons are identical to their relations, but they are not reducible to their relations; they are not mere relations.”¹⁰

Even Moltmann resists reducing the divine persons to relations: “It is true that the Father is defined by his fatherhood to the Son, but this does not constitute his existence; it presupposes it ... there are no persons without relations, but there are no relations without persons either.”¹¹ With regard to human being, several authors point out the egregious consequences of equating personhood with relationality: “will this undermine the personhood of people who cannot form relationships, cannot sustain healthy relationships, or who are not valued in their relationships?”¹²

It is furthermore important not to exaggerate the continuities between divine and human personhood. The divine persons exist in eternal and unchanging relationships with one another; by contrast, humans have to grow into relationships. Even in the act of procreation “there are still boundaries between the two people even though this is the ultimate act of ‘communion.’”¹³ Human nature simply does not display the being-as-communion that characterizes God’s being: “no single human activity is common to all humans,” for example, as it is for God.¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa rightly states that “the divine nature is one in a way that is different from the way in which the human nature is one.”¹⁵ His emphasis is on the communion (*koinonia*) between the “persons,” not on the being of

9. Hendrick Hart, *Understanding our World: An Integral Ontology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 209–10. See also Harriet A. Harris, “Should We Say that Personhood is Relational?” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998), p. 225.

10. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), p. 703.

11. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 172. Moltmann goes on to say that the reduction of the concept “person” to the concept “relation” is ultimately modalistic (p. 172).

12. Harris, “Should We Say that Personhood is Relational?” p. 215.

13. Edward Russell, “Reconsidering Relational Anthropology: A Critical Assessment of John Zizioulas’s Theological Anthropology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5 (2003), p. 182 (order slightly altered).

14. Lucian Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 65.

15. *Ibid.*

a single “community.”¹⁶ Gregory does not prioritize “person” over “substance,” however, and he is clear about the difference between human and divine persons.¹⁷

The Cappadocians employed *hypostasis* for the sake of distinguishing Father, Son, and Spirit, not for specifying the nature of what it is to be a person. Yet the church fathers *do* imply that Father, Son, and Spirit “are distinctively personal in possessing knowledge, purposes, and intentions, and in performing intentional actions.”¹⁸ The point is that relationality alone does not exhaust what we want to say either about God’s being or about God’s triune personhood. It is unnecessarily reductionist to collapse God’s essence or deity into his interpersonal communion or onto-relationality. If God’s being is communion, then divine unity becomes conceptually indistinguishable from divine threeness, and it consequently becomes difficult, if not impossible, to maintain the full divinity of each person in himself.¹⁹

While it may be true to say that “one can only be a person in relation to other persons,”²⁰ it need not follow that persons are nothing but relations. According to Peter Strawson, the concept of “person” is an irreducible, basic particular: humans are embodied beings to whom one can assign physical (e.g., size, weight, location) and personal (e.g., intentionality) predicates.²¹ Put simply: persons are agents who present themselves to others, agents who say and do things, agents with names about whom stories may be told. Persons are not therefore relations all the way down: “One cannot give what one does not have ... We can enter into interpersonal relations with others only because we are already something substantial as persons.”²²

16. Sarah Coakley, “‘Persons’ in the ‘Social’ Doctrine of the Trinity: A Critique of Current Analytic Discussion,” in Davis, Kendall, and O’Collins (eds.), *The Trinity*, p. 134. See also Charles D. Raith II, “Resourcing the Fathers? A Critical Analysis of Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s Appropriation of the Trinitarian Theology of the Cappadocian Fathers,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10 (2008), pp. 267–84.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 137. Indeed, his use of the concept of person is (rightly) tempered by his apophatic sensibilities (Coakley, *ibid.*, p. 125).

18. Alston, “Substance and Trinity,” p. 187.

19. For a further development of this criticism, see Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, pp. 213–35.

20. Brümmer, *The Model of Love*, p. 72.

21. Peter F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959), pp. 15–16.

22. Joseph Torchia, *Exploring Personhood: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Human Nature* (Lanham, MD and Plymouth, U.K.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), p. 249.

The way forward is to say not that the divine *persons* are nothing but relations but to say that their distinct personal *identities* are relational. Too many contemporary theologians confuse the concept of personhood (what it is to be a person) with personal identity (what it is to be just *this* person).²³ The relations that distinguish, for example, the Father from the Son and the Spirit are constitutive of the Father's distinct personal identity rather than the Father's personhood *simpliciter*. We can therefore agree with Harriet Harris's claim that "Persons are ontologically prior to relations,"²⁴ but only if we keep in mind that she is speaking of personhood (*what* a person is) and not personal identity (*who* a person is). To anticipate the constructive argument of Part II: persons are, metaphysically speaking, basic particulars who have the capacity to relate to other persons in various and sundry ways.²⁵

Kinds of relations or ways of relating?

The term *relation* is by itself not very illuminating, for there are many kinds of relations (e.g., logical, temporal, spatial). Much of Aquinas's theology is couched in terms of causal relations, yet even here there are different types (e.g., material, formal, efficient, and final). None of these impersonal causal relations figures prominently in relational theism, however, where the preferred terms pertain to personal and interpersonal relations.²⁶ Yet even here there are many species of relationships: sexual, political, geographical, historical, and so forth, not to mention specific interpersonal relationships such as husband-wife, master-slave, friend-friend, friend-enemy, enemy-enemy, etc.

Kenotic-perichoretic theism focuses on *loving* relations that are *mutual*, *reciprocal*, and *inclusive*. Yet these latter qualifiers are hardly

23. I am indebted to Harriet A. Harris for this point. See her "Should We Say that Personhood is Relational?", pp. 216–17.

24. Harris, "Should We Say that Personhood is Relational?", p. 226–7.

25. Cf. Harris: "to be a person is to have certain capacities whether or not these are realised" ("Should We Say that Personhood is Relational?" p. 234). A "basic particular" is "primitive" in the sense that it cannot be explained in terms of something more fundamental.

26. Speidell further distinguishes "suprapersonal," "interpersonal," "intrapersonal," and "infrapersonal" relations that exist "above," "between," "within," and "below" persons respectively ("A Trinitarian Ontology," pp. 288–9).

adequate, for hatred can be mutual, reciprocal, and inclusive as well. Hence there is good reason to heed David Kelsey's advice to theologians to use the participle "relating" and the verb "relates" rather than the nominative "relation" and the abstraction "relatedness" because (1) Scripture typically does not describe God's static relation to his creation but depicts God actively relating to the world, and (2) it provides conceptual space for observing that God actively relates in several senses, and not one only.²⁷

In the new relational orthodoxy, God interacts with his creatures in space and time in much the same way that those creatures interact with one another, "more as a large disembodied human person relating to much smaller beings than as the infinite Other who has graciously made us finitely analogous to himself."²⁸ Whether this relational revision of theism slides into the open arms of relational panentheism depends "on whether its ontology of God is substantial or merely relational."²⁹ Specifically, "[t]he only way that relational theologies can avoid panentheism is by adopting a philosophically old-fashioned view of God as the essentially independent Being whose relations outside himself are contingent and do not constitutively affect his infinite existence or intrinsic identity even if he chooses them to be part of his 'story'."³⁰

To return to the question at hand: are Father, Son, and Spirit proper personal names or names of relations? The traditional theistic answer is: *both*. "Substance" and "relation" are two aspects of, or perspectives on, God's triune being, as are "nature" and "person."³¹ God's being must be described both in terms of a unified nature

27. Kelsey, "Personal Bodies: A Theological Anthropological Proposal," in Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, and Mark R. Talbot (eds.), *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), pp. 142–3.

28. Cooper, *Panentheism*, p. 344.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.* What Clayton calls *open panentheism* "recognizes that deeper ties bind process and open theists than is often acknowledged" (*Adventures in the Spirit*, p. 175).

31. See Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, pp. 214–16, and Gilles Emery, "Essentialism or Personalism in the Treatise on God in Saint Thomas Aquinas?" *Thomist* 64 (2000), pp. 521–64, on the necessity of a *redoublement* of Trinitarian language. Whereas contemporary theologians are inclined to take something inert (e.g., a rock) to be the paradigm substance, for Aristotle "the paradigm was a living organism" that retains its nature and identity through change (Alston, "Substance and the Trinity," p. 199). There is nothing in the category "substance" itself, then, that precludes conceiving God as relating to, and hence loving, others.

and in terms of interpersonal relations. All three persons possess the same divine nature, yet each has a distinct identity based on his relations to the other two. In Augustine's words: "every being that is called something by way of relationship is also something besides the relationship."³² We must speak about the triune God in two ways in order to discern both aspects, that is, what is common to all three persons (substance) and what is peculiar to each (a distinct relation).

God's substance is not a fourth hypostasis that enters, or fails to enter, into relations of its own.³³ Rather, the purpose of the concept of the divine substance (essence, nature) is to name what all three persons have in common, among which is included such distinctively personal capacities as knowing, willing, and loving. Father, Son, and Spirit are alike in every essential respect, with the exception of how they relate to one another. Nevertheless, the oneness (of substance) and the threeness (of persons) are equally ultimate.

Substance, person, and relation converge in Thomas Aquinas's notion of "subsistent relations."³⁴ God is three persons inasmuch as "person signifies in God a relation as subsisting in the divine nature."³⁵ This notion of a subsistent relation does justice both to the unity of the divine essence and to the threeness of the divine persons. By "subsistence" Thomas means "that which is the subject that 'stands under' the nature or substance."³⁶ It is important not to confuse "subsistent relation" with "individual substance." God in three persons means not that there are three individual substances but rather that the "one divine nature or substance is 'possessed' by three subjects."³⁷ God subsists "in three distinct modes, but the divine being is not what is related in these distinct modes. The divine being is the same in each Person. What are related are solely the Persons who subsist in the divine being."³⁸ For example, to describe

32. Augustine, *The Trinity*, tr. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), Book 7, ch. 1, no. 2 (p. 219).

33. Trinitarian ontology is motivated by the desire to avoid this error but, in overreacting, falls into the opposite error of conflating the oneness and the threeness (Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, p. 228).

34. See esp. Gilles Emery, "Essentialism or Personalism," pp. 554–5.

35. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 30, 1.

36. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, p. 281.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, p. 218. Cf. Moltmann: "The trinitarian Persons *subsist* in the common divine nature; they *exist* in their relations to one another" (Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 173).

paternity as a “subsistent relation” indicates that paternity (the relation) exists in itself rather than being grounded in something prior (i.e., the unrelated Father): “Unlike in creatures, where relation is an accidental quality and does not subsist, in God relations subsist, since whatever is ‘in’ God, is God.”³⁹ To speak of the three persons as subsistent relations is to depict, say, the Father not as one who has but who is (in the sense of personal identity: *who*, not *what*) his relation of paternity vis-à-vis the Son.

For Aquinas, a person’s mode of relational subsistence is not a static substance but a dynamic activity: “Thomas offers a concept of God as subsistent activity/actuality: a triad of action-based subsisting relations.”⁴⁰ To be a person is to be in act: *agere sequitur esse* (“action follows [or accompanies] being”).⁴¹ In Aquinas’s words: “there can be no real relationship in God except founded on action.”⁴² Calvin, similarly, suggests that “to the Father is attributed the beginning of action, the fountain and source of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and arrangement in action, while the energy and efficacy of action is assigned to the Spirit.”⁴³

While all God’s works are common to the three persons, the New Testament often associates certain activities with one person in particular. The technical term for this phenomenon is “appropriation.” For example, the Father appropriates or takes as his own special task the role of creating while the Son appropriates the task of assuming humanity. Although the three persons live in eternal fellowship with one another, we must not let their relatedness blur their distinctiveness: “As the Father is not the Son nor the Son the Spirit, so our Father is not our Savior Jesus Christ who was crucified, nor is our crucified Savior the sanctifying Spirit whom he sent.”⁴⁴

The particular identities of Father, Son, and Spirit follow from the activities that distinguish them – both the eternal activities (i.e., the processions – begetting, spiration) that characterize the immanent

39. Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, p. 225.

40. Kerr, *After Aquinas*, p. 200. Note that David Burrell takes *actus* as the “master metaphor guiding Aquinas’ grammatical treatment of divinity” (Burrell, *Aquinas, God, and Action* [University of Notre Dame Press, 1979], p. 116). We shall return to this point in ch. 4.

41. See the discussion in Torchia, *Exploring Personhood*, ch. 5 and pp. 247–51.

42. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 28, 4.

43. Calvin, *Inst.* I.13.18.

44. Paul K. Jewett, *God, Creation, & Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), p. 308.

Trinity and the historical acts (i.e., the missions – incarnation, Pentecost) that characterize the economic Trinity. If persons are who they are because of their relations to one another, then it is illegitimate to reduce the richness of these Trinitarian relations to relations of origin alone: “The Father does not merely beget the Son. He also hands over his kingdom to him and receives it back from him ... The persons cannot be identical simply with any one relation. Each is a catalyst of many relations.”⁴⁵ The three persons are each subjects of predication or, in Wolfhart Pannenberg’s terms, “living realizations of separate centers of action.”⁴⁶

We can now return to the Bible’s depiction of the three divine persons. The eternal processions that have traditionally defined the relations that characterize the life of the immanent Trinity are themselves extrapolations from the historical missions of the Son and Spirit.⁴⁷ The focus of the Bible’s account, however, concerns less these relations of origin than what we may call the *communicative* actions that characterize the triune life in itself and with human others. In particular, the canonical depictions of the dialogue between Father and Son demonstrate that they are both persons-in-communicative-relation. Jesus distinguishes himself from the Father as the one who bears witness to him (Jn. 8:18). Here we may recall Tertullian’s observation that a person is not less than one who speaks and acts. Miroslav Volf concurs: “If behind the actions of the divine persons there is no ‘I’ of these persons, then the three persons are superfluous in the economy of salvation ... Pure relations ... can no more act in salvation history than they can be petitioned in prayer or praised in worship.”⁴⁸ To frame it as a thesis: *communicative agency is the prime mode of personal existence*. To be a person is to be the subject of communicative action. It is precisely for this reason that personal being is relational being, for the whole point of communicative action is to orient oneself (i.e., relate) to others: “Person is essentially a ‘we’

45. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 320.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 319.

47. The eternal processions are first in the order of being, while the historic missions are first in the order of knowledge (Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, p. 277).

48. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), pp. 204–5. Volf concludes that we must simultaneously conceive the trinitarian persons as subjects and relations.

term.”⁴⁹ It follows that we need to speak of *each* of the three persons in terms of “he who is” (i.e., he who says; he who does).

Each of the three divine persons is fully God, has a distinct existence of his own, yet is not who he is apart from his relation to the other persons. Unlike human persons, for whom relations are “accidents” that either may or may not be, we cannot think of the divine persons apart from their communicative relations.⁵⁰ God is love because his being is a dynamic communion (persons-in-relatedness) *and* because God communicates himself as love in three ways (persons-in-distinctness). The former aspect marks the definitive difference between the Creator and creature. Unlike human persons, the life of Father, Son, and Spirit is one of eternal mutual indwelling. The three persons interpenetrate one another in a way that is unique to the divine being: one cannot understand divine personhood by deriving it from some generic concept of personhood. From a “classical” vantage point, then, the main problem with the new relational ontotheology is not its forgetting of the question of being but its forgetting of the Creator-creature distinction.

Perichoresis and/as relationality

The Christian gospel affirms that God has a “personal relation” with the world: “God so loved the world” (Jn. 3:16). Yes, but *how* so? The notion of persons as relations, combined with Moltmann’s notion of the Trinity as an “open” society whose history includes the history of the universe, has led many contemporary theologians to view “God is love” and “God and world are in interdependent (i.e., perichoretic) relation” as equivalent statements. While Christian theology has always affirmed the God-world relation, the tendency to construe this relationship in terms of perichoresis is new, and the consequences far reaching.

To take perichoresis as the root metaphor for the God-world relation is to conceive creation no longer in terms of the triune economy (i.e., a contingent relation) but rather of the triune essence (i.e., a

49. W. Norris Clarke, “Person, Being, and St. Thomas,” in *Explorations in Metaphysics*, p. 218.

50. Emery cites Thomas’s adage: “If one abstracts the relations in the persons, the hypostases disappear” (in “Essentialism or Personalism,” pp. 549–50).

necessary relation). To affirm a perichoretic relation between God and the world is to claim that God would not be who he is apart from this relation. As we saw in the previous chapter, there is a link between viewing creation as divine kenosis and the ensuing God-world relation in terms of perichoresis – hence the label “kenotic-perichoretic relational theism” to designate the new orthodoxy.⁵¹ This rubric also explains why I criticize the new orthodoxy for “illegitimate Trinitarian transfer,” that is, for applying categories that properly pertain to christology and the doctrine of the Trinity respectively to the God-world relation per se.⁵²

It was John of Damascus in the eighth century who spoke of perichoresis and articulated the divine triunity by referring to the mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and Spirit.⁵³ To suggest that creatures enjoy union and communion with God simply by virtue of *being*, however, evacuates the history of salvation of salvific significance, makes light of sin, and encourages skepticism about the necessity of the cross. Salvation history becomes no more than the story of how creatures come to realize that God only appears to be distant. For, if the God-world relation is perichoretic, then God is not a stranger whom we never meet but one from whom we may be only temporarily estranged.⁵⁴ If persons are in communion with God simply by virtue of their being, however, then the Incarnation would be of no

51. Sarah Coakley identifies, in addition to a christological and Trinitarian sense of kenosis, a third “more generalized” meaning that pertains to creation. The basic idea is that God must empty himself or retract certain of his divine attributes (e.g., power, knowledge) in order to relate to a “free” creation. She points out that Polkinghorne goes so far as to say that God “submits to being a cause among causes” (“Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” p. 201).

52. Coakley concurs: “it is a striking feature of this book that most of its contributors construe the significance of kenosis in this third, generalized, sense – addressing God’s relation to the world – and tend to turn to christological or trinitarian meanings only as a subsequent – paradigmatic or illustrative – move” (“Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” p. 193). The early church understood the Logos to take on flesh, incurring for himself the limitations of fleshly life, yet *without* any loss of divine characteristics. Kenosis according to the old orthodoxy (i.e., classical theism) is more gain than loss: “It is the taking on of flesh, rather than the abandonment of any aspects of divinity, that is the hallmark” (p. 195).

53. For more on the origin and use of perichoresis as a theological concept, see Randall E. Otto, “The Use and Abuse of Perichoresis in Recent Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001), pp. 368–72.

54. Paul Tillich uses the categories “meeting a stranger” and “overcoming estrangement” as his lead metaphors in “The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion,” in *Theology and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 10–29.

decisive importance, a mere object lesson or metaphor for the way things always-already are.

There is a third possibility for conceiving the God-world relationship that fits more naturally with the biblical narrative. On this view, the gospel is neither a matter of meeting a stranger (too anthropological) nor of overcoming estrangement (too cosmological) but of *marrying* a stranger and entering into a fellowship relation. In marriage, the two become “one” without losing their particularity (Eph. 5:31,32). Love on this view is primarily a covenantal rather than an ontological relation.⁵⁵

The importance of this nuptial metaphor lies in its reminder that God’s love is a free act, not a (natural) necessity. To be sure, Barth notes that “‘God is’ means ‘God loves’,”⁵⁶ but for Barth God’s love does not entail his interdependence with creation. On the contrary, God is already love in himself, and it is only thanks to a free act that God wills to relate in love to those who are not God. Barth further insists that God remains the free active subject of his love: “In the fact that He determines to love such another, His love overflows. But it is not exhausted in it or confined or conditioned by it ... It does not belong to us to have being, and when we have it it does not belong to us in this being of ours to be the objects of the love of God. We might not be at all, and we might be without being the objects of His love.”⁵⁷ God’s love is *sui generis*, hence Barth cautions against “an unreflecting inversion ... of a definition of the divine love on the basis of a common concept of love. If we are not careful at this point we shall inevitably rob God of His deity.”⁵⁸ One way to do just that is to inflate the notion of perichoresis, wrongly making it apply not only to the intra-Trinitarian life but also to the God-world relation itself.

Perichoresis as participation: what it means to be “in” God

The concept of perichoresis is properly at home only in discussions of the immanent Trinity. To suggest that God is in perichoretic relationship with the world is to imply that the world is in

55. For a similar suggestion, see Horton, *Lord and Servant*, ch. 1.

56. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 283.

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 280–1.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 281.

some sense constitutive of the divine identity: "Why not just go all the way and affirm a God whose personhood is itself being constituted through God's ongoing relation to the creation?"⁵⁹ Because, as Molnar rightly observes, "the idea that God's relations *ad extra* will become God's relations *ad intra* indicates a confusion and reversal of reason and revelation."⁶⁰

A new picture – of entities constituted by their relationships – holds us captive. On this view, God is no longer an infinite substance set off from a world of independent substances but a communion of persons in open relation to a world of evolving, interdependent entities.⁶¹ This new world picture, proceeding as it does from the new root metaphor of interpersonal relationality, clearly has a leg up on the older picture of the world as a machine, with God pulling the levers, especially as concerns the gospel proclamation "For God so loved the world." Yet there are problems, for, according to the new picture, "all creatures participate in the life of trinitarian communion,"⁶² a notion that would doubtless have surprised those prophets and apostles who marched to what C. H. Dodd called the "two-beat rhythm" of history: salvation *and* judgment.

If Moltmann ultimately subscribes to a metaphysics of relationality, it is not because he reduces persons to relations (he does not) but because he brings a "third term" into his discussion of the Trinity, namely, the concept of the persons' *history*.⁶³ God's history is "open" to the history of the world. In addition to the eternal perichoretic relation of Father, Son, and Spirit that constitutes the divine being, there thus exists a *temporal*, equally perichoretic, relation to the world. The *unity* of the three persons is inclusive rather than exclusive; others can join in. God makes space and time by kenotically contracting his immensity and eternity so that creatures can participate in the divine relational matrix. Moltmann thus speaks of "a mutual perichoresis between eternity and time"⁶⁴ and a perichoretic concept of space as "the social space of reciprocal

59. Ted Peters, *God as Trinity*, pp. 95–6.

60. Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, p. 144.

61. For a fuller statement of the new picture, see Denis Edwards, "A Relational and Evolving Universe Unfolding with the Dynamism of the Divine Communion," in Clayton and Peacocke (eds.), *In Whom We Live and Move and Have our Being*, pp. 199–210.

62. Edwards, "A Relational and Evolving Universe," p. 204.

63. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 174.

64. Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, p. 295.

self-development.”⁶⁵ In particular, it is the Spirit’s continuing operations in creation that leads Moltmann to posit the “mutual perichoresis” of God and the world.⁶⁶ The question remains: is this eco-theo-ontology the best framework within which to interpret the Bible’s depictions of God’s dialogical encounters with human beings?

Moltmann is hardly the only theologian who has stretched the concept of perichoresis to describe not only the *ad intra* life of the Father, Son, and Spirit but the life of the Trinity *ad extra* as well.⁶⁷ Colin Gunton too uses perichoresis as the root metaphor of a world hypothesis that sees all levels of reality – divine, human, and cosmic – as mutually related.⁶⁸ Others claim that “modern physics offers a persuasive argument in favour of the proposition that the universe created by God is perichoretic in character.”⁶⁹ Perichoresis here becomes the root metaphor for ontology in general.⁷⁰

Christian theologians would do well to recognize the limits of the concept of perichoresis, not least because, in a strict sense, it cannot be true of human being: “Another human self cannot be internal to my own self as subject of action. Human persons are always external to one another *as subjects*.”⁷¹ The divine persons indwell human beings in a qualitatively different way than they do one another. So, while we may say, “Christ in us and we in Christ,” it is important to remember that we are not internal to Christ as acting subjects (i.e., we are not the subjects of what Christ says and does); in this respect, the relation is non-reciprocal. The same goes for the Spirit: “The Spirit indwells human persons, whereas human beings by contrast indwell *the life-giving ambience of the Spirit*, not the person of the Spirit.”⁷²

65. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 327. See also Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 258.

67. See the discussion in Graham Buxton, *The Trinity, Creation and Pastoral Ministry: Imaging the Perichoretic God* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 129–36.

68. See Gunton *The One, the Three, and the Many* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 163–79.

69. Graham Buxton, *The Trinity, Creation and the Pastoral Ministry*, p. 140.

70. According to one Eastern Orthodox panentheist, the world is “in” God because the whole universe subsists in the person of the Logos and is thus in God through perichoretic participation (Alexei V. Nesteruk, “The Universe as Hypostatic Inherence in the Logos of God,” in Clayton and Peacocke [eds.], *In Whom We Live and Move and Have our Being*, pp. 169–83).

71. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, pp. 210–11.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

Another question for the new orthodoxy is whether the type of participation implicit in this expansive perichoretic ontology constitutes a “genuine personal relationship” between God and the human creature and, if so, whether it does so apart from the history of Jesus Christ. Most relational theists and panentheists seem to think that it does, for the simple reason that they see creation itself as a free act of divine self-limitation (kenosis) – in a word, love: “Love involves free self-limitation in making space for another.”⁷³ Admittedly, such participation does not bypass the Logos altogether, for “all things were made through him” (Jn. 1:3); at the same time, whether one is “in” God, or even “in” the Logos, has more to do with one’s ontological constitution (i.e., createdness) than one’s involvement with the history and fate of Jesus Christ (i.e., discipleship).

Clayton readily acknowledges that “panentheist trinitarians support a participation of the created order in God in a manner that is at least analogous to the co-participation of Father, Son, and Spirit in the one Godhead.”⁷⁴ The panentheistic analogy provides a superior way of specifying what we mean when we speak of God “relating to us as persons” than theism’s notion that God intervenes from “outside.”⁷⁵ Note well: the type of relation that ultimately matters to Clayton is *ontological*. He is fond of quoting Acts 17:28: “in him we live and move and have our being.” There seems to be no room for properly covenantal relations, however, in kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology, no room for Jesus the Messiah in the panentheistic “in.” That human beings have become alienated from the God in whom they live and move and have their being – that sin can remove us from God’s presence – is difficult, if not impossible, to articulate within a panentheistic participatory framework. Clayton tersely explicates the soteriological implications of his panentheism: “I find no place within emergent theology for substitutionary atonement, ransom metaphors, or the focus on the need for a sacrifice to propitiate the wrath of an angry God.”⁷⁶

73. Edwards, “A Relational and Evolving Universe,” p. 201.

74. Clayton, “Panentheist Internalism: Living within the Presence of the Trinitarian God,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40 (2002), p. 214.

75. Clayton, “Panentheism in Metaphysical and Scientific Perspective,” in Clayton and Peacocke (eds.), *In Whom We Live and Move*, p. 77.

76. Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, p. 113. One here wonders about the willingness to supplement the deliverances of science with the faith once entrusted to the prophets and apostles – spokespersons for God who regularly had

Is it indeed the case that union with God hinges less on what happens in a tiny ethnic group (Israel) than it does on the broader structure of what we could call cosmic perichoresis? Or that God's love for the world involves mutual indwelling – the world in the divine communion and vice versa – in effect, a “*cosmic communicatio idiomatum*”?⁷⁷ According to kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology, what mediates God's love is not the history of a particular man (Jesus) but a general structure (metaphysics). Surely there is more of Hegel (metaphysical necessity) than of *hesed* (covenant faithfulness) in such conceptions of God's love.⁷⁸

The new orthodoxy causes other doctrinal dominoes to fall as well. For example, if no spot of creation is external to God, if the true infinite is inclusive of all else, then what Christians have traditionally termed hell is actually a place or possibility that God opens up inside himself. How ought we interpret biblical texts that depict the fate of the lost in terms of the absence of God? Do such texts have a merely rhetorical (Rahner's “threat discourse”) rather than referential function? Relational theists and panentheists treat presence and absence as metaphysical rather than covenantal categories. Yet Scripture distinguishes the “mere” presence of God (living and moving “in” God ontologically) from the “saving” presence of God (being “in” Jesus Christ covenantally), depicting the latter as the supreme covenant blessing, not a natural right.

Consider Jesus' high priestly prayer in which he asks that those whom the Father has given him “may be in us” as the Father is in him and he in the Father (Jn. 17:21). According to the New Testament, human beings can only be “in” the triune God insofar as the Son is in them through the Spirit. Volf rightly comments: “It is not the mutual perichoresis of human beings, but rather the indwelling of the Spirit common to everyone that makes the church into a communion corresponding to the Trinity.”⁷⁹ In whom exactly does the Spirit dwell? If, on the one hand, the Spirit indwells all human beings, then the

recourse to just these ideas as they attempted to explain how a righteous God could establish right relations with the unrighteous.

77. Otto, “Use and Abuse of Perichoresis,” 382.

78. John Thompson notes the Hegelian ethos of Moltmann's understanding of perichoresis, which involves a “becoming” in God, that is, “an evolving event between three divine subjects and the world” (Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 51).

79. Volf, *After our Likeness*, p. 213.

contrast Jesus draws between “church” and “world” becomes insignificant. If, on the other hand, the Spirit indwells only some human beings, then we need to give an account of why this is. Does the New Testament not point us towards another type of participation – another sort of “in” – than that of panentheistic perichoresis? The answer, I believe, is yes, but we must look to the economic rather than the immanent Trinity for the clue to its nature. Specifically, we must look to the outworking of God’s covenant with Israel in the person and history of Jesus Christ – to a covenantal rather than cosmological form of participation.⁸⁰

We have to consider at least two kinds of “abiding in”: a general cosmological and a particular christological form.⁸¹ It is far from clear, however, that kenotic-perichoretic relational theists and panentheists accept this distinction and, if so, what they could mean by it. To press the point further: if all creation is always/already in perichoretic relation with God, what sense would they make of the following excerpt from Jesus’ farewell discourse: “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abided in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5)? The question remains: *who* enjoys union with Christ through the Spirit – some, or all – and on what grounds? The net effect of depicting creation as a kenotic-relational act of the triune God is to dissociate the gift of the Spirit from the particular history of Jesus Christ: humans abide in God on general cosmological rather than specifically christological grounds. One shares in the “mind of Christ” by imitating his example, responding to the ever-present divine lure. This is a moral rather than a mystical or covenantal union: “to be ‘in Christ’ ... means to subordinate one’s own will to the will of the divine, echoing Jesus’ basic prayer, ‘may your will be done’.”⁸²

80. Cf. Michael Horton, “Participation and Covenant,” in Smith and Olthius [eds.], *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, pp. 107–32, esp. pp. 118–20 and, in the same volume, Justin S. Holcomb, “Being Bound to God: Participation and Covenant Revisited,” pp. 243–62. Though Horton and Holcomb are responding to Radical Orthodoxy’s development of a Platonic, not kenotic-relational, sense of participation, the basic point still applies.

81. The issue is whether the biblical idea of being “in Christ” is cosmological or covenantal: is it a way of speaking about human being in general (i.e., as created through Christ in the divine image), or is it a way of speaking about the redeemed in particular, in which case the emphasis is on the union with Christ reserved for the “born again” who comprise a “new” humanity through dying and rising in him (Rom. 8:29)?

82. Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, p. 109.

The purpose of this section has been to explore the consequences of kenotic-perichoretic relational theism and panentheism for our understanding of God's love. This approach views God as entering into perichoretic relation with the world by virtue of creating it (i.e., making space inside himself for it). A certain union with God is thus established apart from the events recounted in the gospel. This cosmic variation on a perichoretic theme relocates the mutual fellowship of God and world from the person of the Mediator to the neighborhood of metaphysics. The mutuality between God and humanity – the sharing of life – is still “in Christ,” but this is now less a function of the history of Jesus than it is of the cosmic Christ in and through whom all things hold together.

*Perichoresis as projection: why the turn to
relationality may not be Trinitarian*

The notion of perichoresis has gone into the conceptual far country and prospered beyond anything the Cappadocians could have dreamed for it. Contemporary theologians have promoted the concept far above mere journeyman rank: instead of performing a technical function in the discussion of how the three are one, the concept has blossomed into a full-blown paradigm for expounding the nature of human being, the relation between God and human being, even the relation between God and the non-human world.⁸³ It all started with a recovery of the “open” Trinity, viewed not merely as a “self-contained relationality” but as “God’s life with us and our life with each other.”⁸⁴ God’s being as communion – as interpersonal relationality – has become an all-inclusive ontotheological idea, as well as the template for conceiving the sociality of human being.

Even a sympathetic commentator like Richard Bauckham faults Moltmann for making Trinitarian relationality (perichoresis) the model for human social life: “This view of our relationship to the

83. The term “perichoretic paradigm” is Speidell’s, though he focuses only on the Trinity as a paradigm for human life: “God in us, we in God, and we in one another” (“A Trinitarian Ontology,” p. 284). Alister McGrath warns of the danger of Trinitarian inflation. It is simply too easy to reason that humanity has some quality *x* because God, as Trinity, is *x* and humanity is created in the image of God (Alister E. McGrath, “The Doctrine of the Trinity: An Evangelical Reflection,” in Timothy George [ed.], *God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006], pp. 30–1).

84. LaCugna, *God For us*, pp. 103, 228.

Trinity has no biblical basis.”⁸⁵ Furthermore, humans do not relate to each member of the Trinity in the same way. For example, the Spirit indwells us (itself a relation without analogy in human life) to enable our relation with the Son and Father, not to be experienced as an “other” in his own right. True human community comes about “not as an image of the trinitarian fellowship, but as the Spirit makes us like Jesus in his community with the Father and with others.”⁸⁶

Many relational theists and panentheists nevertheless continue to view perichoresis as the principle that explains not only the Trinity but the whole universe. For, like the Trinity, every entity seems to be constituted by two sets of relationships: “First, there are the inter-relationships between *the components* that make up an entity. Thus a carbon atom is constituted from subatomic particles (protons, neutrons, and electrons). Second, there is the relationship between the entity and *its wider environment*. So a carbon atom in my body is constituted as part of a molecule, which forms part of a cell, which belongs to an organ of my body.”⁸⁷ This example tacitly appeals to a striking parallel with the immanent and economic Trinity. Yet the dissimilarities are equally striking: the triune God has no component parts; neither (on the classical view, at least) does some wider environment constitute the divine being.

Classical theists like Aquinas know that the (subsistent) relations that constitute the divine persons are *sui generis*.⁸⁸ By “real relations,” Aquinas means relations that presuppose or imply an ontological similarity or sameness.⁸⁹ On this definition, however, the only “real” relations God has are those that obtain between the three divine persons: perichoretic relations.⁹⁰ It follows that perichoresis is a poor analogy either for the God-world relation or for the relatedness that characterizes creaturely existence. As with all analogies and metaphors, one must acknowledge both the “is” and the “is not.” The

85. “Jürgen Moltmann and the Question of Pluralism,” in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. 160.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

87. Edwards, “A Relational and Evolving Universe,” p. 202. In somewhat similar fashion, Colin Gunton identifies perichoresis as a “transcendental” that captures something universal about being in general (*The One, the Three, and the Many*, p. 152).

88. Kerr, *After Aquinas*, p. 198. See also Torchia, *Exploring Personhood*, pp. 140–1.

89. See Long, “Aquinas and God’s Sovereignty,” in Long and Kalantzis (eds.), *The Sovereignty of God Debate*, p. 53.

90. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia, 28, 1.

problem with the perichoretic analogy is that the God-world relation is fundamentally *not* like the intratrinitarian communion, for God and creation are not on the same plane of being. Positing a perichoretic relation between Creator and creation levels the ontological playing field: "If God were on the same plane of being, then there would be no need for the Incarnation; God would always already be Incarnate. There would be no divine drama."⁹¹

Advocates of the turn to relationality must resist projecting human relationality onto the triune being. Paul Molnar, referring particularly to Moltmann but indirectly to relational theologies in general, complains that "relationality is the subject and God is the predicate instead of the other way around."⁹² Once categories like "openness" and "relationality" are used to tie God to creation, they become greater than God, with a fateful result: "we lose the true object of our worship."⁹³

Once again, Feuerbach was here. It was he who explained the idea of divine transcendence as a projection of human autonomy: "God, as an extramundane being, is however nothing else than the nature of man withdrawn from the world and concentrated in itself, free from all worldly ties and entanglements."⁹⁴ Feuerbach knows, however, that humans are not only rational but social animals: "We can think alone, but can love only with another."⁹⁵ Accordingly, he argues that the doctrine of the Trinity is a projection of the human ideal of "participated life." The secret of Trinitarian theology is human sociability. Christian doctrine mirrors lived human relationships.⁹⁶ If the Trinity did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it, for humans, as social beings, need a God "in whom there is society, a union of beings fervently loving each other."⁹⁷ Feuerbach anticipated the turn to relationality by a hundred years.

Feuerbach is not remythologizing but demythologizing theology. So are other theologians who willfully employ a similar logic of

91. Long, "Aquinas and God's Sovereignty," p. 54.

92. Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, p. 227.

93. Long, "Response," in Long and Kalantzis (eds.), *The Sovereignty of God Debate*, p. 184.

94. Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, p. 66.

95. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

96. Harvey, *Feuerbach*, p. 76.

97. Feuerbach, *Essence*, p. 73. Interestingly, Feuerbach identifies love as "essentially feminine" in its nature (p. 72) and then links the vitality of Trinitarian theology to the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

projection. For example, Elizabeth Johnson asserts that at the heart of the mystery of the Trinity is communal relatedness, yet in answer to her own question of how to characterize this relatedness, she turns to a human phenomenon, namely, the “mutuality experienced in genuine friendship.”⁹⁸ Karen Kilby examines other examples of this projectile logic, arguing that contemporary theologians typically fill out the concept of perichoresis “with notions borrowed from our own experience of relationships and relatedness” that are then used as a *divine* template for ordering human society: “what is projected onto God is immediately reflected back onto the world, and this reverse projection is said to be what is in fact *important* about the doctrine.”⁹⁹ She worries that contemporary theologians have turned what should have been a house of prayer – perichoresis as a conceptual aid in adoring the mystery of the three-in-one – into a den of politics: “In the hands of these thinkers, then, the claim that God though three is yet one becomes a source of metaphysical insight and a resource for combating individualism, patriarchy and oppressive forms of political and ecclesiastical organization.”¹⁰⁰

It would be highly ironic if the recovery of Trinitarian theology ultimately led, albeit unintentionally, to a new round of Feuerbachian projection. The proper function of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity tells us *who* the transcendent God is. Without this knowledge of who God is in himself, our talk of God becomes “only a conceptual construct of our *experiences*.”¹⁰¹ Theologians must not fill the content of God’s inner life with images drawn from what someone happens to regard as humanity’s “best practice.” That way Feuerbach lies.

The remythologizing way forward is not to project human values into the immanent Trinity but to fix our attention on the economy,

98. Johnson, *She Who Is*, pp. 216–17.

99. Karen Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000), p. 442. Gilles Emery concurs: “The contemporary discourse on unity as perichoretic communion is fundamentally animated by a practical purpose that recalls the project of theodicy, and which is presented as a response to the critiques of modern theism and atheism ... One expects the doctrine of God the Trinity to be such that ... it bears within it a remedy to modern individualism and avoids any presentation of God which, in conceiving him as a supreme substance over against man, would make him a ‘rival’ for man. Trinitarian theology is thus put in service of anthropology ...” (“Chronique de théologie trinitaire (V),” *Revue Thomiste* 101 [2001], pp. 581–2).

100. Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection,” p. 438.

101. Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, p. 138.

on those triune acts of revelation and redemption that solicit the prophetic and apostolic testimony to “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life ...” (1 Jn. 1:1). Yes, these are relational terms (“touched with our hands”), though their reference point is not general human experience but a very particular history of salvation that culminates with Jesus Christ. Yes, the meaning of interpersonal relational terms is best grasped when we point to concrete examples: “if we want to define what ‘trust’ is, we will have to point to an example of human interactivity and say ‘That’.”¹⁰² If we want to define what the love of God is, however, we will have to point to an example of divine interactivity and say “That” – or rather, “Him”: Jesus Christ.

Feuerbach got it partly right. Human beings are in the image of God and so, in one sense, all language about God may be seen to be anthropomorphic. Yet one can also appeal to the *imago Dei* in the opposition direction to argue not that we are projecting our image upon God but that God is projecting his image onto us. Relationality would be in this case not a human projection onto God but a *theomorphic* projection onto humanity. The difficulty, of course, is in the details: how do we know which forms (*morphe*) of human life image God and which do not? It is naive to think that community per se consistently images God. Everything depends on what unites the community; hatred, prejudice, and ideology can be as binding a social glue as love and friendship, as such diverse groups as the Ku Klux Klan, Nazis, and even school-yard cliques sadly attest.

The solution is to focus on the form of Jesus Christ. Whereas human individuals and societies image God inconsistently, the person of Jesus – and this includes his way of relating to others – is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). The New Testament fills out with specific content what would otherwise remain abstract, identifying the image that Jesus makes visible with “true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24; cf. Col. 3:10–15). Even these notions need to be “earthed,” and we do this by identifying them with the concrete pattern of action, reaction, and interaction that characterizes the life of Jesus. That means attending to the biblical *mythos* that

102. Timothy J. Crutcher, “The Relational-Linguistic Spiral: A Model of Language for Theology,” *Heythrop Journal* 43 (2002), p. 471.

renders his identity. If our language about God is to be anything more than anthropological projection, then it must be *christomorphic*. To speak well of God one must draw not from the repertoire of our best human experiences, but from the recital of the economy of salvation.¹⁰³

Passion and/as relatedness

Does the new relational ontotheology represent an exodus of the doctrine of God from bondage to Greek philosophy or is it, despite its deepest desire, a return to Egypt (i.e., metaphysical bondage)? Classical theists worry that the turn to relationality simply exchanges one master metaphor (substance) for another (relation), an exchange that results in having to exposit “God is love” in terms of divine suffering: the cross as “the tragedy in God.”¹⁰⁴ Moltmann poses the fundamental question: “Is the suffering God free or is he a prisoner of his own history?”¹⁰⁵ Stated differently: Is the sovereign God free or is he a prisoner of his own love?

The fundamental problem

“For God *so loved* the world ...” (Jn. 3:16a). That God is love is, for Christian theology, beyond question. What remains very much in question, however, is the *meaning* of this claim. How did God love the world? In what does God’s love consist? What was its content, its form? We have only to return to the Fourth Gospel for the answer: “... that he gave his only Son ...” (Jn. 3:16b). Jesus’ death on the cross reveals the God of the gospel to be a *compassionate* God, a

103. A skeptic might at this point observe that we have not yet emerged from the murky waters of the unknown for, as the Jesus Seminar has shown, a scholarly consensus is lacking with regard to what the historical Jesus actually said and did. A full response to this objection is beyond the scope of the present work. Still, let me make two points: first, the canonical account of Jesus’ life is itself part of the process of divine self-presentation, what I will call in Part II the “economy of divine communicative and self-communicative action.” Second, I do not believe that those on the Third Quest for the historical Jesus are any more successful than were those on the First in avoiding the tendency to project their own culturally glittering images of what it is to be truly human onto Jesus. As Albert Schweitzer put it a century ago, they look into the well of history and see not Jesus but their own best faces.

104. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 42. Moltmann takes the phrase from N. Berdyaev.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

God who pours himself out, giving himself in loving passion and suffering love. Can a God who so (i.e., in *this* way) loves the world – limiting his power in order genuinely to interact with creation – also *save* it? What exactly is the gospel according to kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology?

The position here under consideration is voluntary relational theism (and panentheism), not the view that God had to create or be limited by something other than himself. Why treat kenotic-perichoretic relational theism and panentheism under the same ontotheological heading? Two reasons. First, the two positions belong together because both insist that God is in a sort of interpersonal relationship with the world in which both parties may affect, and be affected by, the other. Second, once one subscribes to a relational ontotheology in which creatures can affect or influence God as they themselves are influenced, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that even God's being or, more properly, existence is constituted by his relations *ad extra*.¹⁰⁶

The new kenotic-perichoretic relational orthodoxy maintains that God, out of love for the world, freely limits himself for the sake of a genuine relationship with free human creatures.¹⁰⁷ The basic assumption is that God relates to what is outside himself (the world) in a way that corresponds to the relations of Father, Son, and Spirit (perichoresis). The triune God "opens" the circle of divine fellowship to include creation. That God becomes dependent in some sense on the world follows from *relational* necessity: God is (really, personally) related to the world in terms of mutuality and reciprocity.

That God voluntarily entered into such an arrangement, as the open theists and panentheists maintain, does not make its consequent relational necessity any less necessary. If being is relation, as the new orthodoxy maintains, then God will indeed be affected by his creatures' response, or lack thereof. According to open theists and panentheists, God wills to limit his own freedom for the sake of human freedom, even though this entails God's becoming vulnerable to (i.e., susceptible to being affected by) what humans do with

106. Cooper argues on this basis that open theism is on a "slippery slope" towards panentheism: "This is the case even if God freely chooses to involve himself in creation, as the open theists and Clayton affirm" (Cooper, *Panentheism*, p. 344).

107. See also W. H. Vanstone, *Love's Endeavor, Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977).

their freedom. It is God's vulnerability that prompts the classical theist's concern: can the kenotic-perichoretic relational view – God's voluntary relinquishing of his aseity – preserve divine sovereignty and prevent God from becoming a victim whose goal for creation is at risk of failure? Does the kenotic-perichoretic relational view provide adequate grounds for a realistic and rational hope that all things will be well because God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28)? It is far from self-evident that there is adequate reason to sustain the hope that all things shall indeed be well.

What if human beings decide to pursue their own self-centered individual ends, turning a deaf ear toward their God-given vocation to love God and others as themselves? What assurance do we have that God's non-coercive, persuasive love will prove effective in the end? The gospel is only good news if it contains an assurance that all will indeed end well: "The final causality of God's activity in history must be determinative even if he does not exercise determinative efficient causality. Mere enabling love is not adequate."¹⁰⁸

The problem is whether kenotic-perichoretic relational theology inevitably falls prey to metaphysical bondage, and this in two senses. Such theology appears to have shaken off its Greek chains only to have forged new bonds of more recent Western vintage. Christian Smith has recently described the faith with which most North American teenagers function as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."¹⁰⁹ God, on this view, wants people to be nice, and happy (hence "moralistic" and "therapeutic") but is not actively involved in the process of transforming people (hence "deism"). Kenotic-perichoretic relational theists and panentheists are not, of course, deists. Yet it would not be amiss to describe the position as a "spiritualistic therapeutic Trinitarianism." Therapism, after all, "valorizes openness ... and the sharing of feelings."¹¹⁰ The open question, then, is whether kenotic-perichoretic relational theism and panentheism are not in

108. Cooper, *Panentheism*, p. 346. In Part II I set forth a particular kind of *communicative* causality that is appropriate for guaranteeing the integrity of divine determination while at the same time preserving human freedom in interpersonal relations.

109. *Soul Searching*, pp. 162–70.

110. Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel, *One Nation Under Therapy: How the Helping Culture is Eroding Self-Reliance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), p. 5. See also the classic study by Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

the final analysis new ways of demythologizing theology, in terms not of existentialism but “relationism.”

What is wrong with the new orthodoxy from the vantage point of classical theism is its sub-evangelical view of the love of God. God is less an agent who can work his will than an empath who is (voluntarily) susceptible to the will of others. Aquinas defines God’s love primarily in terms of his benevolent sovereign will: God’s love is his willing the good (*bene + volere*) for others and salvation is “the plan of God to communicate his own goodness.”¹¹¹ The response of these others is the goal of God’s love but not an intrinsic ingredient in it; the love poured out on the cross of Christ is primarily a giving, not receiving.

Love as relatedness: two types of kenosis

The gospel according to relational ontotheology features the hospitable God who “makes room” for us in his own life. The good news is “we in God” and “God in us.” But who are “we,” and what, if any, are the conditions for “getting in” and “staying in” God? The tendency of relational theism and panentheism is to view creation itself as a type of kenosis whereby God, out of love for the world, limits himself for the sake of establishing genuine interpersonal relations with the world. It remains to be seen, however, whether God’s so loving the world results in the loss of divine freedom and transcendence.

Creation as kenosis: God freely relinquishes determining power The gospel of kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology is that God metaphysically limits himself “for us”: God pours out or empties himself of those divine attributes that would inhibit a “genuine” interpersonal relationship with human creatures.¹¹² The assumption is that “there was a time when it [the world] was not.” So far, so classical theism. The novelty of the kenotic relational view lies in its insistence that, having decided to create, God subsequently decides to allow what happens in creation either to constitute, or at least to

111. Aidan Nichols, *Discovering Aquinas: An Introduction to His Life, Work, and Influence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), p. 72.

112. See Clayton, “‘Open Panentheism’ and Creation as Kenosis,” in *Adventures in the Spirit*, pp. 175–84, esp. p. 182. See also the essays in Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*.

affect, his triune life – the divine “experience” or “existence.” Divine kenosis begins not with the Incarnation, with which the notion is traditionally associated (cf. Phil. 2:7), but with creation: “With the creation of a world which is not God ... *God’s self-humiliation* begins – the self-limitation of the One who is omnipresent, and the suffering of the eternal love.”¹¹³ Out of love for the world, God wills what could have been a unilateral relation to become bilateral. The implication is that God’s relations with what is external to him now determine or affect his triune life.

What does it mean to say that God limits or empties himself of infinite knowledge and power? Before answering, it is again important to take note of the basic assumption governing this metaphysics of relationality, namely, that God must give up something of his own in order not to interfere with or violate the integrity of the created order (e.g., natural law; human freedom).

A first observation: to say that God limits his knowledge and power for the sake of a genuine relationship with creation implies that God was initially omniscient and omnipotent in the classical sense of the terms: “Thus, ‘in the beginning’ God *willed* not to know the future, and thus *decided to forget* the future.”¹¹⁴ This is a dark saying. While we can form some notion of what it is to restrain oneself from using one’s powers, it is difficult to make any sense of the notion of “restraining” one’s knowledge. By contrast, if one affirms that God knows everything there is to know, and that the world of free human actors is such that God *cannot* possibly know the future exhaustively, then one acknowledges at least one external limitation on God.

Another consequence of entering into a “real” relationship with creation over which one has abandoned control, then, is the real risk of failure. Relational theists protest that God is infinitely resourceful in responding to events and so can bring about the desired end, yet if pushed too far, this too calls into question the true openness of the God-world relation. We seem here to have arrived at a dilemma: either God is able to bring history to the purpose for which he has determined it, in which case it is not clear how he can preserve the integrity of the relationship with free

113. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 59.

114. Smedes, *Chaos, Complexity, and God*, p. 161.

human creatures who can refuse him, or else he lacks the ability to bring about the desired ending, in which case he is not worthy of worship.¹¹⁵

At this point, many kenotic-relational theologians will balk, reminding us that God's limitations are voluntary, not necessary. God *could* intervene when necessary. Twin difficulties beset this position. First, if God *could* intervene but does not, we run into the same problem of evil for which kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology was to have been the solution. Consider two scenarios: a truck bearing down on a child crossing the road; an asteroid bearing down on planet earth. While we could not blame God directly for either collision, might we hold God indirectly responsible for willing himself into a condition that precludes his being able to save the child or the earth?¹¹⁶ Second, when God does "intervene" – and almost all kenotic-perichoretic relational theists acknowledge such interventions to be necessary on occasion – is God then in danger of acting other than lovingly, if love means being in a genuine (non-constraining) and reciprocal (active-passive) relationship?

The above is actually a false dilemma, based on a category mistake. Category mistakes occur when we think about certain issues in the wrong terms. Gilbert Ryle cites the example of a tourist to Oxford who is shown all the colleges and libraries and then asks, "But where is the university?" The category mistake lay in thinking about the university in terms of one more building instead of the institution that makes of these many buildings one thing.¹¹⁷ So, too, in theology: the most common category mistake is that of thinking about God as one more building, as it were – as if he were like other beings, only greater.¹¹⁸

From the perspective of classical theism, relational theists and panentheists succumb to the most far-reaching category mistake of all, namely, of confusing the Creator with some aspect of creation (e.g., relationality). More particularly, they confuse the way that God and creatures make something happen. For example: though God's love is a personal activity, God is not part of the created order, hence there

115. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

116. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

117. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 16.

118. To be sure, human creatures are in God's image, though it does not follow from this that God shares the *limitations* of human creatures. There is likeness, but not limitation.

are no creaturely limitations to God's love.¹¹⁹ When God wills something's good, then, he is not in competition with either the workings of the natural order or the free action of other human beings.¹²⁰ God can genuinely interact in loving ways with created beings without having to "empty" himself of his omnipotence because his omnipotence is no threat to the integrity of creaturely being.

Underlying this categorial confusion of Creator and creation stands a metaphysical postulate that reduces what is logically possible for God to what is physically possible in the natural order.¹²¹ It is precisely this metaphysical postulate that leads some panentheists to dismiss divine interventionism on the grounds that such divine action competes with and, at the limit, negates the natural order: "The category mistake is thus a confusion between natural causality and divine action."¹²² When it comes to the God-world relation, however, *there is no competition*, for the relation is enveloped by an even greater Creator-creation distinction: "For no similarity can be asserted between creature and creator unless an even greater dissimilarity is included."¹²³

By thinking the God-world relation in terms of kenosis, the new kenotic-perichoretic relational orthodoxy raises the following question: *must the God who enters into dialogical relationship with human beings be always less than fully himself?* It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the self-limiting God "inevitably becomes ruled by a necessity from outside God."¹²⁴ Is a God who is less than fully himself the one living and true God of Scripture?¹²⁵ In the final analysis, the idea that creation necessitates divine kenosis may be not only a category but a doxology mistake. For the serious issue is whether, in limiting himself and so making himself dependent on worldly conditions, God

119. Smedes, *Chaos, Complexity, and God*, p. 180. Cf. Weinandy: "Yahweh is Creator precisely because he is not a cause within the created realm" (*Does God Suffer?* p. 53, n.19).

120. In ch. 7 I shall suggest that God's action stands to human action as authorial action stands to the action of the characters of whom an author writes.

121. So Smedes, *Chaos, Complexity, and God*, p. 182. Smedes defines "scientism" as this tendency to reduce the logically possible to the physically possible.

122. *Ibid.*, p. 198. In Part III I present an alternative account of divine causality in terms of triune communicative action.

123. Fourth Lateran Council, 1251.

124. Long, "Response," in Long and Kalantzis (eds.), *The Sovereignty of God Debate*, p. 184.

125. In Part III I argue that God is always fully himself in his interactions with human beings.

also renders himself less worthy of worship: "Can one put one's trust and hope in a God who is rendered helpless due to God's own act of self-restraint?"¹²⁶ As Pannenberg observes, if God is self-limited, then it follows that the creature is no longer dependent on God alone, but on other powers, so that "it cannot rationally put full trust in God alone for the overcoming of evil in the world."¹²⁷

Incarnation as kenosis: God freely exercises determining power
Kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology mistakenly views God as party to a zero-sum game. The metaphysics of relationality assumes that divine and human action and power are on the same level, rivaling one another. The chief difficulty in this approach is that it begins from below – with the experience of human love – only to project it onto the divine nature. The result: *what it means to say that God is the one who loves in freedom is decided prior to a consideration of how God loves the world in Jesus Christ. Stated differently: the whole God-world relation gets elaborated before the Incarnation – God with us – ever comes into view.*¹²⁸

We come, then, to a second type of kenotic-relational theism, one that derives its understanding of God's being only by analyzing a particular event: "that he gave his only son" (Jn. 3:16). The incarnation of the Son of God – the Word's assuming flesh, becoming man – represents a different sort of kenosis, yet one that is just as relevant, and interesting, to the subject at hand: how to conceive the divine being in light of God's decision to love the world. God, says Barth, "does not will to be Himself in any other way than He is in this relationship."¹²⁹

The incarnation represents an act of freedom, not constraint. The Son of God empties himself of the "form" but not the "content" of

126. Smedes, *Chaos, Complexity, and God*, p. 196.

127. Pannenberg, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994) ST 2:16.

128. Bruce McCormack, "The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism," in McCormack (ed.), *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI and Edinburgh: Baker and Rutherford House, 2008), p. 188. McCormack argues that relational theists and panentheists are as "essentialist" as their classical forebears since they treat the ontology of God as something that can be defined and established apart from the incarnate life of Jesus Christ. This is precisely what I mean by speaking of "relational ontotheology."

129. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 274. Kenosis, in its theologically correct sense, is not a general relation of God and world but a very specific and particular relation, namely, the incarnation of the Son of God that itself is a decisive turning point in salvation history: the moment when God begins to fulfill his covenant promise to Israel in a shockingly new way.

divinity by assuming a human nature.¹³⁰ The “content” of God’s deity is precisely his free decision to be the God he is in Jesus Christ: “He wills as God to be for us and with us, who are not God – He does not will to be himself in any other way than he is in this relationship.”¹³¹ God’s being lies in his self-determination to be who he is in the event of Jesus Christ: the one who loves in freedom. Barth also insists that the way God is in the history of Jesus corresponds to the way God is in eternity: “‘God is love’ is a statement which describes the nature and meaning of the act in which God gives himself his own being.”¹³² Indeed, in a gloss on John 3:16 Barth links God’s love for the world with his decision to elect humanity in Jesus for fellowship: “What can this election be, then, but more grace, a participation ... in His sonship?”¹³³ Election is God willing to be with us and for us in Jesus Christ; it is the choice of the Son to empty himself even unto death on the cross.

“God so loved the world.” Barth’s understanding of God’s love and freedom stands in stark contrast to kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology. Indeed, he criticizes panentheism by name, and with it, tacitly, the metaphysics of relationality, by saying that “God does not form a whole with any other being either in identity with it or as compounding or merging with it to constitute a synthesis – the object of that master-concept, so often sought and found, which comprehends both God and what is not God.”¹³⁴ What is crucial for Barth is that the Incarnation reveals God as one who loves *in freedom*: “God is who He is in independence of them [his creatures] even in this relatedness. He does not share His being with theirs. He does not enter with them into a higher synthesis ... Even in His relationship and connexion with them, He remains who He is. He creates and sustains this relationship.”¹³⁵ In sum: God displays who he is and who humans are in Jesus Christ, in whom there is both perfect love and perfect freedom. When the person and work of the incarnate Son govern the doctrine of God, the result is not ontotheology but theo-ontology. It is in Jesus Christ that we see God actively

130. For more on the christological meaning of kenosis, especially as worked out by the church fathers, see Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” in Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love*, pp. 193–8.

131. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 274.

132. McCormack, “Actuality of God,” p. 216.

133. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, p. 121.

134. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 312.

135. *Ibid.*, p. 311.

determining both himself and us to be covenant partners. There is both real fellowship and real inequality: for God does not need us to be who he is, whereas we would not be who we are, or even be at all, without him.¹³⁶

Does the one who loves in freedom suffer out of necessity?

“God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8). No argument there. The parting of the theological ways occurs only when we begin to say what love is. At the heart of the relational view is one particular interpersonal relation (i.e., love) together with a particular understanding of love (i.e., self-surrender). For the classical theist, God’s love is his self-communication – the gift of himself, the supreme good, to another.¹³⁷ The main question to be asked, of both classical and relational theists, is whether their respective notions of God’s love are ruled by abstract conceptions of deity – forms of ontotheology that give pride of place to substance and relation, respectively – or by the specific contours of God’s triune being as enacted in the history of Jesus Christ: “Here especially the common concept must be interpreted according to the particularity of this object.”¹³⁸

Kenotic-perichoretic relational theism assumes that God voluntarily participates in a “being in relation” with the world. In opening himself up to a loving relationship with the world, God allows the world to get under his skin, as it were, and affect him: “By God’s choice, creatures continuously determine God’s existence ad hoc – what he can know and do, cannot know and do, must know and do, what he risks ...”¹³⁹ Love means entering into a relationship in which one is willing to undergo – *suffer* – change: “To love is to be in a relationship where what the loved one does alters one’s own experience.”¹⁴⁰ Vincent Brümmer examines a number of models of human love – romantic, mystic, courtly, neighborly – but ultimately opts for a literal definition: “Love must by its very nature be a relationship of free mutual give and take, otherwise it cannot be love at

136. We shall return to Barth’s particular take on God’s being-as-act in the next chapter.

137. Cf. Moltmann: “Love is the self-communication of the good” (*Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 57, italics his).

138. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 281.

139. Cooper, *Panentheism*, p. 192; cf. p. 344.

140. Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p. 50.

all.”¹⁴¹ To say, with the classical theist, that love is willing another’s good depersonalizes the concept of love insofar as it falls short of mutuality and reciprocity.¹⁴²

Whence comes this kenotic-perichoretic understanding of love? Could the notion of love as genuine interpersonal relatedness, with the concomitant necessity of suffering, owe more to human phenomenology (and projection) than to “the event of God’s free self-enactment as Father, Son and Spirit”?¹⁴³ Here we may recall the original aim of the kenotic-perichoretic relational view, namely, to correct the classical theist picture of God by focusing on the actual history of the triune God, especially those give-and-take relationships that are the warp and woof of interpersonal dialogue. By taking the idea of “perfect love” as its main point of reference, however, kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology turns out, surprisingly enough, to be another species of “perfect being” theology.¹⁴⁴ This is a curious, controversial, and perhaps counter-intuitive claim and, as such, is worth exploring further.

To be sure, the argument from “perfect love” has as its aim not the demonstration of God’s existence but a claim about God’s nature. The project of kenotic-perichoretic relational theology is nevertheless formally similar to perfect being theology. Both proceed by way of an analysis of concepts to a conclusion that involves necessity: in the one case, necessary existence, and in the other, necessary suffering. Significantly, the inference concerning necessary suffering is drawn from elsewhere than an analysis of God’s self-enactment, but then used to interpret the latter: “they generate a notion of divinity not governed by the specific contours of God’s being and action, which then serves as the frame for positive theological teaching.”¹⁴⁵ The kenotic-perichoretic relational view thus repeats the very same

141. Brümmer, *The Model of Love*, p. 161.

142. *Ibid.*, pp. 156–63. Gary Badcock suggests that “the response of love is something that it is appropriate for God to need” (Badcock, “The Concept of Love: Divine and Human,” in Vanhoozer [ed.], *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, p. 45).

143. Webster, *Confessing God*, p. 88.

144. McCormack concurs: “But to substitute a doctrine of relationality for a doctrine of substance ... is simply to replace one form of metaphysical essentialism with another” (“Actuality of God,” p. 201). By “essentialistic” McCormack has in mind ways of construing God’s being apart from considerations of God’s concrete acts and, in particular, the Incarnation.

145. Webster, *Confessing God*, p. 113.

error that allegedly undermines classical theism, namely, that of specifying the unified divine essence (*de Deo uno*) before considering the triune economy (*de Deo trino*): “perfect loving interrelatedness” is the answer to a “what,” not a “who” question.¹⁴⁶

Defining God’s love in terms of mutual and reciprocal relatedness raises a final difficulty. If love is the relationship, then there could be no such thing as unrequited love. To “requite” is to make appropriate return. To define love in terms of bilateral mutual relatedness is to make “requitedness” analytic to and implicit in the concept. To be sure, love *aims* at generating a loving response. If requitedness – the return response, a giving back – is an essential ingredient in love, however, then the command to love one’s enemies (Mt. 5:44) is incoherent. How can one love those who refuse to enter into relations of mutuality if love is that mutual relation? Again, the problem may be with an excessively romantic view of love as the reciprocal exchange of emotional affects.

The “classical” approach defines love somewhat differently, as a dynamic act rather than a relation: love is the “giving of ourselves – in thought, word, and deed – for the good and well-being of another.”¹⁴⁷ On this view, neither reciprocity nor suffering are constitutive elements of love. The God of the gospel loves, even when there is no immediate return. Moreover, even when God’s love is requited, the ensuing relationship is not mutual and reciprocal in the sense of *exactly symmetrical*. To think so is to fail to appreciate the full measure of the Creator–creature distinction. Lastly, even where relationships are characterized by mutuality and reciprocity, it does not follow that there is love. After all, what is more mutual and reciprocal than “an eye for an eye” (Ex. 21:24)?

Traditional theists will wonder whether, and how, their kenotic-perichoretic relational counterparts can continue to affirm God’s sovereign freedom and transcendence subsequent to his choice to create a world with free agents. For according to the new orthodoxy, God’s actual existence – his concrete and ongoing relationship with human history – is vulnerable. God can be adversely affected by the

146. Cf. Webster’s critique of perfect being theology in *Confessing God*, pp. 89–90. Elsewhere, he links his critique of perfect being theology to phenomenologies that derive the content of divine attributes from descriptions of human being (p. 113).

147. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* p. 160.

world: divine purposes can be frustrated; divine initiatives can be stymied. By entering into “real” relation with the world, God opens himself up to the effects of human history. What is not-God now conditions God. The love of God implies the suffering of God.

Or does it? The classical concept of God’s self-giving for the good of another is a species of unconditional love. The notion that God’s love is *unconditioned* means that it is not susceptible of being changed or affected by what is not God.¹⁴⁸ This “strong” understanding of God’s love thus implies a certain impassibility.¹⁴⁹ Nothing the creature does prompts God’s love or can make God love it more; on the contrary, God “loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses” (Eph. 2:4, 5). The apostle Paul declares that God chose his people “before the foundation of the world” not because they were holy or otherwise attractive but to render them “holy and blameless” (Eph. 1:4). We see the same unconditionedness behind God’s election of Israel. The Lord chose Israel out of all the nations of the earth “not because you were more in number than any other people” (Dt. 7:7) but simply because the Lord loved them or, to use Paul’s language, “according to the purpose of his will . . . [and] the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:5, 7). Such love has nothing to do with disinterestedness or indifference. Rather, what lies behind the whole drama of redemption is an unwavering (impassible!) divine determination to be “with” and “for” the world, to bring about the renewal and reconciliation of all things “in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19).

Passing over/out of Egypt: remythologizing the God-world relation

Christian theology would have little to say about God, or the world, if it did not speak of persons, love, and relations. This is what

148. Cf. Weinandy: “For God to be transcendent means that he intimately relates to, is lovingly present to, and dynamically acts within the created order as the one who is ontologically wholly other than the created order” (*Does God Suffer?* p. 57).

149. I owe the insight into this connection between divine love and divine impassibility to Badcock, “The Concept of Love,” p. 39. He raises the connection only to dismiss it, however, arguing that God’s love for the world includes a desire for a loving response. While the latter point is true, I see no reason why it need contradict the insight that God first turns in love to his elect through no merit or basis on their own part, and, in *this* sense, we may say that his love is unconditioned or “impassible”. I shall return to this issue in chs. 8 and 9.

classical and kenotic-perichoretic theists alike have done. The concerns raised above should not be taken as suggesting that we abandon these important notions. On the contrary, the aim of remythologizing theology is not to bury but to parse these important notions by letting divine rather than human projections specify theological content.

There is no end to proposals for conceptualizing the God whose mighty two-handed acts the Bible recounts. Any theology that fails to preserve the distinction between God and world, however, fails ultimately to do justice to the Bible's rendering of God as Creator of all things visible and invisible (Col. 1:16). Everything comes down to the way theology conceptualizes the God-world relation. The two leading candidates that we have surveyed are "biblical-theological classical theism" and "voluntary kenotic-perichoretic relational theism." Each model claims to provide a conceptually coherent, existentially viable, and biblically based account of the triune God of the gospel, though the former appears initially to be on firmer ground regarding the God-world distinction and the latter with regard to the God-world relation.¹⁵⁰

Sound theology entails ontology and doxology alike. It is right and proper to seek some understanding of the nature of the God whom Christians worship. God's presence is not like the presence of other things in the world; the Creator is not a creature. When Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world, he means that God's new order is not something that can be calculated in this-worldly terms alone. God's action is eschatological, marshalling energies (i.e., Word and Spirit) that transcend the repertoire of worldly possibilities. Call it "eschatontology" or "theo-ontology" to distinguish it from ontological approaches "from below."¹⁵¹ If theo-ontology is the promised land of the doctrine of God, then we must approach it by way of God's self-revelation, and that means by way of the economy of triune communicative action. To remythologize theology is to think God's being on the basis of his communicative action whereby God does things in and through his Word and Spirit.

150. Alfred Freddoso says that Aquinas did not posit divine attributes such as simplicity, aseity, eternity, and impassibility of God because of perfect being ontology so much as because of the Bible's emphasis on God as Creator (Alfred J. Freddoso, "The 'Openness' of God: A Reply to Hasker," *Christian Scholar's Review* 28 [1998], pp. 124-33, esp. p. 131).

151. John Webster puts it this way: "Explication of Christian eschatological convictions ... demands that theology fashion a set of ontological categories

Projecting even our best thoughts about love falls short of the divine reality: "When we equate God simply with anything that is true, good, or beautiful, then it is those things which define God, rather than God who defines them."¹⁵² It is therefore important to determine what *mythos* informs our understanding of relationality. Are human relations the prototype for understanding the Trinitarian relations or vice versa? Some who have made the relational turn acknowledge "the hermeneutical function of anthropological relationality."¹⁵³ It is precisely at this point that classical theological theism, with its sustained emphasis on the Creator-creature distinction, continues to make an indispensable contribution to the contemporary discussion.

It is an inspired irony that the Creator-creature *distinction* serves as a necessary condition for the integrity of the God-world *relation*. Only some such ontological distinction guards against confusing divine action with other forms of creaturely causation, hence only such a distinction preserves the integrity of God's genuine interpersonal relation with human beings. As we saw in the various case studies of divine-human interaction in chapter 1, the primary way in which God relates to human beings is through various types of discourse. God's is a communicative presence: "Come now, let us reason together" (Isa. 1:18). As we shall see in Part III, genuine dialogue requires at least two voices, each with its own perspective. What Molnar criticizes in Moltmann is applicable to panentheism more generally: "because Moltmann attempts to conceive God's nature and suffering in creation *in a single perspective* in which both are on their way toward redemption, he incorporated need, nothingness, suffering and death directly into the nature of God."¹⁵⁴ The fundamental problem with panentheism is its fusion, and hence confusion, of divine and creaturely horizons.

The way forward, beyond relational theism or panentheism and back to something more like classical theism, is to think through

about created being which are oriented towards 'the new,' towards that which the creation becomes by virtue of the regenerative action of God in Christ through the power of the Spirit" ("Eschatology, Ontology, and Human Action," unpub. mss.).

152. Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom, "The Convergence Model of Pietistic Ethics; Faith Active in Love" (unpub. mss.).

153. Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology*, p. 5.

154. Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, p. 216, italics mine. In ch. 5 I shall introduce Bakhtin's notion of dialogue in order to criticize such "single perspective" theologies.

God's love, and being, in terms of neither impersonal causality nor personal mutuality alone but rather in terms of communicative and self-communicative action. The love of God is the triune God in self-communicative action, God's sharing his own life with what is other than ("outside") himself. The triune God communicates not only information but life and energy as well, through Word and Spirit. The goal in what follows is to sketch the contours of a communicative theism that works a variation on the classical model, incorporating the best of the new relational model while simultaneously avoiding its defects.

PART II

Communicative theism and the triune God

Some theologians suggest that we should always hear the voice of the poor in the biblical text or the voice of women, or the voice of whoever happens to be reading it at the time, since all reading is contextual and thus socially constructed. While it is true that the Bible is full of many voices ... the one voice that is silenced by these theologians is the very voice of God.

– Stephen H. Webb, *The Divine Voice*, p. 166

God's works are his words ... his doing is identical with his speaking.

– Luther, as cited by Wilhelm Pauck's introduction to LCC edn. of Luther's *Lectures on Romans* (taken from WA vol. III, 154, 7)

To be means to communicate.

– Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 287

God's being is in communicating

Theology that refuses to address questions of ontology can never be more than a mythology. (David Bentley Hart)¹

The Bible conceives life as a drama in which human and divine actions create the dramatic whole. There are ontological presuppositions for this drama, but they are not spelled out. (Reinhold Niebuhr)²

Contemporary critics of metaphysics (their name is Legion) have accused it of being, among other things, a white man's myth.³ Many in today's multicultural world doubt whether any single conceptual scheme, no matter how coherent, could be universally true (or win universal consent). The notion that a system of humanly derived categories could cut reality at its joints is commonly dismissed as a philosophical Will-o'-the-wisp. Feuerbach's shadow reaches into postmodernity: anthropology is now the secret not only of theology but of metaphysics. Philosophical conceptions of the divine may say more about the reach of human concepts (our theoretical "gaze") than they do about the reality of God's self-giving in Jesus Christ.⁴

One alternative to the myth of metaphysics is the metaphysics of *mythos*, the attempt conceptually to elaborate the truth of the storied history of the God of Israel and Jesus Christ. To remythologize theology (and metaphysics in general) is to put our discourse of *what is*

1. David B. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), p. 213.

2. Cited in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (eds.), *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, vol. I (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 216.

3. So Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," *New Literary History* 5 (1974), pp. 5-74.

4. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, pp. 16-17.

under the discipline of the biblical accounts of God's speaking and acting.⁵

The present proposal has nothing to do with invoking God as the solution to a philosophical problem (e.g., what moves the universe?).⁶ On the contrary, it has everything to do with responding to those prior divine invocations by which the word of God bespoke creation, led Israel out of Egypt, and became flesh in Jesus Christ. Those who deign to speak of God, whether metaphysically or not, could avoid many problems if they learned not to speak until spoken to. For the most basic distinction between theologians derives not from differences in gender, class, race, denominational affiliation, or even historical epoch. The real dividing line is between those who view theology only as talk about God-talk and those who believe in the possibility of true talk about God. Among the latter, there is a further distinction between those who seek to speak of God on the basis of nature (including human nature) and those who believe that speaking well of God is ultimately possible only on the basis of God's own communication.⁷

The God of Israel, Jesus, and the church is not an idea to debate or a force to manipulate but an agent who speaks and acts. History, that continuum of space-time events, is the medium through which God relates to his people, not least by various modalities of speaking and acting. History is not, however, the medium in which God becomes who he is. According to the Scriptures, Jesus' life-history is not God's finishing school but self-revelation.

To remythologize theology we must focus not on the being of God considered in the abstract but on the identity of God considered in the historically and canonically concrete. God is not a story, however; hence to remythologize also entails seeking the implicit *logos* in the *mythos*, and that means reflecting on the "what" of the divine "who." Theology must do more than retell the old, old story,

5. For example, divine "presence" and "absence" are not simply metaphysical but matters of covenantal favor and disfavor (see Horton, *Lord and Servant*, p. 12).

6. Nicholas Lash locates the tendency to make God into an explanatory principle in the seventeenth century (*Holiness, Speech, and Silence: Reflections on the Question of God* [Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2004], pp. 9, 13).

7. See the seminal essay by Christoph Schwöbel, "God as Conversation: Reflections on a Theological Ontology of Communicative Relations," in J. Haers and P. De Mey (eds.), *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2003), pp. 43–67.

but it need not follow that we have to choose between narrative and metaphysics. On the contrary, the way forward is to develop a theological ontology whose basic framework and categories are generated by (or, if borrowed from elsewhere, revised in light of) the divine self-presentation in the gospel of Jesus Christ and its canonical attestation. Such was the strategy of the church fathers in appropriating concepts like *logos* and *ousia* from Greek philosophy and in improvising the concept of *homoousios*. The metaphysical category of substance, so shaped, does not prescribe in advance what God or humanity is but rather identifies a particular actor who is what he is by virtue of his role and his relations to others in the drama of creation and redemption.

The biblical *mythos* calls for and gives rise to theo-ontological thought. It calls for reflection not merely about the historical situation or literary features of the biblical accounts but for reflection on *what happens*, *who does it*, and *what these persons are like*. It is the latter question that will occupy us in the present chapter. My working hypothesis, though modest, is nevertheless significant: if God is ultimately not unintelligible, it is only because God has spoken and acted in the ways represented in the canon (cf. Heb. 1:1) and in the ways instantiated by the various books that render God's word.

The being of God: a *who* or *what* question?

Remythologizing is a matter of rendering explicit the implicit "metaphysics" of the biblical *mythos*. Its aim is to let the biblical texts govern one's understanding of being, not to deploy an independently derived concept of being to govern one's reading of the biblical texts. To remythologize is thus to locate Christian theology "between the poles of metaphor and analogy, of narrative and metaphysics."⁸ Eventually we shall set forth a full-scale theodramatic metaphysics that sets forth categories for *all that is*. The present section focuses on what we must conclude from the divine-human dialogue as concerns the being of God: *that which/he who is*.⁹

8. Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), p. 99.

9. "Metaphysics" here designates the more systematic task of providing categories for understanding "what is" in general, while "ontology" refers to the more specific task of analyzing the nature of particular types of being. The distinction parallels that between "general" and "special" hermeneutics (or

The divine identity: who?

What exactly is one specifying in offering conceptual descriptions of God's (or Jesus') *being*? Is not the very question of their being one that is imposed upon the text rather than one that arises out of it? The monotheism implied by YHWH's self-designation to Moses ("I am who I am" – Ex. 3:14) does not contradict Jesus' self-designation to his disciples ("I and the father are one" – Jn. 10:30), though to see this we need to clarify things in terms of ontology. We come to appreciate the semantic density of the name of God not by analyzing its etymology but by following the history – the saying and doings – of its bearer.

To think with the New Testament authors about Jesus and God is to think in terms of both "who" and "what": "Identity concerns who God is; nature concerns what God is or what divinity is."¹⁰ We infer a person's identity largely by examining what a person says and does. To ask "Who?" is to pursue four related lines of inquiry with regard to personhood: "Who is speaking? Who is acting? Who is recounting about himself or herself? Who is the moral subject of imputation?"¹¹ The New Testament includes Jesus in the divine identity by depicting him as saying and doing many of the same things that only God says and does. For example, the Son creates and rules all things (Col. 1:15–17), forgives sin (Mk. 2:5–7), and receives worship (Mt. 2:2; Jn. 20:28).

While it is one thing to raise both the "who" and "what" questions, it is quite another to conflate them. Robert Jenson moves too far in this direction, claiming that God does not only identify himself by events in time but *with* those events. Jenson thus defines God's being as the event(s) that happen between Jesus and his Father in their Spirit.¹² He wants nothing to do with the ancient Greek philosophical concept of being, which he glosses as "immunity to time."¹³ Traditional metaphysics and biblical narrative are viewed here as

perhaps "hermeneutics" and "exegesis"). See W. Norris Clarke, "The Discovery and Meaning of Being," in *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), pp. 25–41.

10. Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism & Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), p. 8.

11. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 16.

12. Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, *The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 221.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

lying at opposite extremes (timeless vs. temporal). Jenson's brand of theo-ontology is radical precisely because it claims that "history occurs not only in him but as his being."¹⁴ God is the event of his triune history. Moreover, because, language is "the possibility of historical being," and because God's being is historical, "then precisely such address and response must be the actuality of his being."¹⁵ In Jenson's summary phrase: "the one God is a *conversation*."¹⁶

Jenson's work counts as a species of remythologizing theology to the extent that he strives to make the gospel alone – "a very long proposition of the form 'Jesus, *the one who* ... is risen'"¹⁷ – normative for his thinking about God's being. Jenson clearly intends his system be biblical: "a *system* of theology ... is tested against Scripture by its success or failure as a hermeneutical principle for Scripture taken as a whole, as one great text with a very complex internal structure."¹⁸ Reading the canon as one book "pressures its interpreters to make ontological judgments about the Trinitarian nature of the one God *ad intra* on the basis of its narration of the act and identity of the biblical God *ad extra*."¹⁹ It is here, however, that we must question the success of Jenson's ontological exegesis of the gospel *mythos*, especially in light of his collapsing the "analogical interval" between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity.²⁰ The ultimate question for Jenson – and, indeed, for every theologian – is not merely whether he has correctly identified the one who is risen (and the one who raised him), but whether he has rightly understood *what* this "who" is. It is one thing to identify God's being *by* his communicative action, quite another to identify it *with* that (historical) communicative action.

The divine identity: what kind of who?

It is one thing to specify the *one who* is speaking, acting, or risen by assigning a name, quite another to specify a person's nature

14. *Ibid.*, p. 221. Jenson is one of the "radicalizers" of Rahner's axiom concerning the "identity" of the economic and immanent Trinity.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

19. C. Kevin Rowe, "Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics," *Pro Ecclesia* 11 (2002), p. 308.

20. So Hart, "The Lively God of Robert Jenson," p. 31.

by saying *one what*. God's being includes those *capacities* that define God as a person *of a particular kind*. To ask after the "what kind" of the "who" (rather than the "whatness" of a thing) is to orient one's ontology around the question of personal powers. We discover what capacities God has by attending to what God has done.

We must not confuse categories by collapsing *who* into *what* questions. Trinitarian theology distinguishes the three *hypostases* (Father, Son, and Spirit) from the shared divine *ousia* or essence, clearly demarcating the *who* from the *what*. Yet the New Testament narrative identity descriptions of Jesus themselves raise ontological questions. For example: after Jesus rebukes the winds and sea to still the storm, the disciples in Mark's account ask, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" (Mk. 4:41; cf. Lk. 8:25). The Matthean account goes further, moving beyond the question of Jesus' identity to his nature: "*What sort [potapos] of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?*" (Mt. 8:27).

What prompts the disciples' question is a very peculiar speech act. Jesus "rebukes" (Mt. 8:26; Mk. 4:39; Lk. 8:24) the wind and waves. Mark adds the actual words that Jesus speaks – "Peace! Be still!" (Mk. 4:39) – and notes that Jesus directs his words not to the disciples but to the sea. In all three accounts, what amazes the disciples is that even the elements of nature "obey" Jesus. The disciples in Luke's account specify the nature of Jesus' extraordinary speech act: "he *commands* even wind and water" (Lk. 8:25). As we saw in our first canonical exhibit (Gen. 1:1–3), the waters of the sea often symbolized the chaos with which deities in various creation myths struggled to bring order to the realm of nature. YHWH gets the better of the waters throughout the Old Testament, but never more than when he parts the Red Sea in order to release Israel from bondage to Egypt (Ex. 14:26–9). That event may be in the back of the mind of the Psalmist who praises God "who doest still the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves" (Ps. 65:7; cf. Job 38:8–11). In any case, Jesus' directive to the waves echoes the Psalmist.

Jesus does many other things with words (e.g., heals the sick, casts out demons) that similarly prompt the question: what sort of man is this who has divine capacities? We must pose a similar question with regard to the Father, Son, and Spirit: *what sort of persons are these?* These three are one *what*? Who must God *be* (i.e., *what kind of*

person) in order to do what Scripture says he does?²¹ We cannot, of course, begin with a *tabula rasa* as if we were immune to the effects of two thousand years of theology. Better to acknowledge the history of ontotheological reflection, and its discontents. We therefore pursue our guiding question – who/what must God *be* to say/do this? – with metaphysical boldness tempered by prayerful humility.

The strategy to be employed in what follows – extrapolating from God's speaking to God's being – has several advantages: (1) it acknowledges the importance of beginning with God's self-revelation; (2) God's speaking is firmly rooted in Scripture; (3) listening and responding to God (e.g., prayer) figure among the most primary of Christian practices. That we can adduce additional advantages from this strategy is both promise and proof of its validity. The dialogical theism that we will explore further in subsequent chapters thus begins here, with the renunciation of several dichotomies too hastily deemed intractable: who vs. what; narrative vs. metaphysics; metaphors vs. analogies; imagination vs. reason; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob vs. the God of classical theism.

Thinking biblically; interpreting theologically

Can we by reasoning biblically find out God? Not a few theologians have been disillusioned as concerns the possibility of intelligible speech about the reality of God. For some, it is metaphors – human rhetorical projections – all the way down. For others, the terrible secret truth is that all theology is only a species of ideology, of biblical and religious meaning in the service of political power and particular interests. Still others have properly theological reasons for resisting the suggestion that human concepts can be applied to him who is by definition outside the realm of space and time.

Those who believe intelligible speech of God is possible often differ with regard to sources, methods, and norms. Direct inspection is not, of course, a live option, yet some seek to infer truths about God from created reality. Others believe that we may infer certain things about God on the basis of individual or ecclesial experience and practice. Still others believe that the incarnation of Jesus Christ serves as the singular

21. This was Barth's leading question, but its exclusive focus was for him, as for Jenson, what God does in Christ.

basis for proper God-talk. The path ahead does not rule out these other approaches but focuses primarily on the biblical texts in their dual capacity as *records* and *instances* of God's self-communication.

Theology as exegetical reasoning: biblically in-formed thinking

'Come now, let us reason together,' says the Lord. (Isa. 1:18)

Theology has little that is distinct to offer either the church or the academy if it is able to say nothing reasonable about God or to make only arbitrary judgments about what is said or done in God's name. The approach in what follows is to view theology as a species of faith seeking understanding via biblical reasoning. Given the lengthy conflict between faith and reason (at least among modern philosophers of religion), children of the Enlightenment might be inclined to dismiss the notion of biblical reasoning as an oxymoron. That would be a mistake, for "there are modes of thought other than those based on Greek, Cartesian, Kantian, Hegelian, etc. philosophy."²²

Theology is a species of biblical thinking and reasoning.²³ "Thinking" indicates that mental faculty whereby we do not merely perceive things or react to them by instinct but make judgments about them; "reasoning" indicates those mental procedures whereby we give grounds for the judgments we make. Judgments are cognitive acts that concern a thing's nature (what is it? what is it like?) as well as the distinctions and relations that render it the same or different from other things. We express in language the judgments we make in thought each time we construct meaningful sentences composed of subjects and predicates. Biblical reasoning is a matter of forming the same judgments about God (e.g., doctrines) in terms of present-day conceptualities as those expressed in Scripture in terms of conceptualities that may no longer be extant.²⁴

22. Ricoeur and LaCocque, *Thinking Biblically*, p. xvi.

23. The ideas in this paragraph are largely drawn from R. R. Reno's "Biblical Theology and Theological Exegesis," in Craig Bartholomew et al. (eds.), *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 385–408. "Theology is a practice of reading" (p. 403). What I am calling "biblical reasoning" should not be confused with "scriptural reasoning," a recent interfaith hermeneutical experiment. See David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold (eds.), *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

24. Cf. David Yeago's important discussion of the distinction between judgments and concepts in "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis" (in Stephen E. Fowl [ed.], *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, pp. 87–100). His central insight is

Biblical reasoning attempts to give "close canonical readings" of the biblical texts. It is in this way Scripture generates and governs thinking that is theologically "meet and right."²⁵ The details of Scripture, the *signa*, "are ordained by God to bring us into fellowship with his ineffable *res* [substance]."²⁶ This is so because the Scriptures are a vital ingredient in God's own triune economy of self-communicative action: "Theology is disciplined, not by an external science of exegesis, but by the task of making exegetical sense of the signs [whose stated purpose] is to bring us into fellowship with the divine *res* [thing]."²⁷ In attending closely to Scripture we not only read about God but confront God in one mode of his self-presentation. Together, biblical form and content provide *mythos* for the metaphysical mill. Thinking biblically is a matter of reading Scripture *along the grain of* the text. It is less a matter of "drawing out" discrete theological propositions than of "drawing together" scriptural material from across the canon.²⁸

For example, reasoning about God on the basis of Scripture involves marshaling and looking along the grain of metaphors.²⁹ The rubric of "biblical reasoning" reminds us that the use of reason has a dark side; some inferences from metaphor or *mythos* to metaphysics may be fallacious. Fretheim, for example, commits what we might call "the fallacy of misplaced conceptual concreteness" in viewing "relatedness" first as a root metaphor that undergirds all the other metaphors the biblical authors use to speak of God, and then going on to unpack the concept of "real relatedness" with categories drawn from a phenomenology of human experience rather than

that "the same judgment can be rendered in a variety of conceptual terms" (p. 93).

25. On these two criteria for theological interpretation of the Bible, see my "The Apostolic Discourse and its Developments," in Markus Bockmuehl and Alan Torrance (eds.), *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), pp. 191–207.

26. Reno, "Biblical Theology and Theological Exegesis," p. 404.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 398.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 392.

29. And literary genres as well. Theologians tend to construe the Bible "as" one thing (read: literary genre) rather than another (Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, Part I). Warfield, for example, reads Scripture as doctrine; Pannenberg as apocalyptic; Barth as narrative; Bultmann as wisdom; and so on. Indeed, "entire theological constructs have gravitated toward certain genres as their linchpin" (Elmer A. Martens, "Moving from Scripture to Doctrine," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 15.1 [2005], p. 97, n. 51).

with biblical depictions of the singular way in which God relates to the world.³⁰ Remythologizing needs to respect the integrity of large- and small-scale poetic forms even as it undertakes the task of their conceptual elaboration. The difficulty in interpreting metaphor lies in its “impertinent predication” (Ricoeur): to say “God is my fortress” is actually to say “is *and* is not.”

Behind the metaphors and anthropomorphisms in Scripture lurks a subterranean metaphysics: “Metaphor ... raises questions that only analogy ... can answer.”³¹ The challenge in speaking well of God lies in navigating “between the poles of metaphor and analogy ... narrative and metaphysics.”³² Whereas in metaphors we affirm *and* deny the sense of our words, “in analogical talk about God, we do not have to deny before we can affirm; we simply affirm that the statement is true as long as we remember that it is no more than analogical.”³³ Metaphor tacitly asks the question (is and is not *what?*) that only analogy can answer (“is” in this respect; “is not” in that respect).³⁴ As the kingdom of God “is” what happens in Jesus’ parables, so God “is” what happens – who/what presents itself – in the narrative of Jesus’ life.

Our material concern is with God’s self-presentation. That God “is” a speaker and doer casts the diverse literary forms of the Bible in a new theological light insofar as these “mythopoetic modes of thought,” like metaphor, are the indispensable means of conforming our minds to the “divine genius” of Scripture.³⁵ For the way God communicates, and the point of view that gets communicated, “is as much part of the story as the events it tells.”³⁶ Like metaphor, then, the various literary forms that convey and communicate God’s word raise questions that only analogy can answer.³⁷

30. Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, p. 36.

31. Wicker, *The Story-Shaped World*, p. 27. Theology involves both metaphysical sense (analogical reasoning) and poetic-rhetorical sensibility (metaphorical imagining) (p. 76).

32. Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, p. 99.

33. Wicker, *The Story-Shaped World*, p. 26.

34. An analogy is a term or concept that is predicated of different subjects “according to a meaning that is partly the same, partly different in each case: *strength* of muscles – *strength* of will” (Clarke, *The One and the Many*, p. 315).

35. The phrase is Reno’s (“Biblical Theology and Theological Exegesis,” p. 405). In context, it refers to the pattern of divine activity that culminates in Christ that unifies Scripture (the “economy”). I mean this and more: the “divine genius” of Scripture is not simply the master plan but the divine author behind it.

36. Wicker, *Story-Shaped World*, p. 100.

37. In Part II I shall employ the *analogia auctoris* (“the analogy of the author”).

The "Grand Rhetorician": indirect communication as divine accommodation

From the Bible's repeated depiction of God as communicating to human beings in manifold ways (cf. Heb. 1:1), we may infer that God has the capacity to communicate. Theologians would do well to mark not only *what* God communicates, but *that* God communicates, and how. Before turning to an analysis of what God must be like in order to act communicatively, a brief survey of some of the modes of God's communication is in order.

God mercifully adapts the form and content of his revelation to the measure of human capacities by what we have referred to as the "divine system of projection." We must employ the term "system" guardedly, however, because the pattern of God's self-saying and self-showing more closely resembles the authorship that Kierkegaard labeled "indirect communication" than it does Hegel's "system" of abstract theoretical truth. Indirect communication was Kierkegaard's response to the problem of the nominal Christianity of his day. The difficulty lay not in the lack of information on the part of his readers, but rather in their unwillingness passionately to embrace, and hence *do*, the truth. The watchword for indirect communication is "show, don't tell": "To see Christ as the recapitulation of Old Testament detail is more powerful than a statement that he does so recapitulate."³⁸

Theology only compounds the problem when it gives the impression that knowing God is a matter of neat theoretical packaging (i.e., systems of belief). Indirect communication is thus necessary both to speak of the reality of God and to solicit a whole-person passionate response.³⁹ The indirect communication that characterizes Kierkegaard's works has a fundamentally religious purpose: "training in Christianity," as he himself acknowledges in his *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*.⁴⁰

Something similar obtains as concerns divine authorship of Scripture. Yes, there are occasional "direct" divine pronouncements

38. Reno, "Biblical Theology and Theological Exegesis," p. 403.

39. On the latter, see Edward F. Mooney, *On Søren Kierkegaard* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2007) ch. 11.

40. Scholars differ as to the nature and function of indirect communication in Kierkegaard. See, for example, George Pattison (ed.), *Kierkegaard on Art and Communication* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992); David R. Law, *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

("Thus saith the Lord"). Yet it would be more accurate to describe most of the Bible in terms of "indirect" divine authorship. This is not a comment on biblical inspiration but on the nature of divine authorship, or word and world alike: "Calvin frequently uses the vocabulary of 'rhetoric' to describe God's relation to the world."⁴¹ The goal of the "Grand Rhetorician" is "not only a passive understanding but a dispositional transformation."⁴² Calvin and Kierkegaard seek, each in his own way, to emulate God's own speech in their writings by making edification rather than instruction their primary goal. For our purposes, however, the salient point is that God too has a point of view for his work as an author (i.e., of Scripture). Remythologizing theology approaches each of the various forms of biblical discourse as an important ingredient in the divine communicative strategy.

Calvin claims that God "accommodates" his communications to our human capacity for receiving them: "For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking to us?"⁴³ Chief among these rhetorical accommodations are the anthropomorphisms we examined in chapter 1. But these are only the tips of the revelatory iceberg: "Calvin makes this principle [accommodation] a consistent basis for his handling not only of Scripture but of every avenue of relationship between God and man."⁴⁴ Accommodation is the "speech bridge"⁴⁵ the infinite Creator traverses to communicate with finite creatures. God speaks in "many and various" (Heb. 1:1) ways: via creation, conscience, canon, and definitively in Jesus Christ. In each case, the accommodated appearance is an adequate though not exhaustive, muted but not mutated, revelation.

What about instances of divine dialogue? Does God really enter into interpersonal communicative relations with his human

41. Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*. Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p. 132.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

43. *Inst.* 1.13.1. Bernard Ramm speaks of the "anthropic" principle, insisting that God's special revelation is "marked by human characteristics throughout" (*Special Revelation and the Word of God: An Essay in the Contemporary Problem of Revelation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961], p. 36).

44. Ford Lewis Battles, "God was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation* 31 (1977), p. 20.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

creatures, or is this merely the way it appears to us?⁴⁶ Much turns on how one responds to this question: if speech acts are only figurative ways of speaking about God, what is to prevent us from concluding that divine action *tout court* is essentially anthropomorphic, a metaphorical projection of human communicative capacity onto God? Calvin again proves helpful. What his theory of divine accommodation contributes is not an apology for why there is anthropomorphism in the Bible but the implicit claim that *God* is using language to make himself known: “[Calvin] emphasizes that at least some of the language we use of God is language that God uses of himself, and language which God gives us to use of him.”⁴⁷ God *literally* speaks.⁴⁸ According to the Scriptures, God is a communicative agent who repeatedly does things with words.⁴⁹

Biblical reasoners do well to appreciate the subtlety and depth of the divine rhetoric. On the one hand, the Bible communicates divine transcendence by depicting God as the eternal one, the Creator who speaks worlds into existence. Yet there are numerous biblical depictions of God as immanent, a dialogue partner who responds to other persons in real time: “YHWH ... is a quasi-human character in a story, and this way of treating him is the basic metaphor.”⁵⁰ Biblical reasoners who let the *mythos* govern their theology also know, however, that YHWH is the one God who created the heavens and the earth, and hence in some respects is *not* like us. Hence God is and is not like human authors.

Scripture both depicts instances of divine dialogue and is itself a mode of divine communication, sometimes direct and sometimes indirect. It follows that divine accommodation is not a matter of revealed content only. The forms, too, of biblical discourse are ingredients in divine communicative accommodation. Both the metaphors and the literary genres of the Bible are modes of cognition to

46. Cf. Paul Helm: “If God accommodates himself, is the dialogue itself part of the accommodation?” (*John Calvin's Ideas* [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004], p. 201).

47. Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, p. 196.

48. We shall return to this claim in the next section, where we shall see that “literal,” when used theologically, has more in common with analogical than univocal discourse.

49. Furthermore, “How God does things with words becomes the way in which things are to be understood” (Schwöbel, “God as Conversation,” p. 66). In a word: the meaning of a thing is what God says it is.

50. Wicker, *Story-Shaped World*, p. 94.

which God accommodates his communicative action. No one metaphor, or literary genre, is sufficient to govern our theological thinking about God. Does God really repent and change his mind or not? That depends on the extent to which God is “like” a human, and to determine this the reader requires analogical thinking – conceptual elaboration (metaphysics) – that is both generated and governed by the diverse forms of biblical discourse (*mythos*). This is precisely where attending to literary genre helps. The narrative that recounts God’s repentance is part of the same narrative that recounts God’s creation of the world. Moreover, it is told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator. God is not only a character in the plot but its implied author. Again, we see the Great Rhetorician at work: “The only person who can tell us how YHWH ‘regretted’ making man is the God who is beyond all regretting.”⁵¹

*Incarnation as accommodation: the analogy of
being-through-Christ*

All things were made through him ... (Jn. 1:3)

Theists interpret the divine name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14 (“he who is”) as connoting a being of infinite perfection, the source of all that is. There is, however, another route from Scripture to ontology, one that begins by focusing on the reality of the *saying* as well as the *said*. What is ontologically interesting about the “I am that I am” is what it implies about God’s capacity to communicate. What comes to the fore is language as “allocution”: locution or speech that addresses another. To acknowledge this voice as more than a human textual construction is to acknowledge that it addresses not only Moses but the contemporary reader, not from within the bush but from within the text. This way of construing the “metaphysics of the Exodus” lays the emphasis not on God’s abstract existence but on God’s self-communicative activity.⁵²

The prime instance of divine self-communication is the Incarnation, the Son’s *taking* human form (Phil. 2:7), an event which Barth calls “God’s indirect communication par excellence”⁵³ and which Calvin views as the apex of divine rhetoric, God’s supreme accommodating

51. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

52. Cf. Oliver Davies, “Reading the Burning Bush,” in Ford and Pecknold (eds.), *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, pp. 94–104.

53. Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics*, p. 151.

act: "all thinking about God, apart from Christ, is a bottomless abyss which utterly swallows up all our senses ... In Christ God so to speak makes himself little, in order to lower himself to our capacity."⁵⁴ The God of Jesus Christ is not merely one who is with us, but one who *speaks with us*. This is not to suggest that Jesus as the Word of God is only a figure of speech! On the contrary, Jesus Christ, as God's self-revelation, is God's literal (though accommodated) speech, a communication that indirectly – because through a human form – communicates God's being: "the Father, himself infinite, becomes finite in the Son, for he has accommodated himself to our little measure ... it means nothing else than that God is comprehended in Christ alone."⁵⁵

Jenson, we may recall, identifies God's being with the historical conversation between Jesus and his Father in their Spirit.⁵⁶ Unlike Calvin, however, Jenson does not appeal to accommodation: the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and vice versa. Calvin, by contrast, affirms both that God accommodates himself in Christ and that Christ is the measure of our knowledge of God. Jesus' humanity is the ultimate form by which God communicates himself to humanity. As the kingdom of God is like what happens in Jesus' parables, so God's being is like what happens in Jesus' human history. That God's being is revealed in what Jesus *says* and *does* is the heart of what we may call the *analogia dramatis*.⁵⁷

The doctrine of God sails between the shoals of a skeptical agnosticism and a naive anthropomorphism. We make judgments that distinguish the appearance from the reality of God and so attain a "critical anthropomorphism" only by means of some criterion or principle for moving from metaphors to analogies. Biblical reasoning is conducive to ontology, but only if one follows a particular type of analogical thinking, one that recognizes a *real but only partial correspondence (because of the Creator/creature distinction) between what is ascribed to God and to human being respectively*.⁵⁸ What criteria may we

54. Calvin comm. on 1 Pet. 1:20 (cited in Battles, "God was Accommodating Himself," p. 38).

55. Calvin, *Inst.* II.6.4 (citing Irenaeus).

56. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 221.

57. A drama is a *doing* (from *drao* = "I do"). The economic Trinity is a dramatic analogy of the love and wisdom that characterizes the immanent Trinity.

58. W. Norris Clarke, following Gilson, argues that "analogy" for Aquinas refers to our ability to make judgments. It thus has to do not with the isolated "meaning" of words and concepts so much as the use to which these are put

use to distinguish between those anthropomorphisms that mean literally what they say (e.g., God is love) and those that do not (e.g., God has a strong right arm)?⁵⁹ Reasoning to God's being from the divine rhetoric in Christ and canon must be governed by (1) the truth that God is Creator and hence on a different metaphysical level than the rest of creation and (2) the truth that God speaks in diverse ways⁶⁰ and (3) the truth that the fullness of deity was on bodily display in the life of Jesus Christ (Col. 2:9). This third point, the *analogia dramaticis* (God was in Christ *speaking, doing, and, as we shall see, suffering*) merits further consideration, especially in light of the better known *analogia entis*.

The celebrated analogy of being posits a certain likeness between God and other beings despite the difference entailed by the Creator/creature distinction.⁶¹ So-called "natural" (i.e., philosophical) theology begins with creaturely beings and advances inferentially via the logic of infinite perfection to conclusions concerning the creator: if what God has made is good, then God must be all-good. This bottom-up approach to the being of God relies, however, on a priori conceptions of what qualities a "perfect" being would likely possess. Such a "system" invites once again the now-familiar Feuerbachian suspicion.

(*Explorations*, p. 129). We predicate certain attributes and actions of God truly, though not exhaustively. When applied outside the realm of creation to the Creator, our terms stop short of full representation. The various literary forms of the Bible are similar to Wittgenstein's language-games: one has to know the rule of the game in order to understand the nature of the predication. See the discussion in D. Stephen Long, *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), ch. 3.

59. "Literal" here connotes a real, though only partial, correspondence.

Unlike, say, *sneezing, speaking* applies "literally" to God because we rightly ascribe that action to him. But we can really speak of (i.e., refer to) God because God first refers to himself as he speaks to us. Of course, God does not speak in the same way that creatures do; nevertheless, I agree with Alston that the core meaning of the concept is preserved when we apply it to God. God is able to bring about a communicative act, like other basic acts, without having to move bodily parts. See Alston, "Can We Speak Literally of God?"

60. Aquinas distinguishes between how we signify and what is signified. In Scripture, *what* is signified (e.g., love) applies most properly to God, yet *how* this is signified does not strictly apply to God but to creatures instead (*Summa Theologica* I, 13, 13). I would only add that the forms of biblical discourse are part of the "how."

61. According to David Bentley Hart, the *analogia entis* means only "that being can be neither univocal between God and creatures (which would reduce God to a being among being, subject to a higher category) nor equivocal" ("The Offering of Names: Metaphysics, Nihilism, and Analogy," in Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter (eds.), *Reason and the Reasons of Faith* [New York and London: T & T Clark International, 2005], p. 285).

Reasoning biblically reverses the polarities. The analogies employed by the biblical authors, and the incarnation itself, are part of a prior economy of divine self-projection.⁶² Jesus' human history becomes the keystone in the system of projection that is God's before it enters ours. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is God's public speech act, God's *corporeal discourse*. The incarnate life of Jesus is thus the ground that gives the terms we apply to God their definitive sense. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, if we wish to understand the meaning of God's Word, we must look to its use – or rather, to the use to which Jesus puts his own life. Yet the Son also speaks – projects his voice – through his apostles: "Christ," says the apostle Paul, "is speaking in me" (2 Cor. 13:3). The *analogia dramatis* recognizes that divine self-communication comes through Jesus' manner of living and speaking as well as what he says through others appointed to serve the economy of divine self-communication.

We can go further. In the light of the New Testament statement that all things were made through Christ (Jn. 1:3) and in him hold together (Col. 1:16,17), being itself comes into view as a category consequent, and thus subservient, to christology. Hence the metaphysics that derives from biblical reasoning examines not being-in-general but *being-through-Christ*. What all beings have in common as beings – existence in Christ; orientation to Christ – derives from a triune *fiat*. The *analogia dramatis* is thus a function of revealed, not natural, theology: we speak well of God when we speak on the basis of what the triune God is saying and doing in and through Christ to create, reconcile, and redeem. As employed here, then, analogy is not an independent means of gaining knowledge of God so much as a conceptual tool with which to make sense of God's prior initiatives and acts.⁶³

To sum up: biblical reasoning is a disciplined form of theological thinking that entails ontology, an attempt to say "what (God) is" on the basis of that *analogia dramatis* bounded by canonical parameters and centered on Christ. I can do all things – even metaphysics! – through

62. To use Alan Torrance's categories, borrowed from Athanasius: we need to distinguish anthropomorphic projection (*mythologein*) from the divinely accommodated use of language (*analogein*) that is the essence of the remythologizing approach adopted here. See Alan J. Torrance, "Analogy," in Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, p. 40.

63. Stated differently: I am interpreting the *analogia entis* christologically, thus subsuming it under the *analogia fidei*.

Christ who strengthens me (Phil. 4:13). The idea is to work a canonical correction on the idea that “a disciplined attention to linguistic usage can *show* us something of the character of our objects of discourse.”⁶⁴ Wittgenstein famously commented that “Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar).”⁶⁵ Biblical reasoning ultimately aims to describe the Trinitarian (and canonical) grammar that Scripture reports and instantiates, as well as the corporeal discourse – the word of God enfleshed and enacted in Jesus’ life – to which Scripture centrally attests. The vocation of the theological interpreter of Scripture is to render judgments – ethical, epistemological, and yes, metaphysical – concerning what is “meet and right” for Christians to affirm of God on the basis of the various modes of divine self-showing, self-giving, and self-saying.⁶⁶

The analogy of being-in-act: towards a post-Barthian Thomism

We come now to the core of the present proposal: *saying who/what God is – what this “who” is like – on the basis of what God says and does*. We here refigure the doctrine of God in the light of God’s being a communicative agent: a speaker; an author; a being-in-communicative-act. This notion fills a surprising gap left by theologians of the Word of God, who seldom have recourse to conceptual analyses of action, and philosophers who treat divine action but seldom have recourse to biblical depictions of God’s speaking. One prominent exception to the latter is Nicholas Wolterstorff, who examines the claim *that* God speaks.⁶⁷ The aim here is to reflect further on this claim for the sake of understanding better the *being* of the God who speaks.

Word of God or divine discourse? Back to (and beyond) Barth

To explain the Gospel is to define and describe the nature, existence, and activity of God as Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer ... The vital

64. Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, p. 113.

65. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), Part I §373 (cf. §371: “*Essence is expressed by grammar*”).

66. For more on these categories and their theodramatic role, see Balthasar, *Epilogue*, pp. 59–86.

67. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*.

thing in so doing is that the whole content of the Gospel in all its elements and dimensions should be allowed to be its own principle of explanation ... that it should not be forced into any alien scheme but left as it is and understood and expounded as such.⁶⁸

Karl Barth's commitment to thinking about God's being on the basis of his self-communication in Christ makes him a fit partner for the current project. Unlike Bultmann, who discusses God's word/act at length but is agnostic about God's being, Barth resolutely moves from the former to the latter. In contrast, Bultmann's demythologizing (almost) "empties out the sense"⁶⁹ of the divine speaking and acting. Jesus is the Word of God when and where, as the content of Christian preaching, his story brings about an existential event in its hearers.⁷⁰ Bultmann is reluctant to say more of God, other than that he addresses us in Christian preaching, for fear of reducing God to one more worldly cause, force, entity, or agent. To suggest that God intervenes in the natural, historical, or even psychological course of events is to fall back into mythology.⁷¹

Barth's Copernican revolution made the history of Jesus Christ, not human existence, the touchstone for speaking well of God, a move that surely qualifies as the original remythologizing impulse in contemporary theology.⁷² Christians must confess that God acts in the world; the integrity of the gospel message requires no less. God must be not less than a personal agent: one who can literally do things, not least with words. If we cannot say that God is a personal communicative agent – one who relates to us in love and freedom;

68. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.2, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961) p. 849.

69. Austin Farrer, "Emptying out the Sense," in Leslie Houlden (ed.), *Austin Farrer: The Essential Sermons* (London: SPCK, 1991), pp. 117–20.

70. Divine revelation is "no longer a communication of teachings ... but God speaking directly to me" (Bultmann, "The Case of Demythologization," in Bultmann and Karl Jaspers, *Myth & Christianity: An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion Without Myth* [New York: Prometheus Books, 2005], p. 73). Bultmann empties the word that God speaks of almost all meaningful cognitive content, however, interpreting it as a demand to adopt the radical insecurity of faith.

71. Bultmann was willing to speak of divine action only in the language of faith (i.e., the language of personal existence and self-understanding). One wonders, however, whether on these grounds there is any real difference between an event in which God is active and one in which he is not. See Bultmann, "The Meaning of God as Acting," in Owen C. Thomas (ed.), *God's Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), pp. 61–76, as well as the other essays in this book.

72. Jüngel's famous essay on Barth's doctrine of God, *God's Being is in Becoming*, stemmed from a dispute between Herbert Braun and Helmut Gollwitzer over the possibility of speaking of God in himself prior to talk of God for us. This

one to whom we can respond as persons – then, in Austin Farrer's words, "let us confess ourselves atheists and stop confusing the public mind."⁷³

When we attempt to explain the simple statement "God is," however, we confront "the hardest and at the same time the most extensive task of Church dogmatics."⁷⁴ The task, as Barth sees it, is to speak of God only on the basis of his revelation in Jesus Christ: God's self-presentation in human form, God's living Word. If Jesus Christ is truly the revelation of God, then it follows for Barth that "God is who He is in the act of His revelation."⁷⁵ For, if God were something other than he is in his act of self-presentation in Christ, then strictly speaking, Christ would not be God's self-revelation. The wonder of the gospel is that the history of Jesus Christ makes God known as one who is "for us": "it is no longer an open question what He is in Himself."⁷⁶ God is who he is in the event of revelation: the revealer, the act of revelation, the revealed.⁷⁷

It is illuminating to compare §28 of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* on the being of God with §5 on the nature of the Word of God. This earlier section describes the Word of God as the speech of God: "God's Word means that God speaks. Speaking is not a 'symbol'."⁷⁸ Of course, the "Word" that God speaks is first and foremost Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Yet Barth insists that this "personalising of the concept of the Word of God ... does not mean its deverbalsing."⁷⁹ Whenever language reveals Jesus Christ, it is the Word that is the active subject. Indeed, this activity is what makes God a "real person, really free

was "a late phase in the dispute between Barth and Bultmann" over the possibility of divine ontology. Jüngel resolves the dispute by showing that Barth posits "a trinitarian correspondence between God's being *ad intra* and God's being *ad extra*" (Webster, "Translator's Introduction," in Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001], pp. xi–xiii).

73. Farrer, *God is not Dead* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1966), p. 92.

Elsewhere Farrer writes: "We challenge anyone to tell us what middle position is tenable between a serious personalism ... and that pious atheism which has no other god than the backside of human nature" (*Faith and Speculation* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988], p. 48).

74. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 257.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 263. Barth extrapolates from this principle another: "God is who He is in His works" (p. 260).

78. Barth *Church Dogmatics* I/1, p. 132.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

subject.”⁸⁰ Revelation, then, is God's “speech act” (*Rede Tat*): God himself actively speaking.⁸¹

Despite the constant appeal to speech and speaking, however, the only act that Barth counts as genuinely revelatory is the history of Jesus Christ. In this history “God speaks as an I, and is heard by the thou who is addressed.”⁸² In speaking his Word, God “is His own conscious, willed and executed decision,” and “[n]o other being is absolutely its own, conscious, willed and executed decision.”⁸³ It is therefore in this act alone – the event of Jesus Christ – that we come to know who God is: the one who loves in freedom.⁸⁴ God is free because his existence is self-determined; God is love because he determines himself to be for another. Interestingly, though Barth identifies God with his works, he also insists that “God is who he is ... even before and after and over His works, and without them ... He is not, therefore, who He is only in His works.”⁸⁵ Still, everything we predicate about God must derive from the divine speech act: the incarnate life of Jesus Christ.⁸⁶

Does Barth intend his “actualism” – the claim that God's being is identical to his acts – to apply to God only or to all beings? Stated differently: is Barth's actualism a matter of special (divine) ontology or general metaphysics?⁸⁷ No matter how one answers that, there is a broad

80. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 162. There is no evidence that Barth ever read J. L. Austin or, for that matter, Ludwig Wittgenstein, the two “ordinary language” philosophers of his day that emphasized language use, and were hence precursors to speech act theory.

82. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 267.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 271. It is intriguing to compare and contrast this idea with Aquinas's insistence that God is “pure act.” I shall return to this point below.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 300. Note the discussion in *CD* II/1, pp. 315–17, on the various modes of divine action in addition to the incarnation. Barth seems to recognize that God speaks and acts variously; on the other hand, all these other speech acts have their basis, meaning, norm, and consummation in Jesus Christ, for no matter how freely God expresses himself in creation, the Incarnation, as the singular point where the Creator becomes creature, is “the quintessence of all possible relationship” between God and the world (*Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 317).

87. George Hunsinger lists “actualism” as the motif that governs Barth's conception of being and time: Barth “thinks primarily in terms of events and relationships rather than monadic or self-contained substances” (*How To Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], p. 30). In apparent contrast, Jay Wesley Richards defines actualism as “the proposition that God as the preeminent Subject has his being in his

consensus that Barth regards all the divine attributes as descriptions of God's activity. Each attribute opens up a certain perspective on the divine-subject-in-act. This seems at first to be a far cry from Aquinas's notion that God is *actus purus*, where the emphasis is not on God's being a subject but on divine perfection and the lack of potentiality. For Barth, however, agency – the self-enactment of a person – is the fundamental concept for understanding the divine being.⁸⁸ The actualist motif serves in what is ultimately an agential, not substantial, interpretative framework. Though Barth employs philosophical categories, his intent is to let the particular event of Jesus Christ serve as their grammar, not a metaphysics of being obtained from elsewhere. His is thus an exercise in remythologizing and theo-ontology.⁸⁹

Yet questions remain: (1) Is God who he is apart from his act – his lived history in Jesus Christ – as well? It is one thing to say that God is *in se* the one who loves in freedom, quite another to say that God only *becomes* who he is – the one who loves in freedom – thanks to his self-actualization as Word become flesh.⁹⁰ (2) If God is who he is in the history of Jesus, how are we to distinguish deity from humanity, divine loving-in-freedom from human loving-in-freedom? (3) Does Barth do justice to the idea that “the personalizing of the Word does not lead to its deverbaling” if, as Wolterstorff thinks, he regards the Incarnation as God's sole illocutionary act?

These three questions resolve into one: can Christian theologians ever be too christocentric? Usually Barth's critics worry about his tendency so to emphasize the work of Christ that it reduces the significance of human action. The present concern moves in the

act” (*The Untamed God*, p. 116, n.50). Bruce McCormack believes that Barth's actualism has strictly theological rather than philosophical roots: divine election is God's eternal act whereby he determines himself to be for the human creature. Richards notes that McCormack presupposes a “strong actualism” which insists that God *chooses* his being (pp. 132–3). We cannot enter into the details of this debate here other than to affirm divine self-determination (i.e., God's power to be who he is – Father, Son, and Spirit – and to love others).

88. So Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 64. Barth's theological ethics rest similarly on the notion of the human person too considered as a “being in action” (see Nimmo, *Being in Action*, p. 1).

89. Again, the point in speaking about theo-ontology is that it is God's particular revelation in Jesus Christ that governs what Barth then goes on to say about ontology.

90. There is some reason to think, contra McCormack, that Barth too affirms that God is who he is apart from his works. Humans cannot know what God is like in himself apart from contemplating his works, but that is different from saying that God's works constitute his being.

other direction, however, questioning Barth's tendency to let the work of Christ reduce the significance of other instances of divine action: *Why must we equate God's being-in-act exclusively with God's revelation in Jesus Christ when the Bible depicts God as in-act at other points of the biblical narrative as well?*⁹¹

Barth resists christomonism inasmuch as he accepts the witness of the Old Testament. Yet does he show sufficient awareness that without Israel's Scripture we would lack the right interpretative framework with which to understand the event of Jesus Christ? More pointedly: without a prior *revelatory* rather than merely religious (i.e., man-made) framework, the event of Jesus Christ would ultimately be unintelligible.⁹² We must therefore press for greater clarity: is there nothing we can know of God prior to christology, on the basis not of speculative metaphysics but the *mythos* of Israel's history with YHWH? Does YHWH's activity in ancient Israel (not to mention the Ten Commandments and other texts that purport to be direct divine communication) count for Barth as divine revelation or not? Are there not events in Israel's history in which one catches glimpses of God's being-in-act?

It may be that Barth works a unique christological version of the doctrine of divine simplicity, whereby the whole of God's being is defined by the whole of Jesus' life, and nothing else.⁹³ Yet it is difficult

91. Barth does not deny that God is active elsewhere than the Incarnation, yet he worries that the traditional Protestant Reformed view entails the concept of a "God behind God" such that we do not really know the *fullness* of the deity in Christ's bodily form alone. It is true that Calvin distinguishes our knowledge of God "as he is in himself" (essence) from God "as he is towards us" (nature). However, as Paul Helm has shown, Calvin is not distinguishing between God's appearance and reality, as if the former could distort the latter, but between the comprehensive knowledge God has of himself (the divine essence) and the non-exhaustive knowledge we have of God's nature that derives from his self-revelation. What we know of God's nature on the basis of his self-revelation (what he says and does towards us) will always reflect, but not exhaust, his essence (what he is in himself): "This is not because God's activities are arbitrary but because they are contingent and so are not comprehensive accounts of the essence of God" (Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, p. 20). To put it in contemporary Trinitarian language: the economic Trinity corresponds to but does not exhaust or encompass the reality of the immanent Trinity.

92. Perhaps the incarnate Son simply made use of the human symbolic and conceptual resources to hand (e.g., law, sacrifice, covenant) to explain his significance. Jesus does more than that, however, appealing to these words and rituals as God-given means of divine self-presentation and ultimately identifying himself as their fulfillment.

93. "What God is as God . . . the *essentia* or 'essence' of God, is something which we shall encounter either at the place where God deals with us as Lord and Savior, or not at all" (CD II/1, p. 261).

to see how he can derive a complete list of divine attributes by analyzing the life of Jesus alone: "Saying that each of God's properties is identical with his total essence ... muddles the distinction between the essentiality of God's freedom and the contingency of God's free choices."⁹⁴ For example, is God *essentially* related to the world, or is the world the result of God's free (and hence contingent) choice? It is also difficult to see how Barth can demarcate divine from human attributes from the history of Jesus alone inasmuch as it exemplifies both "true humanity" and "true deity." To be sure, Jesus' taking on human flesh and laying down his life for many speaks volumes about God's love, but what about Jesus' sleeping (Mk. 4:38) or increasing in wisdom and stature (Lk. 2:52)? Is every moment in Jesus' life equally essential to God's being? "Simply to say that God's being is in his acts does not distinguish between essential and contingent properties clearly enough."⁹⁵

Wolterstorff notes that, apart from the Incarnation, Barth says nothing about divine speech. The biblical witness is human discourse: "God did not speak by way of the authoring of these books ... [but] by way of a human being ... Jesus Christ."⁹⁶ Even when Scripture becomes a form of revelation, it is not a matter of God now speaking the words but of another action, effected by the Spirit: "God must so act on me that I am 'grabbed' by the content of what God has already said [in Jesus Christ]. I see no reason to call this action 'speech'.⁹⁷ The "grabbing" – the event by which God commandeers human language and uses it to direct the reader to Jesus Christ – is not, strictly speaking, a verbal communicative act. Rather, the "grabbing" is a matter of ratifying or activating what God has already "said" in Jesus Christ.⁹⁸

How Barth accounts for the properly semantic moment of God's self-revelation remains unclear. Wolterstorff entitles his discussion "Why there's less in Barth on God speaking than first appears" and expresses surprise that this should be the case in one who is routinely described as a theologian of the Word.⁹⁹ Must we conclude

94. Richards, *Untamed God*, p. 140.

95. *Ibid.*, p. 144. "Barth's apparent identification of God's essence and will has the unfortunate implication (contrary to his intentions) of either making all of God's properties contingent or all of them necessary" (p. 141). We shall return to this issue in ch. 8, where we consider whether suffering is a property of God and, if so, whether it is essential or contingent.

96. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, p. 70.

97. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

99. *Ibid.*, pp. 72–3.

that, though his reasons for doing so differ, Barth, like Bultmann, ultimately fails to treat God's dialogical action apart from Jesus Christ as indicative of who God is?

The being of God in speech

Barth is clearly a kindred *remythologizing* spirit. His "beginning again" from the event of God's free, triune self-communication marks a great leap forward in contemporary theology. Yet we have wondered whether Barth takes the biblical depictions of divine speaking seriously enough. Is the knowledge of God such that everything can be derived from his single incarnate illocution? By viewing Jesus Christ as God's singular speech act, does Barth inadvertently *demythologize* the biblical accounts of God's speaking by refusing to take them literally, that is, as ascriptions that render an agent? The present section sets forth an alternative account of God's being that draws on the broader biblical account of God's speak-acting.¹⁰⁰

Presence vs. self-presentation Much (too much!) has been written about the metaphysics of presence – the ontotheological notion that to be is to be present and that God is absolute being because God is present to (i.e., sees and knows) all things and perfectly self-present (i.e., self-conscious). Derrida's criticism of speech as the privileged site where being, language, and thought become fully "present" to consciousness is well known and need not be rehearsed here.¹⁰¹

Whether postmodern critiques of the metaphysics of presence hit their mark is more or less beside the present point. What Derrida calls "speech" in the context of the metaphysics of presence is of a wholly different order than the divine speech that figures in the divine self-presentation recorded, and instantiated, in the biblical *mythos*. From the fact that God dialogues with human beings we may infer at the very least that he has the capacity to communicate. From the incarnation of the Word we may further conclude that God has

100. The church has traditionally acknowledged the Bible's self-attestation as the word of God. It follows that the various biblical texts are forms of divine discourse and should thus be counted as figuring among the divine repertoire of communicative action.

101. For an introduction to the discussion, see Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1989); Bruce Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida & Marion on Modern Idolatry*. Derrida's main point is that "writing" – by which he means language as a

the capacity to communicate *himself*. God's presence is thus in the first instance personal, agential, and communicative rather than merely spatial, substantive, or metaphysical.¹⁰²

To reason biblically about God's presence is to view it as communicative, a self-presentation that is less noun than verb: *presenting oneself*. The concepts that faith needs to understand this phenomenon may come from theatre studies as much as philosophy. A "presentation" is a performance in which one being presents itself to another; "theatre" occurs whenever one or more persons present themselves to another or others.¹⁰³ God's being is not something present-to-hand (Heidegger) that humans can inspect at their leisure, but a dynamic self-presenting. In self-presentation, one offers something to others through one's person; hence theatre, in its most essential form, is not a given, but a gift.

All presentation – self-saying, self-showing, self-giving – is a doing: "wherever God acts his act is a communicative act that tells people something, and wherever God speaks this is an effective word that creates effects, like an action."¹⁰⁴ God engages in a variety of communicative actions from Genesis to Revelation. Though God employs various modes and media, in every case God is the sole agent of his self-presentation. In a word, God is the "author" of his being.

Authors are agents of communicative activity who do various things by means of spoken and written discourse. To communicate (Lat. *communicare*) is to "share" or "make common." In the discipline of communications studies, the emphasis is often on sharing or transferring information only. The Bible depicts God's speech acts doing that and more.¹⁰⁵ God uses words to create worlds, convey

system of differences that defers presence rather than a tool of transparent reference that reveals it – exposes the violent lie of a metaphysics that pretends to be a rational "science" of being. For a critique of Derrida from the standpoint of Trinitarian theology, see my *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* Part I.

102. Here "metaphysical" means "pertaining to the science of creaturely being." Scripture typically parses God's presence in covenantal rather than metaphysical terms (i.e., presence as blessing, absence as curse).

103. See Bernard Beckerman, *Dynamics of Drama: Theory and Method of Analysis* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1979) and Gloria Brim Beckerman and William Coco (eds.), *Theatrical Presentation: Performance, Audience, and Act* (New York: Routledge, 1990). See also William Doan and Terry Giles, *Prophets, Performance, and Power: Performance Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (New York and London: T & T Clark International, 2005).

104. Schwöbel, "The Triune God," in Shortt (ed.), *God's Advocates*, p. 94.

105. According to speech act theory, an "illocution" refers to what one does in speaking (e.g., promising) and is to be distinguished from the act of speaking itself (i.e., "locuting").

truth, console the poor and suffering, reconcile sinners, and judge justly. God is God in large part because his communicative capacity far outstrips that of humans. In particular, God has the ability to “communicate” his own life to others, through Word and Spirit, thereby establishing communion and fulfilling his word to Israel: “I will be your God and you will be my people.”¹⁰⁶ God presents himself to Israel as one who is trustworthy and true, the one who keeps his word. In fulfilling his promises, for example, God shows he is the one on whose word others can rely.

None of this need challenge Barth's maxim that “God is who he is in his works.” Barth is an exemplar of remythologizing because he proceeds from the biblical accounts of divine communicative action to ontology rather than vice versa: God *is* as God *says* and *does*. If the present account goes beyond Barth, it is only for the sake of including other instances of divine speaking and acting alongside the Incarnation. Central to biblical reasoning is the ability to make right theological judgments, including judgments about the being and identity of God. The question is whether Barth unnecessarily delimits the set of divine communicative acts by making divine ontology a function of the incarnate life of Jesus alone.¹⁰⁷

Barth is reluctant to attach the predicate “divine” to any other creaturely reality, even the Scriptures, for fear of detracting from God's being in the event of Jesus Christ: to suggest that some worldly object or activity is “the same as” God's Word is basically to say that it is God. For Barth, the Word of God is “identical” only with God himself. When God “commandeers” the human witness of the Bible so that its subject matter shines through, then and only then does it “become” the Word of God; yet even here, its identity is indirect.¹⁰⁸

106. Note that the Latin root of “communication” (*communicare*) means “to share” or “to make common.”

107. McCormack worries that “essentialistic” approaches define God's being in abstraction from the Incarnation. An “actualistic” ontology, by contrast, defines the *whatness* of a thing only by analyzing its actual existence (i.e., its being-in-time). My concern is that Barth unnecessarily restricts the set of acts that define God's being to the immediate events that comprise Jesus' history.

108. According to Klass Runia, the Bible itself “nowhere teaches or even hints at such an ‘actualism’ [i.e., of the Bible's becoming the Word of God]” (*Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962], p. 197) According to Runia, actualism sits poorly with the covenant principle, according to which God *binds himself* to his spoken and written words.

"A real witness is not identical with that to which it witnesses, but it sets it before us."¹⁰⁹

Barth's concern not to confuse a creaturely text with the Creator is admirable. Yet there are other conceptual tools by which to do so. For example, co-opting Paul Ricoeur's distinction between two types of identity may go a long way towards alleviating Barth's worry. *Idem* refers to the sameness of numeric identity where, for example, two occurrences of a thing are not two things but "one and the same" thing (i.e., same substance). *Ipse*, by contrast, refers to the narrative identity that connects a person's life, a sameness of continuity (i.e., same history). It is the difference between self-sameness (repetition) and the sameness of a self (constancy).

With Ricoeur's distinction in hand, let us return to Barth's formula: God is who he is in his acts. This "is" involves *ipse*, not *idem*, identity. God is who he is in his communicative action (i.e., a communicative agent with certain capacities), but this is not to say that God is his action *tout court*. God is not numerically the same as his works.¹¹⁰ The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity in the sense that the former stands in continuity with the latter, though the two are not "one and the same" (*idem* identical). God is who he is in his acts in such a way that he cannot be reduced to his acts. Hence we can identify Scripture as divine discourse – a medium of communicative action – without making the Bible into a fourth divine hypostasis. The Bible is God's word (i.e., a triune communicative work) because the ultimate speaking voice in Scripture is God's, but this no more makes God an attribute of Scripture than of the burning bush. The speaking subject is in, but not exhausted by, the speech act. To affirm God's being as a being in act is to say that God is the agent of the act and thus the possessor of the agency that produced it. We can therefore agree with Barth that God is truly himself in the self-communicating event of Jesus Christ without having to identify God's being with this event in the *idem* sense of equating it numerically (i.e., without remainder) with the history of the incarnate Word. For the same Voice that speaks through the canon inhabits Jesus Christ in a different, more excellent way.

109. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I./2, p. 463.

110. Recall Jenson's tendency to identify God's being not by but *with* the events of Jesus' life.

Does God literally speak? Some contemporary theologians, like Barth, are content to equate God's word with the Incarnation: "In him God's love has become *self-interpretative*."¹¹¹ This seems unduly optimistic.¹¹² Without an event of divine speaking, we are unable to say either *who* is acting or *what* this person is up to: "behavior unaccompanied by speech remains inherently ambiguous."¹¹³ The event of Jesus Christ is ultimately unintelligible apart from other speech acts – namely, those of the prophets and apostles (2 Pet. 1:21) – and, unless these are divinely authorized, there is little reason to think that they alone were able to discern what God was doing in this event.¹¹⁴ George Mavrodes's question is apt: "Could we, for example, make any sense out of the Abraham/Isaac story (whether construed as history or as fiction) if we did not include in it God's ability to speak? I suspect that we could not."¹¹⁵

Speaking is an action. God can only speak if God can act. Further, God can only command, promise, warn, and forgive if he can speak (or otherwise signal his communicative intent), for commanding, promising, warning, and forgiving are speech acts. For example, we can only forgive others by saying "I forgive you" or otherwise signaling our communicative intent. One's position on the literality of God's speaking is thus a matter of no little theological consequence: at

111. Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Becoming Present: An Inquiry into the Christian Sense of the Presence of God* (Leuven and Paris: Peeters, 2006), p. 154.

112. As the work of the Jesus Seminar has made clear, a purely historical approach is unable to respond to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" The quest for the historical Jesus discards literary form in favor of historical content and, as such, is an example of *de-mythos-izing*. By contrast, the approach represented here holds that "there is a 'real Jesus' in the texts of the New Testament . . . It is a Jesus inscribed literarily in the New Testament compositions as compositions" (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* [New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996], p. 167). The biblical compositions define a unifying pattern (*mythos*) of Jesus' existence apart from which his reality will not be grasped.

113. Basil Mitchell, "Revelation Revisited," in S. Coakley and D. A. Palin (eds.), *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 182. Herman Ridderbos argues in *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* rev. edn. (Philippsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Press, 1988) that according to the Scriptures, revelation and redemption always go together. Where there is saving deed (act), there is always revelatory word (speech).

114. Neil B. MacDonald, *Metaphysics and the God of Israel: Systematic Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster and Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), p. 124.

115. Mavrodes, *Revelation in Religious Belief*, pp. 119–20.

stake is nothing less than the integrity of the gospel message ("Your sins are forgiven").

Demythologizers refuse to take depictions of God speaking or acting literally. Remythologizing means taking seriously biblical texts that ascribe communicative actions and intentions to God. The stakes could not be higher: to the extent that one refuses to ascribe specific (communicative) acts to God's personal agency, one revises what the Bible and Christian faith are primarily about.

God acts. No presupposition is more fundamental to the biblical *mythos* than the idea that God is able to do things. May we also hazard the proposition that God *literally speaks*? To say that God "speaks" or "acts" precisely as men and women do is to use such terms *univocally*. God, of course, does not have vocal cords, so the way in which God speaks will not be exactly parallel to human speaking. It is not self-evident that "employing vocal cords" is an essential element in speaking, or that "moving bodily parts" is an essential element in acting. This may be the way that humans speak and act, but it is entirely possible that God could achieve fundamentally the same result by other means: "If God wills, and hence brings it about, that certain thoughts form in my mind together with the conviction that these thoughts constitute His message to me at this moment, that is as full-blooded a case of direct divine action in the world as the miraculous production of audible voices."¹¹⁶

The core concept in action is not bodily movement but bringing about a change in the world – directly or indirectly – by an act of will, decision, or intention. The Bible depicts God as performing some speech acts directly (e.g., authoring the Ten Commandments) and others indirectly (e.g., speaking through the prophets). We may therefore distinguish the *mode of action* and the *action done*.¹¹⁷ God can do what we do, but not in the same way. It is therefore legitimate to say "God (literally) speaks" (because he performs communicative acts via words, which is what "speaking" ordinarily means) even though "speaks" is not being used univocally with regard to God and human beings (because the mode of God's speaking may be

116. William Alston, "How to Think about Divine Action," in Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson (eds.), *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), p. 57.

117. This parallels Aquinas's distinction between the mode of signification and the thing signified.

extraordinary). The Creator-creature distinction serves as a standing reminder not to apply terms univocally to God, but it presents no obstacle to affirming that God literally acts.¹¹⁸

Speaking vs. revealing Barth equates the Word of God with revelation: God actively and personally making himself known in Jesus Christ. In his preoccupation with revelation, however, Barth may overlook many other things that speakers do with their words.¹¹⁹ Strictly speaking, to reveal is to make something unknown known.¹²⁰ Indeed, to focus exclusively on God's revealing the command "Thou shalt not kill" is to miss its real illocutionary intent: it is primarily a directive that requires obedience, not an assertive that calls for assent ("Yes, God revealed that killing is wrong"). To be sure, speech agents may reveal something about themselves in the course of doing other things with words, but self-revelation is not always the main point.¹²¹ Moreover, it is not clear on Barth's account how God can do the things the Bible depicts him as doing (i.e., commanding, warning, promising) if he is not the agent of properly verbal communicative acts as well as of the revelatory act of incarnation.

The gospel depends upon God's literally promising, consoling, and forgiving, as well as upon his revealing. Let "communication" stand,

118. Alston draws a helpful distinction between univocity and literality. Two things are "univocal" if they have the same meaning. To use a term "literally," by contrast, is to use it in its conventional rather than figurative sense. God literally speaks and acts, but because God does so in his own way, these terms are only partially univocal when applied to God and human beings (Alston, "How to Think about Divine Action," p. 52, 68–9). My own preference is to say the two terms are "literal and analogical" rather than "partially univocal." The key is to remember that "univocal" pertains to the mode of God's acting, "literal" to the kind of action done. Cf. the related discussion between Merold Westphal and Nicholas Wolterstorff: "Applied to divine discourse, the theist should say that 'God speaks' is a literal but analogical claim. It is analogical because divine discourse is both like and unlike human discourse; but this is not metaphor, because the performance of illocutionary acts belongs properly and primarily to God and only derivatively ... to human creatures" (Westphal, "On Reading God the Author," *Religious Studies* 37 [2001], p. 273). Wolterstorff, in response, agrees that God literally speaks, though he qualifies divine discourse as "most unusual" rather than analogical ("Response to Helm, Quinn, and Westphal," *Religious Studies* 37 [2001], p. 300). Finally, W. Norris Clarke points out that the best analogies are expressed by verbs (e.g., speaking), because "the same general 'kind' of activity can be performed quite differently by different kinds of agents" (*Explorations in Metaphysics*, p. 131).

119. See the classic manifesto by Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

120. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, p. 19.

121. For an extended discussion on the contrast between speaking and revealing, see the Paul Helm, "Speaking and Revealing" in *Religious Studies* 37 (1001), pp. 249–58, and Wolterstorff's response (pp. 293–6). As I am not an analytic

somewhat loosely, as a catch-all term for the variety of ways in which persons engage one another and interrelate by means of signs, signals, and symbolic actions. We may therefore define communication as “interaction by means of mutually recognised signals,”¹²² “manipulation of symbols by one person to stimulate meaning in another person,”¹²³ or simply “social interaction through messages.”¹²⁴ It is the process of sharing (making common) something (e.g., beliefs, worries, pleasure, views, memories, hopes, demands, ideas) with someone (an interlocutor) for some end by some symbolic means (e.g., language, gesture, pictures.). The process often involves discourse: someone saying something in some way about something to someone.¹²⁵

It is unnecessarily reductionist to view communication solely in terms of the transmission of information.¹²⁶ The etymology suggests the broader sense of “making common” and the OED lists “convey (an emotion or feeling) in a non-verbal way” as one of the meanings of the term. Invoking Kierkegaard’s category, we could say that God’s indirect communication conveys not only information but also the very taste – the *being* – of an affect or capacity.¹²⁷ Jürgen Habermas distinguishes *communicative* action (action oriented to understanding) from *strategic* (causal, coercive) action and the former clearly covers more than transmitting information.¹²⁸ Note, finally, that “communication” carries connotations of “communion” and “communicant” (the person who receives Holy Communion). It is with this broader meaning in mind that we turn now to consider divine communicative agency.

No activity is as characteristic, or as frequently mentioned in the Bible, as God’s speaking. The Old Testament in particular is replete with references to “the word of the Lord” and instances of the formula

philosopher, I do not feel obliged to take sides (neither does Mavrodes – see his *Revelation in Religious Belief*, p. 122). The salient point is that not everything agents do with words is primarily revelatory, though promising, commanding, etc. may indirectly reveal something about the speaker.

122. John Hartley, *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies: The Key Concepts*, 3rd edn. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 32.

123. Fred E. Jandt, *Intercultural Communication: An Introduction*, 3rd edn. (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), p. 33.

124. John Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, 2nd edn. (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 2.

125. See my “The Apostolic Discourse and its Developments.”

126. As does Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, p. 32.

127. See Mooney, *On Søren Kierkegaard*, p. 203.

128. See ch. 6 below for further development of this distinction.

"thus says the Lord." These stand in stark contrast to the silence of the idols; false gods can neither initiate nor respond to communicative action (Ps. 115:3-7; Isa. 46:5-7; Jer. 10:5). By way of contrast, the Bible depicts God communicatively interacting with other persons in various ways: direct address, dreams, visions, and through the words of commissioned messengers (prophets, apostles). What follows is a partial list of what God does in speaking: God names (Gen. 1:10; 17:5; 35:10), identifies himself (Gen. 15:7; 26:24; 46:3; Ex. 3:6), commands (Gen. 1:28; 2:15; 12:1; 22:2; Ex. 20:2-17), blesses (Gen. 1:28; 9:1; 12:3), curses (Gen. 3:14), promises (Gen. 9:15; 12:2; 35:12; Ex. 3:17), questions (Gen. 3:13), predicts (Ex. 7:3-5; Isa. 11:1-2), calls (1 Sam. 3:4), commissions (Isa. 6:8-9), dictates (Jer. 36:2), gives directions (Ex. 25:10-40), responds (2 Sam. 2:1), cross-examines (Job 38), warns (Ezek. 7:5-7), rebukes (Isa. 1:2-4; Job 42:7), and comforts (Gen. 15:1; Isa. 43:1-7).¹²⁹ Most importantly for our purposes, God *covenants* (Gen. 9:11; 15:18; 2 Chron. 7:17-18). Clearly, God does many other things in speaking in addition to revealing.

YHWH's speech to Israel Only speech disambiguates behavior. Only God's word disambiguates God's deed. To remythologize theology is to grasp this point and run with it. God speaks. This both differentiates the living God from false gods and obliges us to attend to the form as well as the content of divine discourse. As we have seen, much of what God does in the Old Testament in particular - warning, commanding, promising, comforting - he does by speaking. Indeed, to remythologize is to take God's speech agency as the paradigm in light of which to understand all other types of communicative agency. In the beginning was the communicative act ...

Consider the alternative. If God does not literally perform speech acts, we cannot say that God commands, blesses, promises, warns, etc. Apart from these divine communicative acts, both the patriarchal narratives and the whole history of Israel would be unintelligible.

129. Whereas earlier theories of communication worked with a linear sender-receiver mode, more recent debate has centered on the extent to which the process of communication requires feedback and mutual influence: "communication isn't something we do *to* others; rather, it is an activity we do *with* them. In this sense, communication is rather like dancing" (Ronald B. Adler, Lawrence B. Rosenfeld, and Russell F. Proctor II, *Interplay: The Process of Interpersonal Communication* 9th edn. [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004], p. 10).

Even more devastating: *if God does not speak, then he does not covenant*. Neither Israel nor the church could be called out from among the other nations if God is not a communicative agent (i.e., one who calls). Yet calling is God's characteristic communicative initiative. YHWH enters into communicative relation with Abraham, Moses, and the prophets by calling them. In this regard, the ending of the episode that recounts the beginnings of Israel – the moment when God tells Jacob to change his name to "Israel" – is of special significance: "So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel" (Gen. 35:15). God speaks – calls and chooses – by performing verbal communicative acts.

YHWH says something determinate to Israel: that he, the Creator, has chosen Israel to be his special people to serve as a light to the nations and the vanguard of a new creation, and that he will love them with a steadfast love. YHWH says repeatedly to the patriarchs, prophets, and kings that he will be their God and that they will be his people, with all the privileges and responsibilities that the covenant entails.

What God communicates to Moses and Israel is no abstract metaphysical formula but something personal, particular, and concrete: "the Lord ... a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). It is difficult in the extreme to imagine Israel arriving at this idea apart from God communicating it. There are only so many logical possibilities: (a) someone other than God informs Israel (but who is in a position to speak for God but God?); (b) Israel finds this out about God with her own resources (but how?); (c) Israel infers this from certain events in her history, such as the Exodus. Only the third option merits serious consideration, yet a moment's reflection is enough to see that it would be impossible to make sense of the Exodus event as a mighty act of God apart from a divine interpretative word that explained it as such (as we have recorded in Scripture).

YHWH's name and identity would be inaccessible without an anchoring divine speech act. To take the Scriptures as this anchoring speech act – as constitutive of the covenant relationship – is also to view the prophetic and apostolic discourse as itself a mode of divinely authorized and commissioned communicative action. The covenant relation would not exist were it not for these texts – God's law and promises fixed in writing – that constitute it. This is how the Law and Prophets

present themselves: as part and parcel of the communicative relation between God and his people, not as some independently observed record of alleged divine activity. Scripture is the means whereby God interacts socially (covenantally) through messages.

Jesus is the living Word of God, the “exact representation of his being” (Heb. 1:3 [KJV]) in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9), and hence the fullness of God’s communication. Do “being” and “deity” here refer to the divine nature or divine person, the *what* or the *who*? Perhaps it would be better to combine both categories and speak simply of the fullness of the divine life. The point is that the fullness of the divine life is on display in the life of Jesus as rendered by the biblical narrative and other forms of discourse. The *mythos* reveals the divine substance. Yet Jesus’ story neither begins nor makes sense apart from the broader canvas of God’s prior speech and activity in the history of Israel. Who God reveals himself to be is the one who in Jesus keeps his word to Israel. God’s speech in Jesus Christ may be definitive, but it presupposes prior divine communicative action. The God whose nature is displayed in the history of Jesus Christ is the same as the God who declares his nature by his name in Exodus 3:14 and 34:6–7: merciful, gracious, steadfast love.

Free speech Barth worries that making God the author of Scripture compromises God’s freedom (and sovereignty). We may recall that, for Barth, God’s word means God himself speaking, and “God himself speaking” cannot be tied to a text.¹³⁰ How might one respond to this objection?

Character, it has been said, is plot. God displays not only his character but his freedom through his self-determination. God emplots; he is not emplotted. He names himself and charts his own covenantal course. To return to Exodus 3:4–17: what is noteworthy about this passage is not only the enigmatic name God gives himself (“I am who I am”) but the fact that God makes a unilateral promise to deliver Israel. God here identifies himself as the one who keeps his word. God’s freedom is the freedom to make and keep a promise.

That some theologians are willing to talk about the promises of God but unwilling to countenance the possibility that God speaks

130. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, p. 513.

is most perplexing. For it is impossible to make a promise without saying “I promise” or performing an equivalent symbolic action that “counts as” promising. Call it the “Rule of Saith”: no divine illocutions apart from locutions. Does speaking compromise God’s freedom? On the contrary, God’s speech is an expression of his freedom. God was under no obligation to make this promise to Moses, or to Abraham before him. Once a promise is made, however, God is obliged – by his own nature and character, not by an external force – to honor his word. We come to understand God by seeing that God is the one who keeps his promises. God is the one who is wholly reliable and true, the one who is free to keep his word.

We must not isolate God’s freedom from God’s faithfulness or covenant love, much less pit the one against the other: “to suggest that God cannot use God’s freedom to bind Godself ... would be to make God a servant of God’s freedom and thus ‘God’ a predicate of ‘freedom’ rather than vice versa.”¹³¹ If Barth insists that God must be so free as to be excused from the normal obligations that attend a promise, then perhaps we need to consider whether Barth is working with an alien (non-covenantal) concept of freedom.¹³² There is no reason to think, however, that the words of J. L. Austin apply any less to God than to us: “Our word is our bond.”¹³³ God is the Lord of his communicative action because, as Scripture repeatedly demonstrates, *only* God is consistently able to keep his word: “you are God, and your words are true” (2 Sam. 7:28).

From the analogia dramatis to the analogy of being-in-act

To reason biblically about God, along the grain of the biblical texts, one must attend to God’s speech, for this interprets his mighty acts in Israel’s history and his self-humbling act in the history of Jesus Christ. The provisional conclusion of our remythologizing, and thus the first plank in our metaphysics of the theodrama, amounts to this: God’s being is in his free, wise, and loving communicative agency.¹³⁴

131. Kevin W. Hector, “God’s Triunity and Self-Determination,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005), p. 256.

132. So Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, p. 74.

133. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, p. 10.

134. See David F. Ford’s variation on Barth’s formula for God’s perfect being: “the one who loves in wisdom” (*Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* [Cambridge University Press, 2007], pp. 236–9).

Do we betray our remythologizing instincts by using the language of being-in-act? No, for theology demands more than storytelling: faith that stops its search for understanding short of ontology risks falling back into mere mythologizing.¹³⁵ By contrast, remythologizing renews and revitalizes our thinking about being – and the notions of truth, goodness, and beauty that attend it – by letting Scripture serve as our primary interpretative framework. The biblical *mythos* absorbs the metaphysics, as it were, rather than metaphysics the biblical *mythos*. To that end, I propose returning to Aquinas via Barth.¹³⁶ As Thomas corrects Aristotle by attending to the implicit metaphysics of the Exodus (and the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*), so Barth corrects Aquinas by attending to the implicit metaphysics of the Incarnation and resurrection. In the final analysis, both Aquinas and Barth discipline their thinking about God's being with the *analogia dramatis*: the principle that theology begins and is governed by God's speaking and acting.

A "post-Barthian Thomism" takes its cue, then, both from Barth's conviction that any ontology of the divine must be *a posteriori* (after the fact or event of Jesus, as it were) and from the twentieth-century retrieval of Aquinas's notion that being is not a static substance but a dynamic, existential act.¹³⁷ The goal is to deploy – or rather, to co-opt – metaphysical categories for the sake of understanding God's being in the light of God's communicative action in word and deed, silence and suffering. The divine communicative acts that propel the economy of redemption are dramatic analogies of the eternal,

135. Ricoeur avers that to think God apart from being is to succumb to the "current vogue for irrationalism": "Why not say that the Hebrews thought being in a new way?" (*Thinking Biblically*, pp. 359–60).

136. Note well: "Thomas's God is not the perfect being of Greek metaphysics, the supreme entity at the top of a hierarchy of atomistically conceived substances" (Kerr, *After Aquinas*, p. 200).

137. For an account of this retrieval, see Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*, pp. 82–4, and Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*. Kerr notes the irony implicit in my project: "Barth's endeavour to reconceive the Godhead as a self-moved event, as 'being-in-act,' is designed to overcome the supposedly Thomist concept of God as a static substance" (p. 200). My "post-Barthian Thomism" resembles Paul Ricoeur's "post-Hegelian Kantianism" ("Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4 [1975]). With Kant, Ricoeur carefully respects the limits of reason; with Hegel, he explores Reason's many forms, both figurative and conceptual (e.g., of history, poetry, culture, and religion). Against Hegel, however, Ricoeur refuses to let conceptual language swallow up figurative language. Similarly, with Barth I wish to respect the priority of revelation (and *mythos*); with Thomas, I employ the resources of metaphysics (and *logos*).

dynamic triune life. Stated differently: *the economic Trinity is a dramatic analogy (a being-in-temporal-act) of the light, life, and love that God is in himself (a being-in-eternal-act).*¹³⁸

Rhetoric and/or reality Any claim to know the reality of God is bound to be controversial. Brueggemann, for example, is unwilling to go that far. He rightly sees God as the prime subject matter of the Old Testament, and acknowledges that God is characteristically the subject of active verbs, yet chooses to overlook the distinction between Israel's speech and God's speech on the grounds that "even where God speaks, the text is *Israel's testimony* that God has spoken so."¹³⁹ Though he includes sections on "the God Who Makes Promises" and "the God Who Commands,"¹⁴⁰ his real focus proves to be the community's testimony and the practices that give this testimony concrete embodiment, not the reality of God. Israel's speech "constitutes reality" which, being translated, means only that its rhetoric has persuasive social force and makes a difference.¹⁴¹ (Apparently, the ontological proof is in the community practice.) Brueggemann admits to finding the issue of speech/reality "most problematic,"¹⁴² but he is fairly sure that one cannot get beyond Israel's rhetoric to the divine ontology: "*the God of Old Testament theology as such lives in, with, and under the rhetorical enterprise of this text, and nowhere else and in no other way.*"¹⁴³ Apparently, Old Testament theologians need not enter the metaphysical badlands. Or do they?

"General" vs. "special" metaphysics To remythologize the doctrine of God is to work with a special rather than general metaphysics. The parallel with hermeneutics is instructive. "General" hermeneutics examines principles and practices of interpretation that pertain to all written texts; "special" hermeneutics, by contrast, deals with

138. Cf. Francesca Murphy: "theo-drama is possible because God expresses himself in creation as he is in eternity" (*God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* [Oxford University Press, 2007], p. 319). I shall return to the theme of God's light, life, and love in ch. 5.

139. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 117.

140. *Ibid.*, p. ix.

141. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

142. *Ibid.*, p. 65, n. 11.

143. *Ibid.*, p. 66 (emphasis his).

principles and practices that are appropriate to Scripture in particular. Similarly, "general" metaphysics works with categories that are applicable to beings of all types. God is not a member of some general system of being, however. Aquinas and Barth agree at least on this, that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* obliges us to posit an absolute qualitative difference between God and the world: "God has 'doing' or 'giving' being, while we and the rest of creation have 'done' or 'given' being."¹⁴⁴ Stated differently: God is not simply the "highest" being (this would be to follow the logic of "more of the same") but, as Creator, the "author" of being.¹⁴⁵ "Being" is an analogical, not a univocal, concept: "In Thomas' view, it's only creation which entails a non-reciprocal relation of dependence."¹⁴⁶ God is nevertheless involved with all being, having spoken it into existence through Christ.

A special (i.e., remythologized) metaphysics takes God's being-in-communicative-act rather than the concept of a perfect being as its lodestar. Its watchword is *analogia dramatis*, not *analogia entis*. Better: the *analogia entis* is a function of the *analogia dramatis*. As in Barth, we arrive at a list of divine attributes not by extrapolating from the idea of infinite perfection, but by describing and detailing the perfections and predicates of God's communicative activity.¹⁴⁷

Are we here in danger of becoming prey to vain philosophy (Col. 2:8)? Theologians should never too hastily dismiss the possibility of a Feuerbachian slip. Is "activity" really an improvement upon "being" if, as some philosophers have suggested, "at the heart of Aristotle's ontology [is] the claim that actuality is activity, and that being is therefore act"?¹⁴⁸ My purpose here is to "excorporate" certain philosophical concepts to make explicit what is implicit in the Bible and

144. Shortt, in *God's Advocates*, pp. 137–8.

145. We shall explore this theme further in ch. 6.

146. David Burrell in Shortt (ed.), *God's Advocates*, p. 139.

147. Strictly speaking, it is preferable to speak of God's being-in-activity rather than his being-in-act. Acts are particular events, tokens of a particular type of action. God's being is not a series of discrete events; rather, his constant being-in-activity is revealed in his concrete acts. For a fuller development of these distinctions, see Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Becoming Present*, pp. 145–7.

148. L. A. Kosman, "Substance, Being and Energeia," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. II (Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 121–49, cited in Kerr, *After Aquinas*, p. 240, n.26.

so serve the project of biblical reasoning.¹⁴⁹ This is arguably what Thomas does to Aristotle, and what Barth does to Thomas.¹⁵⁰

Barth worries that Aquinas's doctrine of God begins with a reflection on "the one God" rather than with the three – with the divine essence prior to the divine economy.¹⁵¹ The first principle of Barth's actualistic ontology is that God's being is his act. It is only by examining what God actually says and does that we can learn who, and what, God eternally is. What, then, does God do? He makes himself nothing (Phil. 2:7), pouring himself out on the cross. Accordingly, Barth speaks of the being of God under the rubric "the one who loves in freedom." God is the triune movement of free love that becomes concrete in the historical particularity of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The ontological proposition "God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8) is followed by a narrative description of equal importance: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son ..." (1 Jn. 4:9). God is love because "this act is His being, His essence and His nature."¹⁵² Barth emphasizes God's being-in-act, then, at least in part to "correct" Aquinas. The plot thickens, however, because according to the latter's recent defenders, *actus* is in fact "the master metaphor" that governs Thomas's doctrine of God.¹⁵³

Should theologians derive their understanding of *actus* from God's communicative action or should they understand God's communicative action against the background of an independently derived general conception of being-in-act? Put differently: is theology merely a regional instance of a general metaphysics?

My proposal is to say about metaphysics what Ricoeur says about hermeneutics. Though biblical interpretation appears to be a regional

149. I am borrowing – excorporating! – the notion of "excorporation" from its home in communication and cultural studies (see ch. 1 above). Specifically, I am excorporating elements of Aquinas and Barth that they themselves borrowed from Aristotle (e.g., "being"; "act").

150. Aquinas does not incorporate biblical faith into an Aristotelian metaphysics but excorporates Aristotle's categories into biblical faith. Was Thomas perhaps a remythologizer too?

151. Several recent studies have exposed this as a misleading way of understanding the impulse and nature of Aquinas's theology. See Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, pp. 23–7 and Kerr, *After Aquinas*, ch. 11. Rudi Te Velde takes a slightly different tack, arguing that metaphysics for Aquinas "assists the theological reflection on the teachings of faith by providing it with an intelligible account of the reality of God as presupposed by faith" (*Aquinas on God: The "Divine Science" of the Summa Theologiae* [Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2006], p. 5).

152. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 279.

153. Kerr, *After Aquinas*, p. 201.

application of principles drawn from philosophical hermeneutics, the actual form and content of what the Bible says – of what God says in and through the Bible – ultimately resists, overcomes, and recasts the general framework: “Theological hermeneutics presents features that are so original that the relation is gradually inverted, and theological hermeneutics finally subordinates philosophical hermeneutics to itself as its own organon.”¹⁵⁴ What bursts out of the old philosophical hermeneutical wineskins is precisely the ways in which the biblical texts name God: “The word ‘God’ says more than the word ‘being’ because it presupposes the entire context of narratives, prophecies, laws, wisdom, writings, psalms, and so on.”¹⁵⁵

So it is with metaphysics. Though we may come to Scripture presupposing general schemes of being and/or becoming, attention to what the Bible actually says about God – his *ex verbo* creation, the jealousy for the holiness of his name against the idols, his revelation in Jesus Christ – resists, overturns, and ultimately recasts these frameworks too. Hence the biblical *mythos* remythologizes metaphysics itself, resisting, overcoming, and recasting our conceptions of what God must be like as supreme being. God's being-in-communicative-act governs accounts of communicative action in general, not vice versa.

Barth suggests a similar dynamic with regard to anthropology, encouraging us to “first enquire concerning this one man [Jesus Christ], and then on this basis concerning man in general.”¹⁵⁶ And, like Ricoeur, Barth works a similar reversal of the relation of general and special hermeneutics, claiming that we learn best how to read books in general by attending to how we read Scripture: “For the sake of better general hermeneutics it must therefore dare to be this special hermeneutics.”¹⁵⁷ Or, being translated in terms of the present project: *for the sake of better general metaphysics we must therefore dare to do this special metaphysics.*

In this light, we would do well not to exaggerate the differences between Aquinas and Barth. Both engage in conceptual analysis and

154. Ricoeur, “Philosophical and Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), p. 90. See also Bernard Stevens, “Herméneutique philosophique et herméneutique biblique dans l'oeuvre de Paul Ricoeur,” *Revue théologique de Louvain* 20/2 (1989), pp. 178–93.

155. Ricoeur, “Naming God,” in *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 227.

156. Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960) p. 44.

157. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, p. 472.

make ministerial use of philosophical reason. The key differences are two: (1) Aquinas employs a single conceptual scheme, that of Aristotle, while Barth is more eclectic; (2) Aquinas asks what God the creator must be given the existence of creation while Barth asks what God must be given the history of Jesus Christ.¹⁵⁸ The present work has Thomistic ambitions yet is tempered by Barthian anxieties: we begin with faith in revealed truth and proceed to reason, sometimes with the aid of philosophical concepts, in order to “take every [metaphysical] thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). The result: not ontotheology but theo-ontology, not general but special (remythologized, biblically governed) metaphysics.

Being-in-communicative-act: elements of a theodramatic metaphysic

It is important to distinguished what I previously called “bad” metaphysics – the position that God is part of a single system of being – from a theological metaphysics that acknowledges the absolute ontological difference between Creator and creation. Despite this ontological difference, do we not need some common categories in order to speak of, and hence understand, the God-world relationship? If all that we have done up to this point is to substitute the general concept of “communicative act” for “substance” or “relationality,” then little has been gained; theology has merely exchanged philosophical masters. But this is not what we have done. Rather, we have sought to remythologize metaphysics, letting Scripture suggest the categories for apprehending both divine and creaturely reality.

A “theodramatic” metaphysics provides a systematic account of the categories needed to describe what God has said and done to renew all things in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. These categories enable us to give a “thick description” of the whole of reality. Let me here underline two points: (1) what God says/does in the world requires new categories and concepts (e.g., revelation, Incarnation, resurrection) in order to avoid reducing what Scripture records to mere epiphenomena of lower-level entities and processes;¹⁵⁹ (2) what happens at the level

158. See Eugene F. Rogers, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

159. For the idea that reality is stratified or multi-leveled, see Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming – Natural, Divine, and Human*,

of theodrama is no less real than what happens at, say, the level of physics, chemistry, and biology. The category of communicative action in particular allows us to understand certain aspects of reality in such a way that, without it, we should understand not more but less.

Self-communicative action as a metaphysical principle

W. Norris Clarke has worked a “creative retrieval” of a Thomistic metaphysics that can itself be creatively retrieved and put to theodramatic work, especially when brought into dialogue with Barth. Though Clarke views metaphysics as strictly philosophical, he believes that revelation illumines the deeper meaning of the natural order itself. Biblical reasoning may therefore inform and guide natural reasoning. Hence the aim of the present section: to deploy metaphysical categories – perchance to co-opt them – for the sake of a project that is ultimately governed by the biblical accounts of God's self-presentation in speech and act. This is what it means to do special metaphysics for the sake of better general metaphysics. We find being in general intelligible, we might say, only because God has first made himself intelligible to us.

It is of considerable metaphysical importance, particularly in the light of the possibility of Feuerbachian slips, that one be able to distinguish “real” from merely “mental” being, what exists independently of our thinking about it from what exists only as thought-about.¹⁶⁰ In contrast to Plato's choice of self-identity and immutability as the criteria of the really real, Clarke follows Thomas in opting for *action*: “What is real is what can act on its own.”¹⁶¹ In Austin Farrer's words: “To be is to operate.”¹⁶² We know that something is real when its activity impinges on the existence of something else: “Real beings *make a difference* in the real world.”¹⁶³

Thomas's “great central metaphysical insight” is the notion that being is not some static substance (*what it is*) but active presence

enlarged edn. (London: SCM, 1993) and Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, vol. II: *Reality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

160. Clarke, *The One and the Many*, p. 30.

161. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

162. Farrer, *Faith and Speculation*, p. 114.

163. Clarke, *The One and the Many*, p. 31.

(that it is).¹⁶⁴ God's being is an "active, doing Being . . . being doing and doing being."¹⁶⁵ "Substance" here appears as "a dynamic center of activity and receptivity" that has its own characteristic capacities.¹⁶⁶ Action is the operative concept: a thing's active presence or activity reveals not only *that* but *what* something is. To cite Thomas's formula: *agere sequitur esse* (acting follows being). Every being "unveils" itself to others through its habitual being-in-act, though only God is lord of his self-communication: "action becomes the natural self-manifestation of a being, both of its presence (its act of existence) and its mode of presence (its essence)."¹⁶⁷ It is as if a being's "economic" action (its "to do") expresses its "immanent" act (its "to be"). Indeed, with an eye to the way in which the eternal processions in the Godhead get expressed in the historical missions of Son and Spirit, we may speak of "the Trinitarian basis for imagining the great theatre of world history as analogous to God's very being, or as dramatically revealing it."¹⁶⁸

Being-in-act spills over as it were into self-communicative action: "it is the very nature of real being . . . to pour over into action that is *self-revealing* and *self-communicative*."¹⁶⁹ Aquinas makes the same point: "It is in the nature of every actuality to communicate itself as far as it is possible."¹⁷⁰ Idols have no reality. Powerless either to initiate a communicative act or to respond to one, they are completely unable to make a difference in the lives of those who worship them: "Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake; to a dumb stone, Arise! Can this give revelation?" (Hab. 2:19). The idol is non-communicative, and thus for all practical purposes, no being at all.

From the premise that action reveals the particular being from which it originates, Clarke infers that "All action is communication, and all communication is action."¹⁷¹ Being is intelligible precisely as communicative act: "I know the *nature* or essence of other real beings as *this kind of actor* on me."¹⁷² What more do we need to

164. Clarke, *Explorations in Metaphysics*, p. x.

165. Cited in Kerr, *After Aquinas*, p. 202.

166. *Ibid.*, p. 16. Note that on this definition, substances have *ipse* rather than *idem* identity.

167. *Ibid.*, p. 8. See also ch. 3 "Action as the Self-Revelation of Being: A Central Theme in the Thought of St. Thomas," pp. 45–64.

168. Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 320.

169. Clarke, *One and the Many*, p. 32.

170. *De Potentia*, q. 2, art. 1; cited in Clarke, *Explorations*, p. 28 n.3.

171. Clarke, *Explorations*, p. 9.

172. Clarke, *One and the Many*, p. 35.

know about things, he asks, "than that they are the *perduring centers* of such-and-such characteristic actions on me?"¹⁷³ It should perhaps come as no surprise, then, that Clarke believes personhood to be the primary model of being. It is persons, after all, who are best at presenting themselves through communicative activity to others. The human person is the best "analogue for us of all the basic metaphysical concepts."¹⁷⁴ As an agent who enters into relations, a person is a substance, in the sense of "an abiding center of acting and being acted upon."¹⁷⁵ Yet relationality too is as intrinsic to being as is substance given the latter's orientation towards self-communication: "all action necessarily generates a web of relations between agents and recipients."¹⁷⁶

Clarke believes that this understanding of being as intrinsically self-communicative is "one of the few great fundamental insights in the history of metaphysics."¹⁷⁷ Congenial as his approach is to the present study, it appears to take its cue from natural rather than biblical reasoning, general rather than special revelation. For example, he posits an analogy between God and the world centered on *action*: "a similar type of activity [self-communication] is going on in each, but carried out by each agent-subject in *its own distinctive way*."¹⁷⁸ Everything depends, however, on the direction of the analogical flow. Bottom-up analogical reasoning looks at things in general and makes of God a higher or perfect instance. God here appears as a chapter in a story of being narrated from elsewhere than God's own self-communication. *By contrast, top-down analogical reasoning (Barth) attends to God's self-communication and looks at everything else in light of that.* To remythologize metaphysics means that theologians must take this latter approach: *post-Barthian Thomism*.¹⁷⁹

Every real being has a certain degree and type of communicative agency, for to be real is to exist, and to exist is to be active: *in act*. Every being, "insofar as it is in act, tends naturally to overflow into action, and this action is a *self-communication*."¹⁸⁰ To be is to be an

173. Clarke, *Explorations*, p. 11.

174. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

175. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

176. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

177. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

178. Clarke, *One and the Many*, p. 47.

179. Clarke affirms God as "the ultimate paradigm of being" (*Explorations*, p. 109), but it is not always clear when Clarke is reasoning philosophically and when scripturally, or which has the upper hand.

180. Clarke, *Explorations*, p. 47.

active presence that presents itself to others. This is as true of berries and bricks as it is of animate creatures such as plankton and porcupines. Everything that is reveals its nature simply by being (i.e., actively presenting) itself. In the final analysis, however, if categories suited to persons (e.g., self-communication) play a privileged role in a theodramatic metaphysics, it is because (1) human persons have been created in the *imago Dei*; (2) human persons are microcosms of creation; (3) God assumed the human form in the Incarnation. Strictly speaking, however, to speak of atoms and molecules “communicating” is to trade in theomorphisms. The triune God alone is the paradigmatic communicative agent: the Father communicates himself in the activity of the Son and Spirit.

While everything that is possesses some type of communicative agency, it is in the communicative action of persons that being most comes into its own. If “*to be is to be together, actively present to each other*,”¹⁸¹ then it is persons who have the best means and widest repertoire for self-communication. Whereas Clarke focuses on human persons, however, biblical reasoning obliges us to take God, especially in his self-communication in Jesus Christ, as the paradigm communicative agent: “The whole personality of Jesus as expressed in the Gospels is also totally relational, dialogical, *toward the Father*.”¹⁸² There are therefore good Trinitarian grounds for taking “person” as the key metaphysical principle.

Unlike creatures, God is the author of his own existence. Moreover, God is constrained by no greater metaphysical principle than himself to be self-communicative. God’s being is active in its own distinct way, communicating its goodness first of all *ad intra*.¹⁸³ Before God creates and relates to the world, God’s being already consists in communicative activity, namely, the Father’s begetting of the Son and the proceeding of the Spirit. We only know God as the paradigm personal communicative agent, however, from his triune speaking and acting in the history of salvation: “It is constitutive of the very personality of God as Father that he communicates the whole fullness of the divine perfection (or nature) without remainder to the Son.”¹⁸⁴

181. Clarke, *One and the Many*, p. 40.

182. Clarke, *Explorations*, p. 118.

183. I pursue the logic of these Trinitarian relations in the next chapter.

184. Clarke, *Explorations*, p. 109.

God is a dynamic being in Trinitarian relation, the abiding center of his characteristic activity and subject of his actions. Being a "substance-in-relation" is analogously true of both God and all other beings, for all real beings are oriented toward action and self-communication.¹⁸⁵ Where other beings have a natural tendency to "share" themselves through action appropriate to their natures, human persons have a special capacity to engage in meaningful dialogue.¹⁸⁶ Unlike other entities that "communicate" themselves simply by being what they are, persons are free to communicate their own natures, feelings, and thoughts as well as the thoughts, feelings, and visions of others. With language, persons can communicate the truth, goodness, and beauty of other worlds, real or fictional. Persons are real because they make a difference in the lives of other persons, not least through their varied forms of communicative action. God is a qualitatively different sort of communicative agent, the source of all created reality whose communicative activity – speaking included – not only makes a difference to things but brings all things into existence. Furthermore, God is the one to whom all other things relate, as creatures to Creator. This is the way God actively presents himself in Scripture, dialogically interacting with characters in the text and with readers – biblical reasoners – who dare to engage it.

Communicative action makes the world go round. The world is a stage for dialogical interaction comprised of things (and persons) whose being consists in the act of communicating what (and who) they are: "Thus the universe becomes a vast interconnected web of interacting beings, reciprocally acting on and being acted on by others, giving and receiving. *To be finite is to share*, in all the active and passive meanings of that term."¹⁸⁷ Contemporary ontologies are right to call attention to our essential relationality, but it is not relations all the way down: "Each being exists *in itself* ... as an originating center of action; yet it is also *related* to others. To be real is to be substance-in-relation."¹⁸⁸ Everything that exists *in-itself*, *towards-others*; everything that exists is likewise *from-and-for-another* (the Son). Against this

185. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

186. This emphasis on interpersonal dialogue is Clarke's unique contribution to Thomist metaphysics. See "The 'We are' of Interpersonal Dialogue as the Starting Point of Metaphysics," in *Explorations of Theology*, esp. p. 43, n.5.

187. Clarke, *Explorations*, p. 51.

188. *Ibid.*, p. 41

cosmic backdrop, God and humans appear center stage, the principal *dramatis personae* in a theodramatic metaphysics that takes its bearings, and its categories, from the history of Jesus Christ.

A note on angels

A third species of communicative agents alongside God and human persons features occasionally in the theodrama. Angels represent an excellent test case for biblical reasoning and remythologized metaphysics alike. Medieval theologians developed a sophisticated, though largely speculative, metaphysical account of angels as finite non-material intellectual beings. They inherited the neo-Platonist notion that certain beings occupied the intermediary space between God and the world. Pseudo-Dionysius, for example, provides a detailed classification (cherubim, seraphim, thrones, etc.) of the angels in *The Celestial Hierarchy*, a systematic treatise he wrote on the subject. Aquinas, too, was much exercised by questions concerning the nature, bodies, and intelligence of angels.¹⁸⁹ The Reformers accepted the existence of angels on the basis of biblical testimony but tended to focus not on the nature of their peculiar ontology but on their communicative function. Angels are God's messengers, not metaphysical mediators.

The existence of invisible beings does not sit well with modern thinkers who can find no place for angelic activity in a world explicable by scientific law. Karl Rahner writes: "The great danger at the present time is that affirmations about angels in the teaching of the Christian faith will be rejected as a mythology which is no longer credible, and so succumb to demythologization."¹⁹⁰ At the other extreme lie the dangers of anthropomorphism (e.g., guardian angels for every individual) and of an unhealthy interest in something about which Scripture is largely silent.

Barth devotes over two hundred pages to angels in the *Church Dogmatics* in an attempt to steer a middle course "between the far too interesting mythology of the ancients and the far too uninteresting 'demythologisation' of most of the moderns."¹⁹¹ Barth again shows

189. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 51–8.

190. "Angels," in Rahner (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p. 9.

191. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960) p. 369.

his remythologizing colors and his commitment to biblical reasoning, insisting that the *intelligere* that faith seeks must limit itself to the witness of Holy Scripture alone.¹⁹² It is a matter not of metaphysical speculation but rather of describing the ontology of the world depicted in the biblical text: "our only concern is with what is."¹⁹³ *Heaven* is: heaven is the realm of "invisible creaturely reality"¹⁹⁴ and angels are "the heavenly entourage of the God who acts from heaven to earth."¹⁹⁵

Angels appear as actors in crucial scenes of the theodrama, yet their appearance is normally marginal. Angels are supporting actors. There are no narratives about angels, only narratives in which angels sometimes figure. Barth reasons (biblically!) that angels are not therefore to become subjects in their own right, either of theological reflection or of personal devotion, for their whole purpose is to point away from themselves: "They do not exist and act independently or autonomously. They have no history or aims or achievements of their own."¹⁹⁶

Angels nevertheless play a significant role in the theodrama; they minister and magnify God's own communicative action. It would not be possible for people to know what God was up to, or even that he was involved in their history, without some communicative clues. If we attend to the biblical depiction of angels, we find that their primary role is to announce what God is doing, will do, or may do.¹⁹⁷ For example, the angel of the Lord informs Abraham and Sarah of the birth of Isaac, prefiguring the annunciation to Mary of the birth of Jesus, an event later confirmed by a whole choir of angels (Lk. 2:10–11). Other key events in the history of redemption similarly receive an angelic gloss: angels were the first interpretative voices on the scene of both the resurrection (Mt. 28:5–7; Lk. 24:4–7) and the ascension (Acts 1:10–11). Angels intervene frequently in the book of Acts to speed the ministry of the word (Acts 5:19; 8:26; 10:22; 16:9). Finally, it is an angel who communicates the vision of the consummation of redemptive history in the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:1). Barth rightly

192. *Ibid.*, pp. 401–2.

193. *Ibid.*, p. 517.

194. *Ibid.*, p. 424.

195. *Ibid.*, p. 451.

196. *Ibid.*, p. 480.

197. So Stephen F. Noll, *Angels of Light, Powers of Darkness: Thinking Biblically about Angels, Satan & Principalities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 165.

grasps the properly communicative function of angels: "They are at the place where the speech and action of God commence in the created world. They are its direct *entourage* and original witnesses. They follow the Word of God as riders on white horses ... Their only *raison d'être* as heavenly beings is to render this service."¹⁹⁸

To the extent that angels make a communicative difference, they are real communicative agents. A remythologized (i.e., theodramatic) metaphysics will view angels as incorporeal creatures, "ministering spirits" (Heb. 1:14) who depend upon God for their existence. They serve (1) as reminders that there is more to reality than what is dreamt of in secular philosophy or demonstrated by science; (2) as reminders that all spiritual forces other than God are less than God inasmuch as they are part of the created order; (3) as ministers of God's communicative action, both extraordinarily by witnessing at certain cardinal points in redemptive history, and ordinarily by worshipping God ceaselessly.¹⁹⁹

Persons as communicative-agents-in-relation

We now have a better grip on the "what" question: all that is – God, earthly creatures, angels – act according to their respective natures in ways that are self-communicative and so oriented toward others. Only persons, however, are communicative agents in the strong sense of the term, for only persons can freely initiate communicative action and employ language not only to reveal themselves but to do other things as well.²⁰⁰ To remythologize our understanding of persons, however, we must take our bearings from God's triune communicative action. This is the Barthian correction of Thomistic metaphysics. As Barth notes, if the being of a person is a being in act, and if no other being exists absolutely in its act as does God, then "It is not God who is a person by extension, but we."²⁰¹ Nevertheless,

198. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960) pp. 451–2.

199. The extraordinary/ordinary distinction comes from Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. II, ch. 9. We shall return to the question of evil powers/principalities in ch. 7.

200. The broad communicative categories sketched out in this chapter may go some way in addressing the broader question of divine action in the natural world that is the central topic of the discussion between theology and scientists. However, the focus of the present work is God's dialogical interaction with humans.

201. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 272.

studying the “extensions” may shed some light on the original, if only by reflection.

What follows is an attempt to fill out the post-Barthian Thomism metaphysics of the theodrama sketched above with concepts borrowed from a variety of philosophers and theologians who view persons as communicative agents. A comprehensive review of contemporary developments is beyond the scope of this chapter. I seek only to plunder certain contemporary Athenians whose thought helps to clarify the ontology of personhood implied by the biblical texts that depict divine and human interlocutors as beings-in-communicative-act.²⁰²

Philosophical contributions Several recent philosophers have corroborated Tertullian's idea that a person is one who speaks and acts.²⁰³ P. F. Strawson argues that “person” is a “primitive” concept, that is, one that cannot be explained in terms of something more basic, yet one to which we ascribe two kinds of properties: “M-predicates” (e.g., five feet eleven inches; one hundred and seventy-eight pounds; bearded, etc.) and “P-predicates” (e.g., witty; patient; introspective, etc.).²⁰⁴ A remythologized concept of personhood alert to biblical depictions of God's being-in-communicative-act will, however, demur from ascribing “M-predicates” to the Father, Son, and Spirit. As to the P-predicates unique to persons, it is important to note that we ascribe not only mental but moral capacities – everything that communicative agents need to be in order to participate freely, lovingly, and intelligently in the theodrama (for it is to that sort of participation that God holds them answerable). Persons are, metaphysically speaking, basic particulars who have certain God-given (and God-like) capacities, especially the capacity to enter into meaningful dialogue (and hence covenantal relation) with others (and with God).²⁰⁵

202. For a fuller exposition, see my “Human being, individual and social,” in Colin Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 158–88.

203. The Latin term *persona* originally referred to an actor's mask and, by extension, to both the individual wearing the mask and the role the actor played.

204. P. F. Strawson, “Persons,” ch. 3, in *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959).

205. This capacity is what some theologians mean by “image of God.” See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI and

Other philosophers share Strawson's intuition that persons are metaphysically *sui generis*. The "personalism" that flourished in Europe, Britain, and the United States from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries held persons to be ontologically and axiologically ultimate. Martin Buber's *dialogical* variation on personalism, *I and Thou*, is especially pertinent to our investigations.²⁰⁶ Buber draws a sharp distinction between the way we relate to things (I-It) and the way persons relate (I-Thou). I relate to things as an active subject to a passive object; I observe rather than speak to things. Yes, we can take an "objectifying" attitude to persons as well, viewing them as mere pawns whose movements are manipulated rather than solicited. In genuine I-Thou relationships, however, there are two active subjects whose behavior is not causally determined but open to the back-and-forth of address and response. It is wrong to reduce others persons, and especially God, to an "It."²⁰⁷ For the essence of biblical religion is the interpersonal dialogue between the human "I" and the divine "Thou."²⁰⁸

John Macmurray accepts the primacy of persons but argues in his 1953 Gifford Lectures that we best understand personhood by starting not with Descartes' "I think" but with "I do." The self is an agent for whom action, rather than being or consciousness, is the royal route to personhood. Macmurray's call to adopt the "standpoint of action"²⁰⁹ for understanding human persons is fully in line with the call in the present work to attend to divine action. For action, human or divine, is "a full concrete activity of the self in which all our capacities are employed."²¹⁰ To act means to take an initiative, to begin, to set something in motion. When things happen apart from an agent's initiative, we have events, not action. Only persons can act in the strong sense of the term. Macmurray distinguishes the "behavior" of animals and the "action" of persons by ascribing

Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), pp. 231-40 and McFadyen, *Call to Personhood*, pp. 18-24, 30-5.

206. Buber, *I and Thou*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

207. For an application of Buber's insights to the question of God, see John A. T. Robinson's recently published doctoral dissertation, *Thou Who Art: The Concept of the Personality of God* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006).

208. It remains to be seen whether all I-Thou relationships, in order to be genuine, must also be fully mutual and reciprocal (i.e., symmetrical), a point to which we shall return in due course.

209. John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1991), p. 85.

210. *Ibid.*, p. 86. Note that acting includes "thinking."

intentionality to the latter. To ascribe "action" of animals is, at best, to speak anthropomorphically and, at worst, to make a category mistake.²¹¹ For to act with intention is to be aware of one's own agency in doing something: action is "a unity of movement and knowledge" that aims to realize an intention.²¹² Specifically, persons have the capacity to act knowing that, and sometimes how, their actions will affect others. To be a person, then, is to be an agent-in-relation-to-others.²¹³

From a somewhat different angle, Hannah Arendt goes beyond both Buber and Macmurray by emphasizing the *political* dimension of action, a feature that arises from the sheer plurality of human persons, each of whom is capable of new perspectives and new initiatives. Arendt distinguishes "labor" (what we need to do to survive) from "work" (what we need to do to create a habitable world/culture). "Action" refers to those initiatives we make in a public space with other political actors whose responses affect what we do, and vice versa. Several facets of Arendt's analysis are germane to our discussion. In the first place, she too sees persons as communicative agents: "A life without speech and without action ... is literally dead to the world."²¹⁴ Second, to act is to take an initiative or to insert oneself into the world of persons. Third, she recognizes that "many, and even most acts, are performed in the manner of speech."²¹⁵ Fourth, action calls for narration in order to determine the meaning and significance of the "who." When human persons act, they find themselves in a world where others have already spoken and acted: "the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer."²¹⁶

Narrative looms even larger in Paul Ricoeur, who insists that only persons can speak, act, have narrative identities, and be held responsible for what they say and do. Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the "I am"

211. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

212. *Ibid.*, p. 128. Macmurray criticizes Whitehead's process philosophy for blurring the metaphysical distinction between acts and events by ascribing to every "actual occasion" a degree of self-determination.

213. Macmurray views religion as inherently bound up with the question of what makes us persons rather than merely material entities or biological organisms. See Stanley M. Harrison, "Introduction" to Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, pp. x-xi.

214. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd edn. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 176.

215. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

216. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

leans heavily on the notion of self-attestation; we come to understand human being indirectly, via a reflection on the words and works that attest human existence. Humans come to know themselves by attesting their power to say, their power to do, their power to recognize themselves as a character in a narrative, and in the power to respond to a call (“Here I am”).²¹⁷ Attestation is the “*assurance of being oneself acting and suffering*” – this as opposed to being merely an effect in some causal chain (a “what”). Moving beyond Ricoeur, our present concern is with the *divine* ontology implied by Scripture’s attestation to what God has said and done – to faith’s assurance that “this is God acting and suffering.”²¹⁸

Ricoeur agrees with Macmurray: actions are not the same as events. We *ascribe* the former (to agents) but *describe* the latter (in terms of impersonal causal laws): “It is first with reference to *action* itself that we say it is mine, yours, his or hers, that it depends on each of us, that it is in our power.”²¹⁹ Further, when we ascribe a series of actions to a person we begin to tell a narrative that reveals who they are and what they are like. The subject of a narrative interacts with others and is thus subject to moral evaluation: because action can be ascribed to me, I am accountable to others. Ricoeur reclaims the term “imputability” to describe the ascription of actions to agents with a view to their responsibility, and puts special emphasis on persons as those who can be counted on by others to keep their word.

Persons have capacities commensurate with name-bearers about whom narratives can be told. Persons can say and do things, call and respond, enter into multifarious moral and communicative relations. As personal, God too displays these ontological traits, though of course God’s life is ontologically distinct: no other being has life or existence from itself. God is the paradigm communicative agent and template of communicative agency. For God is the always active subject who determines his own narrative, a story of free, loving, and wise (i.e., perfect) self-communication. God decides when and where (and under what form) to appear, unlike humans, who have

217. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 22.

218. For Ricoeur’s relation to theology, see Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur* and Maureen Junker-Kenny and Peter Kenny (eds.), *Memory, Narrativity, Self and the Challenge to Think God: The Reception within Theology of the Recent Work of Paul Ricoeur* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004).

219. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 95.

no choice in the matter. The question that remains is whether and to what extent God, like humans, is who he is by virtue of his relation to others who may call upon him: "Thou, have mercy on me!"²²⁰

Finally, in another response to modern and postmodern challenges to personhood, Calvin Schrag depicts an action-oriented self defined by the ways in which it communicates: "The self is implicated in its discourse as a who that ... has already spoken, is now speaking, and has the power yet to speak."²²¹ The key concept is communicative praxis: "a discursive and nondiscursive affair, implicating and constituting the self as [a] speaking and acting subject."²²² Schrag identifies the ability to respond as one of the most important communicative abilities: "To exist ethically with other selves is to respond in a fitting manner to their discourse and action."²²³ It is in this context that the biblical phrase "the only wise God" (Rom. 16:27) comes into its own. Because God is fully himself in all that he does, all his communicative acts are true, good, wise, etc.

Schrag does not apply his personalist categories to God for fear of incurring Feuerbach's wrath: "God as a person, even if in the superlative sense of personhood, remains a being among other beings ... a subject for the assignation of anthropomorphic properties."²²⁴ Schrag believes that the problem of evil will defeat theism as long as God is viewed as a Thou. He consequently throws his lot in with Levinas and defines transcendence in terms of ethics rather than metaphysics, gift rather than substance, praxis rather than being. One wonders, however, whether this is only a postmodern twist on a modern dualist dogma, especially when Schrag contrasts "abstract metaphysical presence" with "concrete communicative presence."²²⁵ Remythologizing moves in the other direction, seeking the metaphysical implications of God's self-presentation in his voiced word. Still, Schrag is right to acknowledge God as a "soliciting presence" who, in making himself known, freely "gives" himself in love. One wonders, however, about his claim that "The gift is an event rather

220. I shall return to this question of communicative "passion" in ch. 8.

221. Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self After Postmodernity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 17.

222. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

223. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

224. Calvin O. Schrag, *God as Otherwise Than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), p. 53.

225. *Ibid.*, pp. 94-5.

than a being,”²²⁶ not least because he seems to have forgotten about the agent (“who”) and action. Can a gift be given without a *Giver*?

Theological contributions So much for recent philosophical variations on a Thomist theme (i.e., being-in-act). We do well to remember that the philosophical contributions we have just examined must pass muster vis-à-vis the biblical accounts of God’s activity. As we turn to consider recent theological contributions, we also do well to remember *who* God is in his act, one God in three persons: “The three persons *are* the being of God.”²²⁷ Moreover, “all of God’s acts take their beginning in the Father, are put into effect through the Son and reach their completion in the Spirit.”²²⁸ That God *is* love, for example, is implied and demonstrated “by the threefold shape of his loving agency.”²²⁹ God’s actions in history (*ad extra*) dramatically reveal how God is in himself (*in se*).

A similar dynamic applies to God’s communicative action. Luther depicts God’s being as an eternal conversation, with the Father addressing the Son and the Son responding. The Spirit is addressed and responds as well, and also makes it possible for humans to participate in the conversation: “it is the Spirit who communicates to God’s created conversation partners what he overhears in the dialogue between the Father and the Son.”²³⁰ The life of God “is an eternal act of communication.”²³¹

From another tradition, Jonathan Edwards, reacting to the Deist removal of God from the world, argues that “it is his [God’s] essence to communicate himself.”²³² God’s communication originates from the “fullness” of his being. Edwards works with a “dispositional ontology” in which God tends to communicate his being outwards from his fullness. What is extended in time and space is not the divine substance, however, but the divine activities of knowing and loving. God makes himself known “in what he says, and in what he does.”²³³

226. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

227. Gunton, *Act and Being*, p. 112.

228. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

229. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

230. Schwöbel, “The Triune God,” in Shortt (ed.), *God’s Advocates*, p. 89.

231. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

232. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. XIII: *Miscellanies 1–500*, ed. Thomas A. Schaffer (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 277.

233. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. VIII: *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 422.

For Balthasar, theodrama is all about God's self-showing, self-giving, and self-saying: "It begins with a Voice."²³⁴ The Voice comes not in response to a prior human question but from its own initiative: "Its sound is full of living, unconditional, unquestionable authority."²³⁵ Most importantly, the Voice becomes embodied and enacts the definitive communication, the perfect self-expression: "God's splendor is his self-surrender, and this ... is his truth."²³⁶

The themes of communication and dialogue figure prominently in Alistair McFadyen's theory of personhood as well: "Persons are unique centers or subjects of communication but they are so only through their intrinsic relation to other persons."²³⁷ This is a dialogical understanding of personhood whereby "we are what we are in ourselves only through relation to others."²³⁸ We are *personae*: beings in whom the call of others "sounds through." As to individual identity, it refers "to the communicative form (the stance in relation; the form taken in call and response) which a person habitually takes."²³⁹ To be a speech agent is to be and relate "as an I which is 'called out' ... as a dialogue partner."²⁴⁰ Our being is in communicative action; our identity is a function of the style or pattern that we freely adopt in our communicative relations, especially towards God: "the form of God's address determines the structure of human being as response without determining the form or content of that response."²⁴¹ To be human is to be answerable to God.

Finally, Oliver Davies's theology of divine communication and compassion is germane to the present work, not least because it too is a type of remythologizing that moves from Scripture (*mythos*) to an ontology (*logos*) of God, world, and self. Davies speaks of "refiguring" metaphysics²⁴² and "re-contextualizing" reason within the

234. Balthasar, *Epilogue*, p. 29.

235. *Ibid.*

236. *Ibid.*, p. 85. See also David F. Ford's work on the relation of the "cry" – a particularly intense articulation of the voice – to Christian wisdom, and the cry of Jesus from the cross (*Christian Wisdom*, pp. 14–45, 170–1).

237. McFadyen, *Call to Personhood*, p. 9.

238. *Ibid.*

239. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

240. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

241. *Ibid.*, p. 22. In Part III we shall see that human beings are communicative agents in properly *covenantal* relations.

242. Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, p. xvi.

parameters of a scriptural account of the world.²⁴³ He defines being as “the medium of relation between self and other.”²⁴⁴ This leads him to his central theme of “kenotic ontology” – the idea that the self, the epitome of being, is most itself not only when it responds to a call but when it dispossesses itself by acting radically for others.²⁴⁵ He is particularly struck by the way in which God’s speaking in Genesis – the self-presentation of God’s being – is tied up with divine creativity and compassion, with God’s active presence *with* and *for* Israel.²⁴⁶ God’s speaking generates a structured world in which God then becomes a speaking presence. God blesses the first couple, signifying his invested relation to his creatures. God speaks face to face with Moses, establishes a covenant, and names himself compassionate (Ex. 34:6). Speaking (through the prophets) continues to be God’s mode of presence in Israel: “God is present where God speaks, and God’s saving communication is the modality of God’s being with God’s people.”²⁴⁷

In the New Testament God actively presents himself not in a burning bush but in human flesh: “God, who already uses the ‘I,’ enters fully into the linguistic world by himself becoming an embodied speech agent among other speech agents.”²⁴⁸ Jesus is both the “Word” or communication of God (Jn. 1:1) and the “compassion of God” (Lk. 1:78). The two themes, communication and compassion, converge thanks to Davies’s key premise that God’s speaking is not only

243. Davies, *The Creativity of God: World, Eucharist, Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 192.

244. Davies, *Theology of Compassion*, p. 258.

245. *Ibid.*, pp. xviii–xix.

246. See Davies, *Creativity of God*, pp. 76–80; *Theology of Compassion*, p. 243. Language is for Davies primarily pragmatic, not referential, a means of doing things in relation to others: “we do not relate and then talk, but relate in talk” (B. Aubrey Fisher and Katherine L. Adams, *Interpersonal Communication: Pragmatics of Human Relationships*, 2nd edn. [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994], p. 1, cited in Davies, *Theology of Compassion*, p. 194). Language and being converge in the notion of “the medium of relation between self and other” (p. xvii). Here is Davies’s one sentence summary of his ambitious project: “The twin themes of our study are kenosis and speech, compassion and conversation, which we have sought to unite in the pragmatic principles of language which affirm speech as social interaction between multiple agents in dialogue with one another” (p. 254).

247. Davies, *Theology of Compassion*, p. 162. Davies describes his project as “a pragmatic reading of the Western metaphysical tradition in the light of rabbinic exegesis of Ex. 3:14” (pp. 54–5). In particular, he is concerned to correct the “Greek tendency” to abstract presence from language (*Creativity*, p. 92).

248. Davies, *Creativity*, p. 84.

communicative but *kenotic*: “the Word can only enter our own condition of contingency and mortality by emptying himself.”²⁴⁹ In the Incarnation, there is a hypostatic union as it were between speaker, message, and addressee. Jesus is God’s Son but also fully human, two voices in one Word: “God inhabits the voice of the man, Jesus, and Jesus inhabits the voice of God, in a radically new coexistence of person and speech.”²⁵⁰ Jesus Christ is nothing less than God’s being-in-communicative (and compassionate) act. Because communication and compassion both bear a self-divesting structure whereby the self goes out of itself for another, “the infinite kenosis of God in Jesus Christ establishes him as the supreme epiphany of being itself.”²⁵¹

There is much in Davies’s account with which remythologizing theology can agree. At one point in his analysis of God’s “speaking with,” however, he appears to fall back into a “perfect being” mode of argumentation. The passage is worth citing in full: “God’s speech is God’s compassion, since speech is always a ‘speaking with’ and for ‘speaking with’ to be perfect as divine ‘speaking with’ must be, then the one who receives the divine speech must themselves [*sic*] be perfected as an interlocutor: as a conversation partner *in a sense equal* with God.”²⁵² A picture of perfect speaking leads smoothly to the conclusion that human beings are in a symmetrical speaking relationship with God. Whether this is a necessary implication of genuine dialogue remains to be seen.

The elements of a theodramatic metaphysics are now in place. Both God and human persons are beings-in-communicative-act who relate, largely through speech, to others. God has unique communicative powers and, unlike the human *dramatis personae*, plays a role that he determines for himself. Recasting ontology in terms of communicative rather than instrumental causal interactions opens up rich new possibilities for understanding the triune God (chapter 5) and the God-world relation (chapter 6), as well as the age-old questions such as the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom (chapter 7).²⁵³ It also raises interesting questions

249. Davies, *Theology of Compassion*, p. 192.

250. Davies, *Creativity*, p. 84.

251. Davies, *Theology of Compassion*, p. 231.

252. Davies, *Creativity*, p. 93–4, emphasis mine.

253. The contrast between strategic and communicative causality derives from Jürgen Habermas’s distinction of strategic and communicative rationality. The former brings about a change in the world by manipulating elements in the

for our understanding of God's suffering/passion and love/compassion (chapters 8 and 9 respectively). Finally, a communicative theism affords new resources for understanding participation in Christ (union) and the life of the triune God (communion), and it is to these that we now turn.

world; the latter brings about understanding by using elements in language. Strategic (i.e., instrumental) causality/rationality is oriented to "success"; communicative causality/rationality is oriented to communion (i.e., an agreed consensus). See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. I: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, tr. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1984). We shall return to the notion of a "communicative cause" in Part III.

God in three persons: the one who lights and lives in love

In God, being is not one thing and living another ... For in God, to live, to know, to be blessed is one and the same as to be.
(Augustine, *City Of God*, viii.6)

God is not a substance underlying the communication; he is the substance of communication.¹

The Person of Jesus and his mission are together grounded in and flow from his unique relation to God: God and I, I and God, the incarnate I AM of the one Lord God of heaven and earth. That is who Jesus is, as the Son of Man, the Son of God become human, the very Light, Life and Love of God Almighty.²

We now turn from our discussion of God's being in communicative activity to consider the communicative agency of the three divine persons. As we saw in Part I, contemporary Trinitarian theology gives pride of theological place to the idea that persons are *constituted* by their relationships. What we have called the "new orthodoxy" holds that the same kinds of relation that characterize God's Trinitarian life apply to the God-world relation as well. Moltmann's view is representative of this kenotic-perichoretic relational panentheism: "God and the world are related to one another through the relationship of their mutual indwelling and participation: God's indwelling in the world is divine in kind; the world's indwelling

1. Stephen H. Daniel, "Postmodern Concepts of God and Edwards' Trinitarian Ontology," in Hyun Lee Sang and Allen C. Guelzo (eds.), *Edwards in Our Time: Jonathan Edwards and the Shaping of American Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 55.

2. Thomas F. Torrance, "The Christ Who Loves Us," in Gerrit Dawson and Jock Stein (eds.), *A Passion for Christ: The Vision That Ignites Ministry* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1999), p. 10.

in God is worldly in kind. There is no other way of conceiving the continual communication between God and the world.”³ The overarching question, however, concerns the nature of the world’s “participation” in God.

To be is to communicate, to be in communicative act. To participate in one whose being consists in communicative activity is thus to be caught up into a drama: “drama is the expression of the structure of Being.”⁴ Not all players are created equal, for at least one player is Uncreated. The Creator/creature distinction acknowledges God uniquely as the source of his own communicative agency. From this there follows a further distinction between an “immanent” and an “economic” drama. God’s eternal communicative activity *in se* must be distinguished from his activity *ad extra*. The kenotic-perichoretic relational view, by contrast, presupposes a single drama of suffering love that features the interplay of finite and infinite freedom, encompassing the world and God alike.

Balthasar stands somewhere in the middle. With the present approach, he locates drama not only in the God-world relation but in the Godhead itself: “it is the ‘drama’ of the emptying of the Father’s heart, in the generation of the Son, that contains and surpasses all possible drama between God and a world. For any world only has its place within that distinction between Father and Son that is maintained and bridged by the Holy Spirit.”⁵ Yet Balthasar also interprets the eternal generation of the Son as a “kenosis” of the Father in the immanent Trinity itself, and suggests that this is “the starting-point for that which can become suffering” in God.⁶

The present work conceives the biblical *mythos* differently. It agrees with Balthasar against Moltmann in discovering drama (i.e., ordered communicative action and interaction) in God’s inner life, but demurs from Balthasar’s description of it. While it is true that the historical life of Jesus, together with earlier interventions of God’s word in the history of Israel, dramatize the eternal being-in-communicative-act

3. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 150.

4. D. C. Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 19.

5. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. III, pp. 326–7.

6. G. F. O’Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 38. See also Stefan Lösel’s argument that Balthasar is unable to ascribe suffering to the Holy Spirit (“Murder in the Cathedral: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s New Dramatization of the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Pro Ecclesia* 5 [1996], pp. 427–39).

of the immanent Trinity, the primal and final theme is not *kenosis* (self-emptying) but *plerosis* (fullness of life).⁷

To respond to Moltmann: God's relation to the world is constitutive of neither God's being nor his triune life. There is an irreducible distinction between created and uncreated being and hence between the "economic" drama of world history and the "immanent" drama of God's triune life. To make the latter hostage to the former is to deny that God is fully himself without creation. We do not come to this conclusion when we think along the biblical texts.

To respond to Balthasar: theologians should proceed most carefully (i.e., non-speculatively) where even angels fear to tread. While it is possible to infer certain things about the inner life of God on the basis of its outward expression in history, one looks in vain for biblical evidence that the eternal generation of the Son should be construed in terms of the Father's *kenosis*, the condition for the possibility of divine suffering. Balthasar introduces a non-biblical complication into the drama when he speaks of the "risk" the Father takes in begetting the Son, a risk that blossoms into divine passibility.⁸ On the contrary, by examining the "plan" (*oikonomia*) of salvation (Eph. 1:10), we rather learn something about the architect, executor, and perfecter of the plan. Scripture depicts the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit as a "perfect drama": *a doing than which nothing greater can be conceived; a ceaseless activity of communication that yields consummate communion.*

We begin, then, with a brief description of the inner life of the triune God – the eternal doings of Father, Son, and Spirit – to the extent that it can be discerned from the communicative patterns that comprise the economy. The exercise proceeds on the presumption of Trinitarian orthodoxy, namely, that because of the oneness of being between the Father and his incarnate Son, God is antecedently in his eternal being what he is consequently to us in the Son.⁹ We therefore come closest to understanding God's inner life by attending to

7. This is in contrast to Jenson's conceptual move that elides the economic/immanent distinction by equating God's self-identification by events in time to his identification *with* those events: "the whole argument of the work depends on this move" (Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 59). As I argued in the previous chapter, God identifies himself *in* but not *with* those events.

8. Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, vol. III, pp. 327–8.

9. So Torrance, "The Christ Who Loves Us," p. 20. Interestingly, Torrance highlights the same three divine attributes that figure prominently in the present chapter: light, life, and love.

the intra-Trinitarian communicative action in the economy, particularly the dialogical interaction between the Father and Son that is on conspicuous display in the Fourth Gospel. There are three main topics in these Father-Son dialogues: mutual glorification; the giving of life; the sharing of love. God's being-in-communicative-act is thus a way of describing God's eternal being as light, life, and love on the basis of his historical relation/revelation to the world in these terms. Whereas the previous chapter examined God's unitary being, then, the present chapter develops the communicative model in light of characteristic activities of the three divine persons. *God's doing than which nothing greater can be conceived corresponds to the perfect life that God is in himself as Father, Son, and Spirit.*

After reflecting on God's perfect intra-Trinitarian communication we will consider God's self-communication to the world and the nature of the world's participation in the triune life. Subsequent chapters will examine the nature of God's "authorship" of creation (ch. 6), the efficacy of God's dialogical interaction with human creatures, the "heroes" of his authorial work (ch. 7), and the possibility that the communicative action (or lack thereof) of his human dialogue partners leads to affecting God adversely, causing him to suffer (ch. 8). This leads to a final examination of how the communicative theism set forth in these pages understands the divine ontology in light of the claim that "God is love" (ch. 9).

Father, Son, and Spirit: communicative agents in immanent relation

A Trinitarian communicative theism explores what God's being in communicative action means for an understanding of the three divine persons (and vice versa).¹⁰ The main focus of the present section is the communicative quality of God's perfect life. God in himself (*in se*; *ad intra*) enjoys never-ending, fully realized interpersonal communication: communion. This blessed communion – the triune

10. God in three persons, we may recall, means not that there are three individual substances in the Godhead but rather that the one divine nature (*ousia* = being; essence; substance) subsists in three persons (*hypostases*), each of whose distinct identity is a function of (1) internal relations, and (2) external actions (i.e., the *opera appropriata*: works ascribed to one divine person in particular).

life of God – involves the “making common” of light and life. This *communicare* is the love of God. The basis for this claim is not abstract speculation (e.g., about the concept of infinite perfection) but the biblical *mythos* that calls for conceptual elaboration (i.e., remythologizing). It is on the basis of God’s communicative presence and activity in history that we come to understand divine communicative perfection in eternity.¹¹

The dramatic *mythos* of redemption consists not merely in a series of events, but in the work of agents: “it has *dramatis personae*; and a doctrine of the perfect life of the immanent Trinity furnishes precisely a description of these persons and agents.”¹² Moreover, the relations in God that distinguish one divine person from another are according to Aquinas “founded on action.”¹³ Indeed, the three persons are not only the *dramatis personae* but as it were the activity itself of God’s being-in-communication: the *dramatis personae* are the drama. Put differently: God’s being in eternal communicative act is the basis for his self-presentation to creatures, his historical “speaking out.” The life of the incarnate Christ, for example, “expresses the very action or movement of his eternal procession.”¹⁴ Each of the three persons is a subsistent relation in what is essentially a communicative act: “Communication indicates the way the trinitarian persons relate to each other in enacting their economy in history.”¹⁵

God’s being is in communicating; God is Father, Son, and Spirit. The challenge is to understand the mutual implications of these two truths. Is God three communicative agents, as the social model of the Trinity might suggest, or one agent engaged in three communicative activities, along the lines of Augustine’s psychological analogy? Has only one of the Trinity spoken, or do all three persons get speaking

11. For the importance of insisting that the God who is with us is the God who has perfect life in himself, see John Webster, *Presence and Perfection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., forthcoming).

12. Webster, *Presence and Perfection*, ch. 1.

13. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 28, 4. Aquinas distinguishes two internal actions (processions): “one derived from the action of the intellect, the process of the Word; and the other from the action of the will, the procession of love” (ST I.28.4). The Son and Spirit are related to the activity of the Father’s mind and will respectively.

14. Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 318.

15. Hak Joon Lee, *Covenant and Communication: A Christian Moral Conversation with Jürgen Habermas* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006), p. 109.

parts?¹⁶ Colin Gunton believes “that if we fail to identify three distinct agents, we are not being true to the biblical witness.”¹⁷ Aquinas agrees: “it is not true that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one speaker.”¹⁸

The Gospels assign speaking parts to each of the three divine persons. For example, the Father’s voice accompanies the descent of the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mk. 1:11; cf. Lk. 3:22; Mt. 3:17).¹⁹ More frequent are instances where the Son addresses the Father (e.g., Jn. 11:41). Interestingly, these intra-Trinitarian dialogues “come at crucial moments in the narrative of the unfolding drama of the Trinity, and they mark the nodal points of the inner relations of the Trinity, worked out in time and space.”²⁰ Jesus tells his disciples that the Spirit, too, will speak, though not on his own authority (Jn. 16:13–14).

The one God who exists as self-communicative activity does so in three subsistent relations. Whatever else it is, the life of Father, Son, and Spirit involves not only generative but communicative relations: God’s being is in *conversing*. The social or conversational analogy of the Trinity suggests that the three persons relate in dialogical fashion: “The divine persons are not only in dialogue, they *are* dialogue.”²¹ God is the Father addressing the Son, the Son responding to the Father, and the Spirit overhearing. Indeed, the Spirit has a distinct personal identity precisely as the witness of, and then participant in, the communication that exists between the Father and the Son.²²

It would be misleading, however, to imply that communicative theism subscribes to the social rather than the psychological analogy

16. For a more developed treatment of this issue, see my “Triune Discourse: Theological Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks,” in Lauber and Treier (eds.), *Trinitarian Theology for the Church*, pp. 23–78.

17. Gunton, *Act and Being*, p. 143.

18. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 34, 1a.

19. The Father affirms Jesus’ mission again in the account of the Transfiguration (Mt. 17:5–6; Mk. 9:7; Lk. 9:35).

20. Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, pp. 199–200.

21. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, p. 290. Leonard Hodgson developed the “social analogy” of the Trinity in his *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944).

22. So Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources outside the Modern West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), p. 141.

of the Trinity exclusively. For the Bible also attributes certain actions in the economy (e.g., creation; revelation) to all three persons, with each person contributing to the same action in distinct ways. As with everything God does, then, communicative action too is ultimately triune: a unified action with three dimensions (*opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*). Gregory of Nyssa's parsing still makes good sense: "Every operation which extends from God to the creation ... has its origin from the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit."²³ To summarize: *the three persons are distinct communicative agents that share a common communicative agency*. What do Father, Son, and Spirit communicate? We begin by examining the way in which the three persons communicate light through mutual glorification.

God is light

God is light. (1 Jn. 1:5)

God's first recorded work is to separate light from darkness: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness" (Gen. 1:3-4). The light burns bright in both Testaments: a pillar of fire lights up Israel's way to the Promised land (Ex. 13:21) and the word of God provides light for people's everyday paths (Ps. 119:105). The Fourth Gospel echoes Genesis 1, though what is spoken is not "Let there be light" but rather the Word who is the life and light of men (Jn. 1:4). The Gospel explicitly identifies this "true light, which enlightens everyone" (Jn. 1:9) with the Word who was with God in the beginning and has now become flesh (Jn. 1:14). This same light is now shining in the church (2 Cor. 4:4-6) and will eventually be the light by which all nations walk (Rev. 21:24). To speak of communicating light is thus to evoke the entire economy of revelation and redemption which, like the primordial separation of light from darkness, features a dividing line that cuts through the whole drama of salvation.²⁴

23. Gregory of Nyssa, *To Ablabius*, on "Not Three Gods," Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd ser., 5:334.

24. I am indebted to R. R. Reno's commentary on Genesis 1:4 for this point (*Brazos Theological Commentary*, forthcoming).

Holy Trinity As light, God is wholly separate from darkness. God is the source of light; everything else must receive light (Jn. 1:9). God is holy (“set apart”), first, in the sense that he is utterly other than the world and everything in it by virtue of being its creator.²⁵ Holiness is more than a moral attribute; it refers first and foremost to the majestic otherness and incomparability of the God “who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16).²⁶ God is holy, second, in the sense that his light promotes his moral goodness; by contrast, those who love darkness rather than light are evil-doers (Jn. 3:19). Those who continue to walk in darkness rather than light risk having no part in God or, in Jesus’ words, being “thrown into the outer darkness” (Mt. 8:12) where they will be condemned to darkness (Rev. 16:10), to the utter absence of God’s light; for there is no fellowship between light and darkness (2 Cor. 6:14). By contrast, the company of the saved will walk in the light (1 Jn. 1:7) and put on the “armor of light” (Rom. 13:12).

The triune communicative activity that is God’s being is holy, and thus wholly, other: “God is holy in himself as Father, Son, and Spirit.”²⁷ Holiness is the excellence of God’s own nature and triune life, the “brightness of all his perfections.”²⁸ To say, then, that “God is light” (1 Jn. 1:5) is to acknowledge God as the “holy other” in both the metaphysical and the moral sense. God’s light is the radiant fullness of his communicative activity. God’s “holy light” qualifies everything that God does and is: “There is none holy like the Lord; there is none besides you” (1 Sam 2:2).

It is precisely because God is the “holy one in our midst” (Hos. 11:9) that his light, as a “medium of discrimination”²⁹ is also judgment: “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19). When confronted with the luminous intensity of God’s holy other communicative presence (“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts” – Isa. 6:3), Isaiah cannot but cry out in despair of

25. Donald Macleod, *Behold Your God* (Christian Focus Publications, 1990), ch. 9.

26. Cf. Webster: “God’s holiness is therefore his sheer *difference*” (*Confessing God*, p. 117).

27. Webster, *Confessing God*, p. 119.

28. Brakel, cited in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. II, p. 499.

29. C. H. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 210.

himself (“Woe is me! For I am lost” – Isa. 6:5). The good news, however, is that “the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light” (Mt. 4:16). Light symbolizes the gift of salvation (Isa. 60:1–3), a share in God’s own communicative action. The holy Trinity, set apart and perfect in itself, freely wills to be a luminous presence to others.

Triune glory The Trinity, as holy, is set apart. Can we say anything else? To repeat the fundamental assumption: the way God is in the history of salvation (*ad extra*) corresponds to the way God is in himself (*in se*).³⁰ Remythologizing the Trinity means beginning with the economy, like the traditional approach, but focusing on the communicative rather than generative relations between the three persons. For example, the Father not only begets but also glorifies the Son, which brings us back to God as light.

“Light” implies knowledge. The main function of light is to illuminate; when light is shed on something, it reveals and makes it known. The Word that was with God in the beginning is the true light that enlightens others (Jn. 1:9; cf. Ps. 119:105). There is thus a cognitive as well as a moral dimension to God’s radiant self-communications: “Implied in the designation ‘light’ is that God is perfectly conscious of himself, that he knows his entire being to perfection, and that nothing in that being is hidden from his consciousness.”³¹ To speak of God as light, then, is to gain an important insight into the nature of the three persons’ communicative activity. Each person is a communicative agent in his own right who glorifies – *makes known* the glory of – the other two. This, then, is the first sense in which we may speak of an “economy of communication”: the ordered ways in which Father, Son, and Spirit know one another and make one another known.

God, as spirit (Jn. 4:24), is neither literal light nor physically visible. The glory of God nevertheless refers to his visible and active presence and self-presentation, to appearances of God’s majestic nature and character – light “like a devouring fire” (Ex. 24:17). Specifically, God’s glory is found in the midst of his covenant people (Ex. 16:7) and is

30. Note that this correspondence is not the same as *idem* identity. Indeed, it has more to do with *ipse* identity, the kind of continuity a person has over the course of his or her life, rather than the kind of sameness that characterizes an unchanging thing.

31. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. II: *God and Creation*, p. 191.

particularly associated with his covenant name (Ex. 33:18–19). Its most impressive economic revelation is in the event of Jesus Christ: the true light (Jn. 1:9), the “Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8), divine glory in human form (Jn. 1:14). The Fourth Gospel associates the Son’s glory with the “hour” of his death, at which time he will be “lifted up” (Jn. 12:32). The next verse makes the connection between Jesus’ crucifixion and glory explicit: “He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die” (Jn. 12:33). The Son’s action and passion are the economic form of God’s glory. Relevant here is C. H. Dodd’s observation that “glory” (*doxa*) and “light” (*phos*) are often found in parallel “referring to the manifestation of the power of God for the salvation of His people.”³² In Jesus’ life shines forth the “grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14) that is the name of God made known to Moses (Ex. 34:6).

The way in which Father, Son, and Spirit glorify one another is of special interest. Glorification is “enlightening” insofar as it is the communicative act of making another’s glory known – the publication of a person’s excellence, especially through testimony.³³ When Jesus realizes that his hour has come, he prays “Father, glorify your name” (Jn. 12:28), only to be answered by a voice from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” Glorification is also the main topic of Jesus’ longest recorded prayer: “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (Jn. 17:4, 5).

The economy of communication involves the mutual glorification and testimony of Father, Son, and Spirit. The Father glorifies the Son (Jn. 8:43); the Son glorifies the Father (Jn. 14:13): “What is particularly telling in the depiction of God as Father is the way in which God’s actions as Father are focused on Jesus himself.”³⁴ The Spirit, too, plays a communicative role: “He [the Spirit] will glorify me, for he will take all that is mine and declare it to you” (Jn. 16:14). Indeed, the Spirit’s communicative action is never directed toward himself. There is thus a kenotic aspect to the Spirit’s role in the economy as there is to the Son’s. The point is that each of the three persons speaks and acts in ways that glorify and honor the other two.³⁵

32. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 206.

33. On testimony, see esp. Jn. 5:31–40.

34. Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), p. 134.

35. The Son also testifies to himself by his works (see Jn. 10:25).

Because the way God is in the economy corresponds to the way God is in himself, we may conclude that the Father, Son, and Spirit are merely continuing in history a communicative activity that characterizes their perfect life together. Indeed, Jesus alludes to his pre-existent glory in John 17:5. Hence this triune dialogue in history fully corresponds to the conversation God is in himself: "it is the speech of God with God, in the immanent Trinity, which is disclosed to us historically and narratively in the incarnation."³⁶ With this thought we arrive at a first conclusion concerning the immanent Trinity.

The inner-Trinitarian conversations we have just examined indicate that there are distinctly communicative as well as causal (i.e., generative) relations within the Godhead. The Father glorifies the Son, the Son glorifies the Father, and the Spirit glorifies the Son: these communicative relations may not constitute the distinctions between Father, Son, and Spirit, but they do express them. The perfect one who dwells in unapproachable light is a society of mutual admiration.

God is life

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. (Jn. 1:4)

Raymond Brown aptly captures the connection between light and life in the Fourth Gospel in his comment on Jesus' high-priestly prayer (Jn. 17:2): "The particular act of power that will make visible the unity of Jesus and the Father will be the gift of eternal life to believers."³⁷ Jesus lifted up on the cross is light (glorious) because it is the supreme condition for the gift of life to those who have it neither by nature nor by right.

Life The living God of Israel stands in stark contrast to pagan idols that can say and do nothing (Isa. 41:21-4). This incapacity to speak and act also characterizes the realm of the dead. By contrast, life comes from God who speaks and breathes it into existence (Gen. 1:24; 2:7). All three persons – the Father's Voice, the Son's Word, the Spirit's Breath – have a share in the "economy of communication" in a second sense, then, by communicating not merely information but

36. Davies, *Theology of Compassion*, p. 256.

37. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 751.

the *energy of life*. The Fourth Gospel in particular identifies the Father as the source and giver of life.³⁸ In giving life, the triune God bestows communicative potency – the power to say or do – to others.³⁹ Life is the capacity to communicate – to “make common” or share one’s being – with others.

Only God is the source of his own life: “the Father has life in himself” (Jn. 5:26). This statement of the Father’s aseity is perhaps the closest New Testament equivalent to the divine name revealed to Moses: “I am that I am” (Ex. 3:14). The main emphasis is on the perfection of the divine life, a being-in-act than which none greater can be conceived: God does not become alive but is absolutely, incomparably alive.⁴⁰ The perfection of divine nature that Father, Son, and Spirit share is a perfection of communicative agency.

The Father gives (communicates) life to the Son: “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (Jn. 5:26).⁴¹ The Father is unbegotten and unbreathed but begets the Son and breathes the Spirit. These “processions” are not acts of creation, however, and so do not take away from the fact that the Son and Spirit have life in themselves, as befits persons who are fully God. Calvin in particular rightly insists that the Son is *autotheos*, God himself. While the Son’s manner of subsistence (personhood) is dependent on the Father, his deity (essence; substance) is not: “the Son since he is God, exists of himself, but not in respect of his Person.”⁴² Hence the Son can be called “the life” (Jn. 14:6) and “the Author of life” (Acts 3:15). The Father and Son share their life

38. Cf. Thompson’s obvious, but nonetheless important, remark: “The fundamental reality is that a father’s relationship to his children consists first in terms simply of giving them life” (*The Promise of the Father*, p. 136).

39. Strictly speaking, not everything that exists is “living.” Living creatures have the capacity to do things, minimally the capacity to communicate life to others of the same kind (e.g., procreate; reproduce). Inorganic things such as rocks and minerals lack this capacity and so, though they exist, are not alive.

40. I am indebted for the ideas in this and the following paragraph to John Webster, “God’s Perfect Life,” in Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker (eds.), *God’s Life in Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), pp. 143–52.

41. *Contra* Brown, who thinks that “life” here refers primarily not to the immanent Trinity but to the life-giving power that Father and Son exercise toward human beings (*Gospel According to John I–XII, The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 2nd edn., 1981), p. 215).

42. Calvin, *Inst* I.13.25. Augustine takes a similar position: “the Father hath life in Himself, which none gave Him, whilst the Son hath life in Himself which the Father gave” (*Homilies on the Gospel of John* [Tractate XIX] cited in Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 319, n. 78. For the way Calvin’s position is worked out in Reformed Orthodoxy, see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. IV, pp. 324–32).

with the Spirit, whom they together breathe, once again, very God from very God. The Spirit, too, has life in himself and is thus a “giver of life” (Jn. 6:63).

The perfect life of God thus consists “in the processions or personal relations that constitute his absolute vitality *in se*.”⁴³ The second person is the Son because he is “begotten” by the Father, and this too is a communication whereby the Father “makes common” his being. “Begetting” is not an event in time, of course, but an eternal procession, the most adequate (or least inadequate) metaphor we have for describing a mysterious inner-Trinitarian relation that will always elude our conceptual grasp.⁴⁴

Eternal life God lives eternally. Some think of eternity as timelessness, others as everlasting time. The former sees time as contradicting eternity; the latter conflates them. Each assumes Aristotle’s view that time is measured by noting change: we feel that time is moving because life is moving (children and grass are growing; deadlines are coming closer, as is death; people are doing things to which we must respond, etc.). Existence in time thus has duration and succession. But this only describes time’s flow, not its nature.⁴⁵

The next chapter argues that time is a predicate of communicative action. Time, I shall claim, is a mode of being-in-act or existence. That which is eternal is that whose existence never ends (or begins). But everything depends on the mode of existence in question. Inorganic material exists and changes from one physical state to another (i.e., degenerates), but such changes only become temporal when some consciousness intuits or interprets them in terms of “before” and “after” (i.e., according to some standard of reference such as the earth’s revolving).⁴⁶ To anticipate the later discussion: time is a dimension of personal existence, being-in-act or,

43. Webster, “God’s Perfect Life,” p. 149.

44. The life God communicates to others through the missions of Son and Spirit corresponds to the life God has in himself (i.e., to the processions of Son and Spirit): “The divine processions and the divine missions that flow from them are together the perfection of God” (Webster, “God’s Perfect Life,” p. 150).

45. I shall return to this matter in ch. 6 and again in ch. 9.

46. W. Norris Clarke, “Being in Time: What is Time?” *The One and the Many*, ch. 11, esp. pp. 163–5.

in a word, *life*.⁴⁷ Time, I submit, is the “space” or medium in which persons communicatively relate.⁴⁸

The time or life of the creature is in one all-important respect distinct from that of the Creator. For human beings, to exist is to have life, and to live is to have time. When one is alive one has the potential to exercise one’s communicative capacity.⁴⁹ By contrast, death marks the absence of life, and hence the end of communicative activity. God will not die, however, because God (and only God) has life from himself (*a se*). God’s eternity names the form of God’s own life, the “time” of the existence proper only to him. Jonathan Edwards conceives God’s eternity in the Boethian terms of the fullness of divine life: “The eternal duration which was before the world, being only the eternity of God’s existence; which is nothing else but his immediate, perfect and invariable possession of the whole of his unlimited life, together and at once.”⁵⁰

God’s eternity is the form of his own life and hence the medium of his own being in communicative act. As such, eternity is not timelessness but “eminent” (Barth) or “supra-” (Balthasar) temporality.⁵¹ Time is not the contradiction but as it were the finite analogy of eternity. God’s life is “temporal” in the sense that it is in communicative motion. Unlike created time, however, God’s time does not pass away. To affirm God’s lifetime as eternal is to affirm the fullness and aliveness of God’s triune being. And this is the key point: God’s time – eternity – is one not of immobility but of ceaseless (communicative) activity. The triune God enjoys life – fully realized communicative activity – *in se*, quite apart from any relation to creation.

To say that the Son is eternally begotten is to speak of a movement that is both successive (i.e., ordered) and simultaneous (i.e.,

47. I am indebted for this idea to one of my doctoral students, Eunsoo Kim, who said that he got the idea from me! See his Ph.D. dissertation, “Time, Eternity, and the Trinity: A Trinitarian Analogical Understanding of Time and Eternity” (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2006).

48. This is a “personalist” view of time. I am not aware, however, of any personalist philosophers who discuss in any detail the implications of personalism for the question of time’s nature.

49. Here we may recall Clarke’s insight that to be = to act = to communicate oneself (*Explorations in Metaphysics*, p. 47).

50. Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (Yale University Press, 1957), p. 385. According to Boethius, eternity is “the total, simultaneous and perfect possession of interminable life” (*De consolazione philosophiae* 5,6).

51. On time and eternity in Barth, see George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: on time and eternity* in Balthasar, see O’Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, pp. 90–101.

there was never a time when the Son was not begotten). The Father's begetting the Son is a communicative act whereby the Father shares being/existence/life with the Son. Jesus' time on earth is "the created expression of that eternal relationship of receptivity to the Father which in turn indicates that give and take which is characteristic of the whole Trinity."⁵² There is thus an order in the eternal life of the triune God that is *temporal* (in the sense that God's time describes the dynamic form of his three-personed life) but not divided by a temporal "before" and "after": "God's life is the process by which he posits himself as the Holy Trinity. His life is a life of free distinction and communion in the *perichoresis* of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."⁵³ This "eternal self-realization" of God is reflected in the economy.⁵⁴ For example, the Father sends the Son but the Son does not send the Father. The assumption, again, is that the economic is the image of the immanent Trinity.⁵⁵ There is therefore a real, though analogical, correspondence between God *ad extra* (in time) and God *in se* (in eternity). Time, says Barth, "is the formal principle of His free activity outwards. Eternity is the principle of His freedom inwards."⁵⁶ God is in created time, we might say, as a moving image of the God who is in eternal communicative motion.⁵⁷

Can we say more about the shape of communicative action that is God's inner life on the basis of the moving images we see in the economy? In particular, does the Son defer eternally to the Father as he does in the economy? There is some textual evidence that he does. Jesus says "I can do nothing on my own ... I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (Jn. 5:30) and "I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me" (Jn. 8:28). Some go further, claiming that there is not even a "modicum of biblical

52. O'Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, p. 90.

53. George Hunsinger, "Mysterium Trinitatis: Karl Barth's Conception of Eternity," in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), p. 192.

54. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 306.

55. So Fred Sanders, *The Image of the Immanent Trinity*, pp. 169–73. Sanders's use of the category "image" is drawn less from Platonic philosophy than from christology: the New Testament declares Christ "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15).

56. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 609.

57. Put differently: the economic Trinity is in *ipse*, not *idem* identity with the immanent Trinity. There is a real continuity but not numeric sameness between the two. For the danger of simply equating the two, see ch. 1.

evidence for affirming an eternal divine democracy.”⁵⁸ We need not enter into debates about the eternal subordination of the Son to affirm an ordered collaboration of divine communicative action.⁵⁹ The apostle Paul hints at such an ordered collaboration when he says, “from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom. 11:36). Calvin develops the idea: “the peculiar qualities in the persons carry an order within them”⁶⁰ such that “to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity ... to the Son ... the ordered disposition of all things ... to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity.”⁶¹

The life of God in three persons is thus one in which there is both call-to-do and answering obedience (“from ... through ... to”). God takes delight in enacting his own perfectly ordered eternal life as Father, Son, and Spirit – blessed Trinity: “the generous preeminence of the Father, the joyous collaboration of the Son, and the ever-glorifying activity of the Spirit.”⁶² It is precisely the richness of this eternal life of triune blessedness that Jesus’ communicative activity to his Father in time communicates to others.

God is love

God is love. (1 Jn. 4:8)

There is a long-established tradition, from Augustine through Richard of St. Victor to John Owen and beyond, of viewing the inner-Trinitarian life in terms of a loving communion between persons (lover, beloved, and co-lover). The challenge here, as elsewhere in theology, is to ensure that a picture of human love does not hold us captive. The love with which God loves the world and communicates to others – the love that God is – is entirely his own.

Communion of action To remythologize theology, we may recall, is to let the biblical *mythos* shape and control one’s conceptual elaboration of God. To the old speculative chestnut, “What was God doing

58. J. Scott Horrell, “The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity,” in Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler (eds.), *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2007), p. 70.

59. Suffice it to say that there is nothing necessarily demeaning in suggesting that God the Son is eternally, yet *freely*, obedient to God the Father (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28).

60. *Inst.* I.13.20.

61. *Inst.* I.13.18.

62. Horrell, “The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity,” p. 76.

before creation?" the correct reply is, "loving the Son." For this is the thrust of Jesus' address to God the Father when he says in the course of his longest prayer, "you loved me before the foundation of the world" (Jn. 17: 24). Indeed, throughout the Fourth Gospel the focus is on the Father's love for the Son (Jn. 3:35, 5:20, 10:17, 17:23-6), and in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus speaks of the Father's love for his disciples only indirectly.

The Father and Son have a unique relationship: the Son is the Father's "only" son (Jn. 3:16). A heavenly voice twice pronounces Jesus "my Son, the Beloved" at two key points in the narrative: Jesus' baptism and transfiguration (Mk. 1:11; 9:7). Jesus typically refers to "my Father" (Mt. 12:50; Jn. 10:29) and claims, "I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10:30). The intimate nature of the Father-Son relationship involves not only love but also knowledge: "no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son" (Lk. 10:22). Yet it is "the mutual love of the Father and the Son [that] lies at the heart of their relationship."⁶³ Their attachment is seen as an eternal and intrinsic good and is grounded in their mutual acknowledgment of the other's worth.⁶⁴ Jesus' claims about the mutual indwelling of Father and Son – "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (Jn. 14:11) – convey the substance of the concept *perichoresis* if not the term itself.

Is the love of God therefore a divine attribute or an interpersonal relation? According to Aquinas, God's love is his benevolence, a movement of the will: to love something is to will its good.⁶⁵ For many contemporary theologians, by contrast, to love is to be in a personal relationship characterized by mutuality and reciprocity (i.e., communion).⁶⁶ The traditional understanding sees love as a qualification of God's unitary nature, then, whereas the newer view ascribes love to the relations between the three divine persons. The contrast, in the briefest of terms, is between doing good and enjoying union.⁶⁷

63. Thompson, *The Promise of the Father*, p. 135.

64. Wolterstorff, "Is there Justice in the Trinity?" in Volf and Welker (eds.), *God's Life in Trinity*, p. 187.

65. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 20, 1.

66. See, *inter alia*, Brümmer, *The Model of Love*.

67. Seventeenth-century Reformed theologians distinguished the love of benevolence from the love of delight or friendship. Note that they understand God's love for himself in both ways: God loves the goodness of his own unitary being; the three persons love one another. See the discussion in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* III, pp. 561-9.

The Fourth Gospel may indicate a way beyond the impasse: “the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing” (Jn. 5:19–20). That Jesus does nothing on his own is “a favorite theme in John.”⁶⁸ What comes to the fore in this passage is the notion of love as a *communion of action*. The love of the Father and Son is a matter both of their *willing the good* (benevolent action) and of their willing it *together* (in communion).

What the Father and Son do together is give life (Jn. 5:21), a project in which the Spirit participates as well (Rom. 8:1–11). The Holy Spirit is not merely a cipher for the ineffable communion of Father and Son but a witness or “communicant” in his own right who shares in the love of the Father and the Son by making it known. The Spirit is the “gift” of the Father and the Son inasmuch as the Spirit is what the Father and Son “make common” to one another. In Augustine’s words: the Spirit is “a certain inexpressible communion or fellowship between Father and the Son (*spiritus sanctus ineffabilis quaedam patris filioque communio*).⁶⁹ The Spirit completes the intra-Trinitarian communicative work by serving as the common bond of love, the personal channel of communication as it were, between the Father and the Son.⁷⁰

God, as love, is communion in action: specifically, the act of willing the good and enjoying union. In willing the good, God wills not some abstract quality greater than God but his own being and triune life. *The doing than which nothing greater can be conceived is ultimately a communing: triune communicative action-in-common.* The Father–Son conversations we overhear at key points in the economy are but the external and temporal communicative face of the perichoresis that characterizes God’s internal and eternal triune being: “From eternity, therefore, God must be self-communicating love.”⁷¹ The inner-Trinitarian conversation that is God is perfect love: a communion of three communicants; the eternal delight of the dialogical dance of

68. Brown, *Gospel According to John I–XII*, p. 218.

69. Cited in Gary Badcock, *Light of Truth & Fire of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. 73.

70. Note that the Spirit is the eschatological gift par excellence according to the New Testament (see esp. Rom. 5:5 but also Acts 2:38; 10:45; 11:17; 2 Cor. 1:22).

71. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, p. 195.

call, response, acknowledgement, and affirmation. What was God doing before creation? Communicating light, life, and love between Father, Son, and Spirit.

Covenant of redemption: the pactum salutis

He chose us in him before the foundation of the world ... In love he predestined us. (Eph. 1:4-5)

Jesus' appearance in history was neither a surprise nor a contingency measure but the result of a joyful collaboration conceived in eternity between the Father and the Son. That the most important intra-Trinitarian work is the so-called plan of salvation, in which a mediator is appointed to make common or share God's life with that which is not God, features especially in the Reformed tradition. The gospel on this view is the execution in time of God's eternal self-determination to communicate his light and life to what is not God: the human creature whom the Father elects in the Son.

What here comes to the fore is the sheer generosity of the triune God in the free determination to include human creatures as recipients of the Father's love in the Son through the Spirit. The good news is that Father and Son agree to share the loving communion that is the perfection of their own life with others: "And so the covenant which the perfect God makes with himself in the deep peace of eternity is a covenant to be with creatures."⁷² Election is thus the free and joyful collaboration of the three persons to initiate a relationship with the human creature, to identify with the human creature, and to consummate the relationship with the human creature. *The God of the Christian gospel is the Father, Son, and Spirit working in perfect communion for an even greater communion.*

What God communicates: triune "ways"
into the far country

What God communicates to us in time corresponds to what he eternally and perfectly is in himself. The trinitarian missions of the Son and Spirit are but the gracious outward expressions of the

72. Webster, *Presence and Perfection*, ch. 2.

processions (i.e., begetting; proceeding). The economic drama (God's blessing creatures) thus corresponds to the immanent drama (God's blessedness in himself). What, then, does God communicate to the world? The short answer: God communicates himself (revelation) and a share in himself (redemption).

Consider the Psalmist's request: "Make me to know your ways, O Lord" (Ps. 25:4). Moses made a similar request – "please show me now your ways" (Ex. 33:13) – and in response God proclaims his *name* (Ex. 33:19). We learn from another Psalm that God has "made known his ways [*derakim*] to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel" (Ps. 103:7). Interestingly, the "name" the Lord proclaims to Moses is also what the Psalmist cites as the content of God's "ways": "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6; cf. Ps. 103:8).⁷³ The "ways" of God – God's own being-in-action – are what God communicates. It only remains to connect these ways of God to what we have said about the circulation of God's light, life, and love in his inner being.

The point of connection is Jesus Christ. For the one who identifies himself by saying "I am the way" (Jn. 14:6a) is also the one who is "full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14), a phrase that many commentators rightly see as an allusion to the *hesed* and *emeth* of Exodus 34:6. The Son alone reveals and makes accessible the Father: "No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn. 14:6b). All God's "ways" are thus summed up and clarified in him, the "way." The Fourth Gospel also depicts Jesus as claiming to be the light and life of God. Remythologizing theology thus gives rise to a new metaphysics of the "I am" that is defined not by speculating on "the one who is" (the name "Yahweh") but on "the one who does," that is, the one who makes known his name and his ways. Jesus' "I am" sayings thus become the basis of a properly christological metaphysic that focuses on the way in which the three persons communicate light and life to the world through the incarnate Son.

God's perfection is his communication *ad intra*; God's presence is his communication *ad extra*. The splendor of God's light, life, and love – his truth, goodness, and beauty – shines forth in the human form of Jesus Christ: "In the economic self-communication the

73. This formula by which God proclaims the meaning of his name or ways is also used in Nu. 14:18. Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2.

intra-trinitarian self-communication is present in the world in a new way, namely, under the veil of historical words, signs and actions, and ultimately in the figure of the man Jesus of Nazareth.”⁷⁴ It is not the body per se that communicates these things but what Jesus *does* in his body: his speech and acts. All the splendor of God’s truth, goodness, and beauty is on dramatic display in the form of Jesus’ communicative action (and passion).

The Son, then, is the focal point of the economy of triune communication, namely, the “ways” of God into the far country (i.e., creation). Although everything that God does is the work of the whole Trinity – *opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt* (“the external operations of the Trinity are undivided”) – we may nevertheless ascribe certain aspects of these works to particular persons. It only remains to explain how the principle that every work of God has its origin from the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit applies to the economy of communication.

To anticipate: God is the communicator, communication, and communicatedness. The triune God is the agent, act, and effect of his own self-communication. As Voice, the Father is the speaking subject who initiates the process of communication. As Word, the Son is what the Father speaks, the content of the communicative act. As the Breath that accompanies and conveys the Father’s Word, the Spirit is the channel or medium of the communicative act as well as its efficacy. When directed *ad extra*, the communicative action of God is perhaps better termed *mission*. Hence the economy of communication is ultimately missional: divine communicative action involves the “sendings” (*missio*) of Son and Spirit.⁷⁵

74. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, p. 276.

75. Another way of analyzing the divine appropriations would be to associate the Father with the locutor, the Son with the illocution, and the Spirit with the perlocutionary dimension of a speech act. Cf. Vern Poythress’s variation on the *communicatio analogia*: “the eternal Word is the archetypal speech of God. This archetypal speech enjoys three aspects: in its *expressive* aspect, it is the speech of God the Father; in its *informational* aspect, its specific content is God the Son; in its *productive* aspect, it is ‘searched’ and carried into effect in God the Holy Spirit. By analogy, God’s speech to us displays these aspects. It is expressive of who God is, and in it we meet God himself; it is informational and contains specific statements and commands; it is productive in us in blessing and curse” (Vern S. Poythress, “Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til’s Idea of Analogy,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 [1995], p. 201).

Light: the Word of God

I am the light of the world. (Jn. 8:12; 9:5)

God communicates himself through himself, and this act of self-communication reaches its apogee in the person and work of the Son of God. Scripture, too, as authorized testimony to Jesus Christ, plays an important role in the economy of light (i.e., revelation, knowledge).

Incarnation The Son is “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3), God’s Word made flesh (Jn. 1:14). As such, he is “the holy one in our midst” (Hos. 11:9). In ancient Israel, God’s glorious presence – the place where his name dwelt, where he met with the people and dealt with sin – was located first in the tabernacle and then in the temple (Ex. 25:8; Ps. 11:4). The Gospels, however, depict Jesus as himself replacing the temple: he is “God with us” and it is through his shed blood alone that salvation now comes. The Son appropriates to his own person everything the temple was and did.⁷⁶

Several motifs in the account of Jesus’ transfiguration are of special note. A special light emanates from Jesus’ face (Mt. 17:2), accompanied by the Shekinah cloud that symbolized God’s presence on another mountain when he was on the verge of giving Israel the law (Ex. 19:16–19). The presence of Moses and Elijah, representing the law and prophets, underscores the connection (Lk. 9:30), as does the climactic voice from heaven that again speaks out of the cloud: “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” (Lk. 9:35).⁷⁷ Jesus’ transfiguration provides a preliminary glimpse of the glory that is already his (the Son’s) by nature and will be his again. In Calvin’s words: “Christ clothed himself with heavenly glory for a short time [and] gave them [the disciples] a taste of his boundless glory, such as they were able to comprehend.”⁷⁸

76. See esp. Bruce Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus: His Sacrificial Program within a Cultural History of Sacrifice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1992).

77. For a fuller development of these themes, see W. L. Liefeld,

“Transfiguration,” in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 834–41.

78. *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, cited in Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 106.

The author of the Fourth Gospel grounds his conviction about the gospel, and his knowledge of God, on the fact that “we have seen his glory” (Jn. 1:14).⁷⁹ Jesus is the Word in whose person and work the Father is made known. The voice from heaven marks the transition from the light of glory to the light of truth: “Listen to him.” Jesus is the one who has “the words of eternal life” (Jn. 6:68).

The author of 2 Peter makes a similar transition from the light of transfiguration to the light of truth, moving in one paragraph from the appeal “we were eyewitnesses of his majesty ... We ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain” (2 Pet. 1:16, 18) to the claim that “we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place” (2 Pet. 1:19). The prophetic word of Scripture is “more sure,” not because written discourse is more reliable than oral (the Voice from heaven), but because the Voice from heaven confirms Scripture, as does Jesus himself (e.g., Lk. 24:27).

Inspiration/inscripturation: “a light to my path” The word of God written, says the Psalmist, is “a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). The Bible too plays a role in the triune economy of communication: “Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). In intertestamental Judaism, the period during which 2 Pet. was written, it was widely held that the Spirit was the “Spirit of Prophecy,” the means of communication between God and a designated spokesperson: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.” (Heb. 1:1).

This is not the place for a full-orbed doctrine of Scripture. The salient point is that YHWH takes the communicative initiative to enter into covenantal relation with Israel, and that this covenant-making involves both oral and written communicative acts on God’s part. The “word of the Lord” came to many prophets, priests, and kings and was arguably the prime driving force of Israel’s history. Israel related to YHWH by relating to YHWH’s words. The words of the covenant – the laws and the promises – were the communicative medium

79. Gundry speculates that the Fourth Gospel may have developed its Word-Christology out of the event of Jesus’ transfiguration that, while absent from the narrative as a discrete event, nevertheless resonates throughout (“How the Word in John’s Prologue Pervades the Rest of the Fourth Gospel,” in *The Old is Better*, p. 360).

by which the people approached God and vice versa, so much so that to engage the words of Scripture is to engage God in communicative action.⁸⁰ Fully to do justice to the ontology of Scripture involves acknowledging the biblical texts as a mode of God's communicative presence and activity.⁸¹

Jesus begins his public ministry in Luke's Gospel by reading Isaiah 61:1,2 ("The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor") and by claiming that "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk. 4:21). Further, he contrasts the teaching of the law ("You have heard it said" – Mt. 5:21) with his own teaching ("But I say to you" – Mt. 5:22). He also promises his disciples to send them the "Spirit of truth" (Jn. 14:17) who will "teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (Jn. 14:26). This is the Spirit of prophecy who inspires or "breathes out" (*theopneustos*) Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16).

Jesus describes the Spirit of truth as one who speaks not on his own authority but who speaks only what he hears (Jn. 16:13). The Spirit will declare what is the Son's, which is also the Father's (Jn. 16:14–15). The crucial point is that Scripture is holy (set apart) and authoritative because it is ingredient in the economy of communication, that is, in the way in which the triune God ministers the Word of God in the power of the Spirit. The emphasis in the present section, however, is on the role of Scripture in communicating light (i.e., truth).⁸² Scripture is a creaturely medium taken up as an "extension of Christ's active, communicative presence in the Spirit's power through the commissioned apostolic testimony."⁸³ As such, Scripture is a means of ongoing triune communication by which the church follows her master's voice: "the sheep follow him, for they know his voice" (Jn. 10:4).⁸⁴

80. For a fuller account of how God administers the covenant via Scripture, see my *Drama of Doctrine* pp. 135–9.

81. Of course, it is not the physical object that communicates God but its message, a message that ultimately points to and provides a thick description of God's definitive communicative act: the life of the incarnate Word. Cf. Bavinck's remark that Scripture is "the handmaiden of Christ" (*Reformed Dogmatics* I, p. 440).

82. Augustine's work on the Word of God as a means of divine illumination is relevant here. The revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures is the external Word that informs memory and calls the soul to attend to the inner Word and so to learn the mind of Christ (*Confessions* XI.8.10).

83. John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 59.

84. For a further development of these points, see my "Triune Discourse."

Life: the Spirit of God

I am resurrection and the life. (Jn. 11:25)

The triune economy communicates more than true information and knowledge. In addition, it communicates the supreme covenant blessing: eternal life in God's presence. As with truth, so with life: the Father communicates each in the Son through the Spirit.

Ascension While it is true that the Son is the one through whom everything was made, the life that Jesus offers to those who believe in him refers not to physical but eschatological existence, an eternal life that is nevertheless partially available in the present: "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me" (Jn. 6:57). Brown's comment is apt: "in its brevity vs. 57 is a most forceful expression of the tremendous claim that Jesus gives *man a share in God's own life*."⁸⁵

Jesus is both the Word of life (1 Jn. 1:1) and the one who speaks words of life: "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (Jn. 6:63; cf. Dt. 8:3). These words bring light – knowledge of God – and, as such, are the enabling condition of eternal life: "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn. 17:3). The knowledge of God is not merely a matter of intellectual apprehension, as if eternal life were a matter of data, but rather of interpersonal relation via all the types of communicative action that the use of words makes possible. In brief: the words of the Word are the means and medium of the human creature's fellowship with the triune God.

Jesus' words communicate more than ideas. Otherwise, Jesus would be no different from any other teacher who claimed to offer enlightenment. On the contrary, Jesus' words do things and are thus of a piece with his mission to communicate the heart, mind, and strength of God. The economy of communication thus involves Jesus' real presence, which brings us to the significance of the Ascension.

On the eve of his passion, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going away to prepare a "place" for them before returning to take them back so that "where I am you may be also" (Jn. 14:3). To have a share in eternal life, that renewing power that counteracts the debilitating

85. Brown, *Gospel According to John I–XII*, p. 292.

effects of sin and corruption, one must be “in Christ.” Outside Christ there is no regeneration. One can be “in Christ,” however, only if Christ now lives. Jesus is not only the risen one who now lives but also the one who has ascended into heaven, that is, back into the eternal life of God. Luke emphasizes his account of Jesus’ ascension by including it both at the end of his Gospel (Lk. 24:51) and at the beginning of the book of Acts (Acts 1:9–11), linking the story of Jesus to that of the church, thereby corroborating Jesus’ words in his Farewell Discourse: “it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (Jn. 16:7).

Irenaeus recognizes the Ascension as an important event in the economy of communication. Against the Gnostics, who believe they could enter into eternal life by shedding their created bodily humanity, he insists on the ascension of the God-become-man, thus preserving the integrity of the relationship between creation and redemption: “Christ’s ultimate mission ... was to draw the Spirit into man and man into the Spirit, that man might truly become a living being.”⁸⁶ Indeed, according to Irenaeus the ascension of Jesus “marks the completion of the divine act of creating humanity in the image of God, through full investiture with the Holy Spirit, thus fitting humans for an eternally refreshing converse with the Father.”⁸⁷

Pentecost The Spirit who gives life is himself a gift – a communication – of the risen and ascended Christ. The risen Jesus presents himself alive to the disciples for forty days and tells them to wait for the promise of the Father, namely, baptism with the Holy Spirit (Acts. 1:3–4). Jesus’ last recorded words before ascending into heaven concern the Spirit’s empowering the disciples to be Jesus’ witnesses (Acts 1:8).⁸⁸ Acts 2 recounts the pouring out of the Spirit on the disciples and their miraculous speaking, which Peter interprets as a

86. Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), p. 60.

87. Douglas Farrow, “Ascension,” in Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, pp. 66–7.

88. See N. T. Wright’s comment that double-decker language need not imply a double-decker cosmology. Luke employed theological shorthand “to denote the parallel and interlocking universes inhabited by the creator god on the one hand and humans on the other [not to imply that Jesus had] become a primitive space-traveler” (*The Resurrection of the Son of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003], p. 655).

fulfillment of the prophecy from Joel 2. Peter's claim concerns not only the resurrection but the ascension: "This Jesus God raised up ... Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promises of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing" (Acts 2:33).

Peter concludes his sermon by citing Ps. 110:1, the most frequently cited Old Testament text in the New Testament: "'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool'" (Acts 2:34-5). The text depicts the crucified Jesus being received into the presence of God the Father Almighty who gives him dominion over all things: "What we are offered is a sermon on the ascension of the risen Jesus to the throne, that is, to Israel's throne *and* the throne of the Presence from which the Spirit goes forth."⁸⁹ Resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost form a single complex salvation-historical event that has to do with the gift of the Spirit, "he who gives life."

Life, as we saw earlier, involves the capacity to speak and to act, the ability to make communicative initiatives. It is therefore of more than passing interest that the chief sign of the Spirit's coming on the day of Pentecost, symbolized by what appeared to be tongues of fire, is a heightened form of communicative agency: the gift of tongues. Whatever the precise nature of this gift – were "tongues" ordinary languages unknown to the speakers or unearthly angelic languages? – the striking point is that the life-giving Spirit enables a powerful form of verbal witness (Acts 2:11).

Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in the Gospel of Luke is mirrored and magnified by the word's journey in Acts from Jerusalem to Rome. One commentator likens the progress of the gospel to a conquest narrative, for despite opposition, the word of the Lord "grew and multiplied" (Acts 12:24). The gospel conquers in the following sense: accompanied by the Spirit (Acts 9:31; 10:44; 19:6), it convicts and persuades its hearers of its truth, thereby forming a community of believers. Indeed, the word appears as "the main actor of the conquest," but only as empowered by the Spirit.⁹⁰ The Spirit, we may conclude, is the power and efficacy of the word of life.

The Spirit thus equips the church with a new communicative capacity: to witness to the word of life and, in so doing, communicate

89. Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, p. 25.

90. David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 155.

life itself. The Spirit communicates not merely truth but energy: a renewal of our communicative capacities that involves both mind and body. The Spirit is the means by which God gives life to our mortal bodies (Rom. 8:11). Eternal life is not disembodied, for the Spirit of the risen Christ is the Spirit of one who has risen bodily. Irenaeus, commenting on the expression “spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:35–49), argues that Paul is referring not to some new immaterial existence but rather to human bodies enlivened by the agency of the Holy Spirit.⁹¹ Life eternal is not simply a matter of possessing natural capacities forever but of being given a new set of capacities, specifically, the capacity to know God in Christ through the Spirit. “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn. 17:3).

What God gives us is “not simply his energies, but mainly his Son and his Spirit.”⁹² The Spirit who indwells believers individually and the church corporately is the personal communicative presence of Jesus, the resurrection and the life. Those who are in the Spirit have been transferred to a new realm of existence altogether, namely, the kingdom of God where God rather than Satan rules in people’s hearts (Col. 1:13): “At the center of Christian theology stands the conviction that the divine trinitarian life has truly been shared with us in Jesus Christ.”⁹³

Love: the fellowship of Father and Son in the Spirit

I am the good shepherd [who] lays down his life for the sheep.”
(Jn. 10:11)

Finally, and by way of summary: what God communicates to us is something of the communion that comprises his own life. For the love God pours into our hearts through the Spirit (Rom. 5:5) is ultimately the mutual love of Father and Son. What God ultimately communicates to us is a share in the triune fellowship of light and life.

Cross The person behind the “I am” sayings in the Fourth Gospel is none other than the Son of God. Hence the “someone” who

91. *Adv. Haer.* V.7.2.

92. John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2006), p. 139, n. 80.

93. Badcock, *Light of Truth & Fire of Love*, p. 236.

lays down his life for his friends (Jn. 15:13), demonstrating great love, is the second person of the Trinity in his incarnate state. The Son demonstrates a love than which no greater love can be conceived by laying down his divine life for those who are not divine and, further, for those who were not friends but enemies (Rom. 5:10).

From Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane we may infer that his drinking the "cup" of God's judgment on sin is a key element in the eternal *pactum salutis* (Mt. 26:39; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 22:42; cf. Jn. 18:11).⁹⁴ The cross is the supreme demonstration of God's love, as can be seen from Philippians 2:5–11. From this passage we discover that the Son, though in the form of God, made himself nothing, voluntarily taking the form of a servant, that is, a human being. Then, as a human, he further humbled himself and took on death, indeed, the lowest form of death, crucifixion. This amazing passage rehearses in a scant three verses the main action of the drama of salvation, from Christmas to the cross.

It is hard not to hear in the words "form of a servant" a reference to the suffering servant, and thus to the saving significance of the cross. Isaiah 53:12 says of the one pierced for our transgressions that "he poured out his soul to death."⁹⁵ The love thus involves self-emptying and self-abasement, a self-giving to the utmost limit.⁹⁶

Community: "that they may be one" God's love "is essentially the heightening and expansion of being ... a still greater selflessness in a very great, a properly great self-relatedness."⁹⁷ The triune communion of action that results in Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension has as its aim an even greater communion of action, greater in the sense that it now includes human creatures. The ultimate good that God wills is to make common the union of his own triune life with others, thus enlarging the circle of communion.

94. The cup of God's wrath is frequently used in the Old Testament to speak of the consequences of evil-doing (Ps. 75:8; Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15–17; Ezek. 23:31–4; Hab. 2:16; cf. Rev. 14:10; 16:19; 18:6).

95. For further support of this connection between self-emptying and death on the cross, see Gundry, "Style and Substance in Philippians 2:6–11," in *The Old is Better*, esp. pp. 288–92.

96. According to Kasper, contemporary theology has largely been given over to the attempt to rethink the doctrine of God in light of the cross of Jesus. We shall return to this theme in ch. 8 when we consider the question of divine impassibility (*The God of Jesus Christ*, p. 194).

97. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, pp. 368–9

The communicative variation on Trinitarian theism set forth in these pages conceives God's perfect life in the dynamic terms of communicative action *ad intra*. The fullness of God's being involves communicative agents in interpersonal (perichoretic) relation. The economic Trinity – the self-communication *ad extra* of the Father in the Son through the Spirit – corresponds to the immanent Trinity, and has for its ultimate aim communion.

Communicating God's own life is the goal of Jesus' life. That communicating triune communion is the aim of Jesus' saving work is clear from his high-priestly prayer: "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us" (Jn. 17:21).⁹⁸ What does it mean to "be one"? It is not a matter of being absorbed into something bigger, like a drop of water into a puddle, for in that case one loses one's particular identity. The Father and Son are "one" even though each retains his particular personal identity. The oneness in view is rather the union of mutual indwelling. The redeemed similarly preserve their particularity but become one by entering into the communion of the Father and Son. Union with the Son is their port of entry: "in him was/is life" (Jn. 1:4). This is the gospel: that God freely and graciously decides to communicate something of what he is to what he is not. The love of God is God's active disposition to communicate the Father's life-giving communion with the Son to others in the Spirit.⁹⁹

The "ways of God" communicated in the economy are best summed up in the name "Jesus Christ." The Son is the focal point of the intra-Trinitarian as well as the divine-human dialogue. Calvin's commentary on John 16:15 is fully in line with this thought, as it is with the gist of the present chapter: "Christ ... has from the Father all that He communicates to us by the Spirit."¹⁰⁰ *The Son is the Spirited projection of the Father's love*. The metaphysics of the "I am" is thus not a matter of

98. Jesus returns to this theme in the next two verses: "that they may be one even as we are one" (17:22); "I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one" (17:23). That this is all connected to God's love becomes clear at the prayer's end: "I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (17:26).

99. The medieval scholar Rupert of Deutz identifies the love that the Father had for the Son mentioned in 17:26 as the Holy Spirit. See Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI*, p. 781.

100. Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John: Chs. 11–21 and the First Epistle of John*, tr. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 2:122.

human speculation about perfect being; it concerns rather the divine communication of perfect love. Projection is first and foremost a divine communicative activity. Jesus Christ is the God-projected word and image of God into the created order.

The triune God has found a way to us. God is never more himself than when he is going out of himself in love – communicating for the sake of communion. How to characterize this communicative relationship between God and the world? Though communion is the end, we shall see that creatures stand not in perichoretic but participatory relation to God's being-in-communicative-act. Everything depends on how one understands the way in which human creatures take part in God's communicative activity such that they actually receive God's saving light, life, and love. Everything thus depends on getting the ontology of being-in-communion with God right, and this in turn depends on rightly interpreting what it means to be "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). Hence the burden of the following two sections: to set forth what such a "communicative partaking" in the divine nature might entail.

The operative concept is *participation*: to "take part in" or "partake." How do creatures come to participate or take part not only in the divine creative action but the divine communicative action by which God makes common or shares his eternal life? It is not enough simply to be on the stage of world history; salvation is a matter of *taking part* in the drama of redemption that has its focus and fulfillment in Christ. Neither is it enough to participate in God as effects participate in causes; to take part in the drama of redemption one has to be an answerable agent. For the history of Jesus Christ is not merely an intensification of the Creator's ongoing relationship to the world but the restoration of a broken relationship. God's name is not merely "he who is" but "merciful and gracious."

A "simple" schema: shapes of triune communicative action

How should remythologizing theologians describe the way in which creatures participate in God? What is the nature of that communion which is the promised end of love, and salvation? In order adequately to respond, we need the right doctrinal categories and distinctions. Whereas Christian doctrines are for Schleiermacher

descriptions of *human passions* (e.g., the feeling of absolute dependence) – “*accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech*”¹⁰¹ – the remythologizer conceives doctrine as the conceptual elaboration of *divine action*. Better: doctrines are *accounts of triune communicative action set forth in speech*. It is not that God may be explained as a by-product of the church’s corporate consciousness – that way Feuerbach lies – but rather that doctrine is a by-product of God’s prior communicative action. Participation in God is ultimately a matter of “fitting” into forms of triune communicative activity. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

“Schemas” of divine communicative action

Time is the sphere of human dialogical action and the form of God’s communicative action *ad extra*. God creates and enters into time in order communicatively to relate to creatures. Does it follow, then, that humans participate in God simply by being in time? This would seem to be the case in kenotic-perichoretic relational panentheism, where created time is “in” God, though God is greater than what happens “now.” This sort of participation involves only the metaphysical presence of God the Creator (i.e., omnipresence), not the saving personal presence of God the covenant Lord. For life with God means being in his presence not merely as a created entity, but as a friend. To come into the presence of the holy God in this latter way is possible only if one is in Christ, a participant in *his* history.

With this caveat in mind, we turn now to examine the way humans may participate not only in world history (cosmic time) but also covenant history (God’s time). It is one thing to be on stage, quite another to participate in the action. The challenge for theology at this point is to specify the ways in which God communicates himself in time. How can beings in time participate in eternity? What must we do, in time, to be saved?

There is, I believe, a parallel or analogy between deriving Christian doctrine from God’s communicative activity and Kant’s explanation of how we apply concepts to items of sensible experience. What,

101. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, tr. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), p. 76 (italics his).

Kant wondered, do concepts (i.e., mental phenomena) have in common with appearances (i.e., physical phenomena)? There must be some third thing that makes the application of the former to the latter possible. Kant names this third thing the “schema” and views it as a product of the creative imagination.¹⁰²

Kant’s seminal insight was to suggest that each of the fundamental categories of the understanding is a particular “schema” or determination of time. A schema is a rule for imaginatively “figuring” time. Schemas show what concepts mean when applied to things in time by effectively creating “shapes” of time. For example: the schemas for the concepts “reality” and “nothing” are “being in time” and “not being in time,” respectively. Other schemas include “permanence of the real in time” (“substance”), “existence in some determinate time” (“actuality”), and “existence at all times” (“necessity”). Kant summarizes: “We thus find that the schema of each category contains and makes capable of representation only a determination of time.”¹⁰³ Simply put: schemas provide rules for applying concepts to phenomena via the notion of determining “shapes” of time.

Schematism is a rather obscure process, as Kant himself acknowledges – “an art concealed in the depths of the human soul”¹⁰⁴ – and subsequent philosophers have rarely pursued it.¹⁰⁵ One relevant exception is Ricoeur, who rescues the notion from obscurity by relocating the process in language – narrative, to be exact. A narrative, too, is a schema inasmuch as it creates a unified whole – a specific shape with a beginning, middle, and end – out of a sequence of time. Ricoeur consequently assigns a properly cognitive function to narrative, suggesting that it is only thanks to narrative shaping or configuration in stories and histories that human beings-in-time become intelligible to themselves.¹⁰⁶

102. Kant devotes an entire chapter to this pivotal notion. “The Schematism of the Pure Concepts of Understanding,” in *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), pp. 180–7. My wager is that “schematizing” will enable us to distinguish God’s covenantal from his metaphysical presence, thereby enabling us to clarify how human beings participate salvifically in Jesus Christ, the communicative activity of God in time.

103. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 185.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

105. Martin Heidegger, however, believed that these pages of Kant’s *Critique* “form the heart of the whole work” (*Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1962], p. 94).

106. For a fuller development of this point, see my *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, pp. 44–6.

Something similar, I suggest, obtains for the biblical *mythos* and its rendering of God's being-in-time.¹⁰⁷ At the heart of the Bible's *mythos* is its comprehensive account of God's communicative activity in time. After all, what is theodrama if not the configured space and time of God's dialogical interaction with human actors and respondents? And this brings us back to the parallel with Kant: schema is to time as doctrine is to *mythos* (i.e., God's communicative activity in time). Whereas Kant's schemas are determination or shapes of time, doctrinal schemas are determinations or shapes of God's time-with-and-for-us (i.e., God's being-in-communicative-act).¹⁰⁸ In short: doctrines articulate ways that God is/acts in our historical time (i.e., economic Trinity), ways that correspond to the way God is/acts in his own eternal time (i.e., immanent Trinity).¹⁰⁹

Schemas of simplicity? God's being

To consider divine attributes as schemas or shapes of God's communicative action is to work a communicative variation on the doctrine of divine simplicity.¹¹⁰ Divine simplicity affirms God's unity in a particular sense: not merely that there is one God (this is true but not the point) but that God is one (i.e., not a compound or composite). Simplicity is not one divine perfection among others as much as a way of defining "the manner in which such properties might be attributed to God."¹¹¹ God does not "have" properties or perfections (e.g., goodness; truth) that stand over against or above

107. The present account departs from Ricoeur's understanding of *mythos* as narrative plot in one important respect. Whereas Ricoeur accords pride of place to the narrative form as the language game associated with human temporality, I believe that all forms of biblical literature are schemas of divine communicative action. The unifying *mythos* that makes the diverse books of the Bible ingredients in a single overarching story belongs more to drama than to narrative, for God uses a variety of modes of discourse to advance the theodramatic action.

108. Theodrama is the ultimate schema of the biblical *mythos*, the overall shape that unifies the many types of divine communicative action therein.

109. I examine the story (and the stories/parables) of Jesus as "schemata of eternity" in *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ch. 8, esp. pp. 209–19.

110. Note that "communication" is not simply one perspective among many possible perspectives on God, but one of the very few, along with "being," capable of elaborating both God's immanent perfections and economic work.

111. David Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 46.

him; rather, God is good, and true, etc. Divine simplicity stipulates that God's essence is identical with his existence; it follows that all God's attributes or perfections are coextensive.¹¹²

"God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8). Throughout this work I have used Feuerbach as a cautionary reminder against projecting human values, including love, onto God. We could not know God's nature apart from triune communicative action. The doctrine of divine simplicity roots God's love in God's own being, such that God would no longer be who he is if he were not loving. Of course, we have to say something similar about God's holiness, justice, wisdom, etc. as well. To its critics, simplicity seems to produce the odd logical result that every divine attribute is identical with every other: God's justice is identical with God's love, his holiness with his wisdom, and so forth.¹¹³ We seem to be speaking nonsense of God.¹¹⁴

Thinking of the divine attributes in terms of schemas of communicative action may help to move the discussion forward.¹¹⁵ When we conceive of God's being in terms of communicative act, we see more easily how God can be simple yet complex, not in the sense

112. It does not follow, however, that all God's properties are identical with one another, as we shall see.

113. For Thomas, however, "simplicity is not an attribute of a being with no distinctions. It is the necessity of denying that any distinctions that help us discern created realities can possibly help us when our subject is the One who is the cause of all being" (Christopher A. Franks, "The Simplicity of the Living God: Aquinas, Barth, and some Philosophers," *Modern Theology* 21 [2005], p. 279).

114. Critics of divine simplicity raise other objections too, including the three following: it is an imposition of Greek philosophy; it lacks biblical support; it is incompatible with Trinitarian orthodoxy. I have dealt with the first objection in Part I of the present work. In response to the second objection: the Bible never singles out any one attribute to the exclusion of the others nor suggests that some divine perfections are dispensable. To the third objection, we can say that the Trinity is not constituted of different parts but of three persons, each of whom is fully God: "Now, the divine being is not composed of three persons, nor is each person composed of the being and personal attributes of that person, but the one uncompounded (simple) being exists in three persons" (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. II: *God and Creation*, p. 177). For a defense of the doctrine against these charges, see Stephen Holmes, "Something Much Too Plain to Say": Towards a Defence of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 43 (2001), pp. 137–54. See also Jay Wesley Richards, *The Untamed God*, ch. 9, and Katherin Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*, ch. 3, for a treatment of the debate over simplicity among philosophers of religion.

115. Cf. Gunton's alternative suggestion that divine simplicity is a way of thinking about perichoresis, the Trinitarian relations between the divine persons: "The Father, Son and Spirit constitute one God without remainder because their communion is perfect and unbroken" (*Act and Being*, p. 122, my emphasis).

that his being is composed of parts but rather that it requires several concepts in order to do justice to its richness. The various names we employ to speak of the divine attributes, for example, each “refer in a partial and imperfect, but nonetheless real, way to the single perfection of God,”¹¹⁶ namely, God’s being-in-communicative-act. Call it divine “simplicity”: “the very unity of His being consists in the multiplicity, individuality and diversity of His perfections.”¹¹⁷ In describing God’s being-in-communicative-act from different perspectives, we are not describing various “parts” of God.¹¹⁸ On the contrary: *each perfection refers to the whole of God’s being-in-communicative-act, though each describes only one aspect of it.* By “schemas of simplicity,” then, I am referring to the way in which God’s unified being may be viewed in terms of diverse forms of communicative activity, each revealing a divine perfection.

Barth rightly identifies what is at stake in the doctrine of divine simplicity: that *God is all that he is in all that he does*. Simplicity is thus first cousin to aseity, the notion that God does not need the world to be himself: “Being simple in the sense described, God is incomparably free, sovereign, and majestic.”¹¹⁹ Barth tends, however, to make the history of Jesus Christ the sole locus of the revelation of God’s being. While Barth’s take on divine simplicity is not remarkable on the formal level, it works a christological reduction with regard to the *matter* of divine simplicity: Barth makes christology the sole criterion of God’s being. Divine simplicity is thus a function of the “simple” story of Jesus Christ.

Much hinges on the scope of this simple story. If Barth has in mind the history of Jesus Christ narrowly conceived (i.e., his thirty-three-year lifespan), then a remythologizing approach must respectfully demur. Not only is the story of Jesus Christ unintelligible apart from the broader history of Israel, but that history too displays a pattern

116. Stephen Holmes, “The Attributes of God,” in John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 64.

117. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 332.

118. It is not that every attribute is simply identical with every attribute, but rather that every attribute modifies every other attribute. For example, God’s power is wise, loving, just, etc. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism states: “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth” (Q.4). See also Frame, *Doctrine of God*, pp. 225–30.

119. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 445.

of divine communicative activity, activity that includes direct divine discourse such as we have in Exodus 34:6,7. A doctrine of God suitably attentive to the whole biblical *mythos* will thus set forth in speech schematized accounts of God's simple being-in-communicative-act as it unfolds throughout the Old and New Testaments, and climactically in the history of Jesus Christ. The story of Jesus Christ, broadly conceived, includes both the history of Israel (that Jesus fulfills) and Adam (that Jesus recapitulates).

Christian doctrine schematizes forms of triune communicative action. Whereas medieval philosophers viewed the transcendentals (truth, goodness, beauty) as characteristics of being as such, a remythologizing approach views truth, goodness, beauty, and love not as abstract universals but as biblically attested schemas of God's concrete being-in-communicative-act: not transcendentals as much as "theatricals." *The divine attributes are thus ways of thinking about the unified theodrama centered in Jesus Christ.* God is one, but his one being-in-communicative-act may be characterized in various ways. God is true because his theodramatic action is reliable and consistent; God is love because he acts in such a way as to share and communicate his being with and to others. In short: to affirm that God is love (or holy, good, true, beautiful, etc.) is not to predicate of God something other than God, but rather to schematize his being-in-communicative-act – to declare what God is.

Triune performatives: theodrama

What God *does*, not least for our salvation, takes the form of communicative action too. The work of his "two hands," Son and Spirit, is largely communicative. To conceive doctrine in terms of schematizing is to suggest that all Christian doctrines ultimately state not merely facts, but shapes of triune communicative *acts*. This is so because the ground bass of the melody of theology is God himself in communicative activity.

A great deal of God's communicative work, perhaps more than has hitherto been appreciated, involves language, the most sophisticated medium of discourse. God is as God does and God does as God says. The notion of a "theodrama" calls attention to the performative nature of God's words. In drama, words both carry the action and perform a variety of actions. The drama begins, of course,

with a particular divine speech act that carries a unique generative force: "Let there be ..." (Gen. 1:3). The doctrine of creation sets forth in human words what God sets forth in his: God's being in generative communicative activity. *Creatio ex nihilo* is a distinct illocutionary act, unique to God. God has "doing" or "speaking" being whereas creation has "done" or "spoken" being. Because God speaks the world into being, metaphysics – the science of created/spoken being – is structured by communicative action from (and in) the beginning.

The drama thus has a "poetic" dimension, inasmuch as the first thing God says/does with words is create.¹²⁰ "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, ... For he spoke, and it came to be" (Ps. 33:6, 9). Augustine compares God to a workman whose tools, like the poet's, are words: the beauty of the created universe is comparable to a polished speech. God's creation of the world is like "the generation of a text" brought into being by the divine voice, word, and breath.¹²¹ Yet God's words, unlike those of human speakers, are always efficacious, able to bring about or accomplish what they say (Isa. 55:11). God's communicative activity is uniquely creative, hence the doctrine of creation.

Subsequent communicative acts in the theodrama similarly give rise to Christian doctrine. The point to keep in mind is that all the various works of God are ultimately forms of triune communicative action. All that God does the Father originates, the Son effectuates, and the Spirit completes. The benefit of schematizing the perfections and works, as well as the being of God, in terms of communicative action is that it rightly acknowledges that much of what God does – making covenants; giving the Law; declaring righteous – necessarily takes place by way of speaking. What doctrine sets forth in forms of human speech are first and foremost shapes of divine communicative action and interaction.

A few further examples must suffice. After the generative speech of creation, the next prominent instance of divine discourse is the commissive speech of God's covenant promise. The doctrine of election is the schematization of God's *promissio* to Abraham. It describes

120. Oswald Bayer's "poetic" approach to theology similarly treats God as doing things with words. See his *Gott als Autor: Zu einer Poietologischen Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).

121. Davies, *Creativity of God*, p. 104.

God's sovereign choice to be for Israel. From this point on in the biblical *mythos*, God orients his triune communicative action towards covenantal purposes and covenantal relations.

The doctrine of the Incarnation sets forth in speech that moment when God's Word makes yet another communicative initiative for the sake of covenantal relationship, taking on the form of a human hero. Jesus the Word of God is the definitive schema of God's being-in-communicative-act. Participating in God's being-in-communicative-activity means partaking not in a Platonic Greek universal but in a Pauline Jewish particular: the history of Jesus Christ. Participation in the triune God – otherwise known as salvation or eternal life – ultimately hinges on the nature of one's communion with Christ. Subsequent doctrines – justification, sanctification, ecclesiology, to name a few – all work further variations on the essential evangelical communicative act that is God's being “for us.”¹²²

Communicating triune life: remythologizing “participation in God”

The challenge for communicative theism is to specify how God remains God while allowing creatures to participate in his triune life. How does the triune God communicate his light, life, and love to others and how does such communication affect God's own being? Here we need to distinguish between God's attributes (God's being *ad intra*) and his redemptive work (God's being *ad extra*). To participate in the life of God is to benefit from his words and acts in history, especially the history of Jesus Christ.

Creatures are, by definition and by dint of their very existence, related to the Creator. But not all relationships are created equal. “Relationality” is, as we have seen, a notion that hides a multitude of conceptual sins. The question, then, concerns the type of

122. Justification and sanctification have to do with the way in which God “communicates” his righteousness and holiness to the ungodly. God *declares* those who place their faith in Christ forgiven and *directs* and *enables* them to live accordingly by having the Spirit minister the gospel to them. In this way the forgiving word of Christ “dwells richly” in them (Col. 3:16). By means of word and Spirit, then, God *calls* or gathers a community of the word, a company of communicants (the church). In each case – declaring righteous, enabling holiness, summoning a fellowship – we see that Christian doctrine is essentially a schema of triune communicative action, a description of what God is doing in, with, and through his Word.

relationality, and participation, implied in the “right relatedness” of communion. The biblical *mythos* displays a drama of salvation whereby the Father in Christ through the Spirit restores the lines of communication that had broken down in order to effect union and communion. God had to *do* something in order to restore right creaturely participation in his light, life, and love.

Communion is arguably the ultimate aim of all God’s communicative action. Though in a metaphysical sense God is always-already communicating something of himself to every entity that exists, the biblical *mythos* depicts human beings as existing in a state of moral and spiritual alienation from God: enemies of God (Rom 5:10; cf. Col. 1:21), the gospel (Rom. 11:28), and the cross of Christ (Phil. 3:18). In every scene, there is Satanic conflict; that all have sinned and rebelled against their Author (Rom. 3:23) implies that they can no longer image God or be holy as God is holy (Lev. 19:2). Indeed, human beings are “dead in [their] trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1; cf. Col. 2:13), wholly lacking the capacity for communicative action towards God. The biblical *mythos* is primarily concerned with another type of participation in God than the ontological picture suggested by panentheism, where one is “in” God simply by virtue of being part of the world that is by nature “in” God.

The issue: parsing “participation in God”

“In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). It is important not to confuse this general being “in him” with the particular being “in Christ” that is the mark of the *new* (i.e., reconciled) creation (2 Cor. 5:17). Kenotic-perichoretic relational theologians sometimes give the impression that all creatures are always/already in a saving relation to God, even if it has yet to be fully actualized. Call it *ontotheological* participation: “I am, therefore I’m saved” (because created being participates in God’s uncreated being). At issue is whether the participation this expansive perichoretic ontology guarantees (i.e., by virtue of simply *being*) is enough to constitute a “genuine personal relationship” between God and the human creature and whether it does justice to the biblical *mythos* concerning the death of Jesus Christ.

Some have distinguished two competing views of salvation in the early church: a “two-act” scheme that sees redemption as the

elevation of human beings from a state of nature to a higher condition (the creation–elevation model) and a “three-act” scheme that posits a fall from the original state of nature as the complicating factor (the creation–fall–restoration model).¹²³ Is saving grace something that perfects nature (i.e., something in which one participates as do beings in Being according to Plato and Plotinus) or something that radically reorients and restores nature (i.e., something in which one participates only by virtue of being incorporated into the particular covenantal history of one who is both sacrificial lamb and high priest)? The stakes for a remythologizing theology are nowhere higher as it strives neither to “re-mythize” nor demythologize the dramatic contours of the biblical *mythos* and the gospel of salvation.

According to the Scriptures, it is not finitude but fallenness that threatens the integrity of humanity’s right relatedness to God. Death – absolute separation; the cessation of communicative activity – is a consequence of sin (Rom. 6:23). Sin refers to one’s alienation from God, one’s “heroic” yet ultimately foolish opposition to the Author of one’s existence.¹²⁴ Though ultimately a futile rebellion, it is nevertheless a popular lost cause, for many agree with Milton’s Satan that (to paraphrase) it is better to reign in one’s own dungeon than serve in God’s castle.

It is in response to the alienation wrought by sin that God takes a new communicative initiative, improvising a new and more wonderful variation on an older covenantal theme.¹²⁵ The incarnate Son performs the decisive action that at once satisfies the covenant sanction and fulfills the covenant promise. What Jesus does is not primarily aimed at affecting the way beings participate in Being; ontological participation is not the primary problem. On the contrary, “The *covenant*, not a general metaphysical scheme, specifies what kind of alienation and reconciliation are in view.”¹²⁶ We therefore have to distinguish two kinds of “being in” or participation in Christ: a general cosmological participation in the Son through whom all things

123. This nomenclature comes from Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* (Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 17–18.

124. The following chapter reworks the Creator–creature distinction in terms of the Bakhtinian distinction between “Author” and “hero” (i.e., character).

125. For further development of this theme, see my *Drama of Doctrine*, pp. 340–1.

126. Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation* (Louisville, KY and London: Westminster John Knox, 2007), p. 154.

were made (Col. 1:16) and a more particular christological abiding in the Son in whom there is reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17). Simply to identify createdness with redemption overlooks an important element in the biblical *mythos* and thus short-circuits the theodrama. Right relatedness to God requires reconciliation. Salvation involves more than relating to God generically, as creature; it involves relating to God covenantally “in Christ.”

This puts the idea of being “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4) in a new light. What does “partaking of” or participating (*koinonia*) mean, what are its conditions, and in what does one participate when one partakes of the divine nature (*phusis*)? There are several interpretative possibilities: the essence of God; the divine “energies”; the divinity of Jesus Christ; The fellowship of the Father, Son, and Spirit? Among the models for understanding the nature of salvific participation in God we find various sacramental and ontological views.¹²⁷

It is precisely here that communicative theism proves fruitful. The view to be argued here understands “partaking in God’s nature” in terms of theodramatic participation (i.e., taking part in God’s communicative action).¹²⁸ The company of the saved (i.e., the church) is made up of communicants: those who commune with Christ as Reconciler, and therefore with one another. This fits well with the context of 2 Peter 1, which says that one becomes a “partaker” through God’s “very great promises” (2 Pet. 1:4). The focus is on the communicative union – fellowship, not fusion – brought into being by triune dialogical action oriented to covenantal relation.¹²⁹ Communion with God consists in sharing the love the Father has for the Son in the Spirit.¹³⁰ Participating in God is by grace – God’s free self-communication to those who have no claim on him in which he favors his recipients with a share in his Son and Spirit – yet it

127. There is not sufficient space to delve further into these alternative options, for example, *theosis* (deification). See Gannon Murphy, “Reformed Theosis?” in *Theology Today* 65 (2008), pp. 191–212.

128. Taking part in God’s communicative action involves more than moral imitation or pragmatics: rather, it is a matter of being addressed by the Word from the Father and of being enabled rightly to respond by the Spirit.

129. For a complementary account of a covenantal rather than ontological mode of participation, see Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, Part II.

130. Cf. the discussion on participation in the life of the triune God in Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, p. 339.

involves human activity (freedom). “I participate” is ultimately a middle-voice verb.¹³¹ We participate in God as we actively image God – as we dramatize *theos* – yet it is ultimately the Spirit who recreates or “makes common” the image of God in us by efficaciously ministering the word of God. Saving grace is God’s self-communicative, redemptive, and oriented-to-communion action “in Christ” through the Spirit towards undeserving others.

Union with Christ: the “author and finisher” of faith (Heb. 12:2)

For we await salvation from [Christ] ... because he makes us, ingrafted into his body, participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself.¹³²

“God was my first thought,” said Feuerbach, “reason my second, and man my third and last thought.”¹³³ For Christian theologians, to have the triune God as one’s first thought means thinking about Jesus Christ, for the Father communicates new life in and through the Son by the Spirit: it is “in Christ” that there is “a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). The company of the saved thus partake of the divine nature (i.e., God’s being-in-communicative-activity) by having a “share in Christ” (Heb. 3:14). Communion with God through union with Christ is the heart of the gospel: the substance of faith, the prime covenant blessing, the key to union with God, and humanity’s ultimate hope in life.

Jesus Christ is the *archegos* of our salvation (Heb. 2:10), a term that can be rendered “author” – an appropriate designation given the purposes of the present work, whose main claim is that participating in God means participating in his triune being-in-communicative-activity.¹³⁴ The consistent teaching of the New Testament is that *right relatedness to God depends on right relatedness to Jesus Christ*. He who sees, believes in, and knows Jesus sees, believes in, and knows the Father (Jn. 14:9; 12:44; 8:19): “No one comes to

131. Cf. the discussion in ch. 8 below. The middle voice is neither a *doing* nor a *being-done-to* but a being caught up in a process – or in the case of soteriology, a person (Christ) – in which one is nevertheless active.

132. Calvin, *Inst.* III.2.24.

133. Cited in Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today* (London: Collins, 1980), p. 192.

134. *Archegos* can also mean “founder” (e.g., of a family, city, people, or nation) or “captain.”

the Father except through me" (Jn. 14:6). The apostle Paul concurs: "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:19). Unfortunately, it is also a notion in which all the fullness of theological confusion is wont to dwell, and so merits our close attention.¹³⁵ Accordingly, we turn briefly to consider the nature of the Christian's union with Christ by tracing its conceptual elaboration in the work of four theologians. We begin by examining Paul's use of the phrase and Cyril's careful attempt to delineate its meaning. Next we move to consider Calvin's *communicative* interpretation of the union and conclude with John Owen's account of the communion that results.

"In Christ" according to Paul Paul uses the phrase "in Christ" as a virtual shorthand term for salvation, the fullest realization of the promised covenantal blessing: "The heart of Paul's religion is union with Christ."¹³⁶ Being "in Christ" is for Paul "a central description of the Christian condition of salvation as the effect of the work of Christ."¹³⁷ Commentators differ as to whether Paul uses the "in" of *en Christo* in a spatial, representative, instrumental, or mystical sense, though there is a consensus that he tends not to emphasize the reciprocity of the relation.¹³⁸ His focus is rather on what God is saying and doing in Christ: "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19).

If we compare what God does "in" his Word to an illocutionary act (i.e., what a speaker accomplishes in saying something), we then discover that "in Christ" focuses our attention on what God is doing in, with, and through his Word.¹³⁹ In fact, God is doing a number of things "in Christ": in addition to reconciling the world, God is "making alive" (2 Cor. 15:22), "dwelling in bodily form" (Col. 2:9),

135. In particular, we need to clarify whether union with Christ implies participation in his nature(s), being, or personal identity and history (or some combination thereof).

136. James S. Stewart, *A Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975), p. 147. Cf. his other central claim: "Union with Christ, as Paul conceives it, is union with God" (p. 170). The purpose of the present section is to elaborate this claim.

137. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, p. 347.

138. Unlike the Johannine tendency to speak of mutual indwelling, Paul speaks of Christ being "in" believers only infrequently (e.g., Gal 2:20).

139. According to Mark Seifrid, more than one-third of the one hundred and fifty-one Pauline occurrences of the phrase "in Christ" affirm something that God has done or does through Christ for salvation ("In Christ," in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 434.

“blessing” (Eph. 1:3), “choosing” (Eph. 1:4), “making known the mystery of his will” (Eph. 1:9), “sealing with the Spirit” (Eph. 1:13), “seating in the heavenly places” (Eph. 2:6), “building a temple” (Eph. 2:21–2), etc. God fulfills his saving purpose spatially, “in” the body of Jesus, and temporally, “in” the history of Jesus. We can combine these two meanings of “in” into a single, overarching spatio-temporal sense, namely, that of a defining sphere or domain of lordly communicative action: the royal “in” of God’s kingdom. God realizes all his intentions for the world “in Christ.”

Union with Christ: Cyril of Alexandria Soteriology and christology have been joined at the hip since the early church. The Fathers took with the utmost seriousness the Johannine declaration that the Word made flesh was “full of grace” (Jn. 1:14). Some believed that salvation means having a share in God’s own immortality and incorruption embodied in the incarnate one. Cyril, for example, had 2 Peter 1:4 in mind when he insisted that salvation is a matter of deification or *theosis*. While this need not mean the undoing of the Creator-creature distinction, such a thought requires careful analysis. For Cyril, the grace that God communicates in Christ is not a gift external to God but God himself. This is the prime insight that leads Cyril to confess Jesus Christ as the Logos made flesh. It is the second person of the Trinity who assumes humanity and becomes the single personal subject of Jesus’ earthly life.¹⁴⁰

“Life” is the operative term: those who partake of Christ’s body in the Eucharist, for example, participate in him (i.e., the Son) who is the source of life and thus receive the grace of life. Cyril nevertheless distinguishes between deification and becoming God. The Son has in essence what saints have only in likeness by participation in him; only one who has life by nature can give it to others. Grace is the communication of gifts by the one who is God by nature to those who by nature are not God. Deification is not a matter of becoming God, then, but of partaking of the divine nature – God’s life, holiness, love, freedom from sin, immortality, etc. – by being in Christ, the grace of God. In particular, Cyril believes that the saved

140. Fairbairn rightly notes that the Fathers were less concerned with psychological questions about the center of Jesus’ consciousness than they were with the “who” question: *who* is acting/suffering the life of Jesus Christ? (Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church*, p. 22).

participate in Christ's sonship, and he takes care to specify how this is so.¹⁴¹

The Son of God is *homoousios* with the Father. Those who are in Christ participate in his sonship, but not in this ontological sense. Rather, those who are in Christ participate in (a) the status of sonship, as adopted children and (b) the communion of Son and Father in the Spirit. Both are important aspects of salvation, though the latter is of special importance here. The Son shares the very being of God, together with the Father and the Spirit, in a "natural" communion. The communion that the Son enjoys by nature the saints enjoy by grace (i.e., through participation): "for Cyril the concepts of grace, deification, and the sharing of divine communion are virtually one and the same."¹⁴²

God is love: an eternal fellowship of three persons. This loving fellowship – the triune sharing of light, life, and love – is precisely what the Son communicates. To be saved, therefore, is to enjoy fellowship with God by grace while remaining a human creature by nature: "For Cyril, grace is God's giving himself to people through Christ."¹⁴³ Cyril's insight into the nature of grace represents a net conceptual gain when it comes to the material content of salvation: *sonship*.¹⁴⁴ Cyril clarifies the content of salvation, though the form and manner of our participation in Christ remain to be thought.

Union with Christ: Calvin With regard to the form and manner of our participation in Christ, Calvin stipulates that whatever salvation the Son has wrought through his suffering is useless "as long as Christ remains outside of us."¹⁴⁵ The good news according to Calvin was that those who believe in Christ are "participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself."¹⁴⁶ Calvin was forced

141. I am indebted to Fairbairn for the following analysis. For a fuller development of this idea, together with documentation from Cyril, see his *Grace and Christology*, pp. 78–104.

142. Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology*, p. 94. Cf. two further comments: "The idea that Christians can possess *by grace* the *natural* communion of the Trinity is a striking one indeed" (p. 98); "Cyril equates this adopted sonship with being partakers of the divine nature" (p. 102).

143. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

144. For the suggestion that there is a link between sonship and the *imago Dei*, see K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996).

145. *Inst.* III.1.1.

146. *Inst.* III.2.24.

to clarify the nature of this participation, however, in response to Osiander's alternative explanation of how saints achieve oneness with God.¹⁴⁷

Osiander is representative of those who give ontological interpretations of union with Christ. He understood union with Christ to imply a literal partaking of Christ's divine nature and, hence, of God's essence. In particular, he claimed that justification requires not imputed righteousness but an actual sharing in Christ's "essential righteousness" thanks to a fusion with his divine nature. Calvin criticizes Osiander's suggestion that God "transfuses" his essence into humanity on the grounds that it makes humans part of God, thereby compromising the Creator/creature distinction.¹⁴⁸

According to Calvin, Osiander fails correctly to identify the "bond" of this union – namely, the Holy Spirit – and hence its Trinitarian structure. The Spirit is "the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to Himself."¹⁴⁹ This, of course, only pushes the question regarding the nature and manner of the union one step back. Calvin does not leave the matter there, however, noting that the Spirit effects union with Christ by the gift of faith: "faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit."¹⁵⁰ Faith itself has no intrinsic value. What matters is its content, Jesus Christ, on which it lays hold through the biblical promises, prophecies, narratives, songs, etc. that are the media of the Word's self-presentation: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). Further, it is the midwifery of the Spirit who enables the faithful hearing of the Father's Word.¹⁵¹ Union with Christ thus signifies a worded, not wordless, personal relation: "we hold faith to be a knowledge of God's will toward us, perceived from his Word."¹⁵²

Calvin presents what we could call a *communicative* (in contrast to Osiander's ontological) understanding of participation in Christ. It is a matter not of sharing the divine essence but of communicating with the divine person: "by the power of the Spirit, he imparts to us

147. Osiander was a Lutheran theologian who reacted to what he perceived to be Melancthon's exaggeration of imputation in his doctrine of justification.

148. *Inst.* III.11.5.

149. *Inst.* III.1.1.

150. *Inst.* III.1.4.

151. *Inst.* III.11.33. Cf. Calvin's statement that "faith needs the Word as much as fruit needs the living root of a tree" (*Inst.* III.11. 31).

152. *Inst.* III.11.6.

his life and all the blessings which he has received from the Father.”¹⁵³ Like Cyril, Calvin finds the idea that union with Christ involves sharing in the Son’s sonship to be of particular importance, so much so that he puts special emphasis on salvation as adoption and on the Spirit as the “spirit of adoption.”¹⁵⁴ To be one with Christ is to share in the privileges and responsibilities of his sonship, understood not in the ontological terms of his nature but in the covenantal terms of his history and work.¹⁵⁵

Communion with the triune God: John Owen That human beings were created to commune with God is a central thesis of the Puritan theologian John Owen: “I pray God with all my heart that I may be weary of every thing else but converse and communion with him.”¹⁵⁶ At first glance, Owen’s understanding of communion as involving “mutual relations” between God and humanity seems to put him in the kenotic-perichoretic relational camp: “communion is the mutual communication of . . . good things.”¹⁵⁷ In fact, this communion is made possible only on the basis of a prior “union” with Christ that is a unilateral divine act. Human participation in God is contingent on a prior triune communicative act. In and of ourselves, we are dead in our sins and walking in darkness; there can be no communion with him who is life and light.¹⁵⁸ Yet in his grace God communicates himself to us and in Christ and through the Spirit we can make “return unto him.”¹⁵⁹ Union with Christ on this view has nothing to do with a fusion of natures or substances. It is rather a matter of thinking, willing, and wanting what Christ thinks, wills,

153. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), pp. 183–4, on Jn. 17:3.

154. *Ibid.* III.1.3.

155. Julie Canlis observes: “For Calvin, the mystical union is a masterpiece of the entire Trinity: our being brought by the Spirit into a form of the Son’s relationship with the Father” (“Calvin, Osiander and Participation in God,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6 [2004], p. 182, n. 48). See also J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

156. John Owen, “Letter #86, To Sir John Hartopp,” in Peter Toon (ed.), *The Correspondence of John Owen (1616–1683)* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1970), p. 160. See also Kelly M. Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), ch. 2.

157. John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, Kelly M. Kopic and Justin Taylor (eds.) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p. 93.

158. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

159. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

and wants.¹⁶⁰ The communion that ensues is therefore active: a fellowship of action.¹⁶¹ Those who are “in Christ” become his dramatic representatives in the world.

Room in the “in”: theodramatic participation It is time to pull these various threads together and explain how those who are part of the company of communicants participate in God. The apostle Paul identifies the crucial premise, and preposition: “being *in* Christ.” Cyril identifies the material principle of union with Christ: participation in the Son’s communion with the Father. Calvin identifies the formal principle of the union: the Spirit who unites us to Christ through faith in the word of the gospel. Finally, Owen puts participation in Christ in Trinitarian perspective, explaining that union with Christ means communion with the triune God.

Union with Christ must not be reduced down to the status of a mere moral union; being in Christ involves more than following Christ’s example. Neither can mystical union be “reduced up” to a metaphysical relation. “Being in Christ” is something other than the panentheist’s “all in God.” The logic of participation in Christ is not that of divine emanation; an alienated world needs more than a divine drip.¹⁶² For the fundamental problem around which the biblical *mythos* turns is not the metaphysical distance between the finite (human) and the infinite (divine) but the distance between sin and holiness.

To remythologize “being in Christ” is to think about union not with the divine nature but with the divine person and work of the Son. It is not the substance but the history (*mythos*) of Christ of which we must partake: “For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion’” (Heb. 3:14–15). The following six theses seek conceptually to elaborate this passage, and hence the notion of union with Christ, in terms of *christodramatic participation*.

1. *Union with Christ is eschatological.* To be in Christ is to participate in his history (the “already”) and future (the “not yet”). Specifically,

160. See Kavic’s discussion of the way in which Owen uses Aristotelian faculty psychology as a way of enriching his description of how humans relate to God (Kavic, *Communion with God*, pp. 45–57).

161. Owen, *Communion*, p. 92.

162. For a critique of Neo-Platonic models of ontological participation, see Michael Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, ch. 8.

it is to participate in his death and resurrection, which is to say in the new order of things that God is bringing to be: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom. 6:5). Being-in-Christ is the present reality of the new age, as Paul acknowledges: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). In Christ, we have become "new creations" (2 Cor. 5:17). To be "in Christ" is thus to participate in a new, Spirit-empowered resurrection mode of existence and in a new sphere – "transplanted into a new soil and a new climate, and both soil and climate are Christ."¹⁶³

2. *Union with Christ is medial.* The Holy Spirit effects our union with Christ by giving us the faith to lay hold of him (so Calvin).¹⁶⁴ To be "in" Christ is thus to be in a process wherein one is both *doing* and being *done-to*. The middle voice once again offers an alternative to dichotomous subject/object modes of thought. Christ is not simply the object of our believing. Rather, the Spirit of Christ lays hold of us as we, in the Spirit, lay hold of Christ. Faith is thus "something we do while it happens to us."¹⁶⁵ We are the subjects of our acts (i.e., believing, having faith) even as we are caught up in an encompassing action of the Spirit. Believing – holding our confidence firm to the end – is something we do as the Spirit renders us believers.¹⁶⁶

3. *Union with Christ is covenantal.* To participate in Jesus' history is to participate in the covenantal history that serves as the framework for the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.¹⁶⁷ Barth goes further, claiming that the covenant relation between God and humanity was the goal of creation in the beginning. Yet this is not quite the same thing as saying that the whole cosmos is the beneficiary

163. Stewart, *A Man in Christ*, p. 157.

164. We could therefore speak of "pneumatic" participation in Christ.

165. Philippe Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Basic Interpretation with Some Theological Implications* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), p. 212.

166. All our actions, and not only believing, can be done "in Christ": Paul speaks the truth (Rom. 9:1), hopes (Phil. 2:19), rejoices (Phil. 4:10), exhorts (1 Thess. 4:1), and commands (Philem. 8) "in Christ."

167. See, *inter alia*, N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991). Horton comments: "Union with Christ and the covenant of grace are not simply related themes, but are different ways of talking about one and the same reality" (*Covenant and Salvation*, p. 181).

of Jesus' history. Hebrews 3:15 states that being in Christ is conditional on not being part of the "rebellion," an allusion to Israel's rebellion in the wilderness (Num. 14; cf. Ps. 95) which resulted in her being forbidden to enter God's "rest." Those who give allegiance to the "prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2) have no part in the dominion of the prince of peace. The book of Hebrews as a whole confirms Jesus' own interpretation of his life: he came to offer his life as a sacrifice for sin, thus laying the foundation for a new covenant (Lk. 22:20; Mt. 26:27,28) for which baptism rather than circumcision is the sign (Jn. 3:5; Acts 2:41; Col. 2:11–12). Participation in Christ makes sense only in a broadly covenantal framework.¹⁶⁸

4. *Union with Christ is dialogical.* The faith by which the Spirit unites us to Christ comes through the hearing of the word. Perhaps this is why Hebrews 3:15 cites Psalm 95:7, 8: "if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." The voice in view is that of the triune God. Jesus is both spoken (by the Father) and speaks. Jesus engages in communicative action; he converses in public and private. Yet Jesus is also the Word of the Father. The Father utters the Word; the Son is what gets communicated, the content of the Father's speech; the Spirit is the "channel" (air/wind/breath) that carries the word. This formula preserves the patristic insight that God's works are indivisible (thus preserving the oneness of the divine nature) yet does justice to the biblical descriptions of the economy of communication (thus preserving the distinctness of the three persons' work): the Father initiates communicative action; the Son executes it; the Spirit carries it to completion.¹⁶⁹

Dialogical union with Christ ushers communicants into a triune conversation whereby God "shar[es] with us the relationship he has between the persons of the Trinity."¹⁷⁰ The Spirit incorporates faithful communicants into the Son as they rightly receive and respond to the diverse divine communicative acts that structure their relation to their covenant Lord. Though there is asymmetry in the relation (Jesus is Lord), there is also covenantal intimacy, even friendship, in communicating with God (2 Chron. 20:7; Jas. 2:23). The paradigm

168. This is the main thrust of Horton's *Covenant and Salvation*.

169. Note the parallel with the three aspects of a communicative act: locution (the act of uttering), illocution (what one does in uttering), and perlocution (what effect one brings about by uttering).

170. Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology*, p. ix.

instance of such friendship between unequal partners is God's dialogical relation with Moses: "Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:11).¹⁷¹ Jesus similarly manifested friendship to his disciples by his "frank speech [*parresia*]" (Jn. 16:25, 29; cf. Jn. 15:15). In so opening himself up, Jesus enabled the disciples to participate in his own love for the Father.¹⁷²

Union with Christ is not a fusion of horizons whereby one's individuality and name are absorbed into the Godhead but a dialogical union in which Christ's "voice" dominates our thinking and feeling. To be in Christ is not to lose but to find one's true identity. It is through Jesus' words and the Spirit's ministry of words about Jesus that God draws us into the sphere of the new covenant and hence into the fellowship of his triune life. Divine communicative action is the source and structuring principle of the new covenantal being-in-Christ, just as God's original generative speech was the source and structuring principle of the original created order.¹⁷³

5. *Union with Christ is sapiential.* According to Paul, the Holy Spirit first ministered to him "in words not taught by human wisdom" (1 Cor. 2:13) the word he now ministers. Elsewhere Paul links our "participation in the Spirit" (Phil. 2:1) to having "this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). To have the Spirit is to have the prime minister of the word of God: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (Jn. 14:26). In ministering the word, the Spirit bestows "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16).

6. *Union with Christ is ecclesial.* The author of Hebrews 3:14 states that "we" share in Christ. Being "in Christ" is not something that happens only to isolated individuals but to a company of people that together form the "body" of Christ: the church. Union with Christ implies union with others. To be in Christ implies corporate existence, an *incorporation* into Christ "in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:21). The drama of redemption reaches a climax with the formation of a "holy

171. On the suggestion that Moses' covenantal friendship serves as a model for ecclesial faithfulness, see Lapsley, "Friends with God? Moses and the Possibility of Covenantal Friendship," pp. 117-29.

172. Gail O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John," pp. 144-57.

173. God's speech structures reality. Right human judgments about the distinctions and relations between things must therefore accord with the word of God.

nation" or covenant people that participates in the theodramatic action precisely by proclaiming and practising the light, life, and love of God (1 Pet. 2:9).

Together, these six aspects of union with Christ demonstrate that right relatedness with God is ultimately a matter of theodramatic participation: a graciously enabled speaking and acting engagement in what the Father is doing in Christ through the Spirit. Communicants do not become one with the divine essence but participate in God's communicative work (i.e., the economy of revelation and redemption). To be "in Christ" is therefore to be in the thick of the Trinitarian action – in the thick of the coming kingdom of God, the sphere of his communicative reign – which is to say in the midst of the Spirit-empowered conquest by God's word of other words and ways. To be in Christ is to be constituted a willing participant in the theodrama.

Those who enjoy union with Christ are not caught up in Christ's nature or essence but are rather *participants in the effects of his personal history* – communicants in the history of his personal effects, a people chosen to proclaim (and perform) the excellencies of God (1 Pet. 2:9).¹⁷⁴ It is through the Spirit's effectual ministry of gospel and law, promise and warning, command and consolation, etc. that the company of the saved come to see, judge, and act like Christ.¹⁷⁵ It is not creatures per se but covenant-keepers that are "in Christ." A company of communicants, the church participates in Christ as saints come to be remade in his image, or rather, his *mythos* (i.e., the plot or pattern of his history). The union is thus neither metaphysical nor moral but theodramatic. To partake of the divine nature is thus to participate in the theodrama that is God's being-in-communicative-activity, namely, the Son's fellowship with the Father and the Spirit.¹⁷⁶

174. This is a distinctly theological appropriation of Gadamer's notion, set forth in *Truth and Method*, that interpretation and understanding are matters of a text's "effective history."

175. Bruce McCormack similarly underscores the importance of viewing union with Christ in terms of sharing in the lived existence rather than divine essence of the Son ("What's at Stake in Current Debates Over Justification? The Crisis of Protestantism in the West," in *Husbands and Treier* (eds.), *Justification: What's At Stake in the Current Debates* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004], pp. 112–17).

176. Justification by faith is a paradigmatic example of how humans participate in divine communicative action. Justification is a Trinitarian communication of righteousness in which the Father declares, the Son executes, and the

In conclusion: the economic Trinity is, or rather *communicates*, the immanent Trinity. The God who is with us is the God who has perfect light, life, and love in himself. It is as communicative agents in eternal relation that Father, Son, and Spirit engage the economy of communication. Scripture singles out the Son in particular as the initiator or “author” (*archegos*) of salvation (Heb. 2:10). Yet those to whom he came received him not but “killed the Author of life” (Acts 3:15). This raises the question of the divine Author’s relation to his work: the text-of-the-world. Is God, by entering into dialogical relations (communion) with his creatures, affected by their response and, if so, how? The way of the Son into the far country involved suffering, but what about the “ways of God?” Does God suffer too? Is it the case, to paraphrase Newton’s Third Law of Motion, that for every divine-human communicative action and interaction there is an equal but opposite reaction, for every passion, a *compassion*?

Spirit effects the sinner’s righteousness. The work of declaring righteous is a triune work involving locution, illocution, and perlocution alike. In declaring us righteous, God implicitly promises to make actual what he says to be real, namely, our union with Christ.

PART III

God and World: authorial action and interaction

Are we confronted with matters spoken or performed? ... It is of the essence of drama that speech should move and motion speak.

– Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, p. 163

All of life is a dialogue, a dialogue between person and person, person and nature, person and God ... the kingdom of God is between us, between me and you, between me and God, between me and nature.

– Interview with V. V. Kozhinov, 1992, cited in Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin*, p. 8.

God works in his elect in two ways: inwardly, by his Spirit; outwardly, by his Word.

– Calvin, *Inst.* II.5.5

Divine author and human hero in dialogical relation

... if God is the Author of Existence, what can it mean to say God exists? There's a problem in vocabulary.¹

Authors are somehow both inside and outside their work.²

To say "God and world" is to express both a distinction and a relation. God is transcendent (God is holy, set apart from the world) and immanent (God is love, invested in the world). When Christians further describe the world as "creation" they place it in the context of the gospel story of its renewal in Christ through the Spirit; in so doing they posit an absolute distinction (Creator vs. created) within an even greater relation (the covenant of grace). A Christian doctrine of the triune God must provide an intelligible account of this distinction and relation.

Part II set forth just such an understanding, at least in preliminary fashion: God's being is that triune communicative agency by which Father, Son, and Spirit actively present themselves to and do things for one another and the world. This communicative variation on theism has many of the strengths of the voluntary kenotic-perichoretic relational theistic and panentheistic alternatives examined in Part I, but not their defects.³ In particular,

1. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 2004), p. 178.

2. Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*, 2nd edn. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 30.

3. Readers may recall that I criticized kenotic-relational theists and panentheists for their inability to maintain a robust distinction between Creator and creature. My "variation" on classical theism is perhaps better construed as a "retooling." The main improvement pertains to the shift in thinking about God's action in terms of a somewhat impersonal causality to a more explicitly personalist paradigm (i.e., communicative agency).

communicative theism describes what it means to partake of the divine nature in a way that does justice to the centrality of Christ as the climax of an extended covenantal history. Part III continues the constructive account by taking up the question of divine action and interaction with the world.

The initial difficulty – characterizing the nature of the God-world relation – is also the greatest, for the God who engages is also beyond us. Like the inhabitants of Edwin Abbott's "Flatland," theologians struggle to describe what ultimately escapes their linguistic and conceptual schemes.⁴ Abbot's story is set in two-dimensional Flatland and recounts the encounter between the eponymous narrator, A. Square, a two-dimensional figure, and a Stranger whom we later learn is a spherical-shaped inhabitant of three-dimensional Spaceland. From the two-dimensional perspective of the Square, the Sphere looks like a circle; "space" for the Square is only height and breadth, indefinitely prolonged. Consequently, the Sphere's attempts to explain three-dimensional space, and depth, fall on uncomprehending Square ears. It is only when the Sphere rises above Flatland (and thus becomes a smaller and smaller line from the perspective of the Square) and then re-enters, saying, "I am of a different order of Beings from those in Flatland," that the Square believes and hence becomes "a fit apostle for the Gospel of the Three Dimensions."⁵

The geometric analogy breaks down, of course, for God does not transcend the world simply because he has an additional dimension. Theology cannot speak of God merely by extrapolating from the world, or ourselves, as if God were simply something more. On the contrary, God is both utterly distinct from and intimately related to our world. We therefore need a different analogy that captures the way that God is both like and unlike other communicative agents. God is to our world, I submit, as an author is to the world of his or her text. More specifically, God is a *dialogical* author, and this in three respects. God authors the world (transcendence); God dialogues with the world (immanence); God authorially governs and cares for the

4. Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1992).

5. *Ibid.*, p. 62. The book concludes with A. Square, like the apostle Paul, in prison, a martyr for the cause of three-dimensional truth.

world dialogically (triune providence). The primary burden of the present chapter is to develop this analogy.⁶

There are at present a number of different discussions about the nature of divine action, though too often they run on parallel tracks that seldom cross:

- (1) Theology and science. One of the most intriguing conversations now taking place is under the joint auspices of the Vatican Observatory and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences: the "Divine Action Project."⁷ In light of the scientific picture of the world as displaying both regularities (law; necessity) and randomness (freedom; chance), this discussion focuses on how one can responsibly continue to assert that God is active in the physical world.
- (2) Philosophical theology. The research program of analytic theism continues apace, focusing mainly on the metaphysics rather than the physics of divine agency and on the task of conceptually clarifying the divine attributes.⁸
- (3) Systematic theology. Under this heading, we can further distinguish (a) versions of Thomism being discussed among Roman Catholics and others;⁹ (b) rehearsals of the familiar Calvinist–Arminian debates among Protestant evangelicals, along with the radical "open theism" revision of the latter;¹⁰ (c) variations on a Barthian theme;¹¹ (d) variations on a Trinitarian theme;¹² (e) feminist and like-minded liberationist accounts that protest ways of speaking about God that serve established

6. The model of authorship is especially appropriate in a project that understands being in terms of the act of existing and communicating as the primary act of persons, for to author is to act communicatively. I am the author (the originating agent) of my communicative acts. As we shall see, authors can also author others (e.g., the literary heroes that populate works of art).

7. Five volumes arising from these conferences have been published to date as a series on "Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action," ed. Robert John Russell. For a helpful review of the recent discussion, see Amos Yong, "'Divine Action' in Theology-and-Science: A Review Essay," *Zygon* 43 (2008), pp. 191–9.

8. See, for example, Hebblethwaite and Henderson (eds.), *Divine Action*; Keith Ward, *Divine Action* (London: Collins, 1990); Gregory E. Ganssle (ed.), *God & Time: Four Views*.

9. See Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*.

10. See Bruce A. Ware (ed.), *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: Four Views* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2008).

11. See, for example, the works of John Webster, Paul Molnar, and Bruce McCormack.

12. See, for example, the work of Colin Gunton, John Zizioulas, and Allan Coppel, *The God Who is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

power interests;¹³ (f) other works by individual theologians who have their own distinct emphases and concerns.¹⁴

While some approaches, like process theology, have adherents in all three discussions, it is more often the case that academic specialization and/or confessional declaration raise intimidating barriers between neighbors who could otherwise benefit from a chat over the back fence. This is to be regretted, for they share a common challenge, namely, to specify how God acts in a world of nature and human freedom. If God is real, then divine causality or agency must make a difference in the world. What sort of agency or causality does God exercise? Is God an efficient cause, to use Aristotle's terms, an agent or effective source of movement? If so, *where* amidst the structures and sinews of created reality does God act? If not, can we continue to speak of divine action?

The present work does not pretend to pronounce the final word on the above approaches but to contribute to the discussion by proposing a fresh way of thinking about the so-called "causal joint" between God and world, divine and human action.¹⁵ The authorial analogy I explore below highlights the concept of interpersonal communicative agency.¹⁶ For, whatever model of the God-world relationship we adopt, it must allow us to provide a sufficiently robust account of special divine action in order to do justice to the Bible's depiction of God as not less than a personal agent, an agent who is able to make a difference in the world, not least by doing things with words such

13. See, for example, Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000); Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, pp. 32–48.

14. See, for example, the works of Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Robert Jenson.

15. John Polkinghorne states the problem of the causal joint as that of knowing "how physical process might accommodate the holistic effects of human and divine agency" (Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology: An Introduction* [London and Minneapolis: SCM and Fortress Press, 1998], p. 89).

16. As we suggested in ch. 4, there is a sense in which everything that exists is "communicative," because everything that exists actively "presents" or "communicates" itself by being what it is (i.e., characteristically does). While I believe that God can bring about changes in the physical world through his speech-determination of things, it is beyond the scope of the present book to enter into these debates. However, as we shall see, many of the leading voices in the theology-science debate (e.g., Clayton) have themselves come to focus on God's ability to effect changes in the world by persuading human beings to do things. The gap between the present account and debates in theology and science may thus not be as large as it initially appears.

as making promises, revealing, and commanding. To understand the Bible's depiction of God's action, one must conceptually elaborate the manner in which God enters into genuine interpersonal communication with human beings.¹⁷ For the most important divine action after creating is, according to the Scriptures, *making (and keeping) covenants*. What must God and God's relation to the world be in the light of God's covenanting activity?

Fidelity to the Bible's depiction of divine agency, while vital, is not the only theological desideratum. Contemporary intelligibility is another. Because communication comes through the senses, it follows that God must act instrumentally in or on some process in the world: "Only with a plausible account of how God can affect the world 'instrumentally' can we proceed to address the question of how God might communicate 'symbolically' with humanity."¹⁸ Arthur Peacocke and John Polkinghorne, two of the leading voices in the theology-science discussion, claim that God influences the course of worldly events by inputting "information" into nature, a process that involves no tinkering with either matter or energy. They disagree, however, as to the level on which God's inputting takes place. Polkinghorne favors the quantum level, Peacocke the holistic level of complex systems at which new properties (e.g., DNA) emerge and influence what happens at lower (e.g., cellular) levels.¹⁹ At what level does God's communicative action take place according to a remythologizing theology: quantum? molecular? psychological? social?²⁰

17. William Alston, "Divine-Human Dialogue and the Nature of God," in *Divine Nature and Human Language*, pp. 144-61.

18. Peacocke, "The Sound of Sheer Silence," in Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, Theo C. Meyering, and Michael A. Arbib (eds.), *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City State and Berkeley, CA: Vatican Observatory Publications and Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1999), pp. 235-6.

19. For a complete description of these positions, see Nicholas Saunders, *Divine Action & Modern Science* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) chs. 7 and 8. Saunders himself is pessimistic as to the credibility of either approach. Peacocke correctly identifies the key issue when he asks "how God can affect our thinking and so events, or patterns of events, in our brains" ("The Sound of Sheer Silence," p. 233). In my view, God "communicates" not simply information (whether propositional or DNA), but form, matter, and energy or, in the theological terms of the previous chapter, the light, life, and love that characterizes God's being-as-activity.

20. See Alvin Plantinga, "What is intervention?" *Theology and Science* 6 (2008), pp. 369-401.

The Bible both depicts God doing things in and through speaking and is itself an ingredient in the economy of triune communication.²¹ Specifically, the Bible depicts God “cutting covenants” and presents itself as the testament to this communicative act. By the very nature of the case, only God can covenant for God, and only by speaking or otherwise communicating intent can God enter into covenantal relation with others: “Covenant making is a verbal action with illocutionary force.”²² The illocutionary force of covenanting is that of establishing a relationship in which both parties undertake solemn obligations, with sanctions (blessings; curses) for covenant loyalty/disloyalty. *Covenanting* is both the substance and the form of God’s characteristic communicative action. To remythologize theology is therefore to adhere to the twin principles that “God *does* as God *says*” AND “God is as God *does*.”²³

God presents himself in Scripture as the one who presents himself in speech: “the transcendent God has deigned to enter human consciousness as the *dramatis persona* of biblical literature.”²⁴ There is a sense, then, in which we may speak of dual divine authorship: God appears as a speech agent in Scripture and as the ultimate speech agent of Scripture itself. Divine speak-acting serves as both the material and the formal principle of remythologizing theology. Fully to understand the God-world relation means coming to grips not with a generically causal but with a specifically *communicative* joint: *God’s relation to the world is a function of his triune authorial action, the self-communication of God the Father through the Word in the Spirit.*

Theistic authorship: unpacking the analogy

God is the initiator and “lord” of his communicative action, and this on three levels, with regard to (1) creation, (2) covenant, and (3) canon. Divine “authorship” marks, first, the infinite qualitative distinction between the Creator God and the human creature. The

21. That God relates to the world by doing things in speaking is the material principle of remythologizing theology; that the Bible is a form of divine communicative action is its formal principle. I shall return to this distinction in the Conclusion.

22. Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), p. 96.

23. So Webster on Barth: “God is as God does; God’s works manifest God’s essence” (*Karl Barth*, 2nd edn. [London and New York: Continuum, 2004], p. 121).

24. Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament*, p. 135.

divine Author is “other” than creation. Authors do not simply have one more dimension than their characters, but a different existence altogether: the author is the originator, the creatures (characters) the originated. God is the “unauthored Author.” Second, it is precisely as Author that God freely enters into covenantal relation with human creatures. Third, God binds himself to his covenantal words by authorizing a covenant document (canon).

God authors human creatures in his image to be willing covenantal agents. There is an “analogy of authorship” between Creator and human creature that has something to do with creativity: “when we turn back to see ... the original upon which the ‘image’ of God was modeled, we find only the single assertion, ‘God created.’”²⁵ Only God creates *ex nihilo*, yet humans display a measure of creativity as communicative agents. Language, after all, is “the infinite use of finite means” (Wilhelm von Humboldt) and human language users have the ability to form countless sentences. Though God is the Author of all that is, human beings nevertheless exercise a secondary authorship, and hence genuine freedom.²⁶

The analogia auctoris

To begin with a provisional definition: by “author” I mean a person who originates or creates a work by speaking or writing, a person responsible “for the acts that words are.”²⁷ “Authorship” designates the capacities and status associated with being an author.²⁸

25. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 22. When read against the background of other ancient Near Eastern creation stories, Genesis 1–11 stands out for its emphasis on God’s gifting the human creature with *agency*: the ability to take initiatives, to make history, to bring about results in the world.

26. God’s speech does not compete with human speech for the same reason that divine action does not compete with human action; they are on different levels.

As we shall see, God’s authorial speech both constitutes and consummates human characters, and this is not the contradiction but the basis of the human creature’s freedom and answerability. Indeed, it is for this reason that Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian literary theorist, serves as an apt conversation partner to the present project. Bakhtin understands “authoring” to connote *responsible and answerable communicative action*. For an introduction to the role of authoring in Bakhtin’s overall project, see Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), pp. 32–57.

27. Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), pp. 92–3.

28. God alone has the ability fully to determine himself. Human beings enjoy the power of self-determination under certain God-given limitations (e.g., their place and span in time).

In particular, it names that peculiar agency whereby persons freely do or make things, especially with words. By extension, it refers to an author's corpus or body of work: the thing done or word made (poem = *poiesis*, "to make or do"). The wager of the present section is that we will come to a better understanding of the relation of God's authorial agency to that of human beings, and of divine transcendence and immanence in general, by working through the *analogia auctoris* (analogy of authorship).

The author is the efficient "cause" of his or her work, the person responsible for the form (ethos), content (logos), and intended effects (pathos) of the thing done or word made. Authorship involves owning up to what one has done in using words in particular ways to do particular things.²⁹ One's authorship is the measure of what one can do and hence the index of one's "poetic" (creative) power: "I am co-responsible for the shaping of others with whom I interact; and as an artist, I author a work of art ... a literary hero, who will author others."³⁰

The analogy of divine authorship seems initially to work best to preserve God's transcendence. The Author is none other than "the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth." As maker, God has control and authority over the world of his work, but does it also make sense to speak of divine immanence (i.e., authorial presence)?³¹ It does if, with Dorothy Sayers, we are thinking of the triune God – the Playwright who enters into the play as an actor. Sayers's tripartite understanding of authorship includes the Creative Idea, the Creative Activity begotten of that Idea, and the Creative Power that proceeds from the Activity and solicits a lively response.³² She correlates these creative moments with the Trinity and concludes "these three are one." Hence the Father takes the authorial initiative, the Son authorially executes and the Spirit authorially perfects each and every divine communicative act (e.g., light, life, love).

The gospel announces the Author's arrival on stage. Here is what Sayers says about the "episode" of Jesus' incarnation and

29. I shall later connect the concept of authorship to that of answerability.

30. Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship*, p. 33.

31. The categories control, authority, and presence come from John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, chs. 3–6, who uses them to develop the notion of God's transcendence and immanence in the direction of a theology of covenant Lordship.

32. Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, pp. 37–9.

passion: "The leading part in this was played, it is alleged, by the Author, who presents it as a brief epitome of the plan of the whole work."³³ Sayers's "plan" corresponds to the one St. Paul mentions in Ephesians 1:10: in the "thing done" or "word made" that is the life of Jesus Christ, the divine author makes known to us "the mystery of his will ... which he set forth ... as a plan (*oikonomia*) for the fullness of time." The saving *oikonomia* is not only an economy of communication but an economy of triune authorship. Better: "divine authorship" is shorthand for the Father authoring creation and redemption in Christ through the Spirit.

In light of God's speaking creation, covenant, and canon into being, divine authorship is an apt aid for understanding the nature of the dramatic action outside (and inside) the world of the text, and thus a helpful heuristic for grasping divine transcendence and immanence. Still, important questions about the author's control, authority, and presence to the world of the text remain. Three are particularly important for our purposes: (1) Is the nature of this Author-character interaction best construed in terms of causality or of something else and, if so, what? (2) Can there really be genuine interaction between characters and Author, between creatures of finite freedom and an infinitely free Creator? (3) May characters ever reject the Author's authority or override the Author's control?³⁴ We will address the second and third queries in the next chapter; the rest of the present chapter takes up the first by examining two rival concepts of authorship.

Tolstoy or Dostoevsky? Monarchic vs. democratic authorship

The works of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky exemplify "an insoluble controversy, in which two sets of assumptions, two

33. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

34. These questions go some way in explaining why I have found Bakhtin such an intriguing interlocutor for this chapter: "The Bakhtin of the early 1920s was convinced that literary authors are related to their work very much as God is related to the cosmos: both are transcendent, active, and loving. Their creations, by contrast, are passive, receptive, and dependent" (Ralph Wood, "Christianity and Bakhtin," *Modern Theology* 18 [2002], p. 120). The editors of a collection of essays on Bakhtin and Christianity suggest another reason: the Incarnation "embodies many of Bakhtin's major ideas" (Susan M. Felch and Paul J. Contino, "Introduction: A Feeling for Faith," in *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001], p. 17).

fundamental conceptions of existence, confront each other.”³⁵ Tolstoy’s consummate narrative artistry is to the panoply of human life what Dostoevsky’s is to the intricacy of the human soul. However, as both George Steiner and Mikhail Bakhtin have noted, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky work with competing conceptions of authorship that parallel the way in which the two types of theism we examined in Part I view the God-world relation.³⁶

Theistic supernaturalism: authorship as monologic determination It is commonplace to depict the God of classical theism as Tolstoy-like: a monarchical author who retains absolute control over the “text” of the world. Tolstoy’s novels are large-scale verbal compositions, poetic forms that provide meaningful frames for a sequence of historical and social events. Steiner associates Tolstoy’s novels with the epic genre in their grand sweep and in “the serene confidence of their narrative voice.”³⁷ Tolstoy is like God, reigning over his epic hero, “a closed and ready-made character who fits neatly into a prescribed plot.”³⁸ Even Tolstoy’s short stories are “epic” in the sense that the author is in full control. In “Three Deaths,” for example, Tolstoy interweaves the deaths of a rich noblewoman, a coachman, and a tree. The three know nothing of one another and never meet in the story; they come together only in the author’s consciousness. The author knows everything about them; their deaths take on final meaning only in light of the “all-encompassing field of vision of the author.”³⁹ Significantly, the character or hero of the work is denied the last word: “He cannot break out of the fixed framework of the author’s second-hand evaluation finalizing him.”⁴⁰ Bakhtin dubs

35. N. A. Berdiaev, *L’Esprit de Dostoïevski* (Paris, 1946) as cited in George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in Contrast* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 11.

36. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, tr. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). While others have reflected on the self/other distinction, Bakhtin “is the only major figure to frame the problem in terms of authorship” (Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984], p. 80). There is a “left-wing” (polyphonic) and “right-wing” (dialogical) interpretation of Bakhtin’s view of Dostoevsky’s conception of authorship to which I shall return in due course.

37. Caryl Emerson, “Tolstoy and Dostoevsky,” in Nathan A. Scott and Ronald A. Sharp (eds.), *Reading George Steiner* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 77.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

39. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 70.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 70–1.

Tolstoy's style of authorship *monologic*: "The author neither argues with his hero nor agrees with him. He speaks not with him, but about him."⁴¹ The only point of view or voice that counts is that of the author: "Monologism is the aggressive self-assertion of authors over their characters ... giving them a destiny that is not their own but their creator's will."⁴² Tolstoy's characters are merely mouth-pieces for the author who uses them to express his own ideas, teach his own values, and display his own point of view. There is no dialogic relation between author and hero in Tolstoy's work.

Classical theism appears similarly monologic, at least to its kenotic-perichoretic relational critics. The theistic view of the world is comparable to that of a Tolstoyan text: a monological epic. World history, to use Sayers's terminology, stems from the Idea, Activity, and Power of God alone. So Bavinck: "Just as a human artist realizes his idea in a work of art, so God creates all things in accordance with the ideas he has formed. The world is God's work of art."⁴³

Theologians, philosophers, and scientists have all made use of the analogy of authorship to explore the God-world relation, though the authorship they typically have in view, for good or for ill, is the Tolstoyan variety, according to which the author serves as the exclusive or primary cause of what happens.⁴⁴ For example, while Duncan's death at Macbeth's hand can be described on one level entirely by the causes at work within the world of Shakespeare's text, on another level one might say that Shakespeare is the ultimate cause of Duncan's death: "Every event in *Macbeth* has two causes ... the causes within the play itself, and the intentions of Shakespeare."⁴⁵ On this view, the author's "primary" causality does not simply set the scene but cooperates with the real secondary causality of the characters. However, when certain events

41. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

42. Ralph Wood, "Christianity and Bakhtin," p. 121. On "monologization," see also Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 56–8.

43. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. II: *God and Creation*, p. 206.

44. On the analogy of the author, see *inter alia* David Burrell, "Divine Practical Knowing," in Hebblethwaite and Henderson (eds.), *Divine Action*, pp. 99–101; James Ross, *Philosophical Theology* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980), pp. 150–76; Barbara K. Olson, "Who Thinks This Book? Or Why the Author/God Analogy Merits Our Continued Attention," *Narrative* 14.3 (2006), pp. 339–46.

45. Frame, *Doctrine of God*, p. 157. Frame borrows this illustration from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 321–2 who uses it as an example of how God's providence combines primary and secondary causes.

occur that are explicable only in terms of the author's unilateral intervention, literary critics speak of a *deus ex machina*. Neither picture is sufficient to ground a genuinely interpersonal relationship between an author and his characters according to kenotic-perichoretic relational critics: "even if he [the dramatist] makes them say 'I love my creator' in his drama, this is not mutual love in the real sense."⁴⁶

Two apparent problems dog the "primary causality" model of divine action.⁴⁷ The first concerns its intelligibility insofar as it fails to explain the nature of the "causal joint" between the primary and secondary causes (i.e., author and character). Theism depicts God as a supernatural author who is "external to nature, dwelling in an entirely different type of 'space' and being of an entirely different 'substance'."⁴⁸ Any action of such an Author on the text-of-the-world must take the form of an intervention from the outside, the very picture that most participants in the theology and science discussion abhor. For to posit miraculous divine interventions is to challenge the very notions upon which science depends – the natural order; the regularity of physical laws – as well as the rationality and fidelity of God as sustainer of the world.⁴⁹

The second difficulty in thinking about divine action in terms of primary causality concerns the problem of evil: if Shakespeare determines all that happens in the world of the text, is he not responsible, not only for Duncan's death, but for all the murders, rapes, and pillaging in the story? Stated differently: if the author can intervene in order to make the story smoother, why does he not do so more often? Shakespeare's excuse is that no real person actually suffers from his non-intervention. It is difficult to see how the Author of the universe could make the same appeal; there is no alibi for being God, which is precisely why theologians and philosophers wrestle with the possibility of theodicy.

Sayers acknowledges the author's power to intervene at any moment in the development of his or her stories: "he can twist either character or plot from the course of its nature by an exertion

46. I. Howard Marshall, "Predestination in the New Testament," in Clark Pinnock (ed.), *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975), p. 139.

47. Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology*, p. 86.

48. Arthur Peacocke, *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 17.

49. See Saunders, *Divine Action and Modern Science*, p. 208.

of arbitrary power.”⁵⁰ She is far from convinced, however, that given the author’s love for the creature, such interventions are desirable. Sayers heartily resented the suggestion that she ensure that Lord Peter Wimsey, her most famous character, eventually become a Christian: “No; you shall not impose either your will or mine upon my creature. He is what he is. I will work no irrelevant miracles upon him, either for propaganda, or to curry favour, or to establish the consistency of my own principles. He exists in his own right and not to please you. Hands off.”⁵¹ Readers who view characters as mere mouthpieces for the author mount “an assault upon the independence of his creatures.”⁵² The Tolstoyan author is, for Sayers, sub-Christian: what we need is a model of authorship in which we can see “the perfect reconciliation of divine predestination with free created will.”⁵³

The strength of the Tolstoyan model is that it upholds God’s authorial transcendence. God’s authorship is an expression of his free creativity: “creation, because it is linked to will and not to nature, and because it emerges *ex nihilo* and not from pre-existing matter, is identified with divine freedom.”⁵⁴ A monologic God is answerable to no one: there is no other point of view from which to pose a question, no other voice to articulate it even if there were. However, the main problem with this view of monologic divine authorship, more serious even than the complaints about deterministic interventions, is that it fails to account for the dialogical interaction of God and human beings depicted in the Bible or, for that matter, the Bible’s diverse human authorial voices themselves.

Relational theism and panentheism: authorship as kenotic conversation As we saw in chapter 3, there is an emerging consensus among contemporary theologians, especially but not exclusively among those who converse with scientists, that a non-interventionist model of divine action requires a model of God’s kenosis or voluntary self-limitation with regard to his relation with the world. The good news

50. Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, p. 78.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

54. C. Paul Schroeder, “Suffering Towards Personhood: John Zizioulas and Fyodor Dostoevsky in Conversation on Freedom and the Human Person,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 45 (2001), p. 245.

of kenotic-perichoretic relational theology is that God limits himself “for us.”⁵⁵

Steiner and Bakhtin agree that Dostoevsky, by writing novels that bring voices other than the author’s into textual being, represents a great leap forward in the concept of authorship. Steiner views Dostoevsky not as an epic narrator but as a dramatist for whom “speech should move and motion speak.”⁵⁶ Steiner contrasts Tolstoy’s “divine providence” over his characters with Dostoevsky’s ability “to listen with an inward ear to the independent and unforeseeable dynamics of action ... The characters seem admirably free from their creator’s will.”⁵⁷ This is precisely the element that Bakhtin sees as defining Dostoevsky’s genius, though he associates it not with drama but the novel, a form on which Dostoevsky left an indelible stamp.

There is debate over the extent to which Bakhtin sought to silence or “exile” the author in order to deliver characters from the tyranny of the plot and the determinism of serving only to articulate authorial ideas.⁵⁸ What is clear is that he believed Dostoevsky to have wrought something new in the novel, and hence in the concept of authorship. For the sake of clarity, I shall distinguish between a “left-wing” interpretation of Bakhtin, according to which he advocates a “radical polyphonic” authorship of immanence, and

55. We concluded in ch. 3 that what starts out as an emphasis on voluntary self-limitation eventually slips into a form of metaphysical limitation on God’s freedom.

56. Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, p. 163.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 173. Of special note here is that emphasis on the author’s *listening*, a point to which we shall return in the next chapter in our discussion of prayer.

58. In Coates’s words: “We find, then, in [Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*] a model of authorship that vacillates between design and dialogue, transcendence and immanence, thereby the former pole gravitates back to a notion of control no longer acceptable to Bakhtin, whilst the latter pulls towards the equally undesirable and resisted extreme of the dissolution of the distinction between author and characters” (*Christianity in Bakhtin*, p. 98). This is one aspect of a larger debate over the trajectory of Bakhtin’s thought, with some arguing for a centrifugal move away from ethics and authority towards the “carnavalesque” and others arguing that Bakhtin’s centripetal Christian and ethical interests continued, albeit in a somewhat camouflaged manner given his context in Stalinist Russia. For an overview of how Bakhtin has been received in Russia and elsewhere, see Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton University Press, 1997). It is beyond the scope of the present work to embark on a “quest for the historical Bakhtin.” My own view approximates what I am calling the “right-wing” interpretation of his trajectory. However, nothing in my argument hinges on this intramural debate between Bakhtin scholars.

a “right-wing” interpretation that focuses on a “dialogical polyphonic” authorship able to preserve authorial immanence and transcendence alike.⁵⁹ My wager is that this brief detour into the dispute over the meaning of Dostoevsky’s authorship will yield theological dividends for understanding God’s communicative relation to the world.

Bakhtin finds Dostoevsky’s novels peopled with characters that speak in their own voices, not merely as mouthpieces for their author. In monologic novels, only the author’s viewpoint gets expressed. By contrast, the characters in Dostoevsky’s novels speak as virtual equals to the author: “Dostoevsky ... creates not voiceless slaves (as does Zeus), but *free* people, capable of standing *alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him.”⁶⁰ Bakhtin claims that Dostoevsky created a new literary genre: the polyphonic novel. Polyphony means that the characters have real voices, and this entails a radical revision of the author’s role and position: “For the author the hero is not ‘he’ and not ‘I’ but a fully valid ‘thou,’ that is, another and other autonomous ‘I’ (‘thou art’). The hero is the subject of a deeply serious, *real* dialogic mode of address.”⁶¹

Polyphonic authorship involves the author making space for and listening to voices other than his own: “the variety of discourses in the novel prevents the novelist from imposing a single world-view upon his readers even if he wanted to.”⁶² Polyphony therefore signals nothing less than a Copernican revolution with regard to the position of the author: “as the earth is but one of many planets, the

59. Note the theological terms in which Ralph Wood explains the contrast between the two positions: “On the left, he is often regarded as the atheist advocate of a ... polyphonic pluralism that spurns all notions of final truth. On the right, especially in Russia, he is sometimes seen as a Christian apologist who had to disguise his faith for political reasons” (“Christianity and Bakhtin,” p. 119). “Radical polyphonic” and “dialogical polyphonic” are my terms. By minting these labels, I seek only to distinguish between two kinds of polyphonic authorship: the one (“radical”) that characterizes kenotic-relational theology, and the other (“dialogical”) that characterizes the present proposal.

60. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 6.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 63. Cf. Bakhtin’s claim that “a genuine polyphony of fully valued voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 6, *italics* his). The best discussion of polyphony, and indeed of Bakhtin’s thought in general, remains Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, esp. ch. 6.

62. David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 22.

author's consciousness is but one of many consciousnesses ... a polyphonic work ... *demands* that the author cease to exercise monologic control."⁶³ Simply put, the author's voice comes to occupy the same plane of existence as that of his or her characters. Some commentators see the activity of the author receding even further in Bakhtin's later work, giving place to the author's "exile," that is, to "the prior and primary global cultural forces of language."⁶⁴ Radical polyphony thus becomes an open process in which the sense of an ending proves authorially elusive.⁶⁵

Transposed into theology, radical polyphonic authorship stands for the way in which God orchestrates an open-ended conversation among his creatures. *Its crucial assumption is that an author's genuine love for his creation requires an emptying out or kenosis that results in the author's relinquishing control and authority in order to be genuinely present.* Human characters become co-creators and co-authors of an indeterminate wiki-world.⁶⁶ Characters become collaborators in the writing of their own histories. The result: a loss in the author's privileged (sovereign) status, hence the similarity between the "self-exiled" author and the self-exiled God of kenotic-perichoretic relational theism.⁶⁷

Instead of divine intervention (i.e., a form of direct Authorial discourse), the kenotic-perichoretic relational theist posits divine influence. Peacocke maintains that God works "in, with, and under" the natural processes of the world, not over (or against) them.⁶⁸ Only such a theistic naturalism respects the "characters," human and non-human, that populate the physical world, as well as the law-like

63. Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, pp. 240, 238.

64. Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin*, p. 113.

65. Morson and Emerson speak somewhat elliptically of the "unity of creative eventness" that derives from our sense of the "integrity" of the creative process (*Creation of a Prosaics*, p. 256).

66. A "wikipedia" is a web-based encyclopedia authored entirely by its users.

67. Coates argues that Bakhtin was never able to reconcile the idea that the polyphonic author is "an equal participant in dialogue with his heroes" (i.e., immanent) with the idea that the author is "transgredient" or "outside" the world of the text (i.e., transcendent). See Coates, "The First and the Second Adam in Bakhtin's Early Thought," in Felch and Contino (eds.), *Bakhtin and Religion*, esp. pp. 74–5 and *Christianity in Bakhtin*, chs. 5, 6. Interestingly, Bakhtin himself demurs from "left-wing" interpretations of his work: a love that empties out the self "leads also to the abdication of answerability" (Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* [Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001], p. 105). As we shall see, a little "outsideness" is for Bakhtin not a dangerous thing.

68. Peacocke, *All That Is*, p. 19.

regularity and openness (i.e., quantum indeterminacy) that characterize the world's evolutionary plot.⁶⁹

What, then, is the nature of God's authorial influence according to this radical polyphonic model? To be real is "to have causal power,"⁷⁰ yet the one thing panentheists rule out is authorial intervention. A polyphonic author does not have to interfere with causal laws but can exert influence at the level of the whole. God is less a physical or chemical or electromagnetic force than an inputter of information into the world system.⁷¹ God's "pattern-forming influence" represents an indirect authorial communication.⁷² Divine action on this scheme is less a matter of singular miracles than of a constant communicative influence which, without abrogating natural regularities at any level, nevertheless makes a difference. According to Clayton's emergentist "panentheistic analogy," the universe is open to being affected in "top-down" fashion in ways analogous to the mind's causal influence on the body.⁷³ Peacocke wonders, however, whether this quasi mind-body, "top-down" causal influence is robust enough to merit the rubric "special divine action."⁷⁴ He believes that it is, but only if one interprets the world, from a perspective of faith, as a sacrament of divine grace.⁷⁵ We neither meet nor hear from God directly, nor do we experience his "force." Nevertheless, we may infer his holistic influence from certain patterns of events and thus discern his self-expression in the world.⁷⁶

69. "If one accepts a picture of the world consistent with scientific practice and results, then one cannot imagine that God regularly intervenes in the natural order in a miraculous way, setting aside the patterns of nature and directly bringing about particular physical or chemical changes independent of the causal antecedents for these particular events" (Clayton, "On Divine and Human Agency: Reflections of a Co-Laborer," in Peacocke, *All That Is*, p. 163). However, as Keith Ward points out in the same collection of essays, we have no reservations in speaking about human actions, even though these are arguably "interventions" too ("Personhood, Spirit, and the Supernatural," p. 157).

70. Peacocke, *All That Is*, p. 16.

71. Both Polkinghorne and Peacocke appeal to the notion of information input.

72. Peacocke, *All That Is*, p. 46.

73. Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, p. 233-40. Cf. his statement in *Adventures in the Spirit*: "If (and only if) downward mental causation is a viable notion, God could bring about changes in individuals' subjective dispositions without negating the laws that we know to hold in physics and biology" (p. 197).

74. Peacocke, *All That Is*, p. 47.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Theologians need not be naturalists like Peacocke in order to hold a similarly radical polyphonic view of the divine Author. As we have seen, open theists, process theologians, and other types of panentheists describe God's relation to the world in kenotic-perichoretic terms that see divine action in terms of loving persuasion.⁷⁷ The ensuing question is whether these positions conceive divine action (and causality) in terms similar to Peacocke's top-down/whole-part determinative influences. Those who cannot follow Peacocke all the way down, reserving God's right to intervene from time to time, come to resemble classical theists, at least momentarily.⁷⁸ Alternatively, those who take up the panentheistic analogy must decide whether one can speak of special divine action if God's voice is only one of many influences vying for the creature's attention. To cite Clayton's formulation of the problem: "Wholes constrain the behavior of their parts in a passive sense, whereas personal agents are actors who are the active authors of their own actions."⁷⁹ Here, then, is the key question: is God's authorial influence *agential*? Can God author action and, if so, what kind? If God cannot originate a sequence of events or bring about a particular action, can God be said actually to *love* the world? Perhaps so, if love means "intent to persuade to the better?" If, however, there is no guarantee that God will persuade, for what can we hope? If God can do no more than exercise a benign general influence – if God cannot *do* anything special – then perhaps, to paraphrase John Wesley, God's love is such to make the blood run not cold but lukewarm ...

To affirm a radical polyphonic divine authorship is to imply that God limits his speech and activity, his authority and power – his *say-so* – to sustain a genuine conversation with his creatures, some of whom (the human kind) become virtual co-authors. The polyphonic Author is present to but not in control of creatures if "control"

77. Note, too, that many process theologians and open theists claim the high ground of compatibility with contemporary science. See, for example, Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, pp. 107–11.

78. John Sanders, an open theist, wavers with regard to the question of whether, given indeterminacy, God's purpose can be thwarted: "there are some things that the almighty God retains the right to enact unilaterally in the future" (*The God Who Risks*, p. 234).

79. "On Divine and Human Agency," p. 169. Clayton's own view is that the only instance of whole-part influence that can serve as an adequate model is the mind/body model of personal agency where the mental causally influences the physical.

means determining their actions.⁸⁰ Is there any guarantee, however, that polyphony will not degenerate into a cacophony in which everyone says and does what is right in his or her eyes?

Perhaps the limit case of the radical polyphonic novel is Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, published in 1939.⁸¹ The unnamed narrator of the book, a lazy student at the University of Dublin, is writing a novel about another lazy author, Dermot Trellis, who borrows characters from other books and invents some of his own. The narrator informs us that it is undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad: "Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living."⁸² Trellis nevertheless exercises complete control over his minions, except when he falls asleep. During these periods, Trellis's characters, both created and borrowed, devise a way to drug him in order to prolong their freedom. One character even begins to write a story in which bad things happen to Trellis. The tables thus turned, the characters are freed to wreak their revenge upon the author.

Back in the real world, some characters – call them literary theorists – have announced the traditional author's "death." Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault raise two points against monological authorship in particular: first, authors are repressive figures who limit readers' freedom; second, authors are passive figures who do not create texts but are rather the "sites" where "writing" happens.⁸³ Barthes goes so far as to claim that "it is language which speaks, not the author."⁸⁴ What is interesting is the negative reaction in literary theory and theology alike to the very idea of an "Author-God," that is, an authoritative voice who calls works/worlds into being and rules them from on high.

What remains of the analogy of authorship after the demise of the monological model? Is there an alternative to the radical polyphonic

80. For a discussion of the sovereignty appropriate to a God who, by virtue of creating something other, voluntarily limits himself, see John Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, ch. 7, esp. pp. 224–8.

81. (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998).

82. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

83. For a fuller account of this development, see Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh University Press, 1992) and H. L. Hix, *Morte D'Author: An Autopsy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

84. "The Death of the Author," in William Irwin (ed.), *The Death and Resurrection of the Author* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 2002), p. 4.

notion and to the corresponding kenotic-perichoretic model of the God-world relation? The crucial issue for theologians who continue to employ the analogy of authorship is how to conceive of special divine action. Any Christian theology worth its salt (and light) must be able to ascribe the Exodus of Israel and the resurrection of Jesus Christ to divine agency. Is there a third way if neither *intervention* nor *influence* is up to the task? There is: *interjection*. To interject is to interrupt a situation through an abrupt address: “Samuel!” (1 Sam. 3:6); “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt. 4:17); “Follow me” (Mt. 9:9). In the next section I shall once again co-opt Bakhtin, this time to argue (with a little help from Barth and Balthasar) for a dialogical version of polyphonic authorship that gives pride of place to divine interjection, and to “the word of the Lord” that came to them and comes to us.⁸⁵

Authoring humanity: the God-world relation as divine dialogue

Language and hearing are at the center of being. (Jacques Ellul)⁸⁶

The Christian story – the grand narrative that encompasses the histories of the cosmos, of Israel, of Christ, and the church – has a beginning, middle, and end. According to the Scriptures, that God is the author of this grand narrative is never in doubt. The same, however, cannot be said of contemporary understandings of the nature of this divine authorship. Many participants in the dialogue between theology and science object to the notion of Authorial interventions in the realm of nature; others object to the notion of Authorial interference in the realm of human freedom. “Kenotic conversation” (i.e., polyphonic authorship) is the preferred alternative among theologians of the “new orthodoxy” inasmuch as it avoids the notion of God’s instrumental causality in favor of “softer” forms of influence.

No one wants to depict the relationship between God and human persons solely in terms of what Jürgen Habermas calls “strategic”

85. The three B’s – Barth, Balthasar, and Bakhtin – share a common context (the twentieth century) and a common foe (modernity’s “turn to the subject”), though they respond from different theological points of view (Reformed Protestant, Roman Catholic, Eastern/Russian Orthodox). Weaving their voices together, as I begin to do here, produces a dialogical catholicity.

86. Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), pp. 37–8.

action. Strategic action aims at bringing about a desired change in the world by manipulating or controlling an entity's behavior. By way of contrast, the success of "communicative" action depends on an agent's bringing about understanding on the part of other interlocutors about some matter, reaching a consensus, and freely coordinating their ensuing actions.⁸⁷

Critics of classical theism object to what appears (to them) to be its overemphasis on strategic (i.e., causal; coercive) action, a prime example of monologic, unidirectional authorship. Persons can (and do) treat one another strategically, but it is hard to square this "I-it" behavior with genuinely personal relations, much less God's love: "If the actors are interested solely in the *success*, i.e., the *consequences* or *outcomes* of their actions, they will try to reach their objectives ... through external means by using weapons or good, threats or enticements."⁸⁸ On the other hand, it is hard to square weaker notions of divine authorship (e.g., Peacocke's top-down general influence) with the biblical accounts of special divine action and God's mighty speech acts. The remythologizing way forward calls for a robust concept of triune authorship that accounts for (1) divine sovereignty – the *Godness* of God; (2) human freedom – the person in the *imago Dei*; and (3) the integrity of their relation. My thesis is that triune authorship is best viewed in terms of communicative rather than strategic action, and that communicative action is best understood in conjunction with Bakhtin's dialogic conception of authorship.⁸⁹

Authoring answerable persons: the imago Dei as vocation

All human beings, and not literary artists only, have authorial potential. I "author" myself, not in the sense of *ex nihilo* creation but rather

87. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*. Habermas is a social theorist concerned with social justice. This is for him a matter of free and unimpeded communicative action. For an application of his ideas to theology, see Helmut Peukert, *Science, Action, and Fundamental Theology: Towards a Theory of Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984) and Nicholas Adams, *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

88. Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 133.

89. My account does not discount God's strategic action but focuses on communicative action. God can "intervene" in the course of nature as can human beings, and does so for the same reason: to bring about some change. Miracles are extraordinary manifestations of God's "general" authorship of the natural order. The focus of the present work, however, is on what Scripture deems primary: God's dialogical action in the human order.

by being the agent of my own actions. Unlike God, human authors cannot speak themselves or other things into existence but have to work with the givens – genetic, physical, cultural, and linguistic – of their place and time. While human agents can do many things by speaking, there are some things – “dialogical acts” – that require the cooperation of others.⁹⁰ Bakhtin thus posits the principle of “non-self-sufficiency”: “the impossibility of the existence of a single consciousness. I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another.”⁹¹

Bakhtin’s earliest work focuses on the ethical aspect of authorship: human agents, as “authors” of their acts, are answerable for what they do, not as members of a general species but as particular persons. Bakhtin criticizes the formal and universal nature of Kant’s moral imperative in favor of a stress on the unsubstitutable singularity of an agent’s time and place: not, “I think, therefore I am (obliged to act like any other rational person)” but “*Here I am!*” (1 Sam. 3:4). He distinguishes the abstractable content of a given act (the typical fodder of moral theory) from its concrete actualization at a given point in space and time. An agent must be prepared to give an account both for *what* he or she did and *that* he or she did it. Christian theologians must, of course, go even further. Answerability is ultimately a matter not merely of ethics but of covenantal responsibility, a matter of responding to God’s call and command. Human authors are answerable for what they do and say before God.

There are two aspects to the *analogia auctoris*. We have already mentioned the first: God’s creating the world is like an author’s writing a text. The truth, however, is that God’s creativity or originating power is the substance of which ours is only the shadow. And this leads to the second aspect, namely, that human beings are in the image of God; we author because God first authored us.

Disputes over the meaning of the *imago Dei* often neglect one crucial textual detail. Scripture depicts God as *addressing* the man and woman in the garden: “and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and

90. The term “dialogical act” comes from Charles Taylor, who clearly has Bakhtin in mind. See Taylor, “The Dialogical Self,” in David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman (eds.), *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 310.

91. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 287.

multiply” (Gen 1:28). Surely it is significant that the only created species with which God entered into conversation was the human. To be sure, the Genesis account repeats “God said” several times, but only in 1:28 do we read “to them.” This is a defining moment in the history of the *imago Dei*. What makes men and women “like God” has to do with their *being spoken to* and their capacity *to speak back*.⁹² Individuality is more a matter of *answerability* (“Here am I”) than of *assertability* (“I think, therefore I am”).

Abraham’s “Here am I” (Gen. 22:1) is the archetypal response to the divine call. To be in the image of God is to be capable of such answerability. A person is a situated communicative agent – an author – in dialogical relation to others and, ultimately, to God.⁹³ There is, says Bakhtin, no “alibi in being” – no evasion of one’s unique *answerability* for every thought, every word, every deed. Indeed: “my entire life as a whole can be considered as a single complex act or deed that I perform.”⁹⁴ Teachers evaluate our academic work, friends our sociability, co-workers our competence, and so forth. Who is in a position to define *me*, to summarize my life and to evaluate me as a particular sort of person: selfish, selfless, proud, humble? Only one who can see my life as a whole – in a word, an author. Who is in a position to judge how well I have responded to my fundamental vocation of being answerable? Only the one to whom I am ultimately answerable for what I have authored: the Author. To be answerable to others and above all to God is our human vocation.

Authoring time: economic forms of dialogical life

The *analogia auctoris* and the concept of triune communicative action offer new conceptual resources for conceiving the time/eternity relation. In the previous chapter I suggested that time is less a measure of bodily movement (i.e., physical change; change in bodily location or bodily state) than it is a measure or form of being

92. None of the other creation myths from the ANE depict the gods as speaking to created humans.

93. See my “Human Being, Individual and Social,” pp. 158–88, esp. pp. 180–4; Michael Horton, “Image and Office: Human personhood and the covenant” in Lints et al., *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, pp. 178–203.

94. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993), p. 8.

and life, a “space” for communicative action.⁹⁵ The cue I take from Boethius’ famous definition – “Eternity is the total, simultaneous and perfect possession of interminable life” – is not “interminable” but “life.” Eternity is measured not by time – it is a function neither of time’s prolongation nor its contradiction – but rather by God’s triune life that Father, Son, and Spirit possess perfectly and simultaneously (i.e., “simply”). Eternity is the form of God’s own life (i.e., communicative activity).⁹⁶

To be is to communicate. Eternity is a predicate of God’s own life, the communication *ad intra* of God’s light and love. God’s time (eternity) is the form of God’s communicative action, the way God lives, the mode of God’s existence *in se*. God’s Trinitarian being-in-communicative-action includes a beginning, middle, and end peculiar to itself inasmuch as it is characterized by various “processions”: “God’s life is the process by which he posits himself as the Holy Trinity.”⁹⁷ “Proceeding” and “begetting” – both “communications” of life – are also forms of “ordered succession”: the Son is begotten yet there was no time when the Son was not. Barth thus avers that God’s eternity “is authentic temporality, and therefore the source of all time. But in his eternity . . . present, past, and future, yesterday, today, and tomorrow, are not successive, but simultaneous.”⁹⁸ God’s own time is neither timeless nor everlasting in relation to created time, therefore, but eminently temporal: God thus “has a basis in himself for a positive relation to creaturely time.”⁹⁹ *God’s time – eternity – is the ever-active communication of light, life, and love within the Godhead itself.* It follows that God is the measure of his own time. There is succession not in the sense of impersonal physical changes but in the sense of personal communications (i.e., the Trinitarian processions). These eternal processions, together with the historical missions on which

95. Jacques Ellul’s study of word and image is relevant here: “Sight is spatial. Sound’s domain is temporal, and it inserts us within a duration rather than an expanse” (*The Humiliation of the Word*, p. 13). See also his discussion of the dialogical nature of time and the temporal nature of dialogue (pp. 15–17).

96. My communicative gloss on the description of God’s life complements Hunsinger’s Trinitarian description: “God’s life is the process by which he posits himself as the Holy Trinity. His life is a life of free distinction and communion in the *perichoresis* of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (“*Mysterium Trinitatis*,” in *Disruptive Grace*, p. 192).

97. Hunsinger, “*Mysterium Trinitatis*,” p. 192.

98. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2 p. 435.

99. Hunsinger, “*Mysterium Trinitatis*,” p. 201.

our knowledge of them is based, indicate that there is a communicative movement in the Godhead akin to question and answer. The Father's speaking meets with the eternal "response" of Word and Spirit. In brief: eternity is the form of God's triune communicative action *ad intra*.

Time, by contrast, is the form of God's triune communicative action *ad extra*. As eternity is the form of God's life, so time is the form of the human creature's life, of human being-in-communicative-act. God creates time in order communicatively to relate to creatures other than himself. Time is the medium of personal self-presentation to human others. At least, such is the nature of time in a theodramatic metaphysic for which the spatio-temporal existence of creation is a predicate of God's dialogical interaction with the world.¹⁰⁰ The banner over this understanding of time is not impersonal causation but personal communication: life-time is the form or medium of interpersonal (relational) existence.¹⁰¹

The biblical authors conceived time not as mere duration but in terms of events that make a difference: time is for deeds to be done – "a time to mourn, and a time to dance ... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate" (Eccl. 3:2–8). Time provides us with opportunities to align ourselves with the created order and with what God wills to be done in particular situations. Time thus affords us opportunities to respond rightly to what is happening in the world in order to learn the way of wisdom.¹⁰² Of special interest is James Muilenburg's observation that the most common word for "time" in the Hebrew Bible is derived from the root "to answer."¹⁰³ Time opens up the possibility of interacting with others, of *saying or doing things in response* to someone or something else. Not the sheer passing of days but *dialogue* – the action of speaking

100. Cf. Douglas Knight: "Time is to be understood as an economy of action and passion ... a function of a continuum made up of many agents, themselves hosted by the triune persons. We could call this continuum ... the generosity of God who makes time for us" (*The Eschatological Economy: Time and the Hospitality of God* [Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006], pp. 20, 22).

101. The present treatment is indebted to my doctoral student Eunsoo Kim's discussion in his dissertation "Time, Eternity, and the Trinity."

102. I am indebted to Dan Treier for this point.

103. "The Biblical View of Time," *Harvard Theological Review* 54 (1961), p. 234. The LXX renders most of these instances as *kairos*.

back and forth; communicatively *processing* – is the key to a theological understanding of time: “In the dynamic, living experience of speaking and hearing [in Israel] the hiddenness of time is somehow, strangely, articulated and bodied forth.”¹⁰⁴

Time is the medium for interpersonal speaking and listening. The appeal to *hear* (a notion largely synonymous in the Old Testament with “obey”) – and hence to recognize oneself as addressed and therefore answerable – sounds forth across the canon: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Dt. 6:4). Time itself, I venture to suggest, is a predicate of hearing: “The sense which is plainly made for successive impressions is hearing. We *see* the spatial and *hear* the temporal.”¹⁰⁵ Muilenburg’s gloss on this idea is worth quoting in full: “Not only are the barriers of our interior isolation broken in the acceptance of this speaking-hearing relation, but all that which is implied in this encounter and engagement and participation of the ‘I’ communicating itself in words and the ‘Thou’ answering to the ‘I’s’ communication provides us with the final matrix in which our lives in history are lived.”¹⁰⁶

To live is to have time for communicative action: “Time exists as the event in which the definitiveness of existence is freely brought about before God.”¹⁰⁷ By way of contrast, death – the absence of life; non-being – signals the absolute loss of communicative agency, and hence the loss of time.¹⁰⁸ Time is best measured (and recognized) not by impersonal cause-and-effect bodily movements but by the ability to call and respond in communicative action. Time is not the contradiction of eternity but its “figure,” the creaturely analogy of the Creator’s form of being-in-communicative-act.¹⁰⁹

The triune God is both Author of created time and, as we shall see in the next chapter, an agent within it: “Time ... is the formal

104. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

105. Thorlieff Boman, cited in Muilenburg, “The Biblical View of Time,” p. 239, n.24. Recall Clarke’s point that time requires “the unification in some consciousness of the successive phases of a real process of change” (*The One and the Many*, p. 163).

106. “The Biblical View of Time,” p. 240.

107. Adolf Darlap, “Time,” in Karl Rahner (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p. 1717.

108. For centuries, the telltale sign of death was the cessation of breathing. Absent the breath of life, and there is no communication either.

109. In suggesting that time “figures” eternity, I leave open the question of whether time is more like an analogy or a metaphor in relation to eternity. The key point is that there is a partial correspondence within an even greater

principle of [God's] free activity outwards. Eternity is the principle of His freedom inwards."¹¹⁰ As Author, God is not limited by his created work: "Eternity and sovereignty mark the ontological divide that distinguishes God from the world."¹¹¹ Neither is the Author's time that of the text's: one authorial day is like a character's thousand years (2 Pet. 3:8). Further, the Author can open the text to any page, flip back and forth at will. Finally, the divine playwright has the freedom to write himself into the drama of human history: God's Word and Spirit are *in* created time but not *of* it. That God can enter into and act in time implies that time does not essentially contradict his being: "True eternity includes this possibility, the potentiality of time."¹¹²

God's being is boundless, his life limitless. Time and space are the delimitations not of the Author but of the Author's work.¹¹³ Moreover, the Incarnation demonstrates that God is so free that he can also be present to creatures in creaturely form: "God's immanence neither contradicts nor compromises his freedom, but rather exemplifies and expresses it."¹¹⁴ Even before the Incarnation, the Bible depicts YHWH, the eternal one who exists outside created time, as *presenting* himself at particular times and places. Consequently, classical theism confessed God's omnipresence; the divine Author has neither spatial extension nor location in his work. A remythologized account of time concurs, not because God is a perfect being but because the self-enacting God declares and demonstrates himself to be ubiquitous and measureless.¹¹⁵ Note that omnipresence has a temporal as well as a spatial connotation: the Author is omnitemporal, free to be present in and to all times. For God's eternity is not timeless but eminently temporal, possessing in simultaneity the successiveness (or rather, the "processiveness") of the beginning, middle, and end of God's triune being in communicative act.

difference between these two predicates of being-in-communicative-act. Note too that God, unlike created entities and agents, has being-in-communicative-act in and of himself. His essence is his existence.

110. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1 p. 609.

111. Hunsinger, "Mysterium Trinitatis," p. 198.

112. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 617.

113. Barth acknowledges that God is timeless in the sense that he is free from the defects of created time, namely, "its fleetingness and its separations" (*Church Dogmatics* II/1 p. 617).

114. Hunsinger, "Mysterium Trinitatis," p. 199.

115. So Webster, "The Immensity and ubiquity of God," in *Confessing God*, p. 91.

“Outsideness”: from aesthetic to eschatological consummation

Having established that eternity is God’s own time rather than the contradiction to created time, we can now return to the question of the nature of divine authorship, aided this time by the right-wing or “dialogical” view of Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony.¹¹⁶ His long essay “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” marks the beginning of his quest for a dialogical conception of authorship that acknowledges not only the self’s answerability but also the need for an “outside” point of view.¹¹⁷ The essay treats the author’s “stable and dynamically living relationship to the hero.”¹¹⁸ Bakhtin is referring not to the author’s moment-by-moment reactions to a character but to the way in which an author considers *all* that a character is – his or her whole life. The author can do this because authors are “outside” the hero, able to contemplate the hero’s finished story as a complete life with a beginning, middle, and end. Indeed, *only* someone outside us and the story of our lives can see us, and our story, as a unified meaningful whole. For Bakhtin, “aesthetics” refers precisely to this ability to perceive wholes as it were from the outside. Authors engage in aesthetic activity as they make “sense out of the world by fixing the flux of its disparate elements into meaningful wholes.”¹¹⁹

Aesthetic completion By “hero,” Bakhtin has in mind a person “about whom a story could be told.”¹²⁰ In this technical sense, heroes are morally neutral; they provide both positive and negative examples. The Bible is replete with hero stories.¹²¹ Its sober-minded narration depicts even the most idealized Old Testament heroes – Abraham, Moses, David – as having serious flaws or making significant errors of judgment. Hebrews 11 nevertheless includes them in the roll call of “heroes” of faith. The final biblical word on these

116. See n. 36 above.

117. Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 4–256. On the concept of “outsideness,” see Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*, ch. 5.

118. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

119. Holquist, “Introduction,” to Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, p. xxiv.

120. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 186.

121. I am indebted to David V. Urban, “Hero Story,” in Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, pp. 287–90) for this paragraph.

characters is that, in their defining moments, they relied on the divine promise. What makes for a true biblical hero is not strength or cleverness but trust in and obedience to God's word.

The question that opens Dickens's novel *David Copperfield* – “whether I [David] will be the hero of my own story” – is easily answered: of course! For Bakhtin, however, the issue is not whether we can be the *heroes* of our own stories but their *authors*. We cannot. The completed whole – the meaning – of the hero's life is not something the hero experiences. Oedipus's suffering, in and of itself, is not tragic, for “a lived life is incapable of expressing and shaping itself as a tragedy from within itself.”¹²² The hero's beginning and end (i.e., birth and death) will always be events that elude the hero's awareness. By the very nature of the case, then, a hero cannot discern the shape of his or her whole life. Hence Bakhtin's thesis: it is the author who is “the bearer and sustainer of the intently active unity of a consummated whole,” a whole that the hero can only receive “as a gift.”¹²³

Bakhtin invokes “outsideness” to make the point that the “whole of the author” and the “whole of the hero” belong to completely different orders or planes of existence.¹²⁴ “Outsideness” names the asymmetrical, nonreciprocal boundary that distinguishes author from hero and that is consequently an aspect of their relationship.¹²⁵ As such, it stands in for transcendence and immanence alike. It is important not to confuse outsideness with antagonism or indifference; on the contrary, outsideness is a necessary condition for the particular dialogue that characterizes the author-hero relation.¹²⁶ Specifically, the author is outside the hero with respect to space, time, and the meaning of the whole.

First, the author is “outside” the hero's spatial existence. The hero has a particular extension in space, a finite body with a limited point of view. The hero cannot see the back of his head, or the world behind his back. The author enjoys an excess of seeing,

122. Bakhtin, “Author and Hero,” p. 70.

123. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

124. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

125. Stated differently: outsideness is the position an author assumes in relation to his or her characters. Remythologizing co-opts the concept to explain the nature of the distinction (and relation) between God and his people. The problem with making mutuality and reciprocity the defining feature of relationships is that God remains covenant Lord even when his people turn their backs on him.

126. Dialogue for Bakhtin is fundamentally a personal interaction.

a species of omniscience, thanks to this outsideness. Moreover, whereas the hero is aware only of his own immediate acting or suffering, the author is able to put this action or suffering into a broader context. Moreover, what we do or suffer only has value in relation to others who are outside us: "I myself cannot be the author of my own value, just as I cannot lift myself by my own hair."¹²⁷ Bakhtin here acknowledges the parallel with the Creator-creature relationship: "God is no longer defined essentially as the voice of my conscience ... God is now the heavenly father who is *over me* and can be merciful to me and justify me where I, from within myself, cannot be merciful to myself."¹²⁸ Outsideness need not imply alienation. On the contrary: "In himself, a human being can only repent ... only the other can give absolution."¹²⁹ Aesthetic consummation – the process by which authors confer wholeness, and therefore meaning, on the lives of their heroes – is to literature as grace is to theology.

Second, the author is temporally "outside" the hero's "inner man" or soul: "As with the body in space, so with the soul in time: outsideness is also 'lateness'; to spatial exteriority there corresponds temporal posteriority."¹³⁰ The "soul" of a hero comes to be seen for what it is only over the course of a whole life. One reveals one's soul by the pattern of one's response to the call of others (ethics), and especially by the pattern of one's response to the word of God (religion). A hero never experiences the whole of himself or herself in time, of course, for birth and death are in excess of conscious experience. Even one's "famous last words" lack consummating power; one speech act does not a *mythos* make. Only someone who stands outside a person's finished life can "consummate" or complete it by construing the whole in a particular way. Authorship consists in just such a bestowal of meaningful form.

Eschatological completion Theology must go beyond Bakhtin, however, to speak not only of aesthetic but *eschatological* consummation. Bakhtin himself occasionally gestures in this direction: "What

127. Bakhtin, "Author and Hero," p. 55.

128. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

129. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

130. Graham Pechey, "Penultimate Words: The Life of the 'Loophole' in Mikhail Bakhtin" (*Literature and Theology* 20 [2006], p. 276).

I must be for the other, God is for me.”¹³¹ As the author is an “I” to the hero’s “other,” bestowing wholeness and meaning, so God is the Authorial “I” to the world as “other.” Moving with but ultimately beyond the Bakhtinian grain, we can say that God’s authorial outsideness enables him to see not only what is “behind our back” but also what is “beyond our death.” Of course, what God authors is not fiction but the whole of history. What else is the drama of redemption if not the story of how the Creator consummates his creation into a whole that is true, good, and beautiful as it is meaningful: a renewed and restored world, an abundant garden-city characterized by everlasting *shalom*?

Balthasar’s notion of theodrama implicitly employs a similar author-hero analogy. Indeed, he makes a positively Bakhtinian point when he says that the standpoint of the author “is entirely filled up by the creative activity of a unificatory endeavor that sheds light on existence.”¹³² God the Father is the playwright as far as human heroes/players are concerned, consummating world history from “outside” the whole of created space and time: “Without the heavenly dimension there would be no distance, and *therefore* no drama.”¹³³

Scripture depicts the consummation of creation in terms of the kingdom of God: the sphere of God’s rule, the time and space in which God’s will is done. Eschatology is connected to God’s time and to the way it breaks into human time in order to establish God’s reign. God’s Authorial voice enters into human time from God’s time – from the “outside.”¹³⁴ “Eschatology” here refers not simply to last things (i.e., the end of time) but to what is *other* than created time, and hence to the possibility of the *consummation* of time and the whole order of creation. History is the arena

131. Bakhtin, “Author and Hero,” p. 56.

132. *Theo-drama*, vol. I, p. 262.

133. Aidan Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth: A Guide Through Balthasar’s Dramatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), p. 61. God is “above the place in that he is not trapped in it but *in* it insofar as he is fully involved in it” (Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, vol. III, p. 514).

134. Minimally, my account requires me to say only that God, as eternal, is “outside” time. Whether this outsideness is construed in terms of timelessness (Helm) or relative timelessness (Padgett) is a matter of secondary concern, provided that proponents of these positions can also affirm that the eternal God enters into and acts in human time. Helm helpfully reminds us that “the idea of timeless eternity is based on the idea that God has fullness of being, that he is ‘pure act,’ and not that he is like a withdrawn, sadly incapacitated human being” (“Divine Timeless Eternity,” in Ganssle [ed.], *God & Time*, p. 39).

of human communicative agency, but it is open to triune communicative agency and therefore has an eschatological dimension. If eternity stands for God's own "Authorial position," then eschatology stands for the dialogue opened up by God's being-in-God's-time entering into being-in-created-time. The Bible describes the contrast of the two positions in terms not only of heaven and earth but also of "this age" and "the age to come" (e.g., Mt. 12:32). The eschatological dialogue that accompanies the interjection of God's word into human history generates the distinct temporality of the "already/not yet."

Interestingly, Bakhtin insists that outsideness, not empathy, is the vital condition for an author's having compassion on the suffering of his or her heroes.¹³⁵ To empathize is to try and feel another's feeling as it were from the *inside*. To share another's physical suffering is to experience their pain; such sharing only gets as far as *repeating*, not consummating, the suffering in question. To relieve suffering, by contrast, requires authorship: a return to one's own position, from which location one can then console, assist, or consummate – perhaps to redeem? – the hero's suffering by recasting it in meaningful (i.e., salvific) form: "If the author/contemplator were to lose his firm and active position outside each of the *dramatis personae*, if he were to merge with them, the artistic event and the artistic whole as such ... would disintegrate. Oedipus would be left alone with himself, unsaved and unredeemed aesthetically."¹³⁶ There is nothing meritorious, or redemptive, in experiencing another's suffering. A fusion of horizons would result in "an infection with another's suffering, and nothing more."¹³⁷

What Bakhtin says about authorial outsideness vis-à-vis another's suffering becomes even more important when it comes to another's death. Aesthetic activity may begin with the author's creative love for the content of a hero's life, but eschatological activity begins with the Author's creative and loving response to the problem of the hero's death, physical and spiritual. The gospel is not only (1) the good news that the end of the hero's physical life is not the end of the hero's story, but (2) the even better news that the Author does

135. Cf. Isak Dinesen: "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them" (cited in Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 175).

136. Bakhtin, "Author and Hero," pp. 71-2.

137. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

not simply summarize my life-as-lived (as I would if writing an autobiography), but *consummates* it by telling the story of my life as taken up into the perfect life of Jesus Christ.¹³⁸

Authoring is thus an asymmetrical process by which a hero is given aesthetic form – meaning.¹³⁹ Only by maintaining a position “outside” the hero’s life can the author consummate it. So it is with the God-world relation. The question that remains is how this conception of divine authorship avoids becoming simply monological, in which the infinite freedom of the Author swallows up finite freedom, thus consuming rather than consummating the hero.

The play’s the thing: dialogical consummation

For in every action what is primarily intended by the doer, whether he acts from natural necessity or out of free will, is the disclosure of his own image ... Thus, nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self. (Dante)¹⁴⁰

As in drama, so in life. Who we are is implicit in our words and deeds: “the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author.”¹⁴¹ Can authorial heroes also be agents with their own identities? It is hard to see how on a monological conception of authorship. It is just here, however, that Bakhtin’s discovery in Dostoevsky of a new dialogical paradigm for authorship comes into its own.

Voices: person-ideas as embodied consciousnesses Earlier we contrasted monological authorship, where characters are simply their author’s mouthpieces, with Dostoevsky’s radical polyphonic authorship, where characters enjoy a real voice of their own. The problem with that picture, when transposed to theology, is that it brings the voice of the Author down to the same level as that of the characters. There is, however, another way of interpreting what Bakhtin is saying about Dostoevsky, one that focuses on the interaction of

138. See ch. 5 above on the importance of union with Christ.

139. “Form expresses the author’s self-activity in relation to a hero” (Bakhtin, “Author and Hero,” p. 84).

140. Cited in Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 175.

141. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 184.

voices, both heroic and authorial, while simultaneously preserving the asymmetry of the author-hero relation.¹⁴²

For Bakhtin, a “voice” is not simply words strung together but an embodied point of view on the world with spatial-temporal location. Dostoevsky succeeded in giving characters “voices” of their own. Bakhtin views this as an artistic achievement: the author’s ability to create “free” characters. It is as if Dostoevsky’s heroes were “*not only objects of authorial discourse but also subject of their own directly signifying discourse.*”¹⁴³ These characters do not simply stand in for ideas that exist in themselves, but for particular points of views – *incarnate* ideas as it were – that are themselves responses to what other embodied consciousnesses have said/done from other points of view. Each participant in a dialogue is a “voice-idea”: “the idea represents a person’s integral point of view on the world, which cannot be abstracted from the person voicing it.”¹⁴⁴

What Dostoevsky projects into the world of his works is not a finished plot but unfinished voice ideas. For example, Ivan Karamazov embodies the idea that “everything is permitted if there is no immortality of the soul.”¹⁴⁵ What matters most is not the hero’s situation so much as the hero’s response to that situation, his or her self-consciousness: “The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to develop ... only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of *others*.”¹⁴⁶ No matter what the author “does” to the hero, the hero has the freedom to respond: “Dostoevsky’s hero is not an objectified image but an autonomous discourse, *pure voice*.”¹⁴⁷ Of course, as we have seen, the hero’s voice is not truly autonomous, for heroes cannot consummate their own lives.

Earlier we defined “person” as an answerable communicative agent: one who can say “Here am I.” The person is a summoned self, one whom a discourse sounds through: *per* (“through”) *sonare*

142. Bakhtin made a thorough revision of his Dostoevsky book (originally published in 1929) in 1963.

143. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 7, italics his. Bakhtin comments that “Dostoevsky – to speak paradoxically – thought not in thoughts but in points of view, consciousnesses, voices” (*Problems in Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 93).

144. Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 237.

145. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 89.

146. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

147. *Ibid.*, p. 53. Bakhtin believes that the theme of Dostoevsky’s work was the struggle against the reification of humanity and human relations. The form of his work thus brilliantly matches its content (see *Problems in Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 62).

("to sound").¹⁴⁸ Stated theologically: *God authors/elects creatures to be dialogical agents in covenantal relation through whom his Word sounds (and resounds)*. A few of these summoned subjects, while persons in their own right, nevertheless serve as mouthpieces for God: "The prophet's task is to convey a divine view, yet as a person he is a point of view. He speaks from the perspective of God as perceived from the perspective of his own situation."¹⁴⁹ Whether or not a hero speaks for himself or for another, the idea is inseparable from the person who carries, expresses and enacts it, so much so that Bakhtin can speak of "the person born of that idea."¹⁵⁰

Dialogical authorship

We live in dialogue.¹⁵¹

Bakhtin's "dialogism" is an apt handmaiden to a remythologized theology that takes its cue for speaking well of God from the Bible's depiction of the divine-human dialogue, the stuff and substance of theodrama.¹⁵² To live, says Bakhtin, "means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth."¹⁵³ At the limit, "dialogism" is less an approach to literature than to life: "Dialogism begins by visualizing existence as an event, the event of being responsible for (and to) the particular situation existence assumes as it unfolds in the unique (and constantly changing) place I occupy in it."¹⁵⁴ The God-world relation is similarly dialogical – a dialogical (i.e., covenantal) unity within an even greater dialogical difference (i.e., authorial outsideness).

Every person has a self-conception – a point of view on oneself – and is thus an "I-for-myself." Two other points of view are relevant: "I-for-the-other" (i.e., how the other perceives me) and "the-other-for-me"

148. "The author's design for a character is a *design for discourse*" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 63).

149. Heschel, *The Prophets*, xxii.

150. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 85.

151. Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), p. 144.

152. Charles Lock claims that the Chalcedonian formula on the two natures of Christ serves as the paradigm for Bakhtin's understanding of the dialogical: distinction, but "without separation, without confusion" – "two voices in the hypostasis of one [dialogical] word" ("Bakhtin and the Tropes of Orthodoxy," in Felch and Contino [eds.], *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*, p. 98).

153. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 293.

154. Holquist, *Dialogism*, p. 47.

(i.e., how I perceive the other). The author, too, is an other to the “self” of a character. To author dialogically is to engage a heroic other, but not as a mere object. The hero is neither the author’s “I” nor “he” but “thou”: “someone who hears him (the author) and is *capable of answering him*.”¹⁵⁵ A Dostoevsky hero, for example, is not a mere mouthpiece but the subject of a serious address. Better: a dialogical author lets the hero “be” by putting him into situations with others that let the hero actualize the “design for discourse” for which he was created. The author is thus an *involved* outsider, an interlocutor in a world that he himself has created.

Outsideness, we may recall, is a vital condition of authentic dialogue. Dostoevsky’s novels are dialogical because they present not a single consciousness (i.e., the author’s) but “the interaction of several consciousness, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other.”¹⁵⁶ Dialogue is the means by which a voice-idea comes to be what it is, that is, to realize its full potential. Each hero’s essential character comes to be seen as he or she speaks and acts, thus “answering” the questions posed by various life situations. Eventually, the hero’s responses manifest a pattern. What therefore makes a hero “whole” is the particular shape of answerability that his or her life, taken as a whole, represents.

Authoring takes place “through” (*dia*) the “word” (*logos*), through the dialogical interaction of author and hero. In particular, a hero’s consummation takes place through dialogical interaction, for a person’s life only comes to be seen for what it is through a process of interlocution in which it both interrogates and is in turn interrogated: “Only in communion, in the interaction of one person with another, can the ‘man in man’ be revealed.”¹⁵⁷ We become, and reveal, who and what we are through a pattern of verbal and non-verbal communicative acts. It is the author’s task to discern and name this pattern, thus aesthetically consummating a life. Such, according to the *analogia auctoris*, is the nature of God’s relation to the world as well.

Divine authorship, of heroes and of history as a whole, is largely a matter of God’s dialogical consummation of individuals and nations alike. God completes or consummates the unfinished person-idea

155. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 63.

156. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

157. *Ibid.*, p. 252.

that is Abraham, Moses, David, etc. through an active dialogical penetration into the depths of their being. It is through the give and take of dialogue that a person – Bakhtin’s “voice-idea” – actualizes his or her potential, realizes his or her true self, and hence rings true or false.¹⁵⁸ The nature, identity, and character of a hero is inextricably connected to how that person addresses and answers others. One’s inner man or soul is exhibited “only by portraying his communion with another.”¹⁵⁹ In exercising dialogical authorship, then, God is neither simply passive nor consigned to the same plane of existence as his heroes. On the contrary, the dialogical author is “the paradigm of a new kind of agency,”¹⁶⁰ one suited neither to examining dead things nor to manipulating objects but rather to engaging the living consciousnesses of human heroes.

I believe that Bakhtin has discovered in literary theory an equivalent to Habermas’s discovery in social theory of the distinction between communicative (dialogical) and strategic (monological) action. It follows that God’s dialogical authorship, though in asymmetrical relation to its hero-interlocutors, is an entirely appropriate way of engaging human persons according to their rational, volitional, and emotional natures: “This is a questioning, provoking, answering, agreeing, objecting activity ... no less active than the activity that finalizes, materializes, explains, and kills causally, that drowns out the other’s voice with nonsemantic arguments.”¹⁶¹

Heroes all too human ... Who I am is a function of how God’s call, and the call of others, “sounds through” (person = *per* + *sonare*) me. Stated differently: personal identity is largely a function of the pattern of my response to others (and the Author) who address me. To be human is to be in dialogical act: to live is to participate in the give and take of question and answer, call and response. It follows that to be human is to have, or be, a “vocation.” That we can answer calls belongs to the very structure of what it means to be a human person. One’s identity is less a matter of some underlying substance

158. In Bakhtin’s words: “in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is ... To be means to communicate dialogically” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 252).

159. *Ibid.*

160. Alexandar Mihailovic, *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin’s Theology of Discourse* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 219.

161. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 285.

(*what* one is) than of the characteristic style of one's relationships with others (*who* one is).

The novel is not the only genre that put heroes in ordinary and extraordinary situations for the purpose of probing voice-ideas and discovering truth. Perhaps the most celebrated precursor is the Socratic dialogue, consisting of virtually no plot and only the flimsiest setting. These dialogues test the truth of ideas through juxtaposing various discourse-opinions on a particular subject (e.g., the nature of knowledge). Yet even here, the idea "is organically combined with the image of a person, its carrier," usually Socrates himself.¹⁶² *The dialogical testing of the idea is simultaneously the testing of the person who represents and embodies it.*

Bakhtin notes a similar phenomenon in biblical narrative where "enormous organizing significance is allotted to the *testing of an idea and its carrier*, testing by means of temptation and martyrdom."¹⁶³ The most celebrated instance is God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac: "God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I'" (Gen. 22:1). Had it not been for the drama of this dialogical interaction, Abraham would not have emerged as a true hero of faith. "Here am I": the way we answer the questions, commands, promises, points of view, and calls that come our way both indicates and constitutes our particular heroic identity.

Authorial predestination and heroic freedom At this point a rather obvious objection to the *analogia auctoris* suggests itself: either real human persons are free from Authorial constraint, unlike their fictional counterparts, or else they are not truly free. This is a bold but ultimately too hasty rebuttal, not only because it makes large assumptions about the nature of freedom but because it ignores the fundamental thrust of our appropriation of Bakhtin, namely, that dialogical authorship represents a new way of conceiving the relation of divine authorship and sovereignty on the one hand and human freedom and responsibility on the other.

Bakhtin's criticism of monologism appears, at first glance, to refute any suggestion of authorial determination, much less Authorial predestination: "nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world,

162. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

163. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free.”¹⁶⁴ Various theists and panentheists who believe in the necessity of a more or less indeterminate future as a condition for genuine human freedom no doubt share Bakhtin’s sentiments but would also want to apply them beyond the world of Dostoevsky’s novels.

Bakhtin himself, however, does not think that it necessarily follows from a character’s freedom from monological determination (i.e., coercion) that this same character simply falls out of the author’s design: “No, this independence and freedom of a character is precisely what is incorporated into the author’s design. This design, as it were, predestines the character for freedom (a relative freedom, of course).”¹⁶⁵ The Bible maintains, of course, that something conclusive has taken place in our world, that the author’s design has been realized, that the ultimate word of the world has been spoken, and that this Word has a name: “Jesus Christ” (Heb. 1:2). Jesus Christ is the voice-person, the definitive divine word-idea whose address to us, together with our response, dialogically consummates everyone who comes into the world.¹⁶⁶ The same word of God that came to Abraham, Moses, and David comes to, addresses, and consummates us as it solicits the obedience of faith.

Our freedom is our answerability. In the words of Karl Barth: “the being of man is an answer, or more precisely, a being lived in the act of answering the Word of God.”¹⁶⁷ The word of the Lord came to Abraham and he believed it (Gen. 15:6). It came to David and he was thankful (2 Sam. 7:18–29). When the word of the Lord came to Jonah, however, he ran away (Jon. 1:1–3). He was “free” to reject it just as Mary was free to accept it (Lk. 1:38, “let it be to me according to your word”). So it is with every human being: the Author addresses each person and each freely responds and, in so doing, freely realizes the voice-idea of the Author.

God is thus the ultimate Author of our existence, “idea,” and situation, though this fact alone provides no one with an “alibi for being.” The Author conceives a voice-idea, but the hero freely

164. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

165. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

166. Cf. Barth: “The man Jesus ... is the sum of the divine address, the Word of God, to the created cosmos” (*Church Dogmatics* III/2, p. 147).

167. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

embodies it. The Author's and hero's activities ultimately exist on different levels. The Author is not, therefore, the hero's antagonist. On the contrary, the hero is concerned with the "effort to exist" and the "desire to be" on the horizontal plane of earthly existence, the very thing the Author enables.¹⁶⁸ The plot that is our story is not our fate – our coerced destiny – but rather a series of situations in which dialogues take place through which a character is consummated. Within the confines of the story, the hero preserves his or her integrity as a voice-idea: "A character's discourse is created by the author, but created in such a way that it can develop to the full its inner logic and independent as *someone else's discourse*, the word of the character himself."¹⁶⁹

The divine Author is committed to the integrity of the world he has made and the characters he has placed there: "God's sovereign plan includes a covenant commitment to every creature, to fulfill the role of that creature."¹⁷⁰ God as Author is not a coercive cause pushing against our freedom in a manner that interferes with (or intervenes in) our heroic integrity. On the contrary, the divine Author is an interlocutor who interrogates and tests our freedom, consummating our existence in the process. My capacity for self-determination therefore has its ground not in my own (monological) existence but rather in the potentially infinite dialogue with the Author God who alone calls me into being and who consummates my life and gives it meaning.¹⁷¹ It is in response to the dialogical situations that comprise my life, especially my dialogical relation to God, that I exercise the freedom to realize my own voice-idea.

There is thus no contradiction between Authorial determination of a character's "idea" and the character's own self-determination. Freedom as the power of the hero's self-determination should by no means be confused with the power of self-authoring, however. It is one thing to realize one's essential nature, quite another to make oneself over into something essentially different. Heroes act according to their natures, freely pursuing what they desire, but they lack the ability so to reorient themselves that they can change their

168. Ricoeur's shorthand terms, borrowed from Spinoza, for human being.

169. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 65 (italics his).

170. Frame, *Doctrine of God*, p. 152.

171. So Graham Pechey, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Word in the World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 154.

natures and desire something entirely different. From a theological point of view, then, the freedom of self-determination falls short of genuine Christian freedom, namely, the freedom to say “Yes” to the divine call. It is for this latter freedom that the Son and Spirit set us free, enabling us to correspond to the Author’s own voice-idea for humanity revealed, and incarnated, in Jesus Christ.¹⁷²

In conclusion: this chapter has argued that God authorially interacts with human beings in dialogical fashion. God’s Authorial word creates and sustains the universe, yet the Bible’s primary focus is on God’s communicative action in, with, and through human persons rather than in, with, and through the processes of nature.¹⁷³ God constitutes his human heroes as communicative agents in their own right, fit partners with whom to enter into covenantal relation. The basic categories of our theodramatic metaphysics are now in place.

It only remains to examine some of the key points in the economy of redemption in terms of this fledgling ontology of communicative action. Three questions in particular stand out and will receive chapter-length treatments: (1) How should we think about the relationship of divine sovereignty and human freedom in light of the concept of God’s authorship, especially given the reality of sin and evil? (ch. 7); (2) Can human communicative agents effect changes in God? (ch. 8); (3) How does a dialogical Trinitarian theism that views God’s being in terms of communicative activity understand the biblical affirmation that “God is love”? (ch. 9).

172. I take up the Incarnation as the definitive instance of the Author’s entering in his work in the following chapter.

173. We can stretch the *analogia auctoris* to cover God’s interaction with the world of nature too, though to do so would take us beyond the scope of the present project. Suffice it to say that (a) God’s general providence or regulation of natural processes – the phenomena that scientific laws set out to explain – represents a type of “implied authorship” of the Book of Nature; (b) God’s interaction with the natural world is “communicative” in the sense that God communicates his light, life, and love (i.e., information, energy) in non-verbal ways that accord with the nature of impersonal entities. It is also important to note that (c) Jesus performed speech acts that displayed his authorship/lordship over nature as well. For example, he “rebuked” the winds and the sea, saying “Peace! Be Still” (Mk. 4:39), and the wind and the sea “obeyed” him (Mk. 4:41). God is thus able to perform strategic as well as properly communicative speech acts.

Divine communicative sovereignty and human freedom: the hero talks back

For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, ... they will never yield him willing service. (Calvin, *Inst.* I.2.1)

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. (Heb. 4:7)

Part II set out the contours of a theodramatic metaphysics, providing categories for describing what God the Father has said and done to renew all things in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Being-in-communicative-activity was the leading concept, and we even went so far as to describe the reality of angels in these terms. Chapter 6 introduced the analogy of authorship in order to set forth the nature of God's distinct communicative agency. The present chapter continues our exploration of authorship as a rubric with which to both distinguish between and relate the respective communicative agencies of God and human beings. In particular, we examine what happens when free human heroes "talk back" to their divine author in ways that either advance the communicative exchange or stop it defiantly in its tracks.

His dark materials: does God author evil?

Surely we have proved too much? If God is the author of the "person-idea" that heroes freely (though necessarily) work out, does it not follow that God is ultimately responsible for what the evil-doing villains do as well? Not according to the Westminster Confession, which states that God ordains whatsoever comes to pass in

such a way that “neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures.”¹ A remythologized theology is not let off the hook that easily, however, for it must give some account of God’s apparent complicity with evil-doing. It must say why, if God not only authors Pharaoh but hardens his heart, God is not also the author of Pharaoh’s evil. It must also give account of where the “principalities and powers” that oppose God’s agency fit into the dialogical scheme of things.

Pharaoh’s hardened heart: whose doing? which agency?

The textual evidence is straightforward, the interpretation less so: “But I [the Lord] will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go” (Ex. 4:21).² Exodus 8:15 says that Pharaoh hardens his own heart, but the passive form leaves unclear who is the active agent. The overall emphasis is on divine agency: God is said to harden Pharaoh’s heart ten times (Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17).³ The Psalmist writes that God turned “their [Egyptian] hearts to hate his people” (Ps. 105:24). Paul also refers to this incident at a key point in his argument concerning divine sovereignty: “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills” (Rom. 9:17–18).⁴

These texts have launched a thousand interpretative ships. We can here deploy only a dinghy. In the first place: the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is a crucial element in the great saving event – the exodus – at the heart of Israel’s drama of redemption. Second, the heart is the mainspring of human action: “from it flow the springs of life” (Pr. 4:23). To harden one’s heart is to stop listening, to block

1. (Westminster Confession of Faith, II.1). Nor according to Balthasar: “[God] is the One responsible for the play, and yet he is not responsible when man, in freedom, acts inappropriately” (*Theo-drama*, vol. II, p. 195).

2. Both Erasmus and Luther appeal to these texts in their debate over the bondage of the will.

3. See D. J. Moo, “Hardening,” in T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (eds.), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, England and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 532–4.

4. See G. K. Beale, “An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in Exodus 4–14 and Romans 9,” *Trinity Journal* 5 (1984), pp. 129–54.

whatever offer one's interlocutor makes. Third, the interpretative crux of these verses pertains to the operative agent: who is hardening whom?

According to the pseudepigraphal *Testament of Solomon*, the active agent hardening Pharaoh's heart is a demon (25:1-7). Commentators in the early church more commonly ascribe this hardening to Pharaoh himself and explain references to God's hardening Pharaoh's heart as a roundabout way of referring to divine foreknowledge.⁵ The biblical text itself, however, posits God as in some sense the agent of Pharaoh's hardening. Calvin cites Solomon's wisdom that the heart of a king is "a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will" (Pr. 21:1), extending the principle beyond monarchs to all classes. In Pharaoh's case, Calvin asserts both that God's will is the "cause" of hardening and that Pharaoh himself acts.⁶ As to how God hardens Pharaoh's heart, Calvin considers two options: (1) God "moves" his will; (2) God refuses to soften his heart by withholding his Spirit.⁷ The first option is unacceptable if "moving his will" means either that God infuses vice rather than virtue into Pharaoh's heart or does something to Pharaoh against Pharaoh's will; such moving (i.e., causing) would be a form of "strategic" action (i.e., monological authorship), making God solely responsible. The second option shows more promise, but only if we develop it in terms of what we have said about God's triune communicative action.

Luther indicates the way forward in his debate with Erasmus over the bondage of the will. Erasmus claims that God hardens Pharaoh's heart by giving Pharaoh a number of occasions to harden his own heart. Luther's counter-claim is that God provokes Pharaoh into showing his true colors "by thrusting at him through the word of Moses."⁸ Luther here anticipates what we have been calling, with Bakhtin, "dialogical consummation": the word of the Lord prompts Pharaoh

5. See, for example, Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.xxix.2.

6. Calvin speaks of God's "inward working" in the mind but does not specify the nature of the operation (*Inst.* I.18.2).

7. *Inst.* I.2.3-4. Cf. Augustine: "We must not think that anything is imposed by God whereby a man is made worse, but only that he provides nothing whereby a man is made better" (*To Simplician*, I. 2. 18).

8. Luther, "On the Bondage of the Will," in E. Gordon Rupp (ed.), *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 234.

to show his true colors by the pattern of his (lack of) response. It is by “presenting and obtruding his words and works from without”⁹ that the Author hardens his hero’s heart.

Pharaoh, like persons in general, is an answerable communicative agent. If to be a person is to be one in whom various voices “sound through,” then not to hear the voice of God is to fail to realize one’s personhood (i.e., one’s being a communicative agent in covenantal relation). A hard-hearted person is one who repeatedly rebuts, refuses, and rejects God’s communicative overtures. The word of the Lord dialogically consummates Pharaoh by effectively soliciting his free response: “No.”

Divine-human dialogues are often diagnostic, resulting in a person’s nature and character coming to light. “The word of the Lord that came to” Pharaoh is a consummating word. As Hebrews 4:12 says: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit ... and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Note that God’s dialogical interaction with Pharaoh through Moses communicated information, but not the light, life, and love that the triune God communicates to others. It is a propositional transaction that falls short of personal communion. Some characters are consummated by a word of judgment, that is, a word bereft of the Spirit’s ministry.¹⁰ The word discerns and pierces, but the Spirit’s agency is needed for the word to *penetrate* and *reform*.¹¹

What should we conclude from this brief excursus? First, that to be hard-hearted is to be disposed not to respond. Hardness of heart is the opposite of right answerability. Indeed, in a real sense the hard-hearted person is *uncommunicative*: unwilling to comply, or to commune. Second, that hard-heartedness is a possibility for all human beings. Psalm 95:7–11 appeals to the people of God not to harden their hearts, a refrain taken up in the New Testament vis-à-vis the church as well (Heb. 4:7). The good news, as Augustine observes, is that God hates nothing which he has created: “God does not hate Esau the man, but hates Esau the sinner,” because sin is what leads creatures

9. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

10. So Luther, who acknowledges that God “does not change it [Pharaoh’s will or heart] inwardly by his Spirit” (*ibid.*, p. 235).

11. I return to Bakhtin’s notion of penetrative discourse below.

to turn away from their Creator and to terminate communication.¹² In biblical parlance, such rebel heroes are dead in their sins (Rom. 3:9–18, 23).

Satanic dialogues

God does not author evil, yet evil nevertheless infiltrated the text of his world, and his hero. Here we take up the task not of solving the problem of evil but of deepening its mystery by reflecting on two Satanic dialogues (Eve, Job), always with an eye to the nature and function of communicative agency. What type of being and reality does a theodramatic metaphysics accord to Satan and the forces of evil?

Father of lies: the disorientation of the hero In the beginning, the Author created his heroes good, with an opportunity to become even better. God enjoined Adam and Eve to use their freedom to trust and obey his word in order to reach a state of mature and complete humanity. Enter the serpent.¹³ The story is well known. The serpent's first word was interrogative: "Did God actually say?" (Gen. 3:1). The second was a contradiction: "You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). The third conjured up an alternative reality: "You will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). In each case, the serpent assaults God's word, the same word that ordered creation. The serpent's verbal ploys therefore represent an attack on Creator and created order alike.¹⁴

How might one metaphysically parse the reality of the Satan figure if being is a matter of communicative agency? What, if anything, does Satan communicate? Remythologizing the demonic requires us to take our bearing from the Genesis narrative, and from Jesus' words: "the devil ... has nothing to do with the truth, because there

12. Augustine, *To Simplician*, I.2.18.

13. As Ricoeur observes, the serpent symbolizes a mysterious depth-dimension of evil that cannot be fully rationalized (*The Symbolism of Evil* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1969], pp. 256–60). The Genesis account stops short of assigning responsibility for the ultimate origin of evil to humanity, though it does assign fault to humanity for falling under evil's power.

14. And on the covenantal relation that God instituted via his law and promise. Cf. Hosea 6:7: "But like Adam they transgressed the covenant" (emphasis mine).

is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (Jn. 8:44).

Lies bring to speech thoughts that fail to correspond to anything in the world. A lie is a misbegotten communicative act whose birth in words (what one claims as true) contradicts what one conceives (what one knows as false) and consequently misleads the one who hears it. A lie is an instance of "deliberately duplicitous speech."¹⁵ Lies are oriented not to what is but to what is not; to exchange the truth for a lie (Rom. 1:25) is to orient oneself to nothing in general or particular. Augustine, who wrote two treatises on lying, moves us to the level of metaphysics in observing that lies do not participate in the truth, which is to say, God's gift of being.¹⁶

The narrative of the temptation and fall recounts an abuse of communicative agency. Sin begins when God's word is doubted (unbelief) and culminates in the attempt to make oneself like God (pride). Because the lie does not participate in being, the liar must manufacture his own goodness and truth. Hence the breathtaking scope of the primal Fall: human freedom reached for spiritual autonomy (e.g., the desire for one's own law and order) but grasped spiritual entropy (e.g., the tendency towards increasing disorder), all because it preferred the lie to the truth.

Pharaoh's hardened heart is a key biblical metaphor for the refusal to hear and obey the word of God. Sin is ultimately a heart condition. As such, it is a refusal of our essential vocation as human beings: to answer the call from the heart of God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. The lying heart is one that actively suppresses the truth, especially the truth of Jesus Christ. Sin is therefore a personal opposition to God and God's word. It is a matter of using God's image (communicative agency in covenantal relation) to deface the original.

To what metaphysical conclusion does such remythologizing lead? The biblical accounts suggest that there is a species of personal opposition to God that predates the human hero's revolt. There is no need to repopulate Middle-earth, only to acknowledge Satan as the father/author of lies. As such, Satan has an improper being and a peculiar power, for to deceive is to exercise a negativity capacity.

15. Paul Griffiths, *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004), p. 31.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

Satan's speech agency is profoundly defective. We must therefore speak not of Satan's communicative power but of Satan's lack or corruption of true communicative agency. Though Satan seeks to persuade, his apparent communicative acts are in fact strategic, aimed at bringing about not understanding (for that would mean self-exposure), but only the desired result. Satan disguises himself as a communicative agent but is in fact only a manipulator (cf. 2 Cor. 11:14). Liars do not communicate in the strict sense of the term ("making common"), then, for they take back with the left half of their forked tongue what they proffer with the right. What the liar "makes common" is only pretence. The liar is the static that distorts genuine communicative action, the noise that interferes with the making common of life, light, and truth.¹⁷

Augustine describes the lie as speech that is "owned" by the liar, a violent appropriation to oneself of what belongs to God.¹⁸ Satan has no positive communicative or causal force of his own. The serpent cannot compel Adam or Eve to disobedience but merely provide the occasion. The liar is put in the unfortunate position, as it were, of trying to achieve perlocutionary effects out of thin air, without a basis in felicitous illocutions. Satan cannot speak the truth, make a promise, or issue a command without violating one of the conditions for proper speech acts. In the final analysis, Satan can *do* nothing with words but gesture vainly.¹⁹

Satan's communicative agency is nothing but a conjuring trick with words. One should no more dismiss Satan's pathological communicative agency, however, than ignore evil. For though it lacks positive being, nevertheless it is (paradoxically) there. For Satan's power is precisely the power of non-being and nothingness, the power of delusion, the means by which Satan works his diabolical version of dialogical consummation. The darkness, death, and hatred in the world are the spawn of Satanic delusion (Rom. 1:28–32). The church must therefore remain vigilant: "But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3).

17. Satan's speech acts are not communicative but strategic, aimed not at reaching understanding but at manipulating minds and hearts.

18. See Griffiths, *Lying*, ch. 5.

19. This account of Satan's defective communicative agency accords with the notion of evil as the privation of being.

It is against such delusion that the church exercises its discipline, and ministry, of truth-telling.

Counsels of despair: Job's spectacle of faith The Book of Job consists in a series of debates over why Job is suffering and who is “authoring” the evil that befalls him. Is it Job himself, God, Satan? As we saw in our canonical exhibit (ch. 1), Job is best read as a series of dramatic scenes, complete with prologue and epilogue, that showcase dialogical interaction. Three dialogues in particular that advance the action call for further comment in light of our current topic: (1) God and Satan; (2) Job and his friends; (3) Job and God.

(1) Satan appears in the opening prologue as the “uncle” of lies, namely, in his guise of accuser (Job 1:6–2:7). Satan again calls God’s word into question, this time with regard to the claim that Job is “a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 1:8). Humans, too, occasionally perform the role of a “satan” or adversary (e.g., Ps. 109:6), and this appears to be the case with Job’s three friends. Human and celestial accusers alike thus beset poor Job.

(2) Job’s friends lay out a “moral vision” of the world according to which one reaps what one sows. God is on this view the world’s moral governor. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar preach law, not gospel; theirs is a theology of retribution. Hence their accusation: if Job is suffering, he must be blameworthy. Job protests his innocence, opposes his friends’ theology, and thus becomes a “minority report filed against the dominant religious orthodoxy.”²⁰ The speeches of Job’s “friends” advance the plot by serving as a step towards Job’s dialogical consummation. Their counsels of despair test his spirit to the limit, ultimately leading Job himself to become, in turn, the accuser of God. He does not say, however, that God actually does evil, only that he permits it and lets it go on (Job 10:3).

(3) What finally reveals Job’s true character is the manner in which he answers God. Indeed, the real “action” in the book takes place in the final chapters where, in response to God’s pointed questions about the extent of his knowledge of the created order, Job adopts a new perspective (Job 42:1–3). God’s speeches out of the whirlwind do

20. Walter Reed, *Dialogues of the Word: The Bible as Literature According to Bakhtin* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.135.

not give a theoretical solution to the problem of unjust suffering but put the question in a whole new light. Job acknowledges both the limitation of his own wisdom and the importance of fearing God. Job is a person of faith and so resists the moral vision of the world in which tit is always answered for tat. That way *lex talionis* lies, not gospel. He now knows that he does not occupy the Authorial position from which to see how it all fits together (Job 42:1–3). He has achieved wisdom, dialogically. Satan consequently loses his wager.

A final point. The book of Job, thanks to its dialogically won wisdom, yields insights not only into evil but also into the nature of divine communicative action. We learn, for example, that it takes more than one voice-idea, more than a monological conceptual scheme, to speak the truth concerning unjust suffering.²¹ In addition to the dialogues that comprise the book of Job, the book also converses with other wisdom traditions in the Bible that speak, for example, of the created order being maintained by God's retributive justice. The truth of Job, and hence the wisdom of God, is dialogic. Indeed, the theme of Job is arguably not the question of unjust suffering but that of right Author-hero dialogical relatedness.

Exploring the powers: the poetics of biblical discourse

Who authors history? Calvin believed, in relation to the calamities that befall Job's family, that God, Satan, and human beings alike are active in the events: "we see no inconsistency in assigning the same deed to God, Satan, and man."²² There are multiple agencies at work in the drama of redemption besides that of the divine Playwright. Calvin goes on to say, however, that God's authorship differs in both manner (i.e., he *permits* Satan) and purpose (i.e., he *tests* Job). A Christian theology that deploys an ontology of communicative action, however, must say more about the ways in which divine, human, and demonic activity overlap and interact. The challenge is to deploy the concept of divine authorship in a manner that preserves God's distinction from and relation to other communicative agents and agencies (i.e., transcendence and immanence). To this end, we turn briefly to consider the apostle Paul's claim that

21. So Carol A. Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996), pp. 297–8.

22. *Inst.* II.4.2.

we wrestle not against flesh and blood, “but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). How does remythologizing move from biblical *mythos* to metaphysics here?

Perspectives: multiple views

Calvin opens his *Institutes* with twin assertions: without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God; without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self. The ontologies are distinct – Calvin does not confuse deity with humanity – but the epistemologies are interrelated.²³ Barth would no doubt add a third assertion: without knowledge of Christ there is knowledge neither of God nor of self. We shall return to this idea in due course. Before we do, let me propose another pair of assertions: without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of world; without knowledge of world there is no knowledge of self.²⁴ The basic idea is still Calvin’s, with something of a twist: “man [is] a microcosm ... a rare example of God’s power, goodness, and wisdom.”²⁵ I wish only to add that human being is also a microcosm of the world. As crown of creation, *homo sapiens* includes all that went before: from dust (the smallest physical particles) and water (itself a chemical molecule) to living tissue (biology) and thought (psychology). As such, humanity is a veritable cosmic crossroads, a site at which all the powers of the universe converge.

Our principal concern is with the dialogical interaction between God and humanity. The question, however, is whether there are other “authorial” agencies that have communicative power on or over men

23. In this section I associate ontology with the multiple levels of reality, and epistemology with the multiple perspectives from which Scripture views the theodramatic action. I also associate poetics with the various literary forms that embody these perspectives.

24. John Frame makes a similar move, suggesting that our knowledge of God, self, and world is “the same knowledge, viewed from three different ‘angles’ or ‘perspectives’” (*The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987], p. 89). Frame’s perspectivalism is “simple” in the sense that each perspective is a perspective on the same thing, just as each divine attribute is a way of characterizing the whole of God’s being. My own position is that the three agent-perspectives open up ways of articulating different aspects of reality, which is more than talking about the same thing in three ways.

25. *Inst.* I.5.3.

and women or that otherwise influence the plot (or set the stage). Calvin, we may recall, discerned three distinct agencies at work in Job: God, Satan, humans. Mary Potter Engel argues that Calvin regularly employs a system of “shifting perspectives” in his theology, particularly in discussing divine and human agency.²⁶ The key to understanding Calvin, Engel suggests, is knowing when each perspective is pastorally and contextually relevant.²⁷ Bakhtin, with his keen sensitivity to voice-ideas and points of view, would no doubt understand. He, too, has a “good ear” for diverse canonical perspectives.

The Bible distinguishes at least three “agent-perspectives” on the theodramatic action. Sometimes a biblical author will focus on human action, at other times on demonic forces, but at all times in all places they all communicate, at least indirectly, the overarching agency of the Author. The story of Joseph’s betrayal by his brothers is a case in point. From one perspective, it is an example of sibling rivalry gone pathological. Yet this is not how Joseph frames it years later: “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive” (Gen. 50:20). Compare this with Judas’ betrayal of Jesus: “Then Satan entered into Judas” (Lk. 22:3). Satan’s agency provides no alibi, however, as Jesus’ subsequent statement makes clear: “For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that many by whom he is betrayed!” (Lk. 22:22). Nevertheless, it later becomes clear that the determination in question is God’s: “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). Here, then, is a clear instance of an event with three perspectives, each of which opens up a window onto a different sort of agential activity: divine, human, and satanic.

The three perspectives represent three ways of viewing the same theodramatic action. It would be misleading, however, to describe the three perspectives as merely three ways of talking about the same thing. On the contrary, each perspective brings into focus either a different agent or a different level of agency. Here we would do well to recall the adage that people are more likely to be right in what they affirm than in what they deny.²⁸ Stated differently: an

26. See Mary Potter Engel, *John Calvin's Perspectival Anthropology*, AAR Academy Series, no. 52 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

27. For example, sometimes Calvin speaks of salvation from God’s “eternal perspective” where election comes to the fore; at other times he speaks from the human “temporal perspective” where responsibility is paramount.

28. Saying attributed to John Stuart Mill.

appreciation for the validity of multiple points of view guards us from reductionism, the temptation to see things as it were monologically, as if one perspective alone enables us to see all the relevant levels of communicative action.

Poetics: multiple lenses

There are at least two senses in which a person may “author history”: one can either make history (i.e., do things about which stories can be told) or write it (i.e., recount stories). We argued in chapter 4 that the Bible not only depicts instances of divine dialogue but is itself a mode of divine communication. If we combine that thought with what we have said about multiple perspectives, we see that the different literary points of view that comprise the canon constitute diverse forms of divine communicative action, diverse modulations of the voice of God which, taken together, constitute God’s word.

God’s authorship is actually three-dimensional: authorship₁ (God authors the created order as a whole from the “outside”); authorship₂ (God authors history from within by speaking and acting); authorship₃ (God authors Scripture by speaking and acting in, with, and through human authors who embody his voice at diverse times and places and in diverse manners).²⁹ Moreover, God’s word written is itself multi-perspectival. God chooses to speak and to reveal his mind dialogically: divine accommodation is a matter of God’s speaking through a variety of different voice-ideas in different ways. The canon itself employs shifting perspectives, some of which highlight God’s authorship₂, others human agency, and still others Satan’s principalities and powers.

Remythologizing theology means respecting the integrity of the various biblical points of view (e.g., word views) even while striving for a unified understanding (e.g., world view). What now comes to the fore is divine authorship₃: the divine poetics of biblical literature.³⁰ Bakhtin can be of theological service here too, for more

29. God’s “causing” physical events may represent a fourth aspect of divine authorship, more “strategic” than “communicative.” While the remythologizing approach to theology does not deny this level of authorship, neither does it give it pride of place. It accords this privilege to the second level inasmuch as God’s words and deeds form the core of the Bible’s own interest.

30. By “poetics” I mean to call attention to the various forms in which God “makes” (*poieo*) or composes literature.

than literary theory is at stake. The larger issue concerns the move from *mythos* to metaphysics: whose voice conceptualizes the world for us, and what does it tell us about the real authorial powers that be in human history? On Bakhtin's view, literary genres offer not only different voice-perspectives, but also different modes of cognition and experience. Each genre is "adapted to conceptualizing some aspects of reality better than others."³¹ Specifically, the many biblical genres open up diverse perspectives on various kinds and levels of communicative agency (i.e., divine, human, Satanic). *Certain aspects of the theodrama therefore come to light under some forms of biblical literature better than others.*³²

Those who seek a "theodicy" as a way of relieving God from authorial responsibility for evil mistakenly employ a form not of biblical but of modern discourse that actually distorts one's reading of biblical texts.³³ A theodicy provides a monological, theoretical view that does not solve but inadvertently contributes further to the problem of evil by remaining on the theoretical level. We need a variety of speech acts to deal with evil, not just the "cool and detached explanations" of the philosopher. But this is precisely what we find in the Bible: a variety of voices that alternately lament, exhort, praise, and console. More importantly: in addition to speech acts, we find a variety of literary forms that, taken together, serve as corrective lenses that enable us to see evil from a number of different angles.³⁴

31. Morson and Emerson, *Bakhtin*, p. 276. Morson and Emerson go so far as to speak of the "eyes of genre": a genre is "a specific way of visualizing a given part of reality" (p. 275).

32. For more on the cognitive significance of genre, see my *Drama of Doctrine*, pp. 284–90.

33. Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000), p. 1.

34. To date no one has employed Bakhtin's insights into the cognitive significance of genres for the sake of a full-fledged biblical theology of the principalities and powers, or anything else for that matter, though some biblical scholars have taken the first methodological steps. See Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth" and, more importantly for present purposes, L. Julianna M. Claassens, "Biblical Theology as Dialogue: Continuing the Conversation on Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Theology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003), pp. 127–44. See also Dennis Olson, "Biblical Theology as Provisional Monologization: A Dialogue with Childs, Brueggemann, and Bakhtin," *Biblical Interpretation* 6 (1998), pp. 162–80. George Caird's image of the biblical authors as gathered around a conference table, adduced from Paul's description of the Jerusalem Council in Gal. 2:1–10, moves in a similar direction, though independently of Bakhtin (G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995], esp. pp. 18–26).

To remythologize theology, then, is to pursue the task of faith seeking understanding by hearkening to all the “genre-ideas” in the canon. “Theodrama” provides the unifying framework (*mythos*) within which the diverse biblical voices all have their say. Scripture yields not so much a single “answer” to the problem of evil as a plurality of ways of perceiving – and thus responding to – evil. The various genre-ideas of the canon depict evil as out of (the created) order, as defeated by Christ’s cross, and yet as a power we nevertheless have, and ought, to oppose. God accommodates his word concerning this ultimate mystery to human understanding by communicating in different generic registers, thereby demonstrating that some theological truths are ineluctably dialogical (i.e., incapable of being exhaustively rendered in terms of a single voice-idea, literary form, agent-perspective, or conceptual scheme).³⁵

Powers: multiple levels

Back to the “principalities and powers” that be. “Be” is the operative term: what are these powers, and what sort of being do they have? Here, especially, it is important not to confuse remythologizing with either a fall back into mythology and superstition or a demythologizing that dismisses the powers as storybook fantasies from an obsolete cosmology. The former succumbs to interpretative sloth, the latter to interpretative pride; only remythologizing serves theological understanding.

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against ... the cosmic powers” (Eph. 6:12). In the preceding verse, Paul mentions “schemes of the devil” (*diabolos* = accuser). By connecting the powers with the figure of Satan, Paul suggests that the father of lies has somehow turned entities originally created good against God. The powers are thus a significant complication and source of conflict in the theodramatic plot. Opinion divides, however, as to the precise nature of their opposition.

There is widespread agreement that Paul borrows the expression “powers and principalities” from late Jewish apocalyptic thought,

35. The implications for a theodramatic metaphysics that employs communicative agency as its basic conceptual scheme is that it must be sensitive to the different levels, orders, and powers of the various communicants that figure in Scripture. That is precisely the intent of the present section.

where it referred to intermediate beings who were “lower” than God but “higher” than humans. As to what Paul thought these powers actually refer to, there is little consensus among modern interpreters. Some believe that we need to demythologize Paul while others claim that Paul is already demythologizing (i.e., depersonalizing) the idea of cosmic power in this passage himself. According to the latter, Paul is referring to the economic, social, and political forces that dominate the human world: historical powers and earthly structures (e.g., the state) that, though part of God’s good creation, may also subvert it. On this view, the powers refer to institutions and ideologies (-isms) that hold individuals, cultures, and nations captive.³⁶

Are there other “authorial” powers or agents that oppose the divine Author and, if so, what power do they have? One’s answer to this question will affect one’s understanding of salvation and of the nature of the coming kingdom of God. Can we establish the kingdom of God by dint of sheer human effort? Or, are human beings caught in the middle of a clash of two titanic forces (e.g., Good and Evil; Light and Darkness) as devotees of ancient Gnosticism (and “Star Wars”) believe? At what level(s) of the universe does power reside, and at what level(s) must the primary conflict in the drama of redemption be engaged, and conquered?

One way forward is to integrate Bakhtin’s insight into the need for multiple genres with Arthur Peacocke’s insight into the multi-leveled nature of reality. Created reality is, for Peacocke, a complex hierarchical physical system with particles of matter/energy occupying the lowest level. More complex entities display more, but not less, properties than those at lower levels. Human beings, for example, are more than merely physical (but not less), more than merely biological and chemical (but not less), and so forth. Though Peacocke would reject the suggestion that there could be higher levels of reality (other than God) not dependent on the lower physical levels, I am less willing to rush towards a metaphysical judgment that, in light of Scripture, may ultimately fall prey to the very reductionism his model is trying to avoid. According to the Scriptures, created

36. See especially Gordon Rupp, *Principalities and Powers: Studies in the Christian Conflict in History* (London and Nashville: Cokesbury and Abingdon, 1952); G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Oxford University Press, 1956); Hendrik Berkof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962); Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

reality involves things “in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” (Col. 1:16).³⁷ With this caveat, we may affirm Peacocke’s basic point: no one level of reality is “more real” than another.

The human experience of oppression certainly seems to be as real at the cellular level (e.g., cancer) as at the psychological (e.g., addiction) and social (e.g., Nazism). To what level should we assign “principalities and powers”? (What would Ockham do?)³⁸ There is at present a tendency to reduce the entities and forces in the universe to those we can observe, measure, and quantify. Scientists have invented sophisticated instruments with which to observe everything from the starry skies above to the quantum mechanics below. The Bible, however, provides a distinct set of lenses – Calvin’s “spectacles of faith” – without which certain levels of reality do not come into focus.

We can “view” the end of history through the lens of apocalyptic, for example. The presence of apocalyptic and other literary forms in Scripture helps keep Christian theology from reducing the gospel – a message about the kingdom of God coming in Jesus Christ – to mere moralism or legalism. So do the healing miracles of Jesus, evidence of his power to “cast out Satan” (Lk. 11:18–20). The conflict of the theodrama will not be resolved on the quantum level only or, for that matter, on any level that is the province of a single science (e.g., physics, chemistry, biology, psychology). For the complication that the Bible calls sin cannot be solved by human ingenuity, but only by the divine warrior making war in heaven (Rev. 12:9) – and love on earth (1 Jn. 4:9–10).³⁹ The “revelation [*apokalypsis*] of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:1) contains visions of Jesus’ victory on the cross over the powers of Satan (1 Cor. 15:24; Col. 2:15).

37. Peter O’Brien insists that the powers cannot be merely natural entities, because they are “in the heavenly places” (Eph 1:20; 6:12) and because Paul’s reference to the armor needed to withstand the “evil one” (Eph. 6:16) fits better with a supernatural spiritual force (see O’Brien, “Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church,” in D. A. Carson (ed.), *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problem of Contextualization* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), pp. 110–50).

38. William of Ockham’s famous “razor” encourages a metaphysical minimalism by not positing the existence of any more entities (e.g., abstractions) than absolutely required.

39. Some scholars suggest that the proper background to Paul’s thought about the powers may be the War Scroll of Qumran, itself a gloss on the eschatological battle depicted in Daniel 11:40–12:3 between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. See D. G. Reid, “Principalities and Powers,” in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, p. 750.

Apocalyptic is of course not the only genre-idea in the Bible. The book of Job, as we saw above, offers a different perspective on how to respond to satanic oppression. God lips in and through the diverse genre-ideas of Scripture what we need to know about the powers. What we learn by looking through the various scriptural lenses is that there are different kinds of agencies working on multiple theodramatic levels. Interpreters would do well not to limit or reduce “real” agency to one level only, especially when it comes to evil-doing. Any such reduction inevitably distorts our understanding of the drama of redemption. The conflict is multi-level: cosmic and historical, psychological and social, demonic and political.

The way forward is to give a thick, multi-level description of these Pauline powers that does justice both to the earthly (e.g., socio-political) structures that oppress us and the spiritual (satanic) forces that employ them.⁴⁰ It is not the “hardware” per se (i.e., the earthly institutions) that has become corrupt, however, so much as the “software” (i.e., the ideological programming) that runs it. Cells per se are not evil, though they can become cancerous; governments per se are not evil, though they can become tyrannical. What we see, at every level of creation, is Satanic powers attempting to subvert the Authorial intention.

Remythologizing theology, like the biblical accounts themselves, focuses on the “dramatic” level of reality where the conflicts that come into focus are interpersonal. The theodramatic conflict centers on human beings who must choose whom they will serve and to whom they will listen. Drama, after all, is largely dialogical, where speaking is a doing and doing a communication. Satan is the key antagonist in the drama from beginning to end: “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (Rev. 12:9). What are the powers? They are all those agencies that seek to stop the theodramatic action from going forward. The powers oppose and seek to disrupt God’s triune self-communicative action in order to separate us from the love of God (cf. Rom. 8:38–9).

The New Testament displays considerable reserve in its statements about the ungodly chain of non-being, though it does depict the

40. J. B. Lightfoot believes that Paul intended his reference to thrones, dominions and rulers in Colossians 1:16 to embrace earthly and heavenly powers alike. See also Richard Mouw, *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976); Wink, *Naming the Powers*, p. 100.

various demons, principalities and powers as subordinate to Satan.⁴¹ What is significant for present purposes is that it also displays them as quasi-personal beings “which can speak and be spoken to.”⁴² What communicative power do Satanic powers have? As we saw earlier, Satan’s power is essentially the power of the lie: the delusion of nothingness. This power held even Israel captive for a time: “They sacrificed to demons that were no gods” (Dt. 32:17). Paul urges believers not “to be participants with demons” by eating food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 10:20). The idols are images of false gods and are thus two steps removed from reality. The demons behind them, likewise, have only a negative communicative power, namely, the ability to share nothing. Yet it suffices to fuel the conflict at the heart of the theodrama, for the principal site of the combat with the powers is not the physical world but the hearts and minds of human actors.

This construal of the powers helps to bring God’s own power – the capacity to communicate light, life, and love – into proper focus. What better way to counter “the deceiver of the whole world” (Rev. 12:9) than by speaking truth? God does not communicate mere items of truth but the truth that he himself is – his faithfulness, goodness, and beauty. Better: God communicates all that he is in one Word: Jesus Christ.⁴³ As light dispels darkness, so the coming of Christ, and especially his death on the cross, defeats the powers: “[God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in [Christ]” (Col. 2:15). One aspect of the cross’s victory over the powers is that it exposes the lie of the accuser and replaces the false knowledge of God and self with the truth about God’s love displayed in Christ.⁴⁴ This is why Paul can refer to the gospel as “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16). It also explains why he describes the “armor” of God with which Christians are to confront the principalities and powers in terms of truth, faith, and the gospel, and why the primary weapon is the word of God, which is “the sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:10–17). Word-and-Spirit

41. O’Brien, “Principalities and Powers,” p. 137.

42. H. Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), p. 18.

43. See Daniel L. Migliore, *The Power of God and the gods of Power* (Louisville, KY and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

44. Some invoke the divine warrior theme in relation to Christ’s defeat of the powers on the cross. See Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1969).

is the chosen form of God's triune communicative action, and thus the primary way in which God relates to humans in the world.

Our inquiry into the nature of the powers that oppose God has yielded an unexpected reward, an important insight into the Bible's form and content that strengthens the case for remythologizing theology. With regard to the Bible's literary forms, we have seen the importance of attending to the diverse perspectives on the theodramatic action associated with the diverse genre-ideas (e.g., apocalyptic) that make up the canon. With regard to content, we have learned that, while there are many levels on which communicative action takes place, the crucial and decisive level pertains to the hearts and minds of human heroes. While there is corruption at the physical (e.g., cellular) level of human existence, the drama of redemption centers on what human beings believe, say, and do. This has implications for our understanding of divine action as well. While God is author of all levels of reality, Scripture focuses on the level of interpersonal communicative action: God's triune communicative engagement with human hearts and minds. God refuses to remain outside the action but decides instead to enter into it by means of a self-communicative act that is as sovereign as it is startling. The gospel is the good news that the divine Author has become a human hero: Jesus Christ.

God's authorial Word enters in

God sets among men a fact that speaks for itself. (Barth)⁴⁵

Scripture depicts divine agency largely in communicative terms. As we have just seen, interpersonal dialogue is the level on which the theodramatic action, and conflict, unfolds. God spoke to Israel indirectly through the prophets and, on occasion, directly by means of his "voice" (Ex. 3:4; 2 Sam. 22:14; 1 Ki. 19:13). Though the "word of the Lord" had already been active in the history of Israel, the name "Jesus Christ" signals nothing less than the divine Author's becoming a human hero, yet remaining divine. In Christian theology, everything begins anew when God speaks in unprecedented fashion, *begetting a Word that communicates all the Author is*. In this one instance, the Author stands both outside and inside his text. The gospel *mythos*

45. *Church Dogmatics IV/2*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), p. 221.

is the good news that the Author freely and lovingly consummates human heroes by entering into the story himself with both hands, Son and Spirit.

Corporeal discourse: incarnation

God speaks with the world through Jesus. (Oliver Davies)⁴⁶

The leading part in the Christ event is played by the divine Playwright, whose scenes on the stage of world history serve “as a brief epitome of the plan of the whole work.”⁴⁷ The plan in question, of course, is the plan of salvation, conceived in eternity by the Father and the Son.

Kenosis by emplotment That God’s definitive self-communication takes the form of a human life instead of, say, a statement of universal truth, angelic being, or pillar of fire is a fact of the utmost theological importance. The preferred form of the Son’s self-presentation – the humanity of Jesus – henceforth becomes the norm for thinking about God’s being. The pattern of being-in-communicative-act embodied in the incarnate Word is nothing less than the divine content (i.e., nature) in human form, “the ways of God” made flesh.

What Jesus says and does, God says and does, for in Jesus is the plenitude of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14). The human life of Jesus is a self-communicative act than which nothing greater can be conceived, or nothing better realized. What theology needs to think in order to know God is not an abstract idea (e.g., most perfect being) but a particular human history, the sum total of the incarnate Son’s words, acts, and sufferings. The *mythos* of Jesus Christ – the drama of his birth, death, resurrection, and ascension – is the divine communicative act of which the church is the effect and theology the response.

God is the unauthored Author of his incarnation. Becoming flesh is not something that “befalls” the Son but something that the Son does (in cooperation with the Father and the Spirit). The kenosis that Paul mentions in Philippians 2:7 is a matter not of divine self-destruction

46. *A Theology of Compassion*, p. 271.

47. Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, p. 129.

(i.e., an abandoning of the divine nature and attributes) but of authorial *self-emptotment*. The *kenosis* of the Son is a function of his “*taking* the form of a servant,” specifically, a “human form.”⁴⁸ *Kenosis* involves a change not in the content of God’s being-in-communicative-act but only in its *form*. God the Son continues to be all that God is under the veil of humanity. The subject of the life of this human hero, Jesus, is the divine Author, the Son of God. In this is love: that the Author, while remaining all that he is, nevertheless pours his uncreated self into a created form of space and time, blood and bone, in order to communicate his light and life to others.⁴⁹

Kenosis is something active, not passive. The incarnation is about the Son’s assuming, not succumbing, to humanity. The contrast is between a *kenosis* of *emplotment* and a *kenosis* of *empathy*.⁵⁰ A *kenosis* of *empathy* says: “I make myself nothing in order to feel your pain.” As we have seen, a number of contemporary theologians are convinced that God’s genuine love for others must be *kenotic* in this empathetic (“I-am-you”) sense.⁵¹ To love is so to identify with the other as to lose oneself. It is this notion of love, we argued, that characterizes relational ontotheology.

By way of contrast, a *kenosis* of *emplotment*, in which the Son takes on the life of a character without ceasing to be Author, suggests a different picture and conception of love. Here we may recall the importance of “outsideness” in relation to an author’s ability to consummate his or her characters. Outsideness is also a *sine qua non* for understanding and loving others. If we actually lost ourselves in others, then instead of two participants there would be one, and this would be “an impoverishment of Being.”⁵² “Pure” empathizing – the act of completely coinciding with another – would mean that I

48. Or “schema” – a communicative shape of time – as we discussed earlier in ch. 5.

49. It is important not to confuse “Author” with God the Father only. God is one Author in three persons. Father, Son, and Spirit are each “Author” of creation and redemption for the same reason that each is God.

50. I am drawing for this contrast upon Bakhtin, who speaks of the “descent” of Christ as “a great symbol of self-activity” (*Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, p. 16) and upon Alan Jacobs’s development of this idea in *A Theology of Reading*, ch. 4: “*Kenosis*.”

51. And not only theologians. Jacobs points to Karl F. Morrison’s identification of a “kenotic tradition” as “one of the great streams of ethical thought in the Western world” (Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, p. 104). See also Karl F. Morrison, *I Am You: The Hermeneutics of Empathy in Western Literature, Theology, and Art* (Princeton University Press, 1988).

52. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, p. 16.

have lost my own unique position and the uniqueness of my action. Only if Christ remains “outside” the world, as it were, can he bring something new to it: “So *kenosis* in the sense of self-evacuation or self-annihilation is forbidden by the Bakhtinian understanding of love.”⁵³ Kenosis by emplotment involves the Son’s movement from heaven to human birth and from life to the obedience unto death (Phil. 2:6–8). Kenosis by self-emplotment has nothing to do with empathetic self-annihilation, but everything to do with active self-renunciation, where what is (temporarily) given up is not being but status.

Corporeal discourse

An authorial idea ... must enter into that world as an image of a human being, ... as one word among many words.⁵⁴

According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky treats ideas not in the abstract but in terms of the persons who bear them. From what we have said about kenosis as self-emplotment we may conclude that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is the divine Author’s embodied voice-idea: God’s corporeal discourse. The voice of God that appears here and there in Scripture in disembodied fashion, or second-hand via the prophets, takes on a particular location in space and time: the human body of Jesus. The voice is the embodiment of a person, the becoming-public of a person’s feelings, thoughts, and impulses.⁵⁵ To speak of incarnation is to locate God’s voice – specifically, the Son’s subjectivity or personhood – in a particular Jewish flesh and blood man. This Jewish location inserts the voice into a particular history: Jesus’ corporeal discourse belongs to the long history of God’s covenantal discourse with Israel.

Jesus’ corporeal discourse includes all that he says, does, and suffers. It is his words, however, that finally put his deeds and death into proper perspective and thus yield understanding.⁵⁶ Though all the Gospels recount Jesus’ teaching, the Johannine Jesus is, to

53. Jacobs, *Theology of Love*, p. 107. Jacobs goes on to develop the importance of this principle for textual hermeneutics.

54. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 98.

55. Kristin Linklater’s *Freeing the Natural Voice* (New York: Drama Book, 1976) locates the act of speaking not in the vocal cords only but in the entire body. See also Webb, *The Divine Voice*, ch. 3.

56. See esp. Robert H. Gundry, *Jesus the Word According to John the Sectarian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002).

use Frank Kermode's felicitous description, "by far the most communicative of the four."⁵⁷ Scholars reckon that about three-quarters of the Fourth Gospel consists of Jesus' sayings, monologues, and dialogues.⁵⁸ The Fourth Gospel not only reports Jesus' words but goes out of its way to call attention to them, employing two different terms. *Remata* ("words") occurs nine times for Jesus' words and three times for the words of God that Jesus speaks (Jn. 3:34; 8:47; 17:8). In addition to its starring role in the Prologue, *logos* appears an additional three times in the plural for Jesus' words, eighteen times in the singular referring to Jesus' discourse, six times for God's word, and twice for the word of God that Jesus speaks (Jn. 14:24; 17:14). The Fourth Gospel also highlights Jesus' voice (Jn. 3:29; 5:25, 28; 10:3, 4, 16, 27; 11:43; 18:37), as well as two particular forms of discourse: commandments and testimony.⁵⁹ Jesus himself calls attention to his words by referring them to God: "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father ..." (Jn. 14:10). John the Baptist's testimony is also apt: "For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure" (Jn. 3:34). Given the centrality of this theme, it comes as no surprise that John virtually equates belief in Jesus with believing Jesus' words (Jn. 2:22; 3:12; 4:50; 5:47; 10:25; cf. 20:30-1).⁶⁰

The theodramatic conflict in all four Gospels is largely dialogical. Jesus' interpretation of the Scriptures as referring to himself, his casting out demons, and his diatribes with Jewish authorities are all instances of discourse: "the work of Jesus the Word (*logos*) is done through words (*remata*)."⁶¹ Equally to the point, it is largely through the discourse of Jesus that the kingdom comes – through his teaching in parables, rebuking the demons, instruction in wisdom, and promised presence to those who believe in him.

The means by which God communicates his light, life, and love are ultimately related to the embodied person of Jesus Christ: *Jesus* is

57. Frank Kermode, "John," in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 453.

58. Gundry, *Jesus the Word*, p. 5.

59. For a survey of the biblical data, see Gundry, *Jesus the Word*, p. 9.

60. The Fourth Gospel has a special interest in communicative action for at least two reasons: (1) its emphasis on Jesus, his words and his miraculous deeds (*semeia*) as all revealing God; (2) its concern to persuade its readers of (1) so that they might have life (Jn. 20:31).

61. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1942), p. 30.

the corporeal discourse of the triune God. After all, communicative action is the stuff of interpersonal relations. To rework an old medieval adage: "Outside the communication there is no communion." Space-time is the medium in which the channel of human flesh bears the Word. If there is "noise" that risks distorting the message, it derives not from finite creatureliness but sin: "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him" (Jn. 1:11). It is one thing for the Author to embody his Voice-idea, another for that voice to penetrate hardened hearts. The divine Author, however, is Lord of his Wording and hearing alike. The Word made flesh, as stand-in for the Author, is that Voice in whose presence I, and others who hear and respond to it, are ultimately consummated.

Convincing discourse: incardiation

The Author's Word enters in but not everyone receives it. We need an explanation for this apparent breakdown in divine-human communication. Peacocke takes up the task, searching to "understand the Christ-event as God's self-communication and interaction with the world, such that it is intelligible in light of today's natural and human sciences."⁶² Peacocke begins with science as his interpretative framework for reading Scripture: God's self-communication refers to "patterns of meaning within the world of nature."⁶³ This is a far cry from the focus on divine verbal communication that characterizes the present work. Zealous to avoid interventionism (i.e., the idea that God interferes with the natural order by creating new matter and energy), Peacocke and other like-minded participants in the theology-science discussion view the incarnation as different only in degree, not in kind, from other emergent events in the natural order that are equally dependent on divine "input": "[Jesus'] 'incarnation' uniquely exemplifies that emergency-from-continuity that characterizes the entire process whereby God is 'informing' the world."⁶⁴

All human beings are in principle receptive to the pervasive divine influence (i.e., God's "general communication" through natural

62. Peacocke, *All That Is*, p. 38.

63. Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, enlarged edn., p. 179.

64. Peacocke, *All That Is*, p. 37. See also Peacocke, "The Incarnation of the Informing Self-Expressive Word of God," in W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman (eds.), *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 321-39.

processes), but Peacocke believes that Jesus was extraordinarily open.⁶⁵ Peacocke's account of a benign divine influence may accord with the natural sciences, but it fails to do justice to the way in which the Bible depicts God's light and grace penetrating the darkness and transforming hearts. In particular, it fails to account for how God can counteract those hard-hearted hearers in Jesus' time, and in ours, who regularly resist the divine influence. In order to do justice to the way the Bible depicts the nature of the Word's interaction with the world, then, we need to go beyond the idea of a mere divine inputting of information. Peacocke's anxiety over interventionism leads him to overlook the way in which the divine Author ensures his Word's efficacy by virtue of its own proper "energy," its distinct and peculiar (perlocutionary) force: the Holy Spirit.⁶⁶ Remythologizing theology views the God-world relation through the biblical depiction of God's triune authorial agency, and it is to this that we now turn.

Authoritative discourse: word and Word Jesus speaks as one with authority (Mk. 1:22). In its maximal sense, "authority" refers to the right *and* power to command assent and obedience. Yet it is also possible to have authority in the sense of the *right* of "say-so" yet lack the power to enforce what one says. At times, Jesus exercises the maximal, magisterial authority by, for example, commanding "even the unclean spirits" who obey him (Mk. 1:27).⁶⁷ Not everyone who heard Jesus, however, was convinced (Mk. 6:1-6; Lk. 18:23; Jn. 6:66). Jesus gives his own explanation of this phenomenon in his commentary on his parable of the Sower: "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart" (Mt. 13:19). Authoritative discourse that is not taken to heart may be true, yet ineffectual.

What power, force, or efficacy do words or discourse have? In his "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin draws a distinction between "authoritative" and "internally persuasive" discourse that may prove

65. "The 'Incarnation' in Jesus the Christ may, then, properly be said to be the consummation of the creative and creating evolutionary process" (Peacocke, "The Incarnation of the Informing Self-Expressive Word of God," p. 334).

66. "Perlocution" refers to the consequence brought about by a speech act: what one does not in but *through* saying something.

67. As does the natural world: "And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm" (Mk. 4:39).

helpful in responding to this question. Though Bakhtin's main purpose is to distinguish between the authority of discourse and its internal persuasiveness, he acknowledges that on rare occasions they "may be united in a single word – one that is *simultaneously* authoritative and internally persuasive."⁶⁸

An authoritative word – for example, a religious dogma, scientific truth, or federal law – "demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own."⁶⁹ It often carries the weight of the past and insists that we take up its mantle of tradition, even if we are not internally persuaded. In these instances, there is no middle ground: one must either affirm or reject it ("choose you this day whom you will serve" – Josh. 24:15). Authoritative discourse is not particularly dialogic. One recites authoritative discourse "by heart"; one does not retell it in one's own words.⁷⁰ Authoritative discourse may be true and right but it lacks the ability to impress these qualities on its hearers. Like the law, it may be written on tablets, but not upon our hearts (2 Cor. 3:3, 6). There is, however, a still more excellent way of divine communicative action (1 Cor. 12:31).

Penetrative discourse: Word and Spirit In contrast to the above, internally persuasive discourse evokes response "from within rather than imposing its truth from without."⁷¹ It is the discourse of another that freely becomes one's own to the point that one can restate it in one's own words. For Bakhtin, it is tied up with the self's very identity, for "selfhood is not a particular voice within, but a particular way of combining many voices within."⁷² There are many voices struggling to penetrate and win over one's consciousness.⁷³ Indeed, the conflict at the heart of the theodrama is to a great extent "an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values."⁷⁴

68. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 342.

69. *Ibid.*

70. *Ibid.*, p. 341.

71. Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin*, p. 170.

72. Morson and Emerson, *Bakhtin*, p. 221.

73. One of the marketing techniques contemporary advertisers frequently use is to employ stories or images that create an emotional bond between a commodity and the audience-consumer or, in the words of one brand expert, "loyalty beyond reason."

74. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 346.

Is Jesus' discourse as recorded in Scripture – or for that matter, biblical discourse in general – authoritative, internally persuasive, or both? Put differently: how does divine communicative action actually work? To the extent that it is effective, is it a matter of its external authority or persuasive force, or both? Consider, for example, Jesus' call to the first disciples: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him" (Mt. 4:19). This is not an episode of physical or psychological coercion. It makes better sense to see Jesus' call as an instance of Bakhtin's "internally persuasive" discourse.

The same dynamic behind this dominical discourse obtains, I submit, more generally in Scripture as a species of divine discourse. On the one hand, the author of Hebrews states that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit" (Heb. 4:12). On the other hand, not everyone who reads the Fourth Gospel is persuaded of its truth, just as not everyone who heard Jesus was persuaded of his own identity claim. So: is biblical discourse both authoritative and internally persuasive?

A theological exposition of divine communicative action must go beyond Bakhtin's notion of internal persuasion. While Bakhtin is correct to say that penetrative discourse "is only possible in actual dialogue with another person,"⁷⁵ not just any person will do. Generals and parents may order captains and children to behave in a certain way, but this gets no further than authoritative discourse. Moreover, no matter how carefully a human author constructs his or her discourse, authoritative or not, whether that discourse convinces a reader or listener is ultimately outside an author's control. Triune authorship, however, is an entirely different matter: when the Spirit speaks, people listen.⁷⁶

Fully to remythologize theology requires us not only to think through what follows for God's being from the biblical depictions of divine communicative action, but also what follows for Scripture's own being from these same depictions. Scripture, according to its own testimony, ultimately lives, moves, and has its being in the economy of triune communicative action.⁷⁷ In Aquinas's words: "The

75. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 249.

76. And they respond in faith and obedience, as we shall see in the following section.

77. "Scripture is normative because it is the *viva vox Christi*" (Webster, *Confessing God*, p. 148). For a fuller development of this point, see John Webster, *Holy Scripture*.

author of Holy Scripture is God.”⁷⁸ The Bible is ultimately the work of the divine Author who uses the variety of human authorial voices and points of view to communicate the meaning of the Word made flesh (Lk. 24:27). The salient point for present purposes concerns the role of the Spirit in this economy. The Spirit is the word’s empowering presence and executor, the earthly presence and agent of the risen Christ (Rom. 8:9; Phil. 1:19).⁷⁹

The risen Christ empowers his disciples to be his witnesses by giving them his Spirit (Lk. 24:48–9; Jn. 20:21–2). In terms of divine communicative action: the Word spoken by the Father enables its own hearing. Jesus’ words are already “spirit and life,” yet it is “the Spirit who gives life” (Jn. 6:62). The solution to this paradox is to see the Spirit as a minister of Jesus’ words – and as one who ministers the Word that Jesus is. The result is an internally persuasive discourse of another order, one that Calvin calls the *testimonium spiritus sancti*: the inner witness of the Spirit.⁸⁰

According to Calvin, the Spirit seals the hearts and minds of the faithful to the written word of Scripture that attests the living Word, Jesus Christ. The Spirit that Jesus promised his disciples is one “that would speak not from himself but would suggest to and instill into their minds what he had handed on through the Word [Jn. 16:13].”⁸¹ As executor of the Word, the Spirit “is the Author of the Scriptures” as well as the enabling condition of their right reception.⁸² Calvin maintains that Word and Spirit belong inseparably together. The contrast between “letter” and “spirit” is meant not to subordinate the Scriptures but to stress the difference between what we have termed externally authoritative and internally persuasive discourse. In support of this point, he cites Jeremiah 31:33, which contrasts the old covenant, written on tables of stone, and the new covenant that writes the law of God “on their hearts.”

Internally persuasive divine discourse – the inner witness of the Spirit – has everything to do with *writing on* or *putting into* the heart: “incardiation.” What the Spirit puts into the hearts of the

78. *Summa Theologica* I, 1, 10. See also my “Triune Discourse.”

79. On the Spirit as “executor” of the word, see my *Drama of Doctrine*, pp. 197–9.

80. Calvin, *Inst.* I.vii.4. See also Bernard Ramm: “The Holy Spirit is the *internal* minister of the Word who speaks the compelling and persuasive Word to the human heart” (*The Witness of the Spirit* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959], p. 17).

81. *Inst.* I.ix.1.

82. *Inst.* I.ix.2.

faithful is the word of God, and the mind of Christ. We have here a pneumatological variation on the idea of “authorial consummation.” The Author completes heroes, not by forcing them into a mold, but by releasing them so that they may freely respond to the word that simultaneously constitutes them. The purpose of the gospel is to persuade, yes, but in this persuasion is truth, goodness, and beauty. The Author’s word is furthermore a liberating word that sets the captive free (Gal. 5:1). Accordingly, where and when the Spirit ministers this word, there will be freedom indeed: “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17).

In sum: triune authorial agency involves not only corporeal discourse but spiritual effects. The Son is the form and content of the divine discourse, the Spirit its energy and persuasive efficacy.⁸³ The Spirit’s ministry is ultimately the reason why God’s word invariably accomplishes the purpose for which it has been sent (Isa. 55:11). Note well: the Spirit makes the biblical testimony to Christ efficacious by changing not the *text* but the *reader*. The triune God relates to the world, then, not only by producing discourse (Word) but by affecting the human heart by, with, and through discourse (Spirit). The key to understanding the God-world relation, I submit, is to understand better the nature of this communicative joint.

Triune dialogics: prayer and providence

Providence consists in action. (Calvin)

Does God bring about change in the world by inputting information or by expending energy?⁸⁴ Too often discussions of divine action are hampered by concepts of causality better suited to other levels, kinds, and relations of realities than that which concerns us here: the theodramatic. The central focus of the biblical depiction of the God-world relationship, we have argued, is dialogical: the theodramatic action, and conflict, turns on the word of God and the human response.

83. In more traditional terms: the same Spirit who authored the discourse (inspiration) also effects its reception (illumination).

84. The thrust of my constructive proposal is towards a third option: in speaking God also *does* things. Speech acts have their own proper force (e.g., illocutionary; perlocutionary).

There are two aspects to the divine-human dialogue: God speaks to us (providence); we speak to God (prayer). The goal in what follows is twofold: first, to suggest that divine providence is essentially a matter of triune dialogical action; second, to explore the relationship between providence and prayer. Whereas many accounts of divine sovereignty look for a causal joint between God and world, I shall explore the potential of thinking about this joint in the communicative terms of corporeal and penetrative discourse (i.e., word and Spirit).

Providence: God speaks to us

The link between the doctrine of providence and divine action is well established, that between providence and divine *communicative* action less so. The traditional doctrine of providence expositis God's relation to the world in terms of care and control or, in more classical terms: *preservatio*, *cooperatio*, *gubernatio*. God preserves creation by the same Word with which he brought it into being in the first place (Heb. 1:3; cf. Col. 1:16–17). The Heidelberg Catechism conceives God's subsequent control of worldly events in terms of his "hand" that upholds and guides creation, an image that suggests a physical force with metaphysical muscle (Q. 27).

A Christian doctrine of providence will not be content with conceiving God as one who unilaterally moves people about like so many otherwise inert chess pieces. That way fatalism lies. But neither does God let the pieces take control of the board. Rather, God convincingly persuades some of the pieces freely to play of their own accord in a way that so corresponds to God's will that we can speak (albeit hesitantly) in terms of dual agency.⁸⁵ It is in such dialogical interaction that we best see the way in which God exercises his sovereignty and humans their freedom. To anticipate: divine providence is less a matter of God's "strong right hand" than of the Father's two hands (i.e., Son and Spirit) – in a word, triune authorship.

Cause, concursus, conversus: on the very idea of a communicative joint The concept of efficient causality historically looms large over

85. Hesitantly, because God and human agents are not on the same ontological level.

the doctrine of providence. An efficient cause is a power or agent that makes something happen. Such causes are what bring about changes or effects. David's playing the lyre, for example, brought about a soothing effect on Saul (1 Sam. 16:23). According to Aquinas and Calvin, everything that happens in the world has two causes: a this-worldly or secondary cause and a divine or primary cause. These causes operate at different levels such that God's primary causality works in and through (i.e., cooperates with) the secondary causes without violating their integrity: no creatures will be harmed during the making of this world.

As primary cause, God need not be involved in the same way (i.e., efficiently) at all levels. It is difficult to conceive how the type of divine causal influence at the chemical or biological level could be appropriate at the level of, say, human decision-making without violating human freedom and personhood. I have already suggested, however, that the Bible's depiction of divine action locates it on the interpersonal level. This is only fitting, for the conflict in the drama of redemption concerns the hearts and minds of men and women, and it is largely at this level that their fate, and that of the whole world as well, will be decided.⁸⁶ This is because human being is not only the microcosm but the fulcrum of the created order, the point at which the battle to realize the Creator's intentions for creation must be won or lost. This is also where attempts to specify the mode of God's governing human history in terms of causality part ways, with some theologians (e.g., classical theists) speaking in terms of causal determination and others (e.g., relational theists) causal influence. When articulating a doctrine of providence, the challenge is to affirm God's authorship (i.e., God's asymmetry vis-à-vis the human actor) without sliding into the determinism that critics decry as destructive of human freedom.⁸⁷

Causality, like relation, is a concept that covers a multitude of theological sins. It is not clear what causal power God has, what

86. The principal interest of the biblical theodrama, and hence of remythologizing theology, is in special covenant history rather than with world occurrences in general. However, as Barth rightly notes, creation and covenant are integrally related.

87. See Paul Fiddes's discussion of G. K. Chesterton's play, *The Surprise*, in which the author performing a puppet play enters into the performance to put things right (*Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000], pp. 119–20).

it would mean for causal power to be “personal,” or how primary relates to secondary causality. What Austin Farrer calls the “causal joint” between infinite and finite freedom (and about which he is agnostic) is every bit as mysterious as the pineal gland, Descartes’ term for the postulated intersection of mind and body.⁸⁸ The salient question is whether theologians should abandon or try to redeem the notion: “The problem lies in the fact that the concept of *cause* has not been adequately christianized.”⁸⁹

To “christianize” the traditional idea of *concursum* is to let the material content of what the Bible says about the nature of God’s sovereign power govern one’s understanding of causality. Otherwise put: to christianize the concept is to remythologize it – to let the particular events of revelation and redemption (i.e., the history of Jesus Christ) govern its content rather than vice versa. Barth is willing to speak of God’s causality provided that what it describes is not some abstract absolute power but “the operation of the Father of Jesus Christ in relation to that of the creature.”⁹⁰ He therefore identifies God’s agency not with the general concept of a mechanical cause but with the unique and particular causality of covenantal grace. God’s control of the world in general is a by-product of his loving concern for his covenant people.

Barth further christianizes the concept of divine causality by elaborating providence in Trinitarian terms. The Father is the one who communicates himself in Word through Spirit. The Father’s rule is therefore not an exercise of raw power but of rational guidance: “the operation of God is His utterance to all creatures of the Word of God which has all the force and wisdom and goodness of His Holy Spirit. Or, to put it in another way, the operation of God is His moving of all creatures by the force and wisdom and goodness which are His Holy Spirit, the Spirit of His Word. The divine operation is, therefore, a fatherly operation.”⁹¹ It follows that the Christian belief in

88. See Farrer, *Faith and Speculation*, p. 65. Polkinghorne’s verdict is especially harsh: “Primary causality seems no more than the imposition of a mysterious theological gloss on natural process” (*Scientists as Theologians* [London: SPCK, 1996], p. 31).

89. Colin Gunton, “Barth, The Trinity, and Human Freedom,” in *Theology Today* 43 (1986), p. 323. David Fergusson notes a lack of attention in Aquinas and Calvin to the role of the Holy Spirit at this point (“Divine Providence and Action,” in Volf and Welker (eds.), *God’s Life in Trinity*, p. 164).

90. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960) p. 105.

91. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

providence “is faith in the strict sense of the term ... a hearing and receiving of the Word of God.”⁹²

Barth’s attempt to shift the discussion surrounding the *concursus* between divine and human freedom from generalities about causal power to the specifics of Word and Spirit is a stroke of theological genius.⁹³ He indicates the correct way to think about the causal joint yet continues to respect its mystery. Is it not obvious, he asks, “that in the Old Testament the creature ... is set in train by a divine address, word, call, command or order?”⁹⁴ The present proposal seeks to go beyond Barth, however, in two ways: (1) by acknowledging these earlier instances of the word of God as bona fide divine communicative acts and (2) in broadening the scope of divine communicative action to include Scripture as a form of divine discourse.⁹⁵

Remythologizing theology means refocusing the doctrine of providence on the activity of Word and Spirit in order to reconceive the causal joint in communicative terms. Here we may recall that the idols, in contrast to the living God, neither care, cause, nor communicate. They have no positive nature to “make common,” hence their powerlessness. In contrast, divine converse *converts* – brings about decisive changes in human beings in ways that do not violate but consummate their nature as persons. Time in particular is the sphere of communicative action, and it is through the process of dialogical consummation that human beings freely realize their personhood. Triune dialogical consummation is a matter of God’s acting not *on* persons but *within* and *through* them in such a way that, precisely by so acting, God brings them to their senses and makes them into the creatures they were always meant to be.

Effectual call as causal effect? There is an interesting convergence between this communicative variation on the notion of the causal joint and what I said earlier about penetrative discourse: both trade

92. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

93. Barth himself credits the school of Cocceius with the thesis that God works his will in the world by his Word, though he regrets they “did not maintain [this thesis] more strongly” (*Church Dogmatics* III/3, [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960] p. 144).

94. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

95. Caroline Schröder comments in relation to Barth’s doctrine of providence that this Word is “crucially and essentially Word in the singular” (“I See Something You Don’t See,” in George Hunsinger (ed.), *For the Sake of the World; Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004], p. 129).

on the conjunction of word and Spirit, as does my whole account of divine communicative action or authorship. The challenge all along has been to deploy the *analogia auctoris* so as, first, to remythologize, and so partially demystify, the way in which God acts in the world and, second, to specify the way in which God's communicative agency is and is not like its pale human counterpart. The present section continues this trajectory by examining that Benjamin among the theological doctrines, the effectual call: "that sovereign action of God through his Holy Spirit whereby he enables the hearer of the gospel call to respond to his summons."⁹⁶ Here, as perhaps nowhere else, we see how divine sovereignty (address) and human freedom (answerability) work together for good.

Why place a discussion of the doctrine of providence and divine action under the rubric of the effectual call? First, because it attends to the particulars of God's special revelation (e.g., God's call to Abraham; Jesus' call to his disciples); remythologizing, we may recall, moves from *mythos* to metaphysics and not the reverse. Second, because calling is a communicative action. Third, because effectual calling focuses on how God's grace brings about a change in the world without violating natural law or human freedom. Fourth, because the effectual call makes for an excellent case study of the phenomenon of dual agency. Finally, because it provides a lens for understanding how the eternal God acts in time, and thus for how God relates to the world more generally.

We begin by picking up the last point, courtesy of David Burrell's thesis that God acts in time through temporal creatures. The thesis breaks down into three constituent parts:

- 1.1. God acts through ... us humans because God can act *in* us.
- 1.2. God can act in us because we are full-fledged agents who act with an end in view ...
- 1.3. And God can insinuate the end in our deliberations ...⁹⁷

The effectual call is the pre-eminent example of God acting in us, and hence of a properly *communicative* causal effect. Consider, for

96. Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Exeter and Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster Press and Eerdmans, 1989), p. 86. I have previously treated this theme in my *First Theology*, ch. 4. See also Michael Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, ch. 10.

97. David B. Burrell, "Divine Practical Knowing: How an Eternal God Acts in Time," in Hebblethwaite and Henderson (eds.), *Divine Action*, p. 93. It should be noted that I unpack Burrell's thesis in my own way.

example, the case of Lydia, the seller of purple: "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). In the words of one theological commentator: "the opening of Lydia's heart by the power of God was the efficient cause of her coming to Christ."⁹⁸ This "cause" is not instrumental, however, but communicative: it works not on or against but in and through Lydia's nature and personhood.

For Calvin, such "openings" are works of grace alone, the result of the Spirit's regenerating activity that works in, with, and through the preaching of the gospel (the words about the Word).⁹⁹ Calvin distinguishes the general (ineffectual) call associated with "outward preaching" and the particular (effectual) call associated with the inner witness of the Spirit. It is ultimately the Spirit that "causes the preached Word to dwell in their hearts."¹⁰⁰

Many modern theologians remain unconvinced, especially when Calvin's followers locate the change of heart at the subconscious level.¹⁰¹ Calvin's recourse (and that of his successors) to the notion of cause leads some critics to accuse him of changing the wine of theology back into the water of philosophy. Emil Brunner's dismissal of Calvin's view sums up the objection: "*The personal relation between God and Man became a causal relation: God the cause, faith the effect.*"¹⁰² Moltmann, similarly, objects to the negative implications for the whole God-world relation that follow from the idea of an effectual call. If God is immanent to the world and the world to God, then we "have to stop thinking in terms of causes at all."¹⁰³ The modern temptation is to think of causation primarily in scientific terms, especially physics, where it concerns the motion of bodies in space, their actions and reactions. The question thus becomes: who moved the will? If the human response to God's call is a change of heart – a causal effect – then is God not moving or operating on the heart – intervening! – in a manner that overrides human nature

98. Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), p. 223.

99. *Inst.* III.24.2.

100. *Inst.* III.24.8.

101. See Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, p. 104. In context, Hoekema is discussing regeneration (what it means to be "born again"), but he later says that he thinks that regeneration and effectual calling are "identical" (p. 106).

102. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 315.

103. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 14.

and freedom?¹⁰⁴ How now may we conceptually expand the effectual call as the “communicative joint” between divine sovereignty and human freedom?

Augustine puts us back on track: “they who believe at the voice of the preacher from without, hear of the Father from within, and learn; while they who do not believe, hear outwardly but inwardly do not hear nor learn.”¹⁰⁵ Augustine’s repeated emphasis on hearing, and especially *learning*, clearly indicates that the effectual call in no way bypasses human volition and cognition. On the contrary, the effectual call exemplifies not brute but a properly *communicative* force (e.g., the “force” of a compelling argument). Is the grace that changes human hearts thus a matter of energy or information? It is both. The effectual call has both propositional content (matter; information) and communicative force (illocutionary and perlocutionary energy).

What makes the call effectual is the self-communicative power of the triune God. The effectual call is a sovereign summons to participate in the light and life of the triune God. As such, it is a species of triune dialogics, a means of God bringing about change in a person’s heart and mind *precisely by bringing about understanding*. Here we may once more recall Habermas’s distinction between instrumental and communicative rationality. The former seeks to bring about change by manipulating objects in the world; the latter aims at achieving understanding between persons through language and communication. It is of course possible to use language too to manipulate: the cynic you will always have with you. Political and theological hucksters regularly employ rhetorical techniques to market their ideological wares. Habermas therefore reserves the term communicative rationality for speech acts that produce an informed and willing consensus, hence the importance of Augustine’s point about *learning*.

The effectual call therefore represents a distinct communicative causality, one that moreover lies at the core of the theodramatic action, where infinite and finite freedom meet. God’s word may “bend and determine” the will, but even the seventeenth-century

104. Cf. the remark by Louis Berkhof: “There is a sense in which calling and regeneration are related as cause and effect” (*Systematic Theology* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958], p. 470).

105. *On the Predestination of the Saints*, ch. 15 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 5:506.

divines knew that God “moves the will to attend to the proof, truth, and goodness of the word announced.”¹⁰⁶ Jesus immediately qualifies his statement “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” with a quote from Isaiah 54:13 – “And they will all be taught by God” – to which he gives the following gloss: “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (Jn. 6:44–5). The Father’s drawing, we may thus infer, is not manipulative but communicative.¹⁰⁷ As concerns the power of grace that accompanies the gospel, one might say that the *message* is the medium.

What finally makes the call effectual is its content – the story of Jesus – as ministered by the Spirit. The external, authoritative kerygmatic discourse is, on its own, a necessary but not sufficient condition for bringing about change in one’s heart and mind. As we have seen, God’s communicative agency is triune: to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, to the Son its execution, and, as Calvin notes, “to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of the action.”¹⁰⁸ We may now return to our initial query: what power or causal agency makes the call effectual?

The Spirit, I submit, has perlocutionary power: the capacity to bring about the appropriate communicative effects.¹⁰⁹ Foremost among these perlocutionary effects, as we have seen, stands persuasion. Yet just as important as persuasion is another perlocutionary effect: understanding. Understanding is a necessary though not always sufficient condition for responding to a call: one must first recognize a warning as a warning before one can heed it, or a summons as a summons before one can answer it. What the Spirit ultimately enables is the hearer’s hearing and feeling the full force of what has been said. God’s call is effectual because the Spirit ministers a word that is true, good, and beautiful: the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The effectual call is the Spirit’s ministering the word in such a way that hearers freely and willingly answer God by responding with

106. Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), p. 520.

107. Cf. Horton: “Bringing about a new relationship through communication is different from simply causing movements between objects” (*Covenant and Salvation*, p. 226).

108. *Inst.* I.13.18.

109. From *per* (“through”) + locution (“speaking”). The illocution – what the speaker does in speaking – is the objective aspect of a speech act; the perlocution – the intended effect of the act – is the subjective aspect.

faith. Remember Lydia: “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14). God’s calling is his restoring and reorienting those spiritual and cognitive capacities taken captive to an unclean spiritual and cognitive environment. The process is not entirely without analogy. Helen Keller was born blind and deaf yet was nevertheless brought to understand language by her teacher, whom Helen later called a “miracle worker.”¹¹⁰ In her autobiography, she describes coming to understand language in terms of religious conversion. Her teacher began by “spelling” words into Helen’s hand. Helen learned to imitate the movements but failed to grasp that they represented words. One day, however, her teacher spelled the word *water* into one of Helen’s hands as she held the other under a spout. Keller later wrote: “I knew then that ‘w-a-t-e-r’ meant the wonderful cool something flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!”¹¹¹

Here is no coercive force, but a marvelous example of how communicative acts can work liberating effects. In bringing about understanding, the Spirit does not oppress but liberates – sets the prisoners free to see, hear, and respond to the call of the truth, goodness, and beauty of Jesus Christ in a way that does not violate but preserves, sanctions, and sanctifies our created natures.

Beyond the call: canon as compendium As a form of the Spirit’s ministry of the word, the effectual call is not only first in the order of the benefits of salvation (Rom. 8:28–30) but has continued communicative effects. In Bavinck’s words: “That calling, however, serves not only at the start to invite nonbelievers to faith and repentance but also to admonish and warn, to teach and lead believers permanently.”¹¹² Barth concurs: the human creature participates in God’s providential communicative action “from within. Of all creatures he is the one who ... also consents to it, having a kind of ‘understanding’ ... with the overruling God and Creator.”¹¹³

These quotations suggest that God engages human beings in communicative fashion not only to bring them to faith but also to nurture it. God is the creator and sustainer of all that is, including the

110. Keller describes her coming to understand in terms of a religious conversion. The film based on her life is entitled *The Miracle Worker*.

111. Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (New York: Signet, 1988), p. 18.

112. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. III, pp. 593–4.

113. *Church Dogmatics* III/3, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960) p. 242.

realm of faith. A Trinitarian account of providence – and hence of divine sovereignty, inasmuch as providence includes God’s ruling – is an account of God’s efficacious communicative action, of the Father making himself known in the Son through the Spirit’s ministry of the word. Recall what we said above about God acting in us by insinuating the end in our deliberations: God directs the drama of redemption largely by directing its company of players, those faithful members who make up the body of Christ.¹¹⁴ A Trinitarian account of providence in terms of communicative action will therefore supplement what we have just said about the effectual call with the related notion of the *effectual prompt*.

Divine providence is best viewed in terms of triune authorship: *the Father rules by speaking Christ through the Spirit into the minds and hearts of the faithful*. “Christ” in this context is shorthand for what the law, prophets, and other biblical writings say about the new thing God is doing in Christ. This puts a new spin on the notion of canon as “rule.” The canon is not only the norm that governs right Christian speech, thought, and action but also the means that God uses to direct his people as they seek to realize God’s rule in their hearts and pursue God’s mission to the world.¹¹⁵

Providence thus names a special communicative relation of God to the world: it is the “word and Spirit” means by which God extends his rule in the world or, to use the terms of the previous chapter, the means by which God *consummates the world dialogically*. Appropriately enough, the “word of the Lord” and the Spirit both figure among the main actors in the Book of Acts. The word’s journey from Jerusalem to Rome is actually a conquest narrative: despite opposition, the word of the Lord “grew and multiplied” (Acts 12:24). The word conquers communicatively, not by hypnotizing its listeners but by bringing about understanding, convicting and persuading listeners of its truth. Its efficacy derives from the Spirit’s ministry of the preached gospel. For example, in response to Peter’s Pentecost sermon the people who heard it “were cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37). The purpose of the word’s journey is “the construction of the community of the

114. For an attempt to understand providence on the model of a theater director, see T. J. Gorringer, *God’s Theatre: A Theology of Providence* (London: SCM Press, 1991), pp. 77–82.

115. If Scripture includes a variety of kinds of divine discourse, there is no need to choose between its being an “epistemic criterion” and a “means of

word.”¹¹⁶ Significantly, Acts treats these two themes – the power of the word and the formation of the community – together.

What is true of the proclaimed word in the Book of Acts applies to the published word as well. God continues to act in the world by acting in his people, and God acts in his people through the Spirit’s ministry of the written word. In Romans 15:4 Paul speaks of the “encouragement of the Scripture” as a means of hope. In the next verse he speaks of “the God of encouragement.” The implication is not only that Scripture and God work to the same end, but that God is at work in Scripture to this end.¹¹⁷

God does more through Scripture than encourage, however. Indeed, God does as many things through Scripture as there are speech genres in it. As Bakhtin notes, “The wealth and diversity of speech genres are boundless because the various possibilities of human activity are inexhaustible.”¹¹⁸ How much more is this so in the case of God’s word. God enters into our world and performs Authorial acts by appropriating various speech genres: “the ability to command a wider set of genres enriches one’s capacity to conceptualize and participate in varying aspects of social life.”¹¹⁹ Just so. The canon is significant as a stretch of divine discourse not only for what it says but how it says it: not just any theology, or view of providence, may be associated with narrative, prophecy, law, wisdom, and apocalyptic.¹²⁰ These biblical genres foster ways of thinking and living that, when ministered by the Spirit, serve as one of the chief means by which God actively guides and governs church history and, through the church, the history of the world.

Prayer: we respond to God

To remythologize theology is to give a dogmatic description of what, from a human perspective, is the chief instance and location

grace”; it is both (*contra* William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* [Oxford University Press, 1998]).

116. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, p. 155.

117. Brian S. Rosner, “‘Written for us’: Paul’s View of Scripture” in Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright (eds.), *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), p. 92.

118. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 60.

119. Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 275.

120. Cf. Paul Ricoeur: “Not just any theology whatsoever can be tied to the narrative form” (*Figuring the Sacred*, p. 40).

of human/divine dialogical interaction, and thus the substance of the human creature's interpersonal relationship with God. Prayer is that form of human communicative action that draws us into communion with the triune God and so helps us willingly to conform to the Father's purposes, will, and wisdom – in a word, to the image of his Son. Prayer is the practical resolution of the theoretical problem of how to balance divine determination (i.e., authorial consummation) and human freedom (i.e., heroic consent).

The dogmatic location of prayer Prayer, it has been said, is both “the key to understanding the nature of God”¹²¹ and “the Christian life in miniature.”¹²² Theological discussions of prayer often treat it in conjunction with providence.¹²³ There is good reason for this practice, especially when one understands providence in terms of triune dialogics, as is the case here. Samuel Balentine's survey of prayer in the Hebrew Bible defines it as “explicit communication with God.”¹²⁴ In Calvin's words, prayer is “conversation [*colloquium*] with God.”¹²⁵ John Knox, similarly, says that prayer is “an earnest and familiar talking with God, to whom we declare our miseries, whose support and help we implore ... and whom we laud and praise for our benefits received.”¹²⁶ Karl Barth, by contrast, treats prayer as “the most intimate and effective form of Christian action.”¹²⁷ In fact, there is no conflict between the positions if we see prayer as a form of *communicative* action, as Barth himself acknowledges: “Prayer ... is

121. Vincent Brümmer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray?* rev. edn. (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2008), p. ix.

122. Ian Ramsey, *Our Understanding of Prayer* (London: SPCK, 1971), p. 22.

123. See, *inter alia*, Peter Baelz, *Prayer and Providence: A Background Study* (London: SCM, 1968); H. H. Farmer, *The World and God: A Study of Prayer, Providence and Miracle in Christian Experience* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1936); Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

124. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 30.

125. *Inst.* III.20.4.

126. *Declaration of the True Nature and Object of Prayer* (1554). “Conversation” is too casual a term for Balthasar, who nevertheless is willing to speak in terms of “dialogue” (*Prayer* [London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1961]), pp. 11ff). D. Z. Phillips expresses similar misgivings about the analogy with conversation and points out that God and human beings lack a common social context (*The Concept of Prayer* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965]). In response, however, one might appeal to Calvin's notion of divine accommodation and to the shared covenantal context that serves as the framework for most of the prayers recorded in Scripture.

127. *Church Dogmatics* III/3, (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1960) p. 264.

simply asking.”¹²⁸ To be precise, it is an asking in response to a prior divine communicative act: God’s covenantal promise to be our God.

Prayer is the paradigmatic act of Christian freedom: “In prayer, [the Christian] makes use of the freedom to answer the Father who has addressed him.”¹²⁹ Note that the divine purpose behind the effectual call is the enabling of a free human response. Prayer is the paradigm of how free human willing (e.g., petitioning, thanking, praising) can also be an expression of the will of God. Prayer lives at the intersection of divine and human freedom, the diastole of the heartbeat that is one’s personal relationship with God.¹³⁰

Prayer is a microcosm of the human creature’s entire relation to God and the means by which the kingdom of God advances and, as such, is a key component in the theodrama. Prayer is the communicant’s response to God’s command to “Call upon me” (Ps. 50:15). This command is not a foreign imposition upon human nature for, as Augustine knew, human hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. Those who refuse to hearken to the divine voice or enter into communicative relationship with God forfeit the privilege of communicative agency, thereby consigning themselves to the role of God’s instruments rather than communicants.¹³¹ To invoke the name of God, however, is to name our heart’s deepest desire. H. H. Farmer combines Augustine’s emphasis on prayer as the heart’s yearning and Barth’s emphasis on petition: “The yearning of the soul towards its highest good in God ... is the *fons et origo* of all petition.”¹³² We see just such a combination of invocation and petition in the Lord’s prayer (“Our Father”) and, more poignantly, in Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane.

The dominical paradigm: what would Jesus pray? To understand the role of prayer in what we have called the communicative joint, we would do well to look to Jesus. Christology lies at the heart of the present proposal because Jesus Christ is the human form of the

128. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

129. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

130. Migliore’s comment on Barth’s view of prayer is apt: “He sees the underlying issue as not whether but in what way God is sovereign, and not whether but in what way the human creature is free” (“Freedom to Pray: Karl Barth’s Theology of Prayer,” in Barth, *Prayer*, 50th Anniversary Edition. (Louisville, KY and London: Westminster John Knox, 2002), p. 105.

131. Brümmer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray?* p. 81.

132. Farmer, *The World and God*, p. 137.

communicative action of God, the Author's Word made earthly text. He is both divine gracious initiative and human faithful response, the perfect image of how the Father as a personal agent can act through a faithful yet free human agent. Indeed, Jesus' prayer is the epitome of the "double agency" that characterizes prayer (and providence) in general: "prayer is a correspondence in Christian life to the perfect co-presence in Jesus Christ of divine grace and human freedom without confusion or separation."¹³³

Dogmatic treatises on prayer often focus on the presuppositions and principles of petition: can we pray for God to bring about changes in nature and history (the external world) or only in the human heart, our own or that of others (the inner world)? The formulation of the question assumes a false dichotomy. Our concern should be for the level of theodramatic action, which I have further identified with the human heart, from which "flow the springs of life" (Prov. 4:23). *God works in the world largely by working through human beings, the microcosms of creation.* The theodramatic action takes place largely on the communicative level of interpersonal interaction that is also the site of theodramatic conflict. This conflict comes to expression in prayer perhaps as nowhere else, as demonstrated by the drama of Christ: "The development of a particular series of events in the life of an individual can reach a point that dramatically focuses on a single decision, a Yes or No that determines everything. This happened to Jesus at the Last Supper and drove him to Gethsemane."¹³⁴ The perennial temptation, from Genesis to the Gospels, is to distrust the divine communicative action (the word of the Lord that comes to particular persons) and hence to de-god God.

Despite slight differences in wording, all three Synoptic Gospel accounts of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane feature the same core elements (Mt. 26:39-44; Mk. 14:35-6; Lk. 22:41-2): (1) invocation ("Father"); (2) petition ("let this cup pass from me"); (3) consent ("your will be done"). Now according to James 5:16 "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects" (RSV). Clearly, Jesus' prayer was that of a righteous man. The prayer he prayed as a model for his disciples is a prayer for rightness in every realm: heavenly, physical, psychological, and political (Mt. 6:9-13). Nevertheless, the

133. Migliore, "Freedom to Pray," p. 108.

134. E. Frank Tupper, *A Scandalous Providence: The Jesus Story of the Compassion of God* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), p. 324.

cup did not pass. It does not follow, however, that Jesus' prayer was ineffectual.

Jesus' "not my will but yours be done" depicts two wills not on a collision course but, on the contrary, coming into perfect alignment: "Petitionary prayer is part of the soul's response to God's challenge and invitation to it to become *through* cooperation with Him a personality more and more fitted *for* cooperation with Him."¹³⁵ Jesus' prayer was a vital means of equipping Jesus to accept his vocation, his cup. Luke reports that following his prayer "there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him" (Lk. 22:43).¹³⁶ If we take our bearings from Jesus' prayer and, indeed, from the shape of his whole life, we can only conclude that obedience, no matter how unpopular a notion in contemporary society, is a bona fide form of interpersonal relationship. Jesus presents himself as the Son of God and Servant of Yahweh, one whose identity is thoroughly tied up in his mission, a mission understood as fulfilling the will of God.¹³⁷ Praying with Jesus, we come to understand the Father's love and so discover perfect freedom in our willing consent to God's will.¹³⁸

Dialogical determination: life in the vocative Prayer is a human response to the divine summons to participate in the economy of triune communication. In Calvin's words: prayer is "the chief exercise of faith ... by which we daily receive God's benefits."¹³⁹ It is also the chief means by which God acts in us to "insinuate [his] end in our deliberations"¹⁴⁰ and hence the prime exhibit of the providential *concursus* of divine sovereignty and human freedom. Praying as Jesus prayed is the God-ordained means of aligning human minds, wills, and hearts with God's, and thus a demonstration of God's communicative power. *It is chiefly through prayer that the Author dialogically determines and refines his human hero.*¹⁴¹

135. Farmer, *The World and God*, p. 138.

136. Here we may recall what we said in ch. 4 about angels as communicative agents.

137. See R. T. France, "Servant of Yahweh," in Green, McKnight and Marshall (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, pp. 744–7.

138. Cf. Migliore's statement that "prayer for Barth is a *participation in the praying of Jesus Christ*" ("Freedom to Pray," p. 99).

139. The title of *Inst.* Book III, ch. 20.

140. Burrell, "Divine Practical Knowing," p. 93.

141. This is my Bakhtinian variation on a Barthian theme (viz., the fundamental insight that theology itself is the free and grateful communicative response to a prior free and gracious self-communicative initiative).

Life with God is vocative. God calls us; we call upon God: “to invoke God (*invocare*) is to invite God into oneself.”¹⁴² To pray is to enter into a communicative relation with a personal God (“Our Father”), not with some unspeakable Ground of Being or ineffable Soul of the Whole. As persons, we relate to God personally and communicatively – which is to say in love and understanding – and this means by knowledge, feeling, and will: “Understanding lies at the heart of all activity that is properly called human.”¹⁴³ *To remythologize theology is to elaborate the metaphysics that undergirds the Christian practice of prayer conceived of in terms of interpersonal dialogue.*

Some theologians, contemplating the phenomenon of intercessory prayer, have concluded that humans can move God to do things. Even Barth appears to say as much, noting that in petitioning God human prayer “exerts an influence upon God’s action, even upon his existence.”¹⁴⁴ More common is the observation that, having chosen to establish a relation of loving fellowship with human persons, God *really responds* to human needs and petitions.¹⁴⁵ Who, then, is dialogically determining whom?

Contrary to appearances, petitionary prayer is not the exception to the general rule set forth in the present chapter, namely, that the divine/human dialogical relation is genuinely personal yet asymmetrical. Barth apparently agrees, judging by his comments on the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer that summon us “to take up the cause of God and actively to participate in it with our asking.”¹⁴⁶ It is not that God conforms his will to ours, but ours to his. God wills “that His cause ... should not only be His but also ours.”¹⁴⁷ Humans are never more active, or free, than in prayer; prayer is the communicative activity of answering God such that, in answering, one corresponds to God’s will.

To put it in remythologized terms: *prayer is an asymmetrical dialogical interaction whereby God effects in us, through word and Spirit, a freedom of*

142. Rebecca H. Weaver, “Prayer,” in Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, p. 671. Cf. Augustine, *Confessions* I.2.2. We may note in passing Barth’s eventual decision to organize the final part of his *Church Dogmatics* dealing with the Christian life under the rubric of invocation.

143. David B. Burrell, *Aquinas, God, and Action*, p. 122.

144. Barth, *Prayer*, p. 13.

145. Brümmer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray?* pp. 36–45.

146. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), p. 103.

147. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

consent. To be sure, the notion of a “caused freedom” is, for some, a stumbling block. Kenotic-relational theists prefer to speak in terms of divine influence or of God’s “haunting the soul with the pressure of an unconditional value.”¹⁴⁸ Paul Fiddes is nearer the mark in viewing the persuasive activity of God in Trinitarian terms, specifically, as relational-actions (e.g., movements of love) that attract us, invite us, and perhaps catch us up in their wake.¹⁴⁹ Yet he also believes that humans can decline the invitation to the divine dance, for God’s persuasive love can be resisted.¹⁵⁰ By contrast, I have argued that triune discourse is internally persuasive: efficacious. The communicative movement of word and Spirit is irresistible (which is what saying that it is “efficacious” amounts to) *not because it bypasses our hearts and minds but precisely because it opens and illumines them*. God’s being-in-act is communicative: the free circulation of light, life, and love. When we relate to God in prayer, we are correspondingly dazzled by his light, rejuvenated by his life, and humbled by his love. To paraphrase Gadamer: the prayerful event of understanding is the self-presentation in language not of the *Sache* (the subject matter of a conversation) but of the Son.¹⁵¹ It is a matter of being not captured but *enraptured* by the truth, goodness, and beauty of the will of God made manifest in Jesus Christ.

Relational theists and panentheists are not the only theologians to raise eyebrows at the notion of this dialogical variation on a determinist theme. However, their objection – that a personal God cannot *cause* humans freely to love him back – labors under a confusion between strategic or instrumental and *communicative* action, a distinction to which we have had recourse more than once. Communicative action brings about its effects irresistibly yet non-coercively, through reasoned discourse that, because it is true,

148. Farmer, *The World and God*, p. 24.

149. See Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God*, ch. 4, esp. pp. 131–9.

150. Fiddes himself indicates that there is no greater power “than the ability to influence others through suffering love, that is, *actually to change their minds and emotions*” (p. 139, my emphasis). He can therefore say that “God will bring us there in the end through the gentle gambits of love” (p. 141). However, it is not clear who he means by “us” (i.e., is it everyone?) and so the extent of the efficacy of God’s suffering love is not entirely clear.

151. See my “Discourse on Matter: Hermeneutics and the ‘Miracle’ of Understanding,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005), pp. 5–37. Note, too, Philippe Eberhard’s emphasis on the active role of the listening subject: “to understand is to open oneself to something that speaks to us (*sprechen*) so as to correspond to it (*entsprechen*)” (*The Middle Voice in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, p. 111).

good, and beautiful, resonates with human minds and hearts (i.e., is internally persuasive). To speak of “dialogical determinism,” then, is to maintain three tenets: (1) the dialogue between God and human creatures is real – interpersonally *genuine*; (2) the effect is *communicative*; (3) the outcome is divinely *determined*.

God begins the dialogue by taking communicative initiatives, summoning answerable subjects and soliciting human heroes to exercise the freedom of consent. Prayer enables humans joyfully to will what God wills; prayer enables creatures with finite freedom to participate in God’s infinite freedom. The goal is to become witnesses to and partakers (i.e., communicants) in God’s own being-in-communicative-activity and hence to be answerable for the specific vocation to which God calls us, as Jesus was for his. The Author creates not “voice-ideas” (Bakhtin) but “life-ideas” (Balthasar), namely, shapes of personal vocation. Each particular “life-idea,” of course, “can only be an aspect of the total idea for the redeemed creation God has in Christ.”¹⁵² When we pray “thy kingdom come,” then, we are asking for the power of the Holy Spirit – the faith, hope, and love not only to say, but to embody “thy will be done” and so to realize our life-idea. It is significant to note that when Calvin explains why prayer is not superfluous, his first three reasons concern its effect on the human heart.¹⁵³ Divine sovereignty is nowhere better on display than in the triune God’s ability to bring about a willing change of human heart.¹⁵⁴

In summary: prayer is a means by which God infallibly persuades human heroes to be conformed to his image by effectually communicating the truth, goodness, and beauty of Jesus Christ. Communication is the operative term; any other means of persuasion would bypass the mind and therefore count as coercion or manipulation. The God who commands us to pray is the God who says “Come now, let us reason together” (Isa. 1:18).

But where and in what manner, pray tell, does God communicate? Are we to expect audible voices? dreams? celestial phenomena? We

152. Aidan Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth*, p. 79.

153. *Inst.* III.20.3.

154. Cf. the disciples’ astonishment at Jesus’ teaching about how difficult it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God and Jesus’ response: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Mt. 19:26). As to why some people do not respond to God, it is a deep mystery; as to why some do, it is a deep grace.

may here recall the canonical case studies examined in chapter 1. We there claimed that dialogical (i.e., verbalized) interaction is the principal form of God's relation to the human world. Subsequent chapters have examined the greatest instance of such interaction, God's *direct* communication to humanity in the person (and words) of Jesus Christ, which continues to be communicated indirectly through the word written and the Spirit who ministers it. As Barth observed, the word of God has multiple forms, though the third and final form – the sermon – appeared only after Pentecost.¹⁵⁵ And this reminds us that God's dialogical determination of those who pray has for its ultimate result not only isolated individuals but a community: the church, the body of Christ.

The church is a "creature of the word," and the place where the word is ministered through preaching, prayer, and the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.¹⁵⁶ Augustine rightly claims that it is through freely praying the Scriptures that God determines our hearts. Immersing oneself in the language of Scripture not only teaches the heart what to desire but molds the heart so that it "produces the desire in the one who is so taught."¹⁵⁷ The various types of discourse in the Bible are the prime locus for the mediated immediacy of hearing the divine address: the word of the Lord. What the Scriptures ultimately speak and bespeak is Jesus Christ: the realization of the supreme covenant blessing (God for us; we for God). Put differently: what God communicates is Jesus Christ, but this light comes to us in the first instance refracted through the many colors (viz., literary forms) of the Bible. In praying the Scriptures we pray as Christ taught us, in Christ's name, with Christ's body, for Christ's coming.

To conclude: God converts hearts and minds through his external and internal address, especially when one prays the Scriptures with Jesus Christ in the Spirit. Prayer is an ordained means by which communicants with Christ immerse themselves in the word that testifies to him.¹⁵⁸ In so doing they also become a part of what we

155. John McIntyre, *Theology after the Storm: Reflections on the Upheavals in Modern Theology and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. 204. For Barth on the threefold form of the word of God, see *Church Dogmatics* I,1 pp. 88–124.

156. See chapter nine below for the way in which the church, and especially the sacraments, "communicate" God.

157. Weaver, "Prayer," p. 672.

158. The Lord's Supper is another ordained means, and the proper context in which to speak of "communicants." In an earlier draft I devoted a section to

may term, with a nod to Gadamer, its *effectual history*. The providence in prayer, so to speak, thus refers to the way in which the triune God works communicatively “toward a congruence between the external word of Scripture ... and the internal yearning of the heart.”¹⁵⁹ It is through such hearts made freely captive to the Word that God communicates his truth, goodness, and beauty not only to the church, but through the church to the world.

the church’s life together *ad intra* (i.e., the communion of the saints) and its mission *ad extra* (i.e., its commission to communicate Christ to the world). Due to space constraints, however, I have decided to postpone extended treatment of the ecclesiological implications of my communicative Trinitarian theism for another occasion.
 159. Weaver, “Prayer,” p. 673.

Impassible passion? Suffering, emotions, and the crucified God

If God as *actus purus*, as pure activity, is the God of abstract philosophy; so, on the other hand, Christ, the God of the Christians, is the *passio pura*, pure suffering – the highest metaphysical thought, the *être suprême* of the heart.¹

As goes impassibility, so goes the ability for language to name something other than a mere human creature. For what is at stake in the doctrine of impassibility is nothing less than the possibility that we can speak of God in such a way that this speech is something other than speaking about ourselves.²

At the beginning of this work we examined ways of moving from biblical representations to theological conceptualizations. We encountered there the Scylla and Charybdis of theology's search for understanding. We fall back into myth (and mythologizing) when we treat God as a being or agent on the same level as other beings and agents – as a creature writ large, as it were. Conversely, we lose the category of divine action altogether when, by demythologizing, we refuse all thought of God actually speaking and doing things in space-time. We lose the *theo* of theodrama in the one case, the *drama* in the other.

In Part II we described the God-world relation in terms of triune communicative action. Though God communicates his goodness to creation in a general sense, we have focused on the biblical *mythos* (viz., the theodramatic story line), where the main interest lies in God's verbal communication to human beings. Yet Scripture also

1. Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, p. 59.

2. D. Stephen Long, *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth*, p. 181.

depicts what seem to be cases of human communicative agents eliciting responses from God. *Does God suffer change as a result of his dialogical interaction with the world?* Far from being an eccentric query, this question strikes at the heart of our conception of God's being as interpersonal communicative agency (and, as we shall see in the following chapter, God's nature as love). How ought remythologizing proceed here? Is God a communicative *patient* who suffers the effects of dialogical interaction with the world?³

The temptation to project one's own interests, values, and categories onto God is a dangerous toxin in the bloodstream of theology. If to be forewarned is to be forearmed, then a little exposure to projectionist thinking may serve as a vaccine against such Feuerbachian slips, especially when we attempt to speak well of the love of God, a topic with many potential human analogues.

Does God suffer? A theological litmus test

Does God suffer? No question penetrates to the theological joints and methodological marrow more effectively than this. It thus constitutes an excellent diagnostic test for an approach that purports to be genuinely biblical and authentically Christian. It also represents an important case study for one who seeks to remythologize theology.⁴ The challenge is to move from the biblical *mythos* to theological metaphysics via the Bible's own theodramatic system of projection rather than by projecting human values onto God.

Feuerbach on the suffering heart of God

Feuerbach *demythologizes* God's suffering in the context of interpreting the gospel. He treats the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus Christ under the rubrics of the mysteries of "God as Love" and "the Suffering God" respectively.⁵

Feuerbach's big idea, we may recall, is that "God" is in fact an objectification of human values – our best and brightest thoughts writ supernaturally large. The heart of the religious matter is, for

3. I interpret God's patience in an active rather than a passive sense at the end of ch. 9.

4. Both this chapter and the next treat various facets of divine impassibility.

5. Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, chs. 4 and 5.

him, the heart: "The truly religious man unhesitatingly assigns his own feelings to God; God is to him a heart susceptible to all that is human."⁶ He then makes the key demythologizing move: "the divine love is only human love made objective, affirming itself."⁷ The fundamental religious feeling is love, a feeling symbolized by God's becoming man: "The Incarnation was a tear of the divine compassion, and hence it was only the visible advent of a Being having human feelings, and therefore essentially human."⁸ Love is "that which impels the sacrifice of self to another."⁹ Love, says Feuerbach, does not exist without sympathy, neither does sympathy exist without suffering: "the suffering of love ... [is] the suffering of the heart."¹⁰

According to Feuerbach, the real meaning of the Passion narrative is that "Christians consecrated passivity, even placing it in God."¹¹ The cross is a testament to the importance humans place on the suffering of love (i.e., self-sacrifice). The gospel story is actually an expression of the human heart, worn on a narrative sleeve. We could say, to paraphrase Proverbs 4:23, that out of the human heart flow the springs of the divine life. Plainly demythologized, "God suffers" means: "to suffer for others is divine."¹² On the surface, then, Feuerbach is a divine passibilist: "A suffering God is a feeling, sensitive God."¹³ Beneath the surface, however, lurks the real claim: "feeling is absolute, divine in its nature."¹⁴

God, for Feuerbach, is the projection of our best selves. God's incommunicable attributes are projections of human reason, that faculty which is impervious to passions and desire, "that part of our nature which is ... impassible."¹⁵ A God who is the projection of human reason cannot, however, satisfy the human heart. Feuerbach thus draws on human feeling to generate the so-called "personal" or communicable divine attributes, which stand in some tension with the more metaphysical attributes derived from reason. In the final analysis, however, it is a matter for Feuerbach not of how a divine

6. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 55-6.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

12. *Ibid.*, 60.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

being can have this or that attribute, but rather of “the divineness or deity of the attribute” itself.¹⁶ Theology simply reflects what qualities human beings at a particular place and time consider divine. Typically, such a claim about the cultural-conditioning of theology precedes criticisms of classical theism (e.g., too “Greek”), but given our analysis of the way in which contemporary theologians have “projected” the ideas of kenosis and perichoresis onto the immanent Trinity (see ch. 3), it seems more appropriate to raise it in connection with relational ontotheology.

“God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8). Feuerbach resolves the tension between God’s metaphysical and personal attributes by viewing the Incarnation as signifying the triumph of love: “It was love to which God sacrificed his divine majesty.”¹⁷ Still, Feuerbach determines the meaning of love by means of phenomenology (i.e., descriptions of human love) and, in so doing, makes God’s love an instance of a more general scheme. By way of contrast, remythologizing begins with accounts of God’s communicative action, those recorded both in, and as, Scripture.¹⁸

Testing the proposal

The question of God’s suffering poses two related challenges. The formal challenge pertains to one’s construal and use of the Bible. How one interprets biblical passages that depict God’s relenting, grieving, etc. invariably exposes the strengths and weaknesses of one’s theological method. Theologians must give a principled account of the way in which one moves from biblical representation to theological conceptualization. In particular, they must provide

16. *Ibid.*, p. 21. Stated differently, but just as provocatively: “The fact is not that a quality is divine because God has it, but that God has it because it is in itself divine: because without it God would be a defective being” (p. 21). Clearly, something other than God’s self-presentation is driving Feuerbach’s doctrine of God.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

18. Not every Christian theologian affirms divine passibility because of a prior commitment to relational ontotheology. Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, does so for strictly biblical reasons, on the basis of his methodological principle “that one affirm, as literally true, Scripture’s representation of God unless, on some point, one has good reason not to do so” (“Could God Not Sorrow If We Do?” in Wilkins (ed.), *The Papers of the Henry Luce III Fellows in Theology*, vol. V, p. 140).

criteria for deciding whether or not a given biblical expression is an anthropomorphism (or anthropopathism).¹⁹ Of special interest here is the dialogue – actually a simmering modern feud – between biblical exegetes and systematic theologians over what it means to be “biblical”: is divine impassibility an exposition of the text or a conceptual imposition?

The second, more material, challenge pertains to what theologians should actually say about the nature of the God-world interaction and especially the love revealed in Jesus Christ. The doctrine of God is not an assortment of distinct and separable attributes so much as a tapestry with a number of interconnected threads: “If God really *responds*, then God is not metaphysically immutable, and if not metaphysically immutable, then not eternal.”²⁰ The question of divine impassibility is nothing less than a referendum on the whole of classical theism.

Both challenges pertain to how best we can understand the triune economy. Formally, because remythologizing theology attends primarily to the economy of triune communicative action, an economy in which the Scriptures hold a privileged place. Materially, because the way in which one relates the economic to the immanent Trinity has everything to do, as Moltmann rightly notes, with “the question about God’s capacity or incapacity for suffering.”²¹

That God is vulnerable is the governing presupposition of the kenotic-perichoretic relational consensus, according to which God limits himself in order to maintain a genuine relation with creation. Indeed, Moltmann holds to a *patheia* axiom: “[God] suffers from the love which is the superabundance and overflowing of his being. In so far he is ‘pathetic’.”²² For Moltmann, the “communication” between God and the world is a general phenomenon that derives from their mutual indwelling.²³ In contrast, the present work focuses on communicative action and upon God’s taking the communicative

19. Gunton makes a similar case study on impassibility in his *Act and Being*, pp. 125–32.

20. Wolterstorff, “Does God Suffer?” in *Modern Reformation* 8, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 1999), p. 47. Wolterstorff views analytic philosophy of religion as clarifying the *logos* of the biblical *mythos*. I therefore consider Wolterstorff to be a fellow remythologizer, not least because he too gives pride of place to the biblical claim that God speaks.

21. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 5.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

23. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 150.

initiative via Word and Spirit (i.e., triune Authorship). It only remains to respond to the objection that genuine interpersonal dialogical relations are mutual and reciprocal and thus require God to “suffer” the effects of communicative action.

Posing the question: why would anyone think that?

Divine passibility has become the “new orthodoxy.”²⁴ This is not the place to trace the emergence of the concept of a suffering God. Historians point to various factors to explain this great reversal in the doctrine of God, some of which we have already examined (i.e., the turn to relationality; the theory of theology’s fall into Hellenistic philosophy). We need here list only six of the most important.²⁵

First, the decline of Christendom and its supernaturalistic world view. The modern trend towards secular and naturalistic ways of thinking and imagining the course of world events has had a profound effect on contemporary plausibility structures: “belief in the ‘mighty acts of God’ is increasingly difficult to relate to modern experience.”²⁶ The idea of divine causality or intervention jeopardizes the very idea of a natural order.

Second, the rise of democratic aspirations. Moltmann perceives a connection between the monotheistic (monarchical) model of God and political monarchies. Liberation and feminist theologians have followed suit. Theologians in these currents of thought reason as follows: if God is an absolute sovereign, human freedom is irrelevant. Human freedom is not irrelevant. Therefore, God is not an absolute sovereign. Given the reality and significance of human freedom, then, we have to revise, or perhaps dispose of, the royal metaphor (i.e., divine sovereignty) in order to keep God in the picture.

24. So Ronald Goetz, “The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy,” *Christian Century* 103.13 (April 16, 1986), pp. 385–9.

25. The first four come from Goetz, “The Suffering God.” Cf. Thomas Weinandy, who lists three contributing factors – trends in the prevailing social and cultural milieu; modern trends in biblical interpretation; contemporary trends in philosophy (“Does God Suffer?” *First Things* 117 [Nov. 2001], p. 35) – and Daniel Day Williams, who similarly proposes three factors: developments in twentieth-century metaphysics; the Biblical Theology Movement; developments in twentieth-century understandings of atonement (*What Present Day Theologians Are Thinking*, 3rd edn. [New York: Harper & Row, 1967], pp. 172–5). Cf. Richard Bauckham, “‘Only the Suffering God Can Help’: Divine Passibility in Modern Theology,” *Themelios* 9 (1984:3), pp. 6–12.

26. Goetz, “The Suffering God,” p. 386.

Third, the problem of human suffering and evil. Moltmann is representative in his conviction that the question of God's suffering is bound up with theodicy.²⁷ To posit an impassible God after two World Wars, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and (too many) other similar events appears to be nothing less than obscene, even blasphemous: "only a suffering God is morally credible in the face of the world's ills."²⁸ If God is not vulnerable, we can only conclude that suffering happens because God either wills it or fails to prevent it. There is therefore a strong apologetic motivation to affirm divine passibility: only a suffering God preaches to a suffering choir.

Fourth, the scholarly reappraisal of the Bible. Modern biblical studies and the Biblical Theology Movement both had their own reasons for wanting to read the Bible on its own terms, free from what they perceived to be the baleful authority of traditional assumptions about divine aseity and immutability and from the metaphysical categories that fund them. As the case studies in chapter 1 clearly show, God appears to undergo changes of heart and mind. Fretheim calls for "a renewed recognition of those metaphors which have been neglected"²⁹ such as the repentance, grieving, and suffering of God. Like all metaphors, these too are "reality-depicting."³⁰ Just what reality they depict – what they affirm about God – is, of course, the question.

Fifth, the centrality of christology and Jesus' passion. Long before divine passibility became fashionable, Luther worked his own revolution against metaphysical categories drawn from Greek philosophy, asserting that the knowledge of God comes not by abstract speculative reasoning (the theology of glory) but by attending in faith to God's paradoxical self-revelation in the cross of Christ.³¹ It was Barth, however, who brought home the *ontological* significance

27. On the link between Moltmann's theodicy and his *The Crucified God*, see the discussion in Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God: Divine Suffering in Contemporary Protestant Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), pp. 37–49.

28. Marcel Sarot, "Auschwitz, Morality and the Suffering of God," *Modern Theology* 7 (1991), p. 135. Theodicies that appeal to the suffering of God raise two further problems: (1) How is a deity limited or self-limited in power still able to redeem the world? (2) How does the suffering of God actually mitigate evil? (Goetz, "The Suffering of God," pp. 388–9).

29. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, p. 13.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

31. See Dennis Ngien, *The Suffering of God According to Martin Luther's "Theologia Crucis"* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

of developing an explicitly Christian doctrine of God on the basis of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Theologians after Barth (e.g., Jüngel, Jenson, Moltmann) have made the cross the centerpiece of their reflections on God's being. It is precisely the belief that Jesus Christ is the revelation of God that leads many to conceive of God "as self-limiting, vulnerable, and self-giving: supreme love in creative action."³²

Sixth, a phenomenology of love. As we saw in chapter 3, the new relational ontotheology espoused by open theists and panentheists conceives the God-world relation in terms of kenosis and perichoresis. We also suggested, however, that this approach deploys specifically Christological and Trinitarian concepts in a misleadingly general way, projecting kenosis onto the immanent Trinity and perichoresis onto the Creator/creation relationship. The net effect is to make God's love for the world a relational affair characterized by mutuality and reciprocity – all this before considering what God actually does and displays in the cross of Christ (or, for that matter, the Exodus). Proponents of the new orthodoxy assume that God's love, because perfect, must be like the best human love. Lovers not only feel the distress of the beloved but also open themselves up to the possibility of rejection. This twofold ground of suffering is therefore essential to love: "To love is to be in a relationship where what the loved one does alters one's own experience."³³ If God is love, then it follows that he suffers for the sake of maintaining relations with persons who are free yet finite, fallible, and fallen. If he were alive, Feuerbach might well nod his head knowingly and surmise that this generation too views love – understood now as relational mutuality, empathetic identification, and passionate feeling – as God.

Sharpening the question: what does passibility mean?

There is broad agreement that these six reasons go a long way towards explaining the sea change among theologians with regard to divine passibility. There is less consensus, however, on what God's suffering actually means. There are two complicating factors: the etymology of the term and the history of its use.

32. Peacocke, "Incarnation of the Informing Self-Expressive Word of God," in Richardson and Wildman (eds.), *Religion and Science*, p. 336.

33. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, p. 50.

The term “impassibility” derives from the Latin *impassibilis* that in turn comes from the Greek *apatheia*. Each of these terms is negative in form, indicating a state of being *without patheia* or *passio* (“passions”). The Stoics believed that a wise person would be without *pathos* – without the various perturbations of the soul that distract reason – and hence *apatheis* (passionless). Philo applies a similar principle to God, denying that God is subject to the sinful passions of human hearts and minds. Biblical passages about God’s repenting, etc. that seem to suggest the contrary are only anthropomorphisms, figurative but not literal truths.³⁴

Two theological controversies in early church history fuelled the fires over the precise meaning of “passion” or “suffering”:

1. *Pater passus est* (“the Father suffered”). Tertullian accused Praxeas of “patripassianism” (i.e., conflating the suffering of Christ with the suffering of God as such).³⁵ There is some question as to whether anyone in the third century actually used the phrase, but Noetus did affirm that “the one God” himself suffered on the cross.³⁶ The upshot of the controversy was that the church affirmed the sufferings of the Son but not the sufferings of the Father. The Tome of Damasus, a document which emerged from the Council of Rome (382), states: “If anyone says that in the passion of the cross it is God himself who felt the pain and not the flesh and the soul which Christ, the Son of God, had taken to himself ... he is mistaken.”
2. *Unus de trinitate passus est* (“one of the Trinity has suffered”). This sixth-century formula, championed by a group of monks, launched the so-called “theopaschite” controversy. As we have seen, the church repeatedly condemned the notion that the divine nature suffers. Yet followers of Cyril of Alexandria, a

34. See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer*, pp. 75–82; Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 23–29.

35. Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean* 1, 2. Praxeas was a modalist who believed that the Son was merely an appearance of God *simpliciter*. He was not really claiming that the Father suffered on the cross, then, because he failed to distinguish between the three persons. Sarot rightly concludes “that the distinguishing characteristic of patripassianism is not that it denies the impassibility of God but that it refused to endorse the trinitarian distinction between Father and Son” (“Patripassianism, Theopaschitism and the Suffering of God: Some Historical and Systematic Considerations,” *Religious Studies* 26 [1990], p. 370).

36. Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, p. 94.

champion of the Chalcedonian formula, maintained that “theopaschite” (“God suffers”) is as technically correct as “theotokos” (referring to Mary as “God-bearer”) provided that in both cases the God in view is the second person of the Trinity: God the Son. The Council of Constantinople (553) eventually accepted the theopaschite formula, with the proviso that it was the person of the Son, not the divine nature, which was crucified. Thus ends the reading of conciliar wisdom on the matter.

This is not the place to provide an encyclopedic survey of the ways in which Patristic theologians understood divine impassibility. As we demonstrated in chapter 2, the Theory of Theology’s Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy is too simplistic a hypothesis to explain all the data. The Fathers pursued various conceptual strategies for preserving the tension between divine impassibility and the core gospel belief that God suffered voluntarily in the flesh. Early Christian usage displays at least three senses of impassibility: (1) incapable of experiencing passion; (2) incapable of suffering; (3) incapable of being acted upon by an external force.³⁷ I am less interested in determining who meant what or in tracing the complex usage of the Greek and Latin terms, however, than I am in clarifying what theologians mean today when they either affirm or deny divine impassibility.

Richard Creel gives eight definitions of impassibility after examining a selection of ancient and contemporary sources.³⁸ The first two – “lacking all emotions”; “having no susceptibility to negative emotions” – ascribe impassibility to the heart.³⁹ The third describes impassibility in cognitive terms: “in an imperturbable state of mind.” The next two pertain to the will: “insusceptible to distraction from resolve”; “having a will determined entirely by oneself.” The last three are connected with one’s immutable strength: “cannot be prevented from achieving one’s purpose”; “cannot be affected by an outside force or by oneself”; “cannot be altered by an outside force.” Taking stock of his inventory, Creel hazards the following “core”

37. For the relevant bibliography, see Sarot, “Patripassianism, Theopaschitism and the Suffering of God,” p. 265.

38. Richard E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

39. Though Creel does not organize them in this way, these eight definitions more or less match up with the ways in which Jesus’ Great Commandment stipulates that we are to love God “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mk. 12:30).

definition: impassibility is “the imperviousness to causal influence from external factors.” An impassible God cannot be affected by anything outside himself. In short: an impassible God “cannot be passive in relation to anything” or, we might add, to anyone.⁴⁰

Creel’s definition signals the close conceptual connection between immutability and impassibility. That which is not subject to change is immutable; that which is not subject to suffering is impassible. The question, then, is whether or not God can “suffer change” and, if so, in what respect.⁴¹ Creel, speaking as a representative of analytic theism, maintains that God cannot suffer change with respect to his nature, will, knowledge, or emotions.⁴²

Even process panentheists agree that God’s essential nature cannot suffer change. Virtually no Christian theologian says that something could happen to God that would render him no longer holy or loving or just. Neither does anyone doubt the constancy of God’s will and gracious purpose. While lively debate remains over what God can know and when he can know it,⁴³ the most pressing questions regarding impassibility pertain to the divine emotions. What does the allegedly apathetic God of Athens have to do with the passionate God of Jerusalem?

That the Bible depicts God as alternately angry, repentant, grieving, and rejoicing over the antics of individuals and peoples is incontestable. Everything hinges on the interpretation of such passages, however, and the presuppositions that govern one’s reading. While most patristic theologians understood impassibility to mean “incapable of succumbing to the passions” or “incapable of impassioned sinning,” contemporary theologians tend to hear “incapable of experiencing emotions.” The question, then, is whether God has an

40. Creel, “Immutability and Impassibility,” in Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 314.

41. It is important not to confuse immutability with immobility. God is not frozen in his being but supremely alive. The living God is immutable in the sense that he remains ever himself (he is constant) and ever retains his perfect liveliness (he is being-in-act).

42. Creel himself suffered a change of mind on this issue some years after writing his book. He now acknowledges that God is emotionally affected by human joys and sorrows (“Immutability and Impassibility,” p. 318).

43. Process and open theologians, for example, argue that God knows all there is to know, but not the future, for the simple reason that the future is not there yet to be known. For a critical examination of open theism on this issue, see Steven C. Roy, *How Much Does God Foreknow?*. For further discussion of this issue, see James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (eds.), *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

emotional life that can “suffer change” due to outside influences. Accordingly, Marcel Sarot proposes the following definition: impassibility is “immutability with regard to one’s feelings or the quality of one’s inner life.”⁴⁴

Feeling, says Feuerbach, “changes the active in man into the passive . . . Feeling is the oblique case of the *ego*, the *ego* in the accusative.”⁴⁵ Can the creature put the Creator into a passive state? Is God’s love fundamentally a communicative action or a passion? Can those who talk back to God hurt God’s feelings? How does one remythologize divine repentance? What is ultimately at stake in such questions is not only the meaning of divine impassibility but also (1) the nature of the relationship between God and human persons; (2) the meaning and character – the ethos, logos, and pathos – of the God of the gospel; and (3) the meaning of God’s love.

Motions and emotions: can humans move God?

Does the world affect God? Can God be “moved” to tears?⁴⁶ Specifically, does God ever suffer *dialogical change* – change as a result of divine/human communicative interaction?⁴⁷ Given the frequency with which the Bible ascribes feelings to God, and the concomitant debates over impassibility, the paucity of explicit studies of the subject of God’s emotions is surprising. Or perhaps not. After all, the term “emotion” does not appear in any major English translation of the Bible. It was Descartes who first used the French term *émotion* (“riot”; “disturbance”) to refer to what had earlier been called “passions.” Whether there is a single concept that unites the various phenomena that modern psychologists classify as emotions is a

44. Sarot, “Patripassianism, Theopaschitism, and the Suffering of God” p. 368. H. P. Owen agrees: impassibility “means particularly that [God] cannot experience sorrow, sadness or pain” (*Concepts of Deity*, p. 23). So does Weinandy: “[God] cannot experience emotional changes of state due to his relationship to and interaction with human beings and the created order” (*Does God Suffer?* p. 38).

45. Feuerbach, *Essence*, p. 140.

46. The etymology of “emotion” derives from the Latin *motus* (“movement”).

47. According to Paul Helm, “It is a logically necessary condition of dialogue between people, or between God and mankind, that the partners in the dialogue should appear to act and react in time” (*Calvin’s Ideas*, p. 200). Helm, however, insists that the change in God is only apparent. The seminal article on the subject remains Alston, “Divine-Human Dialogue and the Nature of God,” in his *Divine Nature and Human Language*.

disputed question.⁴⁸ Ambiguity as to what an emotion is, however, has not stopped biblical scholars and theologians from employing the concept.

In his 1912 essay "On the Emotional Life of our Lord," for example, B. B. Warfield sets out "to ascertain the exact emotions which are expressly assigned to [Jesus Christ] in the Evangelical narrative" without, however, ever defining "emotion."⁴⁹ Stephen Voorwinde's *Jesus' Emotions in the Fourth Gospel: Human or Divine?*⁵⁰ does something similar, and on a more ambitious scale. The book includes ten informative appendices that chart the number of times specific Hebrew and Greek terms for various emotions are ascribed to God and to Jesus in the Old Testament, the LXX, and the New Testament. Appendix 1 "The Emotions of God in the Old Testament," lists sixty-six Hebrew terms (and their LXX translations) including the words for "love," "be angry," "despise," "rejoice," "indignation," "repent of," "be jealous," and "look upon with compassion." Yet nowhere does the author define emotion or explain how he decided what counts as an emotion.

Theologians too skate blithely on the thin ice of conceptual ambiguity. It is often simply assumed that love is an emotion without further analysis of what such classification entails. For example, Charles Hodge stipulates that "Love of necessity involves feelings, and if there be no feeling in God, there can be no love."⁵¹ He does not explain how God can "feel." Similarly, Pannenberg describes God's wrath as "a sudden emotional outburst" but fails to specify what he means by "emotional."⁵² Finally, many open theists, relational panentheists, and others dismiss the notion of divine impassibility simply by appealing to biblical depictions of what they take to be God's emotional responses.⁵³ This will not do. Accordingly, the following

48. See, for example, Nico H. Frijda, "The Psychologists' Point of View," in Michael Lewis and Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones (eds.), *Handbook of Emotions*, 2nd edn. (New York and London: Guilford Press, 2000), pp. 59–74, and Robert C. Solomon, *What is an Emotion? Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 2nd edn. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

49. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*, p. 96.

50. (London and New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2005).

51. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 428–9. Cf. Thomas Oden: "Persons by Definition Have Feelings" (*Systematic Theology*, vol. I, *The Living God* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987], p. 84).

52. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 439.

53. Even some conservative evangelical theologians have jettisoned the doctrine: "that God has no passions or emotions *at all* clearly conflicts with much of the rest of Scripture, and for that reason I have not affirmed God's impassibility in this book" (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, p. 166).

section sets forth the contours of a long-overdue analysis of the emotional life of our triune Lord.⁵⁴

Passions, affections, emotions

Are grief, fear, joy, envy, anger, jealousy, pity, and love all species of the same genus “emotion”? All are personal experiences that differ from bodily appetites (e.g., hunger) on the one hand and moods (e.g., depression) on the other.⁵⁵ Yet if pressed to say what an emotion is, we may be tempted, as Augustine was with time, to reply, “Provided that no one asks me, I know.”⁵⁶ We may think we know, yet several recent studies suggest that discussions of divine impassibility have repeatedly been skewed because of the emergence of the idea of “emotions” that came to dominate modern Western thinking.⁵⁷

Passions Ancient and contemporary thinkers alike conceive feelings as quasi-physical (and thus irrational) forces that “move” a person as do gusts of wind or ocean waves.⁵⁸ To be subject to passions such as rage or jealousy is to be acted upon (*passio*) by outside forces. Augustine viewed passions as involuntary movements of man’s lower animal soul that bypass both mind and will.⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas, similarly, believed that “Passion [*passiones animae*] leads

54. The best book on the subject at present is Matthew A. Elliott, *Faithful Feelings: Rethinking Emotion in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006).

55. As I shall argue below, emotions, unlike moods, have propositional content (i.e., objects to which they are connected). For example, we are sad *that* our dog died. Moods, by contrast, are outlooks that have no specific objects. At the same time, one’s mood can “color” one’s emotions. For a further account, see Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 112–15.

56. Augustine, *Confessions* XI.xiv.17, tr. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 230.

57. So Anastasia Scrutton, “Emotion in Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas: A Way Forward for the Im/passibility Debate?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005), p. 169.

58. Robert Solomon believes that this negative view of the passions as irrational has been the dominant Western view from the Greek philosophers to the late twentieth century. See his *The Passions* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1976).

59. Specifically, Augustine spoke of *motus animae* (“movements of the soul”) and *passiones animae* (“passions of the soul”). It is important to remember that Augustine saw the passions not as mere symptoms of human embodiedness but ultimately as evidence of a sick (sinful) soul with a disordered love (i.e., of self rather than of God).

one towards sin in so far as it is uncontrolled by reason.”⁶⁰ A good deal of the patristic and scholastic diatribe against divine passibility aims at denying this type of passion to God. God is impassible, therefore, because he is neither ruled by passions nor susceptible to sinful inclinations.

Affections Until recently, the prevailing scholarly view was that Western thinkers identified emotions with the passions, only to condemn them for being irrational. This so-called “Myth of the Passions,” like the “Theory of Theology’s Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy” to which it is related, is now being revised.⁶¹ According to the Myth of the Passions, Christian theologians simply appropriated the Stoic assumption that reason must be the master and emotion the slave, together with the Stoic goal of *apatheia* (a considered indifference to the happenings of the world that guarantees equanimity of soul). But this is only half the story. It entirely overlooks another category that Christian thinkers used, the affections – “thoughts of the heart” – and their relation to the will: “The affections, i.e., the voluntary movements of the rational soul, were the crucial second half of the traditional picture.”⁶² Indeed, according to one historian, the notion of emotions as “a set of morally disengaged, bodily, non-cognitive and involuntary feelings, is a recent invention.”⁶³ The Myth of the Passions wrongly associates too many Christian theologians with those who pit reason versus emotion.

Classical Christian thinkers, unlike their nineteenth-century counterparts, were often unwilling to oppose reason and the emotions: “Appetites, passion and affections ... were all movements of different parts of the will, and the affections, at least, were

60. *Summa Theologica* Ia, 2, 24, 2.

61. Robert Solomon coined the phrase “Myth of the Passions” as part of his argument against the prevailing view that Western thinkers viewed the emotions as inherently bodily, involuntary, and irrational. See his *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003).

62. Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 243.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 3. Dixon’s main aim is to discover where, when, and why English-language psychological writers stopped using “passions” and “affections” as their primary categories and started referring instead to the “emotions” (p. 4). His hypothesis: psychology has become secularized and as a result has repressed (!) theological categories. An important by-product of “emotion” swallowing up “passions and affections” was the shift from a realist to a non-realist view of the will. For the non-realist, the will is not an active power but a passive field that receives or feels impressions (p. 250).

potentially informed by reason.”⁶⁴ Augustine criticizes the Stoic idea that every emotion (*motus*) and affection (*affectus*) should be avoided; for him, everything depends on what moves the will, and towards what end: “But since these feelings [*affectiones*] are the consequence of right reason when they are exhibited in the right situations, who would then venture to call them ... disordered passions [*passiones*]?”⁶⁵ As concerns Augustine’s view of the affections, then, “there is no dichotomy between the heart and the head.”⁶⁶

Aquinas likewise distances himself from the Stoic ideal of *apatheia*. Stoics fail to distinguish sense from intellect, and thus between the passions (*passiones animae*) and those movements of the will (*motus voluntatis*) that listen to reason.⁶⁷ With Augustine, Aquinas views passions as passive and involuntary but affections as active and voluntary: “Medieval Western Christian theology introduced a critical distinction between troubling and potentially sinful movements of the soul, which were in rebellion against the rational will – appetites, lusts, desires and passions – and virtuous and potentially godly ones, which were enlightened acts of the higher will – affections ... This was the result of the Christian desire to say both – against the Stoics – that some human feeling or affection is proper ... but also that God, the angels and perfected humans are free from the turmoil and perturbations of sin and the passions.”⁶⁸

The distinction between passive passions and active affections illumines the work of other Christian theologians as well. Lactantius wrote his third-century treatise “On the Anger of God” to rebut the Epicurean view that God cannot be angry because it would be inconsistent with his goodness, because he is indifferent to human affairs, and because anger would perturb the divine mind. To say there is no anger in God entails that there is no kindness in God either.⁶⁹

64. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

65. Augustine, *City of God* XIV.9.

66. Scrutton, “Emotion in Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas,” p. 171.

67. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIa, 24, 2.

68. Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions*, p. 61. Scrutton suggests that the distinction between passions and affections may elucidate debates over impassibility in ways that the category emotion cannot (“Emotion in Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas,” p. 176).

69. Lactantius argues that if Epicurus removes one affection from God, he has to remove them all: “Now, if there is neither anger nor kindness in Him, it is manifest that there is neither fear, nor joy, nor grief, nor pity ... But if there is no affection in God ... it follows that there is in Him neither the care of anything, nor providence” (*On the Anger of God*, ch. 4).

Lactantius insists, by way of contrast, that God is angry because he is moved by kindness, that is, by the will to right injustice: "He has affections of His own, both just and true."⁷⁰ Not only is divine anger just, then, but God "controls His anger, and is not ruled by it."⁷¹

Tertullian likewise offers us a rare glimpse into an explicit treatment of God's affections in his brief but intriguing discussion in *Against Marcion*, book II, chapter 16, where he reacts to Marcion's suggestion that, if God is angry, jealous, or grieved, he must therefore be corrupted (and eventually die). Marcion is confusing divine things with human: "Discriminate between the natures, and assign to them their respective senses, which are as diverse as their natures require." In short: God is angry after his own divine fashion: "Angry He will possibly be, but not irritated, nor dangerously tempted; He will be moved, but not subverted." God possesses anger, jealousy, and grief in the divine manner of the affections rather than the passions.⁷²

Emotions The one word conspicuous by its absence from patristic and scholastic discussions of the passions and affections is "emotion."⁷³ David Hume mentions "emotions" in his 1740 *Treatise of Human Nature*, but the key text is Thomas Brown's 1820 *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind* that employs the term "for all those feelings that were neither [physical] sensations nor intellectual states."⁷⁴ Brown views emotions as non-cognitive, passive psychological states. In what we might term the "great reversal" in psychology, the notion that affections were instances of the soul acting upon the body "was replaced with the assumption that the emotions were instances of the brain and nerves acting upon other parts of the body."⁷⁵ Henceforth the mind or soul plays a *passive* rather than an *active* role.

70. Lactantius, *On the Anger of God*, ch. 16.

71. *Ibid.*, ch. 21. Lactantius exemplifies the patristic tendency to uphold impassibility (i.e., God's goodness cannot suffer change) as the framework within which to discuss his divine affections (e.g., anger).

72. "All these affections He is moved by in that peculiar manner of His own" (*Against Marcion* Bk. II, ch. 16). Tertullian does not say what it means for God to possess these affections according to his nature, thus it is hard to determine whether or not Tertullian thinks that God suffers change in his emotional life (Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* pp. 102–3).

73. Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions*, p. 39.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

75. *Ibid.*

The big historical picture thus reveals a deep irony: it is not Christian theologians who are primarily responsible for the view that the emotions are involuntary and irrational forces before which persons are passive victims but rather secular thinkers who abandoned the traditional (Christian) distinction between the passions and the affections. The category “emotion” is a hasty secular generalization.

By way of provisional conclusion, we may say that God’s feelings are not passions but *affections*: “intentional affective attitudes that he eternally chooses to take toward his creatures.”⁷⁶ Just how these affections relate to what we now call emotions is the subject of the following section. Yet we can already see that “One need not abandon classical theism in order to affirm that ‘God feels our pain.’ This is one of the great confusions in contemporary theology. In fact, classical theism can provide a more robust, proactive account of God’s feelings than relational theology.”⁷⁷

What an emotion is: two types of theories

To this point we have distinguished between the passions and the affections and between the divine and human manners of having affections. Nevertheless, what it means for God to grieve, repent, rejoice, and so forth or whether these states cause God to suffer some change in his inner life remains unclear. What is clear is that the term “emotion” has captured the semantic territory previously occupied by “passion” and “affection,” and that we are only now beginning to appreciate the conceptual consequences of this loss. At any rate, “emotion” is now the key term in the contemporary impassibility debate, and this calls for a brief survey of theories as to what an emotion is.

There is a broad contemporary consensus that emotions involve physiological changes and behavioral reactions on the one hand and intellectual interpretations and evaluations on the other: “Some emotions may be more like sneezes (physiological, non-cognitive and involuntary) and others more like crimes (social, cognitive and voluntary).”⁷⁸ A single definition has proven elusive. The temptation of most theory-builders has been to reduce “upwards” (associating

76. Cooper, *Panentheism*, p. 332.

77. *Ibid.*

78. Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions*, p. 245.

emotions with mental states) or “downwards” (associating emotions with physical states).⁷⁹

Non-cognitive (physicalist) theories Strong emotions produce a number of bodily changes in humans. The physical dimension of fear includes increased heartbeat and adrenaline levels, of unrequited love a sick sensation in the stomach. William James’s 1884 essay “What is an Emotion?” asserts that our *feeling* those bodily changes that follow the perception of, say, a fearful object is the emotion.⁸⁰ An emotion is thus an awareness of a physical sensation: “I’m feeling afraid.”⁸¹

Evolutionary biologists and experimental psychologists, following Charles Darwin, search for causal (i.e., chemical, neural) explanations of emotion.⁸² One of the more ambitious attempts to reduce emotions downwards (i.e., to their biological or physicalist base) is Paul Griffiths’ *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories*.⁸³ Emotion in such physicalist paradigms is a functionally specialized program “written” through a process of natural selection aimed at solving an “adaptive problem that arose during hominid evolutionary history.”⁸⁴ Apparently nature has programmed even fruit flies to respond with fear, like humans, to situations that threaten their survival.⁸⁵

79. This tension between mind and body is also seen in Descartes, who in his *The Passions of the Soul* reduces both downwards (when he thinks of emotions as what happens in the body) and upwards (when he describes emotions such as wonder in mentalist terms).

80. Reprinted in Solomon, *What is An Emotion?* pp. 65–76.

81. William Alston dubs this the “bodily upset theory” in “Emotion and Feeling,” in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. I (New York and London: Macmillan and Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1967), p. 484.

82. See Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* and the introduction by Paul Ekman, 3rd edn. (Oxford University Press, 1998). Darwin was particularly fascinated by the similarity with which emotions are facially expressed by humans and other animals. Interestingly, a number of scientists accused Darwin of anthropomorphism, with regard not to God but to animals!

83. (University of Chicago Press, 1997). For a critique, see Roberts, *Emotions*, pp. 14–36. From yet another perspective, Antonio Damasio, a neurobiologist, updates James’s theory by defining an emotion as a neurological process – to be precise, the “feeling” of what is happening in our brains. See his *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

84. Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, “Evolutionary Psychology and the Emotions,” in Lewis and Haviland-Jones (eds.), *Handbook of Emotions*, p. 91.

85. See Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), p. 147.

Lactantius may inadvertently be an odd precursor to such physicalist theories. He states in his treatise on God's anger that God "inserted anger in the liver of man, since it is believed that the cause of this emotion is contained in the moisture of the gall."⁸⁶ Be that as it may, Wolterstorff speaks for many when he says that God cannot have emotions, because "a person can have an emotion only if that person is capable of being physiologically upset. And God, having no physiology, is not so capable."⁸⁷ Not everyone is convinced. Panentheists, we may recall, describe the world as God's "body" and God as the "soul" of the world.⁸⁸ Hence, "God ... feels the pain of all who suffer within the body."⁸⁹ It is not as if God has a divine pineal gland (i.e., that point where world-body and God-mind meet), but rather that the world serves as the affective equivalent of God's material body. God is affected by the world *as if* it were God's body.⁹⁰

The physicalist view of emotions is not without significant problems, even apart from the issue of God's corporeality. First, such theories fail to acknowledge the importance of the influence of one's beliefs on one's emotions. It is not simply my seeing a snake that causes me to fear it but my belief that it is poisonous. Second, it is impossible to distinguish between emotions on the basis of physical sensations alone: fear, anger, and love alike may manifest the same physiological symptoms (i.e., rapid breathing). It follows that physical sensations are not themselves what we feel as emotions. Third, it is difficult to appeal to emotions as motives that explain a person's behavior if emotions are only bodily sensations. I do not shout at my neighbor because my heart is beating fast but because I am angry

86. Lactantius, "On the Anger of God," ch. 21.

87. Wolterstorff, "Suffering Love," p. 214. Wolterstorff is not equating emotions with having certain bodily states; his is the more modest claim that emotions involve some physiological disturbance in the person. Interestingly, he does not go on to infer divine impassibility, but to argue that God's suffering takes on a form other than the emotional.

88. That the cosmos is God's body is one of the eight themes that Brierley identifies as panentheistic "family resemblances" ("Naming a Quiet Revolution," in Clayton and Peacocke (eds.), *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being*, pp. 6–7).

89. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, p. 176. See also Grace Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

90. So Charles Taliaferro, "Incorporeality," in Quinn and Taliaferro (eds.), *Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, p. 277. For an argument that God must be corporeal because he suffers, see Marcel Sarot, "God, Emotion, and Corporeality: A Thomist Perspective," *The Thomist* 58 (1994), pp. 61–92 and *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992).

about what he did. Finally, while we regularly ascribe moral worth to certain emotions, it is difficult to hold persons praiseworthy or blameworthy for their sweaty armpits.

Cognitive (mentalistic) theories The shortcomings of physicalist explanations have led philosophers and social theorists of emotion in another direction. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* analyzes a number of emotions in terms of the beliefs and contexts with which they are associated. For example, he contrasts confidence and fear. In both cases, one expects something to happen in the near future, but what distinguishes the two is one's belief as to what will happen and how one evaluates that event (i.e., it will be either pleasant or painful).

Modern analytic philosophers by and large consigned the emotions to the rubbish heap of the non-rational until the 1950s when Errol Bedford presented a paper, appropriately enough, to the Aristotelian Society of London.⁹¹ The traditional theory, Bedford suggests, views emotion words as names of feelings that designate various inner forces that move us. He follows Aristotle in pointing out that fear and hope depend on our assessment of whatever our future beliefs are about. It follows that emotions are beliefs that are about something, and our assessment of the content and context of those beliefs is what demarcates fear from hope. Emotions, like beliefs, have intentionality or "aboutness" because they are directed towards an object (e.g., the poisonous snake; the second coming of Christ).⁹² Indeed, one author coins a special term to designate emotional intentionality: "feelings towards."⁹³ To have an emotion, then, is to be *engaged with the world* in a particular way.⁹⁴ Furthermore, the objects that we feel towards are often ones we care about over time, hence our emotional engagement with the world will often take narrative form.

The first recorded instance of fear in the Bible has nothing to do with snakes but rather with Adam's shame for having disobeyed

91. Reprinted in Solomon (ed.), *What is an Emotion?* pp. 207–16.

92. "Intentionality" is a technical term in phenomenology that pertains to the directedness of consciousness. Consciousness is always consciousness of something.

93. Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), p. 19. Martha Nussbaum opens her magisterial *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) with an account of her own grief upon the death of her mother.

94. Goldie, *The Emotions*, p. 48.

God (Gen. 3:10). Adam's "emotion" was less a bodily sensation than a thought. Emotions are ways of seeing a particular object or person, ways that involve both beliefs and evaluations. What distinguishes fear from hope is the way the object in question is interpreted (i.e., as a threat or as a boon). Martha Nussbaum takes a cognitive approach in viewing emotions as "intelligent responses to the perception of value."⁹⁵ As such, emotions are helpful ingredients in ethical reasoning. This is also the wisdom of (Robert) Solomon: "to have an emotion is to hold a normative judgment about one's situation."⁹⁶ Emotions on this view are, in Nussbaum's words, cognitive "appraisals or value judgments, which ascribe to things and persons outside the person's own control great importance for that person's own flourishing."⁹⁷

Concern-based construals: a proposal

Theologians need not wait for a clear winner to emerge from the theory wars over the meaning of emotion. The doctrine of God must not be held hostage to general theories about human personhood, knowledge, or emotion. Theology's task is to offer a conceptual elaboration of the content of God's self-revelation, and it is important that the concepts we use must illuminate the theological matter rather than force it into pre-packaged schemes based on descriptions of human experience. That way Feuerbach (and idolatry) lie.⁹⁸

Theologians are free, however, to employ various concepts in an ad hoc manner insofar as those concepts serve a ministerial role. To that end, I shall present and then modify Robert Roberts's account of the emotions as concern-based construals.⁹⁹ Roberts's account is appropriate for four reasons: (1) it eschews general theories in favor

95. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 1.

96. Solomon, "Emotions and Choice," in Solomon (ed.), *What is an Emotion?* p. 229.

97. *Upheavals*, p. 4. Nussbaum's view eliminates physiological change as an essential component. Others, like William Lyons, offer a more "mixed" account. Emotions on his view involve a mental component (a belief), a physical component (a physiological change), and an evaluative component (*Emotions* [Cambridge University Press, 1980], pp. 56–7).

98. For example, we should not too quickly assume that Nussbaum's qualification of the objects of emotions – that they be outside a person's control – is a necessary component of God's emotions as well.

99. See Roberts, *Emotions*. The only other discussion of Roberts's view in connection with divine impassibility of which I am aware is James S. Spiegel, *The Benefits of Providence: A New Look at Divine Sovereignty* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), pp. 173–6.

of conceptual analysis of particulars; (2) it makes sense of what earlier Christians said about the affections as mental states (i.e., spiritual acts rather than physical events); (3) it builds on the best of the cognitive theories; (4) its method – a conceptual analysis of everyday emotional life – is the functional equivalent to remythologizing. The focus in both cases is on personal action, reaction, and interaction.¹⁰⁰ Where Roberts attends to ordinary language and contexts of life, however, remythologizing attends to biblical language and to conceptually elaborating the theodramatic action through close canonical reading.

Mental: an intentional, not bodily, state Roberts holds, with other cognitivists, that emotions are intentional states: they have objects; they are *about* something. That is why non-cognitivists are wrong to reduce emotions to the feeling, say, of being hit in the stomach. Unrequited love is more than a stomach ache; it can be specified in propositional terms (e.g., “Elizabeth does not want to see me anymore”). Neither abstractions like duty and laziness nor physiological states like accelerated heartbeats and toothaches are in and of themselves emotions, for they all lack intentional objects. Emotions typically involve a person believing something (i.e., a proposition) about a particular person or object. Saul became jealous and angry at David because he *believed that* David’s success and the people’s celebration constituted a threat to his own status as king (1 Sam. 18:6–9).¹⁰¹

Construal: a narrative, not physical, situation Emotions are more, but not less, than mental states involving belief-that. Roberts begins to carve out his own position by viewing emotions as *construals*, ways of grasping one thing in terms of something else. To construe something is to characterize it in a certain way, to perceive, believe, or imagine it *as such-and-such* (e.g., a “rugged face”). What distinguishes one emotion from another is not only its object but the way in which one construes it. The same propositional content can

100. I set forth a “close canonical” approach to reading Scripture in my *Mere Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture for the Love of God. Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Zondervan, forthcoming).

101. A proposition is what an assertive sentence declares; a thought is a mental content that can be expressed in a proposition.

be variously construed: David's military victories led the people to rejoice but Saul to pout.

Construals often involve complex sets of beliefs, not only about a person or object but about the broader context: "The situational object is the whole thing that the emotion is about."¹⁰² Roberts cites the example from Jane Austen's *Emma* of Mr. Knightley's anger at Emma's meddling in her protégée Harriet's love life. What triggers Knightley's anger is not some neurological event but rather his construal of Emma's action in terms of its situation, a situation that can only be depicted by a narrative.¹⁰³ Often, only a narrative – the background story of who people are and what has happened in the past – can provide the necessary framework for interpreting a person's words and actions. Emotions, we may conclude, are *narrative* construals – instances not only of seeing as but of *judging as*, of evaluating situations from a particular point of view.¹⁰⁴

Concern: a motive, not cause, of action We may see clouds as animals on parade, but such construals are not emotions. Neither are evaluative judgments about logical in/validity or judicial innocence/guilt. Emotions are rather *concern-based* construals. A concern-based construal is one loaded – "imbued, flavored, colored, drenched, suffused, laden, informed"¹⁰⁵ – with value. Saul is jealous of David because he is personally invested in the situation. His construal of David as threat is not that of a disinterested political analyst but of one who perceives something dear to himself (i.e., his own status) as at risk. Nussbaum concurs: "The object of the emotion is seen as *important* for some role it plays in the person's own life."¹⁰⁶ By "concern" Roberts intends "to denote desires and aversions, and the attachments and interests from which many of our desires and aversions derive."¹⁰⁷

102. Roberts, *Emotions*, p. 78.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

104. I here draw on Nussbaum as much as Roberts, though the term *judging as* is my own invention. Roberts works with a strict sense of "judging" in terms of assenting-to and demurs from Nussbaum's account. To referee this intramural, metaethical debate would take me beyond the limits of the present project. See Roberts, *Emotions*, pp. 83–106.

105. Robert C. Roberts, "What an Emotion Is: A Sketch," *The Philosophical Review* 97 (1988), p. 191.

106. Nussbaum, "Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance," in Solomon (ed.), *What Is an Emotion?* p. 277.

107. Roberts, "What an Emotion Is," p. 202. It is important to distinguish these particular (intentional) concerns from Martin Heidegger's concept of "Care" as

An emotion is therefore a concern-based construal that perceives an object as having a certain import. Put differently: an emotion is a unique type of perception that grasps things together with their import (i.e., as value-laden facts). Emotions are a function of a concern-based seeing or, to use the apostle Paul's language, of a seeing with the "eyes of the heart" (Eph. 1:18). Two persons' emotional reactions to similar situations may vary because their different concerns lead to different evaluations. In order to free oneself from the power of a particular emotion, one has either to stop caring or to construe the situational object of concern differently. The Stoics took the first way, cognitive psychologists the second. Both are strategies for liberating oneself from the mastery of the passions.

What of what earlier Christian theologians called the affections? How do they fit into the cognitivist account? There is apparently no place for the affections in Nussbaum's psychological inn. On her account, emotions are "acknowledgements of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency"¹⁰⁸ and "are concerned with vulnerable externalities: those that can be affected by events beyond one's control."¹⁰⁹ Roberts's definition of concern, by contrast, does not require that its object lie outside the person's control. Some may be, but this is not an essential condition of what an emotion is. On Roberts's account, then, we do not always have to "suffer" emotions; on the contrary, many emotions give us motivations or reasons to act: "The terms of the construal that is the emotion supply reasons to want to act."¹¹⁰ Action, in contrast to reflex behaviors, is something an agent does purposefully. We can think of the affections then, as godly emotions: construals – or more importantly, *dispositions to act* – based on divine concerns. In sum, there is nothing in the cognitivist account that requires us to view emotions as (passive) passions rather than as (active) affections.

We need to fill in one last piece of the picture in order adequately to address the question of God's emotional impassibility. Does Roberts allow for the possibility that God *feels* our pain, despite

the being of Dasein (see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980], §41). What Roberts has in mind is not an existential mood but rather particular things we care about. Note that he makes the case for *universal* matters of importance (e.g., that children not be tortured; that people be respected) in his "Emotions as Access to Religious Truths," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992), pp. 88–90.

108. Nussbaum, "Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance," p. 273.

109. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

110. Roberts, *Emotions*, p. 160.

God's incorporeality?¹¹¹ The prior question, of course, concerns what a feeling is on Roberts's account. Consider, for example, the feeling of being triumphant. Presumably, Julius Caesar construed himself as triumphant after his Gallic Wars. This construal alone is not, however, sufficient for feeling triumphant. Caesar must also have a strong concern *to be in a triumphant condition*. The feelings commensurate with Roberts's account of emotion are thus "feelings of construed condition."¹¹² The feeling of triumph just is the awareness of oneself as triumphant: "It is not a sensation that accompanies this 'cognition,' but *it is this concern-imbued 'cognition' itself*."¹¹³

Divine emotions: covenantal concern-based theodramatic construals

Can humans move God in such a way that God suffers emotional change? We are now in a better position from which to begin to respond to our initial query. Roberts's definition provides the raw material with which to elaborate the Bible's depictions of God's "inner life" (so to speak). I shall, however, modify his account in light of the biblical material in order to use his concepts in ministerial rather than magisterial fashion.¹¹⁴

Incorporeal intentions God is "Spirit" (Jn. 4:24) and therefore has neither body nor biochemistry. By itself, this fact presents no obstacle to God's having emotions if the latter are mental (conscious; intentional) states – choosing, knowing, and grieving – each with its own intentional object. Significantly, God's cognitions, volitions, and affections all appear to have such directedness. God has feelings-towards his creatures: "Jacob I loved ... Esau I hated" (Rom. 9:13). To speak of incorporeal intentions, therefore, is to highlight God's personal point of view towards persons and things in the world. When

111. For an analysis of seven senses of "feeling" see Gilbert Ryle, "Feeling," in *Collected Papers*, vol. II (London: Hutchinson, 1971), pp. 272–86.

112. Roberts, *Emotions*, p. 67.

113. *Ibid.*, p. 68 (emphasis mine). Cf. Peter Goldie's alternative formulation of the same basic point: "Feeling towards is thinking of with feeling" (*The Emotions*, p. 58).

114. The progression from *mythos* to *logos* only counts as remythologizing if indeed one uses concepts in a ministerial way, that is, to minister the biblical word by aiding and abetting its understanding in the contemporary situation.

we say that God loves Jacob, we are saying what propositional attitude (or “thought-feels”) God has towards Jacob.¹¹⁵

Theodramatic construals God’s “emotions” – understood now in terms of “cognitive affections” – involve his construals of situational objects (e.g., Israel and the golden calf). As we have seen, many emotions are unintelligible apart from their narrative context (e.g., Mr. Knightley). Similarly, God’s emotions are unintelligible apart from his narrative construals of Israel’s history. In particular, God’s emotions are tied up with his judgment as to the fittingness of his hero’s response to his word. We can therefore think of God’s emotions in terms of *theodramatic construals*. God’s emotions proceed from his construals of the way in which human beings respond to his own words and deeds – to the drama of redemption – especially as these come to a climactic focus in Jesus Christ. Moreover, God’s construals, unlike ours, are always objective, hence his judgments about situations are always right and true.

Covenantal concerns Emotions, says Nussbaum, “have a complicated cognitive structure that is in part narrative in form, involving a story of our relation to cherished objects that extends over time.”¹¹⁶ The biblical theodrama concerns the working out of precisely such a story, as we see in Yahweh’s words to Israel on Mt. Sinai: “if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples” (Ex. 19:5). Israel is the object of God’s intense concern. Better: Israel plays a key role in God’s special project, namely, of forming a people that will glorify him and be his – a project that is arguably the goal of all human history.

That the theodrama is freighted with divine emotional concern should come as no surprise for it is, after all, a love story. Better: it is the story of a marriage, a covenantal relationship. Surely it is significant that almost all of the biblical depictions of divine emotions, with very few exceptions (e.g., Gen. 6:6), take place in the context of God’s covenant relationship to Israel (and later, the church): “when one finds pathetic attribution to God in the Old Testament, it occurs within the context of the covenant partnership between God and

115. Peter Goldie highlights the importance of the connection between intentionality and personalism (*The Emotions*, pp. 72–83).

116. Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, p. 2.

Israel.”¹¹⁷ The interests and values that underlie God’s theodramatic construals are consistently covenantal. It follows that *God’s emotions are covenantal concern-based theodramatic construals*. In brief: God’s “emotions” are instances of *covenantal affection*.

“I the Lord your God am a jealous God” (Ex. 20:5) The preceding analysis goes a long way towards explaining the continuities and discontinuities between divine and human emotions such as anger, sorrow, and joy. On a formal level, we may describe God’s grief and other emotions in terms of concern-based construals. Both God and human beings may share the same concern for the integrity of covenant relationships. Yet the similarities between God’s emotional life and ours exist in the midst of an even greater dissimilarity, one that marks the infinite qualitative distinction between Creator and creation, Author and hero. God’s covenantal concern-based construals are *sub specie theodramatis* (from the perspective of theodrama) and, because they are God’s, are invariably comprehensive and true. The way in which God is angry or joyful or sorrowful is significantly different from the way we experience these emotions or inner states, because God construes the theodrama from the perspective of eternity, as a complete and unified whole.¹¹⁸

The situation and concern that occasions God’s jealousy is thoroughly covenantal. It is in the context of covenantal renewal that God commands Israel to worship no other God “for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (Ex. 34:14; cf. Dt. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15). Both human and divine jealousy depend on a “three-party context” involving a lover (the jealous person), the beloved, and a rival.¹¹⁹ Jealousy is the lover’s construal of the beloved as rightfully his own yet in danger of transferring her affections to the rival.¹²⁰ Divine jealousy arises from God’s perception that his treasured possession – Israel – is in danger of transferring her affections to other gods (i.e.,

117. Daniel Castelo, “A Crisis in God-Talk? The Bible and Theopathy,” *Theology* 110 (2007), pp. 411–16.

118. Helm attempts to get at these differences by speaking of God’s emotions as “themotions”: “a themotion X is as close as possible to the corresponding human emotion X except that it cannot be an affect” (“The Impossibility of Divine Passibility,” in Nigel M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *The Power and Weakness of God* [Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990], p. 140).

119. Daniel Farrell, “Jealousy,” *The Philosophical Review* 89 (1980), pp. 527–59. Cf. A. Ben-Ze’ev, “Envy and Jealousy,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 20 (1990), pp. 487–516.

120. See Roberts’s analysis in *Emotions*, pp. 259–61.

idols). The drama is played out in terms of an unfaithful wife (cf. Hosea) whose actions threaten the integrity of her (covenantal) relationship with her Lord. The same concern carries over to the church as the people of God in the New Testament (Jas. 4:4–5).

How should remythologizers understand God's jealousy: is it a positive or negative emotion?¹²¹ The challenge, once again, is to avoid the extremes of mythologizing and demythologizing. To mythologize the relevant biblical passages would be to see God as a larger-than-life Othello, tormented by a strong, possibly irrational, passion that causes him to suffer change. Conversely, to demythologize God's jealousy would be to see it as a mere anthropomorphism or figure of speech that neither means what it says nor is in any way reality-depicting. *The way forward is to see God's jealousy as a concern-imbued cognition of something with theodramatic import*: specifically, divine jealousy is God's concern that Israel not turn the drama of redemption into a tragedy by attaching herself to an unworthy rival. Israel's temptation to worship other gods constitutes a threat to the integrity of her relationship with God.

The biblical ascription of jealousy to God is indeed reality-depicting: it represents God's true construal of the theodramatic situation and expresses God's legitimate (and constant) concern to preserve an exclusive relationship – covenant set-apartness – with Israel. Note that God's "feeling" jealous *is* the covenantally concerned theodramatic construal of Israel on the verge of transferring her allegiance.¹²² To say that God is a jealous God is to say that he feels – or "value-perceives" (i.e., perceives the object of emotion as having import) – fittingly: his concern-based construal is right, appropriate, and true. Indeed, God's construals are always true and his concerns constant – from which it follows, perhaps surprisingly, that God's feelings (i.e., his concern-imbued redemptive-dramatic construals) are as impassible as they are infallible: *the impassible feels*.¹²³

121. Roberts distinguishes jealousy from envy: "In jealousy, one's self as constituted by the bond with the beloved is threatened; while in envy, what is threatened is one's worth" (*Emotions*, p. 262). Strictly speaking, God cannot envy anyone or anything else, for God's worth is greater than any other worth that can be conceived.

122. This analysis differs from the popular idea that emotions are feelings, the result of being affected for good or ill by the things/persons that are an emotion's intentional objects.

123. I recognize the counter-intuitive nature of this claim, for if Israel's unfaithfulness provokes God into jealousy, does it not follow that it affects

Jesus expresses equally strong emotions as concerns the integrity of the covenant. Indeed, the one reference to emotion in the first ten chapters of the Fourth Gospel is in connection with the zeal that led him to cleanse the temple, an act that is arguably his most emotional theodramatic scene, and an act that led his disciples to recall Psalm 29:9: “Zeal [*zelos*] for your house will consume me” (Jn. 2:17).¹²⁴ Jesus’ zeal/jealousy for the integrity of the place of God’s name and presence motivated the one act that, perhaps more than any other, ultimately led to his arrest and crucifixion: “His zeal is inextricably linked to his passion.”¹²⁵ The Incarnation thus raises the question whether the zeal that consumes Jesus – in the dual sense of being overtaken by passion and, more literally, of suffering to the point of death – also “consumes” God.¹²⁶

The “voice” of the crucified God: active or passive?

Christians confess that Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, “was crucified” (note the passive voice) under Pontius Pilate. The conclusion appears inescapable: *God* suffers on the cross. Some, with an eye to Chalcedon, refuse to be so conceptually cornered, however, invoking instead the venerable methodological principle “when in doubt, draw a distinction” – in this case, between Jesus’ human suffering

God? And if God’s jealousy signals a temporary condition, would we not have to say that God suffers a change of emotional state? While it is true that some feelings are transitory, other feelings are more like dispositions and attitudes: inclinations to act towards certain objects and persons in particular ways. This, at least, is how theological theists like Aquinas and Calvin traditionally handled the matter (see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. III, pp. 551–3) as well as contemporary thinkers like Paul Helm: “we may think of God’s ‘feelings’ as simply his attitudes to what he knows” (“B. B. Warfield on Divine Passion,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 [2007], p. 101). God’s repenting, similarly, is “his expression of a different attitude and action about something past or future, not because events have taken him off guard, but because the turn of events (which he himself has ordered – Eph. 1:11) makes a different attitude more fitting.” (John Piper, “The Repentance of God: Meditation on the Mind of God,” in *A Godward Life* [Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1997], p. 191). I shall return to these matters in the next chapter, where I analyze divine compassion.

124. The Greek term *zelos* occurs thirty-three times in the New Testament; translations typically render it “jealous” when it has negative connotations and “zeal” when used positively.

125. Voorwinde, *Jesus’ Emotions in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 136. “Passion” here, of course, refers to Jesus’ “Passion week,” not to his having irrational impulses.

126. “In that his zeal is intricately linked to his death it accents Jesus’ humanity, but in that it reflects Yahweh’s zeal against false worship there are also elements of the divine” (Voorwinde, *Jesus’ Emotions in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 137).

(in body and spirit) and the divine nature that transcends it. By contrast, others appeal to the cross as (1) a revelation of the eternal suffering love that served as its motivation and (2) the supreme instance of God actually suffering not only as man but in his divinity too. If the cross “is the test of everything that deserves to be called Christian,”¹²⁷ does the communicative theism presented in these pages pass or fail? Specifically, how does christology – God’s being in Christ – relate to communicative theism and to its manner of dealing with divine passibility?

Christomorphism and the hermeneutics of impassibility

According to the *analogia dramatis*, God makes himself known as a particular human person (Jesus) doing particular acts. What must we conclude about God’s being from the “act” of Jesus’ suffering and death? With this question, Christian theologians find themselves at a cross-roads, a fateful turning point of first theology. The methodological fork in the road pertains to the extent to which theology lets the person and history of Jesus Christ define God. To what metaphysics (and ontology of God) does the *mythos* of Jesus give rise? Moltmann charges the classical tradition of beginning not with *mythos* but *logos*, specifically, with the axiom of divine apathy, derived from Greek philosophical ideas about perfect being. Moltmann proposes instead to begin with the story of Jesus Christ and hence with the “axiom of God’s passion.”

We have already questioned the historical adequacy of the theory of theology’s “fall” into Hellenistic philosophy. We also suggested that contemporary passibilists may be working with their own notion of “perfect being,” emphasizing qualities such as relationality and vulnerability. While a remythologizing approach agrees with Moltmann’s formal point about the need to move from *mythos* to *logos* rather than vice versa, it is not yet clear that Moltmann’s material point (the “axiom of God’s passion”) is the only way to make the move. Of course, the progression from exegesis to theology is never simply linear, for exegesis without presuppositions is not possible.¹²⁸

127. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 7.

128. One of the main thrusts of Part I was to argue that divine passibilists have not returned to Scripture so much as substituted one metaphysical interpretative background (i.e., the kenotic-relational) for another (i.e., the substantial).

The question, then, concerns the manner in which theologians arrive at the presuppositions that govern their reading of the Bible.

Some theologians believe that clear and distinct biblical passages (not Descartes' "clear and distinct ideas") about God's nature "must control the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic data, and not *vice versa*."¹²⁹ For example, the clear and distinct statement "God is spirit" trumps talk of God's having arms, hands, and eyes. The question for the present project, however, is how we move from the clear and distinct story of Jesus Christ to theological statements about God.¹³⁰

The trend in contemporary theology since Barth has been to correct the tradition christologically. I have a great deal of sympathy for this project, particularly when it entails thinking in a Trinitarian rather than bare theistic fashion. For it is indeed possible to marginalize Jesus Christ, even in "Christian" theology. It is possible, that is, to "reduce up" to a concept of God obtained elsewhere than the history of Jesus Christ. Yet, paradoxical as it may seem, it is also possible so to exaggerate the role of Jesus Christ that one "reduces down," making his history the sole criterion for correct speech about God.¹³¹

Well, why not? If Jesus is the Word made flesh, then surely we have in this one case a fully valid and literal anthropomorphism – or rather, a *christomorphism* – for God. After all, Christian theology speaks well of God not on the basis of our best human experiences but from the event of Jesus Christ. While a christological concentration is entirely appropriate in light of the canonical witness (Lk. 24:27), however, a christological *reduction* is not.

In the first place, Jesus Christ reveals God neither *de novo* nor *ex nihilo*. On the contrary, the identity of Jesus is inextricably tied up with the identity of God already established by his covenant with Israel. What is "new" about the new covenant is its intensity and scope: it is more wonderful, and glorious, than Israel had imagined because it includes the Gentiles and because it is fulfilled

129. Helm, "The Impossibility of Divine Passibility," p. 129.

130. Bruce McCormack faults both classical and open theists for claiming to know *what* God is before considering christology ("The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism," in McCormack (ed.), *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, p. 188).

131. For a fuller account of this development in Jüngel and Moltmann in particular, see Henri Blocher, "God and the Cross," in McCormack (ed.), *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, pp. 125–41.

unilaterally (graciously) by God himself. As to God's fundamental nature, however, it remains essentially the same as that revealed to Moses: merciful, gracious, abounding in steadfast love (Ex. 34:6-7).¹³²

Secondly, if one is truly serious and consistent about this christological reduction, then everything one says about God will have to be drawn from this one event.¹³³ If Jesus' history completely reveals – or, what is more, constitutes – God's very being then it becomes difficult to identify which properties are human and which divine. Does the incarnate life of Jesus reveal that God is a sleeper (because Jesus sleeps)? Yes, Jesus reveals God in bodily form (Col. 1:19), but does it follow that everything Jesus does in the body is equally revelatory of God?

Let me make two additional points. First, the event of Jesus Christ is intelligible only in light of God's prior communicative action recorded in the Old Testament. At the same time, Jesus illumines the Old Testament, not because he changes its sense but because he clarifies its reference: *he* is the climax of the covenants God made with Abraham, Moses, and David. Jesus is the center of the Scriptures, but we only appreciate the center as a center in light of the broader context (i.e., the history of redemption). Second, the canon – which is itself an ingredient in the triune economy of revelation – directs us to see that what is revelatory of God in Jesus' life is precisely Jesus' being-in-communicative-act. Jesus reveals God in everything that he says, does, and suffers *inasmuch as it is his words, deeds, and death that instantiate and advance the triune (theodramatic) action* and so serve the cause of God's coming kingdom. Nevertheless, the primary purpose of Jesus' suffering is not to reveal God's suffering, as if God were a victim of history, but to bring about salvation.¹³⁴

132. Elsewhere I have argued that the Incarnation is a divine "improvisation" on a covenantal theme inasmuch as the person and history of Jesus recapitulate the history (and offices) of Israel, though in a "how much more" wonderful fashion (see *Drama of Doctrine*, pp. 340–1).

133. Cf. Blocher's query: "How does Barth know, *if there is no other source*, that the event is the union of these two, God and man?" ("Karl Barth's Christocentric Method," in David Gibson and Daniel Strange [eds.], *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques* [Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2008], p. 51).

134. Cf. Kevin DeYoung, "Divine Impassibility and the Passion of Christ in the Book of Hebrews," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68 (2006), p. 44.

*Who cries out? Christ's suffering and the
communicatio idiomatum*

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt. 27:46; cf. Mk. 15:34). Jesus' cry expresses anguish; Jesus is God in the flesh. For contemporary passibilists, Jesus' cry from the cross expresses a general truth: God does not forsake human beings but rather identifies and suffers in solidarity with them: "God suffers in the cross in *one-ness* with the person of Christ; God suffers *eternally* in the cross; God is most *Godlike* in the suffering of the cross."¹³⁵

Patristic theologians parsed Chalcedonian christology differently. Their challenge was to preserve the declaration of Nicea (i.e., that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father) in the light of the biblical passion narratives. Alexandrians like Cyril, concerned to uphold the unity of the person of Jesus Christ, spoke of the Son's "impassible suffering." Antiochene theologians, concerned to preserve the integrity of the two natures, were more inclined "to avoid speaking carelessly about the fullness of God's presence and, thereby, implicating God in things properly human."¹³⁶ Both parties more or less agreed, however, that God the Son suffers in his *human* nature. The Docetic, Arian, and Nestorian counter-proposals failed because each eliminated in its own way the tension between the Son's divine status and his human suffering.¹³⁷

Cyril's dictum "the Word suffered impassibly" (*apathes epathen*) led Nestorians to worry that Cyril was not truly committed to the Word's *impassibility*, and contemporary passibilists to worry that he was not truly committed to the Word's suffering. Cyril knew (a) that attributing suffering to the divine nature would inscribe suffering in God's eternal being and thus render the human suffering superfluous and (b) that ascribing suffering to the human nature alone

135. Fiddes, *Creative Suffering of God*, p. 31. Jesus' cry of dereliction is one of the chief proof texts for the "new orthodoxy." See, for example, Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, pp. 76–8. D. Stephen Long believes that the slide towards divine passibility began when Luther misinterpreted the *communicatio idiomatum* and hinted that the divine as well as human nature suffers on the cross (*Speaking of God*, ch. 3).

136. John J. O'Keefe, "Impassible Suffering? Divine Passion and Fifth-Century Christology," *Theological Studies* 58 no. 1 (March 1997), p. 44.

137. Docetics denied the reality of the Son's human sufferings; Arians denied the Son's deity; Nestorians claimed that the divine actions and human sufferings of Jesus Christ had two different subjects. See Gavriluk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, chs. 3, 5, and 6.

would jeopardize divine involvement – hence his dialogical (if not quite dialectical) formulation.¹³⁸ Two related questions nevertheless call for further thought: did the Son’s sufferings affect God and, if so, how? Did the Son’s sufferings enable God to know human suffering? Underlying both questions is the issue of the divine involvement in the human experiences of Christ and, consequently, the concept of the *communicatio idiomatum*.

“I know your sufferings” One common argument in favor of divine passibility concerns divine omniscience: how can God have knowledge of (and love for) particular things of the world, especially human suffering, if he does not sufferingly experience what transpires in the world?¹³⁹ How, for example, should we interpret God’s statement to Moses that he has heard Israel’s groaning because of her bondage to Egypt: “I know their sufferings” (Ex. 3:7)? Is Israel’s suffering something that can be known in a detached, purely intellectual, way? Can God “know” what it is to experience pain, or blindness, or a broken heart, without experiencing these conditions himself? And, would not such knowledge also entail that God be susceptible to having such temporal experiences and thus be in time? In sum: does not omniscience entail *omnipathos* and *omnitemporality*?

To affirm *omnipathy* (“all suffering”) is to say that God freely chooses to experience all that humans experience (because otherwise he could not be said to *know* it): “An *omnipathic* God experiences all emotions that ever have been or will be experienced by human beings. In all human pain and suffering, God emotionally participates.”¹⁴⁰ Let us locate *omnipathy* under the broader rubric of

138. Gavriluk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, p. 174.

139. Wolterstorff, “Suffering Love,” pp. 223–4. There are two senses in which God could be said to “know” suffering in a passibilist way: (1) by God experiencing particular emotional states such as grief; (2) by God experiencing a change from one emotional state (e.g., joy) to another (e.g., grief). By contrast, I shall here argue that God can “know” suffering in an impassibilist manner. The argument depends on the notion of God’s emotions as active affections rather than passive passions presented earlier in this chapter.

140. Spiegel, *The Benefits of Providence*, p. 178. Spiegel is an eternalist who believes that God experiences emotions “all at once,” though this simultaneity is not essential to the concept. One could, for example, hold to eternity as divine everlastingness and simply say that God knows/feels/experiences all that there is to know/feel/experience *now*. Spiegel’s motive in formulating the concept is to make it possible to affirm both divine immutability and divine *pathos*.

kenotic-relational ontotheology and call it the “general empathy” view.¹⁴¹

Omnitemporality is another apparent implication of God’s knowing human suffering.¹⁴² Temporalists insist that it is not enough for God to know *that* someone suffered at time T. On the contrary, to know our suffering God must not only experience it, but experience it *as happening now*. Here too, in regard to the question of God’s entering into human temporal experience, a remythologizing approach strives to articulate a “third way” between, on the one hand, God suffering like a human being (reducing “down” to myth) and God sitting above the human fray impassively indifferent (reducing “up” to philosophical theism) on the other.¹⁴³ What is striking about these discussions about time, eternity, and divine impassibility is the extent to which their proponents construct their respective arguments in almost total disregard for the one place in which Christians confess that time and eternity intersect: the incarnate life of Jesus Christ.¹⁴⁴

Communicatio idiomatum Christology both complicates and ultimately advances the discussion about God’s suffering. To see how this is so, we need to revisit the two questions I posed above and relate them to the question of time/eternity: (1) Did the Son’s sufferings affect God and, if so, how? (2) Is God able to know human suffering in and through the suffering of the Son?

We begin with Weinandy’s claim that patristic theology by and large represents an attempt to justify and clarify the use of the *communicatio idiomatum*, that is, the practice of predicating divine and

141. Henry Simoni draws attention to one of its main weaknesses, a difficulty that he terms the problem of radical particularity: “But since there are contradictory elements of experience within the world, it would seem impossible for God to feel one person’s pain and someone else’s happiness simultaneously” (“Divine Passibility and the Problem of Radical Particularity: Does God Feel Your Pain?” *Religious Studies* 33 [1997], p. 331).

142. For a fuller exposition of this position, see William Lane Craig, “Timelessness & Omnitemporality,” in Ganssle (ed.), *God & Time*, ch. 4. In ch. 6 I affirmed divine omnitemporality in the sense that God exists at all times, not that God “experiences” all times.

143. Helm proposes a third way as well and identifies it with the view that Jesus is the impassible, impassioned God embodied in human nature whose emotions are expressions in time of God’s eternal attitudes (“Warfield on Divine Passion,” p. 104).

144. The authors of the essays in Ganssle (ed.), *God & Time: Four Views*, mention the incarnation only as a test case for their general theories, not as a guiding premise for their theories’ construction.

human attributes to one and the same person, Jesus Christ.¹⁴⁵ For example, according to Cyril the Incarnation is about the person of the divine Son becoming the subject of a fully human life. The person/nature distinction distinguishes between the *who* and the *manner of the who's existence*. In becoming man, the Word does not give up his divine nature but assumes a new nature, a new mode of existence, and so makes human experiences his own: "Jesus is the *person* of the Son *existing* as a man."¹⁴⁶ So far, so Chalcedonian.

If in the incarnate Christ "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9), does it then follow that God suffers in Jesus' passion? As concerns passibility, the reflex of classical theists is to limit God's suffering in the Incarnation to Jesus' human nature. Contemporary passibilists, by contrast, insist that God's very being is seen in or as the event of Jesus' suffering: "God suffers by virtue of the fact that he *is* in his sharing in our suffering but this is a free ... act of love."¹⁴⁷ There is a slight equivocation, however, in the idea that God suffers in his *being*: does "being" refer to the divine nature or to the divine person?¹⁴⁸

If we unpack the *communicatio idiomatum* in Chalcedonian fashion, with Cyril, we will assign the suffering neither to the divine nature nor to an abstract human nature but rather to the divine person (the *who*).¹⁴⁹ According to Cyril, the one divine Word exists in two distinct states: unincarnate (in the framework of the immanent Trinity) and incarnate (in the framework of the economy and history). The

145. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* p. 175. He also insists that the way one understands the *communicatio idiomatum* "continues to be the test of christological orthodoxy" (p. 175).

146. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

147. Alan Torrance, "Does God Suffer? Incarnation and Impassibility," in Trevor Hart and Daniel Thimell (eds.), *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1989), p. 367.

148. God's being is in his personal communicative activity (ch. 4) and God communicates his "ways" – his being-in-communicative-action – in the life of Jesus Christ (ch. 5).

149. I agree with Bruce McCormack that one should not treat the human nature as a Subject in its own right. The human nature of Jesus is *anhypostatic*. But it does not follow, as McCormack thinks it does, that the subject of the human sufferings of Jesus is the triune God rather than the second person of the Trinity. See McCormack, "Karl Barth's Christology as a Resource for a Reformed Version of Kenoticism," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006), pp. 247–8. We need to recall the doctrine of divine appropriations (i.e., the idea that, though all three persons are active in all that God does, we may nevertheless ascribe certain acts, or aspects of these acts, to particular divine persons on the basis of what we see in the economy).

incarnate state is that of the eternal Logos under the conditions of human history.¹⁵⁰ Without surrendering his divine identity, the Logos assumed a human identity, and in so doing became a man acquainted with grief. We may now return to the question of whether the Son's sufferings affect God. Who then suffers the cross? The second person of the Trinity ("God wept"). In what manner does he experience this suffering? As man ("Jesus wept" [Jn. 11:35]).¹⁵¹

Turning to our second question – how God can know human suffering in general – we can do no better than to appeal to Hebrews: "For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Heb. 2:18). Indeed, the Son's incarnation enabled him even to "taste death" (Heb. 2:9). From the Son's high priesthood – his having been "made like his brothers in every respect" (Heb. 2:17) – we may infer that God the Son has personal acquaintance with every human bodily and spiritual anguish and can therefore extrapolate from his own experience to that of others.

What now remains of divine impassibility? If the Son of God has a history, then his interaction with creation is temporal, in which case God would appear to have temporal experiences that affect and change him.¹⁵² Passibilists argue that such relatedness to the world is a necessary condition for God's being able genuinely to respond to what happens in the world. It is important at this point, however, not to reduce the Son "down" to the history of Jesus simpliciter; this way mythologizing lies. We must therefore revisit the *communicatio idiomatum*, this time with an eye to the implications of the time/eternity relationship for the identity of the Son. Specifically, we need conceptually to "expand" the *communicatio idiomatum* in order to work out what one must say about the Son's identity in light of his human temporal experience.¹⁵³

150. "The Incorporeal has limbs that advance to the ripeness of manhood" (Cyril, *In Lucam*, 5, cited in Gavriluyuk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, p. 157).

151. "[O]ne must maintain the unchangeable impassibility of the Son of God as God in order to guarantee that it is actually the divine Son of God, one in being with the Father, who truly suffers as man" (Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* p. 205).

152. Wolterstorff's criterion for saying that something is "in" time is simply "that it has a history." See his "Response to Critics," in Ganssle (ed.), *God & Time*, p. 231.

153. Weinandy similarly tries to apply the *communicatio idiomatum* to an understanding of impassibility but he nowhere relates his discussion to the issue of time and eternity (*Does God Suffer?* pp. 206–13).

Does God the Son have a history? Put differently, to what do we assign the temporal experiences of Jesus – person or nature (and if the latter, human and/or divine)? Those who are inclined to say that Jesus' history is his being collapse the immanent into the economic Trinity. Those who construe God's eternity in terms of timelessness reject the suggestion that Jesus' temporal experiences affect the Son's divine being in any way. The former "reduces down" (i.e., mythologizes), the latter "reduces up" (i.e., demythologizes). The third, remythologizing, way for which I am groping here maintains that (1) the Son's identity is established prior to Jesus' history; and (2) Jesus' history displays the very being of the eternal Son in human form. Hence, everything that Jesus says and does (and undergoes) in time directly and indirectly communicates who he is in eternity.

The Son is what, and who, he is by virtue of his relationship with the Father. Prior to the incarnation and in obedience to the Father, the Son freely determined to make himself nothing, take the form of a servant, and humble himself to the point of death (Phil. 2:6–8). His personhood is a function of his intra-Trinitarian relations, yet he reveals who he is in all that he says and does in his incarnate state. As to the temporal experiences of the human Jesus, they do not constitute but corroborate his identity (i.e., they are signs). The history of Jesus neither inaugurates nor interrupts the Son's personal identity but rather graphically illustrates and enacts it. The Son inhabited Jesus' time but cannot ultimately be confined (reduced down) to it. This follows from Nicea's decisive refutation of the Arian formula "There was a *time* when he [the Son] was not."

The Son's experiences in time are nevertheless genuine. When he cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" the Son experiences real anguish in his human self-consciousness. It is the Son of God who feels pain, precisely as the subject of his human existence. The experience of Jesus' death and dying is none other than that of the eternal Son. Thanks to his humanity, then, the Son is able to "feel" time. Such, I submit, is the implication of the *communicatio idiomatum*: the temporal experiences of Jesus Christ are to be assigned neither to an abstract human nature, nor to the divine nature, but rather to a divine person (viz., the Son) in his human mode of existence.

Active, passive, middle: the Son's suffering as authorial, mediatorial, and medial

What effect does the Son's human suffering have on God? Is the human nature that the Son assumes merely an instrument through which he does things or is it something that "acts" on the Son the way in which bodily sensations (according to one theory) cause emotions? If we follow the logic of the *communicatio idiomatum* where it leads, must we say that the divine person "acts on" the human nature or that the human nature "acts on" the divine person? Here, too, there is a third way – a *middle* way – that conceives the humanity of Jesus not merely as an artificial means of communication but as a fitting medium of the Son's self-communication. For the incarnation is not merely a display of divine passivity (i.e., empathy) but of God's active "living into" the human other.

"I suffer": a middle-voiced passion "I [suffer] thirst" (Jn. 19:28). If I thirst, am I an active subject or a passive object? A good case can be made for either side; for though I am the subject of the verb, something seems to be happening to me. Some languages, like ancient Greek, have a third grammatical voice in addition to the active and passive to express such dynamics.¹⁵⁴ This so-called "middle" voice affords a "third way" to think about the relationship between persons and actions. In addition to my active *doing* or my passive *being-done-to*, the middle voice presents the subject as "within the action which happens to him or her *and* of which he or she is subject."¹⁵⁵

To say "I understand," for example, is to say that one is neither simply active ("doer") nor simply passive ("done to") but rather that one is both active and caught up in a larger process: understanding is both a (mental) "doing" and a "happening."¹⁵⁶ Viewing understanding in middle-voice terms allows one to shift the focus from the doing agent to the location of the process. One gets understanding in the *middle* of a conversation. Being in the middle, one is not

154. See the seminal work of Émile Benveniste, "Active and Middle Voice in the Verb," in *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), pp. 145–51.

155. Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 2.

156. This example comes from Eberhard's fine book on Gadamer's hermeneutics with which I interact in my "Discourse on Matter: Hermeneutics and the 'Miracle' of Understanding," pp. 19–21. Cf. Eberhard, "Gadamer and Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9 (2007), pp. 283–300.

simply tossed to and fro by the conversational currents; one is able to contribute to its flow as well. Understanding happens to me *and* I am its subject.

Is there a “middle” position on impassibility? The Apostles’ creed confesses that Jesus “suffered and ... was crucified.” “Was crucified” is clearly passive: something is done to Jesus’ body but the body does nothing. Suffering, by contrast, like understanding, is a middle-voice phenomenon; it has an active form but passive meaning. Typically in the active voice the subject is “outside” the verb, as it were: in throwing the ball, I am not acting upon myself. By contrast, in the passive voice the subject is acted upon by outside forces. Suffering, however, is neither something the subject does nor something that is done to the subject but a process located in the subject, involving others, in which the subject remains active: “instead of being set against an object and acting upon it from outside, the middle-voiced subject is within his or her actions happening to him or her.”¹⁵⁷ The middle voice thus highlights the Son’s situatedness in a medium – Jesus’ humanity – in which the action (i.e., suffering) takes place.

“I suffer.” The Son is neither merely active nor passive but medially involved – as Mediator – in a broader process (i.e., God’s reconciling the world to himself) over which he is ultimately still Lord. In Chalcedonian terms: the divine Son is within the action which happens to him and of which he is the subject, but the location or medium of the action is his humanity. Inasmuch as Jesus’ humanity means “God with and for us,” the medium is the (gospel) message. In sum: the medial suffering of the Mediator calls attention to the Son’s humanity, the medium of his communicative action and passion, as well as to the Son’s active role in suffering. This latter point deserves further comment.

“It is finished”: an active passion “I thirst.” Though humanly thirsty, the Son accepts the peculiar cup the Father gives him to drink, and does so in a spirit not of unwilling subjection but of willing obedience. In the words of B. B. Warfield: “Nowhere is he the victim of circumstances or the helpless sufferer ... His very passion

157. Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, p. 218. As we shall see below, what the sufferer *does* is endure.

was his own action.”¹⁵⁸ Suffering happens *to* the eternal Son (in the medium of his humanity) *and* he is its subject.

It is worth pausing over Warfield’s paradoxical emphasis on the Son’s *active* suffering. Barth, too, says of the cross that “in it as a passion we have to do with an action ... For this [the suffering on the cross] took place in the freedom of this subject.”¹⁵⁹ And again: “[T]his passion [is] from the very first the divine action.”¹⁶⁰ Barth (and his disciples) go further than Warfield, however, in saying that God’s being is in Jesus’ suffering: “[God] has maintained and revealed His deity in the passion of this man as His eternal Son.”¹⁶¹ The claim that christology should govern a Christian theological understanding of divine ontology is a two-edged sword, however; one can accept the principle without thereby ceding the field to Barth. Everything depends on how one explicates “God’s being in Jesus’ suffering.”

In noting the Son’s activity in his passion, we are doing no more than expanding on Jesus’ own words: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Lk. 23:46); “‘It is finished.’ And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (Jn. 19:30). The Gospels give the distinct impression that Jesus is in a very real sense the *author* of his own passion narrative: “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again” (Jn. 10:18). Nothing moves Jesus to turn his face toward Jerusalem (Lk. 9:51). With regard to his mission, one might say that he is both implacable and impassible. We can say the same, I submit, of his passion.

The cross of Jesus Christ has rightly been called “that than which a greater cannot be thought.”¹⁶² We should not think of the cross as the defeat of God, however, or even as the mark of God’s vulnerability. The apostle Paul calls the word of the cross “the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). Specifically, this word of the cross – the gospel – “is the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16). Jesus’ voluntary suffering on the cross is a crucial ingredient in the in-breaking of God’s liberating reign in human hearts.¹⁶³ Paul, too, experiences the power

158. *The Person and Work of Christ*, p. 134, order slightly altered.

159. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960) pp. 244–5.

160. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

161. *Ibid.*, p. 247.

162. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, p. 194.

163. Cf. Gunton on the cross: “It is the power of God in action because it is the means by which God meets evil on its own ground and defeats it without using its methods” (*Act and Being*, p. 126).

of the cross in his weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Both the cross and Paul's preaching of it display the same power: the power of God's reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:18). The power of the cross, and its proclamation, is *communicative* and *self-communicative*.

The voice of the crucified Son of God ("It is finished") provides the crucial clue for understanding how God's being is in Jesus' suffering. Four points are especially noteworthy. First, The Son became man not simply to identify with our sufferings (i.e., to empathize) but to rid us of them (i.e., by becoming our substitute). The passion "is not something suffered so much as something achieved through suffering."¹⁶⁴

The second point follows from the first: the cross was hardly a divine afterthought to creation but, as Peter's Pentecost sermon puts it, part of "the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). Similarly, Paul tells the Ephesians that they were chosen in Christ "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). Though it provides the salvific answer to the problem of human sin, then, the cross was not, strictly speaking, a belated "response" to something the human hero said or did.¹⁶⁵

Third, P. T. Forsyth rightly clarifies Barth's and Warfield's paradoxical claim about Jesus being active in his passion when he says that "The perfection of the Son and the perfecting of his holy work lay, not in his suffering but in his obedience. And, as he was eternal Son, it meant an eternal obedience."¹⁶⁶ Even Jesus' so-called "passive" obedience (i.e., submitting to divine judgment) has an "active" dimension. It is therefore the Son's obedience that is the watchword of the Passion narrative: "Subordination is *not* inferiority, and it is God-like ... It is not a mark of inferiority to be subordinate, to have an authority, to obey. It is divine."¹⁶⁷

164. Gunton, *Act and Being*, p. 128.

165. The "Protoevangelium" or first anticipation of the gospel in Genesis 3:15 must therefore be read in light of the other biblical texts mentioned in this paragraph.

166. P. T. Forsyth, *Marriage: Its Ethics and Religion* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912), p. 70.

167. P. T. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father* (reprint, London: Independent Press, 1957), p. 42. This is also the perspective from which to understand the cry of dereliction: "The cry from the cross expresses the suffering of the Son and the non-intervention of the Father, a non-intervention fully and freely embraced by the Son in co-operation and inseparable union with the Father, in order that they might together triumph over the powers and principalities" (John Yocum "A Cry of Dereliction?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 [2005], p. 79). Gunton, too, views the cry as the climax of the Son's obedience rather than, as Moltmann wrongly has it, as a breach between Father and Son (Gunton, *Act and Being*, p. 127).

From this we see, fourth, that what Jesus communicates in his passion is nothing less than the “ways of God,” that is, the nature of God’s being-in-self-communicative-action. The incarnation and cross alike indicate that God is the one who freely pours out his own life for others. Herein is love: that the Son of God actively surrenders his divine status, pouring himself into human form and then pouring himself out to the point of death (Phil. 2:6–8). The salient point is that the Son remains the active subject of this twofold “passion”: he freely assumes, and endures, the human condition. Indeed, the Son is not merely active but sovereign in his suffering.

If the cross is indeed the paradigm instance of divine suffering, then we must conclude that God never suffers because he is overtaken by worldly events, but only because he uses them for his own authorial purposes: “God’s self-emptying, his weakness and his suffering are not the expression of a lack, as they are in finite beings; nor are they the expression of a fated necessity. If God suffers, then he suffers in a divine manner, that is, his suffering is an expression of his freedom; suffering does not befall God, rather he freely allows it to touch him. He does not suffer, as creatures do, from a lack of being; he suffers out of love and by reason of his love, which is the overflow of his being.”¹⁶⁸

“Tempted, yet without sin”: impeccability and impassibility The temptation narrative at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (Lk. 4:1–13) is a showcase for the same active suffering that marks another temptation narrative (Lk. 22:39–46), together with the passion narrative, at its end. Satan’s principal aim in the first temptation narrative is to dissuade the Son from completing his mission. The means he employs – the prospect of food, the appeal to pride, the distortion of God’s words – recall the temptation of Eve in Eden.¹⁶⁹ One trial in particular, however, foreshadows Jesus’ later suffering on the cross. The devil transports Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and invites him to throw himself down, reminding him of biblical texts that promise angelic protection (Mt. 4:5–6; Lk. 4:9–11). Jesus answers Scripture with Scripture: “it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (Mt. 4:7; cf. Dt. 6:16).

168. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, p. 195.

169. However, the forty days and the wilderness setting set Jesus’ faithfulness in face of temptation in contrast to Israel’s unfaithfulness during her own wilderness wanderings.

A second temptation narrative occurs at the very end of Jesus' ministry. Each of the Synoptic Gospels records Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsamene where he petitions the Father to let the "cup" or "hour" pass (Mt. 26:36-46; Mk. 14:32-42; Lk. 22:39-46). Luke's Gospel frames Jesus' prayer with appeals to the disciples to pray in order not to enter into temptation (Lk. 22:40, 46). This is apt, for Jesus himself here struggles mightily with the temptation to forsake his mission in order to avoid the suffering that would accompany it. As he prays, he is "in an agony" (Lk. 22:44), "sorrowful, even to death" (Mt. 26:38), "greatly distressed and troubled" (Mk. 14:33). Clearly, Jesus is already suffering, yet the temptation is precisely to avoid an even greater suffering. Significantly, it is Jesus' communicative activity – praying – that enables him to remain committed to his vocation.¹⁷⁰

It is difficult to view Jesus as a hapless victim when we allow the Gospels to govern our reasoning. The Gospels depict Jesus as one who perseveres to the end for the sake of fulfilling his mission. He could have avoided the whole sorry spectacle when Pilate gave him the opportunity to recant.¹⁷¹ Instead, he *endured* his innocent suffering. The crucial question is whether Jesus' endurance of suffering demonstrates his passibility or impassibility. The answer, I believe, lies in discerning a certain parallel between Jesus' impeccability and impassibility.

Because Jesus was truly tempted, he is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses" (Heb. 4:15a). Here is the pastoral word so valued by divine passibilists: "For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Heb. 2:18a). It is worth pondering how our knowing that Jesus himself suffered when he was tempted helps us. Is it perhaps because he "in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15b),

170. Only Luke mentions that, as a response to Jesus' prayer, an angel appeared to strengthen him (Lk. 22:43). Here we may recall what we said about angels as communicative agents in ch. 4. There is also a "last temptation" of Christ that occurs at the foot of the cross, when virtually everyone – those who pass by, including the chief priests, scribes, elders, and those crucified with him – taunt him by asking him, not quite to throw himself down, but nevertheless to come down from the cross in order to prove that he is the Son of God (Mt. 27:39-44; cf. Ps. 22:7-8).

171. In an interesting article on the "efficient cause" of Christ's passion, Aquinas says that Christ was the "indirect" cause of his suffering and death because he could have prevented it. See *Summa Theologica* III, 47, 1.

in which case it is not that misery loves company but that Jesus' example encourages us to resist? We are faced with a paradox: on the one hand, the Son is tempted and so is able to sympathize with us; on the other hand, the Son resists temptation: "He committed no sin" (1 Pet. 2:22; cf. 1 Jn. 3:5; 2 Cor. 5:21).

To say that, as a matter of record, Jesus did not in fact sin takes us only as far as sinlessness (*non peccare*). We can, and should, go further and acknowledge that Jesus, because of *who* he is, was unable to sin (*non posse peccare*): impeccable. It was *inevitable* that the Son would not sin (because of *who* he was) but not *necessary* (because of *what* he was, that, is, a real human).¹⁷² There is no necessary contradiction between Jesus' being "open" to temptation and the certainty of his never sinning. The temptation was no sham, for it is precisely *because* Jesus resisted temptation that he could "feel" its full force. He was impeccable yet subject to real temptation the way an invincible army is subject to real attack. This is precisely the point of the parallel between impeccability and impassibility: as Jesus feels the force of temptation though without sinning, so God feels the force of human suffering without himself suffering change in his being, will, or knowledge.¹⁷³

Jesus' impeccability is not an abstract property of some imagined perfect being but rather a feature of his person, vocation, and self-determination – of his lived history as this comes progressively to light in the New Testament *mythos*. In context, impeccability is a predicate of Jesus' resolve to obey his Father and fulfill his covenant role. By resisting temptation, the Son demonstrates both his obedience and his messianic qualifications for the dual role of sacrifice and high priest: "the significance of Christ's sufferings has nothing to do with 'the suffering in the eternal heart of God' and everything to do with 'perfecting' Christ" for his redemptive role.¹⁷⁴

As concerns temptation, then, the Son is impeccable but not impervious. So it is with divine impassibility. Divine impassibility

172. Cf. Thomas Oden: "Impeccability is a condition that can only be chosen, not externally caused" (*Systematic Theology*, vol. II: *The Word of Life* [New York: HarperCollins, 1992], p. 247).

173. As to whether God suffers change in his emotional life, that is the subject of the next chapter, on divine compassion.

174. DeYoung, "Divine Impassibility and the Passion of Christ in the Book of Hebrews," p. 47.

means not that God is unfeeling – impervious to covenantally concerned theodramatic construals of what is happening – but that God is never overcome or overwhelmed by these feelings such that he “forgets” his covenant, or who he is as covenant Lord. These twin concepts of impeccability and impassibility ultimately have their root in God’s free and loving self-determination to be Lord (and servant) of the covenant of grace. The reason why Jesus cannot be tempted (or God changed) is because Jesus is the truth, the absolute reliability or “troth” of God: the embodiment of God’s covenant “ways.” Nothing in heaven and earth can cause God not to keep his word: “it is impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18). What is finally at stake in divine impassibility is the ontological and ethical integrity – the trustworthiness – of God. God is impassible because his word is true.

Impassible compassion? From divine *pathos* to divine patience

O Lord ... thou art compassionate in terms of our experience, and not compassionate in terms of thy being ... When thou beholdest us in our wretchedness, we experience the effect of compassion, but thou dost not experience the feeling. (Anselm)¹

The impassibility of God cannot ... mean that it is impossible for Him really to feel compassion. ... [the innermost being of God] is not closed but open to feel the distress of man. God cannot be moved from outside, but from inside His own being He shares it in sympathetic communion. (Barth)²

Divine compassion is the goodness God directs to suffering others. Anselm and Barth express this truth in two apparently contradictory ways, the one denying any emotional content (i.e., feeling) to the divine compassion, the other affirming it, at least in qualified fashion. Is God unmoved (Anselm), moved (relational theists and panentheists), or self-moved (Barth) by human suffering?

The compassion of God is a recurring theme at several nodal points in the scriptural account (e.g., Ex. 34:6–7). As the contrasting quotes from Anselm and Barth attest, compassion resembles both action and passion. It therefore serves as an excellent test case with which to sum up our case for remythologizing theology. Accordingly, this chapter contrasts a remythologized conceptual elaboration of divine compassion as a form of communicative action with the

1. Anselm, *Basic Writings*, 2nd edn. trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962), p. 59. Gunton considers this an unfortunate “breach between act and being” (*Act and Being*, p. 126).

2. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1 p. 371.

kenotic-relational ontotheological version that currently prevails in the theological marketplace.

According to Luke 1:78, Jesus is the *splanghna theou*: the “compassion of God.” As such, Jesus is both the “name” and the “ways” of God: the embodiment of God’s goodness in human, historical, and narrative form (cf. Ex. 33:19), the last in a long line of prophets that embody God’s inner life. We may recall that, for Heschel, it is not the message but the passion of the prophet that is the central point: “The prophet’s task is to convey a divine view, yet as a person he is a point of view.”³ Jesus is the corporeal discourse – the prophetic pathos – of God. We would thus do well to listen, and attend, to him in order to understand the impassibility of divine compassion.

Compassion is “the emotion which is most frequently attributed to [Jesus].”⁴ Jesus on several occasions is said to be “moved with pity” (e.g., Mt. 9:36; 14:14; Mk. 6:34; Lk. 7:13) or even “deeply moved” (Jn. 11:33,38). His compassion leads him to act but the emphasis is on “the profound internal movement of his emotional nature.”⁵ What prompts this internal movement is the sight of human distress, either individual (e.g., a leper’s plea for healing [Mk. 1:41]) or corporate (e.g., the multitude’s hunger [Mt. 15:32]). If external states of affairs “move” Jesus, do they also “move” God? What can we learn about God’s being-in-communicative-act from Jesus’ being in communicative – that is, compassionate – act?

The goal of the present chapter is to clarify what God’s compassion means for God’s being from the perspective of the communicative theism advocated in this work and, in particular, to specify further the place and role of suffering in God’s love. We shall also examine the meaning of God’s silence, the apparent absence of communicative activity and thus another possible symptom of divine vulnerability. These two themes, divine suffering and divine silence, converge in the notion of divine *patience*. The chapter sets forth a constructive proposal for rethinking divine impassibility in terms of God’s patience and enduring love, and concludes with some reflections on what it means for the church to participate in the fellowship of divine suffering.

3. Heschel, *Prophets*, p. xxii. Cf. Fretheim: “The prophet, in effect, is called to function as an ongoing theophany” (*Suffering of God*, p. 151).

4. Warfield, “The Emotional Life of our Lord,” p. 96.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Divine pathos: suffering love

Aristotle defines compassion as “a painful emotion directed at another person’s misfortune or suffering.”⁶ “Empathy,” “sympathy,” and “compassion” are all etymologically related to the Greek *pathe* and the Latin *passio* (“to suffer”). Interestingly, the OED (2nd edn.) lists two entries for “compassion.” The first is “suffering with” – participating in another’s suffering through fellow feeling. The second sense accents motive: “a pity that inclines one to ... succour.” A parenthetical note follows, specifying that compassion in the first sense involves equals while compassion in the second sense “is shown towards a person in distress by one who is free from it, who is, in this respect, his superior.” These two dictionary entries, and their juxtaposition, do more than raise questions about the lexical connections between compassion, empathy, and sympathy. They implicitly ask, lying side by side, whether empathizing with the world pulls the Creator down to its level; whether suffering-with is an essential component in God’s loving compassion.

Empathy and sympathy

Both empathy and sympathy have to do with one’s ability to relate to and understand the emotional states of others. To empathize with a person is to feel what that person is feeling, to make the same concern-based construal of that person’s situation, to reconstruct imaginatively another person’s experience.⁷ Empathy imagines itself into the narrative – the thoughts and feelings – of another person. There is debate over the extent to which one person can identify wholly with another. Nussbaum insists, for example, that empathy does not involve a fusion of horizons: “for if it is to be for *another*, and not for oneself, that one feels compassion, one must be aware both of the bad lot of the sufferer and of the fact that it is, right now, not one’s own.”⁸

6. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 306, paraphrasing Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* 1385b13ff.

7. Empathy is “an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another’s emotional state or condition” (Nancy Eisenberg, “Empathy and Sympathy,” in Lewis and Haviland-Jones (eds.), *Handbook of Emotions*, p. 677. See also Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964]).

8. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 327. Cf. what we said in ch. 6 in connection with Bakhtin about the importance of outsideness.

Sympathy, by contrast, is a matter of feeling sorrow or concern for the other person *rather than* feeling that person's same pain or emotion. Feeling sympathetic towards someone involves *caring* about, not *sharing*, the other's suffering.⁹ Further, sympathy involves a "recognition-response" tie: a link between one's awareness of another's difficulty and motivation to relieve it.¹⁰ This contrasts with empathy, where one can be aware of the bad lot of the sufferer but not be disposed to relieve it (i.e., in a case of revenge). Empathy is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for sympathy; we often have sympathy for animals whose experience we can neither know nor share.¹¹ It is an open question, however, whether sympathy involves not merely perceiving but somehow participating in another's suffering, and whether sympathy is a necessary and/or sufficient condition for compassion.

Kenotic compassion

In the previous chapter we noted the problem of evil as a key factor behind the sea change in contemporary theology towards divine passibility. Given this backdrop of innocent suffering, it is not surprising that so many twentieth-century theologians, when apparently forced to choose between divine control and divine love, choose the latter. One of the major arguments for divine passibility, we may recall, is the assumption that love is intrinsically vulnerable. To love, it is argued, is to be in a relation where one can be affected-by the other. To love is to open oneself up to the possibility of suffering rejection by the beloved as well as to suffering the suffering of the beloved. We begin, then, by examining the view that love and compassion are essentially kenotic-relational, and hence passible.

Edward Farley elevates divine empathy – by which he means “a fellow-feeling that participates in the suffering of another” – to the status of root metaphor for understanding God's activity in the world.¹² God's empathy is boundless: infinite and perfect. God

9. See Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954).

10. Goldie, *The Emotions*, p. 180.

11. Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, p. 330.

12. Edward Farley, *Divine Empathy: A Theology of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 288, 295. Farley's self-stated project is to find a third way beyond metaphysical and antimetaphysical (i.e., deconstructionist) approaches to God.

responds to people's suffering not because they are his people but simply because they are suffering.¹³ Jesus, on Farley's view, exemplifies in time the way God eternally is; he is a concrete instantiation of God's "ways." Jesus' empathy is "as such," that is, it requires no qualifications; it is for one and all. God, similarly, engages empathetically with all entities in the world at all times and places: "the divine empathy is what disposes world process in directions of synthesis, cooperation, and novelty."¹⁴ God is the creative influence in the world process that promotes the flourishing (i.e., redemption) of every entity. Interestingly, Farley goes on to argue for God's "efficacious empathy."¹⁵ A compassionate God refuses to coerce. Yet, in suffering with others, the divine empathy evokes a response of empathy in return: "God functions to draw self-oriented entities out of the circle of fear and solipsism into union and cooperation with others."¹⁶

Farley's account of divine compassion falls short in a number of respects: first, in dissolving the distinction between creation and redemption it makes God's special covenantal dealing with Israel, and Jesus, to be merely symbolic of a general process. Second, it fails to take seriously God's special communicative action, thus leaving it unclear just how God's compassion actually produces its effects. Third, it fails to account for the note of joy and confidence that God will bring history to a hopeful conclusion: "in a very real sense God Godself is implicated in the tragic character of world process."¹⁷ We are left, then, with the question of whether divine empathy amounts to no more than ineffectual care.

Care is also the watchword in Wendy Farley's *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*.¹⁸ "Tragic vision" refers to a world mired in suffering; divine compassion describes "a mode of relationship and a power that is wounded by the suffering of others and that is propelled into action on their behalf."¹⁹ Divine

13. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 303.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 303–10.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 304. Farley thus holds to a "moral exemplar" theory of divine action.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 311.

18. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

19. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

compassion depends upon God's sympathetic knowledge, the ability to share the content of another's suffering experience, though not the experience itself. Sympathetic suffering has a power or efficacy of its own: "This communion with the sufferer in her pain ... mediates consolation and respect that can empower the sufferer to bear the pain."²⁰

According to the tragic vision, the problem of evil concerns suffering, not sin. Moreover, it assumes that it is impossible to eradicate suffering from creation altogether, for suffering (and hence evil) is a tragic, though necessary, by-product of finitude and freedom: "love creates the possibility of evil by leaving freedom and the future undetermined ... Love is a *kenosis* of the plenitude of power."²¹ A tragic vision focuses on resisting rather than punishing evil, and on compassion as the power that makes such resistance possible.²² The "tragic structure of divine love" derives from Farley's assumption that finite human freedom and infinite divine freedom are competing at the same level as adversarial powers. God must "decrease," as it were, for humans to "increase" (cf. Jn. 3:30).

Jesus is the compassion of God incarnate. Farley views the efficacy of this compassion in terms of its empowering humans to resist, perchance to redeem, suffering. To redeem suffering is to oppose its destructive effects. This, says Farley, is what we see the incarnate Christ doing, even though at the crucial moment, his trial, he does not resist but submits to evil. Nevertheless, Jesus is the Christ because he mediates the power of compassion, specifically, the power "to break the dominion of suffering over the spirit."²³ Still, there is no guarantee that divine compassion will triumph: the fallible constitution of the world is intrinsically tragic, freedom is fickle, and the "savagery of history is testimony to this long defeat of God by humanity."²⁴ God's weak ineffectual care generates only a faint hope, if one can even call it hope: "Redemption ... remains

20. *Ibid.*, p. 81. The only alternative to empowering power according to Farley is dominating power: "Any power that is causally absolute, even if motivated by a good will, necessarily deprives other creatures of any real activity, participation, or uniqueness" (p. 93). It is my contention that communicative power is an exception to Farley's rule.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

fragmentary, always subject to defeat.”²⁵ Such is the bleak, though logically consistent, conclusion of involuntary kenotic-relational ontotheology.

Many divine passibilists hold to a *voluntary* kenotic-relational view, however, according to which God freely creates the world and freely limits his power in order to make possible a “genuine” interpersonal relation. Nevertheless, this decision to create entails real risks – call it “Yahweh’s wager” – for God so “opens” himself to the world that he is “affected by and responsive to” what happens in it, in particular to the words and deeds of free human agents.²⁶

Oliver Davies proposes a “metaphysics of compassion” or “kenotic ontology” in which the fundamental category is not the autonomous subject but a self in a self-dispossessing relation to another: “In compassion the self experiences the other primordially ... as another who suffers and whose sufferings ... become not our own ... but become the cause of our action *as if they were our own*.”²⁷ Compassion involves a self-risking affirmation of the other. Davies depicts the God-world relation in the same kenotic-ontological terms. God’s being is in his *compassionate* action.²⁸

Davies calls attention to the link between compassion and communication. As both the word and the compassion of God, Jesus is “the supreme epiphany of being itself.”²⁹ God creatively speaks creation into existence and thus has been in communicative and compassionate relation to the world from the beginning: “By creating the world through speech, God himself becomes part of that world, as a ... voice, within it as well as a divine author who stands outside it.”³⁰ Creator and created thus co-exist in the same domain of language, where the human interlocutor is “a conversation partner in a sense equal with God.”³¹ The wages of sinful human speech is divine silence, and it is precisely this silent divine judgment that

25. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

26. So William Hasker, *The Triumph of God Over Evil: Theodicy for a World of Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p. 26.

27. Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, p. xix. Davies notes that he is looking to understand being at the place where it comes up against non-being or evil. Compassion is “born of evil” in the sense that it arises as resistance to evil (p. 160).

28. Davies bases his ontology on a reading of Exodus 3:14 that draws heavily from rabbinic interpretations and seeks to correct a metaphysics of being with a metaphysics of compassion (pp. 241–43).

29. Davies, *Theology of Compassion*, p. 231.

30. Davies, *The Creativity of God*, p. 83.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Jesus experiences on the cross, as evidenced by his cry of dereliction. While it is not clear on Davies's view whether or not God suffers, he does speak of the silence of God as "the kenosis of the Spirit ... God's own loving embrace of the otherness that he willed in the creation, and which he now takes within himself."³² We are most fully persons, Davies opines, when we display the same compassion that characterizes God's prior kenotic being.

Three critical questions are in order at this point: (1) Must compassion be kenotic – and inherently risky – in order to be genuine? (2) If compassion belongs to ontology, and if compassion necessarily has reference to someone's suffering, then is suffering part of the tragic constitution of creation? Or (as I shall argue below) is compassion part of the triune economy by which God deals with sin, and therefore to be viewed in connection with the covenant in particular rather than with creation *per se*? (3) Is kenotic compassion effectual or does it exemplify what we might call, for lack of a better term, "weak care" (i.e., commiseration)?

Divine promise: lordly love

The kenotic-relational version of divine compassion views God as "the great companion – the fellow-sufferer who understands."³³ God's love on this view entails his freely choosing to limit himself, making himself vulnerable for the sake of genuine interpersonal relations with human creatures. The lingering question concerns the efficacy of divine compassion. Can God's beloved spurn his self-dispossessing overtures or refuse to be comforted in her suffering? Can heroic freedom resist Authorial love?

To attend to the biblical *mythos* is to be struck by the prominence, and potency, of the divine promise. God's promises – to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Moses, to David, etc. – are what propel the theodrama forward. The coming of Jesus, God's fulfilled promise, underscores the reliability of God's speech act. Viewed in the context of his effectual communicative action, the watchword is not pathos, but power. The difference stems from a picture that holds many kenotic-relational theologians captive, namely, of love

32. Davies, *Theology of Compassion*, p. 207; cf. p. 272.

33. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected edn., p. 351.

as a reciprocal relationship of mutual giving and receiving in which each party shares and is thus affected by (i.e., suffers) the experience of the other.³⁴ This picture presumes that Creator and creature are in some sense on the same level. Sympathetic (suffering-with) love involves a fusion of divine and human horizons.

In Western thought, knowledge and love of the other have been predicated on sympathy and empathy. The challenge for theology, however, is conceptually to unfold the particular shape of God's love as narrated in the history of Jesus (a history that includes the Old Testament). Love is indeed not less than a communication between persons. As we saw in chapter 6, God's communicative action is a sort of authorship for which a certain "outsideness" is an essential condition of both dialogue and aesthetic consummation: when authors fuse horizons with their suffering heroes the result is an infection of suffering, not an enrichment of the hero's life.³⁵ The biblical name for the Author of Israel's covenant history is "Lord." The story of Jesus is but the culmination of a long-standing love story, a story of a properly *covenantal* consummation, not of a single "hero" but of a whole community. We therefore turn to consider the shape of compassion when viewed in terms of the asymmetrical relationship of covenant lord and covenant servant.

Covenantal concern

A covenant is "a relationship based on a promise."³⁶ Promising is a communicative action by which God unilaterally binds himself to Abraham and his posterity: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you" (Gen. 12:2; cf. Gen 15; 17:1-8). More expansively: a covenant is a solemn commitment by one or both covenanting

34. This description of God's love is my attempt to capture the bottom line on love from several theologians who fall under the kenotic-relational rubric. For example: "Love must by its very nature be a relationship of free mutual give and take" (Vincent Brümmer, *Model of Love*, p. 161); "love is the sharing of experience" (Paul Fiddes, *Creative Suffering of God*, p. 16); "A God who cannot suffer cannot love either" (Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 38); "God risked suffering when he decided to love and be loved by the creature. A lover's existence is inescapably affected by the other, especially when the loved one acts in ways that grieve and disappoint" (Clark Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God*, p. 119).

35. Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," p. 26.

36. Graham Cole, "Christianity as a Relational Religion," in Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft (eds.), *Jubilee Manifesto: A Framework, Agenda & Strategy for Christian Social Reform* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 39.

parties to do certain things for the other.³⁷ The covenant theme is important for our purposes because, according to the Scriptures, it defines, along with creation, the nature of God's relationship to the world.

The Mosaic covenant confirms that the children of Abraham are indeed God's "treasured possession" (Ex. 19:5). God's revelation with Israel is more I-Thou than I-It, however, as is evident from the frequent use of marital and parental imagery (e.g., Hos. 3:1; 11:1). Moreover, as we saw above, the Bible depicts God's emotions as engaged almost exclusively with Israel, and thus with some aspect of his covenantal relationship. So it is with divine compassion. It is not that God is empathetic or sympathetic in general but that he *identifies covenantally* with Israel in particular: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31:33). Specifically, God acts to relieve Israel's oppression: "I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries" (Ex. 23:22). God's compassion is a covenantal concern-based theodramatic construal.³⁸

Jesus' compassion, similarly, is arguably a function not of a generic goodwill but a covenantal concern for "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" to whom he had been sent (Mt. 15:24; cf. Mt. 10:6).³⁹ This notion flies in the face of the popular (and not wholly without scholarly support) picture of Jesus as the compassionate servant of whoever stands in need: "The foundation of his ministry was healing love for others. The sacrificial love of Jesus was deeply rooted in the Jewish understanding of divine compassion for people created in the image of God."⁴⁰ Yet one recent study of Jesus' emotions in the Fourth Gospel concludes by saying that these references pertain

37. David Noel Freedman, "Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: The Covenant Theme," *Interpretation* 18 (1964), pp. 419-31. See also Steven L. McKenzie, *Covenant* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000); P. R. Williamson, "Covenant," in T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (eds.), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, U.K. and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 419-29.

38. Note, however, should be made of Mary Douglas's argument, based on laws applying to animals in Lev. 11 and on the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9), that God has compassion for creation too (*Leviticus as Literature* [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999]).

39. God's purpose in choosing Israel from all nations was that Israel be a light to all nations: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). This theme comes to prominence in the New Testament, but is already anticipated in the Old Testament (e.g., Is. 42:6; 49:6; 66:18-24).

40. B. H. Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), p. 238.

almost without exception to his covenantal mission, and in particular to his passion.⁴¹ Even Jesus' being "deeply moved" at Lazarus' death (Jn. 11:38) is arguably connected to Jesus' anticipation of his own death.⁴² Jesus' emotions in the Fourth Gospel have strongly soteriological overtones; they are covenantal concern-based theodramatic construals. His love is sacrificial, but the context of his laying down his life for his friends is thoroughly covenantal (Jn. 15:12-14).⁴³ The conclusion, then, at least with regard to the Fourth Gospel, is that Jesus' compassion reflects the perspectives of both the covenant lamb and covenant Lord.

Kyriotic compassion

Divine compassion arises not from mere empathy but from God's covenant identification with his suffering people, an identification that ultimately benefits the whole creation (Rom 8:19-23).⁴⁴ Because God construes situations from his perspective as covenant Lord, there is an asymmetrical dimension that distinguishes this "kyriotic" (*kyrios* = "Lord") compassion from its kenotic counterpart.⁴⁵

Divine compassion involves theodramatic seeing, judging, and acting.⁴⁶ God makes covenantal concern-based theodramatic construals of situations and responds accordingly by being everywhere and always all that he is. The salient question is whether God's compassion also requires an affective moment – an actual sharing in the suffering of another – in the Aristotelian sense ("a painful emotion directed at another person's misfortune or suffering").⁴⁷ As an emotion, compassion differs from fear or disgust in the first instance because of the beliefs involved: the cognitive component of

41. Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 266.

42. Voorwinde devotes an entire chapter to an analysis of this episode, the most important possible counter-example to his argument (*Jesus' Emotions*, ch. 5).

43. Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions in the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 251-2.

44. God wills good to and is in the process of renewing the whole creation (Rom. 8:19-23).

45. In the Incarnation, the covenant lord becomes covenant servant without ceasing to be lord; it is precisely through his servant form that Jesus Christ, the compassionate self-communication of God, defines covenantal lordship.

46. According to Roberts, the "defining proposition" for compassion is something like "It is important for S to be flourishing, but S is in distress or deficient in X way; may S's distress be relieved or S's deficiency made up" (*Emotions*, p. 295).

47. Davies views compassion as involving cognitive, affective, and volitional elements (*Theology of Compassion*, p. 232).

compassion is the perception and belief that someone is suffering. The second component, judging, is also cognitive, involving God's appraisal of the sufferer's situation vis-à-vis that person's covenant privileges and responsibilities: is one suffering undeservedly or out of proportion to one's just deserts?

Before we turn to the third component of compassion, it is worth noting that Aristotle thought that a person could not have compassion if that person thought herself or himself above suffering. For Aristotle, compassion requires the judgment that *I* could suffer a similar misfortune to that of the object of my compassion.⁴⁸ Call it the "principle of symmetrical suffering." Nussbaum departs from Aristotle's analysis at just this point: "In my account, unlike his, compassion does not entail personal vulnerability."⁴⁹ What is necessary in compassion, its third component, is not the thought that one might suffer something similar but rather the thought that the person suffering is an important part of one's own "scheme of goals and ends."⁵⁰

The children of Abraham matter because of their role in God's plan of salvation, a plan that climaxes in Jesus Christ and eventually embraces the whole world. Israel is precious to God as the recipient of his promise and as an important part of his plan for creation as a whole. God takes a personal interest both in his name, which he has invested in Israel, and in his image, which he has invested in humanity.

Is God thus spared the "upheaval of painful emotion" that Aristotle sees as intrinsic to compassion? Nussbaum acknowledges that there is a "mental pain" that arises at the thought of someone we care about suffering. The pain intrinsic to compassion is the way we concernfully view a victim's distress.⁵¹ God, however, views everything *sub specie theodramatis* – from the standpoint of the whole theodrama.⁵² In addition, God acts: he actively works to remedy the situation and to advance his plan. Divine compassion is therefore

48. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1385b21–4. Nussbaum calls this the judgment of "similar possibilities" (*Upheavals of Thought*, p. 315).

49. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 324. The immediate context of this remark concerns whether divine beings would have to have the upheaval of the painful emotion itself to be compassionate.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 319.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

52. And this means, as well, from the perspective of the drama's end. Cf. our discussion of "eschatological consummation" in ch. 6.

essentially active, not passive. In the words of Aquinas: “it does not belong to God to bewail the misery of others, but it does most properly belong to him to dispel that misery.”⁵³

Divine compassion is *kyriotic*. It is not a commiserating but a commanding, effectual compassion that does not share but transforms the sufferer’s situation. It is a commanding compassion, first, because it is *self-moved*. In Barth’s words: “He cannot be moved from outside by an extraneous power. But this does not mean that He is not capable of moving Himself. No, God is moved ... and touched by Himself, i.e., open, read, inclined (*propensus*) to compassion with another’s suffering and therefore to assistance.”⁵⁴ Barth relates this divine self-movement to what we earlier called, in contrast to passion, an “affection”: “Everything that God is and does is determined and characterized by the fact that ... He Himself is, this original free powerful compassion.”⁵⁵ Only a free and commanding compassion can say “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion” (Rom. 9:15; cf. Ex. 33:19).⁵⁶ God’s compassion, then, is his disposition to communicate his goodness.

It is a commanding compassion, secondly, because it is *effectual* (i.e., an instance of “strong care”). God’s compassion is less a passion than a power, a capacity to effect something in the world (i.e., relieve suffering). In the words of Gregory of Nyssa: “We do not say that one who touches a sick person to heal him is himself partaker of the

53. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 21, 3.

54. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 370.

55. *Ibid.* I suggest below that this “strong” understanding of God’s love presupposes a certain impassibility.

56. My view on compassion places me in a broadly Augustinian and Reformed tradition in contrast, for example, with Charles Finney’s 1839 lecture on the “Affections and Emotions of God” (*The Oberlin Evangelist* [Oct. 9, 1839], Lecture XVIII). The text of Finney’s lecture is Hosea 11:8: “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.” Finney too wants to remythologize in that he too wants his doctrine of God to derive from biblical representations, not philosophical speculations. His second thesis states that “God really exercises all the affections ascribed to him in the Bible” though his first “proof” of this thesis – “This must be so from the very laws of his being” (II.1) – is rather obscure. The fourth and final thesis declares God’s possibility when it comes to divine election: “Sinners really compel God to give them up.” Finney believes that God’s choice of whom to save is a function of a prior human choice (and of the integrity of that free choice). Put differently: *God suffers the change of human choice*. The implication is that finite freedom conditions infinite freedom: at least in this one, albeit all-important respect (viz., salvation), hero trumps author.

infirmity ... for the suffering does not affect him, it is rather he who affects the suffering.”⁵⁷ Divine compassion is an enabling power by which the triune God shares – communicates – his own life. To be precise, it effects what it communicates: the saving grace and goodness of God. God’s compassion is his active affection.

It is a commanding compassion, thirdly, because it efficaciously *consoles*. God’s communicative acts do more than inform or invoke: they provide comfort. They do so in large part by communicating God’s own covenantal concern-based theodramatic construal of our situation to us – in a word, by ministering the gospel and making common the mind of Christ. It is only upon hearing of the redemption won in Christ that we can say with the apostle Paul, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18; cf. 2 Cor. 4:17). God consoles us by reminding us what he has done, is doing, and will do on our behalf in Christ through the Spirit. Communicating God’s covenantal concern and theodramatic perspective may not remove our suffering, but it provides the power to resist what can be resisted and the power to consent to that which cannot, and the knowledge in both cases that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:39).⁵⁸

It is a commanding compassion, finally, because it is not only effectual but *perpetual*. The asymmetry of God’s love for us is displayed in his “steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6).⁵⁹ God’s compassion is tied to his *hesed*, his covenant love and faithfulness that is as unchanging as its concrete form, Jesus Christ (Heb. 13:8). Indeed, we could say that God’s covenant love is impassible, for there is nothing that anyone or anything can do to change or affect it. This, at least, seems to be the intent of the commentary that Hebrews 6:13–18 offers on God’s covenant with Abraham. In order to emphasize the certainty

57. Eun. 3.4.724, cited in Gavriluk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, p. 9.

58. Note that those who minister his word also communicate divine compassion. Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:3–7 speaks of the “God of all comfort” who comforts us so that we can comfort others. Here is one way that Scripture and the pastoral ministry become forms of what is ultimately divine communicative action (i.e., consolation). For an argument on behalf of the usefulness of the doctrine of divine impassibility for pastoral care, see Robert S. Heaney, “Towards the Possibility of Impassibilist Pastoral Care,” *Heythrop Journal* 48 (2007), pp. 171–86.

59. Many commentators point out the parallels between the incarnate Word’s being full of “grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14–17) and the revelation to Moses of God’s “steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6).

of his promise, God swears by himself, “so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we ... might have strong encouragement [*paraklesis* = “consolation”]” (Heb. 6:18). God’s compassion, like his promise, is as unfailing – infallible and impassible – as God himself.

Divine patience: enduring love

“O Lord, how long?” (Ps. 6:3).

To this point we have emphasized God’s compassion as an active disposition or affection. Another factor in the problem of evil, however, is the perception that God is either unable or unwilling to relieve suffering. Israel received professions of God’s love but then suffered exile and, later, four hundred years of divine silence. The last prophetic word nevertheless emphasizes God’s love for Israel (Mal. 1:2–5) and covenant faithfulness (Mal. 4), even as it acknowledges Israel’s covenant unfaithfulness (Mal. 2:1–16) and complaints about God’s apparent inactivity in the face of injustice (Mal. 2:17; 3:14–15). Such is the context for the divine declaration: “For I the Lord do not change” (Mal. 3:6).

God’s apparent inactivity must not be confused with either helplessness or sloth. God’s compassion – his consoling communicative activity – is both efficacious and economic, the latter in the sense of “working according to divine plan”: “when the fullness [*pleroma*] of time had come, God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4; cf. Eph. 1:10). Jesus Christ is the consolation of Israel, the compassion of God, who arrived at the appointed time, neither too early nor too late (Gal. 4:2). Simeon, a devout man who had been “waiting for the consolation [*paraklesis*] of Israel” (Lk. 2:25; cf. Isa. 61:2), was one of the first to receive Jesus and thus experience the fullness of time.⁶⁰ When he realized that he was holding the fulfillment of God’s promise in his hands, he broke into song, the *Nunc Dimittis*: “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace” (Lk. 2:29). He faces death with such equanimity because he now sees the big theodramatic picture: “for my eyes have seen your salvation” (Lk. 2:30). His song

60. The term *paraklesis* occurs in the LXX of Isaiah, where it symbolizes the arrival of the last days when all God’s promises to Israel will be fulfilled (Isa. 40:1–11).

is fittingly peaceful yet resolute.⁶¹ Simeon's brief appearance in the Gospel *mythos* highlights the importance of patience: "the capacity to tolerate delay, trouble, or suffering without becoming angry or upset."⁶²

Augustine, aware of the etymology of *patiendo* (suffering), wonders how God can be patient if in God there is no suffering. He concludes that the meaning of God's patience is as ineffable as his jealousy and wrath: "For if we conceive of these as they be in us, in Him are there none."⁶³ Is the patience of God a matter of passion or action? Is waiting a matter of suffering time or "doing" time? There is some irony in concluding a discussion of God's love, viewed as a species of communicative action, with an account of patience (and silence). The point, however, is to refute the kenotic-relational claim that love is intrinsically vulnerable. There is another way of construing God's patience – his waiting for humans to respond to his overtures – than by making God out to be the patient of creaturely operations. God's patience is a matter not of communicative *inaction* but of God's doing things in his own time. For God is lord of time, and thus of the form of his communicative action.

"Slow to anger": wise waiting

God's apparent inactivity is never a matter of indecision or impotence but, on the contrary, an expression of his constancy over time. God's "middle" name, as it were, is "slow to anger" (Ex. 34:6). God's patience is a form of his goodness, his expansive gift of time – room for communicative action – to the creature, a vital condition for bringing about a change of human heart. God's patience creates time for repentance and response (Rom. 2:4). What might therefore appear from one perspective to be a symptom of divine vulnerability is, from the perspective of the plan of salvation, a work of divine mercy. In Tertullian's words: "He endures ungrateful peoples who worship the trifles fashioned by their skill and the

61. Shakespeare echoes Simeon's words in the dying Bedford's speech "Now, quiet soul, depart when heaven please / For I have seen our enemies' overthrow" (*The First Part of King Henry VI*, Act 3, scene 5).

62. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th edn. (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 1049.

63. Augustine, *De Patientia*, ch. 1.

works of their hands ... by His patience He hopes to draw them to Himself.”⁶⁴

“Slow to anger”: God overlooks Israel’s faults, for a time, allowing Israel the opportunity to return to him. Heschel observes that “The patience of God means His restraint of justifiable anger.”⁶⁵ It is not a matter of God’s *changing* from being angry to being merciful; no, to “restrain” is not to change oneself but to hold oneself back for a time. God restrains himself from his justifiable anger until which time he turns his anger (righteous indignation) upon himself (i.e., on the cross). The New Testament sounds a similar note: “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9); “What if God ... has endured with much patience vessels of wrath ... in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy?” (Rom. 9:22).

Barth pairs patience with wisdom under the perfections of divine loving: “The divinity of the love of God consists and confirms itself in that fact that in Himself and in all His works God is gracious, merciful and patient, and at the same time holy, righteous and wise.”⁶⁶ God’s patience is his free decision to make room for creaturely freedom: “We define God’s patience as His will, deep-rooted in His essence and constituting His divine being and action, to allow to another – for the sake of His own grace and mercy and in the affirmation of His holiness and justice – space and time for the development of its own existence.”⁶⁷ God does not respond in a knee-jerk way to what happens in human history. In giving the creature space to be itself, God also gives himself “space further to speak and act with it.”⁶⁸ God’s apparent inaction is actually a form of strong care and sovereign compassion.

God’s patience is an aspect of his lordship over time. It is his gift of time and space, his making “room” for communicative action, his own and that of human creatures: “the fact that He has time for us

64. Tertullian, *De Patientia*, ch. 2.

65. Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 366.

66. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 351.

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 409–10. Time, we may recall, is the form of the human creature’s life, of human being-in-communicative-act (ch. 6). God’s patience is his gift of time, that is, the dialogical “space” the Author gives his characters in order to consummate them.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 413.

is what characterizes His whole activity towards us as an exercise of patience.”⁶⁹ The divine patience opens up space both for the word of God to do its work and for the human response of faith. Being “slow to anger” is an attribute of the wise person (Prov. 14:29; 15:18; 16:32; 19:11). God’s patience is wise because it reflects his knowing the right time to act (and to remain silent). That God is wise means “primarily that He is steadfast and self-consistent,”⁷⁰ two further ways by which to speak of God’s immutability and, by inference, impassibility. Put differently: God allows “room” for the creature’s communicative acts without suffering their effects, for nothing will deter him from his loving purpose of covenantal consummation.⁷¹

God’s wise patience is his determination to act at the right time and to give the creature the time to receive and respond to God’s prior communicative acts. God’s patience thus determines the creature’s being-in-time as “a theatre for His action.”⁷² In sum: God’s patience is his self-determination to show hospitality: to make room (i.e., time) for the creatures’ consummation by the Author’s word.

“Silence in heaven”: suffering time’s lapse

“When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour” (Rev. 8:1). God delays judgment on evil and unrighteousness not because he is impotent but because he is wise and patient. According to kenotic-relational theists, however, the real reason that God waits is that he does not know how people will respond. After all, if the divine-human dialogue is genuine, then what humans say and do in response to God’s communicative initiatives makes a difference to God’s response as well. It follows that the silence in heaven is a time of real suspense: what the divine Author does next depends on lines spoken by the human hero. Or does it?

Everything depends on how we interpret God’s silence: “Silence is deep as Eternity; speech is shallow as Time.”⁷³ Is God’s silence a time in which humans speak and act in ways that then determine

69. *Ibid.*, p. 417.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 427.

71. Cf. Pannenberg: “the patience of the powerful who can intervene in what happens but refrains from doing so ... it is a form of the love that lets the creatures have their own existence” (*Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 438).

72. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1 p. 428.

73. Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. IV.

God's response? If so, could we say that the human heroes dialogically consummate their Author? Some feminist theologians say this and more, arguing that we need to reverse the traditional polarities and give priority to God's listening silence rather than communicative action in order to avoid patriarchy; for speaking has traditionally been associated with (male) activity and authority, silence (and hearing) with feminine passivity and obedience. To be silenced is to be done-to.⁷⁴

One way of interpreting God's silence is to see it as a breaking-off of communicative activity, a sign of God's judgment – the withdrawal of his personal presence. Some feminist theologians, however, prefer to move in a different direction, contending that God's silence means that he is “the hearing one.”⁷⁵ Such a view reverses the traditional roles, rendering God passive vis-à-vis his human interlocutors. A good argument can nevertheless be made for silence as a form of communicative action. Silence is not merely an absence (i.e., of speech) but an aspect of communicating, just as the rests in music are not other than but ingredient to the music itself.⁷⁶ Silence, then, need not be oppressive, but relational and personal.⁷⁷ In order to understand God's silence in heaven, perhaps we ought to examine its historical counterpart: Jesus' silence on earth.⁷⁸

On several occasions during his trial – before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin (Mk. 14:61; Mt. 26:63), Pilate (Mk. 15:5; Mt. 27:12–14), and Herod (Lk. 23:9) – Jesus chose to remain silent rather than provide an answer. Even when confronted with false witness and contradictory testimony (Mk. 14:56–9), Jesus “remained silent and made no answer” (Mk. 14:61; cf. Isa. 53:7), a development that “greatly amazed” the Roman governor (Mt. 27:14). There is “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Eccl. 3:7). Jesus' keeping silence, I submit, provided the time needed for him dialogically to consummate his prosecutors. For in responding to Jesus as they did, they condemned their own judgment. It follows that Jesus' silence is of a piece with his communicative action; both his speaking and his silences are means of dialogically completing his interlocutors.

74. See Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, p. 112.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

76. See Bernhard Dauenhauer, *Silence: The Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

77. Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, p. 12.

78. On the principle that the economic is an image of the immanent Trinity.

Caiaphas, Pilate, and Herod nowhere more reveal who they truly are than in their communicative interaction with Jesus. So it is with all human beings-in-time vis-à-vis God's word.

God's silence is a listening silence, a silence "that forms the determinative context for human freedom."⁷⁹ God's silence is an aspect of his gracious gift of time to human creatures, which is to say "space" for human communicative action. Silence also implies that there is something for God to hear: "And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham" (Ex. 2:24). Such passages indeed raise the types of fundamental questions concerning the nature of the God-world relationship that we have been examining throughout this work.

Does God's keeping silent mean that he is simply waiting to respond to what humans say and do in time, or that he needs to be prompted by his creatures into action? Does God "talk back" and, if so, is God therefore as time-bound as other actors in the drama of redemption? Or, if God does not literally react to what humans say and do, what exactly do God's repenting and remembering mean, and how can they be viewed as reality-depicting? Does God genuinely respond to his creatures or is God's communicative action itself anthropomorphic in the sense of a mere *façon de parler*? This query takes us to the heart of the debate over divine passibility: must God be subject to – must God *suffer* – the lapse of time in order to communicate and show compassion?

Those who subscribe to the new orthodoxy insist that if God is genuinely in communicative relation with human beings, then he must let what humans say and do in time determine his response. The problem, once again, is how conceptually to elaborate the biblical descriptions of God reacting and responding to what happens in the world if God is "outside" time (i.e., "eternal"). Kenotic-relational theologians typically hold that God is dipolar: God's essential nature is unchanging but God's existence is temporal. God really experiences the dynamic ups and downs of his relationship with human creatures in time. It would appear, then, that God suffers the lapse of time such that what happens in time changes what God knows,

79. Muers, *Keeping God's Silence*, p. 15. Elsewhere she says: "Listening can be described as the act of 'giving time' to allow the other's own possibilities for new speech to emerge" (p. 94).

wills, and feels. To follow the logic of relational ontotheology at this point, however, is to fall back into myth.

There is a better way to move from the *mythos* to metaphysics, theodrama to conceptual understanding. That God “hears” the groaning of the Israelites does not mean that he learns something new in time but is rather a way of communicating God’s prior and constant determination to save them. To say that God “hears” the groaning is to confess God as the all-knowing one whose name and nature is not only “slow to anger” but “merciful and gracious” (Ex. 34:6). To say that God “hears” is a way of encouraging Israel to trust God in times of his activity and apparent inactivity alike. As such, it is an aid in the process of Israel’s dialogical consummation by the word of God.

When God “hears” and “responds” to human communicative action, he is not undergoing change but, on the contrary, he is being fully himself. It is precisely because God, as Author of all, is both outside time and omnitemporal, that he is to every moment in time the way he is in eternity. That God is “omnipresent” means that God is always and everywhere all that he is in all that he does, that he is “wholly and undividedly Himself.”⁸⁰ The present moment is for God a time in which to be fully himself in relation to created others: “God is so fully in act that no time is only potentially related to God.”⁸¹ It is only because God is outside of time that he is free to enter in at any and every moment: “God can join in such intimate union with the creature exactly because God is simply not part of the order of beings.”⁸²

From the perspective of biblical narrative, accordingly, God acts as an agent in history. However, other biblical voice-perspectives (e.g., apocalyptic, wisdom, prophetic) remind us that God is the Author of all, the one whose life is entirely his own, and hence his own to share with others. Strictly speaking, then, God is not “responding” in the sense of re-acting, much less changing, to the moment-by-moment lives of his human creature. On the contrary, God is at every moment being fully himself as he faithfully accompanies time.⁸³ God’s speech and action will at all times reflect the

80. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1 p. 445.

81. Franks, “The Simplicity of the Living God,” p. 289.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

83. Barth holds that God is before time (pre-temporal), exists after its end (post-temporal), and “accompanies” its duration (supra-temporal). See *Church Dogmatics* II/1, pp. 619–38.

appropriate covenantal-concern based construal of the theodramatic situation.⁸⁴

Silence, then, is but another dimension of communicative action in time. God's silence dramatizes the divine patience that makes space for human response. It is not that his creatures affect God but that God's affections are directed to different situations in different ways based on his covenantal concern-based theodramatic construal of what is happening. God is all that he is in all that he does. Or, to adapt the Vincentian canon for the purposes of the doctrine of God: *God is everywhere and to everyone at all times all that he is.*⁸⁵

"Long-suffering": fullness of life

If passibility involves "suffering change," and change necessarily involves movement in time, then perhaps what God ultimately suffers is time itself. Does God suffer the "ravages of time," or rather, the consequences of human speech and action?⁸⁶ Quite the opposite: what we learn from the history of Israel and the event of Jesus Christ is that God's love does not suffer change but stands fast in its total commitment to the good of the beloved. This is precisely the point of qualifying God's love as "steadfast" (Ex. 34:6) or, as the Authorized Version translates it, "long-suffering." God's patience, I submit, pertains not only to his *giving* time but also to his *enduring* it.

Hesed Long-suffering or "steadfast love" (*hesed*) denotes faithful and resolute covenant loyalty. In the Old Testament, it speaks of God's loving commitment to those with whom he is in covenantal relation.⁸⁷ One of the more striking features of *hesed* is its persistence (1 Chron. 16:34; 2 Chron. 5:13; 7:3; 20:21; Ezra 3:11; Ps. 100:5; 107:1;

84. No one moment ever allows us to see all that God is, though each moment allows us to see God as he truly is *vis-à-vis* a particular situation. Hence the way God appears in time in one situation will be different than the way God appears in time in another, even though it is the same God in both situations.

85. The original Vincentian canon states the criterion for orthodoxy: "what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all" (*Commonitorium*).

86. In ch. 6 I argued that eternity is the form of God's intra-Trinitarian communicative activity or fullness of life and that time is the form of God's communicative activity *ad extra* as well as the sphere of human communicative action (i.e., creaturely life).

87. "In His general goodness God bestows various gifts upon the creature; in His Love He gives Himself and holds nothing back" (Geerhardus Vos, "The Scriptural Doctrine of the Love of God," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing Co., 1980], p. 440).

118:1-4; 138:8; Jer. 33:11). Paul describes love (*agape*) in similar terms in 1 Cor. 13: "Love is patient" (vs. 4); "Love ... endures all things" (vs. 7); "Love never ends" (vs. 8). When the Bible depicts God as "long-suffering," we should understand not that God is affected by what happens in time, but that God *endures* time with neither alteration nor "shadow of turning" (Jas. 1:17, KJV).

To affirm God's long-suffering is thus to affirm divine immutability and, at least in some sense, impassibility. Negatively, both concepts function as apophatic qualifiers, reminding us that God, as Author and Creator, "is unlike everything else, and therefore ... acts and suffers action in a manner different from everything else."⁸⁸ Positively, the concept of long-suffering adds dramatic density to the otherwise abstract notions of immutability and impassibility. God's life is not a matter of static sameness, however, but rather of dynamic constancy: that God is long-suffering pertains not to divine *idem*-identity (i.e., the sameness of immobility or permanence through time) but to divine *ipse*-identity (i.e., the sameness of personhood through time).⁸⁹ *Idem* may suffice for ontotheology, but only *ipse* does justice to the Bible's rendering of God's dramatic covenantal character.

God's long-suffering demonstrates his capacity to endure, that is, to be faithful. We can adapt what Calvin (and the apostle Paul) says about Christian suffering to the question of the suffering of God: "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character" (Rom. 5:3, 4). Calvin notes that bearing the cross is one way to learn self-denial, the "sum of the Christian life."⁹⁰ More to the point: suffering "[brings] into the open the power and constancy to forbear."⁹¹ Again, it is not that God is the passive recipient of adverse effects but rather that what happens in the world affords him the opportunity to display all that he is in all that he does. It is not that what happens in the world actually consummates God – causing him to realize his potential, as it were – but rather that what happens in

88. Gavriluyk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, p. 61.

89. Paul Ricoeur uses the distinction between *idem* and *ipse* to deal with the question of personal identity (*Oneself as Another*, p. 116). Jenson is representative of those contemporary theologians who associate God's eternity with an *idem*-like identity only to show the superiority of a narrative account of God's identity. My proposal differs from Jenson's in associating God's *ipse*-identity with his eternal rather than temporal existence, that is, with eternity seen as God's time of intra-Trinitarian communicative activity.

90. *Inst.* III.vii.

91. *Inst.* III.viii.4.

the world affords God the opportunity to realize (i.e., display) his eternal being-in-communicative-activity.

God's covenantal steadfastness, I submit, is the proper dogmatic location for the doctrine of divine impassibility. Divine impassibility indicates God's capacity to endure (i.e., remain constant despite external pressure to change). We have already conceded that God feels emotions (i.e., makes concern-based construals), but not as we do (i.e., they do not overwhelm him).⁹² We have also argued that worldly events do not cause God to suffer change but enable him to reveal his stable (but not static) *ipse* identity.

Patricompassionism? We are now in a position to respond to our initial question – does God's compassion imply that what the beloved does or suffers can alter and affect God's own experience? – but only because we now have the necessary conceptual ingredients with which to propose an alternative understanding of love. God's love is not his willingness to enter into a mutual give-and-take relation with his creatures but his disposition to communicate his goodness. To say that God is love is to say that God's being is a being-in-communicative-activity oriented to communion. God's love refers to his free self-determination to share his life (i.e., truth, goodness, and beauty) in Christ through the Spirit. God is love because he is the one who gives himself wholly to those who are wholly other.

Contemporary passibilists identify God's being love with his self-giving on the cross.⁹³ Again, everything depends on how one moves from *mythos* to *logos*. Here too, a remythologizing approach positions itself between demythologizers and remythizers. The former tend to lose the *drama* (i.e., the significance of the historical events, in this

92. Creel now distinguishes between God's being emotionally "touched" and his being "crushed" ("Immutability and Impassibility", p. 318). Impassibilists are right that God will not be "crushed" by what goes on in the world. But passibilists are right that God can be "touched" by human sufferings and joys "though not necessarily in the same ways as we are" (p. 318). It is interesting that nothing is said in Gen. 1–3 about God's suffering or grieving or even repenting after Adam and Eve disobey. One might have thought that the Fall would have had a deleterious effect on God's emotional life.

93. Moltmann, for example, identifies himself as a "patricompassionist" to allow for the distinction between the Son's suffering and the pain that this suffering gives the Father (see Nancy Elizabeth Bedford, "'God's Power is God's Goodness': Some Notes on the Sovereignty of God in Jürgen Moltmann's Theology," in Long and Kalantzis (eds.), *The Sovereignty of God Debate*, p. 107.

case, the cross) of the theodrama while the latter lose the *theos* (i.e., the divine agent of the historical events, God). How does one “lose” God? By so dismissing the alleged *apatheia* of God as to be left with a “pathetic” God who exists in a dependency-relation with the world, a God who is so affected by the world that he ceases to be worthy of worship.⁹⁴ It is simply not the case “that God plus creation is greater than God alone.”⁹⁵

To remythologize is to conceive God’s being on the basis of God’s words and acts (i.e., communicative activity) as these are depicted in the biblical *mythos*. The cross may be the climax, but it is not the whole theodrama. Yet this is precisely how many passibilists take the cross, namely, as the key event in the story of how God becomes who he is: “God himself takes place in Jesus’ God-forsakenness and death.”⁹⁶ According to this view, Jesus’ death on the cross is not merely the supreme revelation of the love of God but the effectuation of God’s very being. Divine passibilists here tend towards not a Hellenization but a “Hegelianization” of theology – a “natural theology of the cross”⁹⁷ – claiming that God needs the world to become fully God. Long’s question is apt: “why must theology be ruled by this overarching principle [viz., *crux probat omnit* (“the cross tests everything”)]?”⁹⁸ In making “the Trinitarian dynamic manifested in the cross”⁹⁹ the criterion for speaking well of God, contemporary passibilists risk confusing the ontology implied by the divine name (i.e., the “metaphysics of the Exodus”) with the narrative of Jesus’ passion (i.e., the “metaphysics of the Gospel”).

Passibilists and impassibilists alike affirm that Jesus is the definitive revelation of God. They also agree that Jesus demonstrates the meaning of “God is love” through his own life-pattern of self-giving. They diverge over (1) the choice to make the cross the sole focus of Jesus’ revelatory work and (2) the meaning of the cross in relation

94. See D. Stephen Long, “Response,” in *The Sovereignty of God Debate*, p. 184.

95. I am adapting Robert Sokolowski’s similar formula that he uses to explain Anselm’s definition of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” (*The God of Faith and Reason* [Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1995]).

96. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, p. 370.

97. So Oswald Bayer, *Theologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), pp. 509, 514.

98. Long, “Response,” p. 187.

99. This is Nancy Bedford’s longhand phrase for describing Moltmann’s “crucified God” (“‘God’s Power is God’s Goodness’: Some Notes on the Sovereignty of God in Jürgen Moltmann’s Theology,” p. 100).

to God's being as love. Moltmann, for example, contends that Jesus' experience of God on the cross is the foundation for the whole doctrine of God.¹⁰⁰ The cross defines God's love in terms of God's willingness to suffer such that "the self-sacrifice of love must be God's eternal nature."¹⁰¹ At this point it might help briefly to contrast a remythologizing account of the cross as an element in God's communicative activity with Moltmann's alternative account of the suffering of God.¹⁰²

Moltmann interprets the cross as signifying the concept of death not *of* but *in* God. Both the Father and Son suffer death, but they do so in different ways: "The Son suffers his dying in this [God-]forsakenness. The Father suffers the death of the Son."¹⁰³ The cross, as an "experience" of the Father, is therefore an "event" in the divine history whose pain "determines the inner life of the triune God from eternity to eternity."¹⁰⁴ What the cross ultimately demonstrates is God's triune compassion: not only the suffering of the Son, but the Father-Creator's co-suffering in solidarity with the world, as well as "the suffering of God's Spirit in the birth-pangs of the new creation."¹⁰⁵ Moltmann views salvation in terms of God's voluntarily accepting and absorbing the pain, death, and suffering of the world into himself. As Bonhoeffer says, "only the suffering God can help."¹⁰⁶

Holy Saturday: theology from (far) below? On Moltmann's reading, the cross demonstrates how God's love, understood now in terms of relational vulnerability, opens God up to being affected by others. Other divine passibilists similarly privilege the moment of suffering

100. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. x.

101. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 32.

102. According to Nancy Bedford, Moltmann too is a remythologizer inasmuch as his theology of the cross is "a reflection of God's omnipotence interpreted not metaphysically, but 'biblically and christologically' ('God's Power is God's Goodness': Some Notes on the Sovereignty of God in Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology*," p. 101). Note, however, the unfortunate disjunctive: *not* metaphysical *but* biblical and christological. Daniel Castelo argues that Moltmann wrongly dismisses divine impassibility as an import from Greek philosophy ("Moltmann's Dismissal of Divine Impassibility: Warranted?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61 [2008] 396-407).

103. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 173.

104. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 78. In saying this, Moltmann implies that God in some sense needs the world in order to be himself.

105. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 179.

106. From a letter to Eberhard Bethge dated July 16, 1944.

for formulating a doctrine of God “as if we must do theology only from within Holy Saturday.”¹⁰⁷ Surely a doctrine of divine passibility is on even stronger ground when viewed from the perspective of Holy Saturday, inasmuch as the latter yields a theology not of the cross but of the grave? Saturday’s theological children understand “he descended into hell” passively rather than actively and suggest that the Son not only experienced the God-forsakenness of dying but of *being dead*.¹⁰⁸ Death, not suffering, is the end of his journey into the far country and hence the extreme limit of his passion and pathos.¹⁰⁹

It is, of course, difficult in the extreme to specify what “God suffers death” could mean.¹¹⁰ Earlier we suggested that to live is to have time to communicate with others, and that death was the cessation of communicative activity. Paul Fiddes, similarly, suggests that death is to be defined in terms of relationlessness.¹¹¹ Moltmann too moves in this direction when he interprets Jesus’ cry of dereliction (Mt. 27:46) as signaling the moment where “God abandoned God.”¹¹² Fiddes goes further, suggesting that we think about death – relationlessness – as “separation entering into the heart of God’s relationships with himself.”¹¹³

Contemporary passibilists therefore view the cross and tomb of Christ as inscribing pain and suffering onto the Godhead itself. Balthasar’s verdict on Moltmann’s project is apt: “Interpretations of this kind, like all talk of God’s suffering, become inevitable wherever the internal divine process, ‘procession,’ is lumped together

107. Long, “Response,” p. 188.

108. There is at present a lively discussion about the meaning of Christ’s descent into hell, especially as this relates to the theology of Barth and Balthasar. In addition to the work of Alan Lewis cited above, see David Lauber, *Barth on the Descent into Hell: God, Atonement and the Christian Life* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2004); Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007); Edward T. Oakes, “The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9 (2007), pp. 184–99; Thomas G. Weinandy, “Easter Saturday and the Suffering of God: The Theology of Alan E. Lewis,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5 (2003), pp. 62–76.

109. Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross & Resurrection: A Theologian of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), p. 198.

110. For one brave attempt to do so, see Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, ch. 7.

111. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, p. 200.

112. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 244.

113. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, p. 201. Fiddes pulls back from absolute separation between the three persons by appealing to Herbert Mühlen’s

with the process of salvation history. Thus God is entangled in the world process and becomes a tragic, mythological God."¹¹⁴ By collapsing the immanent into the economic Trinity, passibilists define God only by what he suffers on and after the cross rather than by his free authorial communicative activity *outside* that history as well. In so doing, they mistakenly overlook the biblical emphasis on the covenantal context of the Son's suffering. In canonical context, the cross is not a symptom of God's general metaphysical relationship to the world but the climax of God's particular relationship to Israel that began with a divine promise to Abraham. Only the canonical, covenantal *mythos* can hope to make intelligible the God-world dynamics of the cross.

We return, then, to the theme of God's covenantal long-suffering: *enduring* love. Jesus' death on the cross is but the capstone of an entire history of God's steadfast covenant love and, in particular, of the Son's entire life of obedience to the Father (Phil. 2:8). Yet even the Son's bearing sin does not ultimately separate him from the love of God: the Son's very god-forsakenness – "My God, my God, why ..." – is enfolded within the even greater "unity of God's triune love: 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.'"¹¹⁵ The resurrection and subsequent exaltation of Jesus (Phil. 2:9) shows that the love of the Father for the Son endures even the descent into hell, whatever the latter might mean.¹¹⁶ It is not that God suffers (change by) death, then, but rather that God endures it, remains himself in spite of it. God does not need the history of the world, not even the cross and resurrection, to become who he is.¹¹⁷ Remythologizing theology understands

notion that the degree of closeness in personal relationships stands in proportional relation to one's awareness of the other's difference.

114. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. IV, p. 322.

115. David Bentley Hart, "No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility," *Pro Ecclesia* 11 (2002), p. 205.

116. A number of Patristic and Medieval theologians saw the descent as a victory lap, the first manifestation of his triumph over sin and death. Calvin interpreted it as referring to Jesus' psychological or spiritual experience of God's wrath. Other Protestants maintained that it involved Jesus' proclaiming his power and authority to saints who had passed away (1 Pet. 3:18).

117. Hart's comment is apt: "a God who can by nature experience finite affects and so be determined by them is a God whose identity is established through a commerce with evil; if the nature of God's love can be in any sense positively shaped by sin, suffering, and death, then sin, suffering, and death will always be in some sense features of who he is" ("No Shadow of Turning," p. 191).

what happens in the economy not as constituting, much less changing, God but rather as demonstrating who God (already and always) is: one “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6); “Jesus Christ ... the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

God is always, everywhere, and at all times fully himself. His being love – communicative action oriented to communion – is fully realized in the immanent Trinity before the economic Trinity actualizes it in history.¹¹⁸ The pouring out of the Son’s life on the cross, in time, reflects the Father’s outpouring of love into the Son in eternity: “From eternity, therefore, God must be self-communicating love.”¹¹⁹ As the resurrection makes plain, nothing can stem the inextinguishable overflow of God’s light, life, and love.

He who is ceaseless loving activity is also he who is most at rest. This is not a paradox so much as a faithful conceptual exposition of the logic of the biblical drama of redemption and the identity of its divine *dramatis personae*. God is neither immobile nor inactive when he is “at rest.” On the contrary, the life of God, as perfect blessedness, is at once ever active and complete in itself.¹²⁰ It is the latter aspect that the author of Hebrews has in mind when he speaks of “God’s rest” (Heb. 4:10). The “rest” in view is neither the Sabbath (Gen. 2:2) nor the Promised Land (Ps. 95) but the consummate rest of God’s eternal life. To “enter” God’s rest (Heb. 4:3) is to benefit from “a participation in the very beatitude of God.”¹²¹ God’s rest is as unending as his activity.¹²² Indeed, according to Augustine, “He can act while He reposes, and repose while He acts.”¹²³

Here, at last, is the proper home for the notion of the divine *apatheia*: not a static indifference to the play of the world but the

118. “And precisely because it is prior to and – in God – ultimately impervious to any contrary power (hatred, pride, anger, pain, death) such love as this is the only true impassibility” (Hart, “No Shadow of Turning,” p. 196).

119. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, p. 195. In this sense, and in this sense only, we may therefore speak of an intra-Trinitarian “kenosis” – “the self-outpouring of the Father in the Son, in the joy of the Spirit” (David Bentley Hart, “No Shadow of Turning,” p. 202) – though it may be preferable to use the traditional term: “begetting.” For Balthasar’s idea of a “supra-kenosis within the triune God,” see O’Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, pp. 80–7.

120. John Webster states that God’s perfection is “the sheer positive plenitude of God’s being” (“God’s Perfect Life,” p. 143).

121. C. Spicq, as cited by R. McL. Wilson, *Hebrews* New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), p. 84.

122. Augustine notes that the Genesis account nowhere indicates that the seventh (Sabbath) day has an ending (*Confessions* Bk. 13).

123. *City of God*, XII, 17, tr. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library 1950), p. 400.

perfect fullness of triune life and love, “the absolutely complete and replete generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit from the Father, the infinite ‘drama’ of God’s joyous act of self-outpouring – which is his being as God.”¹²⁴ It is because God’s love is fully actual and in act that it is long-suffering (i.e., steadfast, able to endure). The watchword is thus not immobility but endurance: “the word of our God will stand forever” (Isa. 40:8; cf. 1 Pet. 1:25). *Divine impassibility is best understood as a guarantee of God’s utterly reliable being-in-communicative-activity.*¹²⁵ The book of Micah ends on a positive note: God’s steadfast love and compassion are rooted in divine communicative action, namely, God’s covenant promise to Abraham (Mic. 7:18–20). Communicative action, not suffering, is consequently what lies at the heart of divine compassion.¹²⁶

Divine long-suffering means that God endures his relationship with recalcitrant human creatures by being fully himself everywhere and at all times to everyone. Does the creature thus condition the work of the Author? Nein! To believe that would be “to make of the God who is all in all a God who is only much in much.”¹²⁷ Divine patience is not a sign of helplessness but of grace. It is God’s gift of time: time for triune dialogical activity with human creatures, for shaping them into his treasured covenant possession, for preparing them for eternal fellowship in his own triune life. It only remains to see how humans come to participate in God, or rather, how God brings human heroes to their rest “in the sabbath of life eternal”¹²⁸ and so accomplishes their eschatological consummation through communion with himself.

The triune God and the people of God: a fellowship of suffering?

“But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings” (1 Pet. 4:13a)

Communicative action and compassion; union with Christ; participation in God; suffering: a number of the themes that recur

124. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 167.

125. So Helm: “We must think of [God] as essentially impassioned” (“Warfield on Divine Passion,” p. 102). Passibilists typically fail to perceive “that God’s immutability and impassibility do not make him less loving toward humankind, but actually guarantee that his love contains all its various attributes fully and perfectly in act” (Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* p. 163 n.31).

126. God’s compassion, we said, is commanding: “The compassion of God is seen then not in His suffering in solidarity with humankind, but in His ability to alleviate the cause of human suffering – sin” (Weinandy, “Does God Suffer?” *First Things* 117 [Nov. 2001], p. 40).

127. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960) p. 119.

128. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. 13.

throughout the present work converge in Paul's notion of sharing in (*koinonia*) Christ's sufferings (Phil. 3:10) – a *communio* of *passio*. This fellowship in Christ's sufferings “is Paul's picture of the life in Christ.”¹²⁹ It also appears to be Peter's, for he too speaks, at epistolary length, of the importance of sharing Christ's sufferings (1 Pet. 4:13). To participate in God is to be caught up into the life of Jesus Christ and thence into the life of the triune God. The church is a community of communicants, the company of those “in Christ” who share in his communicative action and passion alike. Such participation is the God-elected means of transforming his people into his image. The church – the “body of Christ” – most corresponds to God when its members pour out their lives for the sake of others in various kinds of communicative acts and, again like Christ, in the loss of the very capacity to communicate on earth (i.e., death).¹³⁰ A closer examination of 1 Peter's notion of sharing in suffering brings the current investigation to a fitting end, not least because it raises two key questions – what does it mean to share God's life? does God suffer with us? – one last time.

1 Peter addresses “elect exiles” (1:1) who are or soon will be suffering social discrimination or political persecution because of their Christian faith.¹³¹ Their precarious historical situation explains the disproportionate number of times that this short epistle mentions suffering. The author encourages his readers to view their situation in a broader, theodramatic perspective. The “spirit of Christ” spoke through the prophets about Christ's future sufferings and glory (1:11), and these sufferings were part of a divine plan conceived before the foundation of the world (1:20). 1 Peter commends to its readers what in chapter 8 we called a covenantal concern-based theodramatic construal. Only on the basis of viewing suffering *sub specie theodramatis* does the imperative to “rejoice” as one shares Christ's sufferings

129. Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: Harpercollins Publishers, 1996), p. 30.

130. Hays makes a similar point with regard to Christian ethics but also says that, for Paul, ethics and theology are one and the same. Union with Christ should issue in a “christomorphic life” – the fundamental norm, and goal, of Christian ethics (Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 46).

131. “The picture we obtain is of minority groups living in an environment charged with dislike, misrepresentation and positive hostility, probably with sporadic explosions of violence” (J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and of Jude* [London: Adam and Charles Black, 1969], p. 10). Cf. J. H. Elliott, *1 Peter*, *Anchor Bible Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

make sense. For to the extent that Christ's suffering is exemplary (2:21) – and there is a soteriological sense in which it is not (3:18) – it is because this suffering is not only morally but *eschatologically* correct: the apparent weakness of the cross is in fact the manifestation of the power of God.¹³²

Suffering witnesses can rejoice only because they have a share in the new order of things “in Christ.” Suffering not only demonstrates the genuineness of one's faith but is also a means for refining that faith, and hence a means of “fiery” transformation (4:12). This is not to suggest that Christians enjoy suffering. Rather, Christians are to rejoice “in spite of” suffering because of the “how much more” of resurrection glory (4:13b–14). This is one way to explain the nature of the saint's sharing in Christ's sufferings: as Christ was made perfect through suffering (Heb. 2:10), so too is the saint.

Does God participate in this “fellowship of suffering” and, if so, how? Because doctrines of God have practical consequences, it behooves us rightly to connect theology and life, especially at this point, where life is exposed in all its fragility. What God communicates to suffering people is the hope of an imperishable inheritance (1 Pet. 1:4) and the power to protect them by enabling their continuing faithfulness (1:5). Here, too, is the clue to the meaning of a *koinonia* (partnership; fellowship) of suffering. The people of God share in God's communicative activity (love; consolation) through action (witness) and passion (suffering), and they do so in the same way, namely, *by patient endurance in doing good and suffering evil* (2:20; cf. 5:9, 10).

Nietzsche would doubtless find his greatest fear – that Christianity makes human beings weak and deprives them of life – confirmed in this suggestion. Moltmann, too, would probably demur on the grounds that such a theology gives rise to a distinctly non-liberation politics. Does the suggestion that the church images God by passively enduring violence not only glorify suffering but, worse, make the mistake of calling evil good? This is an important question, one that underlines the connection between views of God and visions of the good life.

132. O'Donovan notes that, in response to Christ's exaltation, the church is a “glad community” (*The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* [Cambridge University Press, 1996], p. 181).

If, *per* the theology of the cross, God's being is revealed in the act of Jesus' suffering, then everything hinges on how one understands Christ's "patient endurance." The correct way is to ponder the notion not in the abstract but concretely; in short, one must remythologize according to the Scriptures. Doing so makes it clear that God is not a helpless bystander at the foot of the cross. Neither does the pattern of Christ's patient endurance have anything to do with stoic resignation to cosmic fate or political fortune ("Que sera, sera"), but rather with a non-violent endurance without despairing that displays not weakness but strength. Christ's patient endurance stems from the joyful wisdom that all things shall be well, and from a desire to bring about change by communicating the utter goodness of God and by trusting himself to the one who judges justly (1 Pet. 2:23; cf. Isa. 53:7).

God is not Whitehead's "fellow-sufferer who understands" but the "sovereign-sufferer who *withstands*." The church, too, is to withstand: to stand fast. Being steadfast has nothing to do with playing the role of passive victim, or with being a violent victimizer. On the contrary, it involves rejoicing (1 Pet. 4:13), not in the suffering itself but in the fellowship with Christ, with those who are in Christ, in whose person and history we encounter the being-in-communicative-activity of the triune God: "For as we share abundantly in Christ's suffering, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too" (2 Cor. 1:5). God is "the God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3) not because he guarantees comfortable external circumstances but because the Spirit effectually consoles by ministering the gospel. God's compassion is commanding, we saw earlier, because it efficaciously consoles and upholds.

To have fellowship in Christ's suffering and his "comfort" (i.e., resurrection life and glory) is to participate in his eschatologically freighted, death-and-resurrection history. Jesus provides a template for right theodramatic participation; patient yet joyful endurance is the way in which the church plays its part this side of the eschaton: "But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Mt. 24:13). There is joy in suffering in the realization that one has been given the privilege and responsibility of playing a part – that of the faithful disciple – in the drama of salvation. That drama ends "when his [Christ's] glory is revealed" (1 Pet. 4:13b).

Thanks to God's steadfastness, the church is able to be a company of suffering communicants that withstands to the end. We glimpse this end in the book of Revelation. The illocutionary force of its various symbolic speech acts, as in other apocalyptic works, is largely hortatory: "Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world" (Rev. 3:10; cf. Rev. 14:12). By revealing the end, the book communicates grace – hope and strength – for the journey.

John's situation on Patmos at the beginning of the book of Revelation resembles the fundamental situation of the church as it participates in the theodrama and bears witness to the word of God. The risen and ascended Christ speaks to John, and through John to the community of the word. It is in and through the Spirit speaking in the Scriptures that Christ communicates himself to the community and that the church encounters his "real presence": "The church is the assembly which is addressed by this Son of Man."¹³³ John, speaking for the assembly, speaks of the partnership of the "patient endurance" that is in Christ Jesus (Rev. 1:9). Christ addresses John in a "loud voice" (Rev. 1:10; cf. Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34, 37; Lk. 23:46) and identifies himself as "the living one" who is "alive forevermore" (Rev. 1:18). Interestingly his voice – "like the roar of many waters" (Rev. 1:15) – makes the same sound as does the glory of the God of Israel when it filled the temple (Ezek. 43:2).

The voice of God confounds and consoles; such is the transcendence and immanence of the Lord of the covenant and the Ancient of Days. It is this voice that summons and sustains the church. It is this voice that promises to stand fast and support the human voices that speak on its behalf, proclaiming and glorifying its speaker's name. God preserves the saints, enabling them patiently to endure. These are the faithful witnesses that participate in the triune communicative action and that share in the triune communion. A company of communicants, the church has the Spirit and mind of Christ, and thus a share in his life, even (especially!) as it is being transformed into his living image through suffering.

133. John Webster, "The Visible Attests the Invisible," in Mark Husbands and Daniel Treier (eds.), *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, IL and Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press and Apollos, 2005), p. 109.

“The body they may kill; God’s truth abideth still.”¹³⁴ It is upon the truth, goodness, and beauty of the apostolic confession of Christ – a Spirit-enabled ecclesial communicative action – that the Lord builds his church in such a way that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mt. 16:18). The endurance of faith is the impassibility of the church.

134. Luther, “A Mighty Fortress is our God.”

Conclusion: Always remythologizing? Answering to the Holy Author in our midst

In a manner evident and yet mysterious, the poem or the drama or the novel seizes upon our imaginings. We are not the same when we put down the work as we were when we took it up.¹

Christian theologians have a ready answer to what for the philosopher is a speculative limit-question: Why is there something rather than nothing? Because God has spoken. God's speaking – a triune work of voice, word, and breath – forms, informs, and transforms the structures, substances, and subjects that make up the created order. God's speech acts cut and connect reality at the metaphysical joints and joists. Reality is divine rhetoric, the universe a poetic work of triune artistry: "God is the author of everything other than Himself."² Any theology that is not a response to revelation is, strictly speaking, *irresponsible*, in the sense that it is not a response to God's own self-presentation.

Why is there something rather than nothing *to do*? For the same reason: because God has spoken and continues to speak. God's speaking renders human persons answerable. The triune Author of creation, church, and canon thus bears no resemblance to the absentee Author that James Joyce depicts as wholly removed from his work: "The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails."³ Neither is the triune Author merely a figment of Feuerbachian imagination; on the contrary, the proper understanding of the biblical revelation "hangs

1. Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, p. 3.

2. Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*, p. 107.

3. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 215.

upon the recognition that the sentence, 'God created man in his image' is *irreversible*."⁴

Calvin speaks for remythologizing as opposed to speculative theology when he urges his readers not to "rack their brains" about God but rather contemplate him in those works "whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself."⁵ To speak of Creator and creature is to name a relation within an even greater distinction. To speak of covenant Lord and servant, by contrast, is to speak of a distinction within an even greater relation. The God who makes himself known in and through Christ and the Scripture that attest him is both Creator and covenant Lord. The task of theology is to understand God and ourselves in the light of God's self-communication of his first and second names: "he who is" and "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" respectively (Ex. 3:14-16). Both names – the metaphysical and the covenantal – are necessary in order to speak well of God. Theology's conceptual elaboration – and its conscience – are therefore bound to the divinely authored theodrama: God's "myth made act" in Jesus Christ.⁶

Only prior divine communicative action disambiguates speech of God. To remythologize is to tread the narrow *via media* between too ready and too reticent speech of God. Only reverence for God's self-communication (i.e., the drama of the self-presenting divine name) chastens speech of God that is too cavalier. This means deploying both the Creator-creature distinction against the tendency to reduce God-talk down to human proportions and the covenant Lord-servant relation against the tendency to distill God-talk into metaphysics with no historical remainder.

The special focus of the present work has been the way in which God "renders himself near and familiar to us" through verbal communication: triune dialogical authorial action, to be precise. The focus on God's communicative acts goes against the grain of approaches that turn God into a mythic superhuman creature as well as approaches, such as Rudolf Otto's, that view the triune God as a particular species of a broader genus (viz., "the holy").⁷ Despite the spate of books

4. Wilhelm Vischer, "Words and the Word: The Anthropomorphisms of the Biblical Revelation," *Interpretation* 3 (1949), p. 13.

5. *Inst.* I.5.9, emphasis mine.

6. Note that the biblical *mythos* depicts God as "author" of both the universe in general and the covenant history in particular.

7. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, tr. John W. Harvey,

in theology, there is a widespread cultural feeling that, in an age of religious pluralism, no one is really in a position to speak truly of God, and in one sense, this is true. Apart from prior divine communicative action, theology is only a monological projection of human ideals onto a silent sky. As Wittgenstein observes: "Whereof one cannot speak one must be silent."⁸

Remythologizing exists in the discursive interstice of holy reason, between the mythic and the mystical. For much of the book, we have pushed the biblical *mythos* towards metaphysics in order to stop the slide into the mythic. It is therefore fitting that we conclude by pushing in the other direction in an attempt to stop the slide into the mystical. *Properly to speak of the God whose being is in communicative activity is to avoid myth and mysticism alike.* A mythic approach makes the holy too easy; the mystical makes it too difficult. To demonstrate this point, we begin by contrasting Otto's generic idea of the holy with the biblical depiction of the holy Author speaking in our midst (Hos. 11:9). The study draws to a close with a summary review of (1) the formal principle of remythologizing (biblical reasoning), along with some guidelines for understanding anthropomorphisms, and (2) the material principle of remythologizing (triune authorship), along with a reflection on present divine communicative activity, namely, the heavenly session of Christ.

Mythos revisited: between mystery and metaphysics

The typical American Protestant today is in a state of unprecedented metaphysical indifference. His theology has the shape and substance of a fog bank.⁹

"Mythicisism" errs in speaking of God too cavalierly, as though God were a being in the world. Mysticism errs in not saying enough. Mystics assume (rightly) that humans are unable in and of themselves

2nd edn. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). In Barth's words: "Whatever 'the holy' of Rudolf Otto may be, it certainly cannot be understood as the Word of God, for it is the numinous, and the numinous is the irrational, and the irrational can no longer be differentiated from an absolutised natural force" (Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, p. 135).

8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 151. The quotation is the seventh and final proposition of the book.

9. Martin Gardner, *The Flight of Peter Fromm* (Los Altos, CA: William Kaufmann, 1973), p. 13.

adequately to put “God” into words. Mystics also assume (wrongly) that God does not put himself into words. By contrast, remythologizing insists that God brings God to speech via the biblical *mythos* in a way that requires a measure of mystery and metaphysics alike.

Schematizing the mystery of God

Otto’s idea of “the holy” centers on what he calls the “numen” or *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: a mystery that pertains to what lies beyond words and concepts, a matter of feeling rather than belief. Experiences of the numinous evoke dread and fascination, not conversation. Otto’s idea of the holy is compatible with Wittgenstein’s mandate to maintain a respectful silence before those things of which we cannot speak. This way of thinking about the holy views it as a *metaphysical mystery* that lies beyond the scope of the categories of understanding. By contrast, “mystery” (*mysterion*) in the New Testament is a technical term that often refers not to something that is difficult to explain or understand but to God’s plan for salvation that was previously hidden but is now made known in Jesus Christ (Rom 16:25–6; Eph 1:9, 3:3–6; Col 1:26–7).¹⁰ The particular mystery that Christ reveals pertains not to speculative questions concerning, for example, the relation of time and eternity, but to God’s communicative activity and the history of its redemptive effects. We therefore need to distinguish metaphysical mysteries from the *covenantal* mystery that is the subject matter of the biblical *mythos*.

Little children (and adult theologians) best keep themselves from idols (1 Jn. 5:21) by attending to the dramatic form (*mythos*) and content of God’s self-communicative action as rendered verbally in Scripture. The decisive clue to what God was doing in the history of Israel is made known in the history of Jesus, though one must read the Bible in the communion of saints created by the Spirit to see it. The risen Christ provides the key to unlocking the mystery of the *mythos* when he informs the disciples at Emmaus that Moses and all the prophets were ultimately about his life, death, and resurrection (Lk. 24:27). Put differently: *the lifetime of the man Jesus is the “schema” of the mystery of God, yet this schema only becomes intelligible when viewed in*

10. See Markus Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990).

light of the canonical schemata that identify the Lord of the covenant as the Creator of all, the Holy One in Israel's midst.¹¹

Always reformulating

Whereas Otto's idea of *das Heilige* resists the move to metaphysics and conceptual elaboration on the grounds that the numinous is non-rational, Hegel moves in the opposite direction, dissolving the mystery of the Christ in a raft of metaphysical speculation. Hegel translates – in effect, reduces – the biblical representations of Father, Son, and Spirit into an ontotheological conceptualization: “he wants to understand God as a spirit whose essence it is to make himself an object for himself in order then to remove this distinction through love.”¹² Whereas Otto has difficulty getting beyond mystery to metaphysics, Hegel reduces the mystery revealed in Christ to metaphysics without remainder. *Mythos* here gives way to *logos*, theodrama to a conceptual scheme.

The Reformed theological imperative *semper reformanda* (“always reforming”) functions as a reminder that theology's search for understanding is ongoing. The canonical and christological schemata for thinking God are both indispensable and irreducible. All Christian theological statements must answer to the revelation of Jesus Christ. Human words about God have only ministerial authority; they are servants of God's word, not its replacements. The biblical mystery – how God fulfills his covenant promise to Abraham – has been revealed, yet the theological mystery persists, for our comprehension of what has been revealed is only partial (1 Cor. 13:9, 12).¹³ The Holy One is in our midst (Isa. 12:6), but what has been made known is too great for any one person (i.e., voice-idea) to grasp.

The one theodrama requires many canonical voices and points of view to bespeak it. As it takes four Gospels to render the identity of Jesus Christ, so the mystery of God requires a variety of testimonies,

11. I return to the theme of Jesus' time as the schema of eternity below.

12. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, p. 265. Kasper notes that, for Hegel, “The Trinity is therefore a projection and, so to speak, an encoded representation of human intersubjectivity and love” (p. 267).

13. “[A] mystery is not itself a question demanding an answer, but an object inviting contemplation” (Eric L. Mascall, *Words and Images: A Study in Theological Discourse* [London: Longman, 1957], p. 78). See also Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. I: *Reflection and Mystery* (London: The Harvill Press, 1950), pp. 204–19.

figures of speech, and literary genres to do it justice. The reality of God outruns any one theologian's attempt to conceptualize it, just as Scripture outruns the attempt of any one interpretative scheme to capture its meaning. A church dogmatics believes in a dialogic sense of truth – one that requires more than one set of concepts or a single consciousness to express it – even while professing truth to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The ecumenical councils evidence near-perfect pitch in this regard: their formulas employ double-voiced terms that amply attest the extent to which the concerns of both East and West were heard. The best theologians can do now is to offer “provisional monologizations” that preserve as much of the richness of the canonical and catholic testimony as possible while also addressing the particular concerns of contemporary contexts.¹⁴

Theologians who are honest to God will strive to do justice to the clarity of God's communicative action – the Father making himself known in the Son through the Spirit – and to its inexhaustibility.¹⁵ Interpretations of the biblical *mythos* must therefore be both bold and humble. One's willingness to press on towards metaphysics is an index of one's boldness; one's willingness to be corrected – by others, the text, or its tradition of interpretation – is the measure of one's humility. The vocation of the theologian is to bear truthful witness without being overbearing.

Has a divinity professor been honest? I have already confessed to several sins of omission: space-time constraints have allowed for mere gestures in the direction of several issues that warrant further development. Despite my efforts to speak well of God, it is possible that I have done nothing more than lay a golden calf, thus violating the prime theological directive: thou shalt not commit idolatry (Ex. 20:3, 4).¹⁶ One way to forestall this eventuality is not to speak

14. On the idea of a provisional monologization, see Olson, “Biblical Theology as Provisional Monologization: A Dialogue with Childs, Brueggemann, and Bakhtin,” pp. 162–80.

15. C. S. Lewis responds to J. A. T. Robinson's “honesty” in exchanging the image of God “up” there for that of God in the “depths” by asking why one must canonize one image and forbid the other: “We admit his freedom to use which he prefers. We claim our freedom to use both” (“Must our Image of God Go?” in *God in the Dock*, p. 184).

16. Idolatry is a form of defrauding (de-godding) God, a devotion to anything less than God. Idolatry “is an attack on God's exclusive rights to our love, trust and obedience” (Brian S. Rosner, “Idolatry,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, p. 573). Jean-Luc Marion warns that philosophical concepts become idols to the extent that they “capture” God in human thought (*God without Being*,

until one has first been spoken-to, and this means *listening* well – to others, and above all to the word of God. This book sets forth what I have heard on both counts.¹⁷ Yet essential to remythologizing is the requirement that one return to the biblical *mythos* and listen again. “Always remythologizing” means “always returning” to God’s self-presentation to attend to the Trinitarian testimonies themselves: those divine voice-breathed-words that unfold the mystery of the Word made flesh.

Biblical reasoning: the formal principle of divine communicative action

Remythologizing is a species of first theology. It is a proposal for construing God, the Bible, and the related practice of biblical interpretation in terms of a unified vision that views God both as Author of the cosmos (Creator) and as communicative agent who comes alongside us (covenant Lord). God communicates indirectly in the Book of Nature and more directly through his living Word, Jesus Christ, who is the subject of the Book of the Covenant (i.e., the canonical Scriptures).¹⁸ The triune God is the voice, word, and breath that engages beings-towards-death and dialogically constitutes them beings-towards-resurrection. This is perhaps the chief theological mystery at the heart of the biblical *mythos*: that the triune God both authors space-time and appears as a character within it.¹⁹

chs. 1–2). For Marion, concepts of God are Feuerbachian projections that say more about the limit of our human intellectual reach than they do about the reality of God. My own view is that biblical discourse – literary forms, figures of speech, and concepts alike – is ultimately a divinely authorized human dialogue that serves as means and medium of a divine system of projection, as it were, from above. As such, the various kinds of biblical *mythos* function more like verbal icons that solicit conceptual interpretation than idols that constrict it.

17. “*Listening excludes founding oneself*” (Ricoeur, “Naming God,” *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 224).

18. I have not dealt at any length with God’s communicative activity in nature because the focus of remythologizing is on *God the speaker*, and hence on the divine-human dialogical interaction. Though God sustains the natural order by his word, the primary biblical emphasis is on God’s providential rule of the historical order via the work of Word and Spirit. In the case of providence as *gubernatio* in particular, the focus is on God’s special communicative activity in relation to the hearts and minds of human beings.

19. Lewis’s suggestion as to how to conceive God’s “outsideness” accords with the argument of the present work: “If I said God is ‘outside’ or ‘beyond’ space-time, I should mean ‘as Shakespeare is outside *The Tempest*’; i.e., its scenes and persons do not exhaust his being” (“Must our Image of God Go?” p. 184).

Remythologizing and first theology

All theological statements and biblical interpretations presuppose some first theology. Often it is tacit and unspoken. It is to Feuerbach's and Bultmann's credit that they were honest about their own first theologies. However, I have argued that their "first" should indeed be last. For Feuerbach, by viewing God as a human projection, eliminates the *theo* from theodrama, effectively making anthropology into first theology, while Bultmann, by translating statements about God's acts in history into existential expressions of human self-understanding, drains the *drama* out of theodrama.

The new kenotic-relational orthodox theologians put their own Feuerbachian spins on first theology. The tendency today may be to project *communal* rather than individualist traits onto God (i.e., relationality), but the underlying spirit is still Feuerbach's (the remythizer you shall always have with you). The logic behind such moves appeals not to remythizing but to repristination, that is, to the importance of removing centuries of Greek philosophical accretions from the biblical *mythos* in order to expose the pure biblical personalism underneath. Relational theists and panentheists would say that they are "projecting" onto God only those personal traits that he has first projected onto (i.e., created in) us. Put differently: we (anthropo)morphize God only because he first (theo)morphized us.²⁰ Relational theists can also point to the history of Jesus Christ as further evidence that God, as genuinely personal, is a God of responsive, suffering love.

Remythologizing begins with the biblical depictions of God as a personal agent who speaks and acts. The biblical *mythos* calls for thought, however, because God's communicative agency is both like and unlike that of human beings. To fail to be sufficiently attentive to the "unlike" is to risk falling back into myth, in the sense that the Creator begins to take on creaturely characteristics – not physical features like hands and feet but psychological and emotional traits like jealousy, sorrow, surprise, and frustration. What distinguishes remythologizing from remythizing is precisely the "-ologizing" moment of the former. In contrast to Hegel's reduction of *mythos* (a form of dramatic speech or action) to *logos* (concept) on

20. I return to the topic of anthropomorphism in more detail below.

the one hand and remythizers' claim that biblical narrative stands in no need of metaphysical *logos* on the other, the remythologizer deploys metaphysical concepts, not without fear and trembling, in order to facilitate understanding. The *logos* of remythologizing has only a ministerial authority that takes its marching orders from the magisterially authoritative biblical *mythos*.²¹

The Bible schematizes God's being-in-act through *mythos*, through the variety of canonical forms that together comprise the theodrama, the form of forms. Better: God authorially employs the canonical schemata, as he did the burning bush, in order to name and identify himself: "I am who I am." The divine attributes implied by this name (e.g., aseity, sovereignty, immutability) must not be cut off from the *mythos* – or from the "other" (i.e., covenantal) divine name "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" – that alone gives them their proper signification. When divine attributes become predicates of the concept of perfect being rather than of theodramatic agency, not only do we lose the primary sense-giving mechanism for their meaning, but we also invite the charge that the attributes are merely a Feuerbachian projection of speculative reason.

God is the Lord of his self-presentation, the ultimate author of the biblical *mythos*. Scripture presents God as a communicative agent who does things by speaking in words and by sending his Word. Each biblical form that contributes to the *mythos* is itself a thing God has done, a word God has made. Biblical reasoning, the formal principle of remythologizing, involves the conceptual elaboration of the form and content of the Bible, itself a means of divine communicative action.²² This involves not merely thinking *about* but *with* and *through* the various voices and forms that constitute the Bible. Remythologizers therefore approach the Bible less as an object of critical analysis than as a set of literary lenses through which to perceive the contours of reality and discern the acts of God. Formal

21. I have argued that patristic theology did not fall into Hellenistic philosophy but employed (and transformed) it in order to communicate the gospel to the ancient world. Similarly, remythologizing is less a matter of being taken captive by Greek philosophy (Col. 2:8) than of taking every Greek thought captive to obey Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

22. Perhaps it would be more accurate to speak of the "form of the content" or the "content of the form" inasmuch as form and content belong together in discourse as body and soul belong together in humanity. As the person is an embodied soul or ensouled body, so discourse is "informed content" or "contented form."

concerns become material when we recognize that the Bible is a creaturely medium in which God personally relates to his people through a variety of communicative acts.²³ Biblical reasoning thus becomes an aspect of discipleship, one way of responding to the divine injunction, “Come now, let us reason together” (Isa. 1:18).

The dramatics of biblical literature

Biblical reasoning involves more than simply abstracting and ordering statements about God into a cognitive-propositional system. Stories are not susceptible to such systematization, and much, but by no means all, of the Bible is written in narrative form. Narrative is also the scene of the demythologizing crime. In seeking to distill kerygmatic kernels from the narrative husk, Bultmann de-forms the Bible’s content, replaces evangelical *mythos* with existential *logos*, and thereby changes the subject matter of theology in the process. In brief, Bultmann neglects the sense-making, reality-indicating power of the *mythos* itself: “For the reader to grasp Luke’s *dianoia* (‘theme’ or ‘meaning’), it must be done in and through his *mythos* (‘story line,’ ‘plot’).”²⁴ Something similar may be said about all the other biblical authors too. If theology is biblical reasoning in search of understanding, then it must get beyond myth and mysticism to grasp the metaphysics implied by the *mythos*, all the while acknowledging that every conceptual elaboration remains answerable to the particulars of the biblical text.

Such theology recognizes the ways in which human authorial points of view and literary forms make significant cognitive, volitional, and affective contributions to one’s grasp of the subject matter. God speaks through the prophetic and apostolic discourse of the Bible as a playwright speaks through the various characters in a play. God speaks his mind dialogically, communicating through different voice-ideas from multiple points of view in a variety of ways (i.e., canonical schemata).²⁵ All of the voices, in their specific registers,

23. For further development of this point, see my “Triune Discourse: Theological Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks” and Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007).

24. Luke Johnson, “Luke-Acts, Book of,” David Noel Freedman (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 4, p. 405.

25. That God says more than the human authors know in their own time-frame best comes to light at the level of the whole canonical script, at which

are necessary in order to achieve the total communicative effect: the understanding and obedience of faith.

The net effect of this variety of biblical discourse is to train the interpreter in *right practical reasoning* about God. The triune God speaking in Scripture wants to produce not only cognitive, but volitional and affective effects, and achieves such through the various kinds of communicative acts that make up the Bible: poetry, song, parable, apocalyptic, story, and argument. The divine rhetorician speaks not merely to inform, much less to entertain, but to elicit a response. The overall aim is *training in righteousness* and *equipping for good works* – in a word, theodramatic competence, the capacity to participate rightly in what God is doing in Christ through the Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16, 17).

Biblical reasoning is thus an exercise in theological “dramatics” whose goal is understanding in a threefold sense: (1) understanding what God is saying/doing in the script (i.e., in the history of Israel and of Jesus Christ); (2) understanding what God is saying/doing with the script vis-à-vis the contemporary reader, and thus how the answerable reader should respond (i.e., determining how one is to participate in the theodrama in one’s present situation); (3) understanding what the God who is saying and doing these things is really like (i.e., moving from *theo-mythos* to *theo-logos*). God uses the Bible not merely to inform but to instruct readers in the way of righteousness and ultimately to communicate the mind of Christ, thus enabling biblical interpreters to see, judge, and act in every situation in the light of God’s own covenantal concern-based theodramatic construals. The Bible is a divinely authored compendium of practical wisdom that calls not only for conceptual elaboration, but for performance.

Once upon an anthropomorphism

There is no more challenging test of biblical reasoning competence than to identify and interpret anthropomorphisms. Anthropomorphism is nothing less than a small-scale *mythos* or *morphe* (“form”). Remythizers are often content to take this form literally; demythologizers go to the opposite extreme, dispensing

point the meaning and christological focus of the theodrama is best seen and most fully appreciated.

with the offending *mythos* in favor of a more respectable *logos*.²⁶ Yet behind every approach to biblical anthropomorphism there lurks a metaphysics, namely, a set of assumptions about how human-like God really is (or is not).

The Bible describes God's Spirit as "wind," but it does not follow that the Spirit "dies down" at sunset like a California sea breeze; the created is never the measure of the Creator. Uncritically to insist that God has arms and legs – or for that matter frustrations and yearnings – is to fall back into myth, collapsing *logos* into *mythos* and short-circuiting the process of interpretation. Yet biblical reasoning also gets derailed in the other direction: Bultmann was unwilling to accept any account of God's acting in time and space, choosing instead to repackage biblical *mythos* in terms of existential *logos*. The attempt to grab hold of the content (the thing signified) without adequately grasping its form (the way it is signified) ultimately short-circuits the process of interpretation, and thus biblical reasoning. To move from surface grammar to ontology one must take the "long way" of biblical reasoning. The purpose of the present section is to spell out the criteria for interpreting biblical anthropomorphism to which I have tacitly appealed during the course of our exercise in remythologizing.²⁷

Lisp or lip-sync? Divine speech acts "Garbo talks" – yes, but can we say the same for God? The interpretative options are stark: either God does not speak – in which case both biblical and theological discourse are at best poetic strivings after wind – or he does. Calvin takes the latter view, noting that God *accommodates* his communications to the capacity of his intended audience (i.e., human beings). What Calvin terms accommodation is synonymous with what the present work has referred to as divine "systems of projection." The

26. Wolterstorff proposes the following hermeneutic principle: "an implication of one's accepting Scripture as canonical is that one will affirm as literally true Scriptural representations of God unless one has good reason not to do so" ("Unqualified Divine Temporality," in Ganssle (ed.), *God & Time*, p. 188). Everything depends, of course, on what constitutes a "good reason not to do so," thus anthropomorphism represents an apt case study.

27. Theologians typically make decisions about what to take as anthropomorphic in light of their preconceptions of what God is (or must be) like. Yet conceptions of perfect being differ. Many classical theists considered immutability a divine virtue; process theologians like Charles Hartshorne, by contrast, believed that it was more perfect for the God who is related to all to undergo change.

shared assumption is that God is free to make use of creaturely forms as media of his communicative action and self-communication. The incarnation of Jesus is the outstanding example: the Logos who was with God in the beginning assumes human form so that God might pitch his tent among us (Jn. 1:14). God is similarly free to take up and make use of human language, oral and written. God's verbal capacity is on prominent display throughout the drama of redemption, including the discourses of Jesus Christ, God incarnate. Human forms (*anthropos morphe*) – the humanity of Jesus; the diverse literary forms of the Bible – are the elected communicative means of God's chosen communicative ends.

What Calvin terms the scriptural “spectacles” through which the faithful rightly see God are nothing less than schemata of faith.²⁸ A schema, we may recall, shows what a concept means by expressing it in terms of a “shape” of time. To speak of divine communicative action is to acknowledge that God “schematizes” himself, displaying his eternal being-as-activity under the veil of activity-in-time. In Calvin's words: “let us remember that the invisible God, whose wisdom, power, and righteousness are incomprehensible, sets before us Moses' history as a mirror in which his living likeness glows.”²⁹ Indeed, the whole theodramatic *mythos*, together with God's covenant names, ultimately stands under the rubric of anthropomorphic schematization.³⁰

The incarnation is both the climax of the covenant and the ultimate instance of God's anthropomorphic mode of self-communication (“lispings”), for in becoming man God projects himself not in a form of speech but in the “form of a servant” (Phil. 2:7): “The humanity of Jesus is the truth of the biblical anthropomorphisms.”³¹ *The history of the “hero” named Jesus schematizes the being of the Author of all* (Heb. 1:3).

28. *Inst.* I.vi.1.

29. *Inst.* I. xiv. 1. In context, Calvin is speaking of God's acts in creation, but the principle holds for the history of redemption too.

30. To use Calvin's famous metaphor for divine accommodation: “God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us” (*Inst.* I.13.1). Schematization – the eternal God assuming forms of communicative activity in time – may be seen as a metaphysical accommodation.

31. Vischer, “Words and the Word,” p. 9. Again, I am using the term “anthropomorphism” to include ascriptions of both human feelings (“anthropopathisms”) and actions to God. For more on these distinctions, see Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Anthropomorphism in Ancient Religion,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125 (1968), p. 29. Cf. Kierkegaard's observation: “Christ's birth is the most significant anthropomorphism” (*Journals and Papers* I, §280).

As the revelation of God, Jesus' being in time corresponds to God's eternal being (otherwise he could not be a genuine revelation).³² However, while the Son in his human form is the revelation of the Father, it would be wrong to read everything in the human form back into God (e.g., the Father-Son relationship does not involve the all-too-human, all-too-anthropomorphic notion of natural generation). For this reason, then, "we must not compare God to us as if we were the ultimate reference point."³³ On the contrary, it is what God says and does that provide the ultimate points of reference for what is truly divine. So, while "God is love," the meaning of love is determined not by our best thoughts but by God's communicative action: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us" (1 Jn. 3:16).

Anthropomorphism and the analogia auctoris We need criteria with which to interpret anthropomorphisms. One such criterion is "Scripture interprets Scripture." Like Jesus' parables, the Bible's anthropomorphisms should be taken together with all the other linguistic and literary forms that constitute biblical discourse. The multiple points of view and diverse "voice-ideas" make for a thick description of the theodrama. They also provide checks and balances on what might otherwise be reductionist perspectives on the reality of God. For example, "God is Spirit" serves as a check on the tendency to misinterpret language about the "hand" of God literally. The literal sense is the literary sense, which is to say, the communicative intent of the author in using specific words in a specific way.

A remythologizer never loses sight of the fact that the God who acts on the stage of world history is also the Maker of heaven and earth. The biblical *mythos* identifies the covenant Lord as the Creator of all. Hence the narrative accounts of what God says and does as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must be held in tension with the apophatic implications of God's "metaphysical" name: "I am who I am" (Ex. 3:14). In sum: *God is the holy Author – the Creator of all things, visible and invisible – in our midst*. As Author, God is everything he needs to be in order to do what the Bible says he is doing in Christ through

32. That the Son reveals the Father means that what he says and does truly, but not necessarily exhaustively, represents the way the Father is.

33. Caneday, "Veiled Glory," p. 163.

the Spirit to bring the theodrama to its stated conclusion: "God is immanent insofar as He acts in history. He is transcendent insofar as He acts triumphantly."³⁴ Note that God's perfection is a function of his biblically-attested theodramatic *capacities*, not the result of some abstract concept of perfect being. God is perfect because he has full possession of his triune life, not because his predicates conform to an ideal generated by some extra-textual metaphysical scheme. Remythologizers view the authority of metaphysics in ministerial rather than magisterial terms. The success of a metaphysical category is a function of its ability conceptually to elaborate some aspect of the triune economy, which is to say, of the biblical *mythos*.

Take the concept of perfection itself. The Bible depicts the perfection of God in terms of the eternal relations and communications between Father, Son, and Spirit and their free and gracious overflow into the realm of created being.³⁵ There is no higher standard of perfection than God himself in his fully realized being-in-communicative-activity. This description of abundant triune life, rather than some concept of perfect being picked off the shelf of metaphysics, helps to determine how a given biblical predicate should be interpreted when ascribed to God.³⁶ The Bible depicts the living God, the holy Author acting as an agent in our midst. Divine agency means *Authorial* agency. God acts in our world from a different ontological level altogether; this is the truth of the concept of divine aseity.³⁷

To call God "Author," then, is to signal the perfection of his uncreated triune life. Yet God also resembles human authors to the extent that he uses words to initiate action and enter into relation with other persons. Hence the Bible appropriately describes God in personal terms. False gods, by contrast, are only counterfeit communicative agents: "The prophets do not charge the pagan deities with being anthropomorphic, but with being insufficiently anthropomorphic. At their best, they are counterfeit persons. At their worst,

34. E. LaB. Cherbonnier, "The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism," *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962), p. 201.

35. For a further development of this theme, see John Webster, *Presence and Perfection*.

36. The "right arm" of God is a figure of speech: it is reality-depicting, but what it depicts has more to do with power than with physical appendages. "Loving," by contrast, is an analogical anthropomorphism: God really loves, but not exactly as we do. Or rather: we love in a faint way that corresponds to the divine template and true definition.

37. From *a se*: only God has life "from himself."

they are frankly impersonal.”³⁸ Idols neither speak nor act; YHWH does both. To speak of God as Author is to call attention to the fact that God’s is the agency of free self-determination. God, as divine Author, has the capacity to accomplish his will through what he says and what he does.

Descriptions that attribute Authorial authority, control, and presence, to God are not merely but *richly* anthropomorphic: they describe God in human terms while simultaneously transforming them by reminding us that God displays perfect authorial agency.³⁹ God is the Author of whom there is none greater or more excellent, though we only come to know exactly what “perfection” and “excellence” mean as the drama culminates in the history of Jesus Christ, the divine Author become human hero. Thanks to certain credal statements in the Bible itself, however, we have divinely authorized provisional monologizations for filling out the content of perfection: “Only such generalizations, irreducible to story form, enable one to discern continuities in the story ... These truth-claims regarding the *kind of God* active in Israel’s life provide a hermeneutical key to the story, delimiting possibilities of meaning.”⁴⁰ Among the most central of the statements, appearing in several different biblical genres, is the now-familiar revelation of God’s name/nature: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6–7). This is the formula whose meaning the theodrama fleshes out in Jesus Christ.

God comes to speech climactically in the Word made flesh but also through the biblical *mythos*, the literary forms that the Spirit uses to communicate the Form of God made flesh. What is crucial to remember is that God, as Author, is free to assume, and communicate through, human forms. Such is the Authorial perfection of God, a concrete display of his sovereign grace and gracious sovereignty (and thus a concrete definition of his lordship).⁴¹ The one

38. Cherbonnier, “The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism,” p. 187.

39. By “richly” anthropomorphic, I mean reality-depicting by way of the *analogia dramatis*. Frame considers the notions of authority, control, and presence to be perspectives on or aspects of God’s covenant Lordship (*Doctrine of God*, chs. 3–6).

40. Terence Fretheim, “The Authority of the Bible in Imag(in)ing God,” in Fretheim and Karlfried Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 120.

41. So Eberhard Jüngel: “anthropomorphic talk of God is only appropriate and responsible Christian language if it expresses the *freedom* of the God

who assumes human (created) form is the divine (uncreated) Author of all. This is the tension that remythologizing seeks to preserve in moving from *mythos* to metaphysics (and back again). C. S. Lewis captures the balancing act that is needed lest we let our alleged metaphysical knowledge puff us up. Accounts of “meeting” God are no doubt anthropomorphic, he writes, and therefore need to be qualified by metaphysical abstractions. Yet abstractions and anthropomorphisms alike fall short of the literal truth: “Both are equally concessions; each singly misleading, and the two together mutually corrective.”⁴²

What of authorship itself? Is it an anthropomorphism or a metaphysical abstraction? This is a subtle query. On the one hand, it is a term drawn from the created human order, like “monarch” or “father.” On the other hand, I have deployed the notion as a stand-in for the concept of Creator. Moreover, as “Father” is not merely an image but a name for God, so “Author” approximates God’s self-designation: “I am who I am” means “I am my own author,” or “I author, therefore I am,” or perhaps simply “I, author.” In any case, authorship is the remythologized equivalent for expressing the so-called sovereignty-aseity conviction “that God is the one reality that exists *a se* (from and of himself) and is dependent on nothing outside himself for his essence and existence.”⁴³ Again, this conviction proceeds primarily from reflection about the biblical *mythos*, not from independent metaphysical speculation. The Bible posits a decisive distinction between Creator and creation, a distinction that the theological tradition rightly came to express in terms of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.⁴⁴

To speak of God as Author of the world is merely to go with the grain of biblical discourse (Heb. 11:3; cf. Gen. 1:1; Jn. 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Rev. 4:11). The one who brings all beings to be is, for that very reason, “outside the order of all beings.”⁴⁵ Indeed, even to speak of God’s “life” is to employ an anthropomorphism. Remythologizers

who comes to the world” (“Anthropomorphism: A Fundamental Problem in Hermeneutics,” in *Theological Essays I* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989], p. 94).

42. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), p. 21.

43. Jay Wesley Richards, *The Untamed God*, p. 33.

44. For an alternative account, see Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*.

45. Herbert McCabe, “Aquinas on the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 80 (1999), p. 269.

simply want to reinforce the point that the biblical metaphors and anthropomorphisms are part of the divine “system of projection” (i.e., revelation). The many agential anthropomorphisms employed by the authors of Scripture are ultimately elements in a divine rhetoric – divinely authorized assumptions of human (linguistic, literary) forms.

God alone is the unauthored Author. It is precisely the freedom and fullness of God’s communicative activity that we have identified as the life, and impassibility, of God. God’s being is in perfect communicative activity even without creation thanks to the intra-Trinitarian relations: “this awareness of the non-necessity of creation deepens our grasp of what it means for God to be the cause of being, to be the simple *actus purus*, to be the fully Living One.”⁴⁶ This insight yields another criterion for interpreting anthropomorphism: interpret biblical figures of speech in ways that reflect the perfection of the divine life.⁴⁷ Put differently: interpret biblical anthropomorphisms in a way that acknowledges the intimacy of God’s agential dealings *ad extra* with the world while simultaneously preserving the ultimacy of God’s Authorial life *ad intra*. Even more succinctly: remember that God is the wholly Author in our midst.

Triune authorship: the material principle of divine communicative action

Remythologizing theology is from first to last a reflection on divine authorship. Its point of departure is the biblical insight that God actually speaks. Demythologizers and others routinely deny that God speaks yet nevertheless continue to speak of God themselves. “Remythizers,” in contrast, rightly recognize God’s speech agency but fail to see that the one who enters into dialogue with Abraham, Moses, and others is the holy Author in our midst. Still others view God as a co-author, creating and interacting with the world only by voluntarily limiting himself (i.e., the kenotic-relational view).⁴⁸

Remythologizing theology means doing justice to divine communicative agency while remembering that God’s agency is distinct

46. Franks, “The Simplicity of the Living God,” p. 281.

47. Note that Barth insists that describing God as “the living God” is “no mere metaphor” (*Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 263).

48. See the essays in Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*.

from that of all other creatures. Throughout this study, passibility has served as the prime test case for assessing the continuity/discontinuity of divine and human communicative action. Can God enter into genuine dialogue with human others while remaining God (i.e., the Author)? Divine authorship, we argued, is the best rubric under which to understand both God's distinction and relation to the world; accordingly, it serves as the material principle of a remythologized theology. It is therefore fitting that we conclude the present study with some final thoughts on divine action, passion, and authorship.

Divine authorial action

Metaphors matter. Authorship – the capacity to make communicative initiatives and to form discourse – is a controlling metaphor that serves to coordinate other biblical metaphors such as “Father,” “Creator,” and “Lord.” God's authorship is evident not only in creation but in his ability to disclose his name in response to Moses' request in the context of making a covenant. That God is author of creation and covenant shows that God enters into relation with others on his own terms. These terms are spelled out in a passage, to which we have had frequent reference, in which God uses words to communicate his nature and character as impassible love and justice (Ex. 34:6–7). That God is the self-communicating author of light, life, and love therefore derives not only from the central redemptive-historical *mythos* of the Bible but also from biblical generalizations or creedal statements such as the one recorded in Exodus 34:6–7 (and repeated elsewhere in a variety of biblical genres).⁴⁹

Authorial illocution: shaping time Authorship illumines God's transcendence and immanence, God's distinctness from and relation to the created order. The Bible depicts God giving substance and structure to created reality through a unique series of speech acts. Creation is an example of non-kenotic authoring, for God is complete in himself both before and after bringing creation into existence. The triune God enjoys a perfect life of eternal fellowship, mutual glorification, and love in himself before he freely chooses to

49. Fretheim notes that “No other statement can be said to occur so often in the OT” (*The Suffering of God*, p. 25).

share it with human creatures. Yet communicate it he does. The key to reading the biblical *mythos* correctly is to see that the holy Author has entered into our midst, and this in a threefold manner: as disembodied Voice, embodied Word, and empowering Breath. The gospel is the good news that God freely makes common the Father's communion with the Son to others through the Spirit. The operative concept of the communicative theism set forth in these pages is thus triune authorship.

Triune authorship is itself a three-dimensional affair: (1) on the cosmic level, God is the creator and sustainer of the universe;⁵⁰ (2) on the covenantal level, God is the initiator of the promise directly to Abraham, then reiterated though the prophets, and fulfilled in the Son; (3) on the canonic level, God is both the one who is ultimately responsible for the final form of the prophetic and apostolic discourse, and the guarantor of the history of its effects on the community that attends it. In other words, God authors the church by communicating via word and Spirit – and in particular through the Bible as the latter is read, pondered, and preached. Cosmos, the book of the covenant, and the people of the covenant are thus “works” of the *triune* Author, for divine authorship on every level is a matter of the Father speaking Word through Spirit.

Time, we have seen, is the “room” God makes for communicative action with creatures, the medium in which persons communicatively relate. It is God's word that charges time with dramatic urgency, making of time a time *to do* such and such. Divine commands generate a time to be obedient; divine promises generate a time to trust. To be in time is to be answerable to the word of God; time is ultimately the medium of communicative activity. While God is author of all levels and dimensions of reality, the Bible focuses on the level of interpersonal communicative action in time: the divine engagement with human hearts and minds. It is on this level that the divine Author seeks dialogically to consummate human heroes by addressing them in words of Word and Spirit. It is on this level

50. Admittedly, I have not said much about this level, but simply assumed that “there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6) and that the Son “upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb. 1:3). While I affirm God's capacity to intervene in the natural order, I have purposely focused, as does Scripture, on God's dialogical interaction with human beings.

that right covenantal relatedness – union with Christ; communion with God – is achieved.

Authorial incarnation: schematizing eternity God really speaks and acts, though as Author, his speaking and acting ultimately derive not from the created order but from his own life. The Bible's system of anthropomorphic projection is thus "from above": it is a matter of God assuming/appropriating human forms – language, literature, the humanity of Jesus – in order to be fully himself, the holy Author, in our midst. Expositing this claim in terms of the time-eternity relation will prove helpful in providing a summary of our leading claim that God's being is a being-in-communicative-activity.

God can assume or appropriate being-in-time because temporality does not contradict his being. Time is not the contradiction of eternity but its "figure": both time and eternity are forms of life, for to exist is to be in communicative act.⁵¹ God's time (eternity) is the sphere of his own life, which is a matter of his active intra-Trinitarian communicative relations. Kenosis involves neither an emptying of the Son's divinity nor self-limitation of the divine being but rather the assumption of a new servant (i.e., human) form by the fullness of the divine being (Col. 1:19).⁵² The Son's kenosis means that the plerosis of the divine life now comes to expression in bodily form: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). This is the ground of our "analogy of Authorial being-in-act": *God is as Christ does*.

The Incarnation is the culmination (but not conclusion) of a series of Authorial communicative and covenantal acts in our midst. God's authorial activity propels the drama of redemption from beginning to end. Yet in Jesus Christ God takes time for human covenant partners, communicating to us as one of us: "the true and fullest power of deity is displayed in the fact that it has such power over itself

51. In suggesting that time "figures" eternity, I leave open the question of whether time is more like an analogy or a metaphor in relation to eternity. The key point is that there is a partial correspondence within an even greater difference between these two predicates of being-in-communicative-act. Unlike created entities and agents, God has being-in-communicative-act in and of himself. His essence is his existence.

52. So Sarah Coakley: "It is the taking on of flesh, rather than the abandonment of any aspects of divinity, that is the hallmark" ("Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations," in Polkinghorne [ed.], *The Work of Love*, p. 195).

and its creature that it can become one with it without detriment to itself.”⁵³ Jesus reveals the Father; the way God the Son is in time corresponds to the way God is in eternity. Better: Jesus’ communicative activity in time corresponds to the Father’s communicative activity in eternity. Or, to employ a category from the previous chapter: Jesus’ being-in-time *schematizes* God’s eternal being.

The theodrama is the principal schema of God’s being. Biblical anthropomorphisms are but secondary schemata – mini-dramas, God-given guides for thinking about God and the form of God’s relation to the world. Anthropomorphisms are reality-depicting, but they must be qualified by what we could call the “Authorial difference” which reminds us that such terms do not apply to creatures and to the Creator in univocal fashion.⁵⁴ With this apophatic qualifier in mind, then, we can say that *Jesus’ time is the anthropomorphism of eternity*.⁵⁵ God’s other self-communicative acts are, similarly, anthropomorphisms of his eternal Word. For example, God’s name – “merciful and gracious” (Ex. 34:6) – corresponds to the way God eternally is. God is always and at all times everything that he is, albeit under a wide variety of forms. God’s utterances are in time, then, yet in a way that “endures forever” (Isa. 40:8; 1 Pet. 1:25).⁵⁶

Divine speech sovereignty: triune dialogical interjection

Whereas “authorship” emphasizes divine communicative action, it might be thought that “dialogical” opens the door to divine communicative passion. For, from one perspective, dialogues represent the epitome of a relationship characterized by mutual give and take. The challenge throughout this work has been to remythologize God’s dialogical interaction with human beings, letting the *mythos* guide theological reflection while simultaneously keeping in mind the Authorial qualification (i.e., the Creator-creature distinction). As to whether characters can ever affect their Author as equal or semi-equal conversational partners, I have sought to affirm the

53. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 616.

54. Cf. Heidegger on the “ontological difference” between Being and beings.

55. Time can anthropomorphize eternity only because time itself is “theomorphic.” Cf. Plato’s notion that time is a “moving image” of eternity.

56. See also the intriguing statement in Ecclesiastes 3:14: “I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, not anything taken from it.”

contemporary emphasis on the reality of the divine-human relation while nevertheless retrieving (and retooling) certain classical modes of understanding it via the concept of communicative action.⁵⁷

God was under no obligation to create. To say otherwise is to imprison God in a dependency relation with the universe and hence to deprive him of his Authorial rights. In deciding to create, God remains free to enter into relations, dialogical or otherwise, with human creatures.⁵⁸ The pressing question for a remythologizer, however, is whether God remains sovereign *even after choosing to enter into dialogical relations with human creatures*. In determining himself for dialogue, does God thereby determine himself for frustration and heartbreak? For many kenotic-relational theologians, the answer is obvious: in creating interlocutors in his image, God has chosen to be passible – to surrender aseity and, ultimately, authorship alike.

A considerable portion of the present work has sought to rebut this position. God continues to have Authorial agency even when he enters into dialogical relations with human heroes. Some, however, may still be wondering whether, and how, an Author “outside” time may genuinely be said to be responsive. This question is particularly urgent if it “is a logically necessary condition of dialogue between people, or between God and mankind, that the partners in the dialogue should appear to act and react in time.”⁵⁹ Instead of rehearsing the argument once more, we can set out its major contours in a final case study: the divine dialogue not with Moses but with King Hezekiah.

Proponents of the kenotic-relational ontotheological complex wish here to claim the biblical high ground. For the divine dialogue with Hezekiah (Isa. 38:1–5) suggests that God may indeed “suffer” the effects of conversation, that is, be “prevailed upon.”⁶⁰ The story is quickly told: King Hezekiah falls sick and receives word from the

57. Recall Saunder’s dismal evaluation of how attempts to formulate coherent accounts of special divine action in ways that are compatible with modern science “founder on technicalities in the relevant physical theories” (*Divine Action & Modern Science*, p. 215).

58. Some kenotic-relational theologians believe that God chose to be passible in choosing to create. That is, God is free to create or not to create, but if God creates it entails a kenosis or divine self-limitation. The latter seems to be the position of Polkinghorne and Peacocke and others in the theology-science discussion (see Polkinghorne [ed.], *The Work of Love*).

59. Helm, “Divine Accommodation,” in *John Calvin’s Ideas*, p. 200.

60. Sanders uses this phrase as a section heading in his *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, p. 53.

prophet Isaiah that God says that he will not recover from the disease, but die. In apparent response to Hezekiah's fervent prayer and tears, however, God countermands his earlier prophecy and announces that he will add fifteen more years to Hezekiah's life. In the eyes of relational theists and panentheists, the God who participates in this dialogue appears neither omnidetermining, omniscient, nor timeless. These attributes appear to be incompatible with the give and take that is the warp and woof of interlocution: "Dialogue requires two independent participants, neither of which wholly controls the responses of the other."⁶¹ It appears that God voluntarily refrains from determining the behavior of his interlocutor. Human interlocutors, for their part, appear to be able, through their own communicative action (i.e., prayer), to affect God.

Before presenting our own interpretation of this passage, it would be helpful to review the way a classical theist might view the case. William Alston argues, for example, that an eternal God can perform outside time acts of will that have temporal effects. Furthermore, because God is omnitemporal – "all-at-once simultaneous with every temporal state of affairs" – his communicative acts may even count as a *reply* to Hezekiah.⁶² Alston does not see how God can genuinely reply to what humans say or do, however, if what humans say or do is divinely determined – as if God is "always agent, never patient."⁶³ By contrast, the present work has set forth an account of divine dialogical consummation according to which God "determines" human creatures precisely in and through dialogue: the "inner persuasive discourse" of word and Spirit.⁶⁴ Human creatures are "free" because other created entities do not determine their actions. God, however,

61. Alston, "Divine-Human Dialogue and the Nature of God," p. 148.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 158. Most Thomist and Calvinist theologians would not share this compunction, to the extent that they work with instrumental notions of secondary causality and compatibilist notions of human freedom.

64. Alston defines "omnidetermination" as the thesis "that God has decided every detail of His creation, including the putatively free choices and actions of human beings," which he then likens to the ventriloquist Edgar Bergen's relationship to his dummy Charlie McCarthy ("Divine-Human Dialogue and the Nature of God," pp. 147–8). Genuine communication rules out "intentional effective control of one participant by the other" (p. 148). Alston thinks that divine determination "rules out the human being's playing any real role in the proceedings" (p. 158). In contrast, I argued in ch. 7 that God communicatively "controls" (if this is the right term) his dialogue partners by efficaciously soliciting their free consent.

is not like other creaturely causes precisely because he works on a different ontological level altogether: his operation is Authorial.

Here we may remark once more on the surprising convergence between the communicative theism advocated in these pages and Clayton's version of the kenotic-relational theism that has been our chief competitor. Though the two approaches work with different conceptual frameworks and with different concerns, both treat God's communication to human creatures as the prime locus and privileged focus for discussions about special divine action. Clayton finds divine communicative action attractive because "No physical laws are broken if there is an exchange of information between a divine source and conscious human agents."⁶⁵ Divine causal influence works by God inputting information into human consciousness which then serves as a "lure" for human action: "Divine causality is better understood as a form of causal influence that prepares and persuades."⁶⁶ He is careful to note, however, that God's causal influence is indeterminate, for free human agents, when confronted with the divine lure, may decide not to bite: "One cannot *know* in advance that God will bring about the ends that God desires to accomplish, although one can know that, if God is God, the final state of affairs will be consistent with God's nature."⁶⁷ A communicative theism insists, by way of contrast, on the efficacy of God's authorial action.

Clayton nevertheless agrees that the primary way God manifests his power in the world is through human agents who, like Jesus, submit their wills to his: "This manifestation of divine power and presence *just is* (what we mean by) divine action. There is no 'action' that God 'performs' within the created universe other than becoming manifest."⁶⁸ In other words, God's special divine action in the world is a function of human agents willingly accepting the divine lures – ideas, ideals, images – that God introduces into consciousness through "axiological" communication.⁶⁹ Of course, on the kenotic-relational view, God

65. Clayton, "Natural Law and Divine Action: the Search for an Expanded Theory of Causation," *Zygon* 39 (Sept. 2004), p. 630.

66. Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, p. 198.

67. *Ibid.* Clayton is clear that "guidance via the informational content of the whole" or via the luring of conscious agents is "not a form of efficient or determining causation," but he insists that it is sufficient to provide "an updated version of what was once meant by divine providence" (p. 202).

68. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

69. Clayton and Knapp, "Divine Action and the 'Argument from Neglect'," p. 191.

must refrain from giving us thoughts and feelings that determine our behavior, for otherwise the problem of evil would be unanswerable. The God of open panentheism limits himself to inviting human creatures to participate in his own creative activity.

The convergence between the two positions is indeed close. Yet remythologizing ultimately arrives at a different conclusion with regard to the efficacy of God's communicative action and thus the nature of the God-world relation. Communicative theism affirms God's sovereign love: divine authorship works outside, alongside, and inside us, efficaciously persuading us, not to act against our wills but to bring our wills into alignment with the will of the Author. The divine-human dialogue is actually a means of divine authoring, that is, an asymmetrical communicative process by which a hero is theodramatically consummated.

That God occupies a superior position no more threatens the integrity of his dialogues than Socrates' magisterial role does his. Plato's Socratic dialogues depict exchanges over such heady matters as the nature of knowledge, beauty, and love, and it is clear that one interlocutor is the master and the other the pupil. Something similar follows for covenantal Lord-servant dialogues. As Socrates gradually leads his pupil to understanding, so God efficaciously leads (not lures) those to whom he speaks to his desired dialogical end. Let me here introduce the idea of a divine "soteric" dialogue in which the triune God guides interlocutors in a non-coercive, but internally persuasive (and hence efficacious) manner. Whereas Socrates is limited to dialectic, God deploys a whole panoply of covenantal forms of discourse – prophetic, lyric, narrative, parabolic, apocalyptic, kerygmatic – in order to communicate not only his mind but his affections, namely, his covenant-concern-based theodramatic construals.

God does more, therefore, than inform, lure, or even persuade. The triune Author employs diverse forms of discourse to transform minds, wills, and imaginations alike. In "making common" his own mind and heart, God elicits rational passions and holy affections in his human communicants. The efficacious inner persuasive discourse of word and Spirit ultimately moves the heart, but in a properly communicative rather than manipulative fashion, awakening what Jonathan Edwards calls a "spiritual sense": "Regeneration ... change[s] the whole person by changing the love at the heart of the person's being."⁷⁰

70. George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 286.

Meanwhile, Hezekiah awaits an explanation. Calvin's interpretation of Hezekiah's sickness and recovery anticipates the remythologizer's approach. He acknowledges that it initially appears strange that God so quickly reverses his sentence. To surmise that Hezekiah's prayer prevailed upon God, however, is to overlook not only the details of the biblical account but also the nature and identity of the one to whom Hezekiah is speaking. What God is doing in this dialogue is not informing Hezekiah of his death but working a change in his heart. Calvin supplies the unstated condition implied in God's threat: "it would have been unnecessary and even useless to predict [Hezekiah's death], if a remedy had not been provided."⁷¹ God's actual communicative intent was to humble Hezekiah so that Hezekiah might turn to him in prayer: "so by harsh language and an absolute threatening of death, he intended to slay him, that, rising like a dead man out of the grave, he might feel that life had been restored to him."⁷² God dialogically determines Hezekiah, not by manipulating him, but by soliciting his free consent to participate in communicative action. The divine Author's dialogical consummation of Hezekiah involves nothing less than the latter's experiencing, through discourse, a veritable death and resurrection. Throughout this soteric dialogue, however, God is always all that he is: all-knowing, all-powerful, all-wise (and hence patient), all-just, all-loving.

Speaking in and out of session: royal authority

Divine communicative action is ultimately oriented to communion, a divine-human fellowship that effects sanctification: the transformation of human communicants into the image of Jesus Christ. What God is ultimately authoring is a royal priesthood and holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9), a peaceable kingdom characterized by justice and righteousness where God's word rules in his people's hearts and minds just as it came to rule in King Hezekiah's.

The cruciform kingdom of God What God ultimately communicates or makes common is his rule or "kingdom" so that in the end, as in the beginning, "God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28; cf. Col. 3:11). The theodrama ends with an enthronement apocalypse: a

71. Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, tr. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), vol. III, p. 159.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

revelation, or series of revelations, concerning the victory of Jesus Christ over all the powers and principalities in heaven and earth (Rev. 19:11–22:5).

God's kingdom arrives in person in Jesus (God's Word), and in discourse (Jesus' words). Jesus' parables, his most distinctive form of discourse, communicate the kingdom not directly, by transferring information about it, but indirectly, by revealing (and hiding) its nature. The kingdom is "like" what happens in the *mythos* of the Sower and the Prodigal Son. Jesus employs words, but not the way the world does. He does not lie, or make false promises or otherwise make use of sophistry in order to manipulate hearts and minds. Neither does he impose ideological points of view on his listeners nor oppress them with arbitrary hierarchical binary oppositions. On the contrary: Jesus speaks the truth in a way that liberates tired imaginations and encourages despairing hearts. God establishes his kingdom not by force or deceit but by the divine rhetoric of word and Spirit – by not strategic but communicative action. From a "worldly" geopolitical perspective, God's kingdom comes in a surprisingly weak way, where the Spirit effectually ministers the "foolish" word of the cross.

"Thy kingdom come" (Mt. 6:10). The kingdom's coming is both an eschatological and a communicative event: the process by which the triune God "makes common" his other-than-worldly way, truth, and life via Word and Spirit. The kingdom advances as God communicates his word to others who come to share the mind of Christ. The chief means of the kingdom's coming is the preaching of the cross in the power of the Spirit. Ricoeur acknowledges the transformative power of gospel preaching: "The word is my kingdom and I am not ashamed of it ... As a listener to the Christian message, I believe that words may change the 'heart,' that is, the refulgent core of our preferences and the positions which we embrace."⁷³ God uses preaching to take every imagination captive to the cross.

The ministry of the word looks laughably weak in comparison to all the armies, nuclear weapons stockpiles, and financial markets of the world. Yet their combined powers cannot change the human heart. Neither can the communications technologies that dominate

73. Ricoeur, *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p. 5.

global culture; these, too, fall short of the true aim of communication: “communication is the process of reaching covenant, and communion the goal of covenant and communication.”⁷⁴ Though folly to those that think themselves wise, the slight word of the cross, like Jesus’ parables, is to those who are being called “the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18, 24). Paul makes a special point of distinguishing his own ministry of the word from “lofty speech” (1 Cor. 2:1) or “plausible words of wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:4).⁷⁵

The church, too, bears witness to God’s communicative activity both in its discourse and in its lived display. The church is both *polis*, a community that lives under the rule of God, and bride, a community that lives in covenant fellowship with God: “The completion and finalization of political order under the free and worshipping embrace of God’s rule coincides with the completion and finalization of social order in complete and uncoerced fellowship with God.”⁷⁶ The church, precisely as *koinonia*, is a foretaste of that communicative truth, goodness, and beauty that is the substance of the kingdom of God.

The prime task of the Spirit is to communicate Jesus Christ. The triune God freely decides to make what is his – his light, life, and love – ours. The Father gives the Spirit through the Son to the church. The Spirit is now the common possession of God and the people of God (2 Cor. 13:14). God communicates himself through himself to others who in turn become communicative agents. In so exercising his lordship and distributing his kingdom power, God forms a communion: a covenant fellowship (*koinonia*). This is a most important point, for the idea of “kingdom,” together with the related ideas of “monarchy” and “sovereignty” (and authority itself!), have long been out of theological favor.⁷⁷ It is precisely such a kingdom of free and loving communication, however, that is the object of Christian hope.

To confess YHWH king is to acknowledge an authority that evokes free and obedient action “because it holds out to the worshippers a fulfillment of their agency within the created order in which their

74. Lee, *Covenant and Communication*, p. 146.

75. Cf. O’Donovan: “The public aesthetic of the cross has revealed new possibilities for political action, evoking compassion as a politically uniting force and empowering the martyr and the oppressed” (*The Ways of Judgment*, [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005] p. 232).

76. O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, p. 240.

77. Cf. Moltmann on the unfortunate way in which “monotheism” has funded earthly monarchies.

agency has a place and a meaning.”⁷⁸ Stated differently: *to answer to God is to fulfill the purpose for which one has been called into existence*. This purpose is to become part of a whole people with whom the triune God would commune. The kingdom of God is ultimately a communicating *koinonia*, not only in the formal sense of being a place of undistorted communication, but in the material sense where what gets communicated is the good of being together (fellowship). This “being-reconciled with God and one another” way of living together is the vocation of the Catholic Church. Unlike other groups, the church comprises people from different ethnicities, nationalities, and classes: a “universal” community whose life together is itself a parable of the coming kingdom.

The cruciform kingdom of God centers on Jesus Christ, “our peace” (Eph. 2:14). Jesus embodies the kingdom of God, and his community must do likewise, practising the ministry of reconciliation. The ministry of reconciliation involves a number of communicative practices of its own. Participating in God means, at the very least, that church members must avoid slander and obscenity (Col. 3:8), lying (Col. 3:11), irreverent babble (2 Tim. 2:16), empty talking and deceiving (Tit. 1:10), and speaking evil (Jas. 4:11) – all communicative practices destructive of communion.⁷⁹ By contrast, the speech ethics of the church center on speaking the truth in love for the sake of communicating the fullness of Jesus Christ, and thus building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:15).

Among the many edifying speech acts that characterize the church’s communicative practice as a holy nation, one in particular deserves special mention: *parakalein* (“to appeal”). The apostle Paul employs it strikingly in his letter to Philemon where, instead of “commanding” Philemon to receive Onesimus back “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother” (v. 16), he instead “appeals” to him for love’s sake in Christ to do the right thing (vv. 9, 10). There are several noteworthy aspects of this Pauline communicative act. First, Paul fully expects his appeal to be efficacious; indeed, he expects Philemon to “obey” in a way that goes beyond the appeal (v. 21): “The difference between appeal and command reflects not a downgraded authority but a different sort of authority,

78. O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 32.

79. See also James 3 on various sins associated with the tongue.

which does not rely on the power to compel but on the freedom of the addressees to assent.”⁸⁰ Second, Paul is appealing to reality – the *eschatological* reality of what is already/not yet “in Christ.” It is already the case, for example, that Philemon and Onesimus are not only brothers in Christ, but fellow citizens in the city of God (Eph. 2:19). Third, Paul’s appeal is ultimately not on behalf of himself but God: “we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal (*parakalountos*) through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). Finally, to make an appeal is to perform a self-involving speech act in which the speaker tacitly agrees to stand behind and vouch for what is being claimed – to act, and perhaps suffer, in ways that correspond to the content of the appeal.⁸¹ Paul’s apostolic appeal is an invitation to his addressees to participate in the theodrama, to share in the lived reality of the gospel.

Appealing to the real “in Christ” is arguably the church’s principal communicative act: “We appeal to you ... be reconciled to God (and hence to one another).” It is precisely through such self-involving appeals that the church participates in the communicative activity, authority, and expanding kingdom of God. It is the church’s mission and vocation to make, and exemplify, such self-involving non-coercive authoritative appeals to act in ways that are conducive to human freedom and flourishing. Against such appeals there is no law.

From Passion to session

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God.

What may we hope? That the God who began a good communicative work will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6), and that even now we are beneficiaries of Christ’s communicative presence and present communicative activity. For the *mythos* of Jesus ends not with his suffering and death, or even with

80. Bernd Wannwenwetsch, “‘Members of One Another’: *Charis*, Ministry, and Representation: A Politico-Ecclesial Reading of Romans 12,” in Craig Bartholomew, Jonathan Chaplin, Robert Song, and Al Wolters (eds.), *A Royal Priesthood? A Dialogue with Oliver O’Donovan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), p. 200.

81. See Donald D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement: A Philosophical Study of Everyday Language with Special Reference to the Christian Use of Language about God as Creator* (London: SCM Press, 1963). Richard Briggs’s *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* (Edinburgh & New York: T & T Clark, 2001) expands on Evans’s treatment, looking in particular at confessing, forgiving, and teaching as self-involving speech acts. He does not, however, consider “appealing.”

the disciples' faith, but with his resurrection, ascension, present reign, and glorious return. No doubt Bultmann would find this creedal statement and its concomitant biblical proof texts, with their implied divine comings down and goings up, ready grist for the demythologizing mill. Nevertheless, Jesus' heavenly session (Lat. *sessio* – "sitting down") at the right hand of the Father is amply attested in Scripture and carries special significance for our examination of divine communicative action and passion.⁸² It is only appropriate, then, that we close this study by seeking the *logos* of this *mythos* depiction of the present communicative activity of Jesus Christ.

Neither the "sitting" of the Son or the "right hand" of the Father is to be taken literalistically. Yet these anthropomorphisms too are reality depicting. They pertain to the Father's giving the Son the power and authority to rule over all things, visible and invisible (1 Cor. 15:24–7). Christ's session at the right hand of the Father depicts the Son as sharing in the sovereignty and glory of God (Eph. 1:20–2; Phil. 2:9). In the words of the Heidelberg catechism: "the Father rules all things through him" (Q. 50). The Son has all authority (Mt. 28:18) and has received the Spirit, which he then dispenses as he sees fit (Jn. 17:5; Acts 2:33). To quote the Heidelberg catechism once more: "through his Holy Spirit he pours out his gifts from heaven upon us his members. Second, by his power he defends us and keeps us safe from all enemies" (Q. 51). In brief: the heavenly session of Christ refers to his reigning through the Spirit, or rather, to his bringing his kingdom into being through the Spirit's ministry of the word.

It is noteworthy that Christ's threefold office continues "in session" and that this work is largely communicative. As prophet, the exalted Son continues to proclaim the kingdom and lead his people into all truth through the Spirit's ministry of the word that reveals the Father's will (Jn. 16:13). As priest, Christ plays the role of a Paraclete, making appeals and interceding on his people's behalf to the Father (Heb. 7:25). As king, he has been given power and authority over all things, especially the church (Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:16–18), though he

82. Jesus cited Psalm 110:1, an enthronement psalm, in relation to himself (Mt. 19:28; 22:44) and predicted his heavenly session (Mt. 25:31). Peter confesses Jesus' exaltation to the right hand of God, citing the same Psalm (Acts 2:32–4). Paul, too, refers to Jesus' session (Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1) as do other New Testament authors (Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22; Rev. 3:21).

exercises his power in a communicative rather than manipulative fashion. His word proceeds like a sharp two-edged sword from his mouth (Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:6). Christ rules by his word, a word that judges and brings justice, makes free and gives life.

The exalted Son is Lord of his communicative presence and activity.⁸³ His speaking in session is no longer bound by time or space: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me ... And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:18, 20). Christ summons and commissions the church to shed abroad the knowledge of the love of God through proclamation and lived demonstration. The church is the society of Jesus, a community ruled by the communicative practices of the exalted Christ, an earthly body where God's light, life, and love circulate in human form, and thus a foretaste of the eternal communion that is arguably the purpose for God's creating the universe.

Significantly, the theme of the risen Christ's communicative activity – his speaking "in session" – reveals no hint of divine suffering, weakness, or vulnerability. The exaltation of the risen Christ is a far cry from the humiliation of kenosis (Phil. 2:9–11). *The biblical portrait of Christ's heavenly session leaves no room for an ongoing kenotic relation to creation*, contra the contemporary tendency to view the very God-world relation in kenotic terms.⁸⁴ On the contrary, his voice is "like the roar of many waters" (Rev. 1:15) which in turn is "like the sound of the Almighty" (Ezek. 1:24). It is from his heavenly session that, in Calvin's words, Christ "daily lavishes spiritual riches upon [his people]. He therefore sits on high, transfusing us with his power, that he may quicken us to spiritual life, sanctify us by his Spirit ... keep [his church] safe from all harm by his protection, restrain the raging enemies of his cross and of our salvation by the strength of his hand, and finally hold all power in heaven and on earth."⁸⁵ In terms of the present essay: Christ rules by efficaciously and impassably ministering his word and Spirit.

83. See Webster, "Resurrection and Scripture," ch. 8 in Andrew Lincoln and Angus Paddison (eds.), *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), pp. 138–55.

84. Again, see Coakley's excellent diagnostic of the misapplication of the notion of kenosis outside its rightful incarnational boundaries ("Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations").

85. Calvin, *Inst.* II.16.16.

The “new orthodoxy” examined in earlier chapters insists that God must suffer with suffering human creatures. It does so on the basis of two mistaken assumptions: (1) that love is essentially kenotic and (2) that divine and human freedom operate on the same plane. God’s love on this view is less active than passive or “retractive.” How else to explain God’s failure to intervene to prevent egregious cases of innocent suffering? Wesley Wildman’s “argument from neglect” holds that the real problem of evil is not the existence of suffering but God’s not doing something about it.

The present essay does not deny God’s ability to bring about changes in the natural world. Our focus, however, is God’s verbal communicative action and, in particular, the efficacy of God’s words on human hearts and minds. The problem of evil, of course, remains: if God can communicate to human beings, why does he *neglect* to do so in situations where such communicative acts could prevent innocent suffering? Clayton and Knapp state the problem: “What God must refrain from doing, if the problem of evil is to be answerable, is giving us thoughts or feelings that compel an automatic or reflexive response, because otherwise God would incur an obligation to prevent or correct our mistakes whenever they might occur. And a world in which mistakes were impossible would be a world in which finite rational agency was also impossible.”⁸⁶ They go on to claim that God communicates thoughts and feelings “through modes of general guidance, growing illumination, and persistent attraction.”⁸⁷ Such a view approximates the position of the present work but ultimately falls short insofar as it denies the efficacy of divine communicative action.

What, then, of evil? To confess that the Son sits on the right hand of the Father is to shift the perspective from which to address the problem. Christ may not suffer in session, but he is far from indifferent. The Mediator intercedes for us with the Father and ministers to us via the Spirit. The apostle Paul moves from the idea of the Son interceding at the right hand of the Father to the rhetorical question “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom. 8:35a). He then goes on to list seven forms (Rom. 8:35b) of “the sufferings

86. Clayton and Knapp, “Divine Action and the ‘Argument from Neglect,’” p. 192. It is not clear, however, what the source of God’s obligation to intervene in every case would be, or why it would be authoritative.

87. *Ibid.*

of this present time” (Rom. 8:18), only to conclude that we are “more than conquerors” (*hypernikomen*) through Christ who loves us (Rom. 8:37). This is so because Christ effectually communicates his consoling presence – the steadfast compassion of God – through his word-ministering Spirit. The heavenly session of the Son is what enables Jesus’ statement “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20) to be true.

While the existence of evil remains a mystery, the triune God is clearly not hapless before it. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ because God’s love stands fast, enduring forever (1 Chr. 16:34, 2 Chr. 5:13; 20:21; Ezra 3:11; Ps. 106:1; 107:1; 118:1–4; 136:1; Jer. 33:11).⁸⁸ The word of the Lord, similarly, endures forever (1 Pet. 1:25), communicating the hope, strength, consolation, and joy that enable God’s suffering people to endure. To commend endurance in no way justifies inactivity in the face of evil for, as we have seen, enduring – waiting – is often hard work. To endure is not at all the same thing as to submit to victimization; on the contrary, to endure is to vanquish. Learning endurance requires training in sanctification, a strength training “in Christ”: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

In the final apostolic analysis, nothing can separate us from the loving communicative presence and activity of the triune God. Though it surpasses comprehension, God can use even suffering dialogically to consummate human heroes, rendering them fit for eternal communion. Indeed, apart from such triune dialogical activity, suffering yields only bitterness and despair. All things work together for good, however, for those who love God (Rom. 8:28) and hearken to his word: “if we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim. 2:12).

To herald and to heed To speak well of God is to serve as an agent of theological understanding, and ultimately to have a share in God’s own communicative work. Humans participate in God’s work whenever their speech and action mediate the knowledge and love – the light and life – of God. Disciples participate in God’s work whenever they appeal to others to heed the word of the Lord. Theologians speak

88. Fretheim notes that this phrase is the “only real contender” to Ex 34:6 as by far the most frequently cited statement in the Bible (*Suffering of God*, p. 25 n. 38).

well of God whenever they make others and themselves answerable to the Author whose name is above all others.

A divine voice speaks from the burning book; the interpreter stands on holy ground. The appropriate response is not cowering in terror, as before Otto's *mysterium tremendum*, but the fear-of-the-Lord reflex of the faithful Israelite and covenant servant – Mary's "Let it be to me according to your word" (Lk. 1:38). Terror may be the right response to the unknown, but the name of the God who speaks in Scripture is "the Lord ... merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). This same Lord is the Author who has emptied – emplotted – himself in our midst, the triune God whose voice breathes out words that create, guide, challenge, console, and complete us. Only the communicating God can help.

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