



EDITED BY

JOHN

WEBSTER

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TORRANCE

≡ The Oxford Handbook of
SYSTEMATIC
THEOLOGY

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

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FOREWORD

This handbook is intended as an overall account of the field of systematic theology as it is undertaken by contemporary practitioners. Though it is chiefly interested in current systematics, it is not a survey of modern theological trends; nor does it recommend a particular approach to systematic theology or a particular version of Christian doctrine. Its aim is to take stock of where the discipline lies. Each of the authors has been asked (1) to offer an analysis of the state of the question in their assigned topic; (2) to indicate important issues of contention, whether formal or material, and how they are variously resolved; (3) to make judgements about the ways in which inquiry into a particular topic might more fruitfully be pursued.

The project has been a long time in the making; the editors record their gratitude to the contributors for giving time and energy to the work, and to the staff of the Press who have demonstrated heroic patience in the face of editorial tardiness. Special thanks are also due to Rob Price, who spent many hours preparing the text for publication.

John Webster
Kathryn Tanner
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INTRODUCTION: SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

JOHN WEBSTER

THE theological discipline to which this handbook is devoted is variously identified as Christian doctrine, dogmatics, or systematic theology. There is no firmly established usage of these terms; a preference for one or other of them is often arbitrary. Of the three, 'Christian doctrine' is the most general and descriptive, indicating that the field of inquiry is Christian teaching, but making no prescriptions about what might count as normative Christian teaching or about the form which an account of it might take. 'Dogmatics' is often, though not exclusively, used to denote the rather more determinate study and exposition of dogma, that is, of authorized church teaching; it is somewhat less current in contemporary theology, especially in English. 'Systematic theology', on the other hand, is broader in compass than dogmatics, if the latter is taken to be concerned with teaching which has acquired ecclesial definition and approval, since systematic theology occupies itself more generally with Christian claims about reality. Further, as the adjective suggests, 'systematic' theology is especially interested in the scope, unity, and coherence of Christian teaching. Finally, systematic theology is often a preferred term for those accounts of Christian teaching which are especially concerned to coordinate their subject matter with what is held to be true outside the sphere of Christian faith. However, such clarifications of the terms do not always correspond to their actual deployment by particular theologians; in any specific case, use

determines meaning. The choice of 'systematic theology' for the title of this handbook simply reflects its wide contemporary currency and its inclusiveness.

The subject matter which is engaged in systematic theological inquiry is Christian teaching, that is, Christian claims about reality. Systematic theology attempts a conceptual articulation of Christian claims about God and everything else in relation to God, characterized by comprehensiveness and coherence. It seeks to present Christian teaching as a unified whole; even though particular exercises in the genre (such as the chapters of this handbook) may restrict themselves to only one or other element of Christian doctrine, they have an eye for its place in the entire corpus. The shape of a comprehensive and coherent account of Christian claims, as well as the lineaments of the particulars, depend upon judgements reached about the sources, norms, and ends of systematic theology, and about its relation to other spheres of intellectual activity. With respect to *sources*, practitioners of systematic theological work make judgements about where to look for instantiations of or raw material for Christian teaching. Such instantiations would include texts judged to be of enduring substance and authority (scripture, the ecumenical creeds, confessional documents); the theological, liturgical, and spiritual traditions of Christian self-articulation; the practices of whatever are taken to be normative strands of the church; or Christian religious experience. Judgements about sources, however, go hand-in-hand with acceptance of *norms*, that is, criteria by which decisions may be reached about which sources furnish the most authentic, reliable, and persuasive Christian teaching (a norm is a source to which preponderant authority is accorded). Judgements about sources and norms are, in turn, bound up with judgements about the proper *end* of a systematic account of Christian teaching, that is, about the aims and audiences of the undertaking. Is systematic theological work primarily directed internally, to order ecclesial disarray, to reinforce or repudiate some aspect of Christian self-expression, whether theoretical or practical, to promote reappraisal and revision of existing patterns of belief? Or is it primarily directed externally, as defensive, apologetic, or missionary self-explication *contra Gentiles*, seeking to chasten or perhaps entice the cultured despisers of Christian teaching? Judgements about the end or orientation of systematic theology involve decisions about its relation to the work of reason in other fields, especially those which enjoy intellectual prestige or which are considered to be contiguous with Christian theology, such as philosophy or history. Finally, all of these judgements are shaped by, and often shape, a construal of the material content of Christian teaching.

Because the work of systematic theology requires these various discriminations, it is—like any other sphere of intellectual inquiry possessed of historical duration and material depth—characterized by a measure of internal contestation. The contests are generally of two kinds: material, that is, contests about the content of Christian claims to reality which are the matter upon which systematic theology goes to work; and formal, that is, contests about the task, modes, and structure of

systematic theology. Our concern in this chapter is with the formal elements of the discipline, leaving later chapters to treat material matters—bearing in mind, however, that separating out material and formal scarcely does justice to their coinherence in what are commonly taken to be the most commanding representative works of systematic theology. Before entering the discussion, however, a skeletal account of the genesis and development of the discipline will help place in context contemporary contests about its nature and tasks.

I. HISTORY

Conceptual reconstruction of Christian teaching is a post-apostolic enterprise. The texts of the apostolic period which established themselves as the New Testament canon are not concerned for systematic order or conceptual regularity. Some New Testament materials, notably the Pauline corpus, the Fourth Gospel, and the Letter to the Hebrews, deploy elaborate patterns of conceptual argument in the course of articulating the Christian gospel and its requirements, but even these writings are occasional, serving didactic, paraenetic, or polemical purposes and lacking significant interest in speculative entailments (such as the reconstruction of the doctrine of God required by the confession of a triune pattern in God's saving operations). They do not attempt a comprehensive presentation of Christian teaching, and their unity is that given by common attention to saving events rather than unity at a formal, conceptual level.

Early Christian literature from the period after the apostles does not recognize the distinctions between exegetical, doctrinal, moral, and practical-pastoral theology familiar in modern divisions of theological labour, and to a casual glance the texts of this period in which Christian teaching is expounded present themselves as unschematic and at times random. The impression indicates not so much a lack of intellectual rigour on the part of the authors of these texts as a conception of the nature and genres of Christian doctrine which differs substantially from those which emerged much later in the history of theology. Early post-apostolic explanations of doctrine, undertaken primarily for the purposes of edification or combating heresy, generally adopt some variant of the commentarial or expository genre, though not without a measure of thematic organization (even here, however, the exegetical element bears the load, as in Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*). Similarly, Clement of Alexandria's construal of the Christian faith in his *Miscellanies* in terms of the pedagogical work of the divine Logos yields only a very loosely structured set of reflections (Clement himself calls his work 'promiscuously variegated' (*Miscellanies* 6.1, in Roberts and Donaldson 1990: ii. 480)). A firmer

thematic ordering emerges in Origen's *On First Principles*, which follows a sequence of God, the world, freedom, and scripture, with other topics such as the soul, angels, incarnation, and eschatology (sometimes awkwardly) inserted. Origen's ordering of the material of Christian teaching was adapted and supplemented in, for example, John of Damascus' *On the Orthodox Faith*, in which topical treatments are fitted into a sequence roughly following the order of God's acts in the economy: creation, redemption, and perfection. For other patristic writers such as Augustine (both in *On Faith and the Creed* and in the *Enchiridion*), the order of the Apostles' Creed offers a basic narrative-topical order for the exposition of Christian teaching.

The more settled organization of Christian teaching into doctrinal topics owes much to Lombard's *Sentences*, which divides the material into a (to moderns) more recognizable sequence: God, creation, humankind, sin, incarnation, salvation, sacraments, eschatology. Something of the same pattern can be found in Bonaventure's *Breviloquium*. Although Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* is rhetorically and argumentatively different from earlier texts because of its use of Aristotelian methods of analysis, and shows much greater interest in the speculative entailments of Christian teaching, its fundamental structure reflects the Christian kerygma's concern for God in relation to creatures. Like the *Sentences*, the summa genre does not necessarily entail complete systematization and the hypertrophy of concepts arrived at by speculative deduction; it may, in fact, be an informal and less ambitious summarization, categorization, and extension of Christian teaching—though these limitations were not always reflected in the traditions of commentary evoked by both Lombard and Aquinas.

In many respects, the doctrinal work of the magisterial reformers recalls earlier modes of expounding Christian teaching, in that it takes the form of extensive biblical commentary or polemical and hortatory works in which doctrine is not so much a discrete interest as an ingredient of practical divinity. Even in more formal presentations of doctrine, there is little attempt at systematic completeness, and a marked hesitancy towards (which sometimes becomes a fierce repudiation of) the speculative accretions which had grown up around the *Sentences* in particular. In this connection, the strict practical minimalism of Melancthon's *Loci communes*, which in its original 1521 edition does not address apparently speculative topics such as Trinity or incarnation, is characteristic, along with Zwingli's *True and False Religion* (though elsewhere, such as in his handling the doctrine of providence, Zwingli gives evidence of considerable speculative powers). Even in its elaborated 1559 edition, Calvin's *Institutes* is to be set in the same company; its selection of topics, its proportions, and its modes of argument and appeal are shaped not by systematic considerations but by a sense of which aspects of the biblical gospel require highest profile in meeting the demands of Christian nurture and the defence of the church.

Accounts of Christian teaching begin to assume a form more readily recognizable as systematic theology only in the post-Reformation period of doctrinal and

confessional consolidation. There are a number of signs of this: increasing attention to theological foundations prior to the exposition of positive doctrine; methods of argumentation seeking to persuade by evidences and proofs, and placing high value on deduction; an ordering of the material in which the historical shape of the divine economy is sometimes eclipsed by topical division; a certain distance from practical divinity. Such moves are not unrelated to the formal separation of dogmatic theology from moral theology and *theologia historica* (that is, the exposition of the faith tied to the narrative sequence of God's dealings with creatures). Nevertheless, this formative phase of the discipline ought not to be belaboured as systematic domestication of the Reformation impulse (Muller 2000: 101–17), any more than the work of Aquinas can be reduced to a set of fine logical discriminations. Keckermann (1571?–1608), usually considered the first to use the term *theologia systematica*, is also the first great representative of the so-called 'analytical' method in which doctrinal exposition is oriented towards practical issues concerning human salvation and destiny rather than speculative questions concerning God and God's decrees.

Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith*, which dominated Protestant doctrinal theology for a century and beyond, is in some respects a radicalization of the analytical dogmatics of the seventeenth century, transposing the economic-soteriological interest into a focus on the immanent reality of the ecclesial experience of redemption, which furnished both the material and the formal principle for his dogmatics (an obvious result of this is Schleiermacher's drastic minimalism in discussing God *in se*). Schleiermacher's prestige, combined with the rise of historical study of the genesis and growth of doctrine which emphasized the arbitrary character of much classical Christian dogma, pressed for a reconception of systematic theology as a fully historical enterprise focused on the life and activity of the Christian community as the medium of Christian teaching. Mediating theologies (of which the last and greatest representative is the system of Christian doctrine set out by Dorner), which sought a critical integration of positive doctrine with prevailing cultural norms, were largely overtaken by neo-Protestantism, whose dogmatic achievement begins with Ritschl's magisterial *Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*. Ritschl's influence was widespread, not only in Germany but also amongst British and American doctrinal thinkers.

Much of the history of twentieth-century systematic theology was shaped by Barth's early repudiation of neo-Protestantism and his attempt to reconceive the systematic theological task. His achievement was immense, in part because he was able to transform an astonished rediscovery of divine aseity into a positive covenantal dogmatics in the analytical tradition, one possessed of seemingly limitless confidence in the interpretative power of classical trinitarian and Christological teaching. This, allied to Barth's very considerable descriptive and dramatic powers and his boldness in redrawing the overall shape of Christian doctrine, makes the *Church Dogmatics* a text with which all contemporary systematic

theology must at some point enter into negotiation. Alongside Barth, the concerns of theological liberalism were continued, especially by those who drew on the resources of existential philosophy and phenomenology to interpret Christian teaching—Rahner amongst Roman Catholics, and Tillich amongst the Protestants. Both continue to exert influence, especially in North American theology, in particular by exemplifying a mode of systematic theology concerned for the coordination of Christian teaching and human self-understanding (for representative works, see Macquarrie 1977; Hodgson and King 1983; Fiorenza and Galvin 1991). Even though existentialism no longer enjoys widespread currency, the method of correlation exercises a continuing hold, especially in feminist and liberation theologies (Chopp and Taylor 1994).

Although the study of Christian doctrine continues to engender vigorous debate both in German- and English-language theology (renewed interest in the doctrine of the Trinity in the last twenty years is only the most obvious instance of the liveliness of the discussion), there have been relatively few really authoritative attempts at comprehensive accounts of the field. Beyond the textbook literature, much of the influential material has been presented as essays and monographs on particular *loci* or themes. The overall accounts which have commanded most attention are the systematic theologies of Pannenberg (1991–8) and Jenson (1997–9), both ecumenically minded Lutherans, both attracted to an ecclesiology and sacramental theology centred on divine and creaturely participation, both seeking to chart a fresh direction after Barth. Pannenberg is more cautious, offering a good deal more historical elaboration, and has a strong concern for the relation of systematic theology to non-theological fields of inquiry, most of all philosophy and the history of religion. Jenson is more radical, both materially and formally; the work's ellipses are its doctrines of the Trinity and the church, and its treatment of these themes is characterized by a high degree of conceptual inventiveness which, coupled with a certain maximalism in framing its judgements, makes it markedly innovative.

II. TASK

As it has emerged over the course of its history, the task of systematic theology is the explication of Christian doctrine in its full scope and in its integrity. In much classical Christian dogmatics, as well as in some modern systematics, the scope of the discipline requires consideration of both *credenda* and *agenda*, thus prohibiting any separation of doctrine and ethics (although the distancing of morals from dogma in the modern period, entailed by the authority accorded to natural

morality as prior to positive religions, makes their coinherence problematic for some practitioners of either field). Systematic theology is a 'positive' science, that is, an inquiry into an antecedent subject matter, and its work is guided by and responsible towards Christian faith and its various forms of self-expression. Very few approach the task in the purely constructive manner proposed by Kaufman (1975); most undertake their work in relation to a range of sources recognized as bearers of authority. In pre-modern Christian theology, these sources were commonly widely distributed amongst liturgical, creedal, and scriptural materials, though the supremacy of the latter was universally acknowledged. In the dogmatics stemming from the Protestant Reformation, scripture furnished the matter of doctrine, reinforced by the teaching of the early Christian centuries (for a modern example, see Torrance 1993). More recently, some have commended the language and practice of worship as a basic source for systematic work (Schlink 1967: 16–84; Pannenberg 1970: 182–210; Wainwright 1980); others emphasize the historical experience of faith as fundamental (Haight 1990). Whatever may be taken to be its sources, however, systematic theology is generally undertaken as a work of *reconstruction*, referring back to realities (scriptural, practical, existential) which present themselves for systematic consideration. Yet the dividing line between construction and reconstruction is not easy to discern. It is difficult to imagine a systematic account of Christian teaching which simply recorded positive data, for it would lack the abstraction and schematism necessary for a conceptual representation of the material. To make a representation of Christian teaching is to construe it, to commend a version of it which may not be made up but is certainly made. This, in turn, reinforces the need for criteria against which the adequacy of systematic construals can be assessed.

The task of systematic construction has both an internal and an external orientation. In its internal orientation—what might be called the dogmatic-analytic element of the task—systematic theology concerns itself with ordered exposition of Christian claims about reality. In its external orientation—what might be called the apologetic-hermeneutical element of the task—systematic theology concerns itself with the explication and defence of Christian claims about reality in order to bring to light their justification, relevance, and value. Different systematic theologies tend to give priority to one or other element. Barth's *Church Dogmatics* is written out of a conviction that dogmatic description is sufficient to persuade, and that independent apologetics inhibits rather than enables extramural presentation of the substance of Christian faith. Pannenberg, on the other hand, judges this procedure to be introverted, and proposes by contrast that 'systematic theology ascertains the truth of Christian doctrine by investigation and presentation of its coherence as regards both the interrelation of the parts and the relation to other knowledge' (1991–8: i. 21–2). Thus the process of systematic reconstruction in relation to whatever else is taken to be true is intrinsic to the establishment of its truth, which cannot be presupposed. From a different perspective again, the 'revisionist' tradition in North American

theology, much influenced by Tillich's method of correlation between 'message' and 'situation', envisages doctrinal construction emerging from the encounter between the content of the Christian tradition and cultural-intellectual or experiential realities (e.g., Gilkey 1979).

These different orientations of systematic theology are rarely found in pure form. One of the most sophisticated recent attempts to combine them is found in the work of the Jesuit systematician Frans Jozef van Beeck. Van Beeck resists the notion that the structures of religion and the structures of culture are discrete entities to be kept mutually isolated or, perhaps, brought into conversation. Rather, they form a continuum, in relation to which the central task of systematic theology is 'the search for new forms of unity between religion and culture' (van Beeck 1989: 42). Undertaking this task involves both 'positive' theological work, presenting Christian belief in its integrity, and 'fundamental' theology, studying the human condition as it harbours the possibility of integration into God's kingdom. The skill required to achieve this combination of description and the demonstration of credibility is 'spiritual discernment', that is, a well-judged sense of the 'discretionary fit' between church and culture in a theological representation of Christianity (van Beeck 1989: 42). The project is, of course, underwritten by a Catholic vision of the realm of cultural forms as ordered towards participation in God.

Verdicts about the task of the discipline have consequences for its content and shape. A comparison of the ground plans of Macquarrie's and Jenson's respective systematics is illuminative here. Macquarrie considers systematic theology to be 'systematic in the sense that it seeks to articulate all the constituent elements of theology in a coherent whole, and that it seeks to articulate this whole itself with the other fields that go to make up the totality of human knowledge, and especially with those disciplines which stand in a specially close relation to theology' (Macquarrie 1977: 39). This generates a tripartite division of the material into philosophical theology (a prolegomenal or natural theological phenomenology of human and divine being, language, revelation, and religion), symbolic theology (covering Trinity, creation, Christ and salvation, the Spirit, and the last things), and applied theology (ecclesiology and ethics). The conception privileges the generic over the symbolic and positive, with the result that the real engine of the account is to be located in its prolegomena; it is here that the most important decisions are taken. This, in turn, is reflected in the distribution of weight: trinitarian theology, for example, receives only a fairly brief treatment, and has little effect either retroactively on the philosophical theology or prospectively on other topics in symbolic and applied theology. Jenson's conception, by contrast, shows a distinct preference for the ecclesial and dramatic. Theology is defined as 'the thinking internal to the task of speaking the gospel' (Jenson 1997–9: i. 5); Jenson accordingly eschews any pre-theological foundations in a more inclusive ontology or epistemology, on the grounds that 'if theological prolegomena lay down conceptual conditions of Christian teaching that are not themselves Christian teaching... the

prolegomena sooner or later turn against the *legomena*' (Jenson 1997–9: i. 9). Hence in arranging the material, Jenson does not move *towards* what Macquarrie calls 'symbolic theology' but *from* it (and would resist the term 'symbolic' as suggesting that positive doctrine is reducible to some antecedent philosophical phenomenology). Consequently, trinitarian theology bulks very large, not only in the treatment of the doctrine *per se*, but across the entire corpus of Christian teaching: in one sense, Jenson's systematic theology as a whole is a set of amplifications or extensions of the doctrine of the Trinity.

III. FORM AND ORGANIZATION

In reconstructing Christian teaching, systematic theology proceeds by a process of conceptual abstraction and schematization. Both are necessary for rational representation in that they enable the theologian to generate a projection of Christian claims about reality which will display both the core content of those claims and also their overall shape when taken together.

Form

Rational representation requires skilful use of concepts. This is true not only of speculative inquiries but also of a discipline like systematic theology, which has usually been considered to have a strongly practical dimension insofar as it originates in and aims at the understanding and improvement of Christian practice. Concepts are 'abstractions', not in the sense that they discard the practical in favour of the purely speculative, but in the sense that they articulate general perceptions which might otherwise be achieved only by laborious repetition. Systematic theological concepts (Trinity, election, providence, incarnation, regeneration, and so on) function as shorthand which enables more deliberate, reflective apprehension than can be had from the more immediate bearers of Christian claims such as scripture. Of course, scripture is by no means lacking in conceptual vocabulary; but it is more occasional, directed by particular circumstances, and shows less concern for the clarity, consistency, and thoroughness which have to characterize a systematic representation of Christian teaching.

The sources of systematic theological concepts are varied. Some are drawn from scripture, though often their systematic deployment involves a measure of generalization and regularization as concepts are put to work in different contexts and for different purposes than those in which they originally functioned

(‘justification’ is a good example here). Other concepts are borrowed, adapted, or constructed from resources outside the sphere of Christian faith. The generation and use of such concepts usually involves a set of complex negotiations over time, in the course of which what are deemed inappropriate connotations in the original use may be eliminated or minimized, and the concept is reshaped or extended to serve as a more fitting projection of Christian reality claims (the language of ‘substance’ in the Christian doctrine of God and Christology exemplifies this: see Stead 1977).

The most illuminating systematic theologies are often characterized by (1) conceptual ingenuity, resourcefulness, and suppleness, which enable a projection of Christian claims suitable to draw attention to their richness and complexity; (2) conceptual transparency, which enables a more penetrating understanding of the primary modes of Christian articulation of the gospel; and (3) broad knowledge and sensitive and creative deployment of concepts inherited from the Christian theological tradition. By contrast, systematic theologies are less successful if they are conceptually monotonous or stiff, if concepts threaten to overwhelm or replace that which they are intended to represent, or if the concepts do not have a discernible relation to well-seated theological usage.

The systematic theologies of the last two and a half centuries can be divided into two very rough groups, according to the way in which they understand the relation between systematic theological concepts and the Christian reality claims of which these concepts offer a reflective representation (the groupings are merely heuristic, and ought not to be generalized). In the first group, Christian reality claims are taken to be ‘symbolic’, non-final though not, of course, unnecessary expressions of something anterior. What lies behind them may be, for example, experiential (such as the experience of redemption or liberation), or social and moral (a common direction of human ethical purpose). In the second group, Christian reality claims are considered irreducible; they are not expressive, and cannot be translated without serious loss, since their content lies on their surface rather than residing behind or beneath them.

The ‘symbolic’ understanding of Christian reality claims took hold in systematic theology largely as a result of at least two sea changes in western intellectual culture following the period of the great scholastic dogmatic systems in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One was appeal to natural religion and morality as anterior (and in important ways superior) to positive theological teaching, capable of easing intractable confessional conflict. A second was the development of idealist interpretations of Christian teaching (notably at the hands of Kant), in which the capacity of doctrines to act as incitements to moral performance was considered to be largely independent of their reference to reality.

If Christian reality claims are considered ‘symbolic’ in this way, then the work of systematic theology can be thought of as their transposition from the realm of *Vorstellung* (representation) to that of *Begriff* (concept)—the terms are Hegel’s, but

they are widely representative and were reinforced in historical studies of Christian doctrine (such as those of Baur or Harnack) which treated Christian dogma as an arbitrary expression of the essence of Christianity. To conceptualize is to move beyond the immediate in order to penetrate and rearticulate its essence in language more stable and better grounded. Much of the systematic literature of neo-Protestantism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries works along these lines. Troeltsch, for example, in Heidelberg lectures from 1912/13 proposed that the systematic task is that of raising 'Christian faith conceptions to the level of dogmatic-systematic form . . . retrieving that which is essential to these conceptions and giving the most precise conceptual expression to what they instinctively imply' (Troeltsch 1991: 62). This 'essential element' is what Troeltsch calls 'the *Christian principle*' whose purpose is 'to bring the complex of multiple appearances together into a central formula that will express the unifying root and driving force behind the whole'—which in the case of Troeltsch is Christianity as 'a religion of *personality*' (Troeltsch 1991: 63). Systematic concepts push through the multiple phenomenal realm to its underlying moral foundation. In contemporary systematic theology, this approach remains a significant presence in revisionist theologies and in some styles of comparative theology (Ward 1994). In approaching the doctrine of the divine attributes, for example, a sophisticated revisionist theologian such as Farley considers Christian reality claims as 'symbolic bespeakings of God' produced by the 'discursive imaging activity' (Farley 1996: 79) which occurs in the sphere of redemption. The systematic task is not to repeat these symbolizations as if they constituted the end point of theological reflection, but rather to subject them to critical reconceptualization, in order to resist the tendency of mythology to 'finitize the sacred by construing God as a specific entity' (Farley 1996: 82).

This approach to the nature of systematic theological concepts ranges from a modest constructivism to something approaching pure nominalism. Nearly all systematicians (even potent realists like Barth or T. F. Torrance) incorporate some element of it. When it exercises a strong influence, its effect is to encourage the generation of systematic theological concepts which are relatively detached from the immediate language of Christian self-expression, not only rhetorically but also materially, and which exhibit a distinct preference for the general rather than the particular and dramatic. If, on the other hand, Christian reality claims are considered not to be reducible to general moral or religious proposals, systematic theological conceptualization assumes a different role. First, both in rhetoric and in genre it is a good deal less distant from the everyday idiom of Christian teaching. Systematic theological concepts are then considered as a discursive enlargement of Christian teaching but not as an improvement upon it or as a means of access to better-warranted apprehension of the truth. Systematic theology in this mode will often invest heavily in persuasion by citation, commending a construal of Christianity not by appeal to external norms but by building up a portrait of Christian doctrine which commends itself by descriptive cogency. Second, in this

approach the role of concepts is to offer a kind of conceptual anatomy (or perhaps ‘grammar’ (Lindbeck 1984)) of Christian teaching.

Organization

Systematic theology aims at a comprehensive, well-proportioned, and unified conceptual representation of Christian teaching. In conceptualizing Christian doctrine in its full scope, systematic theology treats a relatively stable range of topics, even though individual essays may adjust the proportions or placement of certain elements of the whole, and may judge some topics outside their concern. The common order of the topics emerges from bearing in mind two principles: (1) the theme of Christian teaching is God and everything else in relation to God; (2) Christian teaching about God and everything else is best drawn from the sequence of the divine economy in which God’s relation to creatures is enacted, a sequence set out in scripture and confessed in such primary documents as the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. Attending to these two principles in some form yields an outline in which systematic theology begins with a substantial presentation of the doctrine of God, and especially of God’s life in himself, followed by an account of the history of the relations of God and creatures, usually in some combination of episodic and thematic treatment. Here the topics covered include: creation, creatures, sin, the history of the covenant with Israel, the person of the Son and his work as saviour, the Holy Spirit, the church in its nature, calling, and activities, the future of all things. Much else can be built into the framework, such as consideration of the moral-theological entailments of the topics, or matters of particular confessional prominence (the doctrine of election or aspects of ecclesiology, for example). Some doctrines may be used to guide the exposition of others (such as Lutheran identification of the doctrine of justification by faith as ‘the article by which the church stands or falls’, or Christology in Barth’s Reformed dogmatics). Further, prolegomenal matters may often be treated before the presentation of systematic theology proper.

In certain respects, order is a relatively unimportant and arbitrary affair, though the material naturally unfolds itself in certain ways: putting the doctrine of God first secures a sense of divine priority, and the retention of an economic sequence makes it easier to discern the reference of the conceptual material back to more immediate articulations of Christian teaching. Proportion, however, is a rather more significant matter. This is in part because systematic representations of Christian teaching, even the most abstract, are nearly always occasional, directed towards particular contexts. They may, for example, seize upon one or other aspect of Christian doctrine and deploy it to encourage or chasten a development in the teaching of the church. Or they may pay particular attention to a doctrine because it is considered to be under threat from external critique. The demands of pastoral

and apologetic occasion, however, place strain on the overall shape of Christian doctrine, and can lead to distortion. Under pressure from such demands, doctrines can expand or contract, or can be made to serve purposes for which they were not intended. Teaching about the person and work of Christ may be expanded in such a way as to eclipse pneumatology; teaching about the church may take over tasks more properly assigned to teaching about the prophetic, priestly, and kingly ministries of the ascended Christ. Accordingly, a major systematic theological task is to register and correct such deformations by requiring that particular elements in the corpus be handled so as not to disturb the coherence and balance of the whole. And, once again, judgements about proportion depend upon material judgements about the substance of Christian teaching.

Matters of order and proportion point towards the decisive issue concerning the organization of systematic theology, namely the degree to which it may legitimately seek to generate a unified *system* of Christian teaching. Any enterprise of rational representation requires some kind of schema as a medium through which its subject matter can be displayed and interpreted. A schema is an ordered projection of the subject matter, generated by the productive work of reason in which human understanding makes use of a set of categories in order to realize knowledge. Because rational representation is ‘productive’ or ‘projective’ in this way, much hangs on whether the schemas of which reason makes use are inventive (be the invention innocent or sinister) or receptive, that is, whether they organize inert material by projecting it as a unified whole, or merely discern and follow an antecedent connectedness in the subject matter itself. More simply: how do invention and discovery relate in the work of systematization?

From one point of view, the question of system is ‘the question of eschatology, of how far our intellectual constructions may anticipate such eschatological perfection of knowledge as may one day be granted to us’ (Gunton 2000: 36). Systematic schematization may neglect the mind’s fallibility and the provisionality of its representations, turning *theologia viatorum* into *theologia beatorum* (though it ought to be noted that the Protestant scholastics, often thought to be consummate transgressors here, were sharply aware of the imperfection of theological intelligence). From another point of view, systematic representation may mischaracterize the object of Christian teaching, especially when that ‘object’ is considered to be the personal communicative presence and activity of God. It was for this reason that Barth mistrusted the systematic impulse: a dogmatic system ‘loses contact with the event’ (Barth 1956: 863), and in a well-ordered dogmatics ‘the position usually occupied . . . by an arbitrarily chosen basic view belongs by right to the Word of God, and the Word of God alone’ (Barth 1956: 866). Whatever order there may be must therefore derive from the material centre of Christian teaching, and not from the demands of schematization. Others take a lead from social-philosophical critiques of closed systems, arguing that any systematic presentation must be subject to ‘the prophetic objection to a fixed, congealed system’ (Ritschl 1987: 94).

All this suggests that, by virtue of its subject matter, no representation of Christian teaching can attain a fully determinate rendering of the topic; aspirations to do so can be fulfilled only by reduction or selection. Highly elaborate systematization inhibits catholicity and demonstrates the wrong sort of confidence in theological systematization.

Such objections are motivated by a concern to ensure fit between the material content of Christian teaching and the forms in which it is presented. Equally, the demand for a comprehensive and coherent presentation can be warranted materially by appeal to the unity of God. 'If God is indeed one, and if that oneness is a *revealed* oneness, thus far there is a case for ordering what we are taught of God into, if not a system, then at least a dogmatics in which (1) who and what kind of being God is and (2) the various relations between God and the world . . . are held to be related to one another' (Gunton 2000: 37). 'System' ought not to be confused with 'deductive system', fully elaborated *more geometrico* (Tillich 1951–63: i. 58–9). The criteria for appropriate systematic construction might then be as follows: (1) the systematic character of the schema should not be imposed by analytical reason but should emerge from attention to the subject matter's self-unfolding; (2) systems must retain provisionality and openness to revision from sources which cannot be given exhaustive description within the system; (3) systems must be indicative of, not a replacement for, the persons, events, and acts which form the substance of Christian teaching; (4) formal, systematic coordination must serve material scope and coherence. Many systematicians have thought these criteria best met by a combination of economic sequence and topical description; the *loci* method is often judged the most apt formal organization.

In the end, however, the most memorable and consistently stimulating works in systematic theology are not those which have maximally elaborate or coherent ground plans, but those which register the grandeur of Christian truth in their concepts and schematism, and in which material, rather than formal, skills have been paramount.

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PART I

DOCTRINES

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CHAPTER 1

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

WILLIAM J. ABRAHAM

I. SETTING OUT THE STANDARDS OF SUCCESS

WE begin by getting clarity on the subject in hand. In the Christian tradition God is publicly identified and named as the triune God. This trinitarian identity of the Christian God is not a matter of speculation but of communal, historical, and linguistic fact. Christians are baptized in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; they worship God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; in their creeds they publicly and officially confess that they believe in the Trinity; in their lives they seek to imitate the Son who has brought them to the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. Identifying God as the triune God clearly narrows the options. The question before us is this: Why confess and affirm that this God exists?

In the early twentieth century philosophers and theologians would have rejected this way of posing the problem of the existence of God and asked a different question. The question of the existence of God was posed in terms not of the triune God but of the God of generic theism. To claim that God exists was to claim that there exists a bodiless, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and all-good creator and sustainer of the universe. Once this was agreed then the discussion could proceed. Assenting to the existence of God in an intellectually responsible manner was thought to have three conditions attached to it. First, one had to show that the concept of God was coherent, that is, that it did not involve any explicit or

hidden contradictions. Second, one had to show that there was good evidence for the existence of this God. One was required to have in hand a natural theology that deployed true premisses and valid conclusions. Thirdly, if one desired to enrich the description of God, then one could do so by appeal to special divine revelation, but only if revelation was secured by appropriate credentials (Flew 1966).

It is a mark of how things have changed in the course of a century that the consensus represented by this network of assumptions no longer holds. To be sure, various elements of it linger on, but they are on the way to being historical curiosities. Consider the problems involved in reverse order. It is misleading to think of divine revelation in terms of credentials; divine revelation itself should be considered as evidence for the reality of God. It is epistemologically question-begging to insist that the debate about God's existence be cast essentially in terms of propositional evidence and that such evidence be made a condition of intellectual responsibility. While internal coherence is a condition of all properly formed propositions, the concept of God is too firmly lodged in our linguistic practices and communities to require this kind of initial vetting. Most importantly, the conception of God on offer is an abstraction that does not match the actual conception of God at issue, say, in the Christian tradition. While the concept of God deployed in general theism may still have its uses, it simply does not capture the God identified in the history and practices of the Christian faith.

What is at issue in the end is not the existence of the God of mere theism but the reality of the triune God of the Christian faith. Anything less than this simply fails to reach the subject before us. Posing the issue in this way is not a strategy of evasion, or an arbitrary way of cooking the books in advance, or a way to make life easier. On the contrary, it makes life a lot more difficult; it ensures that the proper epistemological books be consulted; and it avoids the dodging of the real problem that has to be addressed.

Many robust trinitarians have been profoundly uneasy with offering any kind of evidence for the reality of God. The collapse of classical natural theology in the wake of Hume and Kant was certainly one factor behind this unease. Anxiety about relying on reason was reinforced by the hostility to theology that was the hallmark of the analytical tradition in the wake of Russell and Ayer. It did not help that champions of natural theology were often theological minimalists, revisionists, and liberal Protestants for whom the Trinity was an optional extra. More importantly, natural theology simply cannot reach as far as the Trinity. The internal requirements of theology exposed the limitations of reason. The weight therefore fell on the appeal to divine revelation.

In the hands of Barth, revelation was brilliantly deployed as a weapon against natural theology (Barth 1975). Barth made a virtue out of necessity by insisting that the one and only God is made known fully, finally, and exclusively in divine revelation in Jesus Christ. Conceptually the true God of divine revelation is the triune God of the Christian tradition. Belief in God in no way depends on reason; indeed to rely on reason or natural theology is to seek an alien deity, an idol;

common honesty and the logic of belief requires the rejection of natural theology and an exclusive reliance on revelation as the highest ground of truth in theology. Natural theology is not just invalid; it is theologically corrupting. Wedded to a socio-linguistic vision of language derived from Wittgenstein, Barth's vision was ingeniously reworked in the United States so as to secure the internal autonomy of theology from philosophy (Lindbeck 1984). The echo of this synthesis is clearly audible in a new generation of evangelical theologians who have recently bought tickets on the train of narrative theology (Vanhoozer 2005).

The present air of confidence in Christian theology has provided space for theologians to pursue radically new agendas. On the one hand, it has compelled some to enrich the content of theology by drawing on the insights from the oppressed and the marginalized. Liberation theologians and their allies have followed up on the Barthian veto on reason and sought to purify reason of its oppressive dysfunctions and to fill out the vision of God in ways that make theology emancipatory (e.g., Fulkerson 1994; Althaus-Reid 2000; Rieger 2001; Isasi-Díaz 2004). On the edges of this trajectory theology has been set free to explore its pastoral and healing functions within the church and culture. On the other hand, the 'radical orthodoxy' movement launched a frontal attack on all forms of secular reason (Milbank 1990; Milbank et al. 1999; Davis et al. 2005). On this model, God becomes the saviour of reason itself. Here theology moves from the margins into the very heart of the academy. Sensible English dullness transformed into Celtic passion promises to cleanse the metaphysical stables with the broom of Neoplatonic insight. Where once the existence of God was dismissed as a proposition in search of cognitive content, now the reality of God provides meaning and hope to a political and metaphysical universe that is otherwise in ruins. Though theologians have been banished from the public square, their public humiliation has turned into an extraordinary recovery of nerve.

There are important tensions below the surface. While there is a new confidence abroad, there is disagreement on how to proceed in providing warrant for belief in God. In framing the issue in these terms I am deliberately reworking the questions that have been central in debates about the existence of God. Natural theology was not simply a matter of working out the validity and soundness of arguments for the existence of God. It represented an effort to secure the rationality of belief in God. Moreover, it is one thing to challenge the content of a genuine revelation from God; it is quite another to raise probing questions about someone's claim to having received divine revelation. Barth's veto of natural theology has been abundantly fruitful in subsequent theology, but it cannot be sustained. It rested on a narrow construal of natural theology and on a mistaken view of the debate about divine revelation. We cannot shut down debate about the genuine location of divine revelation by claiming that, once we possess it, we have to treat it as ultimate. It is the possession that is at issue, not the logic of commitment. Moreover, when we raise the legitimate issue of whether it is rational to believe in the God identified in Christian revelation and truly celebrated as the Trinity, we are right back at the

conceptual foundations of natural theology. Nor can the Barthian veto be sustained by reworking it into the language of being, narrative, grammar, perspective, forms of life, language games, and the like. Important as these concepts may be, they mask strategies of evasion.

The current intellectual and social location of the Christian tradition confirms that the issue of the rationality of belief in God remains as pressing as ever. Christian theologians operate in a radically pluralistic world where rival metaphysical and revelatory claims compete for attention and commitment. To be sure, atheists often conceal the great diversity of options that they offer; it is rare that they offer a positive case for the comprehensive visions and convictions that they recommend for assent. However, they can no longer hide beneath the cloak of theories of meaning or the shawl of epistemological dogma. All is now out in the open, so a robust Christian vision of God is but one ontology on display. Even more importantly, claims to divine revelation are now firmly back on the agenda with the resurgence of Islam. If we have lost the art of adjudicating between rival claims to divine revelation, then we simply have to go back to school and relearn it. Both global and local conditions combine to destroy the insularity that shields the theologian from providing some account of why we should accept the theology on offer. This is not a return to the bad old days of the Enlightenment. The conceptual shortcomings, the narrow dogmatisms, the concealed interests of the European Enlightenments—these are all too visible to the informed student. The questions of what to believe and why to believe, however, cannot be suppressed; they are intrinsically and contextually inescapable.

It is crucial to note how the terrain has been transformed over the last generation. Two variables have changed simultaneously. First, the existence of God is now framed in terms of a robust version of Christian theism. The Barthian revolution has rightly ousted the kind of minimalist theism that was the standard option in the modern period. Second, the categories of evaluation cannot be prejudged in advance. Here again the Barthian revolution is pivotal because it has insisted that factors internal to the Christian tradition be allowed a place at the table. This requirement dovetails aptly with the epistemological changes that have become commonplace within analytical philosophy. The result is an epistemological freedom that creates space for fruitful new options.

II. TRINITY AND TRUTH

Bruce Marshall has exploited this freedom in an exceptionally interesting manner. Steeped in the history of theology and writing with the clarity and rigour of the analytical tradition, he has staked out a position which maintains the internal

commitments of the post-Barthian consensus without its liabilities. Drawing on the logic of identity, he notes how the Christian doctrine of God is inescapably trinitarian in content. In Christian worship the Christian deity is precisely identified as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three persons of the Trinity are identified by expressions which refer to actions or characteristics unique to each. Such expressions are supplied by the scriptural narratives and liturgical practices of the church. Thus the Father is the one who sent Jesus, the Son; the Son is the one sent by the Father; and the Holy Spirit is the one who unites the faithful to the Son. However, there is more to the identity of the Trinity than this.

The God identified in the church's invocation—the triune God—the church holds to be the creator, redeemer, and perfecter (or consummator) of the world, and in particular of human life and history. To put the point at the highest level of generality, the church holds the triune God and the actions of that God to be of ultimate and universal significance, and has an open-ended variety of ways to characterize this significance. (Marshall 2000: 43)

What this initially means is that belief in the Trinity is both essential and central to the Christian community. It is essential in that it is necessary to the community's identity and survival; it is central in that it is the least dispensable of the community's overall system of beliefs.

Like all beliefs, Christian beliefs are truth claims. But central beliefs are not merely true; they are such that the Christian community treats them as epistemically primary. Thus if a conflict arises, say, between belief A and B, if A is epistemically primary the community persists in holding A true and rejects or modifies B. Furthermore, in the case of belief in the Trinity, the primacy is unrestricted; it applies across the full range of possible beliefs. This insight furnishes a critical clue as to how the church will decide the truth of beliefs other than belief in the Trinity: it will test their truth by seeing how well they cohere with the beliefs that constitute its identification of the triune God. The truth of the Trinity becomes the critical norm by which all other truths are evaluated.

Marshall's move represents a radical reversal of the standard strategy of theology in the modern period in debates about the existence of God. Rather than check how well belief in God comports with other beliefs, the reverse is the case. Other beliefs must fit with the constitutive beliefs of the church. Marshall is well aware that this appears to undermine any claim to have the right to believe. It looks as if any community can help itself to such a strategy and thus claim victory in the quest for truth. Resolving this dilemma takes Marshall into the deep waters of justification and truth.

For Marshall the notions of meaning, justification, and truth are logically inter-related. He insists that the meaning of sentences cannot be determined independently of decisions about the truth of sentences and beliefs. Following Donald Davidson in his vision of radical interpretation, he rejects the epistemic dualism of scheme and content, according to which a system of beliefs and concepts is called

upon to fit some kind of experience or sensation. This leads him in turn to reject both any kind of global scepticism and the foundationalism that seeks to overcome it. Most importantly, it leads him to hold that only beliefs can justify beliefs. Indeed, justification can only be a matter of coherence among beliefs. Given the conceptual connections between meaning, truth, and justification, Marshall can stand by his claim that the Trinity functions as epistemically primary for the Christian community. In the end there is no epistemology without trinitarian theology.

Marshall does not, however, adopt a coherence theory of truth. Here he begins with Tarski's famous T-sentence of the form, '*Grass is green*' if and only if grass is green' (Tarski 2001 [1944]), and then enriches it by a sophisticated reading and deployment of trinitarian doctrine. Truth is predicated of sentences and beliefs; but believing a true sentence does not descend as a bolt from the blue. On a trinitarian reading of the world, even our believing as we do happens because of the appropriate joint agency of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The only exceptions to this are those sentences which speak of the evil actions of created free agents; in such cases there is nothing in God of which they are the origin and likeness. In the main, however, Marshall can integrate the claim that Jesus is the truth and the claim that we believe the deep things of the gospel by the Spirit with the best account of truth currently available. In the end there is no truth without trinitarian theology. The radical reversal of the standard position is well captured in the following:

According to our theologically disciplined notion of truth, beliefs justified according to these standards will generally be true in case the triune God—and especially, in his distinctive way, the risen Christ—undertakes his truth-bestowing act (1) with regard to belief in the narratives which identify him, (2) with regard to no belief inconsistent with these narratives, and (3) with regard to beliefs which there is otherwise good reason to hold. Truth will be accessible to belief if we can count on the triune God to do just this—if, when it comes to our own beliefs, his truth-bestowing act is not for the most part inaccessible to us. Presumably God bestows truth on no false beliefs, since true beliefs are all and only those to which he has granted truth. But we need not always be able to tell which beliefs God makes true; it suffices that we can tell for the most part, and especially with regard to those beliefs which are epistemically primary. (Marshall 2000: 278)

The deep interrelation that Marshall develops between justification, truth, and theology does not mean that theology is hidden away in some ghetto where it can ignore objections and alien claims. While theology brings its own explanatory power to the discussion, it must still deal with contemporary understandings, say, of history and science. Thus it may have to change its understanding of some of its beliefs—even central beliefs. Capacity to assimilate novel beliefs and to include alien beliefs is constitutive of epistemic responsibility. Novel and alien beliefs include beliefs that are widely believed in contemporary culture; so there is no isolationism here. What counts as rationality at this point is that we be prepared to give up any particular belief, even the most central. Rationality does not then involve the attainment of some positive prize; it is enough to be ready to meet the

challenges presented by our neighbours. There is no need to offer some kind of independent support for the existence of God. On the contrary, belief in the triune God has an epistemically privileged position in our thinking about all truth.

There is a pleasing leanness and austerity to Marshall's project. He has reached for a maximum theological outcome with minimum philosophical outlay. Indeed, he has provided the kind of theological vision of truth that has rarely been seen since the medieval period. It is no accident that he is an exceptionally astute interpreter of Aquinas. Yet he systematically rejects any appeal to natural theology, direct divine revelation, and religious experience. Thus there is a generous updating of the tradition rather than simply a fresh restatement.

III. *SENSUS DIVINITATIS* AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

One way to think of Marshall's project is to see it as underwriting the claim that God alone provides warrant for beliefs about God. A similar strategy is visible in the work of Alvin Plantinga. Working out of very different epistemological resources, Plantinga also rejects the claim that the existence of God rests on evidence that falls outside the terrain of divine agency. Belief in the great things of the gospel—Plantinga's happy codeword for trinitarian theism—depends on the proper functioning of our cognitive capacities. A belief 'has warrant for a person S only if that belief is produced in S by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for S's kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth'. When a belief meets these conditions and does enjoy warrant, 'the degree of warrant it enjoys depends on the strength of the belief, the firmness with which the belief is held' (Plantinga 2000: 156). Applied to belief in the triune God, proper functioning involves the proper use of our *sensus divinitatis*, that is, a faculty implanted in us by God but deeply impaired by the consequences of sin. As we are exposed to the great truths of the gospel, the Holy Spirit repairs our *sensus divinitatis* and triggers the truth about God in our minds. Generally we rely on such faculties as memory, perception, reason, sympathy, induction, and the like; if Christian belief is true, we are entitled to rely on our repaired *sensus divinitatis*. In this case Plantinga appeals not so much to the doctrine of the Trinity as to a Christian vision of creation, fall, and redemption.

Once again we have a radical reversal. Epistemology is relocated within theology rather than theology having to meet some kind of external yardstick. The existence of God is built, as it were, into the very foundations of epistemology. This does not

mean that the theologian can ignore objections. On the contrary, potential defeaters require rebuttals. On this score Plantinga's work on the problem of evil is a model of intellectual rigour. He readily extends his reach to deal with a whole host of objections to Christian belief derived from philosophical, Marxist, and Freudian sources. Moreover, Plantinga can naturally help himself to any and every argument that counts in favour of the existence of God. Belief in God is properly basic rather than epistemically primary. Thus his work on the positive but restricted status of the ontological argument is especially ingenious. However, neither natural theology nor for that matter appeal to special divine revelation are essential for belief in God to be warranted. Belief in God is properly basic; it can be held without any evidence as a particular belief lodged in the foundations of a healthy noetic structure. There are plenty of good arguments for the existence of God, but they are not essential to rationality, as evidentialists once insisted.

IV. REVISIONARY NATURAL THEOLOGY

It has sometimes been noted that the kind of position developed by Marshall and Plantinga fits snugly with a cultural situation where it is not coming to belief in God that is challenged, but retaining belief in God. Thus they are less interested in bringing unbelievers to faith than in keeping believers from abandoning faith. Moreover, their positions give pride of place to the work of the Holy Spirit in initiating faith. For many in Europe, where unbelief is much more common, such appeal to the Spirit initially comes across as question-begging and even perverse. The locks have been changed without appropriate approval. There has long been a fecund tradition of natural theology in Britain that insists on evidence that is independent of theology but refuses to be restricted to deductive proof or strict probabilistic argument. The core of this tradition is the appeal to cumulative case arguments that, when taken together, underwrite the rationality of belief in God. Richard Swinburne has articulated the most comprehensive development of this tradition. The final goal remains belief in the Trinity; the means of getting there are traditional. Swinburne moves first to establish belief in the God of traditional theism by way of a revision of the classical inductive arguments for theism; with that in place he enriches this theism by special divine revelation to take us all the way to the trinitarian faith of the church.

The hallmark of Swinburne's initial work is the use of Bayes's theorem in order to quantify as far as possible the appeal to contingency, apparent order, teleology, consciousness, and the like. What especially interests Swinburne is the simplicity and explanatory power of theism. Initially he concludes that the existence of God is

neither very probable nor very improbable on the evidence taken as a whole minus the evidence of religious experience. 'My conclusion so far has been that the probability of theism is none too close to 1 or 0 on the evidence so far considered.' However, the appeal to religious experience changes the final outcome. When religious experience is factored in, 'theism is more probable than not' (Swinburne 1979: 290–1). Given this background conclusion, we are then free to explore the possibility of special divine revelation in scripture. The appropriate evidence in this case must be supplied by content and by miracle. Thus the content must fit our moral and spiritual needs; while a miracle, like a resurrection, shows God's vindication of the proposed revelation. It might appear that this does not get us to the Trinity. However, Swinburne relocates the divine revelation of scripture within the church and argues that the creed be taken as a preface to scripture. Thus the Trinity is secured by a vision of divine revelation that builds the doctrine of the Trinity into its proper identity and interpretation. Swinburne is also persuaded of the doctrine of the Trinity by way of metaphysical arguments that echo the proposals of the Victorines of the medieval period; thus he can appeal to metaphysical considerations that confirm or strengthen the appeal to divine revelation.

As already noted, the argument from religious experience is central to Swinburne's project. He develops this argument in terms of a very general principle of rationality called the principle of credulity. On this principle, things are as they appear to be unless there is good reason to believe otherwise. Swinburne carefully applies this principle to religious experience, casting the argument in terms of perception of the divine. This is a theme that has been explored with exceptional power and clarity by William Alston. Alston nests his appeal to religious experience in a broader theory of perception that is conceptualized in terms of doxastic practices. All appeals to doxastic practice are circular; any appeal to external support will circle back to trust in our doxastic practices. However, this is not the end of the matter. Doxastic practices work within a complex network of mechanisms and practices that operate to trigger our beliefs. These doxastic practices involve large families of mechanisms rather than single mechanisms. Each family has certain formal features. They are socially established; they are subject to change; they work together even though they are irreducibly plural; they provide *prima facie* justification rather than *ultima facie* justification; they display self-support; and they can be defended in terms of practical rationality, since engaging in them 'is a reasonable thing to do given our aims and situation' (Alston 1991: 180). Each family also has its own unique features. Thus they have their own conceptual scheme suited to the relevant mode of reality; they have appropriate sources and results; they have relevant ways of handling defeaters and overrides; and they have their own presuppositions.

Alston's unique contribution to the discussion is having explored this vision of doxastic practice as it applies to an inclusive range of experiences of God. Experiences of God are contrasted to calling up mental images, entertaining propositions,

reasoning, remembering, and the like. Characteristically there is an awareness of God that is self-presenting, whether directly or indirectly; thus the appeal is not by way of explanation. The crux of the argument is that experiences of God should be understood as embedded in a doxastic practice whose implications should be taken as reliable. This is how both ordinary believers and the great saints of the church have naturally construed them. Lodged within the doctrinal commitments of scripture and the church, these experiences should be taken as veridical rather than illusory. They are embedded in what Alston dubs ‘Christian mystical perceptual practice’, a term intended to capture their epistemic significance (Alston 1991: 193). As Alston sees it, the rejection of this practice as *prima facie* reliable invariably rests either on forms of epistemic imperialism, where the standards of one doxastic practice are taken as normative for all, or on a double standard, where the Christian mystical perceptual practice is condemned for features shared by other practices that are approved. While the weight garnered from religious experience in this schema is modest, its cognitive value is genuine. It lends its own irreducible load to the total evidence that supports the classical faith of the church.

V. CANONICAL COMMITMENT AND EPISTEMOLOGY

An interesting feature of the foregoing landscape is the extraordinary fecundity and freshness of the arguments developed to support the rationality of a robust version of Christian theism. Whole new seams have been discovered and mined as resources for belief in God. At present the seams stand as separate channels; indeed, the walls of division can be thick to the point of impenetrable. Three observations are in order at this point. First, as in the patristic situation, the participants in the debate can all assent to the existence of the same God even while they disagree on the strategy for articulating the rationality of belief in this God. This underlying consensus is easily missed in that epistemologists want to get things right and are quick to seize on problems in the work of colleagues. Second, many of the participants have been driven by challenges to belief in God to develop their own original epistemological theories. Hence the debate about the existence of God has shifted the direction of the debate. Where in much of the modern period there was one-way traffic between philosophy and theology, now the traffic flows in both directions. Theology is no longer the poor relation; she has her own voice and her own insights to contribute to the discussion. Third, much of this new work remains undervalued, if not unknown, both in theology and philosophy. In part this is because of the specialization of the contemporary academy; more generally it stems

from deep divisions across the major movements that constitute contemporary theology and philosophy.

In the debate about the reality of God, the tone, the style, and the conclusions have changed radically over the last century. It is no exaggeration to speak of a quiet revolution. The earlier discussion was hostile to faith, the majority voices were self-confident in their scepticism, and it took courage and ingenuity for figures, like Basil Mitchell at Oxford, just to keep the issues on the table (Mitchell 1957). The later discussion is marked by a living commitment to robust forms of faith; the burden of proof has now shifted to the sceptical side; and the wealth of material defies easy delineation. The earlier discussion was public and noisy; philosophers acted like elephants trumpeting their proposals across the room. The later discussion has been stealthy and quiet; philosophers have calmly infested the buildings like termites, and many still remain hidden in the woodwork. It will take time for a new generation to evaluate and assimilate the new data, insights, and arguments that have emerged. There are also very significant tracts of unfinished business.

One issue that demands attention is the place of community in the identification of Christian belief and in the formation of good judgement. Marshall, for example, holds that baptismal and eucharistic practice require commitment not just to belief in the Trinity but also to the claim that the Trinity has epistemological primacy in the internal ordering of Christian belief. If this is offered as a contested unpacking of the implications of Christian belief, then there is surely no problem. However, it is obvious that participation in the liturgical practice of the church does not commit us to such a specific epistemological proposal. More generally we need to distinguish between the canonical or officially adopted commitments of the church and the epistemological strategies that are deployed to explain or defend them. The debate between communities with different official commitments has in fact been exceptionally fruitful in terms of epistemological inquiry. Other consequences of ecclesial division for the life of faith itself have of course been less than salutary. The place of official epistemological commitments in the divided communities of Christianity is clearly a matter for sensitive analysis.

This attention to communal commitments becomes all the more urgent when we reflect on the diversity of positions adopted by theologians and philosophers in the epistemology of theology. Plantinga offers his central proposals in terms of a model whereby we can make sense of warranted belief in God. Basil Mitchell developed his groundbreaking suggestions on cumulative case arguments as a strategy for the defence of the rationality of Christian theism (Mitchell 1974). Furthermore, it is clear that our interpretation of canonical teachers like Thomas Aquinas can shift across the generations. Thus an official commitment to a positive relation between faith and reason, even when cast in terms of the work of Aquinas, can be spelled out in a great variety of ways. To take a very different example, the idea of papal infallibility, a much-neglected theme in epistemology, can be reworked in new contexts in ways that are breathtaking in their diversity.

Such a rich variety of options prompts further reflection on the role of Christian communities in identifying and evaluating epistemological proposals.

The place of community in arriving at an accurate picture of the place of tradition in the formation of good judgement is also worthy of note. Judgement is inescapable in philosophy. The temptation to reduce complex issues to a manageable form that can be settled by some kind of calculus is intense. However, if our epistemological nets are cast too narrowly, then we may miss important insights that are essential in the debate about the existence of God. Happily, general work in virtue epistemology and in social epistemology can help open up the terrain, but we have barely scratched the surface to date.

VI. REVISITING DIVINE REVELATION

An older terrain deserving fresh exploration is the topic of divine revelation. The reasons for the neglect of this crucial epistemological concept are illuminating. Given that general revelation was often confused with natural theology, it was to be expected that this dimension of the topic would be sent into the nether regions when natural theology was rejected. However, there is an obvious distinction between natural theology and general revelation. To believe in general revelation is to believe that God is made manifest in creation; to believe in natural theology is to hold that certain arguments for the existence of God are valid and sound. The first is a claim about perception of the divine in creation; the second is a claim about the legitimacy of various arguments with premisses and conclusions. When philosophers began revisiting the possibility of natural theology, they were tacitly aware of this distinction, and so the topic of divine revelation rightly remained in limbo. This was especially the case with respect to special revelation, that is, to claims to revelation rooted in particular historical events or in scripture. The obvious strategy was to avoid appeal to considerations that were not publicly agreed and accessible.

When the debate about natural theology is relocated in the more general arena of the rationality or justification of religious belief, then the resources for rethinking what is involved in appeals to divine revelation become readily available. We can surely think of the appeal to general revelation as a claim to the perception of divine action in creation rather than, say, inference to the best explanation. The same applies to cases of special revelation. Christians claim to see God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus the extensive work on perception of the divine comes into play immediately. We are no longer confined to the older strategy of working out criteria of special revelation that we then apply to the putative cases on offer. Identifying divine revelation is a matter of

discernment first and foremost. To be sure, the initial identification of special revelation can then be confirmed and strengthened by evidence, by signs and miracles, but to turn the latter into some kind of criteria of truth is to misread the content of the discussion and the direction in which it should proceed.

Moreover, it is obvious that the concept of divine revelation is modelled on the idea of personal agents revealing themselves in what they do. This opens up whole new vistas that deserve attention. It is clear that some actions are more revelatory than others. Thus it is important to get beyond generic talk about agency and action and specify the actions through which God is made known. The place of divine speech-actions to particular prophets and apostles takes on special significance. So too does the action of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Here the language of the Word of God becomes vital in highlighting where the heartbeat of revelation is to be located. The place of agency can also highlight the importance of divine hiddenness in any comprehensive account of the rationality of belief in God. There is a radical element of decision on God's part on whether to remain hidden or be revealed. Philosophers who set up their own standards as to how God should be revealed run the risk not just of mistaking their standards but of cognitive idolatry. What, why, and how God reveals cannot be isolated from the wider purposes of God in creation and redemption. Clearly God sets the agenda on these matters, not human agents. Creation and redemption are self-involving concepts that necessarily have profound consequences for our identity, commitments, and action. They reach not just to the head but also to the heart and to the hand; hence there are moral and spiritual dimensions to the epistemological issues that cannot be bracketed out if we are to do justice to what is at stake.

One way to capture the moral and spiritual significance of divine revelation is to note that it calls for unrestrained commitment in the sense that the proper response to divine revelation is that of radical trust in God. However, this is simply the reverse side of a crucial epistemological feature of special revelation in the Christian tradition. If divine revelation is correctly identified, then the believer has access to knowledge; indeed, the believer has access to God's own knowledge. This insight was widely recognized in the medieval period but lost in the modern era. Divine revelation was reduced to scripture, scripture was treated as a form of ancient tradition, appeal to tradition was identified as a way of authority, and ways of authority were rejected in the name of reason. Good historical investigation and greater conceptual rigour can now unravel the pitfalls of this development. Delivered from its captivity, we are free to reconsider the unique role that divine revelation rightly has in claims to knowledge. To have divine revelation is to have access to divine knowledge; we have entrance to the reality of God and to the purposes of God for the world.

Some will worry that heading in this direction will open the door to fanaticism and to an assault on hard-won intellectual virtue. Some claims to divine revelation do indeed tear the fabric of intellectual life. Not all do, however. What is at issue

here is the nature of divine revelation as a threshold concept. Once we come to believe in divine revelation, then everything may have to be rethought in the light of the new world that has been opened to view. This rethinking includes fresh reflection on the nature and limits of the very cognitive capacities that brought us to believe in God and in divine revelation in the first place. It is no accident that theologians like Marshall are prepared to develop trinitarian visions of justification and truth. Even though divine revelation does no explicit epistemic work for him, it is clear that divine revelation was critical for some of the medieval figures that are important sources for his reflections. Marshall himself also appeals to scripture; in so doing he appears to be relying on a vision of scripture that sees it as a source of special revelation. If claims to divine revelation can call for the revision of our initial epistemological insights, then we can be sure that they may also make a difference to other epistemological commitments. However, we must proceed with care here; we do not know in advance how things will turn out.

It may appear that the topic of divine revelation is taking us off course and away from reflection on the existence of God. This is not the case. If I am right that we have undergone a revolution, then the parameters of earlier discussion have changed. Once we take divine revelation seriously as an epistemic notion, then we simply have to follow the evidence where it takes us. Indeed, one topic crying out for immediate analysis is whether divine revelation constitutes good evidence for the existence of God. In the case of human agents we come to know of their existence in and through communication with them. It is not that we come to believe that certain people exist and then try to figure out what they may have revealed to us. The reality is coextensive with the revelation; divine existence comes with divine revelation. So divine revelation can be thought of not just as a source of new information about God; it constitutes evidence in its own right for the reality of God. The standard separation of the evidence *for* God from actual divine revelation *from* God clearly needs revisiting at this point.

Divine revelation may also require a revisiting of the standard application of central epistemological concepts. In coming to believe in divine revelation we cross a threshold, but there is a journey up to the threshold and a journey on the other side of it. Thus the process of justifying in this case cannot be thought of in purely synchronic terms, that is, in terms of inspecting singular propositions and checking them in various ways for veracity. There is also a diachronic dimension to justifying many of our beliefs, especially when we are dealing with complex networks of belief such as belief in the triune God. We know historically that monotheism and trinitarian theism arose as a matter of development over time in Jewish and Christian communities. It was never simply a matter of a snapshot of the relevant considerations; it was more like an ongoing journey where crucial considerations only came into play after other considerations had been acknowledged. Justified belief was not just a matter of quick verification but was more an issue of discovery and confirmation over time. Similar considerations are at play in claims to

rationality and knowledge in the case of the existence of God; it takes time to gain these much-coveted prizes. Once we recognize this diachronic dimension of epistemology, then we can also readily see the need to explore the place of spiritual direction and religious practice in the confidence and tenacity of mature believers. At this point, spirituality takes on epistemological overtones that can easily remain hidden if we insist on entertaining merely synchronic conceptions of rationality, justification, and knowledge.

The debate about the existence of God has undergone a startling revolution that few expected and no one predicted. The concept of God at stake has been refigured to do justice to the God that Christians actually worship. The debate about natural theology has been relocated in the wider terrain of the epistemology of theology. Theology has rediscovered its own epistemological assets and invented new ones. The resources of epistemology have been enriched to make available a more apt network of concepts, insights, and arguments. Divine revelation has been refigured to make visible a strong undercurrent of reason below the surface. Theologians have long practised the delicate art of turning the water of philosophy into the wine of theology; philosophers have now matched the miracle by turning the water of theology into the wine of philosophy.

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CHAPTER 2

THE TRINITY

FRED SANDERS

I. INTRODUCTION: THE TASK OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

THE doctrine of the Trinity stands out as more than a single doctrine within Christian theology. The word Trinity denotes a field within which an extraordinary range of dogmatic material must be comprehended, brought to expression, and integrated. Its most obvious constituent territories are those of Christology and pneumatology, but through these it also determines the comprehensive *loci* of revelation and soteriology, taking up the full scope of salvation history and providing the framework for the confession of God's gracious self-giving in the economy of salvation. Furthermore, the doctrine of the Trinity has as its characteristic feature that it takes up all of this material together, against the horizon of the eternal being of God *in se*, systematically posing the question of how salvation history is to be correlated with the divine being in itself. To characterize the doctrine of the Trinity in this way is already to charge it with its defining task: The task of the doctrine of the Trinity is to describe the connection between God and the economy of salvation.

More concretely, the doctrine of the Trinity asks about how the threefold act of God in history (the Father sending the Son and the Spirit) corresponds to the triune being of God in eternity. Trinitarianism did not originate from asking about this correspondence as if it were an open question, but on the basis of the primal Christian conviction that God is truly present to his people in Christ (Immanuel, God with us) and the Spirit. There is no prior abstract principle in place dictating

that God's salvific actions, whatever they might be, must be revelatory of the divine life itself. In the majestic freedom and condescension of God, it simply is the case that he has elected to open this triune divine depth for human knowledge and fellowship, by accomplishing salvation in this threefold way. The correspondence is grounded in God's determination to be our salvation in person, and his accompanying refusal to neglect, delegate, or even merely create human salvation. Positing himself as the source, means, and end of salvation, God makes himself present to us in salvation history in the same way as he exists in the uttermost depths of his own exalted being: as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is 'the change in the conception of God which followed, as it was necessitated by, the New Testament conception of Christ and His work' (Denney 1895: 70). On the basis of the gospel of God, Christian faith confesses the God of the gospel. When systematic theology takes up the doctrine of the Trinity, it is scrutinizing and conceptually clarifying this simultaneous confession of God and the gospel. The following chapter is a description of the doctrine of the Trinity from this evangelical perspective.

From the primary task of describing the connection between God and the economy of salvation, there is derived a secondary, critical task of the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine functions to identify God, or to specify the particular identity of the God who is the referent of all Christian discourse. 'It is the business of the doctrine of the Trinity', Karl Barth said in 1932, 'to answer the question who God is', and to distinguish 'the Christian doctrine of God as Christian... in contrast to all other possible doctrines of God' (Barth 1975: 301). To say with all seriousness that this doctrine identifies God is to treat it as God's proper name, which is the direction in which Robert W. Jenson developed Barth's lead in his influential 1982 book *The Triune Identity*. Thus 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' names the Christian God, just as 'Yahweh' and 'Allah' name the divinities of Judaism and Islam (assuming for the moment that 'Yahweh' points to a biblical monotheism disconnected from a constitutive Christology or pneumatology, as opposed to the New Testament construal of Yahweh via Christology and pneumatology) (see Soulen 2002). This critical naming function derives from the task of describing God's connection to the economy of salvation, because it is neither as a set of syllables nor as a conventional label that 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' does the work of naming, but as a condensed narrative providing 'identifying descriptions' from God's history with his people. 'Thus 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' (Jenson 1997–9: i. 46). The Christian God is specified when Israel's monotheism is elaborated through a Christology and pneumatology so robust as to be constitutive of that monotheism. Where any of these elements are lacking, God-talk has not yet specified its referent well enough to single out the God who has revealed himself in the sending of the Son and the Spirit. Lesslie Newbigin has shrewdly pointed out that the doctrine of the Trinity has usually seemed less urgent in historical periods

when Christian theology thought it could take the identity of its God for granted, whereas epochs marked by a greater awareness of cultural diversity and doctrinal pluralism (the fourth, sixteenth, and late twentieth centuries, for example) have considered the identity of God as something that requires deliberate specification (Newbigin 1963).

II. THE PLACE AND FIELD OF TRINITARIANISM

Because the doctrinal territory being surveyed here is a field-encompassing field, it is a locus where basic decisions are made which have ramifications for all of theology. Even the doctrine's proper place within systematic theology is a matter of unusually sharp contention. There was a traditional scholastic sequence, deriving from Aquinas (who in this departed from Lombard), which first established the doctrine of the one God (his existence, essence, attributes, and operations), and then turned to the triunity of that God (processions, persons, missions) (*ST* 1a. 2–26 and 27–43, in Aquinas 1975). A two-part doctrine of God thus preceded the doctrine of creation, at the beginning of the system. Modern theologians like Rahner have complained that the scholastic order brings with it the temptation to develop the doctrine of the one God in a 'quite philosophical and abstract' manner which 'refers hardly at all to salvation history', meanwhile locking the Trinity 'in even more splendid isolation, with the ensuing danger that the religious mind finds it devoid of interest' (Rahner 1970: 17–18). Rahner could also rightly acknowledge, however, that 'if the treatise *De Deo Uno* is to be real theology and not mere metaphysics, it cannot speak of the one God and his nature without speaking of the God of history and of a historical experience of him, of the God of a possible revelation and self-communication. Hence it is already orientated to the treatise *De Deo Trino*, which deals with such a God in salvation-history' (Rahner 1986: 1767).

In Protestant theology, a similar traditional order (Muller 2003) was overturned by Friedrich Schleiermacher, who postponed discrete consideration of the Trinity until an appendix of his carefully structured *Glaubenslehre*, because the doctrine fell outside of the range of things which could be described scientifically within his method of exegeting the Christian consciousness of redemption. Barth somewhat puckishly inverted Schleiermacher's decision and set the doctrine at the very beginning of his *Church Dogmatics*, precisely where a prolegomena might be expected. As Robert W. Jenson observed, 'It was Barth who taught postmodern theology that the doctrine of Trinity is there to be used: that it is not a puzzle but rather the framework within which theological puzzles can be solved. The *Kirchliche*

Dogmatik is a parade of trinitarian solutions to questions that modern theology had answered in unitarian fashion' (Jenson 1997–9: i. 154). For his part, Jenson crafted his own *Systematic Theology* with such an expansive account of the Trinity that it has room for his entire Christology, pneumatology, and atonement theology, reflecting his view that the identity of God is only rendered by the presentation of these economic events by which God identifies himself. On this plan, the doctrines of creation, the church, and eschatology could easily have been developed internal to the doctrine of the Trinity, 'but organizing the work on the plausible principle that finally *all* Christian teaching in one way or another tells God's own story would of course have obliterated the point' (Jenson 1997–9: ii. v).

Since the mere external sequencing of the doctrines is hardly a matter of great importance, consensus at the level of the table of contents is no goal worth seeking. The substantive concerns behind these questions of order, however, can be seen in the tension between two structural principles. On one hand, since systematic theology must presuppose Christology and pneumatology pervasively, it is best to deploy the doctrine of the Trinity immediately in order to allow it to shape the treatment of every doctrine. On the other hand, since the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be elaborated without rather detailed accounts of its subfields, it should be postponed until those doctrines (at the very least, the doctrines of Christ and the Spirit) are in place. All these elements mutually presuppose each other, and while systematic theology must strive to attest 'the *circumincessio* in which all the treatises of dogmatic theology are in the nature of things involved' (Rahner 1986: 1767), it is not possible to say everything at once, at least for those who live and work 'where a word has both a beginning and an ending' ('*ubi verbum et incipitur et finitur*'; Augustine, *Confessions* 9. 10).

Whenever the time comes, in a comprehensive systematic theology, to give an account of the doctrine of the Trinity, the connection between God and the economy of salvation must be described with adequate attention to both poles. In the history of the doctrine, a formidable array of conceptual categories has emerged to this end: mission, procession, person, nature, consubstantiality, relations of origin, perichoresis, psychological and social analogies, etc. Each of these categories continues to be important and illuminating in its proper place, but each has also proven capable of breaking free from its place and becoming an independent centre of interest. Whether the free-floating element is the Cappadocian account of relations, the psychological models from the final books of Augustine's *De trinitate*, or Aquinas's anatomizing of internal processions, there has been a recurring tendency for the conceptual apparatus, helpful in itself, to escape the orbit of the gospel and begin exerting an independent gravitational pull on later theology. For this reason, the history of the doctrine of the Trinity is punctuated by laments about the doctrine's apparent abstractness, irrelevance, and inscrutability—laments which are themselves expressions of the enduring Christian instinct to keep the trinitarian confession transparent to its biblical, experiential, and evangelical basis.

To establish good order among the elements, the doctrine of the Trinity must take its orientation from the dynamics of God's saving act. What vigorous trinitarian theology demands is a flexible and modest conceptual framework which retains enough vestiges of the biblical narrative to situate the conceptual elements. Much contemporary trinitarian theology operates within such a framework, though the framework itself is usually left implicit, and there is considerable difference of opinion about its precise borders. One possible explication of the framework is as follows. The field of the doctrine of the Trinity can be plotted within the coordinates of two intersecting axes which trace the dynamics of God's self-giving. The defining axis runs from the immanent life of God to the outward acts of God in creation. The other axis connects the two trinitarian persons who are revealed by their personal presence in the missions of the economy, and is therefore an axis running between the Son and the Holy Spirit. The resulting field provides the context for situating the traditional conceptual apparatus of trinitarianism, highlighting certain elements while relegating others to the background. For instance, questions about how the three can be one, or about analogical aids to understanding, are temporarily suspended because they can arise meaningfully and concretely only after being situated within the field defined by these axes. More significantly, the suggested field indicates the presence and action of the first person of the Trinity only obliquely. 'The invisible Father' is not mappable on these coordinates because of the unique, mediated way he comes to be present in the economy of salvation. Just as the hypostatic depth of God the Father is what brings forth the Son and Spirit *ad intra*, it is his love which grounds their missions in the economy. The massive attention which patristic authors gave to the Father-Son relationship is represented in modern theology by the immanent-economic axis, which was often the real point at issue in Arian controversies: is the messianic Son also an eternal Son? The other advantages of this framework are that it frustrates the over-neatness of habitual geometries, resists the seductions of the magic number three, keeps the immanent and economic poles from collapsing into each other, draws special attention to the nexus between Christology and pneumatology, and postpones elaborate conceptual definitions long enough to cede priority to the substantial descriptive work which must precede them.

III. RECENTRING TRINITARIANISM ON THE ECONOMY OF SALVATION

All of what has been said above reflects the widespread consensus in contemporary theology that the doctrine of the Trinity must be developed in a way that is centred on the *oikonomia*, the history of salvation. A classic expression of this commitment

emerged from the *Mysterium Salutis* group of Roman Catholic theologians who took up the task of carrying out the theological renewal called for by Vatican II. The subtitle of their multi-volume work, published between 1965 and 1976, was *Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, and the work attempted to recast all of Christian doctrine in terms of the key motif of salvation history, a category which had emerged from the *nouvelle théologie* of the early twentieth century as well as from dialogue with Protestant thought, and which subsequently informed the council. The assignment of setting the doctrine of the Trinity in the framework of the mystery of salvation fell to Karl Rahner, whose chapter for the series was entitled 'The Triune God as the Transcendent Primal Ground of Salvation History' (Feiner and Löhrer 1965–76: ii. 317). This chapter was later published separately as his influential short book *The Trinity* (Rahner 1970). Of all the mysteries of faith, the teaching about God's essential trinity seemed to many theologians, from that mid-century vantage point, to be the least promising for *heilsgeschichtliche* treatment because least engaged with salvation history. As Rahner later reflected, 'Since St Augustine, the "immanent" Trinity has been so much to the fore in theological discussion . . . and the "economic" Trinity has been so obscured in Christology and *De Gratia* by the principle that all actions *ad extra* in God are common to all three persons or belong to God as one, that it is hard to see what Christian existence has to do with the Trinity in actual life' (Rahner 1986: 1765–6). When, in light of the mystery of salvation, Rahner located the Trinity as 'the transcendent primal ground' of salvation history, he was articulating the consensus that marks the twentieth century's renewed interest in the doctrine: a resolute focusing of attention on the economy of salvation as the ground and criterion of all knowledge about the Trinity.

On the whole, this trend to an economic recentring of trinitarian theology has been a beneficial and necessary corrective within the long history of the doctrine. Although the importance of such recentring is often exaggerated by self-congratulatory contemporary theologies, there had indeed been a dangerous tendency in older works to construct the doctrine of the immanent Trinity from speculative or metaphysical arguments. Whenever the doctrine of the Trinity has been presented as a teaching about the inner life of God, and this inner life is filled out conceptually without sustained reference to God's self-revelation and self-giving in salvation history, the doctrine has gone adrift. It is true that God exists eternally as one being in three persons. The danger lies in stating this doctrine in a way that is opaque to its mode of revelation. In more daring versions of speculative theology, this abstraction takes the form of transcendental deductions from the concept of interpersonal love, or the structure of absolute subjectivity, or some other phenomenon sufficiently complex to entertain a threefold dialectic treatment. In conservative theologies of various kinds, a different kind of

abstraction threatens to reduce knowledge of the Trinity to a merely verbal transfer of information, as if God transferred a set of propositions about his threefoldness in order to make it known for its own sake. Either way (through speculative expansion or propositional reduction), dislocated from God's saving acts the doctrine of the immanent Trinity becomes distracting, theologically non-functional, and nettlesome. Against such 'exclusive concentration on the immanent Trinity' which has 'brought the doctrine of the Trinity into disrepute among Catholics and Protestants alike, and has often led to its being dropped from the theological curriculum', David Coffey contends, 'The proper study of the Trinity is the study of the economic Trinity' (Coffey 1999: 16).

On the other hand, merely to narrate the events of salvation history, that is, to tell the story of the Father's sending of the Son and Spirit, without allowing the claims of the narrative to push back into the eternal being of God, is to stall out at the level of the economy of salvation without actually saying anything about God himself. Soteriology then exhausts theology proper. However conceptually unstable the position may be, a great deal of trinitarian theology in the late twentieth century took as its starting point a strong interpretation of Karl Rahner's theological *Grundaxiom* that 'the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and vice versa' (Rahner 1970: 22). Taken in its most radical sense, this axiom indicates not merely an epistemological focus on the economy of salvation, but (especially in the direction indicated by the vice versa) a denial that God in himself is triune apart from salvation history. Catherine Mowry LaCugna's *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, for example, inveighed against 'the non-soteriological doctrine of God' or any version of immanent trinitarian theology which claimed to be 'an analysis of what is "inside" God' rather than 'a way of speaking about the structure or pattern of God's self-expression in salvation history' (LaCugna 1991: 225). Speaking programmatically, for LaCugna 'the fundamental issue in trinitarian theology is not the inner workings of the "immanent" Trinity, but the question of how the trinitarian pattern of salvation history is to be correlated with the eternal being of God' (LaCugna 1991: 6). This way of framing trinitarianism includes both a salutary affirmation and an unfortunately polemical denial. The advent of 'scare quotes' around the 'immanent' Trinity, for example, is symptomatic.

Such reductionistically economic trinitarianism is equivalent to a denial of the immanent Trinity altogether, and leaves theology with nothing beyond structure, pattern, and history, with no way of referring to the God who takes his stand in that history. As Karl Barth had already asked in the 1930s, 'What would "God for us" mean if it were not said against the background of "God in Himself"?' (Barth 1975: 171). Wolfhart Pannenberg's theological system depicts God as very closely engaged with history, but Pannenberg also warns that the priority of the immanent Trinity must be maintained:

It is certainly true that the trinitarian God in the history of salvation is the same God as in His eternal life. But there is also a necessary distinction that maintains the priority of the eternal communion of the triune God over that communion's explication in the history of salvation. Without that distinction, the reality of the one God tends to be dissolved into the process of the world. (Pannenberg 2000: 51)

What Pannenberg describes in somewhat metaphysical terms can be stated more personally: without this distinction, the freedom of God is eclipsed. Paul D. Molnar has argued that 'All Christian theologians realize that the purpose of a doctrine of the immanent Trinity is to recognize, uphold and respect God's freedom' (Molnar 2002: ix), and has shown how the distinction must be not simply asserted, but guarded with vigilance at strategic points such as *creatio ex nihilo*, the pre-existence of Christ as *logos asarkos*, and the distinction between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit.

Notwithstanding the variety of 'post-Rahnerian programmes to collapse the immanent Trinity into the economic' which flourished for a time (Gunton 2003: 71), the twentieth-century recentring of the doctrine of the Trinity on the economy of salvation does not of itself entail denying the immanent Trinity nor assimilating *theologia* to *oikonomia* without remainder. The editors of *Mysterium Salutis* had already recognized this in the period just prior to the ecumenical revival of interest in trinitarian theology:

without the depth dimension of *theologia*, all talk about the *oikonomia* and salvation history becomes admittedly flat and merely foreground. What Barth said of evangelical theology holds also for Catholic: 'The subject of evangelical theology is God in the history of his acts.' (Feiner and Löhrer 1965–76: i, xxx; cf. Barth 1963: 9)

Such easy balance is characteristic of any elaboration of trinitarian theology which recalls that its criterion is the clear articulation of the gospel. Thus Thomas F. Torrance strikes the same equipoise:

the historical manifestations of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have evangelical and theological significance only as they have a transhistorical and transfinite reference beyond to an ultimate ground in God himself. They cannot be Gospel if their reference breaks off at the finite boundaries of this world of space and time, for as such they would be empty of divine validity and saving significance—they would leave us trapped in some kind of historical positivism. The historical manifestations of the Trinity are Gospel, however, if they are grounded beyond history in the eternal personal distinctions between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit inherent in the Godhead, that is, if the Fatherhood of the Father, the Sonship of the Son, and the Communion of the Spirit belong to the inner life of God and constitute his very Being. (Torrance 1996: 6)

If a speculative construction of the immanent Trinity is one possible abstraction from the serious business of trinitarian theology, the opposite abstraction is a speculative deconstruction of the immanent Trinity which reduces trinitarian theology to 'some kind of historical positivism'.

IV. THE ECONOMIC-IMMANENT AXIS

Epistemic priority may rest with the economic Trinity, but ontic priority resides in the immanent. The two are bound together. Much depends, then, on the direction being followed by any particular theological treatment of the Trinity. Augustine's *De trinitate*, for example, begins with the sendings of the Son and Spirit, asking how sender and sent can be equal in all ways. From here Augustine climbs to the eternal relations of origin revealed by the missions, and ends with an attempt to conceive of the one God's immanent triunity. Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, on the other hand, begins with the most fundamental logical distinction, the processions (*ST* 1a. 27, 1: 'Are there processions in God?'), and ends with missions (*ST* 1a. 43, 1: 'Is it suitable for a divine person to be sent?'). In whichever direction it moves, trinitarian theology must make the trip along the axis between God *in se* and God *pro nobis*, tracing God's covenant faithfulness as it is grounded in his character, and thus following what Barth called 'the way of the knowledge of God' (Barth 1957: 179).

Considered as an actual movement of God's grace from above to below, the immanent-economic axis is the occasion for wonder and praise, the one event of divine self-giving than which nothing greater can be thought. Here theology inevitably approximates pure doxology. Considered as a reflective movement of thought from below to above, however, the economic-immanent axis is an intellectual project whose closest analogues are observation, induction, and the formation of conceptual models. Here theology confronts the demand that it be rigorous, consistent, and creative in articulating how the various elements of the biblical witness are to be integrated. It is one thing to assert, with Barth, that 'to the involution and convolution [*Ineinander und Miteinander*] of the three modes of being in the essence of God there corresponds exactly their involution and convolution in his work' (Barth 1975: 374). It is another thing to describe how the particular involution and convolution seen in the economic relations among Jesus Christ, his Father, and their Spirit are to be construed as revealing the very life of God. It is no surprise that the thorniest problems of the doctrine of the Trinity tend to be located precisely here.

The notoriously difficult question of the *filioque*, for example, is mainly an extended discussion about the extent to which the economic missions are revelatory of the immanent processions. The pentecostal Spirit is obviously poured out on all flesh by the Father and the exalted Son; they are the senders behind the advent of the Spirit. If it were axiomatic that every mission is revelatory of a procession, then the Spirit would obviously proceed, within the immanent Trinity, from the Father and also the Son: *filioque*. But there are good reasons to withhold assent from so immediate a deduction, and not simply the mono-patrist or anti-filioquist reasons traditionally urged by the eastern churches. More fundamentally, the direct deduction of trinitarian relations from the history of

salvation is rendered unworkable by what Gary D. Badcock has called ‘the problem of economic diversity’, which is a ‘diversity, not only of the possible trinitarian *interpretations* to which the economy of salvation is susceptible, but of the actual economic basis of trinitarian theology itself’ (Badcock 1997: 213; see 212–29).

Father, Son, and Spirit interact in so many ways in the economy of salvation that we are actually confronted with the material for multiple models that resist harmonizing. In the instance of the *filioque*, while the Word pours out the Spirit, the Spirit also brings about the incarnation of the Word. As Bruce D. Marshall summarizes, ‘Thus we can read off from the economy both that the Spirit originates from the Son, and that the Son originates from the Spirit. But these look like contradictories, so one of them has to be false’ (Marshall 2004b: 197). Why do filioquists ignore the trinitarian implications of the spiritual conception of Christ and of the other triadic configurations? Why do monopatrists refuse to read back along the trajectory of the Son’s sending of the Spirit? Without some criterion for deciding which economic relations are revelatory of God’s own life, such problems are not resolvable, and divergent conclusions are bound to seem arbitrary.

If the excess of economic configurations seems at first to set a limit to coherent trinitarian constructs, the sheer abundance of relationships may also hold untapped possibilities. There are economic relations among Father, Son, and Spirit which are clearly witnessed in scripture, but which have been underused in developing the doctrine of the immanent Trinity. Relatively early in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, the Christian tradition gave privileged status to one set of relations as the foundation of trinitarian difference: relations of origin. The *filioque* disagreement is precisely over these primal relations, to the exclusion of the others. For example, it has not normally been considered relevant that John of Damascus described the Holy Spirit as ‘the companion of the Word and the revealer of His energy, . . . an essential power . . . proceeding from the Father and resting in the Word, and showing forth the Word’ (*On the Orthodox Faith* 1.7, in Schaff 1980: ix. 5b). Is John mobilizing these verbs and prepositions to describe the *oikonomia*, or does he allude to the Spirit’s accompanying, manifesting, and resting on the Word within the immanent Trinity as well? If they are realities within the immanent Trinity, are they any less decisive than the relations of origin? In ecumenical dialogue over the *filioque*, Jürgen Moltmann has proposed distinguishing between two dimensions of God’s life: the constitutional level of the processions, and the relational level at which all of these other pluriform and perichoretic relations take place. The two dimensions need not be thought of as temporally sequential nor ontologically ranked, merely as distinct (Moltmann 1981). Pannenberg likewise has argued that there is a ‘richly structured nexus of relationships’ among the three, and that while the persons are indeed constituted by their relations to each other, ‘yet the persons cannot be reduced to individual relations’ such as origin. ‘None of the other relations is merely incidental to the Son and Spirit in their relation to the Father. All have a place in the distinctiveness

and fellowship of the trinitarian persons' (Pannenberg 1991–8: i. 320). Robert W. Jenson, typically, makes the point more clearly but too drastically: 'that the Spirit rests upon the Son is not a phenomenon merely of the economic Trinity—there are in any case no such phenomena' (Jenson 1997–9: i. 143).

The thorough privileging of the relations of origin has put a certain amount of pressure on trinitarianism, forcing the rest of the data to find recognition elsewhere, as for instance in Moltmann's somewhat idiosyncratic constitutive-relational distinction. The same pressure has also found release in established doctrinal traditions like the exploration of the divine energies in Eastern Orthodoxy, or the explication of eternal decrees and an immanent trinitarian covenant in Reformed thought. In their own ways, each of these traditions opens up zones where the manifold relations of the three persons can be confessed without causing confusion over the processions. Whatever their limits, they approach the insight that relational complexity in the *oikonomia* may faithfully enact the richness and multiplicity of the personal relations in the being of the one God. The sudden popularity of a strong version of social trinitarianism in the late twentieth century is probably most charitably understood as another of these attempts to trace the richness of the economic configurations to their transcendent ground in the divine being. Granted such a 'richly structured nexus of relationships' among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the history of salvation, the immanent-trinitarian nexus must be equally rich and no less structured, even as we move upward along the axis from economic to immanent. This move alone, however, would not signal what is novel in contemporary social trinitarianism. The characteristic social-trinitarian move is to transpose the conceptual apparatus as well, positing in the immanent Trinity three distinct centres of consciousness, volition, and agency, which stand as persons over against each other with faculties of their own. At issue are some general questions of theological language, such as whether terms like 'person' and 'self' can be employed univocally at both ends of the axis. Equally important is the gap that appears here between an ancient valorizing of essence categories (with person categories relatively understocked), over against a modern elaboration of person categories (with an accompanying emptying out of essence categories). The strength of this recent social trinitarianism is this: Everyone is bound to be a social trinitarian at the economic level. Porting over all of the categories (person, mind, agent, will, faculties, etc.), however, as univocally true of the eternal divine persons, is probably an instinctive attempt to bridge the gap between the richly interpersonal economy (Jesus and his Father) and the sheer austerity of the relations of origin confessed by classic trinitarianism (paternity and filiality). Whatever that 'richly structured nexus of relationships' is among Father, Son, and Spirit, it must be confessed to be love. Wherever relations of origin seem inadequate to bear that description, there will be a need to articulate the other relations in which scripture sets before our eyes the love of the Father and the Son in the Spirit.

Fraught questions such as the *filioque* and the meaning of personhood are rooted, then, in the prior question of what criteria should guide trinitarian theology in interpreting the economy of salvation as revelatory of the divine life. Prior to that question, however, is a fundamental question of why Christian doctrine should regard the *oikonomia* as revelatory of *theologia* proper in the first place. Where does the initial cue come from that lets the interpreter know to start the project? Does the economy itself teach us to read the economy as an image or revelation of God's self? Walter Kasper has warned against behaving as if the Trinity is deducible from the history of salvation 'by a kind of extrapolation'. Reading evidence from the economy back into the immanent Trinity 'was certainly not the path the early church followed in developing the doctrine of the Trinity in the form of confession and dogma' (Kasper 1984: 276). Kasper points away from the welter of events that make up the economy and fixes our attention first on the primal ecclesial act of baptism in the triune name, a practice and formula which developed 'from the risen Lord's commission regarding baptism', that is, the great commission passage, Matthew 28: 19. 'Knowledge of the trinitarian mystery was thus due directly to the revelation of the Word and not to a process of deduction' (Kasper 1984: 276).

Whatever riches of the knowledge of God are revealed in the history of salvation, to approach the history as if it were self-evidently God's self-revelation would run perilously close to positing a general principle about the God-world relationship, a general principle which would itself be underdetermined by revelation. Divine revelation is inalienably linked to intention on the part of the revealer, and 'unfolds through deeds and words bound together by an inner dynamism', to use the words of Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* (§2, in Tanner 1990: ii. 972). Kasper's caution is a good reminder that theology should have a good conscience about behaving as if it were led by scripture, even taking crucial guidance from the inspired text as containing, among other things, revealed propositions. Kasper's own theological work is an instance of a project that is well disposed toward revelation through history and committed to reading the signs of the Trinity in the history of salvation. He admits, however, that theology is in possession of a rudimentary doctrine of the immanent Trinity even before it turns to the task of exegeting salvation history under the guidance of an axiom that the economy is revelatory: 'This axiom presupposes knowledge of the immanent Trinity and is meant to interpret and concretize the immanent Trinity in an appropriate way' (Kasper 1984: 277). Carried out in conjunction with some amount of verbal revelation, reading the economy is not a self-initiated or self-norming project. As Bruce D. Marshall notes, 'if we are to "read" the economic data in a way which yields a coherent set of results regarding the relations of origin among the divine persons, we need guidance which the economic data do not themselves provide—perhaps from some sort of authoritative teaching about what makes each person the unique individual he is' (Marshall 2004b: 197). Any such authoritative teaching would of course have to be handled

not as a sheer given, but scrutinized to see whether 'an inner dynamism' between word and deed can be discerned. The main lines of the doctrine of the Trinity have been defined by a Christian tradition which at least thinks it does discern such a relation.

What is needed above all is a holistic approach which can assess all of the economic evidence in one massive movement of theological understanding. Because of the uniquely integral character of the doctrine of the Trinity, it cannot be formulated in a fragmentary way, one bit of evidence after another. Specifically, the fragmentary approach cannot of itself underwrite the necessary transposition of the biblical evidence from the salvation-history level to the transcendent, immanent-trinitarian level, a transposition which requires that all the evidence be reinterpreted simultaneously with its structuring patterns intact. Making the jump from economy to Trinity requires a kind of economy-wide gestalt perception, in which the involution and convolution of Father, Son, and Spirit around the life of Jesus are seen as one coherent pattern bearing a discernible, describable, threefold form. This triune form, once recognized, can then be understood as the projection onto human history of the form of God's triune life. Taken in isolation, none of the elements of the economy makes a particularly strong case for being read back into the immanent Trinity: not even the begetting of the Son or the procession of the Spirit. They must be perceived together integrally, together with the structures obtaining among them, in order to motivate and accomplish the jump to the immanent Trinity.

This becomes a more urgent requirement the more trinitarian theology settles into its task of reflection on revelation that is always mediated by the text. Arguments about texts can quite readily degenerate into fragmentary observations and isolated proofs, to the detriment of the larger doctrinal outlines. This tendency has been exacerbated by the rise of a crucial dialogue partner for modern systematic theology: the discipline of historical-critical biblical research. The overall trend of modern biblical scholarship has been toward a severe attenuation of the traditional exegetical arguments by which the doctrine of the Trinity was crafted and by which it has been supported since patristic times. This is true not only of biblical criticism in its most corrosively sceptical expressions, which have often enough been explicitly anti-trinitarian in scope and motivation. Richard A. Muller has argued that what was occurring in the era after the Reformation, and is continuing today, is a massive 'alteration of patterns of interpretation away from the patristic and medieval patterns that had initially yielded the doctrine of the Trinity and given it a vocabulary consistent with traditional philosophical usage' (Muller 2003: 62). To say that this brings us to a crisis is not to lament the contribution of critical biblical research: Who today would want to support the doctrine of the Trinity using the strangely agglomerated testimony of Proverbs 8 (translated, no less, with Wisdom saying, 'God created me at the beginning of his ways'), the *comma johanneum's* 'three that bear witness in heaven', and an

allegorical gloss on the Good Samaritan leaving two coins (the Son and the Spirit) with the innkeeper? The vocabulary and conceptual apparatus of trinitarianism need to be chastened and kept near to scripture, and critical scholarship demands this. But the discipline also tends toward fragmentation and a kind of textual atomism which make the trinitarian construal of scripture impossible. Whatever weaknesses may have hobbled patristic and medieval interpretative practices, and however unusable some of those techniques may be for us, their great virtue was always their grasp of the overall meaning of scripture. The doctrine of the Trinity is a large doctrine, and its formulation and defence have always required a certain ampleness of reflection on the revealed data. The way forward is to admit that, in Colin Gunton's words, 'it must be acknowledged that there is some doubt as to whether Scripture supports the creedal confession directly or without great labour'. For the justification of a crucial trinitarian doctrine like the Son's eternal generation, 'prooftexting is not enough. . . . [W]e must go beyond any single proof-text or texts and examine the broader context in which it must be understood, that of Scripture as a whole' (Gunton 2003: 63). The doctrine of the Trinity is a conceptual foregrounding of the entire matrix of economic revelation. Only in this comprehensive context can the Christological *monogenesis* of John 1: 18 be combined with the pneumatological *ekporeusis* of John 15: 26 to produce a doctrine of the eternal Trinity. It is senseless to try to retain the result of the early church's holistic interpretation of scripture (the doctrine of the Trinity) without cultivating, in a way appropriate for our own time, the interpretative practice which produced that result. The crucial interpretative practice, which as we have seen must inform both exegesis and doctrinal theology, is attention to the economy of salvation as a coherent whole.

V. REAL PRESENCES

The doctrine of the Trinity, centred on the history of salvation and inquiring systematically into the connection between that history and the God who takes his stand therein, is an account of the real, personal presence of the Son and the Spirit among us. The economy of salvation is actuated by the two kairotic missions, the Christological and the pneumatological (Gal. 4: 4–6). These two missions are mutually constitutive, or configured internally toward one another, such that it is hard to know whether it is best to go on describing them as two missions or as a single, twofold mission of the Son and the Spirit. Without the anointing Spirit, there is no *christos*, no anointed one. On the other hand, the Spirit is the 'Spirit of Jesus Christ', the 'Spirit of the Son', and comes decisively into the church through

the ascended Christ on the basis of his accomplished work of incarnation, death, and resurrection. The outpouring of the Spirit seems to presuppose the work of Christ and to find its purpose in extending that work or applying it. The incarnation and atonement, on the other hand, seem to be ordered toward making the pentecostal indwelling possible. The Irenaean metaphor of the Father taking hold of the world through his two hands has become increasingly common, and a growing awareness of the interpenetration between Christology and pneumatology has opened new paths for theological exploration (Del Colle 1994). All of this, however, is predicated on the fact that the second and third persons of the Trinity are confessed to have been actually sent out from their inalienable centre in the divine life, to enter our existence in manners appropriate to each of them: hypostatic union on the one hand, and indwelling on the other. These missions, of course, are not categories of creation but of redemption, and we are bypassing the question of personal trinitarian presences in creation to pursue the decisive question of how the persons of the Trinity are present in redemption. To put it another way, we are asking how systematic theology in the various ecumenical traditions has developed the doctrine of grace in trinitarian terms.

By common consent, it was for us and our salvation that God has drawn very near in the Son and the Spirit. But the distinct theological traditions of the Christian churches have explicated this rather alarming nearness in various ways: through doctrines of appropriations, of energies, and of created grace. Each of these doctrines is attended with some ambiguity regarding the nearness which it permits. Appropriation, for example, is the ancient practice of attributing to one person of the Trinity a characteristic or action which is in fact common to the Trinity as a whole. The ancient creed appropriates the creation of heaven and earth to God the Father almighty, but this is not to be understood as proper or exclusive: the Son and Spirit are also the creator, are also the almighty. It is proper to refer creation to the first person of the Trinity because from the first person proceeds everything within the Godhead. The whole point of appropriation is to illuminate or illustrate the distinct features of each person, even in those undivided external acts of the Trinity where no distinct personal action is manifest (Emery 2005). However, the doctrine can easily function the other way, relegating every apparent trinitarian disclosure in history to being a function of the one God causing effects within creation, but sending signals that these effects are to be referred in name or understanding to one particular person of the Trinity. External actions appropriated to a trinitarian person are not real presences in the way incarnation and Pentecost are. A central task embraced by western theology, in fact, is explicating the missions of the Son and Spirit as being proper, not merely appropriated.

The theology of the eastern churches does not use the doctrine of appropriations as thoroughly as western theology, preferring to describe external actions of the Trinity as concerted rather than undivided. Instead, it has employed a conceptual distinction between the ineffable divine essence and the uncreated energies around

that essence; the redeemed can participate in the latter but not in the former. The doctrine seems to have been crafted to explain how monks involved in hesychastic prayer were in fact communing with the true God, seeing uncreated light rather than created. Yet this doctrine, designed to underwrite intimate contact with God, can also convert suddenly into its opposite and serve as an explanation of how Christian religious experience does not in fact strike home in the heart of God. In this case, much depends on whether the uncreated energies are thought of in entitative terms, or alternatively as divine actions. The more the energies are described in entitative terms, the more they seem to be buffers between God and the human person. When they are construed more dynamically along the lines of divine actions, it seems clearer that believers are immediately in the hands of God their redeemer.

Roman Catholic theology under the Thomist rubric (and this includes magisterial teachings such as those of Trent and Vatican I) has spoken of God's personal presence to believers in a way that includes the notion of created grace. According to this tradition, God does not directly and personally act on the created person without a created medium, but instead causes effects in the redeemed by the infusion of a gift which is distinct from himself. The point of the doctrine is not to deny God's personal agency, but to account for it in a way that recognizes the form of its reception by a creature and to preserve the kind of room for creaturely freedom which direct divine action on the soul would seem to obliterate. Sympathetically understood, as for instance it has been in dialogue with Eastern Orthodoxy (Williams 1999; Marshall 2004a), created grace is not a substitute for uncreated grace (the personal presence of God, particularly of the Holy Spirit), but the means by which uncreated grace causes effects in the soul. On the other hand, once in place the doctrine has acted as an obstacle to a clear confession of differentiated trinitarian presence: the Spirit's indwelling is less proper to the third person and more proper to the Godhead, and the Our Father is addressed to God the Trinity rather than God the Father. This set of questions in Roman Catholic theology is vexed, as interpreters like Yves Congar have freely admitted (Congar 1997: ii. 79–99).

In contrast to this, classical Protestant theology has tended to hold to a direct and apparently naive use of biblical language, taking some biblical statements about the three persons at face value without subjecting them to the sophisticated analysis of the medieval scholastic traditions. From the clear but unelaborated statements of Calvin ('the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself'; *Institutes* 3. 1. 1, in Calvin 1960: 538) to the more scholastic works of Owen and Turretin, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer is described, without nuance or qualification, as a direct personal office proper to the third person of the Trinity distinctly. On the Reformed side of Protestantism, this commitment is strengthened by two things: a notorious lack of squeamishness over the notion that direct divine action can move the human will without

obliterating properly human freedom; and a preference for categories of interpersonal fellowship as opposed to categories of ontological participation. It is worth noting, however, that the Wesleyan and Pietist offshoots of Protestantism affirm the Spirit's direct personal presence, either not noticing or not caring that their commitment to libertarian human agency might equally lead them to install created grace as a buffer between God and human action.

The doctrine of the Trinity, as an ancient landmark of consensual Christian belief, has long been the site of great ecumenical convergence (the *filioque* notwithstanding). If the varied theological and confessional traditions have anything in common, it is the ancient doctrine of God, or theology proper. However, with the recent recentring of the doctrine on the economy of salvation, certain latent tensions have come to the surface. Oddly, the more clearly the doctrine of God's triunity is integrated into soteriology (an integration demanded by exigencies internal to both doctrines), the more the Trinity will be elaborated in terms shaped by confessional concerns and disputes regarding soteriology. When Trinity and gospel are closely linked, contentions about the character of the gospel also show up in the doctrine of God. This is something of a paradox in recent developments. The ecumenical centrality of trinitarian confession, however, is no illusion. We should gamble on the possibility that the convergence of the various doctrinal traditions in the doctrine of God might have a greater depth of ingression in the Christian church's web of belief than do the details of the various soteriological elaborations. Greater attention to the connection of Trinity and gospel could then be expected to open new avenues of approach to some deadlocked problems. For example, in the thicket of questions surrounding the direct personal presences of Son and Spirit in the economy of grace, it may be possible to marshal economic-trinitarian resources before undertaking a redescription of the zone between God and man traditionally populated by accounts of appropriations, uncreated energies, and created grace. The economic Trinity itself may contain adequate resources for addressing the concerns that arise here: the enhypostatic Christology of post-Chalcedonian conciliar thought puts the eternal Logos personally into the economy in a way that deserves further exploration, and a proper mission of the Holy Spirit as the agent of divine indwelling is the pneumatological parallel. Between these two hypostatically distinct missions, there may be enough space for a satisfactory account of human freedom (Smail 1988: 66–73). The way forward is a more determined commitment to these two real presences (and decidedly downstream from them, the sacraments). In this way, Christian theology can confess the integral doctrine of the Trinity in a way that acknowledges, with all the saints and also with appropriate conceptual integrity and rigour, 'what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ' (Eph. 3: 18).

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CHAPTER 3

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

STEPHEN R. HOLMES

I. INTRODUCTION

PERHAPS no doctrine of theology is more ubiquitous than that of the divine attributes or perfections. It is possible to receive, and perhaps, given a liturgy to follow, even to celebrate, the eucharist without any theological understanding of what is being done—although it will hardly be an honouring celebration in the latter case. It is certainly—gloriously—possible to be redeemed without any notion of redemption. At times it has been proposed that Christians should restrict their language to biblical terms and so refuse to engage in Christological or trinitarian theology. (This procedure was seriously proposed as a way through the fourth-century trinitarian controversies, and has occasionally been revived since the Reformation by radical Protestant and Free Church groups wary of any dependence on tradition.) It is, however, impossible to speak about or to God without some commitment concerning the divine attributes. A sentence that begins ‘God is...’, praise that asserts ‘Lord, you are...’, or intercession that pleads some aspect of the character of God (‘have mercy, Lord, for you are...’) all already betray a doctrine of the divine perfections. That a word (e.g., ‘good’) is held to be a more adequate continuation of each of these statements than other possible words (e.g., ‘bad’, ‘morally indifferent’) is a theological commitment.

Abraham pleads the perfections of God over the cities of the plain: ‘Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?’ (Gen. 18: 25). The highest praises, and the

deepest laments, of the psalmists alike turn on recalling before God his attributes: 'Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable. . . . On the glorious splendour of your majesty. . . . I will meditate. . . . They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and shall sing aloud of your righteousness. . . . The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love' (Ps. 145: 3–8); 'Has his steadfast love ceased for ever? . . . Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?' (Ps. 77: 8–9). In just these few verses it is proclaimed that God is just, righteous, great, majestic, abundantly good, gracious, merciful, steadfast in love, slow to anger, compassionate; the task of a doctrine of God's perfections is to bring some order to such exuberant and heartfelt exclamations.

That the issue is ubiquitous does not make it easy, of course. There are at least five problems in this task:

1. There is an issue of *derivation*. How do we decide which words are appropriate completions of the sentence 'God is . . .'? 'Good' might seem easy, but terms like 'wrathful' or 'impassible' have generated extended and heated debate in recent decades.
2. There is an issue of *span*. 'God is good' presumably does not say everything Christian theologians would wish to say about God. How many words are necessary before we may claim that the list displays some measure of comprehensiveness? The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* defines God as 'a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth', which Charles Hodge asserts is 'the best definition of God ever penned by man' (Hodge 1960: i. 367). Is Hodge right? On what criteria might the question be decided?
3. There is a problem of *analogy*. I may well find myself affirming in prayer one morning that 'God is good', and then in conversation soon afterwards affirming of a certain undergraduate student that she is also 'good', and perhaps of a cricketer in the headlines that he is 'very good'. 'Good' in each context carries a discernibly different meaning: the cricketer demonstrates finely honed physical ability and coolness under pressure; the student shows academic promise; and God—what does 'good' mean when applied to God? Clearly something different from the two other uses in the example, but is it something different from every use with a human being as a referent? This seems likely: of which of the saints will it be said 'she is good in exactly the same way that God is good'? But if this is so, how does any meaning attach to the word 'good' when applied to God?
4. There is a philosophical problem of *definition*. Is it appropriate to call God 'good' because there is some external standard of goodness against which we may measure God? If so, does this not suggest that there is something greater than God, which stands in judgement over him? But if not, does 'good' mean anything at all—is it not just an empty cipher we choose to apply to God, when we apparently could have as easily and appropriately chosen 'evil'?

5. There is a *historical* problem concerning the relationship of certain divine attributes to other areas of theology. Briefly stated, there are a class of attributes (including impassibility, simplicity, and immutability) that were until about 1800 held to be necessary to orthodox accounts of the Trinity, the incarnation, and the atonement. Since then, it has been widely assumed and argued by both philosophers and theologians that such attributes are in fact in straight contradiction with trinitarian theology, Christology, and soteriology.

These five issues will give shape to the account of the divine perfections in this chapter.

II. THE QUESTION OF DERIVATION

How may we discover words that are adequate to the task of naming God? Here immediately we come face to face with what will be the core problem of this chapter. If we were to ask the historical question, ‘prior to 1800, how were such words discovered in Christian theology?’ the answer is surprisingly easy. One method dominates, the method of the *viae* (ways), and it is found in embryonic form in the fathers of both East and West, in developed form in the great medieval Catholic summae, and virtually unchanged in the Lutheran and Reformed school dogmatics of the seventeenth century. God, on this account, is utter perfection, the *summum bonum*, or ‘the absolute’ in more modern language. Therefore to discover what may be truly said about God, one attributes to him every discernable good to the highest possible degree, and denies of him completely every discernable limitation.

The former procedure is the *via eminentiae*, the ‘way of eminence’. Potency, the ability to act, is a discernable good in human life, as is knowledge. God, therefore, must be as potent as it is possible to be, ‘omnipotent’, and as knowing as it is possible to be, ‘omniscient’. The latter procedure is the *via negativa*, or ‘negative way’. The inevitable ending of human existence is perceived to be a bad thing, which we would be better without. Therefore, God is understood to be ‘immortal’. A consideration of spatial limitation, or finitude, might be held to teach us that God is ‘infinite’. To these must be added a third ‘way’, the *via causalitatis*, or ‘way of causality’, in which it is assumed that effects demonstrate something of their cause, and so a knowledge of creation can lead us to a knowledge of God. As St Thomas Aquinas argued, every change is caused by a prior change, and so tracing the causal chain back one reaches either an infinite regression, which he takes to be impossible, or ‘at some first cause of change not itself being changed by anything’, which he identifies with God (*ST* 1a. 2, 3, in Aquinas 1975).

I have quoted St Thomas, but St John of Damascus’ codification of the tradition of the Greek fathers or Francis Turretin’s Reformed polemics would both witness to the same method. As I have indicated, however, around 1800 there is a radical shift in approach to the question. It is difficult to find a theologian (as opposed to a

philosopher of religion) in the twentieth century who would accept such a method. For an eloquent and forceful statement of the objections, we might turn to Emil Brunner. In his *Christian Doctrine of God*, he suggests that there is 'an actual contradiction between two ideas of God, which... cannot be combined..., the philosophical and speculative Idea of God on the one hand, and on the other, one which is based upon the thought of God in revelation' (Brunner 1949: 241–2). The God of Abraham and the God of the philosophers are alien, and great harm is done by any attempt to bring them together.

That such an attempt was made, and was so enormously influential, is traced to two causes: the unreflective but disastrous adoption of methods of Greek philosophy by the church fathers and the enormous influence in later centuries of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius. (This corpus is now fairly universally believed to date from the fifth century; however, the medievals tended to assume it was by the Dionysius who was converted by Paul in Athens (Acts 18), and so had almost apostolic authority.) The task for theology today is to perform or complete the criticism of Greek philosophy and so to purge the Christian account of divine attributes of those claims about God that lack theological warrant. I have followed Brunner in this criticism, but to indicate its ubiquity amongst recent theologians, it may be found in extreme form in Jenson (1997–9: i, esp. 9–11, 112–13, 131–3, 153), Moltmann (1974; 1981), and Gunton (2002); and in measured form in Barth (1957: 329–30) and Pannenberg (1971). This is also, of course, a part of the standard feminist criticism of traditional Christian doctrines of God.

If such criticism can be bracketed for a moment, it may be asked whether the method of the *viae* is retrievable. As I described it above, two problems are evident, but they may provide each other's solution. First, this appears to be a doctrine of God derived quite apart from revelation, an exercise entirely in natural theology. The procedure as described could be practised without difficulty by one who had never opened the biblical text or heard the name of Jesus Christ. This, of course, is not a logical problem (it does not make the position incoherent), and, indeed, in recent years it has been seen as a strength, rendering a doctrine of God that is generally rationally accessible and so open to philosophical investigation without worrying about difficult concepts such as revelation or faith. This philosophical procedure has become known as 'perfect being theology', and has given rise to a number of works exploring the logical coherence of a God who is held to exhibit every human virtue maximally, and to be completely free of every human weakness.

However philosophically attractive such a procedure, it is fair to say that a doctrine of God built without reference to scripture or the gospel is going to appear odd theologically, to say the least, so this remains my first problem. The second lies in the smuggled premiss in each of the three ways: the first two rely on assumptions that we know which aspects of human existence are positive, and which are limitations (Clark Pinnock (2001) makes the point provocatively with a book title, *Most Moved Mover*). The third relies on the assumption that good logical arguments can be made from the nature of effects to their cause.

Given this, might we claim that the smuggled knowledge in the *via eminentiae* and the *via negativa* is precisely the place where accounts of revelation become decisive? That is, we know what is a good, and so must be predicated eminently of God, and what is a limitation, and so must be denied of God, only through a study of scripture, or through a telling of the story of Jesus, or however else we might choose to describe revelation. Consider such attributes as mercy, compassion, or humility: it is not difficult to point to ethical traditions in history or across the world that deny that such things are goods, yet Christian theology has wanted to ascribe each word to God on the basis of what is revealed in the Bible and, in particular, in the gospel story. If the question concerning the influence of Greek philosophy can be adequately answered, this procedure would seem to provide a logically sound and theologically satisfying account of the derivation of the divine attributes.

(The problem with the *via causalitatis* reduces very simply to a set of questions concerning natural theology. If there happen to be well-formed logical arguments that move from details of the created order to facts about the creator, then natural theology is possible and will contribute in part to the doctrine of the divine perfections. I presently believe that there are no such arguments—I think the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* necessarily denies their existence—and so tend to the view that the *via causalitatis* is a dead end.)

I will argue by the end of this chapter that the problem concerning Greek philosophy can be solved, but it is perhaps worth pausing to ask about the derivation of the divine perfections if it cannot. The answers provided by the critics are surprisingly unified, differing only in detail. The perfections become in one way or another descriptions of God's relationship to the world, rather than descriptions of God's own life *in se*. The more extreme version of this tends to suggest that God's own life is somehow defined in his relationship to the world (so Jenson or Moltmann); this has the merit of coherence but is an unacceptable move. The more cautious version appears to suggest that God indeed has, or could have had, a life apart from the world, but that this life is not properly described as 'holy' or 'good'. 'In Himself, however, God is not the Almighty, the Omniscient, the Righteous One; this is what He is in relation to the world which he has created' (Brunner 1949: 247; cf. Pannenberg 1991–8: i. 359–70). This is an equally difficult conclusion.

III. THE QUESTION OF 'SPAN'

Even if we have adequately answered the question of definition and can demonstrate that 'love' and 'holiness' are words adequate to God, to speak only of God's love with no mention of God's holiness—or, indeed, to speak only of

God's holiness with no mention of God's love—seems still to speak improperly. This is the question of 'span'. If the task is to find language adequate to speak of God, then it is not just that the language chosen must refer adequately, it must also demonstrate some degree of comprehensiveness.

Of course, no one has ever 'comprehended' that light which shines in the darkness (John 1: 5), but the limitations of a doctrine of divine perfections is a matter for the next section. One may meaningfully aim at adequacy, at an account that is at least not obviously lopsided or incomplete and that points towards each facet of the character of God revealed in the biblical witness. One could make two lists of words traditionally attributed to God of the same length, where one was manifestly less adequately comprehensive than the other. Consider, for instance, the two claims, 'God is holy, just, righteous, jealous, and unchanging', and 'God is holy, loving, righteous, merciful, and unchanging'.

An examination of the history of attempts to list the perfections of God, particularly in the Protestant scholastics, suggests that one particular procedure has regularly been adopted by theologians aiming at comprehensiveness: the splitting of the attributes into two classes. In Reformed dogmatics these are generally described as 'communicable' and 'incommunicable' attributes. Quite apart from the echoes of Reformed-Lutheran polemics over the *communicatio idiomatum*, such language is perhaps unhappy in suggesting an inability on God's part. Nonetheless, the intention is right: God has graciously and sovereignly chosen that his creatures will image forth or share certain perfections of his being, whereas others he has sovereignly and graciously chosen to retain as marks of his majesty alone. Thus creatures may love, but no creature is infinite; some creatures are made holy by God, but no creature is immutable. The attributes are thus not 'communicable' and 'incommunicable' so much as 'communicated' and 'uncommunicated'.

It may seem that this distinction relates directly to the distinction between the *via eminentiae* and the *via negativa* described above, but this is not in fact the case. To take only one example, God has chosen to create the angels immortal, at least according to classical Christian dogmatics. (Many writers also assert that angels are spiritual, i.e., unembodied, which would be another example of an attribute derived from the *via negativa* which nonetheless appears to be communicable; this point is disputed in the tradition, however.) Some scholastic writers did in fact use 'positive' and 'negative' attributes as their twofold distinction, thus aligning precisely with the *viae*.

Other language that has been used to describe the two classes includes 'personal' and 'absolute'. While this is superficially attractive, in that words such as 'love' or 'holiness' seem more obviously 'personal' than words like 'eternity' or 'immutability', it seems to me even more unhappy, not least in its echoes of technical trinitarian language. If some perfections of God are labelled 'personal', then there will be an inevitable pressure to align them to the trinitarian persons in ways that the 'impersonal' attributes are not aligned. 'Absolute' and 'relative' has a similar flaw, both echoing 'relation' language in the Trinity and perhaps suggesting that

God is ‘eternal’ in himself but ‘loving’ only in relation to the creation. Barth chooses to describe the two classes as ‘perfections of God’s love’ and ‘perfections of God’s freedom’; this echoes his fundamental definition of God throughout *Church Dogmatics* II/1 as ‘the One who loves in freedom’ (Barth 1957: 257). Barth offers good reasons for his decision, but the language appears in danger of suggesting that ‘love’ and ‘freedom’ are the controlling perfections of God, under which all else must be arranged. The same might be said of Pannenberg’s opting for ‘infinity’ and ‘love’—indeed, Pannenberg claims centrality for ‘infinity’ as an attribute of God (Pannenberg 1991–8: i. 396). As will be seen, there are good dogmatic reasons to refuse to promote any of the perfections above the others.

It will be noted, however, that all these different forms of twofold division have a similar intention, even if at the margins one perfection or another might fall on either side of the line depending which schema we choose. There are those perfections of God for which an analogue may be found in the creature, and those which are utterly beyond anything in our experience. The ‘positive’ attributes, the ‘perfections of God’s loving’, the ‘communicated’ perfections, refer to aspects of God’s nature that may be hinted at through human stories (‘out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him. . . . And in anger his lord handed him over. . . . So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you’; Matt. 18: 23–35). The ‘negative’ attributes, the ‘perfections of God’s freedom’, the ‘uncommunicated’ perfections, refer to aspects of God’s nature about which we can only speak by denying that certain facets of our common experience can be mapped in any way onto God (‘God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind’; Num. 23: 19).

The further question of ‘span’ might appear more linguistic than theological. Assuming that we can argue that God may properly be described as both ‘merciful’ and ‘loving’, there is perhaps a question as to whether one needs, in writing a theology of the perfections of God, to include the word ‘merciful’ alongside the word ‘loving’, or whether the latter word covers all the semantic ground necessary and so effectively includes the former. This is more than a linguistic issue, however, and in fact gets near to the heart of any doctrine of the divine perfections, in that it asks both what words mean when attributed to God, and how the different attributes of God are in fact related to each other. To these issues I now turn.

IV. THE QUESTION OF ANALOGY

Our language—all our language—is inadequate to the task of speaking of God. Even when we refer to those perfections that we call ‘positive’ or ‘communicable’ or ‘communicated’, we are always using language that is doubly difficult. There is a