

The Spirituality of Theology and the Work of Rowan Williams

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ABSTRACT

The Spirituality of Theology and the Work of Rowan Williams

Sara Terreault

This study examines the relationship between spirituality and the theological endeavour in light of the work of Rowan Williams, the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury. It traces the history of the relationship, which by the modern era was one of disconnection, and it considers the implications of contemporary culture, and especially the effects of postmodernist thought on the situation. The central thesis contends that Rowan Williams, in his work as theologian, is especially skilled in the task of bringing spirituality and theology into renewed dialogue, and both into conversation with postmodernity.

For Richard, Eli and Jacob: they know why.

The Spirituality of Theology and the Work of Rowan Williams

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I. Introduction

When Rowan Williams was installed as the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury in February 2003, the response both within the Anglican Communion and beyond was varied and intense. While his distinguished career as an academic theologian, his years of pastoral experience, and his familiarity with Church administration in Wales recommended him for the job to some people, the intellectual daring with which he has pushed many anxiously-protected theological, ethical and political boundaries left others critical of and even hostile toward his appointment. As protest rose within the influential evangelical wing of the Church against Williams's supposed "liberal" leanings, and the news media welcomed the tension, dwelling on a few flash-point issues reported with varying degrees of accuracy and sensitivity.

For the most part, the press ignored – or was unaware of – the commitment to orthodoxy that is a hallmark of Williams's theological method, and Church conservatives did not acknowledge, or recognise, this faithfulness as traditional. Subtlety of thought and depth of attentiveness were largely overlooked by a popular culture more cultivated in the pace and superficiality of the sound-byte and the drama of political polarization than the costly time-taking required by, and complex difficulties inherent in, honest theological reflection. In the words of theologian Nicholas Lash, "The term 'liberal' makes no sense applied to him ... he's the best theologian in Britain and thoroughly

orthodox. But society has been de-christianised so rapidly that few people recognize what an orthodox Christian is . . . ¹

Nonetheless, acknowledgments of Williams's qualities emerged amidst the loud reactions, and these tended to consider his personal qualities as much as his professional accomplishments: frequently cited were his "honesty", his "sincerity", and what some described unabashedly as his "holiness". It was, in fact, the perception of the integrity and depth of his spirituality that constituted the one point on which both admirers and critics might agree. While remaining wary, thoughtful conservatives credited Williams with intellectual openness to their concerns. John Smith, United Kingdom director of the Evangelical Alliance, gave this cautious but complimentary reaction to the appointment: "Rowan Williams combines outstanding scholarship with an attitude of personal warmth and an appreciation of the validity of views beyond his own theological perspective."² Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, Professor Jonathan Sacks expressed confidence in Williams as an "exceptional thinker and a man of God."³ Former Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu declared that Williams "towered head and shoulders" above the other candidates. ⁴

¹ Paul Vallely, "Rowan Williams: Intellect and Humility – and Very Much His Own Man", *The Independent*, (July 20 2002). Available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/story.jsp?story=316598>. Accessed 1 August, 2002.

² "People of His Calibre Only Come along Every 200 or 300 years", *The Guardian*, (July 23, 2002). Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/religion/Story/0,2763,761900,00.html>. Accessed 1 August, 2002.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Alex Kirby, "Canterbury Choice – Rowan Williams", *BBC News Online*, (June 20, 2002). Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2048249.stm>. Accessed 1 August, 2002.

Beyond the academic world, Church politics and the spectacle-hungry press, Williams is known to another group of listeners specifically for his skill and generosity as a spiritual teacher and director. In addition to his extensive theological writing, Williams has published collections of sermons and addresses, spiritual histories of persons and movements, and meditations on Scripture, tradition and spiritual practices, reflecting his pastoral work as spiritual guide. From his days at Cambridge (in the early 1970s) onward, Williams worked in college chaplaincy and parish service, and even after being elected Bishop of Monmouth (1991) and Archbishop of Wales (1999), he continued to maintain and value close and thoughtful contact with the clergy and parishioners under his care. He counselled his pastors to attend to all the people of his community including the “unchurched”, in order to remain capable of hearing and responding to the “people’s hard questions”⁵. In the wake of the news of the appointment to Canterbury, his parish communities warmly expressed high esteem for Williams’s instructive spiritual guidance and witness. Even as a fellow-theologian declared Williams’s elevation to the Canterbury primacy as “little short of providential”⁶, and an Anglican bishop reacted to William’s enthronement by claiming, “We have a saint for our leader now,”⁷ a parishioner responded to his spiritual presence by saying simply, “I love him.”⁸

⁵ Rupert Shortt, *Rowan Williams – An Introduction*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003), 54.

⁶ John Milbank, quoted in “New Archbishop of Canterbury”, *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly* 547. Available at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week547/rowan.html>. Accessed 1 November 2003.

⁷ Unnamed bishop quoted in John Wilkins, “Anglicans Enthroned ‘a Saint’ ”, *National Catholic Reporter*, (March 14, 2003). Available at http://www.natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives/031403/031403j.htm. Accessed 1 November 2003.

⁸ Edgar King, parishioner of St Woolas Cathedral, Newport, Wales, quoted in Madeleine Bunting, “Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Wales”, *The Guardian* (April 1, 2002). Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/religion/Story/0,2763,677120,00.html>. Accessed 1 August 2002.

The purpose of introducing a range of responses to Rowan Williams's work and presence is not to promote him as a skilful thinker, a religious man, or a beloved spiritual guide, but to underline the intermingling of these qualities for, and their reception by, the "publics" to whom he speaks. This reception calls attention to his commitment to both the theological endeavour and the spiritual journey. For Williams, the two are aspects of one religious dynamic, unfolding in mutuality and reciprocity, and presenting a challenge to the separation often imposed on them by the pressures of rigorous academic disciplinary or a popular culture disinclined to value intellectual commitment.

Rowan Williams's work explicitly and implicitly constitutes a timely and compelling response to the historical and cultural problem of the "divorce" of spirituality and theology. Postmodernity offers both new risks and new opportunities for the theological endeavour in our contemporary context, and specifically for the re-integration of theology and spirituality. Williams's grounding in doctrinal orthodoxy and the spirituality which in turn rises out of and gives rise to it converses fluently with a variety of streams of postmodernism, dealing in issues of historicity, epistemology, linguistics, pluralism and globalisation, and the constitution and nature of the human self. His particular strengths include a comprehensive understanding of and engagement in current cultural and political discourse, a keen knowledge of and experience in spiritual practice, and an ability to recast the discourse so that it converses vitally and creatively with traditional theology, bringing it into dialogue with extra-theological schemes of meaning.

In the very shape of his life, Rowan Williams navigates the basic tensions that constitute the nature, the method and the practice of theology. As an academic

theologian and a poet, a pastoral minister and a university educator, a churchman and a social activist, he has worked in the theoretical, practical, political, artistic, institutional and spiritual dimensions of religious commitment. As Archbishop of Canterbury, he has and will continue to suffer publicly from his disinclination to settle for simplistic finalities and superficially satisfying conclusions to subtle and complex questions. Still Williams insists on the publicness of theology⁹ and the need among its practitioners for the “sense of active responsibility” to participate in the creation of a society.¹⁰

Williams’s theological undertakings resist easy categorisation as he brings to his theological work a profound integration of biblical and patristic roots with a critical appreciation of the realities of contemporary philosophical and cultural theory. Today, theology and postmodernity press upon each other with great urgency, sometimes seemingly as enemies and other times as intimate partners, circling each other, prodding each other, dismissing each other, only to turn again to each other within an irresistible field of attraction. Williams’s work is marked by the determination to take the time and courage necessary to allow the proper development of the discipline of listening to these many “voices”, and by a patience with the strain of learning from them that is required by the complexities with which we live. This is a contemplative approach, a *spiritual* orientation that guides the basic direction of his theology. It is one where silence and

⁹ For an example of Williams’ appeal for “authentically public discourse” between religious communities and their secular/cultural setting, see his “The Judgement of the World”, available in *On Christian Theology* (London: Blackwell, 2000, 29-43), originally published as “Postmodern Theology and the Judgement of the World” in *Postmodern Theology. Christian Faith in a Pluralist World*, ed. F. B. Burnham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), 92-112.

¹⁰ Williams explores the essential creativity of the human person made in the image of the Creator God, and the basic need in each person for creative interaction with her/his environment in “Penance in the Penitentiary”, (*Theology* 95, no. 764, 1992), 88-96.

speech draw one another forth in a proper self-awareness that is nevertheless not self-enclosed. John C. McDowell of the University of Edinburgh comments on the experience of reading Williams: “[It] requires skills of patience, careful attention, and an intense struggle to understand.”¹¹ Reading Williams is itself, in a very real way, a spiritual practice that provokes a “proper interrogative silence or self-reflexivity” in the reader, and encourages a “return to a sense of honesty” in our theological considerations.¹² Mc Dowell continues:

. . . the very theological style of Williams is testimony to the fact that living responsibly as a Christian is hard work and takes time to learn, and no amount of appeal (no matter how loudly and ferociously they are made) to the ‘simple faith’, to authoritative structures or texts can excuse the Christian or enable her to modify the complexity involved in worshipping the God of Jesus Christ whose expansive ways with the world exceed our contracted and fragile imaginings.¹³

It is this *spiritual* theological style, its effect on the relationship between theology and spirituality, and its implications for the theological task in the twenty-first century, that is the concern of this thesis.

¹¹ John C. McDowell, *The Most Reverend Rowan Williams: A Passion for Holiness*, (University of Edinburgh, 28 March 2003). Available at http://www.geocities.com/johnnymcdowell/Rowan_Williams.html. Accessed 1 November 2003.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

II. The Predicament of Spirituality and Theology

A. Rowan Williams and the Territory of Spirituality and Theology

Rowan Williams begins his *Wound of Knowledge: A Theological History from the New Testament to Luther and St John of the Cross* by offering an approach to the meaning of the word “spirituality” in Christian tradition:

. . . if ‘spirituality’ can be given any coherent meaning, perhaps it is to be understood in terms of this task: each believer making his or her own that engagement with the questioning at the heart of faith which is so evident in the classical documents of Christian belief. This is *not*, it must be said, to recommend any of the currently fashionable varieties of relativism or to romanticize a wistful ‘half-belief’. The questioning involved here is not our interrogation of the data, but its interrogation of us. It is the intractable *strangeness* of the ground of belief that must constantly be allowed to challenge the fixed assumptions of religiosity; it is a *given*, whose question to each succeeding age is fundamentally one and the same. And the greatness of the Christian saints lie in their readiness to be questioned, judged, stripped naked and left speechless by that which lies at the centre of their faith.¹⁴

The question of the nature of spirituality is plainly not one that lends itself to easy or simple definitional answers, first of all because the use of the word is flexible and its meaning shifts elusively from one time period to another, and from one person to another. Secondly, if it claims as its source the Spirit which indwells the human person, and who is described in the third chapter of the gospel of John which “blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit”, the “spiritual” by its very nature resists

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: A Theological History from the New Testament to Luther and St. John of the Cross*, reprint, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 1. Originally published as *Christian Spirituality: A Theological History from the New Testament to Luther and St. John of the Cross*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980). Page citations are to the reprint edition.

analysis, prediction, definition. Thomas Aquinas recognises this difficulty when he says of the Spirit that “[this] Person ... has not a proper name of its own.”¹⁵

Williams’s method above is to approach the problem of definition obliquely, by describing something of the *territory* of Christian spirituality; opening up the potential for rich significance, especially with regard to its implications for the intersection of the territories of spirituality and theology. The cautious and provisional attitude with which he proceeds indicates an acknowledgement of the difficulty of the undertaking, a difficulty in setting exact borders, drawing exact boundaries. Spirituality as set forth in this description is a phenomenon that is relative to a “task”, an activity, an “engagement”, not with a static *thing* available for simple scrutiny, but with a *questioning*. And if a questioning directs “spirituality”, it is no less the heart of the epistemological task of theology. “Questioning” necessarily carries a sense of the “unfinished” – and perhaps *unfinishable* – nature of spirituality that is inherent in Williams’s dynamic depiction. It is also central to his understanding of the nature of theology.

According to Williams’s description, spirituality is a kind of *orientation*, one that is personal but not relativistic, necessarily subjective but not reducible to subjectivism. Its objective elements can be found at once in the *givenness* of its “ground of belief” which is theological, and again in its very persistence as questioning impulse. As “personal”, it is inevitably individual, but only as grounded in a communality that extends backward in

¹⁵ *Summa Theologiae* Pt. 1, Q. 34, Art. 1, (Benziger Brothers Edition, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1947). Available at <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html>. Accessed 1 November 2003).

time to the “classical documents of Christian belief” and to the theological dimension within the Christian tradition, even as its questioning impulse pushes it forward into the future. If this sounds paradoxical, it is because it must: spirituality’s “ground” is enduring in its dynamic “strangeness”. The paradoxical orientation of its own central structure is based on the apprehension of a God whose action in the world is fulfilled in *kenosis*, self-emptying, and who can be both experienced *and* theologised only against a condition of self-questioning, even self-negation. Accordingly, considering that the tradition’s “central image ... [the empty tomb which harkens back to the empty throne of Israel’s mercy seat] ... is not any one apparition but the image of an absence”, then “the theologian’s job may be less the speaking of the truth ... than the patient diagnosing of untruths, and the reminding of the community where its attention belongs.”¹⁶

Spirituality’s state of questioning, seeking, is perennial in its challenge to the human propensity for fixing and finalising answers, for replacing the human potential for self-emptying – for self-transcendence – with the idolatrous desire for self-fulfillment and self-creation. Its stability lies in its suspicion of the human temptation to construct and impose patterns of ideological stability, its permanence in its suspicion of the craving for a sense of theoretical permanence at the cost of truthfulness. As such, the direction of spirituality is essentially one of surrender, not in servile submission to a competing “other”, but in yielding to *what-is*: to that which is *given*, that which is not of my making and is not under my control. Similarly, suspicion of the human yearning for stability in the face of the world’s disarray, and of the desire for permanence in the face of our basic

¹⁶Williams, “Between the Cherubim: the Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne,” *On Christian Theology*, 195-196.

finitude, are attitudes fundamental to theological inquiry as understood and practiced by Williams. Imperative in the endeavour are both a willingness “to live in postponement”¹⁷ and a concomitant watchfulness against the persistent temptation to “foreclose the eschaton”.¹⁸ Indeed the discipline proper to theology is a self-dispossession, an *askesis* of intellectual integrity for the sake of truthfulness. It is a call to attention: to nakedness, speechlessness. But then, would that not seem to be the contrary to what we generally understand when we say *theology* – words, speech, writing about God?

Williams writes that theology is:

... a way of talking – is a language used by a specific group of people to make sense of their world – not so much to *explain* it as to find words that will hold or reflect what ... is sensed to be solid, authoritative and creative ... Thus theology is always involved with doing new or odd things with speech.¹⁹

Theology is speech, God-talk, converse – *conversation* – about how-it-is among persons with God and within the world. Accordingly, as speech, it is presumably, *logically*, the antithesis of naked “speechlessness”. And yet, these words maintain the traces of something besides – or, actually, literally *beside* – the “speech”, something which shapes its very contours: a sensing, an *experience*, which the speech carries into consciousness. Elsewhere, Williams further unfolds the character of the speech of theology by citing its origins, “The Church’s theology begins in the language of

¹⁷ Dorothy Sölle, *Christ the Representative. An Essay in Theology after the Death of God* (London: Unknown binding, 1967), 109, as quoted by Williams in “The Finality of Christ” in *On Christian Theology*, 101.

¹⁸ Williams warns about totalitarianism in *theology* in “The Judgement of the World”, 36.

¹⁹ Williams interviewed in Todd Breyfogle, “Time and Transformation: A Conversation with Rowan Williams,” (*Cross Currents* 45, no 3, Fall 1995), 396, 397.

worship”²⁰; that is, in the metaphoric consciousness and speech that communicates experience and meaning, rather than simple positivist data. Further, “its proper character as a discipline” is one of “*interpretation* . . . not simply of *analysis*” or ordering of conceptual structures:²¹ it is creative before it is organizational. And its goal lies not in abstract systems but in concrete lives: “what our [theological] language is for . . . [is] . . . keeping open the door to the promises of God.”²²

So theology is strange speech, speech that eschews neat theoretical resolutions in favour of recognising “the way in which ‘God’ is specified in the flux of interpretation and action in the community’s *life*”.²³ Even the most propositional theology, even when institutionally codified and set as dogma, always stands *beside* the parallel tradition of negative theology. Stretching back to the roots of Christianity and formed by its basic kenotic dynamism, the *via negativa* points to the dispossessive moment of theology that acknowledges the interruptive, always-surprising, always mysterious nature of the Christian God. As such, Christian theology, unlike any other field of inquiry, proceeds with a consciousness of its “generating its own near-negation.”²⁴ It stands on a razor’s edge, not solid ground (like the Son of Man at Matthew 8.20, it has nowhere to lay its head). It is shaped by an unspokenness and *unspeakableness*, and is spoken into – and out

²⁰ Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, reprint, (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 235. Originally published in London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987. Page citations are to the reprint edition.

²¹ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 142.

²² Williams, “Beginning with the Incarnation,” *On Christian Theology*, 85.

²³ Williams, “Trinity and Revelation,” *On Christian Theology*, 146.

²⁴ Williams, “The Finality of Christ,” 104.

of – the flux of Christian *life*. It is strange, ultimately, because it is, as per Williams, not an end, but a *beginning*, whose purpose is to teach “silence, watchfulness, and the expectation of the Spirit’s drastic appearance”.²⁵ We arrive at the point where theology not only clearly corresponds to spirituality. It also implies its own seeming-antithesis: silence, the very “speechlessness” toward which Williams’s understanding of spirituality points.

B. The *Via Negativa* in the Relationship between Spirituality and Theology

The implications of negative theology constitute neither a repudiation of speech, nor a diminution of the possibility of knowledge in the theological endeavour. Speech and the capacity to know, as essential to human being, are essential to human engagement with God. They create and deepen the understanding of what speech is *for*, what the conditions for its truthfulness are, and what the character of knowledge is. Further, speech, as conversation, in some ways facilitates retrieval of an older, more holistic understanding of knowledge as communion:

Knowledge of God [that] cannot stop at definition . . . knowledge of *anything at all* is something which goes beyond definitions . . . language may not alter the nature of an object, but the function of speech is nonetheless to articulate a changing *relation* [my emphasis] as ‘the understanding makes contact with things’.²⁶

We are speaking then, of a speech and knowledge not limited to the mechanics of logic and the territory of empirical positivism, and not confined to intellectual neatness, but

²⁵ Williams, “The Judgement of the World”, 43.

²⁶ *Wound of Knowledge*, 51; here Williams refers to the thought of Gregory of Nyssa.

coming out of, and returning to, *impinging upon*, the very object of its regard. It is a notion of knowledge explained by Antiochian Orthodox priest Patrick Henry Reardon:

...modern Westerners on the whole seem not aware that, for the great philosophers at the core of the ancient cultures, metaphysical "knowledge" (*jnana, gnosis*) was experiential. It was not simply the factual or logical content of a person's head . . . For the ancients, metaphysical intuition implied an ecstatic union with Reality: *con-scientia, com-prehendere*. "Truth is not known," wrote Saint Gregory the Great, "unless it is loved" (*Veritas non cognoscitur, nisi amatur*), and Plato spoke of an ardent yearning (*eros*), as well as disciplined dialectics, along the path to remembrance. Thinkers as different as Lao-Tzu, Ben Sirach, Plotinus, Shankara, Al-Ghazali, and Maximus the Confessor shared the presumption that noetic discourse involves noetic intercourse—that "knowledge" implies union, communion, with the Real.²⁷

The experiential character of knowing, the unity as it were of its objective and subjective aspects, is clearly understood by Williams so that theology, then, is not only *not separated* from spirituality, they are *not separable*: indeed they are two aspects of the same religious intentionality of the human person. Spirituality is theology's experiential matrix, and it at once shapes and is orientated by Christian tradition's intellectual discipline. The relationship between the two, while complex, is basic.

Spirituality is often popularly identified today as the subjective and individual aspect of religious engagement, and theology is seen as its objective and communal or institutional element. The two are frequently set in opposition. Williams, however, links the two in a kind of synthesis of objectivity and subjectivity, of knowing and living, of word and spirit. This is not to collapse the one into the other without distinction.

Theology's task might indeed be described, in part, as "the rational and precise

²⁷ Patrick Henry Reardon, " 'Truth Is Not Known Unless It Is Loved': How Pavel Florensky Restored What Ockham Stole", *Christianity Today*, (Sept/Oct 1998). Available online from *Christianity Today.com* at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/8b5/8b5044.html>. Accessed 1 November 2003.

expression of the believer's reflection on God," but we must add that it "is not a disinterested observation but a personal engagement".²⁸ The "speech" of theology is not *only* observation, reflection; it is also creative and formative construction, and what it constructs is Christian *life*. Williams writes of God's own creative speech,

God 'utters' the life of Jesus, he 'speaks' an event, a human history; and so he enters the fabric not merely of human verbal or conceptual exchange but of human society, community, making it the *commixtio et communio Dei et hominis* . . . of human language in the fullest sense of the word, a shared 'form of life'.²⁹

It is a speech that is a transmission of life, of spirit. The theologian images this speech, generating the word indeed, but communicating also, the spirit.

Theology, then, is an activity of the intellect, as its traditional partnership with philosophy indicates, but as Reardon's assertion above explains, the *intellectus* does not abide tidily within the narrow confines of modernity's notion of reason. Knowledge cannot be separated from love – knowing cannot be separated from being and doing – if human nature is to be attended to fully. Via Gregory of Nyssa, Williams links knowledge (*gnosis*) to desire (*epithymia*) in order to broaden the perception of understanding as "vision" to allow understanding as *intentional living*: "Knowledge of God can only be seen as personal, relational, evolving, a *project* for human living."³⁰ Theology's traditional definition, Anselm's "*fides quaerens intellectum*" – faith seeking understanding – remains a helpful characterization of the theological endeavour, if the

²⁸ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 16.

²⁹ *Wound of Knowledge*, 30; Williams quotes from Irenaeus's *Against the Heresies (Adversus Haereses IV. 33)*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

understanding of “understanding” is not allowed to slip into a reductionist notion of knowledge as mere conceptualism.

C. Experience and “Experientialism”

A corresponding reductionism in the contemporary understanding of spirituality might be characterised by its transformation into a kind of “experientialism.” Scholar of mysticism Denys Turner cites nineteenth-century interpretation of medieval texts as solidifying the notion of “a distinct, esoteric essence of the ‘mystical’, a thing in itself”³¹ which, from the late Middle Ages, begins incrementally to develop into a kind of inner essence of spirituality. A privileged and private, *extraordinary experience*, comes to characterise the basis of the “spiritual” as the source of – and necessarily *prior to* – the “theological”.

The role, and the very *meaning*, of religious experience – of spirituality – has shifted from the New Testament and Early Christian understanding of an inclusive, communal, *common* experience within the context of a shared theological vision that is offered to *all* Christians, to an exclusivist, esoteric, *special* experience restricted to *some* Christians, and taking place not only beyond, but even (and sometimes preferably) independent of theological understanding. That spirituality necessarily overruns the boundaries of the language of the intellect is modified to mean that it supersedes it, that it is of another order entirely, and so it is detachable, and perhaps best detached, from theology.

³¹ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7.

The classic metaphors of the Christian journey “into” God are broken off from their theological underpinnings and thus are literalised, reified. Spirituality ceases to operate dialectically with its theological dimension, which is rejected, and eventually goes unrecognised. Turner expands upon the way an extreme “experientialist” approach to spirituality displaces the genuine “negativity” of religious possibilities with a quest for “*negative experiences*”, in the process effectively inverting the very intention of negative theology:

‘Experientialism’ is, in short, the ‘positivism’ of Christian spirituality. It abhors the experiential vacuum of the apophatic, rushing to fill it with the plenum of the psychologistic. It resists the deconstruction of the negative way, holding fast to suppositious experiences of the negative.³²

This “experientialism” is ironically a kind of rationalistic fundamentalism, a literalising and reifying of exactly what Christian tradition has struggled so hard to preserve and present in its teachings as not-objectifiable, and indeed as not a “negative experience” but as not experience-able at all. Spoken of by Dionysius, picked up by the medieval mystical traditions in varying degrees of faithfulness to the original language, elaborated upon by John of the Cross in the sixteenth century, and brought into contemporary contemplative culture, for example, by Thomas Keating’s teachings on Centering Prayer, clearly the “ray of darkness” is what *cannot be perceived*, rather than a *perception of darkness*.³³

³² Turner, 259.

³³ Dionysius’ “superessential ray of divine darkness” is mentioned in the first section of the first chapter of his *Mystical Theology*; it sets the conditions for reading the rest of that work. The image is famously appropriated in John of the Cross’ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Chapter 8 (and appears throughout his writing). Cistercian Abbot Thomas Keating of Contemplative Outreach offers an understanding of the language of the dark-ray image to a popular audience in his books on contemplative prayer, *Open Mind*, *Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, (New York: Continuum, 1986), Chapter 9, and

In a short but stunning sermon “A Ray of Darkness”, Rowan Williams offers a remarkable and beautiful vision of the meaning and function of the *grammar* of Christianity, situating the darkness of God at the very centre of Christian spirituality, and as an issue essentially – ironically – tied up with human language, and so at the very centre of Christian theology as well. The language of darkness is the language of paradox: not a dodge into fuzziness that evades or finishes the *questioning* with a warm imprecision about the encounter with God, but the properly odd language that refuses to evade the fact that language itself runs out in the face of such a question. To be truthful, it must become a language “that keeps a question *alive*.”³⁴ And the “question” is not merely the response to an experience, but the *condition* for any religious experience at all. Likewise the language, the God-talk, the theology, is not merely a reflection on or description of religious experience, but the very lens through which religious vision is made possible.

For Williams, the language of Christian negativity is not a matter of pleasant vagueness functioning to fill in the gaps in our understanding: he reiterates unambiguously that the darkness of God is not a “thing, or a face, or even a person” to be

Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation, (New York: Continuum, 1995), Chapter 19. To his credit, and unlike many contemporary engagements with the imagery, Father Keating maintains the proper understanding of the “ray of darkness” as that which we have no faculty to perceive, rather than as a sort of “spiritual” darkness that we “experience”.

³⁴ Rowan Williams, “A Ray of Darkness,” *A Ray of Darkness* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), 100. Originally published as *Open to Judgement*, (London: Daryon Longman & Todd, 1994). Page citations are to reprint edition.

experienced in this or that moment³⁵, but is rather – at least in our experience – a kind of a *process* to be undergone. Here God is discernable only through the traces of his activity, not as an object, and certainly not as an object over against ourselves as objects. In this vision of God, perceived only obliquely, the experience is one of disorientation, reorganisation: an *interruption* of the images we create and harbour of ourselves and of religious understanding and experience. God as dark ray is not a romantically-conceived, thrilling maybe, and ultimately satisfying sense of adventurous “mystery” for the one sensitive and subtle enough to experience him, but a terrible challenge to our self-satisfied imaginings of and speech about what God is, and who we are. The ray is like light in that it “interrupts our blindness ... it cuts through something”³⁶, offering not an elimination of difficulties and questions but rather a demanding illumination of them. The persistence of the “question” is alarming to our sense of self-fulfillment and self-possession, our desire for complete and final knowledge. We come to know *that we do not know*. That is a frightening thought.

In his *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot visits and revisits the theme of the profound difficulty inherent in the simple realisation that: “...human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.”³⁷ Hebrew Scripture is notable in its keen awareness of the clarifying activity of God, the proper response toward whom is “fear”. What Carmelite William McNamara

³⁵ Ibid., 101.

³⁶ Ibid, 100.

³⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton”, I (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1944, reprinted 1989), 14.

calls the “Terrible Good” captures something of the sense and meaning of the “fearsomeness” God:

The so-called object of our quest, which cannot be objectified, is the Terrible Good. It is not manageable, and it is not in any way utilitarian. One of the most unfortunate things that can happen to any one of us, or to any church, is that we end up trying to use God - which occurs frequently in this age. People try to use God. But God will not be had. God will not be possessed. That is why it is important to remember that every time you or I enter into prayer, we enter into the cave of a lion, and who knows if we are going to make it out alive? God is not a tame God, and that is why we must never speak about him glibly or casually. Anytime we refer to him without awe and astonishment, without holy fear - not psychological fear, but holy fear - we take his name in vain, which is one of the greatest sins of humankind.³⁸

But the Christian God is not only the one who disrupts our self-satisfaction; he is also the one we call Father, Lover, Comforter. Williams reveals God as the pivot around which the Christian paradox, linguistic and lived, turns: the “ray of darkness” is also the “dart of love”.³⁹ Paradox, then, is not fanciful device, but necessary self-negation, operating poetically, (rather than prosaically *literally*), to manifests an odd dispossessive moment in language that preserves the awareness of its own limitations both as language *and* experience. Poetry is not decoration, but manifestation of that which cannot be spoken in consistently neat logic. The noisy protests of some anti-theist theologians who would identify traditional Christian doctrines as a primitive, passing and passé stage on the way to something more truthful have missed the whole mode and orientation of traditional Christian language, or are perhaps rendered incapable of hearing it due to a

³⁸ William McNamara in *Speaking of Silence: Christians and Buddhists on the Contemplative Way*, ed. Susan Walker, (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 151.

³⁹ Williams, “A Dark Ray,” 103.

failure in our reduced rationalistic sense of what language is, and is for.⁴⁰ Eliot struggles consciously and agonisingly with the inherent difficulty of language in his *Four Quartets*, but he knows better than to give up “the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings”⁴¹; it is central to the paradoxical method of incarnation. That the devastating ray of darkness should be also the dart of love is the matter he describes in the exquisite cascade of paradoxical images:

The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.⁴²

This is the dark ray whose action has been represented as “a kind of refining fire”.⁴³

But the “threat” is the underside of the promise, of “love”: when the difficult task of

⁴⁰ In the wake of the nineteenth century’s passion for recovering the “historical Jesus”, an attraction to “de-mythologisation” has accompanied the developments of liberal theology throughout the twentieth-century, from Bultmann to the post-Nietzschean “Death of God” movement and more recent projects such as John Hick’s *The Myth of God Incarnate*, (London: SCM Press, 1977), and yet the a-realists like Don Cupitt, whom Williams has debated on this subject (see Williams’ “Religious Realism’: On Not Quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt”, *Modern Theology* 1, no. 1, 1984, 3-24, and Cupitt’s response “A Reply to Rowan Williams,” same issue, pp. 25-31). A pointed, if less sophisticated condemnation of traditional theism was made by American Episcopalian bishop John Shelby Spong in his (somewhat grandiosely-titled) “Twelve Theses” in “A Call for a New Reformation”, published in the *Church Times* of 17 July 1998, available at: <http://www.dioceseofnewark.org/jsspong/reform.html>. Williams’ response, “Is This Tradition as Barren as Spong Seems to Think” can be found at: <http://www.prayerbook.ca/cann/1999/03/pblam154.htm>. Spong’s counter-response appears in *The Bishop’s Voice* at: <http://www.dioceseofnewark.org/vox21098.html>. All internet pages in this note were accessed on 1 November 2003.

⁴¹ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “East Coker” II; see also “Little Gidding” II and V.

⁴² *Ibid.*, “Little Gidding” IV.

⁴³ Williams, *Ibid.*, 101.

relinquishing our desperate desire for certainty and finishedness, for *control* of reality and a place in its centre (the heart-wrenching request of James and John at Mark 10.37, perhaps), we “discover a harmony and an affirmation of ... [our] ... humanity utterly unconnected to surface happiness or security.”⁴⁴ The ultimate sign and fulfilment of this paradox is imaged in Jesus crucified, the central motif of Christianity: “He *is* the ‘ray of darkness’ in the world of our religious fantasy. He *is* that which interrupts and disturbs and remakes the world.”⁴⁵ The world is re-*made* by this crisis, which historically “shattered and reformed a whole religious vocabulary”.⁴⁶ This vocabulary provides us still with *the words to ask the questions* that the life, death and resurrection of Christ impels us to ask, and to shatter again our own vocabulary whenever it succumbs to the temptation to *too easily, too quickly* turn the questions into answers.

If God is that which “makes the world new and makes me strange to myself, forcing me to see my contingency, my participation in the world’s uncontrollable flux”⁴⁷, then our language about God – our theology – must operate in awareness of its own contingency, must be *strange*, must illuminate and encourage *participation* in the contingent, in the volatility of the world of human language and experience. It is not insignificant that the classical documents of Christianity are grounded in a *story*, “not a system or a spiritual theory”⁴⁸, a language not of analysis and organisation but of

⁴⁴ Ibid., “A Dark Ray,” 103.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 102.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 104.

manifestation. It is not coincidental that we have come to understand the gospels as sacramental, to call the Scripture the “living word”. Language and life’s experience are linked here at the foundation in the foundational texts of Christian tradition. These are the sources of both Christian theology and Christian spirituality, where might be discerned theology’s orientational task, and spirituality as the shape of that orientation.

Thomas Merton described the problem of the loss of the proper, and essential, relationship between spirituality and theology in Christian life:

Contemplation, far from being opposed to theology, is in fact the normal perfection of theology. We must not separate intellectual study of divinely revealed truth and contemplative experience of that truth as if they could never have anything to do with one another. On the contrary they are simply two aspects of the same thing. Dogmatic and mystical theology, or theology and “spirituality” are not to be set apart in mutually exclusive categories, as if mysticism were for saintly women and theological study were for practical but, alas, unsaintly men. This fallacious division perhaps explains much that is actually lacking both in theology and in spirituality. But the two belong together, just as body and soul belong together. Unless they are united, there is no fervor, no life and no spiritual value in theology, no substance, no meaning and no sure orientation in the contemplative life.⁴⁹

Merton describes a division that was firmly established by the time he was writing in the mid-twentieth century, and he understood that what was at stake in the division was a vital relationship that nourishes both theology and spirituality. Turner identifies the same vital imperative for “a theological precision which alone can sustain an adequate Christian practice”. The consequence of the loss of the *dialectical* relationship sets theological intellection over against spiritual experience, turning dialogue into opposition. More significantly, it misses the analogical nature of the “speech” and indeed

⁴⁹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1961), 254-255.

the experience of both theology *and* spirituality, risking a new fundamentalism wherein spirituality is reduced to positivist experientialism, and theology to propositional formulation. Further, it sets theological and spiritual distinctions against one another as alternative choices among religious lifestyle, rather than cultivating them as reciprocal “moments” that mutually constitute each other within each Christian life. The historical question arises as to how and when this division and disjunction emerged.

III. The Historical Relationship between Spirituality and Theology

A. Scriptural Roots

The earliest Christian references to “spirit” are found in the epistles of Paul, who coins the adjectival neologism “spiritual” to describe that which is under the influence of the Spirit of God.⁵⁰ In Paul, this relates to concrete experience of Christian communities of persons indwelt by the Spirit of God through participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus. While Paul’s theology cannot be described as neatly systematic, it is nonetheless the proclamation of the meaning of the life and death of Jesus that opens the community up to the Spirit’s influence. The “spiritual” person is one who conforms to the learned pattern of Christ’s self-emptying, and the location of this conformity, this “spirituality”, is the body, within and through the Body of Christ, the community.

Paul’s individual “experiences” of conversion and mystical encounter with Christ notwithstanding, the spirituality that Paul preaches is communal, outward-directed and open to all who have been baptised: “the heart is broken so as to make space for others, for compassion . . . The ‘un-selfing’ involved in union with Christ’s death is made real in the public and social world . . . ”⁵¹ Further, Paul’s preaching transmits a knowledge of God that both directs and clarifies the community’s experience “in the Spirit”, opening it up to what later tradition called “unknowing”, that is, to faith. For Paul, “Knowledge of

⁵⁰ Sandra Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners”, *Horizons* 13, no. 2 (1986), 257-258.

⁵¹ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 11, 12.

God is not a subject's conceptual grasp of an object . . . God is known in and by the exercise of crucifying compassion; if we are like him in that, we know him."⁵² At the Scriptural root of Christian tradition, knowing is yoked to living experience, theology to spirituality: "It is in this very basic Christian theological perspective that we must look for the heart of Christian spirituality . . . it is the life of the *believer*, material and imaginative and desirous."⁵³ Knowledge is not mere conceptualism (see Paul's suspicion of "philosophy"); it is a perspective needed for the living of an otherly-directed "new life". "Experience" is not rarefied and individual, set apart from the intellectual and bodily reality of everyday life; it is the experience of a christologically-understood and realised death for the sake of the new life made possible in faith, the knowing of "unknowing".

B. The Patristic Period

The patristic period maintained an understanding of "spirituality" as *life* in the Spirit, life under the influence of or in the presence of the Spirit of God. Various divisions and developments in thought, most pointedly the flourishing of Arianism, pushed Christianity to discriminate among the array of beliefs and practices in common currency, and toward a more precise articulation of orthodoxy. Consistent with ambiguities in Christian Scripture itself, first and second century Christian thinkers oscillated between an embrace and a rejection of materiality, seeking the elusive goal of being "in the world", but not "of the world", of being incarnate but not reduced to mere

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵³ Rowan Williams, "To Stand Where Christ Stands", *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Ralph Waller and Benedicta Ward, (London: SPCK, 1999), 3.

flesh. The great creedal formulations and the defences against various heresies reflected an increasing sophistication of intellectual engagement with the faith tradition in conversation with current cultural schemes of meaning. Scripture formed the basis for theology and the spirituality of the Early Christian period, and while the emerging doctrinal developments were articulated in the language of Greek philosophy, they reflected the needs of the concrete cultural and religious situation in which they arose. Sermons, letters and narratives of saintly lives proliferated, underlining the close connection between reflection, pastoral concerns and practical living. Philip Sheldrake, historian of spirituality, calls attention to the intimate bond between the intellectual discipline, and the practical and prayer life of the theologian of the patristic period:

To be a theologian meant that a person had contemplated the mystery of the incarnation and possessed an experience of faith on which to reflect. Theology was always more than an intellectual exercise. Knowledge of divine things was inseparable from the love of God deepened in prayer . . . God is known not by *scientia* but by *sapientia* – that is to say, not by objectification and analysis but by a contemplative knowledge of love and desire.⁵⁴

The patristic theologian worked by a synthetic method, drawing together biblical exegesis, creative discursive engagement with the intellectual currents of the time, and mystical contemplation. Seconding Turner, Sheldrake explains that “mysticism” and even “spirituality” as special and distinct categories removed from the theological endeavour is a later notion unknown in the early Christian era.⁵⁵ If “spiritual” or

⁵⁴ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 36-37. Sheldrake refers to Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, Books XII-XIV, on *scientia* and *sapientia*.

⁵⁵ An extended discussion of the break between the classical Christian tradition of mysticism with its essential Neo-Platonist foundations which were operative up to and including the writing of John of the Cross, and the later “experientialist” use of the same terminology evacuated of its self-critical theological

“mystical” refers to a subjective experientialism divorced from any *a priori* theory and formation or *a posteriori* reflection and dialectic (as is not uncommon today), it would be in many ways in direct contradiction to the patristic religious itinerary.

The rise of monasticism, beginning in the Egyptian and Syrian deserts of the third century and developing throughout the patristic and medieval periods, established the explicit spiritual-theological foundations for Christian living. According to Cistercian Armand Veilleux, abbot at Scourmont, Chimay, the foundation of patristic monasticism was engagement with Scripture “interpreted and incarnated in the concrete life of a Christian community” as the “school of life” which includes intellect, prayer and action:

In the desert, Scripture is constantly being interpreted. This interpretation is not expressed in the form of commentaries and homilies, but in actions and gestures, in a life of holiness transformed by the constant dialogue of the monk with the Scriptures. The texts do not cease to be ever more significant not only for those who read and hear them, but also for those who meet these monks who have incarnated these texts in their life. The man of God who has assimilated the Word of God has become a new "text", a new object of interpretation.⁵⁶

Here knowledge is inseparable from patterns of living, and indeed from the very personhood of the Christian: “the monk’s ‘philosophy’ is the pattern of the incarnate Christ.”⁵⁷ Considering the relationship between spirituality and theology in the first

underpinnings is made in Turner’s *Darkness of God*, especially well established and summarized in the introduction and Chapter 11.

⁵⁶ Armand Veilleux, *Lectio Divina as School of Prayer Among the Fathers of the Desert*, (talk given at the Centre Saint-Louis-des-Français, in Rome, November 1995). Available at: <http://users.skynet.be/scourmont/Armand/wri/lectio-eng.htm>. Accessed 1 November 2003.

⁵⁷ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 52; referring here to the monastic lives of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, in whose “work we may see again the close connection between theological positions and forms of Christian life.”

Christian centuries, Sheldrake affirms that, “The very heart of patristic theology was mystical.”⁵⁸ The unity of *askesis* of the will and *askesis* of the intellect that is apparent in patristic understanding of the theological task is formulated in the later Eastern Orthodox tradition by Theophan the Recluse (Theophan Zatvornik, 1815-1894) thus: “the principal thing is to stand before God with *the mind in the heart*, and to go on standing before Him unceasingly day and night, until the end of life.”⁵⁹ The activities of the mind cannot – must not – be separated from the activities of the heart or the “spirit”. At the beginning of the Christian tradition, the pattern of mutuality emerges: the heart of spirituality is theological (see Williams above); the heart of theology is spiritual.

C. The Medieval Period

The medieval period saw the development within theology what might be referred to as a “scientific” mode, in some ways corresponding to our modern understanding of the word “scientific”. For the medieval theologian, *scientia* as “knowledge” had a broader meaning than that accepted by the modern methodology of the natural sciences. Indeed, “science”, for Thomas Aquinas, for example, followed Aristotle’s understanding as being that which in turn proceeds, deductively, from universal “first principles”, or self-evident truths, which form the basis of any possible further knowledge and are not in their nature subject to “proofs”. In the case of theology, “the queen of the sciences”, Aquinas cites as source of its “first principles” the higher authority of God, available not through the

⁵⁸ Sheldrake, 37.

⁵⁹ See the website of the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM), available at <http://www.wccm.org/ThisWeek/2002/wk0209d.html>. Accessed 1 November 2003. (Emphasis mine.)

natural intelligence but through the light of the “higher science”: revelation.⁶⁰ Clearly, this is not science in the modernist sense, but it is nonetheless an understanding that lent itself, by the process of rational speculation, to analysis, testing by argument, and systematisation.

Anselm and Peter Abelard (1079-1142) introduced dialectics into theological method, expanding on the traditional practice of exposition of and commentary on Scripture and authoritative patristic sources. While Scripture remained basic – at least in the early Middle Ages – as *sacra pagina* for the scholar-theologian and as *lectio divina* for the monk-theologian, speculative intellectual work took on an increasingly central role in theological work. Scholastic theology harkened back to the patristic practice of engaging Christian tradition with philosophical culture, looking now to Aristotle re-discovered in the West via the Arab world, as the early Church had drawn on Platonic sources in the East. The illuminative goal of theology was served by exploration of internal coherences among the data of faith, and speculation regarding their reasonable implications.

As the patristic theologians intended divinisation as understood in Platonist notions of participation and union with the God, Aristotle’s thought provided medieval theologians with a philosophical matrix that emphasised the importance of *knowing God* in the journey toward *loving God*. In Aquinas, following Augustine, Gregory the Great’s “truth is not known unless it is loved” (*veritas non cognoscitur, nisi amatur*; see Reardon

⁶⁰*Summa Theologiae*, Pt., Q. 34, Art. 1.

above), is turned on end so that “nothing is loved unless it first be known”, (*nihil enim amatur nisi cognitum*).⁶¹ Nonetheless, for Aquinas (as for Augustine), the movement toward truth originates within the will. While knowing and loving may appear separate in the human person, in their ultimate end, God, they are entirely coincident.⁶² Thus, Thomas’ notion of the contemplative life is intellectual, but

. . . *intellectus* does not . . . equate with our usual modern understanding of ‘intellection’ or discursive rational analysis. It is, rather, a process of union between the knower and the known . . . *Intellectus* is not some kind of ‘intellectualism’ in our pejorative sense, but a movement which ultimately transcends the objects of sense; further it is the consideration of realities which even ‘reason can neither discover nor grasp. . .’⁶³

It is important to clarify the early medieval, and perhaps especially the Thomist, conception of the unity of knowing and loving, in order to point out the continuity implied for the spiritual heart of the theological endeavour. If the theology of the “schools” inadvertently laid the groundwork – and developed a language – for a divorce between the pursuit of theological study and the practice of spirituality, it is only because the groundwork was reassembled according to a new language that was slowly evacuated of the richness and depth it originally contained, and was retained as terminology while being severely reduced in meaning.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid., Pt. 1, Q. 60, Art. 1

⁶² Ibid., Pt. 2.2, Q. 180, Art. 1.

⁶³ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: the Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*, (Malden, Mass. and Oxford, U.K: Blackwell Publishers, 1998; reprint 1999), 70, 71.

⁶⁴ I mean to underline how the spiritual end of Thomas’ work (the opening of the person to *contemplatio*, the patristic *theoria*; that is, to the vision and knowledge of God) made use of rationality as a *means*. Later medieval rationalism might be seen to lose sight of this relationship so that rationality becomes the master rather than the servant of the theologian. In some ways, the very structure of the *Summa Theologiae* prepares the way for a sense of disconnection between theology and spirituality (or dogmatic theology and moral theology), even while Thomas did not consider them to be separate endeavours.

D. The Roots of the Modern Period

The rupture between theology and spirituality coincides with what we might today mark as the onset of modernity, traced back to the waning of the Middle Ages. Loyola University, Chicago professor Mark A. McIntosh attributes the change to a shift from a theological world view that was God-focused to world view centred on the human person. As the medieval perspective of the unity of reality gave way to intimations of differentiation among human endeavours, making way for an eventual shift to the idea of theology as one among other such ultimately *human* activities, a more human-centred fragmentation of vision was inevitable. According to McIntosh, the “shift to a more anthropological analysis, a reading of the mystical life primarily in terms of the inner self is, not surprisingly, going to unravel the perceived unity.”⁶⁵

As the medieval period advanced, theological study shifted from monasteries to the urban “schools”, relocating from an explicitly religious setting centred on spiritual goals to a secular setting centred on scholarship. The schools increasingly specialised among faculties, and the theology faculties increasingly distinguished among the disciplines of biblical, doctrinal and moral theology. The writing of theology took on the form of the classroom process of lecture, commentary and disputative question. Consequently, a tendency to a propositional approach to theology solidified, removed from the intense spiritual intentions of the monastic houses, and there appeared an increased sense “that the discipline of the mind could be separated from the discipline of an ordered lifestyle or

⁶⁵ McIntosh, 71.

ascesis.”⁶⁶ Intellectual work was pulled away more and more from the spiritual *life*, so that:

By the later Middle Ages, the assumption has become in some cases nearly insurmountable that knowing is the task of theologians, while loving is a task for mystics; and instead of perceiving knowing and loving as one coinherent activity in God, they come to appear as strangers, rivals, even enemies struggling for dominance in the drama of the inner self.⁶⁷

Rowan Williams links the phenomena of the widening rift between “the Scholastic professionals of theology” and “the poor servants of God”, the loss of the sense that the “roots of theology” lie in Christian experience, and the understanding that “Christian speculation is properly inseparable from engagement of a personal and demanding kind,” to a loss of *vocabulary*, a loss of *language*. Williams cites Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1327) as an example of an influential thinker and teacher whose reputation, (as well as the subsequent grasp of his work) suffered under the degradation of the theological-linguistic matrix, such that his theology, while firmly Thomist, appeared suspiciously passivistic and anti-theological to some Church authorities, and often appears satisfyingly so to contemporary anti-intellectual strains of Christian spirituality.⁶⁸ According to Williams:

Western Catholicism by 1300 was rapidly losing the means to express theologically the basic principles of its life, the *ekstasis*, emptying, displacement

⁶⁶ Sheldrake, 39-40.

⁶⁷ McIntosh, 71.

⁶⁸ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 130-137; this section presents a good discussion of the subtle distinctions in Eckhart’s language that have led to a re-assessment of his spiritual legacy as much more *theologically* traditional than has frequently been acknowledged. Turner argues similarly in *The Darkness of God*, in chapter 6 (“Eckhart: God and the Self”) and chapter 7 (“Eckhart: Detachment and the Critique of Desire”). Turner’s central thesis is that contemporary understandings of medieval spirituality tend to exactly invert their content and intention while retaining their vocabulary.

of self in response to the self-emptying love of God, the communion of God and humanity by the presence of each in the other.⁶⁹

Not only is the language of God-talk essential to God-living, but the loss of adequate God-talk results in a degeneration of God-living. As thought and practice reciprocate vitality in each other, such too does the deterioration of the one signal the decline of the other, so that the fundamental kenotic shape of Christian spirituality was inverted into a self-seeking and self-filling experientialism centred on special, personal, interior *sensation* increasingly detached from theological engagement. Williams reads the Reformation as primarily a fervent response to the state of affairs arising as “the chasm widens between intellect and will” and “the contemplative was offered next to nothing for the theological elucidation of his life.”⁷⁰ He characterizes the response as “a violent counter-attack, a desperate attempt to reclaim the territory of theology for the realm of experience and engagement” such that “it was a search, seldom successful but constantly serious, for the lost art of understanding.”⁷¹

The rationalism of the schools increasingly assumed a Nominalist viewpoint, resulting in an understanding of religious knowledge as impossible in any purely natural sense, since “natural” knowledge could issue only from sense experience. The effect was to further disengage faith from the intellect, consigning it to the realm of the will under the effect of a supernatural (and therefore super-knowable) cause, or characterising it as

⁶⁹ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 136-137.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

the assent to propositional data supernaturally transmitted to and disseminated by an authoritarian Church. Either way, natural experience could have no revelatory value, and intellectual inquiry might revolve only around analysis of the propositionally dispensed dogmatic *ideas*. Either way, therefore, intellectual pursuit is cut away from the experience and discipline of everyday Christian *living*; theology is disconnected from spirituality.

Among the complex religious, socio-economic, and cultural factors leading to the Reformation, it is clear that it was essentially a response to spiritual crisis at both the corporate and personal level, triggered by late medieval spiritualities weakened because unsupported by relevant, and *related*, theology. From the depths of a remarkably contemporary-sounding existential anguish, Martin Luther knew that neither the rationalistic intellectualism of the schools nor the sometimes-compulsive merit-focused devotional and ascetical practices of popular piety appropriately addressed the basic experience of the human person's sense of inadequacy in the quest for "perfection". Honest self-appraisal only widened the chasm between a God imaged as judge of success in the spiritual life, and the human doomed to failure. His religious formation in Augustinian theology provided him with the understanding that human will was simply incapable of bridging the disconnect; his own experience of anxiety and despair brought him to the conclusion that it was in this human will – and not in Christ – that he, and the religious culture, had been seeking salvation. Luther came to understand that both precision of logical ideology and extremity of pious practical effort missed what has been central to the patristic and early medieval mystics: that God is approachable finally only

in the darkness of unknowing, unseeing, unfeeling, unexperiencing, in other words, in faith. The original challenge provided by the dialectical relationship between theology and spiritual practice that had guided the early kenotic pattern of both had been replaced by emotional self-fulfillment or satisfying intellectual neatness, and the breaking off of the one from the other ensured neither could act as self-subverting in-forming corrective to the other.

Luther diagnosed this practical and linguistic illness in religious culture, identifying it within both theology's intellectual pursuit and the devotional practices of spirituality. He reacted against the increasingly highly-abstract and highly-structured theology of the schools, both in its Aristotelian form, completely confident in its own logic, and its more and more influential Nominalist form, which restricted the role of reason in matters of theology, insisting on the primacy of the will in the journey to God. He opposed as well a spirituality that was increasingly juridical, non-Scriptural and mediated by a heavy-handed, immense and corrupt ecclesiastical system. With the other major sixteenth century reformers, he was "inherently opposed to the kind of divisions that late medieval Scholasticism brought about between spirituality and theology, especially doctrine and ethics".⁷² His response was a retreat into a principle of divine monergism whereby God alone initiates and realises the work of salvation, the human person responds to a personal "vocation" or call to justification by faith alone, and knowledge of God is acquired from Scripture alone. His suspicion of the place of both the intellect *and* the will in the scheme for salvation translated into a resistance to the notions of the mediation of Church tradition and human agency.

⁷² Sheldrake, 46.

E. The Early Modern Period

Currents that run from the late medieval into the modern era can be detected in these Reformation principles. However unintentionally, many of them further sealed the split between spirituality and theology, defining the relationship in modernity as one of separation, even suspicion, suffering the loss of the imperative dialectical dynamic between the two which gives vitality to both. That both Protestant and Catholic reformers of the sixteenth century worked toward “restoring to the Christian world of a theology both rooted in and critical of ‘experience’”⁷³ did not eliminate the tendencies toward self-sufficiency, either through exalted spiritual experience or a defensive, propositional theology bent on protecting those aspects of tradition against the changes set in motion by the movement of modernity.

Western Christianity became divided and alienated not only politically, but practically and theologically. Awareness of individual and national identities rose to fill the void left by the loss of religious unity, risking in a fragmentation of purpose and understanding, and resulting in a failure of common structures, and common language that had heretofore guided the spiritual life. The Renaissance focussed human consciousness toward the human person, and the inevitable movement toward secularisation proceeded. The gulf left by late medieval theology between universal concept and concrete reality, between theory and practice increased the gulf between the

⁷³ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 159.

professional theologian and the Christian pilgrim. Spirituality toward the margins of the intellectual dimension such that its subsequent tradition largely developed outside the schools, while what was taught in the schools concerning the spiritual life tended to be meagre and highly formalised.⁷⁴

Unmoored in varying degrees from both Church control and from cohesive theological underpinnings, and influenced no doubt by an increasing tendency to specialisation in the great expansion of knowledge in areas of secular inquiry, a variety of spiritualities shifted toward highly specialised, individualised, and increasingly privatised forms. The sixteenth century saw an explosion of interest in and preoccupation with mystical events and experience, and the development of a language of spirituality that described and engaged the personal, the affective, the “psychological” in the journey toward God.

The Carmelite reformers John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, and Ignatius of Loyola are perhaps the most prominent among the superabundance of spiritual writing the subject matter of which response to the divine of the human person, and so was mainly concern with the *experience* of the human “soul”. Divisions among disciplines proliferated, as tracts on moral theology distinct from dogmatic concerns appeared among the Jesuits, and Quietist-influenced treatises further separated “ascetical” or ordinary spirituality from “mystical” or extraordinary spirituality.

⁷⁴ Schneiders, 261.

By the seventeenth century, the “spiritual” referred not to communal Christian life, but to interior, affective, experiential and essentially private relationship with the divine, even within spiritual community. Schneiders calls the seventeenth century “the golden age, so to speak, of spirituality” but warns that “alongside the orthodox and healthy developments there were numerous less than orthodox developments of an enthusiastic and quietistic nature.”⁷⁵ “Golden”, no doubt, due to its exuberance and relative freedom from institutional control and theological critique, this age’s spirituality fell prey at times to extremes of individual temperament and personality. The fears of both Protestant and Catholic reformers regarding mysticism as dangerously lacking in ecclesial or biblical foundations were frequently justified, and “Sometimes, therefore, the term “spirituality” was used pejoratively”.⁷⁶

Aidan Nichols points out, however, that in spite of the spiritual enthusiasm of the period, concerns regarding its practice were articulated. Awareness of the complexity, and inherent elitism, of some spiritualities, and their detachment from a meaningful theological grounding was expressed in works like Guillaume Vincent de Contenson’s (1641-74) *mentis et cordis* which “aimed at recovering a lost unity of mind and heart, as the very title shows.”⁷⁷ As the Middle Ages moved toward modernity, the Christian life of the intellect and life of prayer moved toward deeper division, distinction and separation. Sheldrake notes von Balthasar citation of the end of the High Middle Ages as

⁷⁵ Ibid., 259.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 319-20.

the point of “the disappearance of the ‘complete’ theologian ... the theologian who is also a saint.”⁷⁸ As the humanist attitude of the Renaissance turned toward the scientific world view that would shape it and shake it to its core, the early Christian model of the person, whole *and* communal, thinking *and* desirous, standing before God with the mind in the heart, seems to have receded indeed. It is interesting to recall at this point, and reflect upon the qualitative *traditional* significance of the sentiment expressed by a fellow bishop about Rowan Williams on the occasion of his enthronement at Canterbury: “We have a saint for our leader now” (see above, Wilkins).

F. The Modern Period

The exact location in time of “modernity” is highly debatable. With regard to theology, I would trace its inception back to the emergence of the sense of the “scientific” in the Scholastic theology of the Middle Ages; it is this quality which within the practice of theology takes on increasing significance as it develops in relationship to other fields of inquiry in the modern world. While the terms “scientific” and “scientist” as we now use them are products of the nineteenth century (at the beginning of which chemists and physicists were still referred to as “philosophers”), the shift in the pursuit of knowledge from foundations in first principles to the empiricism which characterised the orientation of the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Personal experience and human reason would generate knowledge of the human person, of the natural world, and of God (or no-God).

⁷⁸ Sheldrake, 40 -41. He quotes from Hans Urs von Balthasar’s “Theology and Sanctity,” in his *Word and Redemption: Essays in Theology*, (translated by A. V. Littledale with Alexander Dru, New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 57.

The celebrated turn-to-the-subject of modernity, building on the emergence of the individual in the medieval religious imagination⁷⁹, is perhaps most clearly delineated in Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. With this phrase, the conscious individual self, ostensibly loosened from traditional intellectual foundations, is identified as the medium of knowledge; the method is observation of experience, and the crowning characterisation of the human person is as a "thing that thinks". Within this phrase, we recognise the core of what became known as scientific method which influenced henceforth theological method and its relationship to spirituality. The paring down of the human person to the *thinker within* coincided with an understanding of knowledge as objective, value free, and isolated from personal feeling which might distort the perception by the mind "inside" of what is "outside" in the world.

The dualism of Greek antiquity's Platonic and Neo-Platonic sources had walked side-by-side with the Christian incarnational regard for the material world, the historical and the human body, producing an ambiguous state of affairs that constantly threatened to – and indeed sometimes did – fall into an anti-materialist, anti-world, anti-body attitude. In Descartes, the split is recapitulated, and the implications for theology and spirituality are clear. Theologians were already suspicious of the subjectivism of mystical orientations, and of devotionism that made use of dubious theories about God and the human person. On the heels of the discord of the Reformation period, as they

⁷⁹ McIntosh discusses the collapse of the corporate metaphors of the Christian life derived from biblical anthropology as concern for personal salvation intensified in the popular mind, coinciding with the rising consciousness of the "individual" whose inner states and intentions come to the fore, *Mystical Theology*, 64.

reacted to these inclinations in spirituality, and to the pressure of empirical objectivism, Catholic theologians tended toward a positivist objectivism based on incontestable appeals to revelation. Typical of this era were such labours as the production of manuals for seminary training, and of encyclopaedia which sought to collect and reunify what had by that time become fragmented in the pluralistic wake of the split of Western Christianity. Protestant theologians, meanwhile, eschewed a systematic approach to the spiritual life, still wary of intimations of merit and self-justification.

Schneiders describes the “lively debate”⁸⁰ in the eighteenth century regarding the continuing distinction drawn between the ordinary Christian life of virtue and the extraordinary life of perfection of the mystic. The emergence of the term “spirituality” (originally in the French) gathered under one heading the stages of the Christian life which had previously been separated into ascetical and mystical theology. Indicating the systematic study of the journey of the Christian soul toward God, “spiritual theology” developed into a field of study of “the science of the life of perfection”⁸¹, retaining as subdivisions the ascetical and mystical distinction. The language of spirituality stabilised within the period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though the specific vocabulary was largely confined to Roman Catholic circles until the late nineteenth century. It must be noted, of course, that non-Catholic churches developed practices and produced writings on prayer, devotion, holiness and piety, which today we would consider as part of the practice and study of “spirituality.”

⁸⁰ Schneiders, 259.

⁸¹ Ibid.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, “spiritual theology” was considered a branch of theology, dealing basically in the mechanics of the soul’s journey toward God. It was subordinated to dogmatics and moral theology, and was cause for scant, and certainly secondary, attention in any “professional” religious development.

IV. Spirituality, Theology and Postmodernity

A. Postmodernism Emerges from Modernity

While the roots of modernity clearly reach back to the Middle Ages, and in some ways arguably to antiquity, its orientation was established in the humanism of the Renaissance, and its character realised in the spectacular transformation of the method of intellectual inquiry of the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The scientific revolution redrew the boundaries of objective knowledge to fit the conditions required by empiricism. Descartes launched the celebrated turn-to-the-subject to the fore with when he formalized the mind-body split by way of his *cogito ergo sum*. Distinct from, and presumably practically separable from, the mechanistic *extensio* that is the body, the person as “thinking thing” is the medium of knowledge; she peels off her material conditions as far as possible in order to attain the best shot at “objectivity”. While many of the early moderns were religious people, Descartes certainly included, faith was slipping from a focus on God to a focus on humans, and specifically human reason as the source of “salvation”, which took on an increasingly non-religious significance in the notions of temporal freedom and equality.

As it felt the effects of the shift from the classical consciousness of antiquity to the empirical consciousness of modernism, the contours of the theological endeavour changed, most notably by being acknowledged as *changing*: as both conditioned and developmental. What was once considered in its classical definition to be “faith seeking understanding” might thereby be transmuted in the twentieth century into that which

“mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix”⁸². Awareness of historicity resulted in a shift in theological attention to an anthropological starting point, manifesting itself in the change of understanding of the *direction* of knowledge from top-down to bottom-up, a change in the understanding of the *status* of the enterprise from fixed to contextual, a change in the understanding of its *object* from God to human experience (human experience of *God* would seem obvious here, but is not necessarily an element in all theologies), and a change in the understanding of the very *nature* of the enterprise from a metaphysical-ontological to an epistemological project.

Theology and spirituality were both forced up against the sceptical pre-disposition of the modernist orientation. On one hand, theology was marked by a defensive ambivalence that alternated between a search for its own positivistic sense of certainty in rewriting tradition as proposition, or a reshaping of its own agenda – and to some degree its own scope and limitations – to fit the contours of the scientific method. Where the theological endeavour sought the confidence it had known prior to the upheavals of the Renaissance, the Reformation and then the Enlightenment, it alternately retreated into systematic anti-modernist conservatism or it followed a rationalistic swing to scientific-critical modes⁸³, breaking off into differentiated disciplines that offered depth of focus due to specialisation, but also risked increasing fragmentation of purpose.

⁸² Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1971), ix.

⁸³ A notable exception was Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s retrieval of a Christian cosmology which set the theological notion of grace within a quasi-scientific framework. His major philosophical works, *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu*, were conceived and written in the 1920’s and 1930’s, but were condemned by his order and not published until 1955 and 1957 respectively. It is interesting that in addition to seeking a rapprochement between theological tradition and modernity, his writing has a strong

Theology's recognition as a "science" in the evolving modern sense of that word was hotly debated, as seen pointedly, for example, before the foundation of the University of Berlin in 1809⁸⁴; the debate continues in various forms today. As it happens, both traditionalist and modernist approaches to theology reinforced the momentum of its alienation from spirituality, which itself had withdrawn in highly-specialised language into the increasingly private sphere of the phenomena of personal experience. Drifting further and further away from a theological enterprise that was at the same time proving to be less and less of an effective critical counterpoint, spirituality found refuge in pietistic or esoteric language that offered union and harmony rather than judgement. Further, neither mysticism nor pietism seemed compatible with the methods and findings of modernity: if piety seemed like so much superstition and moralising, mysticism was just plain weird. Mark McIntosh remarks the dilemma which mysticism presented to modernity, in the words of Dutch Carmelite Kees Waaijman:

It [modernity] had to eliminate mysticism ... as an unproductive element, often falsely labeled as quietistic, irrational, and occult ... In reaction, mysticism ... developed a language and logic of its own which in turn rendered it unintelligible to cultural rationality.⁸⁵

spiritual dimension, arising out of both his work as a geologist and his intense personal experiences in the trenches of World War I. It addresses the human person in the modern world in the context of a renewed understanding of the transcendence of God.

⁸⁴ The debate is detailed in Hans Frei's *Types of Christian Theology* (ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 1992). The dispute centred around the issue of whether to consider theology as an appropriate discipline in a university committed to *Wissenschaft*: "the inquiry into the universal, rational principles that allow us to organize any and all specific fields of inquiry into internally and mutually coherent, intelligible totalities" (p.98). Frei argues for a social scientific rather than philosophical understanding of the theological task, and so argues for its legitimacy as a properly academic discipline on those terms. The debate today considers whether theology is best understood among the social sciences, the humanities or even the arts, often over against the discipline of religious studies.

⁸⁵ Kees Waaijman, "Towards a Phenomenological Definition of Spirituality", *Studies in Spirituality* 3 (1993), 35. Quoted in McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 8.

The methodical *articulation* of faith had moved away from the *experience* and *practice* of faith: away from contemplation, from prayer. Theology and spirituality both occupied questionable, and indeed much questioned, positions within a culture that increasingly defined value in empirical and pragmatic terms. But even though theology was both under the pressure of the scepticism of such a culture and at risk of being confined to the boundaries of scientific or social scientific inquiry for the sake of preserving its perceived legitimacy, and spirituality was retreating into privatized enclaves of lifestyle choice cut off from its intellectual-critical dimension, other possibilities for both were also emerging.

Modernity's brave new world contained the seeds of its own self-doubt. Suspicion once unleashed cannot very easily be re-confined: it was not long into the nineteenth century that modernity looked suspiciously at its own premises and found them wanting. Various threads of thought, philosophical, political and social, came together to reinvigorate the spirit of sceptical inquiry that had animated early modernity, but which had since settled down into a seemingly-secure set of convictions about the power of reason to work goodness, and the inevitability of progress toward human freedom and equality under reason's guidance. Marx (1818-1883) re-cast history in light of economic factors, re-writing Hegel's (1770-1831) dialectics of self-development in materialist terms, and re-introducing the question of the nature of the individual self vis-à-vis the collective. By the end of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche has declared that "God is dead", that metaphysics was illusory at best and mendacious at its core, and that science

failed to see its own presumptions and biases. He worked to undermine what he saw as the pretension that truth has any objective foundations, leaving in his wake a growing sense that “truth” is in reality radically relative, the “self” radically fluid, and that both are radically culturally-constructed. Heidegger (1889-1975) furthered the impulse to deeply question basic cultural assumptions, and, suspicious of the notion of “presence” and its reifying effect in the philosophy of “being”, he worked toward an escape from the tradition of metaphysics, via a sweeping questioning of language, the location and nature (and failure) of linguistically-mediated meaning, and the ultimately relational nature of time, all of which function as structures of “difference” which resist interpretive closure.

The slipping of confidence in modernity’s project for human progress was felt catastrophically beyond the sphere of philosophy in the practical reality of lives lived in view of and under the yoke of nationalistic totalitarian regimes, and the astonishingly powerful technological achievements that arose under its influence. If it seems too-often stated that the horrors of Stalinist communism, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and the televised Vietnam War irreparably damaged the self-assurance of modernity, the very scope and depth of these events compel a repeating of their names. By the 1960’s, the optimism of modernity seemed old and spent.

Western culture’s political, cultural and social revolutions in direction, one upon the other, were felt within the theological endeavour as in all other fields of human enterprise. Modernity pressed upon theology, certainly, but ironically also set the conditions for freeing theology from the very risks it posed. It prepared theology to take

natural and social scientific advancements into its own service, while developing the critical edge necessary in a now pluralist and secular culture. If theology was then threatened anew by the risk of being reduced to an undertaking of human reason, it was also newly gifted by necessity with the responsibility of distinguishing and articulating its own task proper to itself and distinct from other human endeavours. As the dynamisms of modernity established autonomy among the spheres of human activity, theology definitively lost its former standing as “Queen of the Sciences”⁸⁶ over other fields of inquiry. At the same time, it gained the opportunity to re-define itself, its role and its very legitimacy, in itself and in relation to other fields of knowledge. When modernism faltered under the effects of the post-structuralist consciousness of postmodernism, the conditions emerged whereby it remained for theology, pressured by modernity and re-shaped by postmodernity, to reconsider the relationship between its intellectual enterprise and its spiritual foundation. The possibilities were risky, but also extremely promising.

B. Theology and Spirituality Encounter Postmodernism

Where modernism cast suspicion on the downward (from God) direction of knowledge, postmodernism relativised the notion of an upward (from *any* foundation) direction as well. As modernism doubted subjectivity as a channel of real knowledge, postmodern thinking dismantled the myth of objectivism. Whereas modernism scrutinized assumptions of ontology, postmodernism has dissected assumptions of rationalist epistemology. We have entered the twenty-first century with one foot in the camp of objectivist scientific modernism and the other in the camp of deconstructed

⁸⁶ See *Summa Theologiae*, Pt. 1, Q. 1, Art. 2 for a discussion on theology as the “noblest” of sciences, a view that prevailed during the medieval period.

relativist postmodernism. In our cultural environment where everything is seemingly variable, indeed where variety and variability seem to be the only constants, the gap between spirituality and theology remains. The relationship between the two is often understood as one disconnection, regarded with suspicion, in the name alternatively of objective scholarship or subjective interiority. And yet, the influences toward change that were gathering when Merton spoke of the split a generation and a half ago (see above, Merton) have begun to offer new possibilities for reconnection.

Postmodern, post-Christendom Christianity, especially in the West but inevitably increasingly elsewhere, finds itself in an increasingly marginalised situation in some ways analogous to that of the early Church, before Christianity gained political ascendancy, and before the articles of faith had been painstakingly and precisely – “scientifically” – systematized in the objective language of philosophy, before theology was loosened from its spiritual core. While the early Church was *pre*-structural, we find ourselves, if reluctantly, in a *post*-structural context. The political clout of the Church has been diminished and sidelined; the cultural conditions in which it operates are pluralist and therefore relativised. The scientific revolution has secured the ascendancy of the secular – and most especially the economic – over the religious, in society in general, and even ironically to various extents within religious establishments themselves. Religious belief and practice have effectively retreated, or been pushed, from the public sphere, and such “privatisation” has left it vulnerable to being sold in the all-powerful marketplace as a consumer commodity. Consequently, religious engagement is at risk of being reduced to a hobby-of-choice or a self-help therapy, an

item of nostalgia or superstition, or a social project. Moulded by personal preference, it becomes a support for individual inclinations and desires, inverting and neutralising its any transformative possibilities.

We find, therefore, a situation into which Christianity cannot speak authentically, or even audibly, unless it speaks clearly and in a shared language, out of concrete personal *and* shared experience. It must speak courageously enough to be utterly honest and self-critical, being both well-informed and humble enough to appropriate its own history. It must speak creatively and imaginatively, exchanging a totalising vision for the possibility of a vision of wholeness. The postmodern situation demands of, and so potentially elicits from Christians, both active intellectual engagement and practical involvement with the world as it is. Rowan Williams identifies the task of Christians as one of “restoring an authentically public discourse in their cultural setting”, of “making certain claims on the possibility of a global community”⁸⁷ while searching there “for what recognizably – however imperfectly – shares in the same project that the Gospel defines”,⁸⁸ in other words *in the project for authentic human freedom* (and what, if not this, is the unrealised intention of modernity?). Williams expands this engagement with the world *as it is* to include the essential “need to know when to be silent, when to wait

⁸⁷ Rowan Williams, “The Judgement of the World”, 38.

⁸⁸ Ibid. Williams references here the thought of Cornelius Ernst, OP, in “Theological Methodology,” published posthumously in *Multiple Echo* (ed. Fergus Kerr and Timothy Radcliffe, London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1975), 85. The writings of Ernst and Kerr have had formative influence on Williams’s theology.

... [which] requires something like a contemplative attention to the unfamiliar – a negative capability”.⁸⁹ He insists that:

The Christian claim, then, is bound *always* to be something evolving and acquiring definitions in the conversations of history: it offers a direction for historical construction of human meaning, but it does not offer an end to history.⁹⁰

This means necessarily that Christian God-talk, and Christian *life*, cannot speak with any illusion of its own finality or completeness, but only in the fragmented voice of human frailty, which in Christian understanding becomes human hope. Only then can it offer the vision of authentic and creative newness to the *saeculum*, which is the mission and sign of the Christian tradition. In its embrace of growth and change, its willingness to speak with a sense of its own *unfinishedness*, the Christian task can carry forth modernity’s resources of hope into postmodernity’s refusal to call complete what is not. In many ways, this nexus of modernity and postmodernity fits especially well with the Christian experience and understanding of the world as good, and indeed as saved, but *not yet finished*. The irreducibly eschatological shape of the Christian vision requires as much.

C. The Peculiarity of the Theological Endeavour

Christian theology cannot be confined to the formulas of its classical past or to the territory of individual feelings. As the understanding of the self and of the nature of knowing has changed, theology cannot be reduced to the context and method of modern science. Certainly, theology is in turn reflective, critical and constructive, all operations

⁸⁹ Ibid., 39.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 36.

of human consciousness. Surely as well, it strives for understanding by attending to data through analysis, systematizing and speculation, and shares some common methodological ground with the social and natural sciences. However, a methodological template that normalises for theology a method designed for scientific research risks collapsing theological method into modernist scientific method, and so losing sight of the deep significance of what is *peculiar* to theology. Anselm's definition identifies plainly what remains the distinctive, what Rowan Williams might call the *strange*, mark of theology: "faith".

While "belief" plays a role in any field of inquiry, and any body of knowledge functions at some level on *a priori* components or principles, theology in the Christian tradition operates in unavoidable and irreducible relationship to the *pistis* – faith – of the New Testament which, while not *irrational*, nonetheless overruns the limits of the merely rational and opens up into the un-measurable, un-reproducible, un-predictable sphere of trust, however varied the interpretation of "trust", and its object, might be. It is not an unfortunate gap in knowledge to be overcome by more data, or by more scrutiny of the data. It is an orientation that places its critical thinking always in the context of hope, trust and openness, rather than adopting a presumptive stance of scepticism. This orientation of hope, this faith, is the shape of Christian spirituality, and it is the ground on which Christian theology must stand. It is the proper posture for theological inquiry, and it calls the theologian beyond the bounds of objective science's ideal of disinterested value-free disinterestedness purified of the taint of subjectivity, and unencumbered by *meaning*. In theology, the medium of objective inquiry *is* human subjectivity, and its

interest is in human meaning, recalling Williams's characterisation of the "basic Christian theological perspective" being "the life of the *believer*, material and imaginative and desirous" (see above, Williams). This is some way away from Descartes' person as "thinking thing" inhabiting a mechanical body, and from modernity's fantasy of a pure objectivity purged of the contamination of sensual or psychological conditioning.

My intention is not to ignore or deny the proper rigour required among the various specialities within the discipline of theology, some of which especially look toward the sciences for methodological direction (historical and linguistic research are two obvious examples here). Nor is it to overlook the need for *askesis*, the necessary discipline of the "fabric" of subjectivity, of imagination and desire. It is to suggest, however, that while it shares an empirical dimension, theology taken as a whole is simply not quite like the other sciences, at least not as "science" is understood in its strictly empirical modernist sense, and that its discipline – its own particular dedication to intellectual honesty and integrity – extends beyond the sphere investigated by the empirical sciences, and beyond the method which requires neutrality and non-involvement on the part of the observer.⁹¹

⁹¹ A discussion of the findings of postmodern physics, most notably the subatomic "world" of quantum mechanics' "probabilities", the inherent turbulence and complexity revealed by the mathematics of chaos theory and multiple universes predicted by string theory should certainly be undertaken against this classical notion of scientific objectivity, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis. For my purposes, by "scientific" I refer to the macro-level of scientific inquiry, which is the concern of the bulk of actual scientific research, and is also the model for our common cultural understanding of "scientific". I would argue, further, that the classical scientific outlook is still the reigning worldview of contemporary culture, excurses into postmodern thinking notwithstanding.

Examining theology's *peculiar* – and potentially embarrassing – integrity, Williams lays the cards plainly on the table: “Religious talk is in an odd position...”⁹², not least of which because its context is “God”, and “God is not the same as anything else.”⁹³ He describes the dilemma wherein the proper subject matter and scope is the totality of the moral universe: in other words, theology's *orientation is toward* totality, ultimacy. However, as itself *subjected* to that moral totality (total perspective being God's alone), it must itself remain “under judgement”, and hence, can never legitimately see itself as totalising, or ultimate: it is always, in some way, inadequate to its apparent task. “So it looks as though religious discourse⁹⁴ is doomed to continual betrayals of its own integrity ... and if what cannot be answered ... cannot honestly be said in the first place ... it seems as though integrity in religious discourse is unrealisable ... This is very nearly true...”⁹⁵

Very nearly, but not quite, not completely *necessarily*, true. But the “narrow gate” through which real theological speech might authentically pass is opened up only if that speech carries with it the sharp awareness of its own limitations. Williams is determined to underline this limitedness, so that his characterizations of theology are often negative, not unlike his negative description of spirituality with which we began. This description addresses the strangeness of the “ground of belief” (referring both to the Christian

⁹² Williams, “Theological Integrity,” 5.

⁹³ Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 162.

⁹⁴It is important to note that Williams is speaking here specifically about “religious discourse” (that is, theology) as distinct from *discourse about religion* as a social science issue.

⁹⁵ Williams, “Theological Integrity,” 5, 6.

tradition *and* the Christian God); it follows necessarily that the speech which engages this strangeness, this *otherness*, would also be characterised by it.

If theology begins in worship⁹⁶ and ends in silence⁹⁷ it is a strange speech indeed, and one that, as a whole, cannot obviously or easily fall in beside scientific or even social scientific speech in a simple, straightforward manner, no matter that some aspects of specialities within the theological project properly operate in a scientific mode. The epistemological base of theology – faith – is peculiar, and so is the talk that emerges from it and speaks into it. At some level, the theological endeavour turns the aspirations of “regular” speech on end: if theology is somehow concerned with *knowledge in the context of a relationship to an ultimately mysterious God*, its inherent risk is not that *too little* be delivered, but rather, *too much*.⁹⁸

Williams refers to Karl Barth (1886-1968) in reaffirming that theology does not have and must not invent possessive power over its subject,⁹⁹ whether that subject be conceived of as God, the stuff of revelation, or human experience under the pressure of revelation. In Christian tradition, itself a strange territory by virtue of its faithful and (worse!) kenotic model, revelation is neither absolute knowledge,¹⁰⁰ nor merely “a matter

⁹⁶ Williams, *Arius*, 235.

⁹⁷ Williams, “The Judgement of the World”, 43.

⁹⁸ Williams, *Arius*, 234.

⁹⁹ Williams, “Trinity and Revelation”, 133.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

of the mental operations on the part of believers”¹⁰¹, but a *story* capable of provoking questions – provoking vision of the *newness* of God – comprehensively. Williams converses with Ricoeur’s (b. 1913) “hermeneutics of testimony”¹⁰²; accordingly he puts revelation forward as that which initiates our theological language, and asserts that the initiative does not originate with us. Further, revelation not only initiates the “hermeneutical spiral” but also operates within it, so co-operating with the human epistemological method, but not determined by it, nor by the human penchant for mastery, control, or even knowledge. This is extremely significant for the understanding of theology as a spiritual, and not simply an epistemological activity. Revelation is not a rejection of knowledge, certainly, but neither is knowledge – *gnosis* – its final end. Its end is *pistis*, and knowledge is one of its means.

Theology, then, is an essentially ascetic practice of humility and dispossession, an activity that intends not mere epistemological mastery but, ultimately, spiritual surrender. It must be said that a certain “surrender” before the truth is inherent in any honest inquiry, certainly including the empirical sciences. But a fundamental task of theology is the effort to maintain, not eliminate, the “strangeness” of scripture and tradition¹⁰³, of the unknowability of God, of the unknowing of faith, beginning by conserving the ancient

¹⁰¹ Williams, “Between the Cherubim”, 195.

¹⁰² Williams, “Trinity and Revelation”, 133. In n. 8, Williams explains “testimony”, by virtue of its relating “to the particularities of events, not to common essences”, as being in opposition to a notion of absolute knowledge, and as calling forth an “event” in the interpreter. We approach here the notion of witness as manifestation, and not mere reportage (not unrelated to Williams’s perception of poetry in his “Poetic and Religious Imagination”, [*Theology* 80, no. 675 (1977)]), and the possibility that revelation not only initiates the “hermeneutical spiral” but also operates within it.

¹⁰³ Williams, *Arius*, 234.

ambiguities of metaphor and title which guard against the hegemony of human logic. It elicits awareness of possibilities outside logic's boundaries, and speaks afresh this strangeness (the "otherness" of God and salvation by kenosis) in every era. In so doing, it does – and must – at some point invert conventional human epistemological projects. It offers instead that which has appeared variously as anti-wisdom (as in Job), the anti-logic of foolishness and weakness (1 Cor 1.23), as kenosis, negativity, the "stumbling block" for the audience of the Christian kerygma from its beginning

None of this implies a disparaging of the proper function and domain of either conventional or scientific wisdom (that would be merely another version of trying to force a simplified, clear-cut situation). Theology's relationship to these is more complex and more subtle. Its contemporary expression must critically appropriate doctrinal heritage in full awareness that faithfulness to its integrity *requires* attention to and engagement in the contemporary context. It requires innovation in order to respond to these new contexts, and to take into its service new knowledge and new self-awareness. Thus, the epistemological project launched by Descartes' thinker-subject and pressed forward by Kant's (1724-1804) transcendental subject are taken into the *service* of the theological project in so far as it is useful and no further, and only with the recognition that all theological knowledge is bound to carry with it the potential for its own negation.

A formative, *spiritual* task underlies theology's epistemological project, and spirituality's goal, when not negatively expressed, must be identified as "transformative", as that which opens us to the possibility of newness, of the generative activity of God.

Examining the elements of theological and spiritual unity in his now-classic analysis of the modes of theology¹⁰⁴, David Tracy asserts that “truth is always best understood as basically transformative in character”,¹⁰⁵ that conversely only radical transformation can assure the presence of truth,¹⁰⁶ and that therefore “the attempt to separate truth as disclosure from truth as transformation is damaging to the fuller understanding of truth itself.”¹⁰⁷ “Transformation” of the self may seem a strange goal against certain modern, especially instrumentalist, notions of knowledge as a kind of acquisition (not to mention, too, its accompanying implications of power). “Faith” might likewise appear as plainly counterproductive, but faith in the theological sense is not blind belief in irrational propositions but a radical openness to even that which overflows the boundaries set by human rationality, and the dimensions available to human experience.

It follows, then, that when we speak in either a scientific or a common mode to this “overflow” which calls us both by and beyond our own cognitional apparatus, we must allow other kinds of speech to accompany it. These “other kinds” may disrupt and even suspend ordinary speech. They constitute the language of surrender, of obedience (in the sense of the Latin root “to listen”), of vision and prophecy, of praise. We see such speech in the classical Christian use of paradox, of negative wisdom from Job through Paul and throughout the mystical tradition, and even in weird phenomena such as glossalalia

¹⁰⁴ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, (New York: Crossroads, 1981), 59 ff., but especially 69 ff. which deals with his understanding of “practical theology”.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 73.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 71.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 78.

which are embedded, perhaps embarrassingly but persistently, within the tradition. This is the language that reminds us that we are in strange territory when we are doing theology: *spiritual* territory, a territory of faith – and it is one that makes theology a problem within the confines of modernity, and within the academic and popular spheres that look to the standards of the modernist sensibility for an indication of value. This is the language that reminds us that what elicits our God-talk lies not within human consciousness, memory, or desire but beyond, calling all of these forth. It is the language that reminds us that “there is a kind of truth which, when it is said, becomes untrue”.¹⁰⁸ It may be that in this strange territory, the language of postmodernity – the language of difference, deferral, erasure, alterity, slippage of meaning, absence of presence – may be put in its turn to very good theological service in the attempt to speak of a God who, in order to “see” him” we need to attend not just to the picture constructed, the word spoken, the insight arrived at, but “to look into the gap between the holy images”.¹⁰⁹

The task of theology, then, is negative *and* affirmative, critical *and* exploratory, ascetic *and* constructive. It must engage in history, knowledge, cultural multiplicity, personal and social interaction, and shared language, if it is to realize its traditional role of “faith seeking understanding”, while actualizing its postmodern task of mediating between culture and religious significance. It must speak publicly, but with integrity, subjecting itself to the world’s judgement, and the world to the judgement provoked by the Gospel’s direction.

¹⁰⁸ Williams, “Between the Cherubim”, 196.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 187.

The task is a precarious affair, a kind of razor's edge, away from which we are always tempted in order to secure some sense of stability or mastery. As practitioners of theology, we are at constant risk of either foreclosing on truth by delivering too much, or falling into mere repetition of others' words and actions by relinquishing the creative duty to seek fresh expression in order to speak the newness of God in ways that the world might hear. The word is in service to the spirit. The goal, task, *nature*, of theology is essentially spiritual. Positioned today at the edge of both great uncertainty and tremendous opportunity, perhaps never more so since the earliest days of Christianity, theology must identify a compass proper to itself, one capable of guiding it in the world, of teaching it to interpret and judge the world, and to learn from and speak to the world. Looking back to the early Church for direction in operating in the midst of plurality, equivocation and spiritual hunger, before the alienation of theology from spirituality, I propose that the compass proper to Christian theology *is* spirituality, that is, that fundamental shape of *life in the Spirit*, and that theology's task is to discern, critique, appropriate and make available to human understanding *and experience* the nature, meaning and implications of that shape. I propose further that the theological work of Rowan Williams works toward conscious and practical reconnection of the practice of theology with its spiritual matrix, speaking anew the "shape" of Christian tradition into the contemporary language-world which has been itself been shaped by modernity and postmodernity.

D. Deconstruction, Chaos and God-Talk

Plenty of effort has gone into the task of disentangling the threads of modernity and postmodernity, a decidedly *modern* task undertaken by the self-consciously postmodern. Perhaps this irony is perfectly appropriate, though, in a context where the “play” – and risks – of conversation have replaced systematisation, where gaps and irruptions have replaced a certain, progressively flowing vision of history, and where a self-conscious perception of contingency has replaced confidence in certainty and finality of meaning. Nonetheless, perhaps in spite of itself, there are certain touchstones of postmodernism that can be identified, most of which respond and react to some aspect of what is perceived as characteristic of post-Enlightenment modernity. The disposition (I am tempted here to say “spirit”) of postmodernism’s response is negative: it seeks to undermine and destabilise the overarching systems-based foundationalism of modernity, though it is not clear exactly what might replace it. In this sense, postmodernism might be considered an *orientation* rather than a clearly definable scheme of thought, (and that might be part of why I am drawn to use the word “spirit” to describe it). It becomes quickly apparent that it would be difficult to ignore the possibility of commonality between postmodernism and the negative dimension of Christian spirituality, though care must be taken not to rush to declare simple equivalencies from apparent similarities which do not hold up under sustained attention.

It is helpful to look at influential postmodern thinkers in order to secure some sense of what is “typical” of the postmodern orientation¹¹⁰. In philosopher Jean-François

¹¹⁰ It is interesting to note, while its implications cannot be delved into at any length in the context of this thesis, that the voices most consistently cited as sources of the postmodern movement emerged within a

Lyotard (1928-98) we see the rejection of the “grand narrative”, or overarching and developmental structure underlying modernity’s assumptions of the unity and objectivity of the knowing self, of history, and of reality itself. The search for a theory-of-everything in either contemporary physics or fundamentalist religion might be seen as the quest to fulfill the meta-narrative’s aspirations toward basic simplicity and clarity of knowledge. Interestingly, paradoxically – and importantly, I think – Lyotard’s thought emerged from modernist roots, and he maintained that potentially harmful effects of postmodernist excesses might be checked only in the context of modernity’s “story”, which is that of “the life of the spirit and/or the emancipation of humanity”.¹¹¹ The story’s *vector* is valuable; its reification or finalisation is false and harmful.

Michel Foucault (1926-84), cultural historian and philosopher, focussed on what he perceived as the ineluctable connection between knowledge and power, specifically *power over*, power as domination or coercion. His “discourse-analysis” included an “archaeology of knowledge” wherein the past was examined for clues to the power-structures that shaped what came to be understood as the very constitution of what

continental, specifically French-speaking context, and they are predominantly male. I do not presume to say that postmodernism can be summed up by these few figures, nor to deny the important work of women in this area, only to suggest that postmodernism may have some way to go to pull itself beyond the very restrictions and conditions against which it rails, and that it is inevitable that such a continuing shift in “speakers” will add more unanticipated matter to its “speech”.

¹¹¹ Lyotard, in his 1984 study of education systems *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge* (translated from the French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 51), as quoted in Clare O’Farrell’s “Postmodernism for the Uninitiated”, *Understanding Education: Contexts and Agendas for the New Millenium*, (Eds. Daphne Meamore, Bruce Burnett, Peter O’Brien. Sydney: Prentice Hall, 1999), 15; available online at <http://www.qut.edu.au/edu/cpol/foucault/pomo.html>, accessed 1 November 2003.

counted *as* knowledge.¹¹² An intense awareness of the marginalisation of “otherness” – that which is different from the dominant cultural norms – emerges from Foucault’s studies of the history of the treatment of madness and other illnesses, of systems of incarceration, and of sexuality; this sense of the significance of “alterity” becomes one of the marks of postmodernism.

The “death of the author” announced by cultural critic Roland Barthes (1915-80), carrying with it the inescapable echo of Nietzsche’s “death of God”, tore into structuralist confidence in the straightforward signifier-signified relationship in language, dethroning the “author” as the creator and controller of the meaning of a “text”¹¹³, and placing the responsibility, and indeed the very *possibility*, of determining the meaning of a “text” with the “reader”. The nature and location of knowledge with regard to human communicative language emerges as complex, and inherently problematic and variable.

Perhaps the most famous of the postmodernists is Jacques Derrida (b. 1930), in some ways attaining a kind pop-star of postmodernity status, which he has hardly discouraged.¹¹⁴ And maybe this is fitting with postmodernism’s rejection of the

¹¹² This linkage between knowledge and power was sometimes expressed quite explicitly in the early moderns. For instance, in Francis Bacon, one of the pioneers of modern scientific method, we see this plainly: he described the intention of science as the human conquest of and mastery over “nature”. See Keith Thomas’s *Man and The Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), part I, chap. ii (“The Subjugation of the Natural World.”), *passim*.

¹¹³ It should be noted that in the context of postmodernism, “text” signifies not only written words but any form of representation of, communication of meaning, and hence “reader” should be understood accordingly.

¹¹⁴ Derrida was the subject of a recent (2002) film by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Koffman, he is the focus of a number of mailing lists on the internet (and of innumerable websites) and his speaking tours have something of the feeling of a rock concert, complete with contact- and autograph-sleeking fans.

formalism and formality of modernity, its openness to previously marginalised, maligned, unlistened-to, or simply unheard voices, and its blurring of distinctions between “high” and “low” culture which favours eclecticism, interest in surface, and pastiche against illusory notions about depths, purity and wholeness. Derrida’s work centres on the diagnosis and deconstruction of the supposedly-rational foundations of Western culture. He sees these foundations not as *real* structural constants but rather as constructions of the arbitrary and shifting human desire for core meaning, intention, essence and functionality. He calls this assumption of the rationality of cognitive foundations “logocentrism”.¹¹⁵ In its place, Derrida offers that “there is no system, no theory, no science or political system which rests on entirely rational foundations.”¹¹⁶ He coordinates a group of ideas around the “slipperiness” of language, which includes the unspoken and even unconscious “traces” of a meaning which is apparently “absent” but is actually carried by its very absence nonetheless. The resulting necessity to defer indefinitely any assignment of final meaning is referred to by another of his neologisms: *différance*, distinct from but even so carrying the impression from “difference”, and thus not only representing but manifesting the point he intends to make. The attendant denial of “presence” (his word for Western tradition’s assumption that the full meaning of a word is necessarily present in linguistic representation) follows, and so the denial of the possibility of reaching absolute truth.

¹¹⁵ After the opening words to the Gospel of John, wherein “the Word” as the principle of Reason in the universe is presented as the ultimate foundation of reality. Issue needs to be taken with the reduction of “Reason” to modernist notions of rationality, and a “trace”, perhaps of anti-Christian sentiment, but the underlying point that Derrida makes is worth considering.

¹¹⁶ O’Farrell, “Postmodernism”, 14

Derrida is also the postmodernist most directly engaged by contemporary theologians (or “a/theologians” as per Mark C. Taylor,¹¹⁷ philosopher and religious studies professor, and arealists such as Anglican clergyman and theologian Don Cupitt), and has become very popular within certain circles of thought interested in negative theology.¹¹⁸ Reading postmodernism against a context of Christian negative theology provides rich ground for exploration, though it also entails a certain risk in terms of a simplistic or overstated correlation between the language of postmodernism and the language of the classical Christian *via negativa*.¹¹⁹ If we let go of the need, for example,

¹¹⁷ A visit to Taylor’s website at <http://www.williams.edu/mtaylor/> (accessed 1 November 2003) provides an experience, another *manifestation*, of self-conscious irony regarding the “slippage” of language as letters in the site’s list of links shift and change, making navigation a precarious affair. A judgement as to whether this is insightful and effective design or mere cleverness may not be considered a valuable distinction in the context of postmodernist orientation.

¹¹⁸ One example is the recent *Questioning God* (ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001). The book is based on the “Religion and Postmodernism 2: Questioning God” conference which took place at Villanova University on October 14-16, 1999. Both conference and book centre on an engagement by an impressive array of philosophers and theologians with the thought of Derrida.

¹¹⁹ A similar obscuring of distinctions can be seen in the sometimes overzealous equating of postmodern physics with the mystical formulations of Christian and other religious traditions, which arises out of a tendency to literalise analogical links. (For example, the “emptiness” of Buddhism might be identified with the empty space of the subatomic world.) Rather than legitimately raising awareness regarding the figurative nature of *all* language (see below, this footnote), including scientific language, religious language is mistakenly literalised to keep pace with a mistakened-for-literal language of particle physics. Awareness of this risk is instanced in the sentiment of Sir Arthur Eddington, theoretical physicist, (d. 1944), who, having witnessed the new literalism of physics-as-religion, wrote: “The starting-point of belief in mystical religion is a conviction of significance or, as I have called it earlier, the sanction of a striving for consciousness. This must be emphasised because appeal to intuitive conviction of this kind has been the foundation of religion through all the ages and I do not wish to give the impression that we have now found something new and more scientific to substitute. I repudiate the idea of proving distinctive beliefs of religion either from the data of physical science or by the methods of physical science” (from *The Nature of the Physical World* [NY: Macmillan, 1929], as quoted in *Quantum Questions: The Mystical Writings of the World’s Great Physicists*, Ken Wilber, ed., [Boulder, CO: New Science Library/Shambala, 1984], 168). In the book’s introduction (p. 9), Wilber points out that “The great difference between old and new physics is both much simpler and much more profound [than that the latter is relativistic, non-deterministic, four-dimensional etc.]: both the old and the new physics were dealing with shadow-symbols, *but the new physics was forced to be aware of that fact...* (Emphasis Wilber’s). This lengthy excursus is made in order to demonstrate that an instructive warning against a too-easy conflation of different modes of knowledge is in order, and hopefully it is also a suitable caveat to preface the association between postmodernist and

to *equate* postmodernism's "aporia" – the gaps before and within the human apprehension of meaning – with the Christian *via negative* tradition, we can explore legitimate heuristic connections with less risk of blurring legitimate distinctions.

Two main categories of concern for theology emerge from postmodernity's upheaval of order: one is the problem of relativism and the other is the overriding turn-to-language¹²⁰. As modernity proclaimed the values of objectivity by way of the turn to the subject, postmodernity wrestles with the relativistic implications of its own turn to language as both the location of the creation of the world of meaning (literally the creation of the possibility of cognition), *and* the means of obscuring or corrupting that meaning.¹²¹

traditional Christian negative orientations.

For an interesting examination of the figurative nature of language, and indeed of human consciousness, see *Metaphors We Live By*, by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980). The implications are further developed in their *Philosophy in the Flesh* of 1998 (New York: Basic Books) where the notion of the "embodied mind" challenges the Cartesian/Kantian self and explores the importance of "unconscious thought". The authors intend no religious significance, but the implications for incarnational Christianity are great.

¹²⁰ As with "text" above, "language" and "writing" here are not restricted to linguistic expression, but includes all mediums of representation of meaning. By definition, as *mediums*, they are classically considered as second order, *mediated*, and therefore impure when compared to supposedly unmediated, first-order experiences of "presence". This is significant when considering whether theology is in fact only and always a second-order activity, either a step removed from the reality of experience (as with an empirical viewpoint) or a step removed and set *over* experience as its determinant (as in an idealist viewpoint). The question of the spiritual nature of theology suggests that neither of these divisions between theory and practice is quite adequate to the task of determining the nature of theology, or perhaps better, *theological practice*.

¹²¹ At the risk of pushing the physics analogies too far, this might be considered a spin on Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle (after physicist Werner Heisenberg, 1901-1976), which states that one can never have the whole understanding of a subatomic particle because knowledge of its location eliminates the possibility, *by any method of measurement*, of its velocity, and vice versa. It becomes clear why postmodernism has embraced this area of science.

Postmodernism destabilises any assumption of a clear-cut and foundationally dualistic, all-encompassing reason-based system of signification “in here” (in the human consciousness) of the reality “out there” (in the material world), suggesting that such a simplistic view of language erroneously ignores and suppresses the remainder or surplus of meaning that does not fit into the operative “system”.¹²² We see here the rejection of modernism’s fondness for “systems”, whereby “system” becomes that which erases the legitimacy and even the existence of the person – or at least *some persons* – in all their potential “otherness”. We see also a deep doubt concerning the dualistic modernist notion of the person as thinking thing (associated with reason) plus material extension (the conditionality of the body) which must be shed or suppressed if pure, objective reality is to be grasped. And we see, finally, how the unavoidable slippage of meaning in a “text” commits us to the Heideggerian notion of “erasure”, that is that any representation must self-consciously carry with it the possibility of its own negation. Western culture’s assumptions of “presence” – that is, of pure and whole understanding of the meaning of words via direct and certain correlation between word and meaning – are emphatically denied. Instead, linguistic meaning is actually seen as being constituted by a necessarily variable, *slippery* interplay between what is present in and what is absent from the text. The slippage always risks “aporia”, a vacuum of meaning abhorrent to modernism’s desire to master the nature of the real in the form of reason, logic, objectivity. The resulting chaos would seem to consign humans to meaninglessness, utter

¹²² This paradox is studied in Derrida’s engagement with Plato’s notion of writing as *pharmakon*, a word that indicates notions of both “cure” and “poison” (see “Plato’s Pharmacy”, *Dissemination*, [trans. Barbara Johnson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983]).

relativity of knowledge, and therefore despairing of any possibility of communication, understanding, and communion.

That is the case only, however, if postmodernism falls into the same dualistic trap it so disdains in modernism. If it opts for the irrational over the rational¹²³, it remains bound to the very binary dynamism it purportedly seeks to escape, by looking to “chaos” as an alternative certainty to the certainty of “order”. But that would be too simplistic: reality is more complex, more subtle, *messier*; and it requires more attention and engagement at the level of faith than either positivist knowledge or rejection of rationality might admit. Besides, it is in a way a disguised form of instrumentalism, whereby the recesses of the imagination that have been banished to the asylum, or children’s literature, or Star Trek conventions, (that is, the realm of art-as-entertainment, erasing art as vital dimension of the society) – or religion (likewise with an emphasis on religion as optional distraction-of-choice rather than as something of real, essential significance) are retrieved for the purpose of addressing some imbalance set in place by the Enlightenment’s crowning of Reason.

¹²³ This may seem to be an absurd choice, and I do not suggest that irrationality is a stance taken or promoted as the alternative to rationalism by the thinkers mentioned here, though it certainly has explored in research (see Foucault’s studies of the history of cultural attitudes toward madness) and artistically (among many performance/electronic/body art of the 1960’s and 1970’s, see for example, Richard Serra’s 1974 videotape *Boomerang*, a comment on the chaotic nature of discourse, which presents artist Nancy Holt in headphones repeating taped words with a one second delay, resulting first in fragmented then in nonsensical verbal sound; or Bruce Nauman’s *Stamping in the Studio* in which the artist’s inverted camera angles show reality literally upside down. Viewing available at: <http://www.vdb.org/packages/survey/vol1pro2.html> . Of course, these reread, in media that reflect socio-technological change, some of the same concerns of earlier artistic explorations in the irrational or transrational by the surrealists, the Dadaists and other twentieth-century art developments.). A diluted and pernicious, (but not unrelated, I think), form of anti-rationality may be discerned in recent tendencies within our culture toward an anti-intellectualism that regards theory as unpractical, elitist, and/or irrelevant to “real” life.

To take another key from the sphere of mathematics and science, chaos theory provides us with an interesting and helpful symbol for and intuitive “interpretation” of the chaos or relativism discerned by postmodernist thinking. (And that it needs interpreting is *de rigueur* in light of postmodernist consciousness.) Chaos theory describes “dynamical systems”, or anti-systems, which are so sensitive to fluctuations in initial *conditions* that they are practically-speaking (at least from the point of view of predictability) inherently disorderly. However, the mathematics of chaos theory reveal within the disorder, *without eliminating it*, patterns which emerge from the chaos and dissipate back into it, but which nonetheless provide a possibility of a vision of wholeness that is dynamic. Objectively speaking, there *is* order, that order is *real* and it is knowable, valuable, even usable¹²⁴, but it is neither permanent in form, nor ultimate. What is inherent, and constant, is complexity and the reality of contingent and changing conditions. This is neither the stasis of classical vision, nor the finality of objectivist modernity, nor is it the utter chaos of some interpretations of postmodernity. This may be a very instructive alternative model for considering the apparent either/or choice presented to theological inquiry by the clash of modernist/postmodernist consciousness. It is the vision permitted to creatures both intelligent and finite, who can, and indeed, *must say something*, and something *true*, even while that cannot say *everything*.

¹²⁴ Chaos theory is put to practical use in such “hard science” endeavours as climate prediction and mapping of neural networks, as well as in economics and data analysis, for example.

E. Contemplation, Attention and Theology

It would not be mistaken to say that the Christian tradition is founded in a negative moment that might justifiably be called a religious deconstruction. That Christ dismantled assumptions operating within his religious context is clear. His example invites his followers “to keep awake” (Mark 14.38), to become aware of and attend critically to their own foundational assumptions and their implications is reasonable. The significant motif of Christ’s life and his teaching is kenotic:

“There is a basic ‘shape’ to being Christian, determined by the fact that its identifying narrative is one of *peripeteia*, reversal and renewal. If the paschal story is, as a matter of bare fact, the bedrock of Christian self-identification, that which is drawn upon to explain what the whole project is about, there is no escaping the pattern there defined of loss and recovery. Faith begins in a death...”¹²⁵

The “death” manifested bodily in Christ’s story witnesses to this basic “shape” of loss and recovery, and it describes not only the fact of human bodily finitude, but of our ideological finitude as well. It speaks of the need to step back from the tendency within human consciousness to automatic unmindful operation which leaves it bound to the predominant ideological currents in the environment, religious or otherwise. That is not to suggest any shunning of discursive reasoning: Christ’s method of attention is complex and operates among all the modes of human knowing and being. The Gospels give accounts of intellectual debate with religious authorities, and of instructive and challenging preaching to disciples, as well as presenting Christ listening and responding to the needs of the many “others” he encountered. They also present Christ as imaginative storyteller, and Christ as one who prays. “Keep awake” precedes the signal “to pray” (Mark 14.38), and he taught the “need to pray always” (Luke 18.1). He himself

¹²⁵ Williams, 83.

“would withdraw to deserted places and pray” (Luke 5.16). Paul takes up the call to pray, understanding it as the responsive cooperation of the person under the influence of God, where the “Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words”, calling for the Christian to “pray without ceasing”. Prayer, charism, and what we would today call “mystical” experience are treated by Paul as components of the “life in Christ”. Prayer remains the fundamental practice of Christian spirituality, the means of conforming the person and the community to the “basic shape” of being Christian.

Christian tradition has maintained the importance of prayer in the cultivation of humility – that is, of clear and honest attention to what-is, and so the precondition of authentic freedom. Its contemplative modes might be seen as the place where the tradition is most explicit in its kenotic impulse, most disruptive of ordinary rational thought, and most dislocating with regard to the assumptions with which we clothe our notions of the “self”, the “other”, and “God”. Contemplative prayer in its various forms, especially as it moves toward its most attentive/receptive point, steps back from the pragmatic, instrumental programmes of regular consciousness which tend to seize upon and hold the objects of consciousness, to allow the consciousness to remain alert but with no pre-imagined goal or object to possess. Rowan Williams appeals to John of the Cross, the sixteenth century Carmelite mystic, to explain that this consciousness is *faith*, a trusting openness to what-is (“a decision for reality”¹²⁶), a matter of *understanding*, not only *feeling* or *willing*, but an understanding that is far removed from that of regular intellection:

¹²⁶Williams, “Word and Spirit”, *On Christian Theology*, 122.

Faith is for [John of the Cross] the mode of *understanding* proper to the contemplative life (as love is the proper mode of willing): it is what happens to the *intellectus* when there is nothing particular for it to understand, a trustful directedness toward that wholeness of vision which eludes us. For John, 'meaning' is always elusive and unmasterable.¹²⁷

Understanding in the contemplative mode is a dispossessive attentive and object-free openness, not a closed ownership of a commodity of cognition. The various strategies employed in contemplative practice help to loosen the consciousness's attachment to preconceived goals and to free one from the impulse to possessiveness. Author and professor of philosophy and religion Philip Novak describes in rather stark terms the negative character of contemplative *askesis*:

Contemplative attentional exercises are strategies of starvation. Every moment that available energy is consolidated in concentrative and nonreactive attention is a moment when automatized processes cannot replenish themselves. In the dynamic world of the psyche, there is no stasis: if automatisms do not grow more strongly solidified, they begin to weaken and dissolve. When deprived of the nutriment formerly afforded to them by distracted states of mind, the automatized processes of the mind begin to disintegrate. Contemplative attention practiced over a long period of time may dissolve and uproot even the most recalcitrant pockets of psychological automatism, allowing the consciousness to re-collect the ontic freedom and clarity that are its birthright.¹²⁸

Williams' own insight supports Novak's, and in the two we begin to feel quite concretely the deconstructive nature of contemplative prayer and how it coincides at least in disposition with some aspects of postmodernist concerns:

There is a strategy of *dispossession*, suspicion of our accustomed ways of mastering our environment: a search for prayer beyond deliberate and ordered meditation, the expectation of failure in coping with the 'truths of faith' when trying to use them for the stirring of devotion, essays in physical privation or

¹²⁷ Williams, "'Religious Realism': On Not Quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt", *Modern Theology* 1, no. 1 (1984), 18.

¹²⁸ Philip Novak, "The Practice of Attention", *Parabola* 15, no. 2 (May 1990), 11-12.

isolation, scepticism or hostility towards internal and external props of devotion . . .
. . . The fruition of the process is the discovery that one's selfhood and value
simply lie in the abiding faithful presence of God . . ."¹²⁹

In his assertions regarding the self-emptying movement of contemplation, Williams goes so far as to cite certain moments in the self-disruptive stage of the journey as "sometimes issuing in what might well have to be called temporary pathological states, periods of suspension of the ordinary habitual workings of mind or body."¹³⁰ He identifies these moments of seeming-pathology or aporia with Hans Urs von Balthasar's "profound and even harrowing treatment of the themes of Christ's dereliction and descent into hell . . . inextricably connected with his sensitivity to the cost and pain of Christian contemplation."¹³¹ And lest the extreme language of such descriptions tempt us into a dramatised fantasy wrapped up in extraordinary private interior states, Williams insistence is that if contemplative prayer is "a decision for reality" (see above), it is a decision for a concrete life lived in active engagement with the world:

. . . a decision *for* powerlessness, *against* the domination of the world manipulated by fantasy . . . a *decision*: that is to say it is meant to determine, to create, a course of action . . . It is not a decision for passivity or disengagement, but a decision to live with and within the potentially harmful and destructive bounds of the world . . .¹³²

I think it does not go too far to recognise in this spiritual decision something of the quality of postmodernist approach, and interestingly, of pre-modern, especially early

¹²⁹ Williams, "Theological Integrity", 11.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Williams, "Trinity and Revelation", 145. He refers to passages in Balthasar's *On Prayer* (A.V. Littledale, trans., 2nd edition, London: SPCK, 1973), Part II, chs 2 and 3.

¹³² Williams, "Word and Spirit", 122.

Christian theological approach: a decentring of the self, a direct look at human finitude, a reticence about totalising claims and a resistance to the temptation to reduce reality to human reason, an ascetical attitude toward language so that it does not become a protection against the disarray and uncontainability of reality, and a refusal to isolate theory from practice. If theology enters risky territory here, it is because it cannot do otherwise, since “that narrow and slippery region between joy and desolation, that zone which only God can inhabit, is our homeland.”¹³³

The Christian is in some very basic way, defined, *shaped*, by prayer. It is the activity which defines the Christian’s personal and corporate *spirituality*, not only for *some* who are especially “spiritually” orientated (however that is construed), but also for the activist engaged in the social dimension of the Christian project, or the one oriented toward its intellectual dimension, the theologian. Neither the activist nor the theologian can separate her/himself from the basic practice of being Christian; neither can assume that the practice of Christ and the counsel of subsequent tradition are meant for those specialists in “spirituality.”

If we consider theology, as the intellectual dimension of Christian life, to be in some aspects a theoretical endeavour, it is instructive to reflect on our cultural tendency to separate theory from practice. Cultural studies scholar Clare O’Farrell (Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane) points out that “there is no such thing as a ‘theory’ that does not express itself in a physical and historical form. A ‘theory’ needs to use the

¹³³ Williams, “‘Religious Realism’”, 15. Here Williams translates a line from Petru Dumitriu’s *Au Dieu inconnu*, (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 76.

forms at hand – language, technologies such as the book and various institutional structures . . . in order to be visible.”¹³⁴ She prefers, therefore, to use “intellectual practice” instead of “theory” in order to underline the problematics of the separation: she *then* proceeds to the defining of what is specific to *intellectual* practice: “the process of rational analysis.” I am reminded of my experience a few years ago of hearing a question put to Rabbi Howard S. Joseph of the Spanish-Portuguese Congregation of Montreal, regarding whether and how his intense focus on study left him any time for prayer. The Rabbi answered quietly and with conviction, “My study *is* my prayer.”

The Rabbi’s words bring to mind the biblical call to attention, which Christ repeats in his instructions “stay awake with me” (Matt 26.38). It is this wakefulness, this attitude of listening (the “to hear/listen” at the root of “obedience”¹³⁵) and seeking, openness and non-possessive intentionality, which give shape to Christian prayer and thereby to the Christian person and community. Wakefulness, in all its literal and figurative richness, resounds throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and is picked up in the spiritual and mystical traditions. It is connected to notions of attentive presence, renewal and resurrection: the “Awake my soul!” of Ps 108.2 and the “O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!” in Is 26.19 resonate again in the baptismal hymn of Eph 5.14: “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you!” In the practice of prayerful attention, the Christian lives out the conversion from sleep to wakefulness, from

¹³⁴ O’Farrell, “Theory, Practice and Imagination in the Creative Industries”, *Foucault Resources* (website). (Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology, 2000). Available at <http://www.qut.edu.au/edu/cpol/foucault/ci.html>. Accessed 1 November 2003.

¹³⁵ From the Latin *oboedire*: *ob-* toward + *oedire* (akin to *audire* to hear). From *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary: Tenth Edition* (Springfield MA: 1993), 801.

death to life, which is the essential sacramental mark of Christian spirituality and the ground of Christian theology.

Simone Weil (1909-1943) identified “unmixed attention” with prayer; her sense of its importance is underlined in the conclusion that “We have to cure our faults by attention and not by will.”¹³⁶ She described attention thus:

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of . . . Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.¹³⁷

Weil describes an activity of attendant but objectless hopefulness, emptied of all but the slenderest remnant of will. Certainly, this description presents a picture of prayer that is the fruit of sustained practice, but it should not give the impression that it is a specialised requirement of only the few, the gifted, the especially spiritual. And it certainly is not an effort to retreat from the world of human finitude or meaning, in favour of a mythological pure core or essence, a “true self” which is beyond all image or thought. The sense of humility and acceptance of the world in Weil contradicts this entirely. Williams supplements Weil’s vision with an understanding of the self conditioned by his reading of Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who rejected the Cartesian notion of an essential self separable from the conditions of human limitedness.¹³⁸ His

¹³⁶ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, (London: RKP, 1952), 105; as quoted in Williams, “‘Religious Realism’”, 16.

¹³⁷ Simone Weil, “Reflections of the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God”, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd, (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 111-112.

¹³⁸ Fergus Kerr’s *Theology After Wittgenstein*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), is frequently cited in Williams’ writings with regards to the nature of the self as *basically* material, linguistic, and finite.

conception of “religious interiority” clarifies any mistaking of prayer, spirituality or interiority for an abstract, magical or privileged “experience”:

Religious interiority, then, means the learning of patterns of behavior that reinforce the awareness of my finite and provisional status, my being in time. It is neither a flight from relation, nor the quest for impossible transparency or immediacy in relation but that which equips us for knowing and being known *humanly*, taking time with the human world and not to have done with knowing and (and desiring).¹³⁹

What Williams’ vision of prayer does convey is that it is a conscious decision to face reality, to take time, to listen, to hope, to ask and to speak, both personally and as a community. It inverts “ordinary consciousness” in the sense that it challenges an automatic passivity of mind which leaves the person vulnerable to the whims of worldly fashions, and bound to an instrumentalist sense of value as achievement and possession which leaves the person turned in on and defined by the self, unable to claim her/his freedom. It overturns any utilitarian measuring of the person as quantifiable commodity and of the person’s activities by their perceived “applicability” and usefulness for others. In doing so, it thereby also overturns the perception of the personal God as an object for human use. As such, it is the fundamental practice of Christian spirituality, of Christian *orientation*, and it is the fundamental posture required for the practice of theology. It is not an add-on or an alternative to the practice of theology, but rather its attitudinal heart – its *spirit*, its compass and orienteer. Theology, in turn, is the in-former, the *shaper* of spirituality’s orientation.

¹³⁹ Williams, “The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer”, in *The Grammar of the Heart: New Essays in Moral Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Richard H. Bell, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 50-51.

Clare O'Farrell refers to the tendency to separate theory from practice as rooted in ancient dualisms that separate reason/spirit from matter (classically by elevating theory above practice).¹⁴⁰ However, with regard to our contemporary tendency to separation, she identifies “the theory/practice divide as a legacy of the Enlightenment”, where “Science became the pinnacle of rational activity, a form of knowledge which all others should emulate.”¹⁴¹ By its “apotheosis during the post War period in the 1950s and 60s”, science had come to be seen as a functional pursuit, valued insofar as it was useful, *practical*, having been purged of any “spiritual” or *theoretical* values which may have marked its practice in early modernity.¹⁴² Imagination was subordinated to pragmatism, and so “Gradually from an undue adulation of intellectual activity, the pendulum has swung the other way to an equally extreme vilification.”¹⁴³

The general separation of theory and practice effects, of course, the separation of theology and spirituality. It highlights the fragmentation that gives rise to an instrumentalist attitude toward the meaning of “reason”, and is accompanied by a kind of puritanical reduction of the imaginative nature of human consciousness. Along with religion, imagination is consigned to the periphery of life where it becomes a lifestyle option, a distraction or entertainment, maybe, but certainly not a valuable or *dependable*

¹⁴⁰ Ancient meanings with regard to theory must consider the term *theoria*, or “contemplation”, which while certainly intellectual in nature, is mistakenly understood if conflated with modern functionalist rationalism.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² I feel it is very important to insist again on the distinction between the common contemporary understanding of “theory”, and the ancient understanding of *theoria*, which is much broader and deeper (see Reardon above). This truncation of the word contributes to the easy, indeed completely *sensible*, separation of theory and practice.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

constituent of society – except insofar as it creates wealth as part of a leisure industry.

Referring to a phenomenon she calls “sociological imagination”¹⁴⁴, O’Farrell writes:

In other words, imagination must be subordinated to the currently accepted rules and logics of material, social and political existence and must ultimately express and refer back to those rules. Only “applied” imagination is of interest: socially and politically “useful” works – these are the serious works of art.¹⁴⁵

She cites Foucault’s articulation of the situation, “The imaginary . . . is a phenomenon of the library.”¹⁴⁶

O’Farrell’s essay does not address theological or spiritual matters, but she raises many concerns that are relevant to the dilemma of the separation of theology from spirituality, of the sidelining of both in modernist culture, and of the reign of a utilitarian worldview that undermines the imaginative dimension of human consciousness, falsely positioning practicality as its opposite. It is exactly within this imaginative dimension, I will contend, that the proper realm of the spiritual theological pursuit is located. O’Farrell recognises in postmodernist thinking an awareness of the problem of reducing to “sociologically”- acceptable the scope of the imaginative. She hears in some quarters of postmodernism, and I would agree, a hope for the retrieval of the imagination as a valued human dimension. There are important implications here for the restoration of the essentially imaginative task of the practice of theology, and, therein, for its re-connection to its spiritual foundation.

¹⁴⁴ After C. Wright Mills’ in his *Sociological Imagination*, 1959.

¹⁴⁵ O’Farrell, “Theory, Practice and Imagination”.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. The quote is from “Afterword to *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*”, in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954—1984. Volume Two*. (Ed. James D. Faubion. Tr. Robert Hurley and others. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Allen Lane, Penguin, 1998), 106.

F. The “Halo” of Meaning

In his book entitled *Creating Consciousness: A Study of Consciousness, Creativity, Evolution, and Violence*¹⁴⁷, Montreal Zen master Albert Low considers the nature of the “word”, of “meaning” and of metaphor. Following some thought in the contemporary study of consciousness¹⁴⁸, Low understands the “word”, or language, as the creator of consciousness, and hence the creator of the world of meaning that we inhabit. He has clearly rejected the simple signifier-signified relationship between word and objective “reality” that is assumed by structuralism. In some sense, Low is claiming that the word not only refers, but also embodies, not the *thing* to which it refers, but the idea by which we *know*- and *connect to* – the thing.

Knowing, then, in the full communicative sense of the word, is mediated by language and thereby language takes on something of the ambiguous permeable quality of the iconostasis in an Orthodox church: it is a kind of membrane which at once *separates* (or perhaps “distinguishes” is a better expression) between two dimensions, and at the same time *unites* them. Not unlike the word under the influence of the God of Genesis’ first creation story, and resounding in the “Word” of the Gospel of John, the *naming* brings a world into existence. Low cites Heidegger’s description of the poet’s act of speech,

This naming does not consist merely in something already known being supplied with a name; it is rather that when the poet speaks the essential word, the

¹⁴⁷ Albert Low, *Creating Consciousness: A Study of Consciousness, Creativity, Evolution, and Violence*, (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 2002), chs 17-18, passim.

¹⁴⁸ Lakoff and Johnson’s work would be one example; Low does not refer to their work, but his own contains many similar elements.

existent is by this naming nominated as what it is. So it becomes known as existent. Poetry is the establishing of being by means of the word.¹⁴⁹

Here, language is not seen as a *tool* in any functionalist sense. It is the poetic *imperative* of human consciousness, poetic in the sense of its root *poiēsis*: to make, to create. The human creature appears in the image of the Creator God: “We make in our measure . . . because we are made.”¹⁵⁰ To further communicate the force of the imperative, Low quotes from T. S. Eliot who describes the need for the poet to speak is as if “he is haunted by a demon.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Low, *Creating Consciousness*, 187. He quotes from Heidegger’s *Existence and Being*, (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1949), 281.

¹⁵⁰ J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories”, *Tree and Leaf* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1964; reprinted in *A Tolkien Miscellany*, [New York: QPB, 2002], 128. In this Andrew Lang Lecture delivered in 1938 at the University of St Andrews, Fife, Tolkien discusses the nature of imagination in human consciousness (his term “fantasy” may be confusing if we take it to mean escapism-denial, which it does not) as that which is a “natural human activity” that “certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason . . . On the contrary” (p.127); further, it is “a human right” (p.128), derived from our “strange nature” as “making creatures” (p. 137). One gets the sense of an imperative not unlike the duty to make icons in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, required in us by the fact of the Incarnation, and our calling to image in ourselves God the “Maker”. In the Epilogue, Tolkien is explicit about this incarnational “method” of salvation (p. 137), and discusses the mysterious and subtle relationship between “fantasy” (in the sense of *poiēsis*) and religious truth. He also laments the pragmatism but ignorant relegation of “Faerie”, the “Perilous Realm” of the imagination, to the “nursery”, not unlike Foucault’s observation of its banishment to “the library” (See above, Foucault.)

¹⁵¹ Low, 190. It bears mentioning that the word “demon” takes its origin from the Greek and Latin words for “spirit”.

G. Rowan Williams and the Art of Theology

Rowan Williams's witness to the profound relationship between *poiēsis* and theology is particularly authentic because he is not only a theologian but also a working poet. Like Albert Low, he understands poetry incarnationally as manifestation of experience or revelation of meaning, not as a second-order activity whose task is reporting external information. He asserts by way of reference to Welsh poet Saunders Lewis (1893-1985) that: "... the poem does not recollect or recreate an experience. The poem *is* the experience: it creates the experience for the poet just as much as for his first audience."¹⁵² He concurs with Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) and T. S. Eliot in contending that poetry is not a re-presentation or an expression of personality¹⁵³, nor is its business mere novelty.¹⁵⁴ The poet, as maker, does not create *ex nihilo* (that presumably is the task of God), but uses the material of "the world as it is", and makes it "new" by setting it in a new context, against a new horizon.¹⁵⁵ It is a prophetic and visionary duty, one of renewal by re-interpretation and re-articulation.

The poet's work is not merely productive, either. It starts *before* the crafting of words, in the contemplative and ascetic striving for awareness of the ambiguity of the

¹⁵² Williams, "Poetic and Religious Imagination", *Theology* 80, no. 675, (1997), 182. Emphasis is mine.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 179. Williams cites Maritain from "The Frontiers of Poetry", in *Art and Scholasticism* (trans. by J. F. Scanlon, London: Sheed and Ward, 1946), 68-94. He does not cite Eliot directly here, but must surely be aware of his identical point of view in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality"; (from *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, [1920; reprinted London: Methuen, 1964]; available at: <http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html>. Accessed 1 November 2003. In the same place, Williams also mentions Tolkien in the context of "fantasy" as "a significant – and underrated – expression of the poetic impulse."

¹⁵⁴ "Absolute innovation is not possible." *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

word, of language, of its dual nature as bond-forger *and* separator, as veil *and* revelation, as *pharmakon*. The poet must be at once dedicated to the word, and yet not be seduced by its magnificence into thinking that the thing created is final, complete, containing full “presence” of meaning:

The poet has to break away from “possession” (the demonic resonance is deliberate), the destructive sterility of a consciousness dominated by the bewitching power of words, by a vastly complex, rich and satisfying linguistic past.¹⁵⁶

The breaking away involves the same negative momentum entered into in contemplative prayer, in apophatic theology, and in postmodernity’s rejection of complacent and straightforward assumptions about reality. The negation is fulfilled by the linguistic dispossession of the poet, whereby “he has at last to confess what his whole utterance has pointed towards, his *own* incompleteness, exigency, poverty.”¹⁵⁷ Williams appropriates Polish poet Jerzy Peterkiewicz’s (b. 1916) convictions in asserting that

. . . every poem is a step along the road to a liberation from words, from the determinations of the language of men. *Every* verbal structure is an offence against the impenetrability of things, an imposition of alien and subjective constraints; no poetic form is transparent enough not to stand between us and honesty.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 184.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 180. Williams writes here in conversation with Peterkiewicz’s book *The Other Side of Silence: The Poet at the Limits of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

This keen awareness of and attention to the veil of words is what also makes possible, indeed propels the poet toward its power as manifestation, revelation.¹⁵⁹ This is what Williams reads in Peterkiewicz's notion of "the other side of silence": it is the "slippery homeland" of the human person in the world (see above, Dumitriu), no longer able to claim innocence, purity, simplicity of communication or communion. But the hope for honest poetry lies exactly in this "experiencedness"¹⁶⁰; it is "the fruit of this 'self-noughting', the experience of the world as utterly resistant to self."¹⁶¹ And exactly here lies the grace amid the suffering, in the image of the Christian motif of hope in desolation. The near-impossible feat of writing honest poetry is made possible by the very experience that world is not me, is not mine, nor will it ever be not possessible by me. The pain and sorrow of contact with the utter irreducibility of "the other" is what makes my own self capable of existing, and makes my own voice capable of speaking. There is a deep irony in the paradox, in the "cost of speech" where "the return to words is not simply a pointless and disastrous martyrdom, but is itself obscurely redemptive."¹⁶² This is the other side of silence.

I hope that the last section has carried with it clear suggestions of the correspondences of risks and joys inherent in the poetic task and the theological task. The connection forms the crux of why I locate the theological task in the realm of art,

¹⁵⁹ This coincides with Ricoeur's notions about the revelatory powers of poetry, touched on briefly above, and at length in Williams's "Trinity and Revelation."

¹⁶⁰ There is a resonance here of William Blake's awareness of this poetic and spiritual journey, expressed in his poetic cycles *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*.

¹⁶¹ Williams, "Poetic and Religious Imagination", 181; Williams links this resistance to Simone Weil's notion of "necessity – the inescapable flux of 'the way things are' ", (same page).

¹⁶² Ibid., 184.

poetry, the imagination, rather than in the domain of the sciences. Rowan Williams shares in some fundamental way a similar sense of theology's location and mode of operation in human consciousness. He says:

. . . Theology is a way of talking, and a way of transforming and negotiating with or in a language. It's not just a report or a set of arguments . . . Theology is not poetry, exactly, but it's close.¹⁶³

I would like to propose that the poetical heart of theology lies in its innate and imaginative creativity, which is not direct reportage, not accumulation and organisation of data, nor mere translation, but *poiēsis* and vision. Further, the linguistic process (and I use "linguistic" in the same broad sense that postmodernity uses "text") that is most suitable to theological expression is metaphor. Because the subject matter of theology is "strange", at once engaged against a horizon of holism and ultimacy while its media (word, image) are fragmented and finite, it finds itself in the odd position of having to do what seems to be impossible. Metaphor as a strange, deep and multilayered "linguistic" phenomenon¹⁶⁴, is particularly suited to the theological task.

H. The "Word" and Metaphor

In his study of "word" and metaphor", Albert Low presents a dynamical picture of these linguistic operations. "Words are something happening", he says, citing as

¹⁶³ Breyfogle, 296.

¹⁶⁴ Again, I would emphasise that I use "linguistic" in its broad sense of means of human expression and communication. In this vein, Leonard Bernstein has referred to the intrinsic metaphoricity of musical semantics: Low, *Creating Consciousness*, 199. Low quotes Max Black, professor of philosophy at Cornell University, on the *oddness* of metaphor: ". . . the 'mystery' of metaphor is that, taken as literal, a metaphorical statement appears to be perversely asserting something to be what it is plainly known not to be" (p. 198).

evidence the fact that the roots of all Sanskrit words are verbs, and thus removes any sense of the word as static and direct referent.¹⁶⁵ The figure he uses to illustrate the “happening” of the word depicts a relatively stable core which corresponds to the objective, or common “dictionary” meaning of the word. Around this core shimmers what he calls a “halo” of meaning. Within this halo move all the associations, conscious and unconscious, that the subjectivity of the author and the reader bring to the writing and the hearing of the word. Not only is this halo variable by person, but the relationship between the core and the halo is always dynamic, with the analytical objectivity of the core reaching out centrifugally to the halo’s periphery, and the halo conversely moving inward, intuitively, centripetally toward the centre. It is this dual, interactive motion inherent in the “word” within human consciousness that accounts for the basic metaphoric quality of language and cognition. By way of metaphor, the “impenetrability of things” might yield itself up to a gaze that seeks not to pin down and possess it, but to attend to it. The intuition of the strength and delicacy of metaphoric revelation is expressed in William Blake’s lines from his poem “Eternity”: “He who binds to himself a Joy / Doth the wingèd life destroy; / But he who kisses the Joy as it flies / Lives in Eternity’s sunrise.” The activity of the metaphor cannot be stopped and held, must be neither possessed as literal nor considered merely arbitrary, or it ceases to have meaning at all.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 196. The discussion of the “structure” of the word is found chap. 18, pp.195ff.

¹⁶⁶ To return symbolically to the language of physics for an illustration. The subatomic particle is not known directly but mathematically, as a wave of probabilities in terms of its movement and its location. The act of measuring causes “the collapse of the wave function”, which then simultaneously reconstitutes itself elsewhere in the universe. If the probabilities of quantum mechanics sound like figurative expressions that pertain to mathematical language but not “reality”, it should be remembered that as elusive as the subatomic world is to our consciousness, and as symbolic as our vision of it is, this vision is used in very practical applications in the macro-world.

Because the metaphor functions on two levels, the core and the halo, the objective and the subjective, the rational and the imaginative, analytical and intuitive, it offers a depth of vision not possible in either level alone. Metaphor's fluid "double vision" thrusts meaning forth into multidimensionality; operating not unlike the binocular differential of stereoscopic vision which creates the very possibility of the apprehension of depth. Metaphor is neither relativism nor stasis, but a contemplation of the complexity and depth of reality.

In a radio broadcast entitled "Dante: Poet of the Impossible", Dante scholar Giuseppe Mazzotta speaks to that poet's understanding of metaphor, and its link to the transformative and unitive nature of religious and poetic vision:

What he understood is that poetry is unlike all the other forms of expression – unlike dialectic, unlike science, unlike physics, unlike anything else. All the other forms of discourse have a kind of linear and a kind of persuasive aim that belong to the rhetorical aim of discourse. Poetry makes us see the world as whole, so that poetry has the power to transcend linear, partial and separate modes of perception. It is a unique language because it is the language of beauty and the language of play, and it forces on us a contemplative way of seeing. So Dante is the figure who truly understood from the start the power of beauty and the power of poetry as ways of leading us to the vision of God.¹⁶⁷

Rowan Williams characterises the movement of poetry as a development from protest, to disillusion with language, to silence, then irony and into the "simple hope of grace".¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Giuseppe Mazzotta speaking in "Dante: Poet of the Impossible", a radio broadcast prepared by Greg Kelly for the *Ideas* programme on CBC-Radio One, (first broadcast 1, 8 and 15 May, 2002, by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation).

¹⁶⁸ Williams, "Poetic and Religious Imagination", 185.

The pattern fits some elements of the direction of postmodernism, and describes also, I think, the spiritual unfolding of the task of theology.

V. Reconnecting *Logos* and *Pneuma*

A. Rowan Williams and the Spiritual Task of Theology

Williams speaks a theology that reaches toward the complex, deep, concrete needs of our world, I would argue, *because* it reconnects theology with spirituality, contemplation and prayer, and so with the very ground of creativity and transformation. Williams' understanding of theology, by virtue of its necessary linking of the spiritual and temporal, the religious and the secular, builds its fundamental contours from the doctrine of the Incarnation. Its shape is Trinitarian: it speaks of God by way of the reconnection of *logos* and *pneuma*, Word and Spirit. Trinity and Incarnation form the basic conditions for both Williams' spirituality and his theology.

When Rowan Williams outlines the task of theology in post-modernity, he describes an endeavour whose foundation is essentially spiritual and creative, and hence, ascetic. By the intimate link between prayer and theology, he establishes theology as fundamentally connected to religious and spiritual practice:

Religious practice is only preserved in any integrity by seriousness about prayer; and so, if theology is the untangling of the real grammar of religious practice, its subject matter is, humanly and specifically, people who pray.¹⁶⁹

He describes the radically spiritual territory of theology itself, and its fundamentally spiritual end:

. . . [theology] feels as though it's got to maintain its respectability alongside other intellectual discourses, even while it's uneasily conscious that that's not

¹⁶⁹ Rowan Williams, "Theological Integrity", *On Christian Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 13.

where its own territory lies . . . theology as a way of dealing with peculiar concepts is dead, not because it is untrue or even because it's irrelevant, but because somehow the kind of language it represents is no longer a language of transformation.¹⁷⁰

I would like to approach Williams' understanding of the tasks of theology indirectly at first, by considering his understanding of the function of one aspect of prayer (in this case, praise). According to Williams, praise operates by guiding attention not toward "the smooth and finished quality of its own surface" but rather in the direction of "a reality not already embedded in the conventions of speech"¹⁷¹, in other words, *through but beyond itself* as praise and beyond ourselves as ones who praise, to that which calls forth the praise. Praise is not merely:

. . . a matter of euphoric fluency; because of its attempts to speak to and of God and not simply to collapse back upon itself as a mere articulation of religious emotion, it involves 'the labour, the patience and the pain of the negative', a dispossession in respect of what is easily available for religious language.¹⁷²

The effect of attending to the creative "reality of God", rather than merely to the static surface of the self-constructed self-image, is a yielding to the creative *novum* of God's action. The "labour" begins in the practice of attention, which makes us available to receive God's gift of regeneration. And it *is* a work, an *askesis*. As with all authentic asceticism, the point is not to denigrate the self, but rather to deflect energy away from the compulsion to confuse the finite with the infinite, from the temptation to insert the self into the proper place of the other, or to mistake one's own perspective for God's.

¹⁷⁰ Breyfogle, 396, 397.

¹⁷¹ Williams, "Theological Integrity", 9.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 10.

According to Williams, such self-projection forecloses on authentic relationship, preferring instead the limited but known horizon of the self to the risky novelty of the other and, ultimately, the Other.

I would like to suggest that Williams' understanding of the task of theology involves a parallel movement, and might be translated from the medium of spirituality into the medium of theology. The proper task of theology, then, is not merely a matter of brilliant intellectual fluency or cleverness, private reflection or self-satisfied finality. It must begin, primarily and foundationally, not in the construction of an idea to support the initiatives of the self, but in a deconstructive gaze aimed critically at the self's attempts to recast the endeavour in its own image. This negative gaze throws all of theology into question, much as post-modernism places all previous certitudes under examination, *under judgement*, not as an end in itself but as a means of recognising and repudiating inauthenticities. The humility of silence is the Christian tradition's contemplative acceptance of our inability to possess the Divine; so the contemplative gaze – not speech – is the first subtle, humble work in the task of theology. It is theology's preliminary *askesis*, aimed at self-knowledge not self-construction. It turns toward disruption, criticism, reaching beyond the familiar, the conventional, beyond the self's horizon in full acceptance of, indeed *because of*, its limitedness, toward the newness of otherness. It is not a matter of polish and finish, but of the ability to suffer, in all senses of the word, the unavoidable messiness of human contingency, and to discern God's movement not *in spite of* this humanness, but *through it*.

B. The Threefold Movement of Theology

Williams speaks of three modes of theological activity. It is interesting to note his characterization of theology as movement¹⁷³; it is not merely a variety of translations of a static deposit of knowledge but an ongoing human endeavour that develops, not by way of fashion but by way of attention and openness to God's generative activity. Williams describes the movement as threefold: *celebratory*, *communicative* and *critical*. He locates the roots of theology in preconscious "informal" theology, that is, in the "prayer, art and holy action"¹⁷⁴ of the Church community in its attempt to order its faith experiences. It is from here, most obviously, that the energy of the celebratory rises, but not where it confines itself. The category operates poetically, that is, as evocation rather than argumentation or explanation. By virtue of its very creativity, celebratory language, like poetry, demands its own stringency, if it is to remain authentically creative and not become a mere exercise in self-regard.

The communicative mode, as rhetorical category, witnesses and exhorts. It addresses the unconverted, not only – and perhaps now no longer – in the traditional sense of that word, but in its more subtle manifestations within the Church and for the *human* person and the world. Judgement and conversion are linked in an ongoing process both personally and corporately, and it is the communicative mode that carries out the Church's mission of evangelization. It recognizes in the call to mission not proselytization, but recognition of the obligation to share what God has given, not as an exercise in power but as a telling of the story of the discovery of God's grace.

¹⁷³ Breyfogle, 303.

¹⁷⁴ Williams, "Prologue", xiii.

The third mode of theology, the critical, might be described as the means by which the Church places itself and its activities – including its other modes of theology – under judgement. It is a “nagging at fundamental meanings”¹⁷⁵, an examination of data for the purpose of understanding their significance, an exploration of ontology by the agency of epistemology. It speaks God-talk by speaking of what we know of what *is*, and it speaks also, perhaps even more fundamentally, of how and what we *don't* know. As contemplative, Williams remains aware of the need to be on guard against the idolatrous risk of claiming finality in the theological undertaking. As postmodern, Williams appropriates deconstructive method for the same purpose, willing to stand at the edge of nihilism in order to conform to the deconstructive, dispossessive shape of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. He sees in the Christian claim, and so in Christian theology, “a religious tradition generating its own near-negation”.¹⁷⁶ The risk of an intellectual abyss is converted by the Christian awareness of the link between death and resurrection: theology becomes an act of faith in the reality of Christ, not a manipulation of concepts or ideologies. Authentic theology *is* risk, and it is ultimately in the unknowing of faith that the risk of doing theology can be taken. Of the attempt to speak of Christian theology, Williams writes: “we must remember that none of this makes any sense without some confidence in the possibility of the reality of our own transformation in Christ, the confidence that can be nurtured only in the disciplines of praise and silence.”¹⁷⁷ Only a

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, xv.

¹⁷⁶ Williams, “The Finality of Christ”, 104.

¹⁷⁷ Williams, “The Unity of Christian Truth”, *On Christian Theology*, 28.

theology arising out of and surrendering itself to a spiritual orientation of faith can hope to speak humbly and authentically.

The three modes of theology do not function independently of one another: “I do not mean to suggest that whole theologies really fall under one or the other style.”¹⁷⁸

Williams insists on the interconnectedness of the modes, and the presence of or pressure on one style in the activity of the others: “theology is always a three-way conversation between these elements; each is damaged when it is out of touch with the others.”¹⁷⁹ I would suggest that Williams’ understanding of the theological enterprise makes visible a similar interdependency between theology and spirituality: neither operates independent of the other if it operates authentically; each presses the other toward authenticity.

C. The Meaning of “God”

At some point, talk of God-talk has to talk of God: what *is* God, what might “God” mean to the theologian today. Postmodernism requires us to approach such a word only very carefully, if we are to approach it honestly. Interestingly, caution of approach and suspicion of claims to finality in human understanding of “God” also marked early Christianity.¹⁸⁰ Williams does not set out to “prove” God; indeed his approach to theology presupposes God, but it is not God as an object somehow occupying the same

¹⁷⁸ Williams, “Prologue”, xv.

¹⁷⁹ Breyfogle, *op. cit.*, 304.

¹⁸⁰ Williams notes not only the contemplative mode’s *negativa* approach to God, but also the “messiness” innate in Scripture’s indeterminacy on key theological questions (see “Between the Cherubim” in *On Christian Theology*, esp p. 195), and the ambiguity of classical Christological formula of Chalcedon (see for example, p. 58 of “The Discipline of Scripture”, *On Christian Theology*).

“territory” as us. He speaks expressly of the difficulty of talking about God. For direction, he looks to the patristic and medieval doctrinal articulation of God as *act*: “the unconditioned act of self-diffusion and self-sharing upon which all things depend.”¹⁸¹ He refers to Thomas Aquinas on how the name *Deus* is ascribed on the basis of his *operatio*: though the reality of *Deus* cannot be confined to this activity, it is through his activity that we can know him.¹⁸² Williams converses with Aquinas’s understanding of God’s essence and existence in light of Wittgenstein’s vision of the “grammar” of God-talk “to see that it is structurally more like talking about some ‘grid’ for the understanding of particular objects than talking about particular objects in themselves . . .”:¹⁸³

Wittgenstein compares the “existence” of God to the ‘existence’ of colour in the visual field. The question, “what difference does colour make?” cannot be answered with reference to some particular; and there is no graspable ‘essence’ of colour . . . Its essence is its existence: what we mean by colour as such is established only by the fact of its all pervasiveness in our discourse. And so it is with God.”¹⁸⁴

Williams is careful to point out that: “This is not, of course, to imply that God is to be *identified* with some bit of our psychological equipment.”¹⁸⁵ He raises both the problem of reducing “God” to a sophisticated conceptual tool whose ontology vanishes except as an idea functional to human uses, and the equally problematic assigning of object-status (and so conditions) to God: “this begs the question of whether this can

¹⁸¹ Williams, “Unity of Christian Truth”, *On Christian Theology*,, 21.

¹⁸² Williams, “Trinity and Revelation”, *On Christian Theology*, 146. See *Summa Theologiae* Pt.1, Q.13, Art. 8.

¹⁸³ Williams, “religious Realism”, 15.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

strictly be called talk about God at all.”¹⁸⁶ “God”, then, cannot be reduced to an activity, or to a construct of human meaning, nor to objecthood. Nonetheless, an examination of Williams’ thoughts on “God” reveals that the significance of *God for us* is tied up with human meaning. Our understanding of God is a *theological* understanding arising out of the experience of faith. It is an understanding based on what we *can* experience and know, that is, not God-in-himself, but *God with us*, God through his activity, (including revelation), God through the Christian community, and through our participation in and our examination of these realities.

. . . *theological* understanding is the conscious and articulate effort to sustain the critical and dialectical aspect of this participation – keeping Word and Spirit in touch with each other... Which means that the theologian’s involvement . . . in the events of grace . . . is taken for granted.”¹⁸⁷

Williams’ affirms, first, that our knowledge of God is knowledge of his effects, that is, is knowledge of *God with us*. This of course sets out the Christian way to God through Jesus, *Emmanuel*, God-with-us: through the one who is the Word, who is God’s intelligibility to human intelligence. Theological understanding is our human way to understand anything at all about “God”. Finally, theological activity is not an abstract ideological project. It is an excruciatingly delicate undertaking, because while rooted in engagement with God’s activity, it must at the same time be critically conscious of that engagement. It is the articulation of the exchange between spirituality and appropriation of the meaning of that spirituality in our lives.

¹⁸⁶ Williams, “Unity of Christian Truth”, *On Christian Theology*, 21.

¹⁸⁷ Williams, “Trinity and Revelation”, *On Christian Theology*, 146.

A naïve ontology is no longer possible in a contemporary theology, and it is a formidable task to walk the line between a literalistic objectivism and “God” as mere symbol, tool, projection. Rowan Williams grounds his theology in the doctrines of the Trinity and, especially pertinent to this problem, the Incarnation, and brings the full weight of the implications of the doctrine to his understanding of God. If we know God as God-with-us, that is, God in the form of Jesus, then we know God not through an abstraction, as an idea, but through a real historical human being. Williams indicates that theologizing is not a processing of the historical Jesus into a parable or universalised symbol. Hence he holds, though gently, to the materiality of the resurrection and the realness of Christ’s presence, and makes no attempt to either eliminate or side-step the inherent problems. The ambiguity itself, a kind of lateral vision more linked to evocation than explanation, becomes a guard against the illusion of assuming a full grasp of divinity:

This indeterminacy in the resurrection stories is one way of saying what the content of the stories is meant to convey: that Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified is not confined in the past, and that this non-confinement is more than just some sort of survival in the minds or memories of Christian believers. Belief in the resurrection, in the Christian scripture and Christian theology, affirms that the action of God in and through the acts of the human subject Jesus continues to be associated with Jesus after his death and to be accessible through his human identity.¹⁸⁸

D. From Ontological to Substantive Meaning

The option for theology, then – if it is to be “God-talk” – cannot be either naïve realism or abstract symbolism. Likewise, “God” cannot be objectified over against other objects,

¹⁸⁸ Williams, “Between the Cherubim”, 188.

nor can he be reduced to human meaning or memory, though he operates (as *operatio*) in both. Williams turns for direction to the work of Cornelius Ernst and his apprehension of God as “Meaning of meaning”, and of Christ as the “substantive meaning” of God.¹⁸⁹ While Ernst is concerned with a specifically *christological* problem, the issue of substantive meaning extends beyond christology to the wider sphere of theology as a whole. The problem with “ontological meaning”, as expressed by Ernst and appropriated by Williams, is that it ultimately requires a singleness or uniformity of meaning. This may manifest itself in terms of a naïve objectivism, or a rendering of Christ (and possibly “God”) into symbol, or a “universality” as expressed in notion of the Cosmic Christ (e.g. Rahner’s ‘anonymous Christian’ notion, or more popular contemporary creation theologies). These are all finally (if with varying sophistication) characterized by their underlying compulsion to the uniformity of vision and voice more commonly associated with fundamentalism. None are in the end useful in facing the reality of the multiplicity of human meanings, in facing the “otherness” of the other, or indeed of God. While of serious concern to Williams, it is not the chauvinism (intended or not) inherent in meta-theories of Christ’s universality (and extendable logically to meta-theories of theology as well) that concerns him the most. More dangerous are the *implications* of such an approach: in its single-mindedness, however disguised, and in its collapsing of otherness into the image of the self, it indirectly imposes uniformity and claims a finality of vision which usurps God’s unique perspective.

¹⁸⁹ Williams, “The Finality of Christ”, 93.

The alternative to the problem of ontological meaning is what Ernst calls “substantive meaning”, and which is also significant beyond its christological relevance to the broader scope of *theological* meaning. The term “substantive meaning” does not imply an essential pure-core meaning, separated from the historical and cultural particularities which transmit it (this would simply be the “symbol only” form of ontological meaning). Rather it refers to the meaning transmitted by these very particularities in the narrative of Jesus: by the movement, the direction, the shape of his life, death and resurrection. This meaning is neither reducible to nor separable from their particulars, and so does not require either an imposition of one (ontological) fixed meaning on all other human schemes of meaning, nor does it become a generalized abstraction to which the particularities of Jesus’ humanity are in the end irrelevant. It functions more as *pattern*, or series of patterns, than as unconditional, and unconditioned, *system*. As such, it inheres in all other human schemes of meaning not as externally imposed power, but as internal pressure – as test, judgement and catalyst¹⁹⁰ – toward *their own* authenticity.

The dynamic of the substantive meaning of Christ is itself a pattern for the dynamic of substantive meaning in theology. The pattern it sets up is one that seeks an inherent dynamism rather than an external control, one that allows the other, and the Other, to be *truly other*, and yet still by virtue of its pattern, demands authenticity in any particular set of human meanings. The substantive meaning, then, of Christ, and of God as the “Meaning of meanings” is a matter of authenticity in whatever realm human meanings

¹⁹⁰ Williams, “The Finality of Christ”, 94.

operate. The source of this pattern, which manifests itself in the Incarnation – the making historical, making human, making intelligible of God – is the Trinity, the image of God’s relational, kenotic activity. God himself, in the act of creation *ex nihilo*, gives creation its being *and* its freedom, and so sets up the ultimate pattern for human living. Williams offers Dominican Jacques Pohier’s (b. 1926) image of God who “does not want to be Everything”¹⁹¹ to illustrate God’s radical and unconditional self-giving, his relinquishing power over the other that he has created, thereby allowing that other to be truly other. But God does not withdraw his love, or his judgement. He graces creation with both, and both may be discerned in the substantive meaning of “God”.

Substantive meaning is fundamental to a theology that can speak in a postmodern world, and the substantive meaning of Christ, and of God as revealed in Christ, allows us to fulfill one of the basic tasks of theology: “The effort to preserve the edge of conflict between ideology and honest discourse about God.”¹⁹² Logic alone does not yield substantive meaning, and theology is not carried out in the scientific-critical mode alone. Substantive meanings – and theology – are both the fruits of a subtle dialogue between knowing and unknowing, and theological knowing cannot presume a purely objective “scientific” finality. Rather, it is dependent on a “conversation” among experience, reason, feelings, conscious and unconscious memory, context and cultivation, and the discernment possible through contemplative *askesis*. It is not “innocent” or unalloyed but “experienced” and embodied; in this weakness is also the strength that gives access to the

¹⁹¹ Williams, “On Being Creatures”, *On Christian Theology*, 74. See Jacques Pohier’s *God – In Fragments* (NY: Crossroads, 1986), Part III: “God is God, So God is not Everything”, 262-314.

¹⁹² Williams, “The Finality of Christ”, *On Christian Theology*, 100.

full range of human possibilities. The realization of the non-finality of theology requires the preservation of a critical edge. It requires too the recognition that sometimes, clear-cut answers to theological questions are not immediately available; they call for the ability to wait and listen. In Williams' plain words the spiritual dimension of theology is again revealed: the theologian, nurtured in silence, must know when theological discourse "has said what it can say and when it is time to shut up."¹⁹³ The theologian enters back into the spirituality of silence from whence God-talk comes.

E. *What is Theology?*

Theology, according to Rowan Williams is "a way of talking --- is a language . . . always involved with doing new or odd things with speech", (see above, Williams.) As *God-talk*, theology's medium is speech that by its Christian-ness is called to conversation and to song. Williams's description of the spiritual task of hymnody sheds light on the task of theology. He writes that the Christian hymn:

. . . exists in part to give a map of the landscape of faith. It sets out the direction in which all believing life is going – toward God; so it needs to find vivid and forceful language to express why the journey is worthwhile and why those on the journey are passionately committed to it. And it also sets out how varied the journey will be, what different views will open up as time goes on; how the sky may be completely dark at some points, even when we are still moving forward...¹⁹⁴

In this reflection, we can recognise something of the territory of theology as the re-reading and re-interpreting of the map of Christian life in the spirit, the life of "people

¹⁹³ Williams, "Theological Integrity", 15.

¹⁹⁴ Williams, *The Landscape of Faith*, (lecture delivered at the National Eisteddfod, Denbigh, 8 Aug 01). Available at: <http://www.churchinwales.org.uk/archbishop/0010e.html>. Accessed 1 November 2003.

who pray” (see above, Williams). Williams provides a shape for what the theological map re-presents: “the pattern there defined of loss and recovery. Faith begins in a death...” (see above, Williams). The “death” which underlies “being Christian”, also underlies theology, where it takes the form of loosening our grip on presuppositions, fixed ideologies and any other refuge we construct to protect us from how things really are, from what the shape of Christ’s life really is and what it really demands of us.

Theology can only be authentically Christian if the theologian has consented to this “death”, this *transformation*. The consenting is a *spiritual* act, which in theology manifests itself in the form of intellectual integrity.¹⁹⁵ Only the spiritual experience of “theological death”, conforming to the *motif* of Christ’s life, can prepare the theologian vis-à-vis *motive*. Williams writes about the basic “responsible” character of faith, as answer to a call initiated by “pressure beyond its own life at any one moment or in any one place”¹⁹⁶. Theology participates in faith’s positive and negative modes:

The theologian’s task is to remind the Church both of this fundamental motive and motif in dogma, *and* of that concurrent and inevitable temptation to treat dogma as a solution, a closure. *In this, the theologian will share the concern of those who want the Church’s liturgy properly to open up a congregation to wonder and newness of life, and will also understand the reticence of the contemplative.*¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Bernard Lonergan’s ideas on the intellectual, moral and religious aspects of “conversion” and self-transcendence help to further clarify the notion of spiritual “death” as prerequisite to the doing of authentic theology (*Method in Theology*, e.g. 267, 338, etc.). Regarding systematics for example, Lonergan says: “... when conversion is the basis of the whole theology, when religious conversion is the event that gives the name, God, its primary and fundamental meaning, when systematic theology does not believe it can exhaust or even do justice to the meaning, not a little has been done to keep systematic theology in harmony with its religious origins and aims.” p. 350.

¹⁹⁶ Williams, “Beginning with the Incarnation”, 86.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

The theologian not only *understands* contemplative reticence: s/he is *called* to it. Drawing a map of Christian territory begins in the silence of attention and ends in the silence of humility, knowing the map cannot ever speak exhaustively, or sometimes maybe not even very adequately, about God.

The theological map, then, is not a map of God in himself, but of our experience of God's revelatory *operatio* and its meaning for us. As response, it answers to the silent judgement of Christ, a judgement revealed in Scripture, verified in the Christian's concrete life experience, and articulated in Christian dogma. The notion of judgement is fundamental to Christian understanding and is central to Williams' *understanding* of theology, and to his *practice* of it. As such, the same judgement – according to the form of the Trinity and of the life of Christ – under which the Christian places her life, the theologian places her work, recognizing always the need to discern if indeed his words promote transformation and conversion, in her community, making it freer to “open up ...to wonder and newness of life”.

With Rowan Williams, theology seeks not self-justifying answers but its own judgement, in order to keep alive the question of the Gospel and the doctrine that articulates it, “to keep alive the impulse that animates such formulae”.¹⁹⁸ It seeks not the fixing of language but the freeing of language, in order to resist the temptation to ideology in which self-satisfaction displaces wonder, worship, and communication. It

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

seeks not self-defense but transparency, not to dictate to a controllable universe but to speak in a moral universe. It seeks not the ease of relief but the work of transformation. It seeks not its own finality, but its own limits. “The theologian’s job may be less the speaking of truth ... than the patient diagnosis of untruths...”.¹⁹⁹ Theology becomes less a propositional affair than a movement toward, an evocation of, a freedom “uncircumscribed”, yet “with the shape of Jesus.”²⁰⁰

F. How Is Theology Spoken?

Considering the role of concrete materiality in the language of fiction, Flannery O’Connor wrote:

We will be concerned in this with the reader in his fundamental human sense, because the nature of fiction is in large measure determined by the nature of our perceptive apparatus. The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins. He appeals through the senses, and you cannot appeal through the senses with abstractions. It is a good deal easier for most people to state an abstract idea than to describe and thus re-create some object they actually see.²⁰¹

If it sounds odd to relate her reasoning about narrative fiction to theology, it might be less so when we consider the fundamentally narrative nature of Christian tradition. The incarnational aspect of Christianity and our awareness of the constitutive role of human subjectivity in human experience and knowing likewise require a concrete, sensible, material approach to the theological enterprise. Williams sees Christian theology as grounded in the literature of Scripture, and Scripture rises out of and

¹⁹⁹ Williams, “Between the Cherubim”, 196.

²⁰⁰ Williams, “Word and Spirit”, 126.

²⁰¹ Flannery O’Connor, “The Nature and Aim of Fiction”, *Mystery and Manners*. (Eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), 67.

expresses particular human experiences: any access we have to the universal, the objective, the abstract is through the particular, the subjective, the concrete. Williams cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer on various issues of theological method, especially concerning the temptation to abstraction in religious/theological language. Bonhoeffer developed a profoundly incarnational approach proper to a follower of Christ the Incarnate in his idea of the “penultimate” as the necessary and only route to the “ultimate”. He wrote: “In Christ we are offered the possibility of partaking in the reality of God and in the reality of the world, but not the one without the other. The reality of God discloses itself only by setting me entirely in the reality of the world...”²⁰²

Theology speaks a language of call and response, and so as such is *conversation*, not static decree. Williams insists that the theologian must be immersed in Scripture and tradition, *and* in the affairs of the world in order to trace Christian experience of and response to God, to “explore the continuities of Christian patterns of holiness ... to explore the *effect* of Jesus, living, dying and rising...”²⁰³ He embraces St Thomas’ assertion of the literal as basic among the traditional senses of Scripture, a position largely out of favour with poststructuralist sensibilities. The potential confusion of the *sensus literalis* with a fundamentalist letter-of-the-Law understanding of Scripture adds to this problem. Be that as it may, Thomas’ understanding of the literal sense is complex, deeply literary, and far from univocal.

²⁰² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 61.

²⁰³ Williams, “The Unity of Christian Truth”, *On Christian Theology*, 21.

Williams also argues for the profound significance of the literal sense: of what he calls the diachronic reading of the Biblical narratives, which he contrasts with non-structured – and perhaps too easily abstracted – synchronic reading. He insists that the temporal unfoldment of the stories of salvation history carries with it the concrete form and means in which temporal humans expressed their experience of God’s action, and the concrete form and means by which its meaning may be transmitted to other temporal human beings, to us. He argues for our full humanity, as his patristic ancestors argued for Christ’s, and suggests that the theologian’s immersion in Scripture, before seeking a spiritual or universal sense, must begin in the particular, concrete temporal mode of the human story that carries it.

Looking to the methods used in Scripture itself as guides for the theological task, Williams refer to Christ’s own use of parable for a model for how “theology should be equipping us for the recognition of and response to the parabolic in the world.”²⁰⁴ Far from contradicting the analogical sense of Scripture, the literal sense as set up by Thomas, and accepted by Williams, is necessarily linked to it: “*Analogy* is fundamental to literal reading.”²⁰⁵ Williams also uncovers the Scriptural roots of interpretation and criticism, both essential to postmodern awareness, both ancient in origin. He advocates a “newly critical and constructive reading of Scripture” which incorporates these ancient elements: “revived ‘analogical’ skills ... the profound hermeneutic of parable ... [and]

²⁰⁴ Williams, “The Judgement of the World”, 42.

²⁰⁵ Williams, “The Discipline of Scripture”, 52.

...the whole process of reclaiming the bible as source of critique.”²⁰⁶ The Spirit inhabits the event *and* the interpretation.

Likewise, the theologian’s immersion in tradition must be approached not in an abstract fashion, as if dogma was merely a set of positivist theorems about fixed objective truths, but in the human terms of the particular, the concrete, the embodied. It is here – in the biblical narrative *and* in our lives – and not in theory, that the process toward doctrine starts: “We do not begin with the trinitarian God and ask how can he be such, but with the world of particulars ... asking, ‘How can this be?’”²⁰⁷ And if we start in the concrete and the particular, we end there also, even when the concrete and the particular open up to speculation and universality, to the transcendent. Bonhoeffer’s words are helpful again here: “Does one not, in some cases, by remaining deliberately in the penultimate, perhaps point all the more genuinely to the ultimate, which God will speak in his own time (though indeed even then through the human mouth)?”²⁰⁸ Human speech is the agency and method of choice of the Trinitarian God who takes on flesh. Where we seek authenticity in theological discourse, complete perspective and finality of decree are not options for us; and fragmentation remains not merely an obstacle to understanding but a means to communion. Indeed:

To begin from a sense of achievedness, consummation [...] undermines its own claim to be able to speak with authority to an experience of conflict and fragmentation, to the historical aspiration and work of men and women.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Williams, “The Unity of Christian Truth”, 27-28.

²⁰⁷ Williams, “Trinity and Ontology”, 161.

²⁰⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 85.

²⁰⁹ Williams, “Trinity and Revelation”, 132.

Williams reiterates Bonhoeffer's concern with the deadly effect on Christian discourse of language allowed to become overly-religious, smooth and banal. He pinpoints the risk of retreating from worldly reality into religious mythology which Bonhoeffer considered dishonest, retrograde and ideological in the modern context. He also identifies the danger in speaking mechanically or glibly, about our experience of the salvific word of the divine, which is nothing if not strange-sounding, even alien, to our ordinary habitual hearing. The balance between the suitable use of the secular language of the world (which is also the language of Jesus' parables),²¹⁰ and the linguistic removal of profane "shoes" on holy ground, must be worked out appropriately. The one must not be used in the place of the other, lest we fail thereby to make audible "the real moral and spiritual strangeness [and I would add "newness"] - and thus the judgement - of the gospel."²¹¹ There is a space between the words of the world and the words of the sacred; the space is discernable and penetrable only contemplatively.

G. Who Speaks Theology, and to Whom Do They Speak?

When Rowan Williams situates the roots of theology in the preconscious reflection of the believing community, he demonstrates that all Christians participate in some aspect of, are called in some way to the task of theology. The theologian-in-particular emerges from among the "informal theologians" who practice theology as spirituality: in "prayer,

²¹⁰ Williams, "The Judgement of the World", 41-42.

²¹¹ Williams, "Beginning with the Incarnation", 84.

art and holy action.” Williams draws out the link between art and sacrament by way of David Jones’ understanding of the making of art as an essentially religious activity²¹²; for him, religion, including theology, is essentially a creative activity. Jones re-names *homo sapiens* as *homo faber*²¹³, indicating the basic connection between human wisdom and human creativity. The theologian is not primarily a scientist, at least not in the modernist scientific sense of the word, but an artist, made in the image of the creator God, seeking and realizing the *novum* of God by means of human intellectual creativity.

The theologian’s prophetic hermeneutical task is a task of *seeing*, a task of contemplation. When Flannery O’Connor describes the prophetic nature of writing novels (and especially novels with an element of the grotesque), her words describe analogically the theologian-as-prophet as well. O’Connor’s reference to the grotesque as prophetic judgement from the margins corresponds to Williams’ intuition of judgement in the gospel’s “strangeness”. She writes (and I quote her at length because I think what she says pulls together some of the various threads I am attempting to follow):

[The grotesque characters] seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity. I believe they come from the prophetic vision peculiar to any novelist whose concerns I have been describing. The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that you find in the best modern instances of the grotesque.²¹⁴

The theologian is both the grotesque, (or marginal), character, *and* the one who sees and records what the margins can reveal. Writing about one of her stories, O’Connor

²¹² Williams, “Theological Integrity”, 9.

²¹³ Jones, “The Utile”, *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber and Faber: 1959), 181f.

²¹⁴ O’Connor, “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction”, *Mystery and Manners*, 44.

again sheds light on the theologian-as-prophet and the “story” he writes, and on the prophet as necessarily dispossessed, as having undergone the contemplative deconstruction which fosters clarity of vision:

This story has been called grotesque, but I prefer to call it literal. When a child draws, he doesn't intend to distort but to set down exactly what he sees, and as his gaze is direct, he sees the lines that create motion. Now the lines that interest the writer are usually invisible. They are lines of spiritual motion. And in this story you should be on the lookout for such things...²¹⁵

The theologian who speaks the “grammar of ‘spirituality’ in the fullest sense of that emasculated word”²¹⁶, speaks in response to the Spirit, which Rowan Williams describes as:

. . . the pressure upon us towards Christ's relation with the Father, towards the self secure enough in its rootedness and acceptance in the ‘Father’, in the source and ground of all, to be ‘child’, to live vulnerably, as a sign of grace and forgiveness, to decide for the cross of powerlessness.”²¹⁷

The theologian who seeks authenticity seeks the spirituality of dispossession of the gospel: “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 18:3)

“In spite of everything, we go on saying ‘God.’”²¹⁸ The theologian speaks “God” and so exercises his role as advocate – even if indirectly – for the community moving toward God. Talking God is an imperative, a duty to exercise the authority of having been “spoken to” for the good of the community. It is a role of fostering the movement

²¹⁵ O'Connor, “On Her Own Work,” *Mystery and Manners*, 113.

²¹⁶ Williams, “Word and Spirit”, 124.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Williams, “Trinity and Revelation”, 131.

of the world toward God, of the community toward its own fulfillment. Williams treats the notion of “authority” with extreme care, noting its frequent misuse²¹⁹. In spite of the caution, he maintains that the Christian *is* authorized to speak by the very fact that s/he does not initiate the communication, but answers a “revelation” that comes from outside of the self’s horizon. “Revelation, on such an account, is essentially to do with what is *generative* in our experience – events or transactions in our language that break existing frames of reference and initiate new possibilities of life.”²²⁰ Revelation authorizes, indeed impels the theologian to “say ‘God’”; and patterns that speech as creative, and responsive, and rooted in attention. It demands that theology face judgement, and help the community to face judgement. It demands that theology be a means to challenge the status quo in the name of regeneration and liberation. It demands that the theologian remain transparent to the effects of God and of the community toward God. It emphasises that the theologian must not only speak, but listen. The call to theology is a call to serve, not a call to power.

H. Where and When Is Theology Spoken?

The theologian speaks not only in the Christian community, but in the wider world as well, beyond the boundaries of Christian institution, beyond the boundaries of what is “Christian” and even what is “religious”. As suggested by Ernst’s understanding of substantive meaning, the universality of Christ and of Christianity lies exactly at this threshold of encounter with the world, not as meta-meaning but as substrate to

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

authenticity within the multiplicity of human meanings. The encounter is an imperative pressed upon the theologian by the implications of the Incarnation, by the kenotic dynamic of Trinity. It is especially here that the public nature of theology is emphasized. Williams refers to David Tracy's work on the public character of theology to underline the risks of privatized theologizing. Tracy explains the centrality of publicness to Christian tradition, and the risks of abandoning it. He explains that this publicness, extends beyond the confines of one's own community and goes so far as to say:

Indeed, theologians of every radically monotheistic religion realize that its fundamental commitment to God demands that we express that theistic belief in ways that will render it public not merely to ourselves or our particular religious group [...] It is not, of course, the case that all theologians should accept an explicit concern with "publicness" as their major focus. A thrust to publicness must, however, be present in all theologies. Otherwise, theology no longer exists.²²¹

Williams takes up the question of religious pluralism that is raised when theology is undertaken publicly in a globalized world. The theologian's task again springs from the concrete reality of life and from the contemplation of this reality, not from abstract frameworks into which reality must be forced. The work, the *askesis*, of speaking publicly, yet Christianly, revolves, for Williams, around the question of self-definition and self-expression in the context of an actuality which transcends that self:

How does the Church become free to hear and to do the Word of God, free to be its distinctive self?' ... so that somewhere in the Church's self-definition there is a genuine concern to find what it is that keeps it faithful to itself and its Lord...²²²

²²¹ David Tracy, "Defending the Public Character of Theology", (*Christian Century*, April 1, 1981) 350-356. Available at: http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showarticle?item_id=1720. Accessed 1 November 2003.

²²² Williams, "Beginning With the Incarnation", 88-89.

At the same time, the theologian must understand that “what keeps it faithful” is to be understood substantively, not naively-ontologically, that is, as “meaning of meaning”, not as exclusive formula, nor as repository of all other meanings. Thus, the pluralist dialogue is neither threat to identity, nor concession to relativism. Nor is it a fantasy of an essential spiritualised ideal ultimately unrelated to temporal accident. The movement toward substantive meaning allows the “other” to be truly *other*, and not to be rejected for that otherness, nor to be subsumed by another’s meaning, nor yet to be merely tolerated in a relativistic universe where by virtue of being one of its many parallel tracks, is never truly encountered. The *askesis* becomes again a spiritual work, that of disempowering the ego as the self’s master and returning it to its rightful place as the self’s servant. This freedom grants to the self the ability to be open and vulnerable before the other because of its rootedness in the Spirit.

The task requires then the dual operations of spirituality and intelligibility, of *pneuma* and *logos*: the spirit to effect the opening up, and the word to define the shape, the limits, the identity of what it means to be formed by Christ in a pluralist world. It is its spiritual foundation that enables Christian theology to speak the shape of the gospel to the Christian and the human community, to speak of the relationship of the Christian, the human and the global community to God:

Being Christian is being involved in witness to and work for a comprehensive human community because of what has happened to specific human beings and their relationships in connection with the ministry, cross and resurrection of Jesus.”²²³

²²³ Williams, “Trinity and Pluralism”, 179.

Rowan Williams remarks that the imaging of God in human beings is not located “in any quality that we and God have in common”, but in the fact that the “location” of our humanness is “as elusive and difficult as the ‘where’ of God”.²²⁴ He speaks of being in the “place” of Jesus as “paradoxically . . . always *moving* in the direction of Jesus.”²²⁵ The theologian must be prepared to navigate and live in a territory inherently difficult and elusive, and *moving*. The “where” of theology is within “the comprehensive human community” which images God, not in a place of resolved totality and finality, nor in the relinquishing of its own identity. It is to be in the place of creative and real “tension between tradition and unforeseen possibilities”²²⁶, between universal and particular, between Word and Spirit. As for the “when” of theology’s speech, that will be determined by the contemplative discernment between knowing and unknowing, between word and silence.

I. To Conclude

Describing Gregory of Nyssa’s vision of the goal of Christian life as “both seeing and not seeing”, Rowan Williams also describes the ascetic spiritual work which is the beginning and ground of theological work. Williams writes of Gregory’s milieu:

“. . . early Christianity was, as much as anything else, the discovery of fresh modes of

²²⁴ Breyfogle, 307.

²²⁵ Williams, “To Stand Where Christ Stands”, *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, (Edited by Ralph Waller and Benedicta Ward. London: SPCK, 1999), 6; my emphasis.

²²⁶ Williams, “Trinity and Pluralism”, 179.

prayer”²²⁷. Christian theology acquires from its spiritual roots these essentially spiritual tasks: prayer as a means of conforming to the essentially contemplative attitude of expectant asking, and of silence, as prerequisite to the finding and articulating of new ways of being with God and each other. The newness of prayer, newness of ways of being in daily life, require that the theologian forego dependency on the moral, intellectual and religious status quo. Dependency must shift onto the Spirit, “allowing the divine voice to interrupt, to subvert or contradict”, an act that Williams identifies as “a real doing of theology”²²⁸, and which coincides with the basic movement of postmodernism’s “disruption”.

The primary task, then, is the subtle but extremely difficult one of allowing first a dismantling of the known and then an opening to the unknown, of withdrawing the ego’s control and ceding space to the “other”, to what transcends one’s own horizon, to what is the generative *novum* of God. Williams brings to the theological task the orientation of the apophatic tradition, providing the spaciousness in which the concrete, incarnational elements of discursive theology might unfold. The apophatic remains a reminder of the limits of human knowing, the cataphatic of the Incarnation’s blessing of that humanity even in its limitedness.

Williams founds the task of theology on the structure of Scripture, reiterating its literal, diachronic sense as yielding the basic parabolic skills necessary to recognize the shape of the gospel in and beyond Christian boundaries. He characterizes dogma’s

²²⁷ Williams, “Trinity and Revelation”, *On Christian Theology*, 137.

²²⁸ Breyfogle, 295.

authentic purpose not as a closing of conversation, but as a means of describing Christian identity and belief in order to make the motifs available for those turning toward God. He draws the rich and complex patristic and medieval understanding of doctrine which did not reduce it to fundamentalism. Neither did it set human logic as the ultimate means of expressing divine reality, but rather called for a “working with what the formulae have made possible”, that is, a remaining open to “the negative and regulative aspects of patristic dogma”. Scripture, doctrine, dogma, are all aspects of the theological “word”. So is the fact of the gaps in incarnational knowledge; it is in that empty space, which “takes its shape from what it lies between”,²²⁹ that “Other” resides. The silence of God takes its shape from the Word of God, and it is thus that we can hear it.

Scripture and theology, as word, are basically literary endeavours which indicate, suggest, feel out, and attempt to define the coherence, direction and orientation of the life shaped by Christ’s life, i.e. the life in the spirit. Scripture and theology transmit meaning through narrative, which unfolds over time like human life. Theology is grounded in story, and so in the parabolic, the analogical, the concrete, which are all aspects of the “literal sense” as appropriated by Williams from tradition.²³⁰ The story of Scripture and tradition form the basis for judgement, for asking: “What of my own story: am I being invited to retell or recast it in the light of the way the text presents the story of God’s action in Jesus Christ?”²³¹ Returning to Flannery O’Connor and to the analogical

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 298.

²³⁰ Williams, “The Discipline of Scripture”, 44-59; see *Summa Theologiae* Pt.1, Q.1, Art. 10.

²³¹ Williams, “To Stand Where Christ Stands”, *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 12.

method, a description of the incarnational nature of story writing illuminates the incarnational nature of the method of theology in which word and spirit unite:

Manicheans separated spirit and matter. To them all material things were evil. They sought pure spirit and tried to approach the infinite directly without any mediation of matter. This is also pretty much the modern spirit, and for the sensibility²³² infected with it, fiction is hard if not impossible to write because fiction is so very much an incarnational art.

One of the most common and saddest spectacles is that of a person of really fine sensibility and acute psychological perception trying to write fiction by using these qualities alone. This type of writer will put down one intensely emotional or keenly perceptive sentence after another, and the result will be dullness. The fact is that the materials of the fiction writer are the humblest. Fiction is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't write fiction. It is not a grand enough job for you.²³³

The task of theology as practiced by Rowan Williams is incarnational; it is work by and about and for human beings, and their relationships with God and with one another. Theology is in some real sense *art*: it is creative, generative and self-transcending, by virtue of the theologian's openness to the creativity and otherness of God and of God's image in the neighbour. Theology is concrete, not allowed to rest in abstractions. Like story writing, theology is about everything human, and so about dust, and about the glory of dust by way of the glory of the trinitarian God who empties his being into ours, and who tabernacles among us in the dust of the earth. The only glory in this basically

²³² The debate is detailed in Hans Frei's *Types of Christian Theology* (ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 1992). The dispute centred around the issue of whether to consider theology as an appropriate discipline in a university committed to *Wissenschaft*: "the inquiry into the universal, rational principles that allow us to organize any and all specific fields of inquiry into internally and mutually coherent, intelligible totalities" (p.98). Frei argues for a social scientific rather than philosophical understanding of the theological task, and so argues for its legitimacy as a properly academic discipline on those terms. The debate today considers also whether theology is best understood among the social sciences, the humanities or even the arts, often over against the discipline of religious studies.

²³³ O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction", 68.

humble task is God's, so the theologian begins with a deconstruction of the self as self-created, and with an openness to the self as created by God. If the theologian does not begin there, in the darkness of dispossessive spirituality, then authentic theology is "not a grand enough job" for her.

Theology seeks new modes of prayer; it seeks new modes of vision. Its task is to intuit and speak the unity of Spirit and Word, through the bringing together of its hermeneutical and transformative modes, so that "the disjunction between interpretation and transformation become less absolute", where "interpretation is not an explanatory reduction, but the gradual formation of a 'world' in which realities can be seen and endured without illusion".²³⁴ The world that theology refigures is the "landscape of faith", a landscape oriented also by other modes in hymnody, art, liturgy and prayer. There is only one landscape, approachable from a multitude of perspectives, whose unity flows from the unity of God and in proportion to the unity of the community of faith. That landscape is "the heart of Christian spirituality"; it is "the life of the believer, material and imaginative and desirous."²³⁵ In a newspaper article published shortly after the announcement of his candidacy for the seat of Canterbury, "a senior cleric who knows him well" described Rowan Williams as "naturally a very spiritual man; indeed his spirituality and his theology feed each other".²³⁶ He is a theologian who seeks to

²³⁴ Williams, "Trinity and Ontology", 163.

²³⁵ Williams, "To Stand Where Christ Stands," 3.

²³⁶ Stephen Pritchard. "Troublesome Priest?", *The Observer*, (Sunday, 20 January 2002). Available at <http://www.observer.co.uk/comment/story/0,6903,636262,00.html>. Accessed 1 August 2002.

articulate the landscape of faith by integrating theology and spirituality, by the integrity of Word and Spirit.

Supernal Triad, Deity above all essence, knowledge and goodness; Guide of Christians to Divine Wisdom; direct our path to the ultimate summit of your mystical knowledge, most incomprehensible, most luminous and most exalted, where the pure, absolute and immutable mysteries of theology are veiled in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their Darkness, and surcharging our blinded intellects with the utterly impalpable and invisible fairness of glories surpassing all beauty.

Opening prayer, Dionysius' *The Mystical Theology* (c. 6th century)

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