

**Confronting ‘meaningless’ suffering:
from *suffering-as-insult* to
*suffering-as-ontological-impertinence***

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Abstract

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From the personal contemporary pastoral experience of caring for dying people, and with particular attention given to the psychospiritual anguish often associated with the perceived failure of death, I argue that suffering is primarily identified in the modern West as an insult to normality, expressed in various forms of the question: ‘Why me?’. I challenge this view of ‘suffering as insult’ by selectively identifying and critiquing some culturally embedded views of the nature of reality, taking note of the influence on suffering persons of the dialogue between science and faith in the UK, and by introducing dialogue with the process thought of Whitehead as an alternative to traditional theistic models of God. Such a dialogue also affects the nature of the person conceived in *imago dei*, and so I examine the effect of replacing the rational autonomous individual with the dialogical personhood of McFadyen. I then consider the rehabilitation of suffering as a key experience of *metanoia* in the formation of the person. Finally I reflect on suffering in postmodernity in the light of Ricoeur’s hypothesis that reality is narrative in form, and develop the argument that suffering can be understood as an ‘ontological impertinence’, analogous to the ‘semantic impertinence’ which Ricoeur attributes to the category of metaphor.

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Introduction

Why is light given to one in misery, and life to the bitter in soul? (Job 3: 20, NRSV)

As a hospice chaplain I became part of a group of professionals who adopted a fascinating and eclectic practice with patients *in extremis*. We were not afraid to ‘spoil the Egyptians’ and make use of ideas from sociology, psychology, and spirituality of all kinds. These methods were often very effective in helping people to live with their suffering, but, thinking as a Christian pastor, were they adequately theologically underpinned? This thesis is part of the search for a pastoral theology of suffering that really fitted the people I met every day, who for the most part knew little about the Christian God and yet asked me constantly the deeply theological question, ‘Why me?’, expecting me to be able to offer some answers. Broader reflection shows that this anxious question is not in fact confined to the hospice but applies to all people who find themselves isolated and confused by the struggle with suffering in a success-focused late modern culture.

The 20th century watershed

My first step requires the pastoral question to be *located*. In Chapter 1 I have surveyed the ‘landscape’ in which we suffer and die, noting that one of the highly significant factors that led to the development of the modern hospice movement is that people who are terminally ill do not ‘fit’ anywhere. Hospitals are places of cure, and the terminally ill are beyond cure. Normal society struggles to ‘do’ death, and the terminally ill are not able to be ‘normal’. Dame Cicely Saunders, who founded the first modern hospice, describes this attitude as people ‘crossing the road’ to avoid the embarrassing encounter with death – literally, avoiding the terminally ill. While death has rarely been a welcome friend in any era, there would in earlier centuries have been a stoicism about it that has disappeared, in a culture that currently offers multiple opportunities for the evasion of the reality of mortality. Not only is our culture predicated upon achievement, success, and fulfilment, but medicine offers us opportunities to ‘cheat’ and postpone death in ways that our forebears could never have envisaged.

In spite of this post-Enlightenment optimism, however, the reality is that we do still die eventually; and we do still suffer along the way, whether mentally, physically, or psychologically. We still need a worldview that can help us when the material promise of the post-Enlightenment world fails. I have described this in Chapter 1 as a crisis place between the ‘cultures’, in which the suffering and dying person finds him/herself: a crisis place in which the

solutions offered are material ones, but the *problem* exists in the transcendent space, and encompasses questions such as: What makes a person? What is spirit? What cannot be empirically rationalised? The crisis place is not, however, the simple antagonism between science and faith that is often presumed. The pain of the suffering and dying person is exacerbated by the continuing expectation that a philosophical materialism is a sufficient worldview, because that person – often understood as the rational autonomous individual – can neither articulate nor address his/her pain solely in a material dimension. The popularity of the books of Richard Dawkins, for example, suggests that many people do accede to an underlying reductionism and materialism, but the truth is that there have been enormous shifts in science and philosophy, especially during the 20th century, that have deposed the Newtonian view of the world from its dominant status. A Newtonian model is often acceptable for practical purposes but it is not sufficient or adequate for the totality of human being.

Rather than the antagonism that is often popularly assumed, it might be more helpful to understand theology and science as helping one another to develop and mature. The picture is far from simple. The superstition of the pre-Newtonian world was replaced by a period of technological and industrial development in which religion came increasingly under pressure. Some see Kant, the great Enlightenment philosopher, as a single-minded advocate of reason to the detriment of religious faith; yet in fact Kant did have religious concerns (see the useful book by Anderson & Bell, *Kant and Theology*) and indeed, religion is only irrational under certain metaphysical presuppositions (*ie* that we can only work meaningfully and truthfully with empirical facts).

The influence of Hegel on western philosophy has similarly been enormous and enduring, and his thought undergirds some of the watershed mentioned above. Hegel was concerned during his life in the 19th century about the moral and religious disintegration of western culture. He believed that there was no real division between philosophy and theology if they addressed a single 'absolute'. His work was encyclopaedic and complex, but included the important ideas that (i) reason (beloved of the Enlightenment) can be understood as absolute Spirit and thus directs us to an ultimate and singular reality; and (ii) that reality itself has a dynamic and relational character (often described as dialectic). These two ideas were and are hugely influential and have been of fundamental importance in the journey of western culture to where it is today. They are also vital tools in thinking about the hidden 'crisis issues' of the suffering person to which I refer above.

Other significant figures include Darwin, whose work was a serious challenge to the religious fatalism and escapism of Victorian Britain, and after whom hermeneutics could never be the

same again; Marx, who applied reason and dialectic to economic policy and generated an atheistic apologetics that still influences the western world; and Einstein, whose theory of relativity was a true paradigm shift that surely could not have occurred without these earlier foundational steps in thinking about the nature of reality.

This overview of the watershed of 20th century thought is very rough and broad but indicates the basis for some key aspects of our 21st century embedded worldview. We live with a working dependence on technology that seems to make sense within a Newtonian view of the world. Because it is successful, we apply it indiscriminately to other aspects of life. C. P. Snow's critique of the 'two cultures' is still significant in that many of our policy makers are poorly educated in science, misunderstand its limitations, and therefore do not engage creatively with a non-material worldview. However, science has in fact moved on. We can search for a view of reality that is less unhelpfully dualistic and which does not dismiss religious faith as irrational. That is why Whitehead's process thought has been such a helpful dialogue partner in this study. I use process thought as a 'narrative tool' with which to question the unhelpful embedded materialism that prevents modern westerners from accessing the transcendent dimensions of human experience. I am not undertaking a process analysis of the human person but I am using key shapes from process thought – its dynamism, its transience, its openness to future possibilities; its commitment to a single reality; its sense of 'God with us' – as metaphors for aspects of reality. I have not dialogued explicitly, for example, with Whitehead's idea of God's dipolar character. I am aware that this method opens the argument to specific criticisms, but I want to hold fast to my convictions about the value of narrative and metaphor in the description of reality: that we look for a shape, a sense, a pattern, which is just as valid as an empirical assessment in the total experience of being alive in this world.

The key questions

In considering this question, 'Why me?', with regard to suffering, I have identified three key areas of discussion.

(i) The nature of the embedded worldview that underlies the question. When we say 'Why?', that is essentially a question about the nature of reality; as a consequence it also indicates the character of the crisis in which the sufferer finds him/herself, by focusing on what does not 'fit'. I have discussed the context of the 'Why me?' question in Chapter 1, which leads naturally to the content of Chapter 2, in which the nature of the God-world relationship and the

possibilities of using some process ideas as a response to reductionism and materialism are explored.

(ii) The nature of the human person – the way in which we understand what ‘makes’ a person is crucial, because we are dealing with matters of value, purpose and meaning when we say ‘Why me?’. The prevailing cultural idolatry around the idea of independence reflects our underlying commitment to autonomy; while our capitulation to rationality and materialism undercuts the spiritual and transcendent dimensions of being that are essential if we are to address our human existential pain. In Chapter 3 I have interacted with McFadyen’s model of the dialogical person as a basis for understanding the human being in this thesis. I like McFadyen’s model because it is dynamic, not static; relational, not individual; it can comfortably accommodate a variety of process insights (although McFadyen did not intend it to do so); and it also has a narrative shape (see (iii) below).

(iii) The importance of narrative structures in human life. Narrative therapy was observed to be extremely effective in the hospice in helping patients to incorporate their suffering and loss into their lives and to live more contentedly with it (not necessarily to understand it). Ricoeur has to be one of the finest exponents of narrative theory in the late 20th century and his view that reality is narrative in shape is an effective way of mediating between (i) the nature of the God–world relationship and (ii) the nature of the person.

Seeking a way forward

Having set in context and broken down the pastoral problem, I then dialogue extensively with narrative ideas. In Chapter 4 I suggest some examples of the practical therapeutic use of narrative in songs and other *mementi mori* and outline the recovery of interest in storytelling in the late 20th century. Narrative offers a way of linking the transcendent and the everyday and it is also the natural desire of the person to tell his/her story and to find in it a coherence that ‘makes sense’ of the life it represents. Narrative also ‘fits’ a process model and the two can be happily used together.

With this threefold foundation of narrative, relational personhood, and process thought in place, I move on in Chapter 5 to a fuller dialogue with Ricoeur’s narrative approach, particularly the material in *The rule of metaphor* and the three-volume *Time and narrative*. I am interested in the temporal nature of narrative, since the extension over time of suffering is extremely important. I also develop in this chapter my main thesis: that if narrative is credibly a basic pattern of reality, then perhaps we can use the idea of Ricoeur’s ‘semantic

impertinence', which he discusses in the context of the role of metaphor in a sentence, as a paradigm for the effect of suffering in the narrative of life. Thus I identify suffering as an 'ontological impertinence' which, like metaphor, causes us to stop and re-evaluate meaning – but in this new case, we re-evaluate the meaning, purpose and significance of life, not just the word in the sentence.

In Chapters 5 and 6, in which I consolidate the application of ontological impertinence, I also consider the two archetypal stories of suffering in the Bible: the book of Job; and the passion of Christ. In these two stories I can identify the characteristics of ontological impertinence. If we are made in *imago dei*, then these stories are patterns, suggestions, on which we can model our own lives. They do not offer explanation, in the scientific sense; nor is this strictly a theodicy, for God is not exonerated (though neither is God blamed): but the idea of ontological impertinence dismisses the suggestion that suffering may have no meaning, which so degrades the person who is enduring it.

The key argument of this thesis is ***that there is no 'meaningless' suffering,¹ but rather, suffering has the character of 'ontological impertinence' and is (a) the primary vehicle for metanoia or personal transformation; and (b) the intrinsic mark of personhood in the image of Christ.*** I hope that in believing that the suffering of those I care for in the pastorate has a meaning, I can restore value and hope to their condition – and to my own.

¹ Not everyone will be comfortable with the idea that all suffering has meaning. See fn 550 and the main text of Chapter 6 for a fuller argument.

Chapter 1. The context of suffering and death

Only a few years will pass before I go on the journey of no return (Job 16:22, NIV)

1.1 Crossing the cultural divide: the experience of dying

The modern hospice movement in the UK was founded by Cicely Saunders in the 1950s to allow dying people the dignity of being able to integrate the whole experience of life and death.² Saunders' personal experience in social work and medicine during the mid-20th century had led her to a disturbing conclusion: that dying was often an experience that isolated and dehumanised the terminally ill at a time when support and affirmation were desperately needed. Over 50 years on, hospices providing this kind of supportive environment at the end of life now constitute a highly successful, although under-resourced, section of the charity sector³ in this country and overseas, yet, in spite of the growth of the hospice movement, terminal illness remains outside mainstream consciousness and the discussion of death is still difficult in western cultures.⁴ I think it is also true to say that the discussion of suffering in general, of which terminal illness is a particular category, is discouraged. In this chapter I will consider some possible reasons for this avoidance of suffering and for the existential crisis that is undergone by those who do suffer. I will argue that the western tendency to reductionism and materialism struggles with the allocation of meaning to suffering because of an impoverished grasp of the transcendent aspects of human life, and question the presumed antagonism between science and faith that lies in the background.

Sociologists and anthropologists have explored the reasons why the modern taboo around death should exist.⁵ Although the background is complex, there is a general cohesion of views that death – except perhaps for elderly and infirm persons – is perceived to be a failure. It is a

² See, for example, Saunders & Baines, *Living with dying: the management of terminal disease*, p1. 'The aim of the treatment of terminal disease is more than the absence of symptoms, it is that the patient and his family should live to the limits of their potential'. See also Saunders' books, *Beyond the horizon* and *Watch with me* for more on her philosophy of terminal care. Useful material can also be found in Murray, *Faith in hospices*.

³ I think it is significant, when thinking about our cultural perception of death, that in a market economy based upon success it is primarily the charity sector that has invested in the terminally ill. Rohr (with Feister) mentions the 'market mind' in which everything is for sale, in his discussion of postmodern culture in the book, *Hope against darkness*, p 7.

⁴ Gorer, *The pornography of death*, first published in *Encounter*, October 1955 and reprinted in *Death, grief and mourning*, appendix 4.

⁵ See, for example, McNamara, *Fragile lives: death, dying and care*; Walter, *The revival of death*; Walter, *The eclipse of eternity*; Kellehear, *A social history of dying*; Kellehear (ed), *The study of dying*. More discussion of 'modern' death can be found, for example, in Anderson, *Attending the dying*, Brown, *The living end*, Clark (ed) *The sociology of death*.

failure of modern medicine; a failure of social and economic participation; and a failure of the hopes and expression of the autonomous self. On the basis of her observations among dying persons, Saunders comments: 'Loss of love, of freedom, of abilities, of self-respect and peace of mind are all forms of suffering that assail us in sickness and bereavement. We look back on the past and what has gone; we wake each day in a bleak present and we look ahead in fear or apprehension'.⁶

Such observations have philosophical justification: death is a source of existential pain because it acts as a constant reminder of our inability to tell the *whole* stories of our lives – and reminds us of our mortal limitations.⁷ Martin Heidegger notes the way in which people try to comfort someone who is dying by telling him or her that s/he will escape death, effectively evading the reality of that person's impending non-being (definitely a failure in our culture of self-fulfilment). He says that publicly we are compelled to distance death from ourselves; to 'tranquillise' our minds: 'The public interpretation of *Da-sein* says that "one dies" because in this way everybody can convince him/herself that in no case is it I myself, for this one is *no one*. "Dying" is levelled down to an event which does concern *Da-sein*, but which belongs to *no one* in particular'.⁸ Paul Fiddes comments that 'We are unable to bring our past, present and future into a whole. We cannot integrate our present with our past because we either regret the loss of the past in nostalgia, or we try to obliterate our memory of it in guilt. We cannot integrate our future with our present, because we either try to escape into it in wish-fulfilment dreams, or feel threatened by it. Most acutely, suffering defeats us because we cannot unify our time; suffering overwhelms us because we cannot live with our past or face our future. If we were whole in time we would not be broken in our personalities by suffering'.⁹

In recognising the existence of what she uniquely termed 'total pain',¹⁰ Saunders was intuitively responding to a deeper clash of worldviews in British society, of which the experience of dying was (and is) one aspect. On one side stood the reductionist and materialist scientific approach that had empowered rapid technological progress and which increasingly underpinned daily life in modern times; on the other, a vestigial religious belief struggled to hold its ground. Dying was not accommodated well within the dominant materialist worldview, but an alternative 'religious' interpretation was not – and still is not – perceived to be

⁶ Saunders, *Beyond the horizon*, p1.

⁷ Cavarero reflects on our desire to tell our stories as a basic human characteristic (with a particular emphasis on feminist issues) in *Relating narratives*, discussed further in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

⁸ Heidegger, *Being and time*, p 234-5. *Da-sein* is translated roughly as 'being' or 'existence' (see his p 5).

⁹ Fiddes, *The creative suffering of God*, p 103.

¹⁰ The phrase 'total pain' expresses the all-consuming nature of some pain. It has physical, emotional, social and spiritual components. See Saunders & Baines, *Living with dying*, p13.

compatible with an authentic scientific framework.¹¹ This clash created a tension for the dying person who struggled to locate his/her experience meaningfully – and still does so.

Since Saunders founded the hospice movement, British culture has continued to evolve rapidly and is now often described as postmodern¹² – a reaction to the unachievable optimism of modernism, leading to deconstruction and a loss of faith in the big picture. Loughlin¹³ describes postmodernism (with reference to Lyotard) as ‘what happens when master stories lose their appeal and become incredible’. Some of the many possible ‘markers’ of postmodernism of relevance to this study are the perceived individualisation of meaning, the erosion of traditional locations of authority, and the rehabilitation of spirituality. These developments have led to a greater recognition of the importance of spirituality in healthcare settings generally, and to a partial loss of the 20th century authority of the scientific endeavour in the light of current environmental and medical issues. Together these changes might at first be supposed to alleviate the psychological tension and spiritual pain of the experience of dying. However, numerous pastoral encounters¹⁴ demonstrate the continuing enormous difficulties with which people are reconciled to their mortality – and, indeed, to the process of living life as it actually is, rather than as we might hope it to be. People with or without religious faith are struggling with the big questions of suffering, evil, and death.

Even within the Christian community these big questions are often avoided within the normal devotional life of individuals, until circumstances change and something traumatic has to be faced and somehow incorporated into one’s belief system. With this particular community (as with other faith groups) it is of course still possible to draw upon a ‘grand narrative’ or ‘metanarrative’ – a ‘big’ story or worldview that makes sense of the world as it is. Christians should be able to understand the biblical accounts of the life of Christ and his context as paradigmatic of life generally, and can explore what it means in practice to hold the belief that Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, represents perfect humanity and personhood but nevertheless experiences an actual human existence that includes profound pain, suffering and rejection, and ultimately an unjust death. It is useful to note that this illumination or

¹¹ See, for example, McNamara, *Fragile lives*, chap 4.

¹² See, for example, Lyon, *Postmodernity*, for an overall discussion. *The Brill Dictionary of Religion* speaks of postmodernism as ‘plurality-friendly opportunity’ with a spectrum of approaches but in particular, modernism ‘with its “technological superiority complex,” is said to have conjured up an ecological crisis too, and therefore to be in need of complementation in the form of a postmodern era of nature mysticism’. Von Stuckrad (ed), *Brill dictionary of religion*, vol III, p 1479.

¹³ Loughlin, *Telling God’s story*, p 9.

¹⁴ Personal conversations with patients, 2003–2006.

'meaning' of life and death is not *deduced* from scripture: rather, it is *inferred*.¹⁵ I will return to the importance of this point about meaning in Chapter 5 in the discussion of narrative and reality.

When we speak of a Christian metanarrative, we are also making implicit assertions about the nature of scripture. We are talking of parable, story and metaphor, of the precious 'is and is not' quality of the text that allows it to live and remain meaningful in a diachronic and crosscultural manner.¹⁶ A particular problem for modern cultures that have been deeply impacted by reductionist analysis is the loss of the communal ability to use and understand metaphorical, non-concrete, story-like forms of explanation, which are open to a range of interpretations and do not close off alternative meanings.¹⁷ There exists culturally a perceived difference between 'form' and 'content' (or between the expression of truth and truth itself), and a belief that truth is 'correctly' expressed in terms of abstract logical argument,¹⁸ although experientially we know that life does not fit into such categories of explanation. Mary Hesse, discussing the presumed authority of science in contemporary culture, notes: 'There is a contrast of mathematical, impersonal order, which is the only context given to the concept of God, with the messy, dynamic, contingent and accidental history of the universe and humankind, which apparently has no place for God'.¹⁹ John Cottingham argues that the austerity of contemporary 'scientific' discourse has its place when we are 'confronting...particles in the void, or molecules in a test tube', but when dealing with real life it is 'plainly misguided'. He notes that even philosophy has narrowed its horizons to focus on the immanent and descriptive; it is 'modest in its ambitions' and can be described as 'postmetaphysical' (quoting Habermas).²⁰ Philip Hefner observes that much scientific argument about the person 'leapfrogs directly from physics, biology, genetics, and neurobiology, right over culture, to make judgements about the human mind and the

¹⁵ John Colwell discusses the difference between deducing and inferring the doctrine of the Trinity from scripture in *Promise and presence*, pp 21-22, and comments on the inescapably metaphorical nature of our language for God.

¹⁶ Books about interpreting scripture and including an overall discussion of these narrative issues include, for example: Caird, *The language and imagery of the Bible*; Cotterell & Turner, *Linguistics and biblical interpretation*; Goldingay, *Models for interpretation of scripture*; McFague, *Metaphorical theology*; TeSelle, *Speaking in parables*; Watson, *Text, church and world*.

¹⁷ John Weaver discusses the separation of 'scientific' and 'religious' views; *In the beginning*, p 153.

¹⁸ S. Nelson, *Metaphor, atonement and personhood*, p 4; see also Gunton, *Actuality of atonement*, p 22. There is a long history: Plato included in *The republic* the argument that belief and knowledge were different, see no 476 in Ferrari's version, p 179.

¹⁹ Hesse, *Is science the new religion?* Essay in Watts (ed), *Science meets faith*, p 124.

²⁰ Cottingham, *The spiritual dimension*, pp 102-104.

behaviour it organizes...’ but continues to argue that, in contrast, personhood ‘is defined in its intercourse with the challenges it must face’ – *ie* it is messy, multifactorial, and open-ended.²¹

Life cannot be reduced to its parts. When we are unable to validate the ‘messy’ experience (of disaster, death, or loss) by rational explanation within the dominant materialist-reductionist framework, then the suffering experience becomes an excluding and isolating one of failure rather than being understood as a season of life.

Reductionism, often wrongly identified exclusively with scientific method, has become so deeply embedded in the cultural psyche that it is difficult to think in a different way about understanding the world, yet Hesse warns that to use empirical scientific methods and language to evaluate the traditions and beliefs of religion is to start in the wrong place. She identifies the ‘metaphorical and mythical language of religion [as] perhaps nowadays the most intractable stumbling-block in the confrontation between science and religion’,²² adding that the perceived use of religion to support abusive social power structures is another issue (although not in fact one to which science is immune). Colin Gunton supports the theory about language, saying that ‘[t]he underlying approach is still that utterly clear and distinct ideas are more suited to tell the way things are than that language which draws upon sense, imagination and the historically particular’.²³ Hesse notes in her essay that science does in fact have myths and metaphors of its own, but they are evaluated internally by the science that produces them – which is actually an inappropriate authority for science to hold. In other words, science is used to challenge religion and science is also used to challenge science, yet there are good epistemological reasons why this should not be so.

Unfortunately for those who are dying, the materialist-reductionist context that has shaped so much of their life experience cannot provide a truly satisfactory narrative for death and bereavement. To say bluntly that death is the end may be theoretically satisfactory in reductionist terms (biologically, this creature ceases to be alive), but does not address the felt pain of anticipating that end for ourselves or for another, which is why we are driven to denial. Committed materialist-reductionists may be content to say, with the biologist and writer Richard Dawkins, that the only immortality we will have lies in the ideas and writings we leave behind us,²⁴ but for many people the idea that death is a terminus simply raises additional

²¹ P. Hefner, *Imago dei: the possibility and necessity of the human person*, in Gregerson *et al* (eds), *The human person in science and theology*, pp 78 and 83.

²² Hesse, *Is science the new religion?*, p 129.

²³ Gunton, *The actuality of atonement*, p 22.

²⁴ Dawkins dismisses belief in life after death and remarks that, contrary to the (supposedly) religious assertion that life is therefore pointless, ‘The truly adult view...is that our life is as meaningful, as full and as wonderful as we choose to make it’. *The God delusion*, pp 352-360.

questions about the meaning and value of life. In particular, people who are terminally ill seek a cause, or at least something to blame (even if illogical). Increasingly, genetic factors are found to be active in disease processes and so there is a popular sympathy for Dawkins' idea of the human body as a vehicle for genes, although his theory may not be well articulated or understood by the victims of such diseases. Inadvertently Dawkins has thus allowed people to have a materialist rationale for their illnesses while being free to blame the God they do not believe in for their misfortune: in other words, it is possible to occupy the space between the cultures intellectually, even though this position provides little emotional or spiritual support when dying or suffering. Dawkins' ideas constitute a useful corpus with which to dialogue, of extreme (and influential) materialist-reductionism.

1.2 Richard Dawkins, neo-Darwinism, and the 'two cultures'²⁵

Dawkins' personal atheism was progressively confirmed by his scientific work and he has written extensively (and increasingly) over the past 30 years about the intellectual redundancy of God in a post-Darwinian age. He comments: 'We no longer have to resort to superstition when faced with the deep problems: Is there a meaning to life? What are we for? What is man?'²⁶ He is comfortable with the sense of 'natural awe' that any scientist contemplating the natural world may feel, but refuses to identify such feelings as spiritually 'meaningful' and eschews any suggestion of an ultimate Being as the origin of 'creation', seeming to be unable to understand how theologians think and capitulating instead to an objectification of God.

Dawkins, a neo-Darwinist,²⁷ is an evangelist for Darwin's theory in terms of our understanding of the world and sees in it the ultimate ratification of reductionism. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection comprehensively challenged the earlier 19th century assumption that the massive variety of different species in the world had been 'designed' for their specific habitats. Evolution occurs *via* the natural processes of physics and chemistry and does not require God as a designer (dispensing with the cosmological argument for God), an ultimate cause (the ontological argument), or a source of meaning (teleological argument). In *River out of Eden* Dawkins discusses the human tendency to ask the 'Why?' question, and suggests:

²⁵ The 'two cultures' is a reference to the influential book, *The two cultures and the scientific revolution* by Snow, first published in 1959, in which Snow claimed that science and literature formed two dangerously non-interacting cultures separated by an incomprehensible gulf. Science was perceived to be the vehicle for the improvement of humanity but was beyond the reach of understanding of most politicians, the decision-makers, whose (normally upper class) classical education would have focused upon literature rather than science.

²⁶ Dawkins, *The selfish gene* (new edition, 1989), p1.

²⁷ Neo-Darwinism combines the theory of evolution by natural selection with Mendelian probability and Dawkins describes his position with clarity in his first book, *The selfish gene*.

‘When the obsession with purpose becomes pathological it is called paranoia – reading malevolent purpose into what is actually random bad luck’. He argues that the ‘Why?’ question is often simply inappropriate to the nature of the problem, and goes on to explain that the only mechanism that ‘operates behind the scenes’ is not God, but DNA survival. He quotes a priest’s response to the news of a fatal bus accident: ‘...we do not know why there should be a God who lets these awful things happen...[but] If the universe was just electrons, there would be no problem of evil or suffering’. Dawkins responds: ‘if the universe were just electrons and selfish genes, meaningless tragedies...are exactly what we should expect, along with equally meaningless good fortune...The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference’.²⁸

It has been suggested that Dawkins has simply replaced one religion with another (*ie* science). He writes: ‘Not only does the Darwinian theory command superabundant power to explain. Its economy in doing so has a sinewy elegance, a poetic beauty that outclasses even the most haunting of the world’s origin myths’.²⁹ The philosopher Mary Midgely comments that ‘Evolution...is the creation myth of our age’,³⁰ explaining that as the Christian worldview is shaken apart, some parts of traditional religion have simply migrated to a new place in a scientific world framework. Hesse, on the other hand, although drawing our attention to the ‘unnoticed’ mythology of science (see §1.1), still affirms that science is unable to fulfil any real function of religion because it does not have the authority to posit metaphysical claims about design, origin or purpose, but merely to organise and predict empirical data.³¹

Dawkins views religious interpretations of the origin of life as misleading at best and evil at worst, because of the exclusive and oppressive tendencies that he sees as the unavoidable outcome of irrational belief in a supernatural source of power and authority. His recent and popular book, *The God delusion*, is not about biology but is entirely given to communicating his atheism: ‘...there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no *supernatural* creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles – except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don’t yet understand’.³²

The perception that science and religious belief are today incompatible for an intelligent person is still fairly widely held, which is worth unpacking, given the fruitful companionship of

²⁸ Dawkins, *Selfish gene*, pp 132-133.

²⁹ Dawkins, *River out of Eden*, p xi.

³⁰ Midgely, *Evolution as religion*, p 33.

³¹ Hesse, *Is science the new religion?* in Watts (ed), *Science meets faith*, p 134.

³² Dawkins, *God delusion*, p 14. It is important to note that Dawkins reacts against a very ‘hard’ classical image of God; this issue is discussed further in Chapter 2.

science and faith in earlier periods – many of the original founders of The Royal Society were committed Christians, for example. Useful accounts of the history of the science/faith debate include Colin Russell's *Cross-currents*, chapter 2 of Alister McGrath's *Dawkins' God* (a careful apologetic response to Dawkins written in 2005), and John Weaver's *In the beginning God*, already mentioned; but there has been a vigorous output of such books in the wake of the publication of *The God delusion*.

For Dawkins the incompatibility is intellectual: religious people have 'blind faith',³³ without the credibility of evidence, and theologians might be sincere but are certainly mistaken. McGrath, however, has a different explanation of the perceived 'feud', maintaining that science and religion (specifically Christianity in the West), having for centuries enjoyed a close partnership of goals in exploring the natural world, then parted company in the Victorian era because it was sociopolitically (rather than intellectually) expedient to do so.³⁴ Moltmann's 1984 Gifford Lectures, addressing natural theology,³⁵ also identify the context of the debate as one of science colluding with politics in 'usurping power' by the objectification and consequent subordination to humanity of the material world.³⁶ Seeking the true location of power in a particular worldview is a useful feature of many contemporary theological approaches, and may be especially significant for a study of death and suffering in a culture which perceives these experiences as failures.³⁷

In the past century, surrounded by ecological and economic global problems directly related to the technological development of society, the 'moral' authority of science has been challenged, and there is a growing public realisation that we are responsible for putting science to work (science itself is not the culprit, but our scientific idolatry might well be). A parallel questioning of medicine has arisen as expectations of the health services increase and 'failures' become more prominent. The result has been a partial capitulation to more organic strategies, evidenced particularly in the increased bias in personal healthcare towards complementary and alternative medicines; in the holistic care of hospices; and paralleled in community projects that seek to reduce an impact on the environment. John Weaver remarks that 'It is significant that people have sought satisfaction of their spiritual hunger in

³³ Dawkins, *Selfish gene*, p 198, p 330.

³⁴ McGrath, *Dawkins' God*, p 142

³⁵ Natural theology is a general term for the revelation of God through nature. The argument from design, or cosmological argument for God, is one from of natural theology (Paley's watchmaker and the more recent anthropic principle, which states that the universe is so finely tuned for the evolution of life that it cannot be an accident, are both examples). Others include debates about origins (ontological arguments) and about purpose (teleological arguments).

³⁶ Moltmann, *God in creation*, p25.

³⁷ Power is a key feature both in liberation and feminist theologies; Hesse (*Is science?*) also observes that science has power but not authority in matters of meaning and transcendence.

movements that tend to hold human beings and the world together in some sort of harmonious relationship'.³⁸ Mary Midgley describes the danger of the inappropriate application of knowledge – scientists have to live and apply their science in a real context, contending with politics and corruption, and this reality raises its own ethical issues: some things can be inappropriately studied and naïvely applied.³⁹ For example, J. Robert Oppenheimer, the controversial figure who was known as the 'father of the atomic bomb', remarked that scientists had discovered 'sin' when nuclear technology was used to develop the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – an example of gifting science with an inappropriate moral authority.⁴⁰ In short, living with the two cultures unreconciled leaves us with a great many difficulties, of which meaningful dying is one.

1.3 Problems with reductionism

The everyday success of the scientific worldview has left western culture with a pervasive tendency to think of the materialist-reductionist approach as the only intellectually credible method of investigation.⁴¹ Why should this be so?

1.3.1 A brief historical diversion⁴²

The purpose of this diversion is not to survey the history of western philosophy of religion, but to outline the possible roots of the dualism with which we contend in pastoral care today.

Many of the philosophical problems that Christian theology faces can be identified as rooted in the faith itself. Two features are particularly important. First, the development of monotheism meant that all reality had to be related to the same ultimate, so God and philosophy became logically connected. Not only was Judaism monotheistic at the time of Christ, but many Greeks had also adopted monotheism, which had thus become the currency of religious and philosophical debate. Secondly, Christianity was profoundly influenced by Greek culture, in which religion had traditionally had an anthropological function regarding ritual and culture; while philosophy addressed the ultimate questions of life and death. Greek philosophers emphasised the ability of human reason over belief or revelation in terms of finding the truth.

³⁸ Weaver, *In the beginning God*, p 17.

³⁹ Midgley, *Evolution as religion*, chap 3.

⁴⁰ This remark is widely quoted and comes from Oppenheimer's 1947 lecture, *Physics in the contemporary world*: 'In some sort of crude sense, which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose'.

⁴¹ See Maxwell's analysis of knowledge and wisdom in *Cutting God in half*, chap 2.

⁴² There is an abundance of material written on the history of the philosophy of religion. Some useful texts include Cottingham, *The spiritual dimension*; Rudman, *Concepts of person and Christian ethics*; Zagzebski, *Philosophy of religion: an historical introduction*.

As early Christianity spread, its apologists in the West were obliged to adopt the rational argument of Greek debate.⁴³ Thus Christian belief in the West had an inbuilt latent tension from the very earliest stages, and the Enlightenment provided the cultural conditions in which this tension could be developed. Although the defence of the existence of God was frequently addressed philosophically in earlier periods, in the context of Christendom it became an academic exercise (literally ‘preaching to the converted’). However, once the possibility of unbelief was given cultural credibility in more modern times, the matter of defending God’s existence became a very different exercise.

Very broadly, the beginning of the permissible cultural articulation of doubt about religion is usually considered to be rooted in the revolution initiated in the 17th century by Galileo and Descartes (although neither intended to discredit the Christian faith). Galileo bravely challenged the teaching of the church on the basis of his astronomical observations (*ie* empiricism ‘taking priority’ over tradition); while Descartes developed a philosophy that had a profound impact upon religion and wider culture: his approach to religious belief was reductionist: he wanted to strip it down to a reliable ‘foundation’ and then to rebuild it in what he perceived to be a credible manner. As applied by others in practice, the Cartesian approach was more destructive than constructive for religious belief, but this was not Descartes’ intention. A particular development was that the three classical arguments for God – the teleological, ontological and cosmological arguments – became hugely important as foundational justifications for religious belief in God. If the primary belief in God could not be justified then the whole religious edifice fell.

The awareness of the ‘wedge’ between the material and the transcendent was driven more deeply into western culture by Hume and Kant in the 18th century, although it is again important to note that the philosophers were not intent upon discrediting faith *per se*, but upon showing that the investigation of the material world does not shed light on the transcendent and *vice versa*. Hume was anxious to confine philosophical investigation to matters of experience and fact: ‘The existence, therefore, of any being can only be proved by arguments from its cause and effect; and these arguments are founded entirely on experience’.⁴⁴ Hume challenges scholars of divinity or metaphysics to show that their reasoning is abstract and factual, and if not, asserts that their books should be committed to the fire for they contain ‘nothing but sophistry and illusion’.⁴⁵ Kant made a significant

⁴³ See, for example, the account of Paul’s debates with the Greek philosophers in Athens (Acts 17: 16-34). In general Paul’s apologetic style in the NT letters is quite different from the parabolic style of Jesus in the gospels, reflecting the different audiences and cultures addressed.

⁴⁴ Hume, *Enquiries concerning human understanding*, §xii, part iii, p 164.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p 165.

distinction between the noumenal world (things as they are in themselves) and the phenomenal world (things as we experience them), suggesting that the noumenal world is simply beyond the possibility of investigation. However, although these Enlightenment philosophers have undoubtedly been used to discredit religious belief, and the sheer beauty and usefulness of the scientific revolution dazzled human beings into viewing it as an alternative ultimate explanation, the Enlightenment can be better understood as a valuable step in the development of human understanding rather than as the intentional process of religious destruction. John Cottingham suggests in an interesting chapter that the proper response to the Enlightenment's challenge to religion is not to discredit the Enlightenment, but to move forward from it and make use of the philosophical (and technical) advantages it continues to offer.⁴⁶

In the 19th century, Charles Darwin's work reinforced the challenge to the authority of traditional religion. The literal understanding of the Bible was already being challenged by developments in literary criticism and *Origin of species* was an influential addition to the debate, using the methods of science as a measure of truth. The two cultures came into an open conflict at this point that has not yet been fully resolved.

1.3.2 Unpacking the problems of reductionism

Having briefly indicated this background to reductionist thinking, we can return to the main concerns of this study. The problem with materialist reductionism is its inability to deal adequately with the questions and 'untidiness' of life, *particularly matters of ultimate meaning, as evidenced by experience with people who are in extremis*. A number of specific issues connected with reductionism can now be identified as significant for this study.

1.3.2(a) Secularisation

It is often suggested that we live in a secular society,⁴⁷ meaning that we seek non-religious explanations for the questions of life, and this belief is arguably institutionalised in modern culture such that it is difficult to identify, challenge, and adapt. There is, however, a debate about whether secularisation is occurring: it may rather be that fundamentalism has adversely affected popular adherence to traditional religion; or that our social dependence on technology has simply prejudiced us towards 'knowledge' over 'wisdom'. David Martin's

⁴⁶ Cottingham, *The spiritual dimension*, chap 6.

⁴⁷ This subject is debated – see, for example, D. Tacey, *The spirituality revolution*, pp 12-16, and G. Lynch (ed), *Between sacred and profane*, p 51; D. Martin, *The future of Christianity*, chap 1; S. Bruce, *God is dead*, esp chap 5.

recent book⁴⁸ discusses the complex sociological background to religious decline in the west, and suggests that there is no simple connection with scientific success, although neither are they unconnected: he is more inclined to talk about the impact of rationalisation and of 'disenchantment' (the loss of the sacred)⁴⁹ – the philosophical roots of which can be identified in the same kind of traditional monotheistic separation of God from the world as is discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, and which may lie behind the two cultures.

Whether or not science is the new religion, and whether or not secularisation exists, the new philosophy is probably naturalism:⁵⁰ a determination to account for 'things' without recourse to supernatural arguments. Cottingham, who argues this point clearly, defines naturalism either as methodological (*ie* that phenomena can be explained without recourse to the transcendent) or as ontological (*ie* that there is no such thing as the transcendent). This emphasis on philosophical naturalism will certainly be mirrored in the movements of the philosophy of religion and one such development has been the emergence of natural theology, which is an area of study that affirms that something of God can be known from the study of nature.⁵¹

The postwar German theologian Jürgen Moltmann recognised the need for a theology that made sense in a technological world; a theology that reintegrated God and creation and provided a vision of hope.⁵² Moltmann's style and method have proved him to be an exceptional exponent of Christian theology in the postmodern era. I would like to dialogue with Moltmann here because he has so profoundly entered into the question of suffering in *The crucified God*. Moltmann's ideas are very helpful in dealing pastorally with suffering and dying people who are asking 'Why me?', and so I was interested to see how he had also dealt with the issue of the two cultures.

(i) Separation of God and the world. Moltmann's *God in creation* begins with an exploration of some of the world-shaping dualisms that support the apparent rationalism of secularisation. Modern theology's residual dependence on Platonism has tended to identify God as the 'absolute subject', which means that the material world tends towards absolute object: 'The more transcendent the conception of God became, the more immanent were the terms in which the world was interpreted. Through the monotheism of the absolute subject, God was

⁴⁸ D. Martin, *The future of Christianity*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, see especially chap 7, *Science and secularization*.

⁵⁰ Cottingham, *The spiritual dimension*, pp 109-113.

⁵¹ McGrath, *Science and religion*, p 111.

⁵² German Protestantism had been suspicious of natural theology since the Nazi period (an endorsement of Nazism could be located in natural theology in some readings). Karl Barth in particular held to the primacy of christological revelation in scripture as a basis for all 'safe' theological enterprise. Moltmann recognised that the new technological era brought new challenges to theology.

increasingly stripped of his connection with the world, and the world was increasingly secularised'.⁵³ Reductionist investigation, highly successful with the material world, thus delivers little or no information about God (or indeed anything transcendent), who is therefore deemed (in reductionist terms) not to exist – or, at best, to be completely unproven.

Moltmann argues that this separation of God and the world is both read into and out of mainstream theologies of creation, which are based upon a flawed interpretation of the Genesis accounts. He suggests that Genesis is intended primarily to teach the difference between God (the creator) and the world (the created) in order to distinguish them appropriately; however, the loss of the *immanence* of God in God's creation is something that we have made up for ourselves, because modern reductionism does not (and logically cannot) need God as an explanation. A helpful corrective would be to recover a pre-modern concept of reason (particularly when reading such pre-modern texts): one that makes use of the concepts of participation and perception, and which sees the integrated whole rather than simply causes and effects or results. Moltmann's panentheistic perspective, which is not palatable to some traditional theists, is a characteristic common to many newer approaches to natural theology.

(ii) *Anthropocentrism*. Another issue identified by Moltmann is the uncritically anthropocentric perspective assumed with respect to life on this planet: that in the Genesis creation stories readers normally (and wrongly, according to Moltmann) understand the 'crown' of creation to be humanity. This 'usual' reading then leads the reader to an implicit subordination of the created world to human needs and desires – with the result that the earth can be abused by humans, with God's 'permission'. Moltmann suggests that reading Genesis 1 and 2 properly shows us that the crown of God's creative activity was properly the *sabbath*, which leads to a different fundamental understanding of the purpose of the whole of creation: that of displaying the glory of God. Within Moltmann's reading, humankind most certainly has special responsibilities on the earth, but creation has a profound intrinsic value that is not connected to its materialist 'use'. Our preconceptions immunise us against a critical reading and we become stuck in the domination paradigm: 'Because the second creation account gives the impression that the world was created for the sake of men and women, people believed that the modern conquest of the world by human beings proved that the ancient anthropocentric view of the world was the true one'.⁵⁴ One of the minor themes of this thesis is the need to continue to acknowledge the existence of such 'canalised' thinking: that we have default

⁵³ Moltmann, *God in creation*, p1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p30.

mental pathways that lead us to monochrome interpretations of the experiences and events of life, but which are so natural to us that they are very difficult to perceive.

(iii) *Power and dominion*. Moltmann examines the effect of this objectification of creation on our way of life and comments that we even perceive our bodies as something that we 'possess'.⁵⁵ This dualistic belief that the self is somehow separate from the body underlies much of modern medicine and culture, but in particular Moltmann observes that the objectification of the natural world means that science (which investigates it) is godlike in its authority. We are reminded of the discussion in §1.1 and §1.2 about power and authority and the perceived superiority of scientific thought in our culture. Theology, says Moltmann, is not considered a proper tool for the understanding of nature but is relegated to the study of human history, with science dominating theology because of its 'manner of knowing', which is linked to power.

This discussion of power and authority is highly significant for the way in which medicine and technology dominate at the time of sickness and death, and also for the way in which these experiences have been removed from the 'place of life' (the home and community) to the 'place of science' (the hospital or – better, but still institutionalised – the hospice). Suffering and death, the 'messy' experiences of life, are subjected to a rationalistic analysis and treatment; yet there are good arguments to suggest that this process is inappropriate.

1.3.2(b) Complexity and simplicity

In a reductionist worldview, conclusions about complex systems are drawn from the understanding of simple ones. This approach to investigation is elegantly described by Peter Atkins, a physical chemist at Oxford, as follows: 'there is nothing that cannot be understood, and [the] path to understanding is to peel away appearances in order to expose the core, which is always of unsurpassed simplicity'.⁵⁶ Atkins believes that this approach is universal in its scope and comments further that 'it is possible to think rationally about what many regard as lying beyond explanation, such as the processes involved in the creation of the universe and the emergence in it of consciousness...there is no *need* to involve the idea of a Supreme Being'.⁵⁷ He thus concurs with Dawkins' statement: 'if there is something that appears to lie beyond the natural world as it is now imperfectly understood, we hope eventually to understand it and embrace it within the natural'.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Moltmann, *God in creation*, p3.

⁵⁶ Atkins, *Creation revisited*, p vii.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p vii.

⁵⁸ Dawkins, *God delusion*, p 14.

Experientially we know that we cannot describe everything satisfactorily as the sum of its parts, but rationalist and reductionist thought beguiles us with its veiled promise of power. We would all love to command our own destinies, and the Enlightenment hope of understanding leading to wellbeing is highly resilient. Thus the public communicators of science have a great responsibility in a culture shaped, maintained and progressed by technical expertise,⁵⁹ for the promise may exceed the actuality. For example, a person who is dying may be aware of the potential genetic root of his or her cancer and of the possible contributions of diet and lifestyle, freely chosen, that led to the disease being manifest. He or she may have all available knowledge about drugs, therapies and surgery. Even so, suffering and death remain in a mysterious zone that cannot be penetrated by science. It is for such matters that a reductionist approach to life will not answer.

Because materialist reductionism is such a deep influence on our culture it is difficult to evaluate it in non-reductionist ways. Moltmann's suggestion of using pre-modern reasoning, in which relationships are as primal as things, is helpful.⁶⁰ Then true knowing is defined as *communication* rather than *domination*, which fundamentally alters the dynamics of power. Theologically our working view of the Trinity is important: whatever we might affirm in the creeds, commonly in practice we imagine a God whose relationship with the world is one of remote one-sided domination. A truly trinitarian and immanent conception of God challenges every aspect of God's relationship with the created world – and particularly our fixation with cause and effect, which often even shapes the form of our prayer.⁶¹

If humans are made in *imago dei*, then the model for this trinitarian relational interaction in the Christian worldview is that of eucharistic community rather than hierarchical authority, characterised by self-giving love rather than abusive and acquisitive relations of power. The dynamic possibilities of such community are pictured and modelled in the gospels in the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus, whose other-centredness challenges the canalisation existent in human social structures. This way of life is opposed to individualism, authoritative power, hierarchical domination, and the categorisation of others. It is fundamentally non-reductionist but functions unashamedly through metaphor and mystery. Consequently the way of Christ is a profound challenge to the power structures embedded in modernism.

⁵⁹ There are some fascinating dialogues between eminent evolutionists, cosmologists and others in Brockman, *The third culture*. This book discusses the emergence of the 'third culture' from the two cultures of Snow. In *The third culture*, scientists are presented publicly as literary intellectuals, shaping culture in their own right. Dawkins, with his prolific output and charismatic style, would definitely be identified as a culture shaper.

⁶⁰ Moltmann, *God in creation*, p11.

⁶¹ Meaning that prayer is often a request for intervention rather than for relationship.

Later (in Chapter 5) I will discuss the phenomenon of liminality, the ‘in-between-ness’ of dying and suffering. We are generally uncomfortable with this poorly defined threshold experience because we cannot pin it down, explain it, analyse it. It has a metaphorical character that ‘is and is not’ and it resists reduction to simpler components. Our discomfort with this state may be in part related to our desire to analyse and possess.

1.3.2 (c) The loss of meaning and the loss of God

Although the scientific enterprise has been optimistic in terms of its ability to describe and to understand (‘Complete knowledge is just within our grasp’,⁶² claimed Atkins), it is epistemologically ill equipped to deliver hope in the sense of a meaning to life beyond the cycle of existing, consuming, and then dying to make room for the new generation. In the hospice it is interesting that many patients appear to benefit from exploring their own sense of ‘meaning’: perhaps by oral life histories; or by expression of their experience through art or music; or by leaving a ‘memory box’ behind which summarises their existence in some way. Those individuals who are able to explore meaning – either in these ways or through a personal faith – seem to be able to enter the dying process more peacefully. The idea that terminal illness ‘just happened’ to this particular set of biological organs (*ie* this particular individual person) is rarely felt to be an adequate explanation and is almost always contested by denial, anger, and disbelief (*via* a whole range of ‘Why me?’ and ‘What is God doing?’ questions, even from those who claim no personal faith).⁶³

Although the idea of the totally objective viewpoint has been comprehensively challenged both philosophically and scientifically, a fascination with the objectification of the natural world is tenacious and underlies hardline reductionism. Moltmann observes that such objectification and dualism not only alienate human beings from the natural world but also alienate us from our own bodily existence,⁶⁴ leaving us existentially ‘adrift’ in the cosmos, without purpose or meaning. In addition, since God’s creative activity is both contingent and free, there is no way in which the objective creation is causally linked to the creator: and so a commitment to a strictly mechanistic and disenchanting worldview means that we also lose access to God, since revelation does not count. Dawkins, for example, quotes James Watson (of the Watson–Crick hypothesis): ‘I can’t believe anyone accepts truth by revelation’.⁶⁵

We need a relational metaphysics in which humanity is truly a part of nature rather than in authority over it, and in which the perceived distinction between God and the world, which

⁶² Atkins, *Creation revisited*, p 157.

⁶³ Personal conversations with patients.

⁶⁴ Moltmann, *God in creation*, pp 34-50.

⁶⁵ Dawkins, *God delusion*, p 99.

raises so many philosophical issues, can be appropriately reconciled. John Cooper, in a comprehensive recent study,⁶⁶ notes the increasing tendency for theology to move away from classical theism and towards panentheism (towards which, as a traditional theist, he is not sympathetic), because of the felt need to address the kind of issues that have to be reconciled with science. Particular problems with classical theism include God's immutability and transcendence; the issues around freedom and divine foreknowledge; and the particularity of the incarnation. Modern theologians have been vigorously seeking new approaches to these questions, taking seriously the challenge and the credibility of science.

1.4 Theological responses to the two cultures

Charles Darwin had initially a fairly literal biblical faith, but moved away from it first because he could not achieve a satisfactory conciliation between evolution and Paley's natural theology⁶⁷ (by which he had been deeply influenced), and later because of the problem of evil as evidenced in the brutality of nature itself. Darwin effectively made a choice between apparently incompatible belief systems, although he never referred to himself overtly as an atheist. His scientific contribution was hugely influential and impacted religious belief, and the discussion is alive today.

Most people learn some basic awareness of the process of evolution and many assume uncritically that it is an unanswerable challenge to God. Dawkins' prolific output has already been mentioned, but he is not the only highly literate proponent of atheistic evolutionary theory. The philosopher Daniel Dennett⁶⁸ (for example) claims that Darwin has given us a 'dangerous idea' with two serious implications for theology – first, that all living creatures share a common ancestry, which blurs the distinction of human and other (and even between living and non-living); and secondly that natural selection is random and undirected and leads us to an impersonal, self-generating universe. The first 'dangerous' implication challenges the

⁶⁶ Cooper, *Panentheism*, pp 15-17.

⁶⁷ William Paley (1743-1805) published *Natural theology* in 1802, which held that the existence of a designer was evident from the observation of that designer's work (the classic watch on the heath story, described in the opening sentences of his first chapter, implying the existence of the watchmaker). This 'theory from design' has been very influential although now largely discredited. Darwin initially accepted Paley's idea but later found that it conflicted too greatly with his biological observations and abandoned it, and moved away from his original Christian convictions. The anthropic principle bears some similarities to the argument from design.

⁶⁸ Dennett, a philosopher who is probably better known in the US than the UK, published *Darwin's dangerous idea* in 1995.

literal Genesis account of creation; the second challenges belief in the existence of a necessary creator God at all.⁶⁹

Theology continues to develop responses to Darwin's legacy. Ian Barbour has reviewed the current dialogues of theology with science and has suggested four main categories:⁷⁰ conflict; independence; dialogue; and integration. I have decided to group responses here into three categories of opposition, separation, and engagement, since Barbour's dialogue and integration are closely related.

1.4.1 Opposition

The most obvious form of opposition is simply to say that Darwin is wrong, and prominent among the holders of this position are the proponents of creationism,⁷¹ particularly strong in the US.⁷² If the non-negotiable assumption of creationists is that scripture must be literally inerrant, then a seven-day understanding of creation is the only possible conclusion and an *impasse* with science is unavoidable. This is not the place to survey hermeneutical approaches, but simply to note that using the Bible as explanatory of current scientific evidence is an area of interpretive difficulty. Philip Clayton, a process theologian/philosopher, comments that 'the textual accounts of Yahweh must not be read as dispassionate quasi- (or pseudo-) scientific accounts of the world'.⁷³ However, opposition may not be opposition to evolution *per se*, but rather to the underlying metaphysics of scientific materialism. In this case it is important to find ways of 'decoupling'⁷⁴ the issues of evolutionary theory, which are well evidenced and currently highly credible, from the intrinsic materialism through which they have been interpreted by Dawkins, Dennett and others.

A dying person in 21st century Britain will be likely to feel indebted to the benefits of the scientific and technological enterprise (having been in receipt of medical care and possibly mechanical assistance in the home or care environment), and is also likely to be fairly sceptical about a creationist position, since only around 5.5% of the total population actively practises the Christian faith⁷⁵ and of these a much smaller proportion will hold a fundamentalist

⁶⁹ Various theological responses to Darwin are reviewed by John Haught in *God after Darwin*.

⁷⁰ Barbour, *When science meets religion*, chap 1. Another text by Barbour relevant here is *Religion and science: historical and contemporary issues*.

⁷¹ The 1989 Oxford English Dictionary defines creationism as 'the theory which attributes the origin of matter, the different species of animals and plants, etc., to 'special creation' (opposed to *evolutionism*)'.

⁷² See Attridge (ed), *The religion and science debate*, for a recent set of essays analysing the US position.

⁷³ Clayton, *God and contemporary science*, p 17.

⁷⁴ Haught, *God after Darwin*, p 26, comments that if we do not achieve this decoupling of science from materialist metaphysics, then theology is dead.

⁷⁵ The figure of 5.5% comes from Peter Brierley's research for 2010 and refers to active Christians (other faiths may not hold an evolutionary view, but comprise a much smaller percentage of people in the UK),

creationist point of view. Most patients will not be particularly scientifically or theologically literate and will hold a worldview that is shaped by a fairly basic idea of evolutionary theory, and a view of religion shaped by a hard classical theism. Some will vehemently reject any supernatural or transcendent dimension to life; but most will be caught within the culture clash and struggle to make sense of the transcendence of death within a working materialist-reductionist worldview.

1.4.2 Separation

A much more common dialogue between theology and science has been ‘separation’ – by theologians who recognise that the evidence of evolution cannot be ignored, but who cannot fully integrate it with religious belief. This approach normally insists on the empirical nature of science and the transcendence of God, which thus occupy separate realms, each of which is epistemologically inaccessible to the other (after Hume, Kant, Spinoza). The separation position is frequently expressed, for example, in terms of science answering the ‘how’ and theology the ‘why’ questions of life. This form of ‘escape’ from the issue can be intellectually unsatisfactory. The biologist Stephen Jay Gould coined the term ‘NOMA’ (‘non-overlapping magisteria’) for the separatist approach, which has been criticised by Dawkins as a technique for evading difficult questions.⁷⁶

The root of the separatist approach is ontological. If God is the ultimate, necessary, uncreated ground of being, the ‘that than which no greater can be thought’ of Anselm’s *Proslogium*, then what theologians call the ‘creation’ (and scientists call ‘nature’) can of course be contingent rather than necessary. There is then no possible rational or causal link back to God from any empirical study of nature, and there is also a proper area of study of God that is of another order – whether one speaks of revelation, supervenience,⁷⁷ or the numinous, or some other term.

Again, the difficulty is an issue of materialist or reductionist metaphysics integrated into science and not of evolutionary theory itself, a point that is not always made clear in discussion. Rather, the problem is the insistence by Dawkins and other like-minded writers that God be fitted into a rationalist worldview, because that is the *only possible* worldview of

see [www.http://brin.ac.uk/news/?tag=peter-brierley](http://brin.ac.uk/news/?tag=peter-brierley), last accessed at 1413 h on 3 August 2010. To provide a context for this figure, the census of 2001 suggested that about 72% of the population of England and Wales would describe themselves as Christians as opposed to any other faith. These numbers point to a majority worldview with residual Christian structure that is poorly reflected or recontextualised.

⁷⁶ Dawkins, *God delusion*, pp 54-61.

⁷⁷ Supervenient properties cannot be easily reduced to components at the same ‘level’ (eg the physical level and the mental level). See Clayton, pp 250-254.

which they can conceive. Such a limitation of God is clearly untenable in any orthodox understanding of scripture, tradition, and transcendent religious experience – and so Dawkins attacks all these bodies of knowledge as unreliable in his more recent publications, always basing his arguments uncritically upon materialist assumptions.

Separation has much to commend it theologically because of its humility in the face of revelation. But does separation help those who are dying? Not really, because most of the existential questions about the nature of suffering fall into the transcendent category, while the physical experience is dealt with in the materialist dimension. Somehow the person is not whole, and the answers are unsatisfactory. Walter Wink describes the separatist position as a reaction to a materialist worldview and views its inherent lack of wholeness as ‘schizoid’.⁷⁸

1.4.3 Engagement

In the light of the ‘new physics’⁷⁹ Weaver says: ‘We have left the deterministic, infinite universe of Newtonian physics behind, and as Christians we will need to come out from the bunker of private religious belief and engage in a dialogue with science’.⁸⁰ Scientific materialism has the great advantage of ‘working’ at a hands-on level in daily life: in fact without it we could not plan, organise or predict very much at all. On the other hand, not all that is of significance in life is amenable to forensic description. Moltmann hopes for ‘a *community* of scientific and theological insights’ in which relationships are as primary as things.⁸¹ A dialogue is crucially important for theology.

Sometimes people might believe they are ‘engaging’ when actually they are ‘separating’. Post-Darwinian engagement between science and theology generally falls into one of two categories: either science is used to interpret religion, which may alienate those of a religious persuasion; or primacy is allocated to religious belief. Is it possible genuinely to hold both science and religion together as equal debating partners? Bearing in mind that the ‘view from nowhere’⁸² is unobtainable, the answer is probably no – a person in today’s divided culture will need to adopt a starting point that is either scientific or religious in character. However, there is no reason why theologians should not use a considered argument that begins and ends in God. Mary Hesse reminds us of Kant’s three philosophical questions: *What can we know?*;

⁷⁸ Wink, in Gingerich & Grimsrud (eds), *Transforming the powers*, p 21.

⁷⁹ The 20th century developments of relativity, quantum theory, and chaos theory, which challenge determinism.

⁸⁰ Weaver, *In the beginning*, p 190

⁸¹ Moltmann, *God in creation*, p 13.

⁸² As discussed by Nagel, *The view from nowhere*, Introduction, and Hart, *Faith thinking*, chap 3.

What then can we do?; and *What can we hope for?*, and notes that science cannot really answer any of these except in a partial way.⁸³

In the search for a metaphysics that makes sense in late modernism, questions of authority, theism, hermeneutics, and providence are unavoidable: these are the questions that are important to dying people struggling to deal with the slippery issues of suffering, pain, and evil. In Chapter 2 I will discuss how process insights can help to address these issues.

1.5 Key issues for a study of the embrace of suffering and death

I began with the suggestion that an overly reductionist and materialist view of reality is a serious hindrance to the task of answering the question: 'Why me?'. Western culture is liberal and postmodern, yet demonstrates the existence of an influential underlying mechanistic view of the universe, and remains highly enchanted with the promise of technological answers to the problems of health, environment and age – understandably so, given its dependence on successful technological development to raise the standard of living for the majority of people. This ready capitulation to reductionist explanation may result in an extreme hostility to religious belief although once again it should be noted that it is not science *per se* but the materialist metaphysics to which it is frequently wedded that is the cause of this problem.

As this point, certain key issues have emerged that may be useful in addressing the root problem of dealing pastorally with issues of suffering and dying, summarised here.

1.5.1 The question of suffering

The questions, 'Why me?', or 'Why does God allow cancer at all, if he is good?', arise with regularity in the hospice setting. It is rarely possible or appropriate to engage in any meaningful theological or philosophical debate when someone is either very ill or very distressed. However, having engaged with such questions oneself is a great help in the ministry of 'being with' those who are asking, even if one's own experience or reflection is never explicitly verbalised. In the following chapters the issue of suffering will be addressed to support the pastoral question as follows: in Chapter 2 there will be some metaphysical analysis; in Chapter 3 the suffering person will be the focus of discussion; while in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I will look at the use of narrative theory and develop my main thesis of understanding suffering as *ontological impertinence*.

⁸³ Hesse, *Is science?*, pp 122 ff.

1.5.2 *The human person*

The question, 'Why me?', directs us to a consideration of the human person. Is a person something that can be studied in a mechanistic or reductionist fashion? If not, why not? The related issue of an individualistic cultural view of personhood is vital for this argument, and I will consider the implications for the suffering person of being *a person in relation*, and ask whether our individualism impairs our experience of suffering such that we can no longer incorporate it meaningfully into the stories of our lives.

Individualism has some fascinating features – in particular, defining freedom as total detachment from others, which allocates great power to each individual.⁸⁴ Personal autonomy is a prized status and exercises a powerful influence on healthcare and palliative care. However, it can make the process of dying a lonely one, because the emphasis on patient-centred care has the potential to damage awareness of the patient's relational context.⁸⁵

The contemporary social commitment to personal autonomy also causes confusion around the concept of suffering: there is a tendency to assume that the pain and suffering belongs largely to the patient. Thus family members will often comment that they would prefer a quick death (like a fatal heart attack) to the lingering demise of cancer or MND (motor neurone disease) – although in reality, while suffering may be reduced for the person who dies suddenly, it will be enormously increased for those who remain. This loss of relational awareness is another difficulty for modern people who are trying to deal with suffering (of any sort) and death.

1.5.3 *Language and story*

How do we deal with material that does not lend itself to discussion as 'facts'? If we cannot understand suffering in a reductionist or causal manner ('it was a result of X or Y'), then how are we to speak of it? And even if we identify such a cause, does that really reduce the pain, or simply satisfy our curiosity?

In the following chapters I will be thinking of the sort of language used to discuss suffering – in particular, the use of story or narrative. The practical, pastoral value of telling the story will be discussed and I will think further about the implications (for suffering) of this observation by

⁸⁴ Midgley (*Evolution as religion*, pp 52-53) believes that Dawkins enshrines a classic but simplistic individualistic worldview in *The selfish gene*.

⁸⁵ This is a complex phenomenon caused in part by the increasing professionalisation of death for both the patient and his/her family. Diagnosis, treatment and palliative care are almost all removed from the family home, in spite of more recent moves to 'hospice at home' schemes. Even specialised bereavement services today take the role that a family or local community would have filled. While it is true that people may lack the experience to deal well with death, it might be helpful to focus on empowerment rather than 'services'.

using narrative theory, focusing on the work of Ricoeur. Our scientific culture, and the scientific language that goes with it, resists the use of story, parable, and metaphor because these forms are perceived to be 'woolly' rather than 'factual'. Does this resistance really indicate a deeper cultural discomfort with not being in control and with the sense of the impenetrable mystery that we call transcendence? What might that mean for the way in which we deal with suffering? This observation leads me to mention two final points that will be of interest: the phenomena of canalisation and of liminality.

*Canalisation*⁸⁶ is a biological phenomenon that describes stereotyped reactions. Canalised thinking triggers patterns in the mind rather than analysing the facts, which may be complex. Human learning is often canalised, and this includes cognitive and moral development. Of particular interest for this research is *the tendency to assume that personal agents cause events to occur*. Patricia Williams notes that human beings have a canalised response which leads them to *personalise* all sorts of inanimate and non-human objects (we might call this anthropomorphisation) – leading to certain beliefs about the causes of evil. In particular, studies on ancient religions by Walter Burkert⁸⁷ indicate a canalised reaction to catastrophic events which falls into four parts: an event is perceived as a catastrophe; a mediator is involved; the mediator links the catastrophe to sin of some sort; and finally the community or person makes atonement for the sin.⁸⁸ Williams examines this process with respect to atonement theory, but the implication for the question: 'Why me?' is clearly interesting. I have explored the implications of this tendency to canalisation for the role of the chaplain in a hospice setting in another article, suggesting that patients tend to see their doctors as liminal guides through this difficult terrain because of the perceived authority of the medical model, but in fact, because of the power of the perceived two cultures, the best placed person to be a liminal guide in the threshold world is indeed the chaplain.⁸⁹

In this study the interesting features of canalisation seem to be (a) the assumed connection between punishment and sin, remembering the injunction in Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death ('she didn't deserve to die, she lived a good life'); (b) Williams' repeated warning that canalised thinking should not be accepted uncritically precisely because it is stereotyped and not a proper response to the facts in hand (the reluctance to accept bad news or 'failure'); and (c) the positing of personal causal agents behind things that happen ('God allowed my

⁸⁶ Williams, *ibid*, chap 2.

⁸⁷ Burkert, *Creation of the sacred*, quoted by Williams, *Doing without Adam and Eve*, pp 19-21.

⁸⁸ So Jesus makes atonement in this classical manner. René Girard understands this process of scapegoating as a typical human reaction to 'violence' or inherent discord in social groups.

⁸⁹ S. Nelson, *Medical rites*.

husband to die'). I will discuss these issues in Chapters 5 and 6 and make some use of the classic biblical story of Job.

Liminality – liminal experience is about standing on the threshold of something new; about an open future; about possibilities and progress; about not being narrowly defined. Although commonly our culture displays a fascination with the new and the different, in practice we enjoy order and control, which means knowledge and understanding in a mechanistic universe. Richard Rohr⁹⁰ and others (see Diarmuid O'Murchu⁹¹ for example) have started to discuss the ways in which a lack of cultural liminal experiences (such as initiation processes for adolescents on the verge of adulthood, for example) in our western culture holds people back from exploring their inner personal identities.

Death and dying are liminal experiences – or could be, depending upon what one's personal beliefs might be. An extreme materialist would not view death as liminal, simply terminal (although possibly such a person might allow that the process of dying has liminal characteristics).

I think that it might be useful to examine why we are so uncomfortable with the liminal and particularly to place this question within the materialistic, reductionist worldview that we have already identified, with a view to addressing the needs of those who are suffering or terminally ill. This material will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5 with the help of a narrative approach. Before that, in Chapter 2, I want to consider the impact on our culture (even though it is no longer Christian) of the way in which we conceive God to relate to the world (particularly through the science–faith debate), and in so doing, have found process-based thinking (understood as a metaphor for reality, rather than as an 'explanation') to be a helpful option.

⁹⁰ Rohr, *Everything belongs*, pp 47-59.

⁹¹ O'Murchu, *Consecrated religious life: the changing paradigms*, pp159-224.

Chapter 2. God and the world

Where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell? (Job 28:20, NIV)

2.1 Materialism and European culture

A person's image of God, whether or not s/he believes in that God personally, will nonetheless shape that person's response to, and expectations of, that God; and thus also his/her rationalisation of the whole of life.⁹² Concepts of God are drivers of meaning, often operating 'below the radar' of conscious awareness, but this should not be taken as a suggestion that God manipulates us mentally from behind the scenes. Culture, religious tradition, and personal experience are not neatly separable, and we do not simply bring an abstract 'shape' of God to our lives to dominate our conscious or subconscious responses: rather, we will question and interact with our assumptions about God in the light of our experiences in life.⁹³ In the contemporary interaction of materialist metaphysics and Christian theology, certain 'shapes' of God have been reinforced while others have been eroded. In this chapter I will examine the implications of the 'shape' of God for the suffering person.

2.1.1 Pervasive materialist-reductionist thought

In Chapter 1, which set the context for this study of suffering and dying in 21st century Britain, the impact of materialist reductionism on our culture (primarily *via* science, technology, and medicine) was discussed. This phenomenon cannot be ignored by any theologian or pastor who is attempting to develop contemporary apologetics or spirituality. Richard Rohr, who has written many books on the crisis of spirituality in the West, comments rather sadly that 'The

⁹² Assuming, with Anselm, that if God exists then God by logical definition is greater (in some way, for the definition of greatness is a moot point) than every other existent. So, for example, Richard Dawkins claims that he does not believe in God, but at the same time he knows exactly which God he does not believe in, and in fact such a God would be unpalatable to many Christians too. Nonetheless, it is this particular image of God with whom Dawkins interacts, and to which Dawkins forms a response – so God still shapes his 'anti-theology' and hence his response to life's experiences. Monotheism is also an important associated assumption, and I shall discuss its significance later in this chapter.

⁹³ This process of questioning the 'shape of God' in order to work out a response to life's events is normative in scripture (explicitly in the psalms and prophets, and conversations with Jesus), in the rabbinical tradition, and in the disputations and debates of Christian theology. A summary of this process appears in the introduction to Frances Watson's book on hermeneutics, which discusses the unique nature of scripture as a text requiring interpretation (by preaching) in the presence of the community, who are also part of the larger sphere of the world. See *Text, church and world*, pp 1-17. This dynamic is often overlooked in arguments against God, since it is easier to form an argument against an immutable protagonist than against one who is in responsive relationship with us and who reveals Godself to us in vulnerability.

Western mind refuses to be in awe any more. It is only aware of what is wrong...’,⁹⁴ and it is this hopelessness which leads to the existential anxiety that characterises postmodern living – and even more, postmodern suffering, and dying.⁹⁵ In this chapter I will examine the way in which the mechanistic cultural shift has interacted with Christianity to precipitate revisions of the ‘classical’ God–world relationship.⁹⁶ In particular, Christian worldviews founded upon versions of classical theism have struggled with some of the questions of the post-Enlightenment, primarily around the task of harmonising the existence of suffering and evil with an understanding of God as both sovereign and good, since a powerful God is normally viewed as ultimately causal. The emergence and application of process thought over the 20th century is one response to these dilemmas, and is especially helpful in thinking about the issues of suffering and of personal and individual significance, as we shall see in §2.3. Later I will draw also on some aspects of narrative thought which seem to me to be complementary to a process model of reality.

The great hope of the Enlightenment was (and it still is, in part) the triumph of reductionism and materialism – that everything can be explained by ‘taking it apart’ to see what the simpler components are, without recourse to the non-material or spiritual. As our ability to investigate empirically becomes more sophisticated, so the realms of the supervenient⁹⁷ and of the mysterious appear to become smaller; and the need for God as an ultimate explanation is supposedly correspondingly reduced.⁹⁸ But has this strategy been successful in responding to the deep questions of life? Walter Wink, a popular theologian who has been writing about the nature of the transcendent for the past 20 years, speaks of the ‘sickness’ of materialism conceived as an ultimate principle.⁹⁹ He comments that ‘...the moment the decision was made

⁹⁴ Rohr with Feister, *Hope against darkness*, p53.

⁹⁵ Paul Ricoeur locates this anxiety in the temporal character of our existence, and this is discussed further in Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis.

⁹⁶ There is no single view but by ‘classical’ I mean broadly a God who is ultimate, eternal, impassible, omnipotent, unchanging and omniscient. This view of God is often assumed but not justified (see Peter Forrest’s discussion of kenotic theory and divine attributes in Crisp (ed), *A reader in contemporary philosophical theology*, p 152). Impassibility is different from immutability: God’s ability to suffer is part of God’s character of self-giving love and essential in my argument if God is meaningfully to share our pain. A passible God does not, however, have to mean that God must change in God’s essential nature. Perfection need not mean unchanging completion but can mean consistent in dynamic, relational character.

⁹⁷ Supervenience was a term originally used to denote the relation between mental and physical characteristics, but has been developed to indicate behaviours that resist reductionist analysis. See, for example, McGrath, *Science and religion*, p 223. There is also some discussion of supervenience and personhood in Gregersen *et al* (eds), *The human person in science and theology*.

⁹⁸ The ‘God of the gaps’ has progressively less ‘gap’ over which to assert God’s authority.

⁹⁹ Wink, *Unmasking the powers*, p 1. Wink has written extensively about the nature of the ‘powers and principalities’ of the NT – not an easy concept to discuss in a materialist framework – and invokes a supervenient rationale for these phenomena. For more of Wink’s theology see his books, *Naming the powers*, *Engaging the powers* and contributions in *Transforming the powers* (ed Gingerich & Grimsund).

to seek for the ultimate principles of nature in nature's irreducible components, the choice had been made for materialism, whether one was a theist or not'.¹⁰⁰ He describes a development over the centuries of the loss of 'participating consciousness' in favour of mechanisation, such that human beings now experience a deep estrangement from nature as its consumers and controllers.¹⁰¹ He believes that Christianity's contemporary lack of credibility is not to do with its intrinsic message but rather that this message cannot be meaningfully communicated within a materialistic cosmology.¹⁰² This difficulty is exactly that experienced in the pastoral care of suffering people: transcendent meaning escapes forensic definition, but the latter is our preferred method of thought, analysis, and communication. In Chapters 4 and 5 I will be discussing the need for different kinds of explanation to deal with life, and in particular the nature of *meaning* in the context of suffering, arguing that the kind of meaning for which we are now conditioned to search is bound to elude us at times of crisis.

Since the Bible is neither written *out of* nor *for* a materialistic cosmology, there is clearly an issue of *metaphysical* interpretation to be addressed when using it today (in addition to the cultural, historical and linguistic influences that need to be negotiated around the interpretation of ancient texts). It is inappropriate to use reductionist methods *alone* to understand scripture, and yet in fact such methods (which are part of our near-invisible cultural baggage) are often felt to yield the most significant information because they are more 'scientific' than, say, narrative or metaphorical approaches. Historical-critical methods and etymological studies, which are reductionist in character, are indeed extremely useful, but they can only yield incomplete meanings for texts that were written for people in a pre-modern culture. Some of the meanings of these texts will never be truly available to us, with our contemporary presuppositions, culture and worldview,¹⁰³ but that is far from saying that truth and meaning are not present in these texts for us today.

The analysis in Chapter 1 and above of the development of post-Enlightenment culture and its impact upon religious belief is well studied, and reference has been made throughout this thesis to many works on this subject and on the response of various natural theologies, which in a sense 'beat science at its own game'. By this I mean that the methods of observation, logic, and rational deduction are used in conjunction with Christian doctrine to generate apologetics of one form or another – and applications of process theology currently provide a

¹⁰⁰ Wink, *Unmasking the powers*, p 137.

¹⁰¹ Moltmann discusses this idea in the early chapters of *God in creation*.

¹⁰² Wink, *ibid*, p 6.

¹⁰³ See, for example, Barr, *Has the Bible any authority?*, chap 4 in *The scope and authority of the Bible*; Cotterell & Turner, *Linguistics and biblical interpretation*; Fish, *What makes an interpretation acceptable?*, chap 15 in *Is there a text in this class?*. Later chapters will examine some of these issues in the interpretation of narrative from Ricoeur's viewpoint.

helpful synthesis in the contemporary climate. However, it is taken as given that we are shaped by our life experiences and that the interpretation of truth has to evolve and to move on as environments change. Scripture itself is an example of progressive revelation over time, such that the God of the Old Testament is sometimes barely recognisable in the New – although this is not to do with the truth of God, but rather with the interpretive environment and the contemporary mythologies and ethics of the people with whom God communicates.

David Hay has a research interest in tracking religious trends in the UK and has written several books on the nature of contemporary belief.¹⁰⁴ His conclusions, from sociology and science, are that human beings are hard-wired for religious belief and that indeed (as Dawkins and others assert) this trait may confer survival advantages. In Hay's view, this 'evolutionary' aspect of human development does not necessarily invalidate the existence of God.

Hay has traced the history of our culture of scepticism in Europe. In particular he examines the contribution of written languages to the formation of western individualism and abstract thinking, as opposed to the arguably more 'instinctive' social and concrete knowledge of pre-literate societies.¹⁰⁵ He concludes that widespread literacy alters our cognitive approach to life by promoting the practice of thinking in abstract categories and of detachment from others. In turn this practice impairs our ability to understand ourselves as integrated and interdependent beings; it impairs our practice of prayer and meditation; and it impairs our sense of communion with God (or ultimate reality, whatever form that reality might take). Hay's recent book, *Why spirituality*, examines the impact of this abstract and individualistic thinking on economics and politics; and also surveys the results of neuropsychological experiments on meditative prayer practice, finding that there is no reason to assume that mystical experience is not 'real'. He concludes that the widespread scepticism about religion can be shown to have evolved culturally and also to have shaped culture; and the supposed superiority of the empirical scientific method is a philosophical assumption – just one that has become so much part of the furniture that we cannot see it any longer (it has become 'canalised' – see §1.5.3). Hay believes that the increased sense of global belonging that is now emerging (for example, in response to ecological and debt crises) will help us to regain a confidence in spirituality that we have lost in the West: 'Spirituality will regain its rightful place at the heart of our understanding of what it is to be a true humanist'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Hay & Nye, *The spirit of the child* (revised edn); Hay & Hunt, *Something there: the biology of the human spirit*; Hay, *Why spirituality is difficult for Westerners*.

¹⁰⁵ See in particular chap 3 of Hay, *Why spirituality*.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p 94.

2.1.2 The significant historical development of monotheism

The materialist-reductionist, abstract, individualistic ways of thinking which are now culturally dominant align themselves naturally with some aspects of Christian classical theism. The early development of the Christian faith took place in a world heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and culture, and the doctrines and creeds of the church inevitably bear the marks of this scholarship, for good and ill. The Judaeo-Christian worldview developed over many centuries of writing and reflection, and a number of particularly significant transitions occurred as it took shape from within the ancient world. Both Greek culture and the ANE tribal cultures against which Judaism and later Christianity were progressively defined were originally polytheistic in nature, which influenced profoundly the kind of God in which people believed.

Polytheism allowed a multiplicity of gods, existing 'outside' the world, frequently to intervene causally in human affairs – there was no 'problem' of divine agency as there is for us today. Each god had his or her own area of responsibility relating to human life. Often there would be an 'overall' god who was responsible for creation in some way.¹⁰⁷ Clayton points out that this view of a creator god should have led to philosophical questions about ultimacy, but since matter was held to be pre-existent in the ancient world such questions did not appear to arise (an example of ancient canalisation, perhaps).¹⁰⁸ The switch to belief in a single God would naturally alter this God's characteristics significantly: God would have all the power of the others and would not be limited by the others in the group; it would also be tricky to identify God's characteristic 'features' (because this God would not exist in necessary relation to anything); and there would be difficult questions about whether God also created matter *ex nihilo*.

In short, belief in a single God leads to a very different worldview. Clayton writes that the Hebrew authors of scripture realised what Yahweh represented and this was the cause of their frequent references to a 'jealous' god, which often seem strange to us from a Christian perspective. Furthermore, this shift took place gradually, so that Yahweh was initially described as the *God above gods* (henotheism); but finally as the *only God*, with unimaginable power, yet retaining the 'otherness' of the polytheistic gods that had been superseded.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ A helpful chapter can be found in Zagzebski, *Philosophy of religion*.

¹⁰⁸ Clayton, *God and contemporary science*, p 84.

¹⁰⁹ Alison, in *Undergoing God*, notes that the first commandment ('You shall have no other gods before me', from Exod 20:2,3 and Deut 5: 6,7) is a henotheistic claim, while true monotheism appears after the exile with Deutero-Isaiah: 'I am the Lord and there is no other' (Isa 45:18d). Alison notes that if there is only one God he is truly *beyond comparison* with anything, and defines himself out of nothing; but ironically, this strict Jewish monotheism served to *exclude by comparison* and ultimately 'victimise' theologically those who were not Jewish. See also Whitehead on the notion of 'one' in *Process*, p 21. A monotheistic metaphysics thus has implications for morality and anthropology.

Clayton¹¹⁰ suggests that this historical process towards monotheism led logically to the options either of classical theism or pantheism: and clearly pantheism was incompatible with the Bible, so classical theism, rooted deeply in the past, by default ruled our 'shape of God' for centuries (and continues to do so). Unintentionally, as a result, we can endow this 'principal' God with a subtle competitive and comparative nature, because that is how human 'principals' normally reach the top. For some thinkers this is a reason to avoid the loaded term 'person' for God. Stanley Rudman notes that while modern philosophers like the use of 'person' to describe God (because it is comprehensible), theologians today are cautious in handling the term, aware of its pitfalls: he says they often '...emphasise that God cannot be a person in the sense of one being amongst other beings'.¹¹¹ Rudman surveys the views of a variety of theologians on this subject and the overall message is one of caution. God is generally understood to have personal characteristics; yet God the Trinity is also a community of persons; and God is not quite like human persons. Rudman notes the need to hold onto the relational and transcendent dimensions of God's personhood:¹¹² humans also have these personal characteristics yet we understand that we are both like, and not like, God. (Interestingly, even Whitehead, who is concerned to identify a single reality, understands God to be 'more than' any other entity, as demonstrated by his description of God as the 'chief exemplification' of all metaphysical principles.¹¹³)

The idea of a singular powerful God is hugely attractive to humans, whose livelihoods depend inescapably upon competition for material resources on a limited planet, reflecting all that is most successful on Earth. Such a God 'makes sense' within our experience of life – especially in the kind of materialistic, post-Enlightenment culture that we have been thinking about. Scripture tells us that we bear the *imago dei*, and it is very difficult for men and women to discern when they are reading this image from God, and when they are projecting it back onto God¹¹⁴ – one of the many pitfalls of the interpretive process both then and now. Scripture also provided sufficient 'monarchical' metaphors to support this view of God for centuries, and indeed God is still alive and well in this form, to the exclusion of others, in many sectors of the church today.¹¹⁵ Some are satisfied simply to say that God, being God in the Anselmian sense,

¹¹⁰ Clayton, *ibid*, p 87.

¹¹¹ Rudman, *Concepts of person and Christian ethics*, p 163.

¹¹² *Ibid*, p 164ff.

¹¹³ Whitehead, *Process*, p 343.

¹¹⁴ Very many feminist theologians have explored this theme; an interesting recent discussion can be found in Bruteau's *The Holy Thursday revolution*, chap 2.

¹¹⁵ For example, Pannenberg observes '...the finitude and anthropomorphic character of the fundamental predicates of God, and then their derivation from merely man and nature have provided the lever which has toppled the traditional picture of God in the public eye. Today, the effects of this criticism have penetrated into Christian theology itself. In this case, in addition to the concept of the

is under no obligation to defend Godself,¹¹⁶ but to make this assertion surely does not attempt to address the issues of contemporary society satisfactorily: particularly with respect to suffering. Moltmann comments that death, suffering and mortality have been excluded from the divine being from the earliest philosophers until the present day precisely because we image God in a way that assuages our own insecurities.¹¹⁷ Does such an inert God really help when someone is experiencing failure, disability, dying, or in pain? How does this God relate to the processes of reality?

The same question resurfaces in each cultural shift. In *Cross-currents*, a survey of the science/faith dialogue over the centuries with a particular focus on English belief, author Colin Russell says of the scientific revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries: 'The dilemma posed by the success of the mechanical philosophy was, therefore, about the relation of God to his universe. How could nature be apparently self-sufficient and yet under God's control?'¹¹⁸ Russell identifies five responses in English thinking at that time: pantheism, deism, semi-deism, human instrumentalism, and radical Christian theism (this latter as exemplified by Wesley and the early evangelicals). Today this same question, in the UK at least, has led to a massive proliferation of spiritual alternatives and also to a significant group of agnostic and atheist positions, as a more literate and affluent population is unafraid to challenge the traditional teaching of the church in the light of lived experience. The cry of pain that is expressed as 'Why me?' is no longer rhetorical. It represents a profound existential question that can be broken down into a number of fundamental recurrent questions about the God-world relation.

2.1.3 Issues for classical apologetics when dealing with suffering

Some of the current apologetic difficulties with classical theism in terms of God's involvement with the world, and of especial relevance to the issues of suffering, can be briefly summarised as follows.¹¹⁹

Immutability. The classical theistic God is 'immortal, invisible, God only wise; in light inaccessible hid from our eyes...unresting, unchanging, and silent as light; nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might...' – but does God really care? It can be argued that such a picture

personality of God, what is involved is above all the idea of a transcendent being as such: theism has finitized God as a being alongside other beings'. (*Basic questions in theology*, vol II, p 234.)

¹¹⁶ See §1.4. The separatists take the view that science cannot be an appropriate vehicle with which to speak about God. There is also a devotional reticence to challenge God, arising from reflection upon such passages as Romans 9:20, 'But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?'

¹¹⁷ Moltmann, *The crucified God*, p 221.

¹¹⁸ Russell, *Cross-currents*, p 92.

¹¹⁹ Once again, it is helpful to remember that the classical 'omni' picture of God is an assumption about God, see Crisp, p 152ff. Our default understanding of 'power' and of what it is to be a divine person may need examination.

does not adequately reflect the progressive OT revelation of God; neither does God really look like the God incarnated and revealed in Jesus Christ.

Impassibility. This question is indicated in fn 96 of this thesis. If God is immutable then how can God suffer – since suffering must imply change? Suffering also suggests weakness and impairs God’s omnipotence. But if God does not suffer, then how can God understand our humanity, and what does that mean for the incarnation?

Dualistic thinking. God ‘out there’ encourages dualistic rather than holistic thinking – a Greek influence on the Fathers, leading to a conception of God as pure spirit and in ontological ‘opposition’ to the material world. In Christian circles there can be a tendency to denigrate the bodily and the material for this reason; and at times even to embrace suffering and asceticism in a perverse (rather than a healthy and necessary) manner.¹²⁰

Divine agency. Causality is a problem – if God ultimately determines everything in a causal manner, exactly how and why does God intervene in the world, which is classically perceived to be ontologically other? And surely such a God would be able to create a world without the sin and suffering of this one: in which case, if this world were perfect at the beginning, why should God need to intervene at all? What about miracles?

Responsibility for evil. This question relates to the previous one: if God is the ultimate source of everything and is omnipotent and omniscient, then it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that a good God is also responsible for evil.

Determinism. If God is omnipotent and omniscient in the classical way then it is difficult to understand how humanity’s freedom can be real; the outcome of our decisions must already be determined. There are serious related questions about God’s foreknowledge.

Many contemporary theologians employ a revised version of ‘hard’ classical theism – for example, one can distinguish between God’s impassibility and his immutability in addressing the issues of God’s involvement with suffering; or separate God’s essence and existence (God’s active from inner being); or the immanent and the economic Trinity (God’s central nature and God’s self-revelation in history), so that God’s interactions with the world involve genuine relationship and are not just some kind of sterile intervention.¹²¹ These approaches have particular validity in retaining the very clear difference between creator and created that is classically vital to maintain a good correspondence with the scriptural shape of God – in fact,

¹²⁰ Meaning that suffering can be viewed as ‘good’, or at least, ‘good for us’ and the enjoyment of the body has often been frowned upon (sex, eating, drinking, dancing *etc*). Such views are of course also dependent upon theological tradition and cultural patterns at the time.

¹²¹ See Cooper, *Panentheism*, for a survey; also the discussion in Fiddes, *Creative suffering*, chap 3.

this ontological issue is one of the main objections to process thinking and panentheism, which can be argued to blur the distinctions between God and creation and to place limitations upon God.¹²² There are others who believe that panentheistic (and process) insights currently address these questions more satisfactorily in a scientifically literate culture, without becoming heterodox. It is not necessary to dispense with a biblical or trinitarian basis in order to do this: examples of theologians who are committed to holding science and faith together include Moltmann, particularly in his Gifford series of lectures¹²³ (we should note that Moltmann does not base his arguments on process theology, although he is a theologian of the 20th century watershed); Paul Fiddes, especially his work on suffering; and Philip Clayton, who has written on the science/faith interface.

2.2 Some possibilities in process theology

Process thought is a complex product of the 20th century which grew out of reflection on the watershed changes in natural science, evolutionary science, theology, and philosophy (see the Introduction for an outline). The first comprehensive version of process thinking is usually attributed to A. N. Whitehead¹²⁴ (although he is part of a historical development of thought). Process thinking has been extended and applied in a variety of ways but is panentheistic¹²⁵ in nature, understanding God as the ultimate reality who also participates fully in the universe's ongoing and unconstrained development – one of Whitehead's best known proposals is that 'God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification'.¹²⁶ Process thinking has of course evolved in the light of the complex crisis of faith in western society that we have been discussing. The Holocaust and the more recent episodes of ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia have led to deep theological reflection in recent times on the nature of a God who could 'permit' such offences against humanity – although, as we have seen, western society's reservations

¹²² Typical Whiteheadian statements such as 'It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God' (*Process and reality*, p 348) are generally unacceptable to traditional theists. Arguments upholding revised classical pictures and opposing process/panentheistic alternatives can be found in Gunton's *Becoming and being*; in Cooper's *Panentheism* (containing a chapter entitled *Why I am not a panentheist*); and in Colwell's *Promise and presence*, particularly pp 22-25, where Colwell argues that the problem is actually the result of a poor understanding in the West of the trinity of God, leading to an overly monarchical stereotype.

¹²³ Published as *God in creation*.

¹²⁴ See particularly *Process and reality*.

¹²⁵ Cooper's *Panentheism* is a comprehensive survey of panentheistic influences from the Greek philosophers to the present day. Although Cooper is not personally persuaded by panentheism as an alternative to a revised classical theism, he gives a comprehensive account of major and minor participants in its development.

¹²⁶ Whitehead, *Process*, p 343.

about God's power actually has deeper roots, dating from the Enlightenment and even earlier. Nevertheless, in spite of suspicion about religion,¹²⁷ atheism remains a terrifying option for many people and an intellectual need for ultimate meaning prevails, which places a number of governing criteria on the nature of God: for example, he should be worth worshipping; he should be both good and ultimate; and he should make sense of our experience of reality.

David Pailin, a contemporary British process theologian, is of interest because he has engaged very personally with the reality of suffering in his book, *A gentle touch*.¹²⁸ This book is a theology of disability resulting from Pailin's pastoral care of the family of a severely affected boy named Alex. Pailin observes that in a classical scheme the convictions of faith and the demands of reason seem to make incompatible claims. The God of love, nurture and action (revealed particularly in Christ) cannot be easily harmonised with the traditional view of a God who is absolute, necessary, unchangeable, infinite, eternal, and impassible.¹²⁹ Pailin argues that theologians working with the traditional view of reality accept that God's nature cannot be contradictory and he helpfully categorises their responses into four types, which I summarise here:

- (1) that God is basically the unmoved mover of Aristotle, and reason is superior to faith;
- (2) that revelation takes priority over reason, but we must accept that our understanding of revelation is not value-free and may be wrong;
- (3) that the terms describing God are used loosely – which is confusing;
- (4) that we hold both reason and faith as true, and say that God is inexplicable to humanity.

The first alternative leaves us with no explanation for God's 'presence' or 'absence' in human affairs; the second is a postmodern position in which every man's religious truth is 'true for him', but does not deal with universals; the third is an issue of hermeneutics and homiletics; the fourth leaves God's goodness and integrity open to doubt. All four are inadequate to account robustly for suffering and evil.

¹²⁷ For example, a 2007 YouGov survey of 2437 British people claims that 42% think that religious belief is harmful, while only 17% believed religion was beneficial. Of the total group surveyed, 28% believed in God; 26% believed in 'something'; 9% were agnostic and 16% were atheists (see the report at <http://today.yougov.co.uk/sites/today.yougov.co.uk/files/YG-Archives-lif-dTel-Religion-041229.pdf>). At the hospice, few people were committed to an atheistic position, although the majority of these 'believers' did not know in what they believed. Clearly these patients were *in extremis* and therefore might never have seriously considered the transcendent aspects of life before. Pailin comments, however, that theism cannot be defended on the grounds that it is comforting! (Pailin, *God and the processes of reality*, chap 1).

¹²⁸ Pailin, *A gentle touch*; Pailin's process theology is communicated more rigorously in *God and the processes of reality* and *The anthropological character of theology*.

¹²⁹ See Pailin, *God and the processes of reality*, chap 2.

Some writers believe that process thought can offer a helpful way through this maze. A Whiteheadian version of process thought argues that reality (including God) is not static, but exists in process – *ie* it is dynamic. All entities are in relationship with all other entities, and all undergo change – there is an immediate predecessor and a successor for each actual state, which exists transiently and then decays. To illustrate, Pailin invites us to think of the continuation of ourselves in life, each as an ‘I’ (in context and relationship) that experiences, responds, and changes constantly, yet remains ‘I’. God is the pre-eminent example of such dynamic reality, and every tiny experience is held eternally in God’s being. This holding of all experience is Whitehead’s ‘objective immortality’, the way in which he gives eternal significance to all ‘bits’ of life. There is an ongoing debate about the adequacy of objective immortality to account for the felt human longing for eternal life in the light of the resurrection of Christ,¹³⁰ but for now it is sufficient to say that, at a philosophical level, process thought deals with (a) the eternal significance of all aspects of creation, including human lives, and (b) the presence of evil, which exists as part of a free reality within Godself, rather than being perceived as an unexplained intrusion into a good creation.

2.2.1 Process thought and apologetic issues relevant to suffering

Process thinking in its various forms has several helpful features that can help to address the logical difficulties described in §2.1.3 around the nature of the God–world interaction. Process thought is most helpfully viewed as a useful working model in the current context, rather than as a comprehensive ultimate explanation. Clayton, for example, acknowledges that there is yet work to be done on how far one can allow God to be affected by the world without sacrificing God’s sovereignty; yet affirms the possibilities of panentheistic process thinking for describing the God–world relationship.¹³¹

2.2.1(a) The question of intervention

Interpretations which maintain a strict difference between God and the world will struggle with the task of explaining God’s intervention. How can God bridge this ontological otherness to be active in creation as the biblical record suggests; and how can God’s apparent interventions be understood as just when there are so many occasions when God does not seem to intervene? In other words, the classical ‘otherness’ of God also leaves God open to being held ultimately responsible for evil.

¹³⁰ See Griffin’s review of Suchocki’s *The end of evil* in *Process Studies*, 1989, 18(1), 57-69. In *The end of evil*, Suchocki argues that God will transform evil, rather than that he is powerless to prevent it.

¹³¹ Clayton, *God and contemporary science*, p 95.

Process-adapted thinking can retain the idea that God is necessary being, and the ultimate ground of creation. The process God is panentheistic, which requires that all creation is held in God in some way: God is not ‘outside’, although neither is God defined and therefore limited by creation. To those who argue that this imposes a limitation on God (*ie* that creation is *necessary* for God), Paul Fiddes responds that for us to discuss how the God–world relationship might be ‘otherwise’ does not make any sense.¹³² By thinking of ‘otherwise’ we raise the spectre of a capriciousness in God that does not cohere with God’s nature as revealed by scripture and in Christ as self-giving and ultimate love, because we then hold the possibility that God *might not* love the world, or *might not* have created it/continue to hold it in creation. (It is also true that ‘otherwise’ means that we are no longer dealing with the processes of reality, since we have begun to talk about some other creation which we do not inhabit, and it is fair to say that if God created time and space, then to speak of ‘before’ or ‘outside’ creation is difficult if not impossible conceptually.) Moltmann¹³³ comments that if we view nature as God’s creation (and his view of creation is panentheistic), then nature and natural law must be contingent (as opposed to necessarily existent), since nature cannot be deduced from the idea of God, only observed.¹³⁴ Contingent, too, is the rational process by which we observe nature! We cannot escape these limitations to our subjectivity. Very recent research suggests that there may be other universes in which the natural laws of physics are different – although it is simplistic to jump to the conclusion that this proves some version of the anthropic principle, it may support the argument that we cannot assume that we are necessarily existent! Clayton takes the view that even if the conceptual difficulties with a God who can be affected by God’s own creation are sustained, they do not outweigh the biblical testimony to a God who is intimately involved with all that God has made.¹³⁵

Fiddes further notes that we really do have to engage with the worldview of *today*: that many of the theological objections to natural theology relate to scientific worldviews that have actually been superseded, although they might still influence the popular understanding of reality.¹³⁶ Today we conceive of reality in terms of community, network, relationship, symbiosis, cooperation, organic structure and change (Moltmann’s ‘relational metaphysics’¹³⁷). The ‘designer’ of such a community or ongoing project must necessarily work from *within* it

¹³² Fiddes, *Creative suffering*, pp 115-123.

¹³³ Moltmann argues that creation *ex nihilo* demands that God ‘withdraws himself’ in order to create. Creation then involves both self-differentiation and self-identification on God’s part, see *God in creation*, p 15. Moltmann, we note again, is not a process theologian but his theology is surely influenced by such developments in 20th century thinking.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p 38.

¹³⁵ Clayton, *God and contemporary science*, p 93.

¹³⁶ Fiddes, *Creative suffering*, p 39. This problem of the public understanding of science is the issue with which Snow first did battle.

¹³⁷ Moltmann, *God in creation*, p 50.

and *alongside* it as it develops, not stand 'outside' the finished article.¹³⁸ This approach is profoundly different from the classical insight into creative possibilities and the nature of God's intervention. Of course, we cannot prove or read God adequately out of the world as we see it, says Fiddes, but the traditional objection to natural theology (that it produced the god of the philosophers and not the God of the cross) is no longer valid, and we *can* see the image of the crucified God in the world. Pailin says that we have no choice but to use this way of thinking about God and reality: anthropomorphisation is the only experience truly available to us and it need not be demeaning to the divine, since we have to interpret the reality we inhabit, and which ultimately bears the image of God.¹³⁹

2.2.1 (b) The question of foreknowledge

Are our lives laid out in advance before God? If so, what does it mean for the nature of our choices and our freedom? The possibility of foreknowledge presents enormous difficulties for classical theism, particularly over the matter of suffering: why would a good, omnipotent and loving God observe and foresee God's creatures struggling through life without taking action?

To approach this question from non-classical perspectives opens up some alternative avenues of explanation, which may not be fully satisfactory in terms of a biblical faith¹⁴⁰ but are nonetheless useful in helping us to think creatively about the relationship between God and the world. In principle God (on the Anselmian definition of God) knows everything, but logically God can only know what is to be known: there is no 'defect' in God because God does not 'know' the things that do not happen. Pailin argues that this problem lies with our concept of omniscience, and is not a limitation of God. Future possibilities are not knowable until they actually happen – the future is not symmetrical with the past. Whitehead speaks in terms of the totality of 'potential' and 'actual' events available to God. He describes God's nature as 'dipolar', possessing a primordial and a consequent aspect nature. God as primordial is, he says, 'the unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute wealth of potentiality. In this aspect, he is not *before* all creation, but *with* all creation'. God is also 'consequent' (he is the beginning and the end,¹⁴¹ but we should take care not to equate these ideas directly with past and future). God is in ongoing dynamic and salvific relationship with creation. God 'constantly

¹³⁸ One's view of the state of creation is important: although most Christians would in theory hold to some form of inaugurated eschatology, in practice there is a tendency to see the creative act as 'over' in Genesis, when God pronounced the work 'good'. Moltmann's division of creation into three 'types' (beginning, history and endtimes) is helpful here (*God in creation*, p 55). Interestingly, these types can also be identified in the visions of the relatively uneducated (by her own claim) English mystic Julian of Norwich, as if there were an inherent integrity about this way of seeing creation.

¹³⁹ Pailin, *God and the processes*, p 26.

¹⁴⁰ For example, what is the purpose of prayer as normally practised? But see Ellis, *Answering God*, for a process influenced examination of prayer.

¹⁴¹ Whitehead, *Process*, p 345.

saves the world as it passes into the immediacy of his own life', and 'God's rôle is not the combat of productive force with productive force, or destructive force with destructive force; it lies in the patient operation of the overpowering rationality of his conceptual harmonization. He does not create the world, he saves it: or, more accurately, he is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness'.¹⁴² This whole picture is one of moving forward, absorbing and adjusting ('judging') events and experiences to form an ultimate harmony. There is no sense in which this picture of God and the world is static, determined, closed, or separate. Pannenberg even describes God as 'the power of the future', which is 'being itself',¹⁴³ and further believes that humans are free only because they have a future and can go beyond their present existence: so being a person means having a future.¹⁴⁴ This logically implies that there is indeterminacy about the future, which we can interpret as blessing or bane.

Sometimes the question of foreknowledge is accommodated by an argument from a classical position that God's omniscience and foreknowledge is about God's ability to know all things contemporaneously.¹⁴⁵ The argument is that since all possible places can coexist simultaneously for us, so also can all possible times coexist simultaneously for God. Pailin, Fiddes and Clayton (and implicitly Moltmann, who discusses the nature of time as a network of processes¹⁴⁶) all argue that contemporaneity is not persuasive as a solution, since it invalidates the meaning of relationship, which involves being affected by the other dynamically over time. Without this time constraint, God's perception of our suffering is not a truly experienced understanding, since God can only observe it, not participate fully in it as we do. Thus the question of God's foreknowledge is very important for a discussion of suffering, for a large component of our pain is not to know whether or when our suffering will end.

Pantheism describes a reality in which nothing can occur outside the divine experience and response. Thus pantheism rejects the possibility that God chooses to respond sometimes or never responds at all, in favour of the argument that God *always* responds, and is always involved, having freely chosen to be a God who creates and loves. Pantheism also rejects the argument that we are therefore unfree, because God is understood therein as a responsive and relational ultimate being, not as a dictator, manager, or organiser. The future is thus

¹⁴² Whitehead, *Process*, p 346.

¹⁴³ Pannenberg, *Basic questions in theology*, vol II, p 242.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p 245.

¹⁴⁵ See, for example, Colwell, *Actuality and provisionality*; Cooper, *Pantheism*, p 343.

¹⁴⁶ Moltmann, *God in creation*, chap 5. Moltmann discusses the biblical insight that the present is actually defined by the messianic future, not determined by the historical past. He talks (pp 114-117) of 'God's time' – that God withdraws his eternity into himself to make time for creation (and presumably to share in its experience). See also p 129, in which Moltmann relates past, present and future.

genuinely open, as in the sense of Pannenberg's argument above, and the eternal divine holding provides a salvific and transformational dimension to our experience that gives significance to all of our lives, good and bad, if we want to appropriate it. This divine dimension is, however, not forced upon us since God has the nature of love and not of oppression. Whitehead speaks rather of the 'persuasive' influence of God, and of the divine 'lure', which we might want to call the work of the Holy Spirit.

History is not therefore a journey in which God holds our hands and leads us to a predetermined outcome, but rather has a purpose perceived in the richness of human experience itself and in the ultimacy of God, as the final 'holder' of all experience. An appropriate human reaction to life is not to try first to discover and then to conform to what God 'wants', or to what other people want, but to find a creative and compassionate response to the events of existence. This creativity, being ultimately held and valued in God, enriches both human and divine experience and thus confers significance on all of life's events. This view of life experience is especially valuable for those who suffer, and the relating of the human story to the divine in the search for meaning is a vital step in the narrative interpretation of suffering, as I will examine in Chapters 5 and 6.

2.2.1 (c) The question of omnipotence

God's power is ultimate, but cannot be identified with the demonstrations of force that we normally associate with the word 'power'. God is Godself by choosing to be the self-giving God in responsive relationship. God's power to be Godself (the I AM of scripture) is without limit, and has a dynamic quality because it is exercised as a response to the creation in love. Our view of power tends to be coercive and about the imposition of will, and so, because we do not recognise a persuasive self-giving as power, we then question God's existence. Indeed Pannenberg argues (with others) that God as the ground of all reality is hidden from us and cannot be reified.¹⁴⁷ So God's difference from us in terms of God's unlimited capacity for self-giving love rather than force means that we cannot easily understand God's power, even though it underpins reality itself. We do not 'see' it – except in the revelation of God in Christ, who chose a way of vulnerability that for Christians should be a normative belief. One of Whitehead's most famous phrases arises in his discussion of the relationship between God and the world: 'there is, however, in the Galilean origin of Christianity yet another suggestion which does not...emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover.

¹⁴⁷ Pannenberg, *Basic questions in theology*, vol II, chap 8.

It dwells on the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love...Love neither rules, nor is unmoved...'.¹⁴⁸

This view of God's power forms the basis of the discussion of suffering in §2.3 and in later chapters in this thesis. Incredibly it also lays the foundation for making sense of our suffering. Pannenberg says, quoting Bloch, "Only in relation to the 'hidden God' [*Deus absconditus*] is the *problem* of what is at stake in the legitimate mystery of the 'hidden man' [*homo absconditus*] kept open." The primacy of the future, and therewith of the 'hidden God' who is its ground, is necessary in order that man's humanity be protected against trivialization and continue to be summoned to its future possibilities'.¹⁴⁹ In later chapters I shall look at the need to find meaning in suffering and how process and narrative thought can suggest some 'shapes' for locating this meaning.

2.2.1 (d) The question of change in God

God must be worthy of worship. Traditionally theologians equated this requirement with the need for God to be 'perfect' and immutable (and sometimes also impassible, although I have already noted the distinction between immutability and impassibility). The logic of immutability is that if God changes then either God was not perfect before, or is not perfect after, the change: either way, God's perfection is compromised. Anselm's concept of God as 'that than which no greater can be conceived of' is prone to misinterpretation because of our assumptions about the nature of power and perfection (see discussion in §2.2.1 (c) above); but in fact Anselm's statement is a really good one, especially if we use Forrest's suggestion¹⁵⁰ that 'greater' is rendered 'properly more awe-inspiring', which escapes the association with forceful and potentially abusive power.

This brief discussion helps us to see that perfection need not be defined as a 'maximum' or 'completion'. Perfection can mean that the divine is irreducibly divine even if God changes in responsive relationship with creatures. God can become 'more' Godself in terms of increasing God's experiences, novelty, and creativity, without becoming 'less' Godself.¹⁵¹ God can *supersede* previous divine states and so become 'more' God, but can never *surpass* a previous divine state because both states are perfect (this divine process is ontologically unlike human

¹⁴⁸ Whitehead, *Process and reality*, p 343.

¹⁴⁹ Pannenberg, *Basic questions* vol II, p 241.

¹⁵⁰ Forrest, p 153 of Crisp (ed), *Reader*.

¹⁵¹ In a very crude analogy, I am not *less myself* when younger or *more myself* when older: I am always fully myself, but life delivers a broader canvas for the experiencing of self as time goes on. However, I may become more moral, more mature *etc*, things for which one broadly hopes in the lifelong process of sanctification, which is ontologically quite unlike the 'more' of Godself.

personal experience).¹⁵² Indeed, if God is God in responsive relationship with creatures, then change appropriate to this kind of divinity can be argued to be a logical necessity. God can continue to respond in perfect love and justice to us in all our changing circumstances, being in Godself always perfect yet far from superimposably 'the same'.¹⁵³ Belief in an unchanging God might also exalt our human view of the (logically unchangeable) past and thereby diminish the (open) future of possibilities, and our ground for hope. Possibly this is a source of some of the fear which surrounds death.

Can we say that such change is of a passible nature only and so retain the immutability of God? This distinction within the nature of God feels rather artificial and indeed is unnecessary in a process/panentheistic model. In fact, 'God is not simply passible: God is pre-eminently so'.¹⁵⁴ This insight is vital if we are to penetrate the meaning of suffering.

2.2.1 (e) The question of ultimacy

Panentheistic worldviews understand that God cannot be considered coherently *without* the world: the existence of *this* world necessarily prompts our reflection upon God. The question may be asked whether, in panentheism, God is still ontologically ultimate, or whether the necessity to create limits God and makes some principle of creativity the ultimate.¹⁵⁵ In process thinking, which views reality as a complex network of myriad series of small changes, God is active among the factors which determine each miniscule event, without dictating the outcome.¹⁵⁶ This activity, which is persuasive in character, is Whitehead's divine 'lure' (others think of it as a masked supercausality or continual self-extension of the divine: maybe to refer to 'the work of the Spirit' accommodates them all). God's involvement is, however, a real influence, just as we can allow God to influence our personal decisions in life – or not. This process philosophy allows real alternatives to classical models to emerge, rather than thinking of everything in terms of God's planning and making.¹⁵⁷ It allows for both natural and moral evil at different levels without impugning God's goodness, and is delightfully consonant with the theory of evolution. It also allows us to address the occurrence of 'bad' things in life

¹⁵² Pailin, *God and the processes*, chap 6.

¹⁵³ Ricoeur discusses the two categories of '*ipse*' and '*idem*' identity in *Oneself as another*, pp 2-3. *Idem* identity is about permanence over time or 'sameness', while *ipse* identity does NOT imply an unchanging core of the personality and can be thought of as 'selfhood', internally consistent but not immune to change.

¹⁵⁴ Pailin, *ibid*, p 64 (quoting Whitehead).

¹⁵⁵ Such a principle sounds a bit like a Theory of Everything.

¹⁵⁶ Pailin notes Hartshorne's view that God influences everything but determines nothing; and Whitehead's comment that persuasion is 'the divine method of world control'. Pailin, *ibid*, chap 9.

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, Pailin, *ibid*, p 153. This view is clearly not an easy one for classical theists to hold but it does honour both God's sovereignty and creation's freedom.

without seeing God as either weak or culpable, which is helpful for a pastoral theology of suffering.

2.2.1(f) The question of incarnation and salvation

Process theology is often accused of being inadequate to account for the particularities of God's self-revelation, because it is primarily an understanding of God's influence upon every event. Criticisms understandably focus upon the competence of process thinking to deal with the key Christian beliefs in the incarnation and resurrection of Christ.¹⁵⁸ Pailin challenges us to take a different view of God's activity and relationship with persons. He understands the self as existing in process and the worth of the self is then determined by its relationship with God, with all experiences of that personal self realising their ultimate value in Godself. Jesus Christ shows us a concrete example of divine reality, to which we can relate in order to understand the nature of salvation – which is about personal value and worth, understood as love. Maximum creativity is achieved by maximising personal relationships, and so we can understand 'heaven' (the experience of the ultimate) as being about maximum *agape*.¹⁵⁹

The theologian James Alison, who is interested in issues around diversity from a Girardian perspective, puts it like this: '[Jesus] went to his death in order to create the possibility that we might follow him in forging stories of a rich diversity which would be the fulfilment of creation. That is to say, we saw how Jesus inaugurated a diverse visible practice which was to become the constant and free re-creation of his story by us. Another way to describe what Jesus was doing is to say that he was bringing in the kingdom, and yet a third way is to say that he was founding the church'.¹⁶⁰ This way of life is about creative openness to God's lure, not a prescriptive closing-off of possibilities. Understanding Jesus as a pattern for personhood is an orthodox exercise.

In this section I have indicated the usefulness of process thinking as an underpinning of a dynamic view of the person understood as being in *imago dei*. We often fail to recognise how much we are influenced by the static categories of Greek philosophy and therefore just how radical the process challenge is. Pailin describes western metaphysics as 'immunised' against change by Greek thought.¹⁶¹ To deal with suffering requires a breaking open of this stasis.

¹⁵⁸ Although perhaps we could think in terms of an unlimited openness to God's lure in Christ.

¹⁵⁹ Haught also assumes this view of heaven/ultimacy in *God after Darwin*, as does Bruteau in *The Holy Thursday revolution* and *The grand option*.

¹⁶⁰ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p77. Other books by Alison include *Faith beyond resentment* and *On being liked*. Girard's key text is *The scapegoat*, but other books include *I saw Satan fall like lightning*, *Things hidden since the foundation of the world*, and *Violence and the sacred*.

¹⁶¹ Pailin, *God and the processes*, p 50.

2.3 The power of suffering

In the light of this overview we can begin to see that the deep questions about the nature of suffering and dying can be understood at one level as an expression of existential anguish at the failure of a pathological mechanistic Enlightenment worldview (process thought is also a product of the Enlightenment, but without the tendencies to reductionism that characterise so much of our culture). It may be intellectually satisfying to explain the origin of the universe in terms of physics, but the resulting inescapable conclusion that we are here only by chance and that there is no ultimate purpose in human life is simply unbearable for most people.¹⁶² The argument of this thesis so far has been to examine the pastoral effect of such reductionist conclusions and then to suggest alternative ways of describing reality (for example, process philosophy) that can (a) hold the work of science and of theology together and (b) provide a locus for the experience of suffering. In the rest of this chapter I will review the engagement of some key theologians with suffering to provide foundational material for developing a narrative response to the pastoral problem outlined at the beginning of Chapter 1.

When science and medicine – which are often, *but not necessarily*, predicated upon a worldview without an overt spiritual dimension – fail, then a crisis is triggered which abandons the experience of ‘bad things’ ***perceived to be without meaning***.¹⁶³ Viktor Frankl,¹⁶⁴ after his experience as an imprisoned Jewish psychologist during the Holocaust, reflected that it is not suffering that destroys a person: indeed, it was amply demonstrated in the camps that people could endure terrible suffering. What destroys a person is suffering without meaning.

Dying (in the absence of a spiritual framework¹⁶⁵) represents a failure of medicine in a materialistic culture, and therefore struggles with meaning. The pastoral care of those who are

¹⁶² On 9 September 2010, Stephen Hawking released *The grand design*, the successor book to *A brief history of time*, concluding that religious reference to a creator is not necessary: physics can do the job of spontaneous creation. He also argued in interviews that philosophy is not keeping up with science and is failing as a rigorous logical discipline. In response, we can still make a fair case that the scientific worldview, however successful, is not the only way of describing reality. In a discussion preceding the book launch on Radio 4’s *Today* programme for 7 September, the ex-Director of the Royal Institution, Baroness Susan Greenfield, offered the view that it was unwise to dismiss other dimensions to scientific study and cited aspects of her neurological research in which such ideas had been helpful, and also that science needed to be placed in a wider academic context. Philosopher Prof. A. C. Grayling, in the same debate, argued that in the history of humankind religion was the first engagement with mystery of life, followed by philosophy; but now science has replaced both as an ultimate explanation. Philosophy still has work to do in his opinion.

¹⁶³ I explore the issues of addressing spiritual need from a mechanistic perspective in S. Nelson, *Medical rites*.

¹⁶⁴ Frankl, *Man’s search for meaning*.

¹⁶⁵ It is arguable that such a thing is not possible, since all human beings are spiritual even if not religious. However, spirituality is not well understood, or easily discussed in our culture – and particularly not in the hospital setting, which is highly medicalised, and focused on cure rather than palliation.

suffering and dying has to work in this conceptual space, which is defined by intense suffering of body, mind and spirit – Saunders’ total pain, which requires a more holistic approach than analgesia alone. Perhaps it is suffering itself that can provide the key to meaning – and here there are some rich resources in the writings and insights of the mystics, human ‘experts’ in transcendence. To quote Meister Eckhart, ‘The fastest beast that will carry you to your perfection is suffering, for no one will enjoy more eternal sweetness than those who endure with Christ in the greatest bitterness...whichever mortal crawls here in the deepest abasement, his spirit will fly up into highest realms of the divinity, for love brings sorrow, and sorrow brings love’.¹⁶⁶ Evelyn Underhill echoes this train of thought: ‘The only victories worth having in any department of life must be won on Calvary’.¹⁶⁷ Are they (and others) right? I will argue that they are, and that suffering has a key ontological function in the project of being a human being.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 is a passionate rhetorical passage dealing with the countercultural characteristics of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps nowhere in scripture are the economics of grace so concisely elaborated: that the values of wealth, success, knowledge and fame, which are so attractive to human beings, are of little ultimate significance; and that the cross of Jesus Christ, which would normally signify indignity and suffering, is a mysterious yet hugely powerful metaphor for the true nature of reality. It is the love that can be crucified and find fulfilment in crucifixion, becoming love of the enemy and showing that suffering love is stronger than hatred.¹⁶⁸ The Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori draws our attention to this hiddenness of God in suffering, when he notes that we are unable to believe in the pain of God (in which he argues that God’s love is rooted) by rational philosophical deduction: it has to be revealed to us, because it is so comprehensively NOT what we would think.¹⁶⁹

It is this paradox about the very nature of God that it is so difficult to communicate within a mechanistic worldview. Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹⁷⁰ wrote that God was ‘weak and powerless in the world’, and our natural inclination (though not Bonhoeffer’s intention) is to interpret this as meaning that God could ‘do nothing’ about such evil as that perpetrated by the Nazis. Rather, God’s ‘weakness’ is that power of 1 Corinthians 1: 18-31 or Philippians 2: 5-11 – an ‘identifying from within’, rather than an ‘observing from without’. Even when the expectations of mechanistic culture have been destroyed – for example, when medicine cannot postpone

¹⁶⁶ Eckhart, *The essential sermons*, Treatise D: *On detachment*, p 294.

¹⁶⁷ Underhill, *The school of charity*, p 60.

¹⁶⁸ Moltmann, *The crucified God*, p 257.

¹⁶⁹ Kitamori, *Theology of the pain of God* (5th edn), p 25. We have already mentioned Pannenberg’s comments on the hiddenness of God as the ground of reality.

¹⁷⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and papers from prison*, pp 360-361.

death or disability any longer – there is still often a human resistance to hearing the transcendent hope expressed in these terms of material ‘failure’. In practice, the friends and relatives of a dying person often struggle more with the suggestion that meaning lies in the cross than the patient him/herself. (Possibly this is because of the process of decathexis, in which the dying person’s focus is progressively limited by weakness and ultimately becomes a welcome to death. This perspective is simply unavailable to someone still very much alive.) The experience of Christ on the cross as normative and meaningful in suffering is certainly not obvious to all. One terminal patient’s brother commented: ‘If he [God] knows what it’s like, then why doesn’t he put a stop to it?’ In short, the suffering that we want to avoid is actually the key to ultimate meaning in the Christian story, and if this connection can be made successfully, then hope may be able to enter the suffering process – but this is a difficult task in our conceptual climate.

2.3.1 *Suffering and the cross*

Kitamori suggests that although every person experiences pain, only believers are able to understand that their own pain symbolises (and has meaning in its testimony to) the pain of God. For those without faith, the pain is ‘unrecognisable’. In other words, it has no apparent significance or meaning and seems wasteful of life, and simply reinforces the person’s alienation from God.¹⁷¹ This dynamic – of seeing pain in God and then recognising the meaning of our own pain as a symbol of ultimate reality – is particularly interesting and will be explored in Chapters 5 and 6 when Ricoeur’s narrative theory is used to examine the significance of suffering. Experience with hospice patients would suggest more seriously still that even Christian believers struggle in today’s pervasively antireligious culture to hold onto their convictions that suffering is not a vain experience. If we examine this difficulty more closely, it seems to be a question formed in the context of a reductionist worldview about the logical validity of extending God’s particular ‘experience’ in Christ to the universal stage of personal and world suffering (bluntly, what has the death of Jesus of Nazareth, 2000 years ago, to do with me today?).¹⁷² This question will also be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 with regard to Ricoeur’s narrative theory.

2.3.1(a) The crucifixion and the Trinity

I have argued that it is vital to address the classical material/spiritual dualism if we are to try to establish God’s real involvement with – and culpability for – a suffering world. Since Christians

¹⁷¹ Kitamori, *ibid*, p 62.

¹⁷² The issue for non-believers is epistemological and forms some of the material of Chapter 1 of this thesis.

believe in an trinitarian God and an incarnated Christ as foundational doctrines , a key question centres on how the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth is incorporated into the experience of the Trinity. Was it ‘just’ an experience of the temporally human Jesus? How were the Father and the Spirit involved at Calvary? What does Calvary mean for the second person of the Trinity in eternity? Helpful explorations of aspects of these questions with respect to the matter of suffering can be found in Fiddes, Kitamori and Moltmann.

Paul Fiddes¹⁷³ discusses the way in which classical theology shrank from the implications of allowing God to be affected by others. However, if God was ‘in Christ’, then God must have suffered; and, given the centrality of the cross for Christian belief and the way in which the crucifixion (and resurrection) dominates the NT witnesses, then that suffering must be significant for us. Theologians in the classical tradition have sometimes distinguished the economic from the immanent Trinity in an attempt to speak of the worldly suffering of God while retaining God’s essential impassibility without contradiction. Contemporary theologians of many persuasions, on the other hand, tend towards the belief that the cross shows us something of the eternal nature of God, not that it was somehow a ‘strange’ experience for him.¹⁷⁴

Fiddes¹⁷⁵ rejects any kind of separation of nature or personality within God and affirms the possibility of God’s suffering in God’s inner essence while remaining the transcendent and self-existent creator. God’s suffering cannot be just an omniscient sensitivity to our pain, says Fiddes, but pain must truly disturb God.¹⁷⁶ While adopting some process insights into the nature of the God–world relationship, Fiddes develops (in preference to the process dipolar models of God) a solidly trinitarian personal analogy for God: the community within the Trinity (the ‘event of relationships’¹⁷⁷) is the ground of God’s desire for communion with the creation. The Trinity is thus an adequate explanation of God’s transcendence and God’s ability to suffer, by being both *other than* and *inclusive of* the world (a panentheistic view). The cross signifies the experience of desolation at the very heart of the Trinity.

Kazoh Kitamori¹⁷⁸ argues that if we preach Christ crucified then we must accept a God who suffers. God’s pain is at the root of God’s love, because God suffers when embracing those who should not be embraced – in other words, God suffers in the forgiveness of sin; suffers

¹⁷³ Fiddes, *Creative suffering*, chap 2.

¹⁷⁴ See Fiddes, *Participating in God*, chap 5.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, chap 5.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p 102.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p 140.

¹⁷⁸ Kitamori, *Theology of the pain of God*, p 23.

through God's grace. This constant love comprises God's immutability¹⁷⁹ – God continues to love God's creatures perfectly in spite of betrayal, which is Kitamori's first location of pain within the Trinity. The cross is thus the place where wrath and love meet. Jesus reveals the loving character of God and because of this revelation he is put to death. The cross displays the eternal nature of God at the heart of the Trinity, and the pain of the cross is real pain. Kitamori urges us to remember that the Father begets the Son, but this is secondary to the fact that the Father 'causes' the Son to die: and here is the second location of the pain within the Trinity, which in summary has two components – the love of the unlovable, and the death of the Son.

Jürgen Moltmann argues in *The crucified God* that the 'controversy' between a purely theistic metaphysics on one hand, and the story of God in scripture on the other, must lead to the conclusion that 'the cross is "evacuated" of deity',¹⁸⁰ since the philosophical God cannot be identified with suffering or death and remain God. Suffering is the point at which the difference between the God revealed in Jesus Christ and the 'God of the philosophers' becomes irreconcilable, and is exactly what we observe in the pastoral setting. Interestingly, Moltmann quotes Whitehead several times in his key chapter, *The crucified God*, in his book of the same name.

Furthermore, Moltmann identifies the doctrine of the Trinity as the primary characteristic of the Christian faith, and insists that we cannot begin to understand the cross in a non-trinitarian way.¹⁸¹ He interprets the death of Christ not through his divine-human nature but as a relational event in which the persons of the Trinity define themselves by their relationship. The Spirit proceeds from the event of suffering love – *suffering* love – between Father and Son.¹⁸² The abandonment of the cross involves both the Father and Son. The Father suffers the infinite grief of love at the Son's death. In the cross the Son becomes Fatherless and the Father becomes Sonless – both are forms of the most terrible suffering we can know, but they are not identical: the Father does not die, and the persons of Trinity do not collapse into three identical beings. It is also important to understand the unity of will between Father and Son, in that the Son delivers himself up to die. The events of the cross can be conceived only in trinitarian terms, and it is where the most profound separation of Father and Son also

¹⁷⁹ Ricoeur discusses the dialectic between *idem* and *ipse* identity in *Oneself as another*, p 18. The constant lovingness of God towards God's mutable creatures illustrates the two kinds of identity working in harmony.

¹⁸⁰ Moltmann, *The crucified God*, p 221.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, especially §6.5: *Trinitarian theology of the cross*, p 243.

¹⁸² In the context of suffering Underhill notes in her comments on the creed that the Paraclete of John's gospel is the one who stands alongside us to give support, and who 'sweetens' suffering by love. Underhill, *Charity*, pp 80-82.

constitutes their greatest unity; it is where God died and yet did not die, and it is thus the place of hope.

2.3.1 (b) The historical cross and universal suffering

‘What difference does Jesus make?’ is a question asked by many hospice patients and families, because our culture does not easily allow us meaningfully to appropriate and universalise the experience of another. How can the particular events of Calvary have meaning for someone dying in the 21st century?

The ‘scandal of particularity’ is another aspect of the difficulty of attempting to communicate the transcendent within a vestigial mechanistic worldview. Postmodernism presents complex possibilities here. On the one hand, the characteristic postmodern rejection of authority and of global values makes it hard to understand the process of identification with a ‘hero’ or role model – although, in typical postmodern fashion, celebrities flourish! (but normally only when they are, or have been, successful). Ironically, this anti-universal culture is also the culture in which themed ‘self-help’ groups flourish as a therapeutic tool.¹⁸³ On the other hand, the particular is the locus of postmodern interpretation (in other words, there is a tendency to validate one’s own experience in terms of ‘this explanation is true *for me*’), so the process of ‘appropriating’ the work of Christ for oneself might not be stigmatised as it might have been in modernism. Nevertheless, as we have seen in §1.1, the cultural context is complex and the influence of mechanistic thought is still pervasive.

Fiddes claims that there is no difficulty with speaking coherently about a God who suffers yet remains God, and who suffers particularly in Christ yet universally with us. Without becoming theologically complex we can see that the incarnation provides a picture or metaphor of the particular suffering of God (in Christ) within the universal suffering of the world, and faith encourages us to accept this as normative for all people and for all time.¹⁸⁴ However, faith continues to seek understanding! Further, if God suffers universally then the cross cannot be a ‘new experience’: God must eternally be suffering love (the lamb slain from the foundation of the world of Revelation 13:8). Some theologians have addressed this dilemma by recourse to theories either of timelessness or of contemporaneous experience in God, because they are rightly concerned to avoid any suggestion of limitation or determinism in God. However, those

¹⁸³ Bereavement groups, which are often (though not always) convened in hospices by non-religious professionals rather than *via* chaplaincies, often take this form. Bereaved people at such groups share their experiences either in a forum or informally, and sometimes there will be separate groups of ‘newly bereaved’ and ‘later bereaved’, since the experience of loss changes with time.

¹⁸⁴ Underhill expresses it thus: ‘...what theology means by the Incarnation [is] the eternal Charity of God finding utterance within His creation, and making of the common material of our earthly existence a revelation of His nature and so of the real nature of man’. Underhill, *Charity*, p 26.

making use, either explicitly or implicitly, of process insights are generally not persuaded by such arguments. Fiddes, Clayton, Moltmann, and Pailin, for example, all believe that a God who is outside time cannot truly identify with our suffering or even engage in real relationships, since neither suffering nor relationship can be undergone without development in and dependence upon time. This position does not, however, necessarily imply that God is limited or determined by time, other than by God's own free decision (this will be discussed further in §2.3.1(c)).

Moltmann argues that the cross can only heal the world if God's experience holds all death and suffering as well as joy and salvation. 'The "bifurcation" in God must contain the whole uproar of history within itself. Men must be able to recognize rejection, the curse and final nothingness in it'. He continues: 'All human history...is taken up into this "history of God"...and integrated into the future of the "history of God"'.¹⁸⁵ Moltmann continues by discussing the way in which God allows Godself to be 'forced out', meaning that in unconditional love God accepts the contradiction of men and heals it. The Spirit draws believers into this experience of the Trinity, which is no closed group in heaven but 'an eschatological process open for men on earth'.¹⁸⁶

Kitamori discusses our use of symbol in our application of the cross to our own suffering and pain.¹⁸⁷ To human beings, normally the worst imaginable pain is the loss of a child; and the idea that a parent might permit or cause the death of the child is so far against nature that it is taboo in most societies. Thus the 'symbol' and 'story' chosen by God to reveal God's unconditional love for us is that of the Father-Son relationship of the cross. In this story we can find meaning and healing – but it is of course inaccessible to unbelievers. We must be careful not to suffer in vain, says Kitamori in effect, since our pain should 'serve' (*ie* be revelatory of) the pain of God in order to be meaningful.

Interestingly, Kitamori notes that the pain of loss of a loved one can be self-centred and indulgent, and even describes it as potentially sinful (we might object that Jesus himself wept at the death of Lazarus, but this is not Kitamori's point in context – he is referring to the exclusive nature of familial human love that denies the needs of others, and which Jesus condemns in Matt 10:37). Kitamori wants to show that God can communicate powerfully through the medium of our sin, and uses the pattern of parental love to do so.¹⁸⁸ Man's pain

¹⁸⁵ Moltmann, *The crucified God*, pp 254-255. Moltmann's emphasis here is pantheistic – if we speak of the God of history then we can only arrive at classical theism or atheism; however, the history of God understands all human history through the cross and opens it to new creation and to hope.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p 257.

¹⁸⁷ Kitamori, *Theology of the pain of God*, chap 3.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, chap 4.

(such as dying) is difficult to heal when we cannot find comparisons or metaphors to describe it. The cross provides such a metaphor but needs to be accepted and heard in order to be effective. Kitamori comments further on the cross of Christ as the central symbol of pain in the Bible: the suffering Servant was the symbol of redemptive suffering whose pain was fulfilled in Christ; and Israel is a symbol of the Saviour to come while the church is the symbol of the Saviour who has already come.¹⁸⁹ In each case the symbol has both historical reality and a transcendent dimension, which Kitamori explores further in his consideration of the way in which Jesus links the love of God and love of neighbour – *ie* that we can find the transcendent in the reality of our brothers and sisters. In a materialistic culture, however, we struggle with the transcendent aspects of truth. Kitamori's analysis of humanity's appropriation of pain helps us to understand the need of our culture to find ways of assimilating the meaning of symbols and metaphors if we are to grasp the ultimacy of suffering and transcendence at all, and in the discussion of narrative (Chapters 4–6) it is important to remember that our scientific culture is not very comfortable with metaphor.

2.3.1 (c) Suffering and the free creation

In the context of this thesis there are implications of the nature of creation for (a) freedom; (b) love; and (c) personhood.

(i) Freedom. If God is the ground of ultimate reality, whether in a classical or a process model, then it is reasonable, logical, and a matter of faith to assert that God is free in his essential nature, and that God has created beings in *imago dei* that can love God in freedom. Here there might be a division, however: classical theists of various degrees would probably say that God chose to create in *this* way, that this world is contingent, and that it could have been otherwise (*ie* God could have chosen in God's omnipotence either not to create or to have created differently). Those accepting some process insights would say that God could only be Godself in creating as God did; perhaps adding with Fiddes that there is no meaning in 'otherwise', since this would leave God open to the charge of capriciousness (God could change God's mind, even about sustaining that for which God has already decided). This fear, that the classical God could change God's mind, is necessarily present as a possibility, even if dismissed as never to occur – but classical theists, in order to deal with this horrifying scenario, will draw our attention rightly to the evidence of scripture that God has always been faithful in God's promises to humanity.

¹⁸⁹ Kitamori, *Theology*, chap 5.

Clayton reminds us that, in the progressive revelation of scripture, the creation narratives are part of the history of a people who have experienced Yahweh as salvific. Moltmann argues that there is nothing in God that is not revealed by the cross.¹⁹⁰ I would therefore argue that we can say that the creation narratives are coloured by the purposes of salvation, redemption, reconciliation and love, and we should not read them as an abstract project of the divine in an attempt to be forensic about our own origins, interesting though that might be. We must try to hold the whole shape of scripture together in interpreting what any part of it might mean: in particular, once we have identified the event of the cross as central and therefore as an indication of the eternal nature of God, then we cannot think of creation without the cross either. It is disingenuous to say that creation is primary, because of the difficulties of speaking of time and eternity and because God is always the Trinity whose second person is the crucified Jesus. Thus the God who freely creates in God's own image is also the God who freely suffers on Calvary in God's own being. The possibility of suffering is part of the *imago dei*.

We, God's creatures, must be free if we are to respond with true love, which cannot be coerced or prompted in any way: '...it [love] cannot command love or counterlove'.¹⁹¹ God's trinitarian nature means that within Godself there is already an 'event of relationships' (according to Fiddes), and thus the ground for desiring fellowship and communion that is other-centred is intrinsic to the very heart of God. Bruteau describes the ecstatic love of God that spills over from the inner relationships of the Godhead, while Vanstone styles it 'the love that overflows from fullness'.¹⁹² God 'cannot' be otherwise since this is Godself, the God of love. God is, however, free to be Godself always.

It is interesting to explore what this freedom (to be Godself) means. Fiddes says that the universe depends upon God for its existence, while God chooses to 'depend' upon the universe *by God's desire*¹⁹³ – a desire that is much more than a love that arises solely from the logic of the statement: God is love. Creation emerges from God's will and desire. This desire *is* God's will, but it is also more than God's will since,¹⁹⁴ if God longs for and desires us, that is the reason why the universe cannot be different from the way in which it is: it does not make sense to say 'otherwise'. It also means that we cannot think of the 'time' when the universe

¹⁹⁰ In Moltmann, *The crucified God*, p 210: 'All Christian statements about God, about creation, about sin and death have their focal point in the crucified Christ'; and p 211, 'The nucleus of everything that Christian theology says about 'God' is to be found in this Christ event. The Christ event on the cross is a God event'.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, p 257.

¹⁹² Bruteau, *God's ecstasy*, chap 2; Vanstone, *Love*, p 69.

¹⁹³ Fiddes, *Creative suffering*, pp 75-76.

¹⁹⁴ Fiddes discusses God's will as God's desire (with reference to Moltmann and Berdyaev), meaning that God's choices are not just an ethical necessity for a good God but signify the abundantly overflowing love God has for us, as others.

did not coexist with God, because God has defined Godself as the God who desires us. Incredibly, 'God wants us as much as he wants himself'.¹⁹⁵ In her book on friendship Liz Carmichael discusses the nature of both friendship and love and concludes that the idea of ourselves as 'friends' of God in a mutual way has been lost and could be helpfully reinvigorated in our quest for a modern spirituality.¹⁹⁶

Richard Rohr makes an interesting comment upon our perception – or misperception – of freedom that is helpful here. He talks about the difference between secular freedom, in which we *have* to do what we want; while religious freedom is *wanting* to do what we have to do.¹⁹⁷ Further, he remarks that choosing (*ie* using our freedom) to suffer nullifies the power of suffering. I think that Rohr's insight is undergirded by something similar to that of Frankl in his Holocaust observations about meaningful suffering being bearable. This common 'something' is about being able to incorporate the experience into our personal stories or narratives, and it seems to be about the act of interpretation, which sets an experience in a context and gives it meaning. We can choose to interpret or not to interpret, to narrate or not to narrate, and I shall return to this idea when I discuss narrative and suffering in later chapters.

(ii) *Love*. Moltmann warns against interpreting love as a romantic goal, and reminds us that love can neither command a response nor forbid injustice or cruelty: it must be unconditional, and as such it can be abused – or crucified.¹⁹⁸ If again we skip around the analytical theology for a moment and look instead at the picture or metaphor of the cross, then what we see is love. This love is not a gracious and patronising dispensation by a majestic transcendent deity, but suffering in agony in an incarnate Jesus. Love means a free (and often hard) choice in *this* world, not a glittering abstraction in some other existence that has no actual meaning for us.

Love has to be freely given and received: it has to be completely unconditional, or it is other than love. Love is the characteristic of God's dealing with creation (see in particular 1 John 4:7–21 and the teachings of Jesus, but especially Matthew 22: 37-40; Mark: 12: 29-31). Love is the essential nature of God: and the pattern of the Trinity, of three Persons selflessly loving one another, is the pattern of God's desire for relationship with us. This love, and God's desire to love, necessitates the creation of beings who are free like Godself. There cannot be love without freedom; and with freedom comes risk. It is this aspect of reality with which so many people struggle: the truth that love and determinism cannot coexist, and that actually if God is love then there is no 'problem of evil' other than humanity's inability to understand what love

¹⁹⁵ Fiddes, *ibid*, p 76.

¹⁹⁶ Carmichael, *Friendship*, esp chap 6.

¹⁹⁷ Rohr, *Everything belongs*, p 108.

¹⁹⁸ Moltmann, *Crucified*, pp 256-257.

really means. The intellectual problem with pain is not in fact the traditional intuition that a loving God would protect us from all suffering: this does not make sense in our dealings with one another as free beings and certainly does not make sense in terms of God's dealings with us in freedom. The problem is the matter of recognising love and then responding to it. It is here that our cultural conditioning and our ability to communicate the locus of meaning are so very important.

Finally we need to notice that the concepts of love and pain are often connected, both in our experience and in theology. Kitamori explicitly locates the love of God in God's pain, for the reasons explored in §2.3.1(a). Moltmann explores this connection in the context of the crucifixion. The death of the Son is not the death of God,¹⁹⁹ but an event in which life-giving love emerges from pain. Moltmann says that we who suffer tend to question God and God's integrity: but in fact, when we cry out in pain we echo the cries of Christ on the cross. 'The one who suffers is not just angry and furious and full of protest against his fate. He suffers because he lives, and he is alive because he loves. The person who can no longer love, even himself, no longer suffers, for he is without grief, without feeling and indifferent...the more one loves, the more one is open and becomes receptive to happiness and sorrow...we suffer and die because and in so far as we love'.²⁰⁰

And of course, God's love is so full and so perfect that God's suffering must be full and perfect too. Underhill warns us about the seriousness of the New Testament: 'There we find a suffering and love twined so closely together, that we cannot wrench them apart: and if we try to do so, the love is maimed in the process – loses its creative power – and the suffering remains, but without its aureole of willing sacrifice. Love, after all, makes the whole difference between an execution and a martyrdom. Pain, or at least the willingness to risk pain, alone gives dignity to human love...without this, [love] is mere emotional enjoyment'.²⁰¹

(iii) *Personhood*. The third aspect of the free creation that we must consider here is what it means to be a person, which is a key concept for this thesis and will be explored in more detail in Chapter 3, although it is important to indicate the importance of personhood in the context of this section, and considered alongside observations on freedom and love, from which it is inseparable.

From the discussion so far it can be seen that personal love will inescapably involve suffering, since the freedom that is necessary for love is also the freedom that will disappoint and fall

¹⁹⁹ Noting that Moltmann, in *The crucified God*, describes the cross as the place where God dies and does not die, p 253.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p 261.

²⁰¹ Underhill, *Charity*, pp 54-55.

short. Fiddes explains that the God who endures suffering cannot therefore *cause* suffering, although God is in one sense responsible for suffering because God *allows* it: this kind of God is one who accepts self-limitation for the sake of true freedom and love in that which God has created.²⁰² Suffering is not a surprise because it belongs to the nature of who God is. It is also true that if God has created persons and not machines (*ie* creatures governed by cause and effect), then suffering is unavoidable in the self-development of these persons – but of course, this suffering is both purposeful and redemptive. ‘The goal of God is nothing other than the making of persons, and the kind of persons we become is based upon the choices we make, the kinds of values we hold to, the ways in which we respond to challenges and disappointments. The personality is not a ready-made entity, but is formed through experience’.²⁰³ It is to the nature of suffering personhood that we turn in Chapter 3.

Interestingly there is also a case for saying (carefully!) that this ‘growth’ in personhood is also true of God’s own being, although this argument does not fit a classical theistic picture of God. Fiddes says that God relates to free beings which cause God to suffer. This suffering does prompt a ‘change’ in God, but not a change comparable to our human personal change. God’s change in response to suffering is such that God becomes more ‘godly’ – more truly Godself. Fiddes calls this the ‘perfect incompleteness’ of God.²⁰⁴

In the light of the earlier remarks on suffering and pain, we can also say that thus God’s love increases – not implying that God’s earlier state is ‘imperfect’ (see the discussion in §2.2.1(d) on the meaning of perfection in God), but that (in process terms) a ‘perfect’ God can become a differently ‘perfect’ God. In fact, in a dynamic relationship, this dialectic process of love and suffering and becoming ‘more’ – accumulating new responsive experiences – is logically unavoidable. For Pailin, this way of thinking about God describes grace – it is the consistency of God’s love for persons despite the moral (and other) changeableness of those persons.²⁰⁵ By a parallel argument, if we are made into persons by our journeys of pain and love, and if relationships are key to this, then we might tentatively begin to say that actually it is pain in particular, and our response to life’s pain, that is significant in our human journeys; that, strangely, it is suffering that makes us more truly ourselves if we can recognise in it the redemptive suffering of God. This conclusion, which will be developed into the suggestion that suffering can be described as ‘ontological impertinence’ and a vital key to *metanoia*, is the complete opposite of the normal human reaction to pain and returns us to the passage in 1

²⁰² Fiddes, *Creative suffering*, pp 32-33.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, p 105.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p 91.

²⁰⁵ Pailin explores the idea of the perfection of God in a process model, at some length, with many examples, in chap 6 of *Processes of reality*.

Corinthians 1 with which this section began. To close this chapter with the words of Moltmann, 'God did not become man according to the measure of our conceptions of being a man. He became the kind of man we do not want to be: an outcast, accursed, crucified'.²⁰⁶ Perhaps this misunderstanding of God, in a nutshell, is our problem with suffering, as presented parabolically in the story of Job. We want to be like God, but we do not really want to understand what God may be like: we prefer to make God as we think God should be.

²⁰⁶ Moltmann, *The crucified God*, p 211.

Chapter 3. Who dies? The place of the person

A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble...does not last (Job 14:1-2, NRSV)

If our culture is predominantly materialist, reductionist, and dualist, then should people be content to think that terminal illness and death are merely biological processes of decay? Experience would suggest that it is rare for someone to be so clinically reductionist in practice.²⁰⁷ In this chapter I will examine some questions around whether, culturally, personhood means more than an embodied neuronal network. Although in later chapters I will be thinking about suffering in a broader context (*ie* not just terminal illness), here I want to adopt a particular focus on the existential suffering that is attached to dying, because I have come to believe that the extreme circumstances of death can illuminate our deepest desires and assumptions.

Why does it seem to our culture that death is a disaster for personhood? What exactly is it that comes to an end when we die? In this chapter I will explore this assumption about the ‘material’ person in the context of death, or ‘the end’, because the supposed finality of death may reveal that many people do not in fact fully subscribe to the profound materialism of contemporary culture. I will continue the debate in Chapters 4 and 5 by using the narrative work of Kermode, Fiddes, Cavarero and Ricoeur with respect to ‘the end’, and the way in which our perceptions of ‘ending’ change the way we live prior to that end. If there is indeed a sense that personhood includes a measure of transcendence,²⁰⁸ then the interpretive context of all suffering and death during a life is altered, and I think this insight can help us to develop an approach to the pastoral case of perceived meaninglessness in suffering.

3.1 The material person

When speaking of British customs around death and mourning in the early 20th century, the Anglican clergyman Arthur Chambers wrote: ‘How absolutely and glaringly inconsistent to mark our respect for a dear one “passed over,” by using a universally recognised emblem of gloom and hopelessness [wearing black]! Do we wonder that the non-Christian man notes it all, and mentally asks whether those Christians really believe what they profess?’ He wrote the

²⁰⁷ Although some hospice patients did not admit to any belief in, or even desire for, a ‘life to come’, whatever that might mean, issues of blame and cause were normally invoked.

²⁰⁸ Rudman reviews a variety of theological approaches on transcendence and the person in chap 8 of *Concepts of person and Christian ethics*.

book *Our self after death* in 1916 to address the problem, particularly severe during the Great War, of what he called 'Christian agnosticism' regarding belief in the continuing existence of the 'self' after death.²⁰⁹ Chambers, who commented prolifically on the subject of death and the afterlife, advanced in this volume a theory about the nature of the resurrection body in which the recognisable self continues, based largely upon the gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances. In his attempt to bring comfort to the thousands of bereaved families of wartime Britain, Chambers found himself challenging the materialism of his time, which eroded popular confidence in the Christian hope (many historians subsequently analysed the seminal impact of the Great War upon our cultural attitudes to death). Our culture no longer styles itself as Christian, and even in the churches there is often inadequate routine preparation for the end of life: as discussed in Chapter 1, there is a sense that dying and death are in fact God's dreadful mistake.

The modern hospice and palliative care movement in the UK has, as we have seen, been able to rehabilitate the dying person to a certain degree. In hospices, more than almost anywhere, it is 'OK' to talk about dying and death; the terminal patient is treated with dignity and love; and the emphasis is upon holistic care with a genuine commitment to responding to spiritual need. Death in a hospice is not perceived as failure, as it might be in an active care setting such as a hospital, but it is still understood as an unfortunate ending of possibilities for the individual concerned: there will be no more story, no more self-development, no more fulfilment. Such an understanding of death is so inevitable in the context of a prevailing materialist culture that it can feel absurd even to suggest, within the context of religious belief, that death might not be as 'terminal' as it seems!

As a generalisation, if we identify closely with our bodies, then physical death appears to spell the end of everything, and the stronger the sense of this physical 'I', the harder it is to face dying.²¹⁰ The Benedictine monk Sebastian Moore notes that death is 'disastrous' to us because of our self-conscious individualism: death is perceived as the endpoint of a highly individual experience of living, and is catastrophic because we relate it entirely to ourselves, and anguish over our personal significance, rather than accepting it as an event *within* a process of universal significance.²¹¹ Ian Barbour echoes this thought: 'Meaninglessness is overcome when

²⁰⁹ Chambers, *Our self after death*, p 35. In addition to his reasoning from the gospels and epistles, Chambers was also impressed by psychic phenomena and saw them as contemporary evidences of Christ-like resurrection experiences.

²¹⁰ Levine, *Who dies? An investigation of conscious living and conscious dying*, pp viii, 14.

²¹¹ Moore, *The crucified Jesus is no stranger*, pp 56-59.

people view human existence in a wider context of meaning, beyond the life of the individual'.²¹² How did our culture become so 'self' focused?

3.1.1 *The problem of defining the 'self'*

The philosopher Charles Taylor, in his book, *Sources of the self*, traces the shaping of the (western) modern self. He argues that meaning (*ie* the answer to the ultimate questions: Who am I?²¹³ Why am I here?) has been influenced in the West by three domains of thought: theism; rationalism; and romanticism. We inherit this complex legacy in the form of a desire for justice, freedom, self-rule, and a high cultural priority for the 'avoidance of death and suffering' (all of which partner an Enlightenment understanding of the person as a rational autonomous individual).²¹⁴ Interestingly, the definition of spirituality that predominates in current healthcare settings enshrines broadly this set of attributes of the person: spirituality is that which constitutes 'meaning, value and purpose', and good healthcare should incorporate these things so that a patient is not perceived merely as a statistic (furthermore, the move to patient-focused practice has profoundly altered the dynamics of treatment and care). Although the intention is admirable, I will argue later that this apparently holistic definition of spirituality is in fact implicitly materialistic because of the way in which it assigns value to life.

Taylor concludes *Sources of the self* with some comments on the impact of what he terms 'instrumentalism' (a facet of materialism characterised by seeing things as 'means for ends') in modernity: 'the individual has been taken out of a rich community life and now enters instead into a series of mobile, changing, revocable associations, often designed merely for highly specific ends. We end up relating to each other through a series of partial roles'.²¹⁵ Interestingly, Taylor believes that a rediscovered commitment to the larger social whole does not address this loss of meaning, which has taken place at a deeper metaphysical level, linked to the cultural 'disenchantment' of the universe.²¹⁶ Taylor's belief is not necessarily in contradiction to Barbour and Moore (above), since their rediscovery of meaning within a larger whole refers to a metaphysical *metanoia*, the appeal to some kind of transcendent belief, rather than to social and cultural behaviours. The question, 'Who am I?' in a general context is loaded with existential pain that can only be magnified in the contemplation of individual death, the focus of pastoral concern here.

²¹² Barbour, *Religion and science: historical and contemporary issues*, p 112.

²¹³ The question 'Who am I?' is one of the basic existential questions of all religious faith: see, for example, Cotterell's analysis of the need for life to make sense in *Mission and meaninglessness: the good news in a world of suffering and disorder*, especially chaps 1, 2.

²¹⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the self*, p 495.

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, p 502.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, p 509.

Nikolas Rose has made an interesting analysis of the contemporary and highly influential therapeutic culture and its relationship with the self's fulfilment. He suggests that the 'liberated' self (*ie* the self that necessarily has to *choose* its life story from the alternatives available) is 'obliged to live its life tied to the project of its own identity'.²¹⁷ We are obsessed with our individual freedom;²¹⁸ we identify ourselves through our freedom; and we reach for that freedom by becoming experts or by using the expert knowledge of others (power and professionalism), to maximise our understanding of the options available to us.²¹⁹ This desire for 'freedom', which is embedded in the philosophical autonomy of the contemporary 'patient-led' healthcare culture, is in fact quite isolating.²²⁰ Once again we find that the goal of self-fulfilment, where self is identified as the rational autonomous individual, generates issues around the meaning of life.

There are myriad ways of examining and explaining the 'person', the 'I', or the 'self': even the use of these terms is disputed between scholars, and arriving at a consensus is probably unachievable. For example, while Taylor uses the terms 'person', 'self' and 'human agent' interchangeably, Young-Eisendrath & Hall conclude a volume of essays on aspects of the self with the conclusion that '*A person* [my italics] is universally recognized as a particular occurrence of a point of view and point of action within a human body. A sense of oneself is secondarily formulated according to principles of individual subjective experience given within one's social group'.²²¹

Some theologians suggest that the definitional difficulty around the person is characteristic of postmodernism: for example, Elaine Graham²²² speaks of the mercurial nature of personhood as 'the discursive result of inhabiting a culture'. The ethicist Stanley Rudman surveys approaches to personhood in the first part of his book, *Concepts of person and Christian ethics*, and remarks on the 'complexity of the concept and the diversity of interpretation'.²²³ What is clear for the purposes of this pastoral study is that although the 'person' conceived by liberal individualism (broadly implying the rational autonomous subject) may be the assumed

²¹⁷ Rose, *Governing the soul: the shaping of the private self*, p 254. Charles Taylor also deals with the therapeutic culture in *Sources*. Ivan Illich comments starkly that, 'Industrialized humanity needs therapy from crib to terminal ward', in *Limits to medicine*, p 205, n 60.

²¹⁸ Where freedom has the popular meaning of having an unlimited choice, rather than meaning the integrity of being oneself and under no compulsion to be other.

²¹⁹ Ironically, public freedom is undermined by unrestrained individual freedom.

²²⁰ There is an interesting conflict here between the medicalisation of healthcare and the newer emphasis upon patient-led care strategies. I believe that this can actually increase the sense of meaninglessness for the patient, who may expect the professionals to 'take charge' while also wanting to assert personal freedom about decisions.

²²¹ Young-Eisendrath & Hall, *Ways of speaking of self* in Young-Eisendrath & Hall (eds), *The book of the self*, p 439.

²²² Graham, *Transforming practice*, p 27.

²²³ Rudman, *Concepts of person*, p 117.

functional model in our culture, it does not withstand much analysis or real life experience.²²⁴ In this thesis I will generally use the terms 'person' or 'self' interchangeably, and in a dialogical sense (see §3.2).

To add to the complexity around definition, a common contemporary assumption is that persons are 'fragmented': in other words, the complexity and disunity of our culture imposes multiple reactive 'selves' such that modern persons struggle to identify the 'real me'. Stephen Levine, a Buddhist who teaches meditation techniques to dying people, observes that we spend so much time wishing we were 'other than we are' that we are not even sure *who* is dying,²²⁵ which, if true, is a revealing comment upon the constructed self of the modern and postmodern era.²²⁶ Dealing with this apparent confusion of identity is also a significant and recurring theme in the writings of the Christian mystics (and other religious), and in modern psychotherapy, ethics and anthropology. Linda Woodhead, however, says that theologians in particular have too readily assumed this 'problem' of the 'fragmentation' of the self in modernity; she argues that postmodernism has not *caused* so much as *revealed* the possibilities for multiple identities. There was no earlier 'golden age', when persons were 'simpler'.²²⁷ Holstein & Gubrium also acknowledge the complex pressures on the socially conditioned self, while advocating that the self is not just responsive, but able to stand up to postmodern pressure: the self is 'a construction that we both assemble and live out as we take up or resist the varied demands of everyday life'.²²⁸ Nonetheless, the confusion about the self (even if more perceived than real) creates a cultural context of pressure for the dying person, who is dealing with the loss of much that has subjectively defined his/her life, and is asking which bit really matters, which bit has enduring significance.

Other writers utilise the move towards the less dualistic and more holistic aspects of postmodernism to seek new ways of describing the self. One such is Alistair McFadyen,²²⁹ who seeks an understanding of the person that lies between the inadequate extremes of the wholly collective or the wholly individual by using the concept of dialogue. I have found McFadyen's

²²⁴ This model of the person is that upon which much of modern politics and social practice is predicated, and is probably what is meant at a superficial level when people say 'me' – until an existential challenge arises.

²²⁵ Levine, *Who dies?*, p 10.

²²⁶ Further insights on Buddhist approaches to dying can be found in the fascinating *Tibetan book of living and dying* by Rinpoche.

²²⁷ Woodhead, *Int. J. System. Theol.*, p 54, 'According to the fragmentation thesis, many of the most central and characteristic processes of modernity lead directly to the decentring and destabilization of human identity', but warns that, while widely used and probably not without some substance, the fragmentation thesis is largely anecdotal and circular in argument.

²²⁸ Holstein & Gubrium, *The self we live by*, pp 10-11.

²²⁹ McFadyen, *The call to personhood*, introduction. McFadyen has also written *Bound to sin*; with Sarot he co-edited *Forgiveness and truth*, and was a member of the Anglican Doctrine Commission 1996-2003, looking at personhood.

personhood a very helpful complement to the ideas and concepts from process thought and from narrative that are key in this examination of the suffering experience. McFadyen avoids identifying body with self, and also avoids the understanding that personhood is a 'something' enclosed within a physical body. Rather, a person is intensely relational and fluid. Another is Stanley Rudman, who surveys personhood approaches in *Concepts of person*, and concludes that 'Human personhood, it is clear, is importantly related to relationships and communication between people, as well as individual rationality and purpose'.²³⁰ This summary seems key to the questions behind this thesis about meaning, relationship and narrative, and identifies an area of popular assumption on personhood (that persons are autonomous, rational, individual) that may need to be challenged if we are to break through the complexity of issues around suffering.

3.1.2 Theological background: the God–world relationship

These difficulties over the nature of the person (from a theological perspective) are arguably rooted in a more fundamental problem over which theologians lack consensus, and which links neatly back to the question of the God–world relationship explored in earlier chapters – and, even more specifically, to the question of whether we are able helpfully to model human personhood upon divine personhood. What does it mean to be created in God's image, and how do we know what God's image is? Do we say, with traditional theism, that God is wholly other and therefore all speculation about human nature can begin only with revelation? And if we understand God as an absolute being, who confers personhood upon us, then the nature of God's 'absoluteness' is also significant. For example, is our view of God influenced by traditional theistic or process insights? And how can we even begin such an argument without confronting scientific materialism?

Rudman's analysis of the history of Christian personhood is helpful here. He challenges theologians to examine the trajectory of philosophical thought over the centuries and to be open to the consideration that theology must be a dynamic process. He notes the tendency, particularly in studies of personhood that emerge from doctrines of the Trinity, to make use of the writings of the early Fathers without engaging adequately with the developing historical context of thought. Rudman²³¹ comments: 'It is not enough to show what the early Fathers believed. The continuing adequacy of their views must be argued for'. Rudman believes that we need to ground personhood in an 'understanding of human nature which combines

²³⁰ Rudman, *Concepts*, p 117.

²³¹ *Ibid*, p 142.

attention to empirical factors with theological interpretation'.²³² Rudman argues that such an overemphasis on the Fathers, because of the Hellenistic subculture, will also be an overly rational process. He suggests that models of human personhood should be grown theologically not only from trinitarian doctrine, which developed from reflection on the gospels and stories of the early church, but should equally rely upon, say, creation doctrine, in which relationship and communication are significant characteristics of the nature both of creature and creator.²³³ The incarnation provides a way of thinking about an embodied and temporal God (as opposed to the God who is other) and affirms the use of anthropological insights in trying to develop a model of human personhood.

Rudman believes that rationality and relationality are both important in thinking about the analogy between divine and human personhood. Tradition has emphasised rational thought while modern theologians are more organic, but either will provide a skewed picture without the other.²³⁴ Within this, Rudman is careful to caution that the differences between the creator and the created should not be blurred; and that direct inferences from the inner life of the Trinity (about which we can know nothing) to human relationships should not be made. The Trinity is not a 'blueprint' for human social behaviour.²³⁵ However, he adds, 'In the process of drawing an analogy between divine and human personhood, the original conception of human personhood is deepened and enriched...the Trinity may become the correcting lens for our understanding of human mutuality, particularly if we find this insight corroborated in prayer and worship'.²³⁶ Once again we are challenged to consider the very nature of reality and of the act of knowing (and of interpretation), to question the totality of empiricism, and to allow transcendent experience to play a part in our understanding while continuing to hold that the world we inhabit is neither illusory, nor so irreparably damaged that it no longer tells us anything about God, but is actually *indicative* of the nature of God.

The problem of the right balance of rational and of empirical explanation is not new, but evolves alongside the developments of natural science as the latter expands its influence. During the scientific revolution of the 20th century, alongside which the western crisis of Christianity became established, many theologians were concerned to relate Christian doctrine to the modern scientific world and to develop views of the person that had contemporary credibility. Pannenberg observed in the 1970s that no valid revival of the cosmological proof of

²³² Rudman, *Concepts*, p 142.

²³³ *Ibid*, p 141.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, p 171.

²³⁵ *Ibid*, p 172.

²³⁶ *Ibid*, pp 194-5.

God was possible in a contemporary scientific mindset.²³⁷ the relationship between God and nature had been philosophically and comprehensively decoupled in modern thought. In addition, western Christianity from Augustine onwards had become progressively privatised, leading inevitably to a loss of its universal credibility and a move away from Christendom and towards humanism as a unifying social philosophy. Pannenberg thus argued that 'Christian theology in the modern age must provide itself with a foundation in general anthropological studies'.²³⁸ We have no choice but to use human experience: otherwise we are not arguing in a comprehensible language.

Pannenberg also argued that if God is found in all aspects of human experience, then in any engagement with history we are also in fact engaging with God's revelation: and this reality should present possibilities for theology and personhood.²³⁹ From a contemporary perspective Linda Woodhead concurs, arguing that theologians should look around and see what is happening in the world: 'To have any real bite, theology should engage seriously with the complexity of the modern world and the diverse modern construals of selfhood. It should do so in honest acknowledgement that it is already implicated in these strands and has played a significant part in their unfolding'.²⁴⁰ She means, among other things, that no monolithic theological position is likely to be credible today; a diversity of approaches that make sense in today's culture will be more fruitful.

The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner argued that all concepts and experiences are metaphysically and analogously linked to the absolute, which we can name as God.²⁴¹ Rahner believes that we cannot logically speak of man without God or God without man (rather as Fiddes rejects the idea that the suffering world could be 'otherwise'). If this is true then an anthropocentric theology is a perfectly acceptable approach that does not contradict theocentricity.²⁴² Personhood for Rahner is understood as 'man's transcendence, his

²³⁷ Pannenberg, *Basic questions in theology*, vol 3, p 83.

²³⁸ Pannenberg, *Anthropology in theological perspective*, p 15.

²³⁹ See, for example, Pannenberg's discussion of the human openness to the world that allows us to grasp the idea of transcendence and hence an ultimate Other, in *Anthropology in theological perspective*, chap 2.

²⁴⁰ Woodhead, *Int. J. System. Theol.*, 1999, 1(1), 72.

²⁴¹ I did consider whether it would be appropriate to follow neo-Thomist thought on the nature of the limit and its implication of an absolute, and the impossibility of reifying human personhood and death. However, neo-Thomism is not obviously compatible with process thought as a metaphysical scheme, and so I decided to remain with process ideas as a natural partner to narrative. I would be interested to think further about neo-Thomism as a challenge to the material suffering person, especially in the light of my final thoughts on ontological impertinence.

²⁴² Rahner sets out this relationship between the human and the transcendent in his paper, *Theology and anthropology*, in *Theological investigations*, vol 9, part 1, chap 2.

responsibility and freedom, his orientation towards the incomprehensible mystery, his being in history and in the world, and his social nature'.²⁴³

Each theological approach has its strengths, but the challenge of this particular culture in which we live, shaped by scientific materialism, demands that we pay careful attention to the nature of reality, and whether in fact there can be a credible metaphysical separation between God and the world in the manner of traditional theism. If we cannot make use of the experience of the everyday world to 'see' God (metaphorically) then we will not be able to talk to most people in words that they understand, less still help to moderate the existential fear of death. The same point is made conversely by Grace Jantzen, who notes that holding an extreme view of God's otherness would mean that even God's self-revelation will tell us nothing that we can comprehend.²⁴⁴

Theologically, the issue of whether 'God's reality' is different from 'our reality' is crucial to our self-understanding, and to the credibility of a theistic position. In the apologetic volume written by Rahner with Weger, the authors say that in the past, 'One existed to serve God, created by God. One knew where evil in the world came from and where suffering came from; one had one's place within a clearly structured society, and so on. And today?'²⁴⁵ They argue that we cannot communicate theology in yesterday's language, but plead also for a special humility in our attempts because, 'Even less than other people do Christians have final answers...'.²⁴⁶

There are many advocates for a fresh look at forms of natural theology; or at least to be conscious of some of the difficulties of a traditional theistic starting point. To attempt to approach the issues of suffering and death pastorally means necessarily that we have an awareness of these difficulties.

3.1.3 Social and biological concepts of death

A great deal of helpful research has been done in anthropology and sociology on the dying self, which supports and enhances some of the theological approaches but which begins from very different starting points. For example, the view that persons exist by virtue of their relationships in some way emerges consistently across a variety of disciplines.²⁴⁷ The

²⁴³ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian faith*, p 26.

²⁴⁴ Jantzen, *God's world, God's body*, p 103.

²⁴⁵ Rahner & Weger, *Our Christian faith*, p128.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p 165, though noting Woodhead's objection that a previous golden age of social stability and coherence in which persons were reliably identified did not actually exist.

²⁴⁷ It could be argued (negatively) that this is a case of postmodernist thinking justifying postmodernism, or (positively) that this is a way of thinking appropriate to the times.

anthropologist Monika Konrad²⁴⁸ claims that ‘a “person” stands for a locus of relationships...social relations reveal the persons they produce...every relation contains within it its own outcome, which is a previous relationship in a transformed state’ (the similarities to some of the concepts of process thinking are obvious); while Kaufman & Morgan²⁴⁹ see personhood as ‘conferred, attenuated, contested, and withheld by the collective. It does not reside in the physical or cognitive attributes of individuals’. Young-Eisendrath & Hall say that ‘Characteristic features of our individual selves are appropriated from the communications and practices of our tribe’.²⁵⁰ Yet again, Waskul & van der Riet, in a study of the effect of body image in cancer patients on selfhood, believe that the relationship between body, self and society is culturally constructed, not ‘natural’.²⁵¹ Does all this mean that there is no such thing as a person, but just a relative concept?

It has already been noted that there are many models of the person, constructed with regard to multiple referents and with different emphases. Nevertheless, as John Lizza comments, just because ‘person’ has various definitions does not mean that death – which he insists depends upon the definition and ontology of the person – collapses into relativism. Rather, he says, we need to ask which approach to personhood *makes most sense* of the experience of death, which he understands as not just biological but metaphysical, ethical and cultural.²⁵² We *can* begin to think about death and its meaning (as opposed to lack of meaning). Lizza’s suggestion, which echoes the common theological plea for contemporary relevance, seems to be a helpful way forward when trying pastorally to navigate the turbulent area between the culture of materialism and its reduced view of the person, and the experience of death with its transcendent dimension.

What exactly happens when someone dies? We understand what it is to be alive; and we know after the event that someone is dead, but what about the actual process of dying? Sometimes the act of dying is complicated by technology: the removal of life support systems in hospitals would constitute one such area, as would the use of certain interventions such as tube

²⁴⁸ Konrad, *J. R. Anthropol. Inst.*, 1998, **4**, 645; Konrad is describing some ideas emerging from the study of Melanesian societies, which are highly corporate, but applies the suggestions to British society in the context of ova donation. She uses the idea of the ‘partible’ person – *ie* ‘persons, as agents, can detach from, and attach to themselves, parts of their own and other persons’ bodies’.

²⁴⁹ Kaufman & Morgan, *The anthropology of the beginnings and ends of life* in *Ann. Rev. Anthropol.*, 2005, **34**, 320.

²⁵⁰ Young-Eisendrath & Hall, *Book of the self*, p 439.

²⁵¹ Waskul & Van der Riet, *The abject embodiment of cancer patients: dignity, selfhood, and the grotesque body* in *Symbolic Interaction*, **25**(4), 510.

²⁵² Lizza, *Persons, humanity and the definition of death*, preface.

feeding, or the use of resuscitation in terminal patients.²⁵³ Commonly life is considered extinct when brain death is established, and the medical criteria associated with brain death are constantly under review.²⁵⁴ In practice most medical teams would usually look for the permanent cessation of heart, lung and brain activity.²⁵⁵ At the hospice, death is usually more 'natural' (because medical interventions are minimised), although the question about when exactly a person 'ceases to be' remains – if, indeed, that is what death is. Is death simply the point at which breathing ends and the heart stops? Or is that point just a medical milestone to mark a significant step of the transition from life to death? Medical ethicist Paul Ramsey notes that 'we need some procedure for determining when a life is still with us, making its moral claims upon us, and when we stand instead in the presence of an unburied corpse'.²⁵⁶

This question about the point of death is important, since many terminally ill patients are heavily sedated by painkillers for some time prior to the cessation of breathing and have long since ceased to take an active role in the family or group: the end of breathing makes no effective difference to their social contribution, but it does 'liberate' those who watch and suffer with the dying. This liberation is essential for the continuance of the life of the wider community and normally comes as a profound relief as well as a time of deep sadness and loss.²⁵⁷ In recent research on palliative bereavement services, Milberg *et al* comment that, 'Even if being a caregiver to a dying relative or friend may be meaningful, it is clear that many family members also often experience substantial degrees of anxiety, depression, exhaustion, worse physical health, an existential crisis, and negative role changes during the patient's deterioration. After the patient's death, the family member may struggle with intense suffering to do with feelings of loss, loneliness, anger, guilt, and doubts about whether they had done enough for the patient'.²⁵⁸ Scripture validates the deep sense of loss and existential

²⁵³ In hospices there would normally be a documented agreement with the terminal patient about the use (or, more usually, avoidance) of resuscitation. There is not space for a discussion of the ethical and moral issues about such interventions here, simply to note that death is not always a simple end to a person.

²⁵⁴ See Lizza, *Persons*, for a recent summary of the criteria around biological death.

²⁵⁵ Ramsey, *The patient as person*, p 65.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p 64. It is notable that the moral/ethical demands of the person dictate this view: Charles Taylor argues that the definition of personhood in moral terms is a post-Enlightenment development. Taylor, *Sources*, chap 1.

²⁵⁷ Often family members will comment that they are glad that the time of suffering is over, although the sense of loss of the person is acute. The suffering to which they refer is mutual between the dying and the soon-to-be bereaved and has all the components of total pain, not just physical. In 1968 Toynbee argued that 'There are two parties to the suffering that death inflicts; and, in the apportionment of this suffering, the survivor takes the brunt', in Toynbee *et al*, *Man's concern with death*, p 271.

²⁵⁸ Milberg *et al*, *Family members' perceived needs for bereavement follow-up*, in *J. Pain. Sympt. Management*, 2008, **35**(1), 58-59.

fear combined with continuing history that characterises human experience in raw, bleak language:

*As for man, his days are like grass,
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers him no more.
(Psalm 103: 15-16);*

And, elsewhere:

*Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.
He springs up like a flower and withers away;
Like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure.
(Job 14:1-2).*

These remarks will make it clear that from the pastoral perspective of the chaplain the event of dying is multidimensional. I would like to suggest that Cicely Saunders' insight into the complex nature of total pain (and, arguably, the nature of true humanity) is finally both exposed and resolved at death. Mark Cobb, who has written extensively on healthcare chaplaincy, comments that dying is not 'just a matter of irreversible pathology and catastrophic biological failure for the individual or for society'.²⁵⁹

Similarly, sociologists Hallam, Hockey & Howarth comment in their study of death and social identity, *Beyond the body*,²⁶⁰ that life and death may not be so easily separated as we should like. In another article, Howarth explains that in premodern Europe life and death were mutually dependent, each having implications for the other. Earthly wealth dictated one's resting place and memorial, while death (the great 'leveller') was for all a reminder that judgement was a possibility if one's morality and charity left much to be desired. The Reformation, with its insistence that the dead were dead and intercession for them was pointless, helped to reinforce the separation between the living and the dead.²⁶¹

In *Beyond the body*, Hallam *et al* discuss a matrix of possible identities such as being socially and biologically alive; socially and biologically dead; socially dead and biologically alive (*eg* having dementia or being in a persistent vegetative state); and socially alive and biologically dead (the 'continuing presence' of the recently deceased).²⁶² It is also true that the

²⁵⁹ Cobb, *The dying soul: spiritual care at the end of life*, p16.

²⁶⁰ Hallam, Hockey & Howarth, *Beyond the body: death and social identity*, chap 1; also Hockey, *Experiences of death*, and Clark (ed), *The sociology of death*.

²⁶¹ Howarth, *The rebirth of death*, in Mitchell (ed), *Remember me: constructing immortality, beliefs on immortality, life, and death*, p 21.

²⁶² Although western culture avoids contact with death and dying, the dead are more visible than ever in photographs, videos, and the desire for memorials; today's opportunities to 'live on' socially are

memorialisation of the dead helps to form the identity of the still living, in that it provides a historical context that may be considered determinative: the dead person becomes a genetic and a social ancestor, with all the associated power of leaving an inheritance.²⁶³ A familiar example might be the post-Holocaust identity of Jewish people. Margaret Mitchell's compilation, *Remember me*, includes some discussion of the suggestion that the relationship with a dead person continues and may even grow.²⁶⁴ 'It is evident that the dead do not go away but are maintained', she remarks.²⁶⁵ The use of material memorial objects is another interesting area of study.²⁶⁶

3.1.4 *The person fragmented by dualism*

As we have already observed, Hallam *et al* note that materialism tends to lead to an overt identification of the body and the self, which renders the self vulnerable to disease, age and, of course, death. In addition, to an outsider the self is understood as bounded and defined by the body, but to the person concerned, the self also has an identity apart from the body (although the authors do caution, *contra* dualism, that the self exists in a physical and social context of which it cannot be independent; see also the fascinating discussion of the inseparability of the mind and brain by d'Aquili and Newberg²⁶⁷). Problems arise when observers 'read off' an inauthentic identity from a damaged body – and this is an issue of care for the terminally ill person, especially where communication is impaired and it is difficult to establish needs and wants (this also applies to the disabled, the elderly, and anyone who 'looks different').

Two issues are identified as of particular interest here. First, there is an ongoing conflict through life between the active, individual social self and the decaying biological self, culturally experienced as the denial of ageing, disability, and death. Hallam *et al* comment that 'Self-reflection thus becomes more pronounced when the limits of the physical body are experienced',²⁶⁸ because sickness, suffering and death are crisis points in this conflict. This self-reflection is definitely observed in terminal hospice patients, and I refer here to Ian Ainsworth-Smith & Peter Speck's model of the dying patient's 'cones of awareness', in which the number

unmatched in previous generations. Rom Harré notes that 'people seem to work for a post-mortem future in the thoughts and memories of others', in *Physical being: a theory for a corporeal psychology*, p 31.

²⁶³ A general discussion of memorialisation is given in Green's book, *Beyond the good death*, chap 6.

²⁶⁴ Mitchell (ed), *Remember me*, deals with various aspects of the continuing social impact of a person after death.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p 16.

²⁶⁶ Hallam & Hockey, *Death, memory and material culture*, *passim*.

²⁶⁷ d'Aquili & Newberg, *The mystical mind: probing the biology of religious experience*, chap 3. See also Newberg *et al*, *Why God won't go away*.

²⁶⁸ Hallam *et al*, *Beyond the body*, p 21.

of significant persons with whom the terminal patient interacts gets smaller with time until the dying person withdraws into him- or herself.²⁶⁹ This tendency is sometimes described as 'decathexis' in the palliative literature.²⁷⁰ Therapeutically this is the point at which life reflection projects²⁷¹ can be helpful – for example, writing or making visual or virtual life stories; preparing memory boxes or letters for relatives; having conversations about the past; and possibly seeking forgiveness and reconciliation if appropriate. In Chapters 4 and 5 I will examine the importance of narrative in more detail in the experience of suffering. Other severe traumas may precipitate an extreme form of this 'inward' journey: Pines describes her therapeutic work with Holocaust survivors in which some survived the death camps by going into a form of 'psychic death' – a perceived separation of self from body. Not surprisingly this fragmentation of the whole person causes problems in later life.²⁷²

Secondly, Hallam *et al* note the existence of a fear associated with the loss of normal boundaries in the sick or dying body, which challenges the western cultural obsession with the 'classical' body that is clean and well controlled. This fear is thought by anthropologists to be linked to the human fear of the liminal or threshold state (see §5.3 of this thesis for a discussion of liminality). Julia Lawton conducted a 10-month study of hospice patients whose bodies were disintegrating from their disease, and concluded that hospices permitted the 'sequestration' of such bodies, allowing wider society to continue to 'live' as normal.²⁷³ In a paper on the 'abject' (*ie* 'degraded') body, Waskul & van der Riet²⁷⁴ offer the belief that the relationship between body, self and society is culturally constructed, and therefore fragile in the event of serious damage to the body, as occurs through cancer. The 'normal' balance between self and body is disturbed, yet we are dependent upon the body to give expression to the self. In our society the visible expression of self has a utilitarian priority over inner meaning, although when pressed, people will acknowledge that these inner aspects of self are important. However, in the public space the priorities are often with utility.²⁷⁵

²⁶⁹ Ainsworth-Smith & Speck, *Letting go: caring for the dying and bereaved*, p 32. In a process model, this social withdrawal could possibly be understood as a reduction in the number of possible futures.

²⁷⁰ Kubler-Ross, *Questions on death and dying*, p 13.

²⁷¹ The Rosetta Life project facilitates such life reflection processes in hospices by using digital media. For example, patients have made films and recorded songs; or have undertaken 'virtual tourism' when the real possibilities for travel have been curtailed. Further information can be found at <http://www.rosettalife.org/content/about/>.

²⁷² Pines, *Working with women survivors of the Holocaust*, in Pines, *A woman's unconscious use of her body*, pp 178-204.

²⁷³ Lawton, *Contemporary hospice care: the sequestration of the unbounded body and 'dirty dying'*, in *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 1998, **20**(2), 121-143.

²⁷⁴ Waskul & van der Riet, *The abject embodiment of cancer patients: dignity, selfhood, and the grotesque body*, in *Symbolic Interaction*, 2002, **25**(4), 487-513.

²⁷⁵ See also Mathieson & Stam, *Renegotiating identity: cancer narratives*.

Clearly both these issues are pronounced in a materialist society, which has a deeply dualistic approach to the mind or spirit and body that escalates the conflict described between the real and ideal body. The second issue, the fear of abjection, is aggravated by our consumerist appetite for advertising and visual beauty. In a materialist society that has 'downgraded' its traditional religious or other metanarratives, it is not surprising that the body becomes the seat of meaning (and hence the popular interest in Dawkins' reductionist genetics, or Stephen Hawking's 'theories of everything', which dispense with God). The existence of soul or spirit²⁷⁶ is an uncertainty for many people (because the non-material natures of these entities render them invisible in materialism) and 'self' is an apparently more rational category with which to work, which can be more easily accommodated within a materialist description.

A dualist view of the person, separating body from soul, spirit or mind (depending upon one's categories), is associated with certain assumptions about the nature of reality. In essence, dualism tells us that there are two sorts of 'stuff' – the physical and the non-physical – which by definition are not interconvertible.²⁷⁷ Thus when we come to discuss ultimacy, we have a decision to make since there can logically be only one form of absolute reality. Either the ultimate is spiritual, or it is material, or it is something other than these, of which we cannot conceive. Materialism commits to the ultimacy of the physical and thus subordinates all other categories of reality to that which can be empirically examined. This decision has profound implications for any understanding of death and resurrection. Christianity traditionally has undone this dualism in theory with its insistence upon the resurrection of the body and its roots in Hebrew culture, yet in practice it has functioned as though it is only the spirit that survives death.²⁷⁸ This theme of the nature of reality is a recurrent one but deeply significant because of the entrenched and often invisible nature of the dualism described.

The effect of a materialist metaphysics on the interpretation and experience of dying is clearly profound, since dying represents the logical crisis of both the conflict and the abjection. As anthropologists Kaufman & Morgan observe, beginnings and endings of life are 'frequently characterized by a time of provisionality, indeterminacy and contestation as social relations are reordered'.²⁷⁹ This time of stress and decathexis²⁸⁰ among families of the terminally ill is

²⁷⁶ Fraser Watts suggests that 'soul' goes deep while 'spirit' soars, but the definitions are highly flexible. See Watts, *Theology and psychology*, p73.

²⁷⁷ d'Aquili & Newberg believe that dualist thinking is a basic evolved mechanism of the brain arising from the action of the 'binary operator', see *The mystical mind*, chap 3.

²⁷⁸ J. B. Nelson, in his study of sexuality and Christian theology, comments that we do not have eternal souls waiting to be released from the body – Christian resurrection is about the continuing body-self. See *Embodiment: an approach to sexuality and Christian theology*, p 249.

²⁷⁹ Kaufman & Morgan, *The anthropology of the beginnings and endings of life* in *Ann. Rev. Anthropol.*, 2005, **34**, 319.

²⁸⁰ Described as withdrawal by Greyson in Kellehear (ed), *The study of dying*, p 262.

well recorded in the literature on dying and grief and accords with experience at the hospice. Such fluid categories of relationship and self-understanding do not fit comfortably into a materialist worldview. Once again we are led to the conclusion that a materialist paradigm does not easily contain the dying experience, and those who are dying are caught in the clash of worlds described in Chapter 1. The absent dimension in materialism is of course the transcendent: the material person at the end of life is left asking the question: 'What happens to 'me' when I die?', which materialism cannot address. Religious faith *should* address it, even if it cannot give an answer.²⁸¹

3.1.5 The 'medical/professional gaze' and the degradation of the dying person

To summarise what has been said so far, there is a significant consensus of opinion across disciplines that personhood does not reside in the physical or cognitive attributes of an individual, but is formed in the community and context of lived experience – a major shift away from the Enlightenment projection of the individual autonomous person, characteristic of modernism, and which complemented the Reformation emphasis on the individual conscience. Nikolas Rose writes: 'The Protestant revolution begins a new era in the culture of the self and the systems for self-direction, in which the union of conscience, casuistry, and the cure of souls is rejected; in its place, each individual comes to bear the obligation of doing the will of God...'.²⁸² This isolation of the self is existentially unbearable without faith, and Rose attributes the popular dependence upon therapies (as a substitute for religious belief) to this spiritual pain. The late 20th century Christian movements of charismatic renewal, and more recently of a recovered interest in monastic spirituality, may be responses to the hidden sense of meaninglessness that has pervaded the most individualistic expressions of church.²⁸³

One of the developments of a technological and materialist society has been the 'medical gaze', a new perspective on the body, arising during the 18th century from a combination of anatomical scholarship and clinical practice and achieving ever-increasing diagnostic success and consequent authority.²⁸⁴ The medical gaze in its strictest form reinterprets death as a purely biological event, and life as a 'commodity' in which 'bits' of bodies can be replaced, repaired, and regrown from cells much as one would deal with a machine or engine. The

²⁸¹ Interesting material is covered in Pevey *et al*, *How religion comforts the dying*.

²⁸² Rose, *Governing the soul*, p 220.

²⁸³ Ian Stackhouse and Stuart Murray have both explored the loss of confidence in the church that has led to unprecedented numbers of religiously committed people leaving it. See Stackhouse's *The gospel-driven church* and Murray's *Post-Christendom*.

²⁸⁴ Kaufman & Morgan, *ibid*, p 328, referring to the work of Michael Foucault. An interesting article considering the compassionate 'gaze of Christ' (as opposed to the objective medical gaze) has been written by D. C. Tolley; while A. Webster explores the medicalisation and objectification of the person in *Wellbeing*.

impact of medicalisation on death has been explored by McNamara and others and is discussed in Chapter 1.

One of the consequences of the medical (or professional) gaze is a shift in power, away from family networks and the dying person him or herself, towards doctors and other professional staff. A progressive disenfranchisement of the dying person takes place, which is increased by the experience of institutionalisation. Over the generations, families and friends have lost the confidence to deal with dying locally and have submitted increasingly to professionals. This whole process is endorsed within a materialist paradigm, in which the body, one's utility in society, and professional skill, are all (and increasingly) described in reductionist terms. In 1976, Ivan Illich wrote that 'Socially approved death happens when man has become useless not only as a producer but also as a consumer...Dying has become the ultimate form of consumer resistance...Technical death has won its victory over dying. Mechanical death has conquered and destroyed all other deaths'.²⁸⁵ Ironically today, at the same time as the NHS has been considering a new commitment to spiritual (as well as medical) care and the hospice movement is growing, so is the requirement to document, objectivise and professionalise spiritual care.²⁸⁶ McNamara²⁸⁷ (whose experience in Australian city (not rural) hospices seems to parallel the UK hospice scene²⁸⁸) notes a further contradiction in the shift to patient-centred palliative care – that often dying becomes extremely individualised, and, even in the hospice movement, the emphasis has shifted from dying well to living well while dying, because the patients (and carers and professionals) themselves have bought into the materialist paradigm so fully that to think about death is abhorrent.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁵ Illich, *Limits*, pp 206-208.

²⁸⁶ The NHS project *Caring for the spirit* produced a newsletter on the spiritual care of patients. Initially it examined the spiritual care provided to patients in the NHS and made recommendations for chaplaincy, although since funding has become an issue in the NHS the project is struggling. See 2003 report *Caring for the spirit*. The Association of Hospice and Palliative Care Chaplains (AHPCC) voluntarily produced and adopted sets of standards and competencies during the period 2003–2006. These developments shift spiritual healthcare into the professional category by moving towards continuing professional development, registration, standardised documentation of patient care and initial training requirements. See the AHPCC document *Spiritual care competencies in specialist palliative care* on the AHPCC website.

²⁸⁷ McNamara, *Good enough death: autonomy and choice in Australian palliative care*, in *Soc. Sci. Med.*, 2004, **58**, 936.

²⁸⁸ Although the hospice movement among native Australians is very different because of cultural factors.

²⁸⁹ Nursing staff new to palliative care often experience a kind of initiation period: at first there might be a honeymoon period with a number of 'good deaths' in which the new nurse is protected against the environment to some extent, but eventually there will be an intense period of multiple losses and more difficult dying experiences. This can make or break a nurse in the hospice. Levels of work-related stress can be high, and even experienced staff do not always deal with personal bereavement well, suggesting that in spite of acquired work skills, personal spiritual self-awareness is still largely influenced by the wider culture.

Waskul & van der Riet²⁹⁰ note that cancer patients often undergo a loss of confidence in their bodies after the disease (whether or not they are 'cured'). The damage to the balance between self and body already noted can be permanent. This loss of confidence may be the result of aggressive treatments, or arise from the disease process itself, and often patients will deal with the abjection by distancing themselves from their own bodies, perhaps by using humour. We could interpret this as a serious loss of power – and certainly of personal integrity, or freedom – in an embodied materialist environment. It allows the abject body to become an 'object' of professional interest – and of distaste. Nikolas Rose comments that: 'The regulative technology of expertise has invaded the competence of the individual and family, and produced dependence upon the state, the corporation, and the bureaucracy...Even personal life and forms of self-reliance have been transformed into a set of skills to be learned from doctors, social workers, and psychologists'.²⁹¹

With the delegation of power to professionals, however, comes another consequence. Decisions about care are more likely to be made on materialist criteria simply because funding, training and authority are predicated upon a materialist (and ultimately a market) philosophy. Thus materialism is cyclically reinforced between patients and (professional) carers. Further, if the patient's ability to communicate his or her preferences is impaired, the family (acting on that patient's behalf) is more likely to default to the professional's view. If personhood is perceived starkly in terms of the autonomous individual, then it is vulnerable with the loss of communicative ability and the absorption into the institution. However, if personhood is conceived as social and contextual in some way, then the whole perspective changes and the dying process has the potential to become more meaningful and less destructive. In Chapter 4 of this thesis I will explore the development of narrative – and narrative medicine is of particular interest here – as an approach to reality. Narrative interaction, rather than transactional, has the ability to replace the medical gaze with something altogether more holistic and can reveal different aspects of what it is to be human.

An interesting project was undertaken recently by photographer Walter Schels and his partner, journalist Beate Lakotta, in a German hospice, in which photographs were taken of a number of patients before and after death. The team used the photographs to create an exhibition, which was installed at the Wellcome Foundation in London in the spring of 2008. The purpose was to tackle the 'horror' around the dead body and the fear of death. At the start of the project, Lakotta explains how she had been frightened of death, especially because Schels, her partner, was 30 years her senior. The couple hoped to learn from the hospice patients who

²⁹⁰ Waskul & van der Riet, *ibid*, p 506.

²⁹¹ Rose, *Governing the soul*, p 216.

were soon to die, and found a wide range of attitudes towards death among them. Ultimately, Lakotta comments, 'I wouldn't like to be treated as just a corpse, a dead body – "just close the coffin as soon as possible." I would like that people I loved would look at my last face'.²⁹² The couple experienced a profound reorientation towards the experience of abjection through simple exposure to the death of patients they had come to know well. This rehabilitation of death took place in a hospice, where the 'medical gaze', although still present, is less powerful than in most healthcare settings, and interpersonal relationships with dying people may develop more normally, profoundly affecting the way in which the terminal patient, and indeed death itself, are perceived .

3.2 A way forward: the dialogical person

We have examined how, in the western world, 'person' commonly implies a highly individualistic phenomenon deeply influenced by materialism. The model of the material person has serious inadequacies because it fuses the ontological and functional aspects of the person together. Once a person's functionality is impaired, his/her (whole) personal being is also suspect, and questions of value and meaning become painful. The overview in §3.1 has shown that across various disciplines there has been a significant move towards a less reductionist view of the person based upon social and cultural constructions.

It will be helpful in developing better pastoral care to use a theological approach to personhood that offers a corrective to excessive materialism while 'making sense' in contemporary culture. Alistair McFadyen's model²⁹³ addresses this concern thoroughly – his 'dialogical' person holds the self in relationship and the self in context together with a mainstream Christian theological understanding of what it is to be human and created by the triune God (*ie* it bridges anthropology and theology). It is also a model that explicitly allows for the importance of story or narrative in the understanding of the person (McFadyen speaks of memory and language games); and one that I believe can be used in conjunction with process

²⁹² There is a report of the exhibition by Kmietowicz in the *British Medical Journal*, and one by Martin in *The Lancet*. A record of the project, entitled *Life before death*, is held in German at <http://encore.wellcome.ac.uk/iii/encore/record/C%7CRb1665186%7Cslife+before+death57COrightresult%7CX3?lang=eng&suite=pearl>, last accessed 1415h on 27 September 2010.

²⁹³ McFadyen, *Call, passim*.

and narrative insights to attempt to challenge some of the limitations of a materialist worldview.²⁹⁴

3.2.1 Overview of McFadyen's personhood

McFadyen's concern is to answer the question 'What is a person?', which originated in his early background in mental health nursing. Mental healthcare, like palliative care, deals with people on the boundaries of mainstream (and, I have argued, materialist) society; and I would argue that their circumstances could probably, as for the dying, be categorised as liminal (see Chapter 5) and therefore viewed as separate and even frightening in their strangeness.²⁹⁵

McFadyen observes that some approaches to the person refer everything to the individual (which at its logical extremity leads to chaos and anarchy), while other approaches are overly collective and displace personal responsibility. He seeks a *tertium quid* that respects the inherent social and theological relationality of human life, and in doing so draws upon the work of the sociologist Rom Harré,²⁹⁶ and on Martin Buber's theology of the 'I-Thou' relationship.²⁹⁷ McFadyen does not dialogue explicitly with the work of Paul Ricoeur, but I believe that dialogical personhood forms a natural partnership with Ricoeur's narrative anthropology and will later discuss the helpful connections between these models.

McFadyen concludes that we become 'personal centres' or selves by relating to other personal centres or selves *via* communication: 'A person is a subject of communication...'²⁹⁸ and 'Being a person means existing in relation'.²⁹⁹ Each of us is a recipient, from others, of information that changes us: we accumulate a reservoir of such information and experience and are thus 'sedimented' subjects of communication, in which history and context are important. (Pastorally this model feels highly appropriate when working with families at the hospice.) McFadyen understands creation in the image of the trinitarian God³⁰⁰ to mean that we are unavoidably and ultimately related, both to God, as the recipients of the divine address (the vertical dimension), and to other humans (the horizontal dimension), because the Trinity is a relational community of being (whose desire is creation). Personal identity and individuality,

²⁹⁴ McFadyen does not discuss process theology, and in one place says that he is unhappy with natural theology because it renders God dependent upon nature (*Call*, p 72). I would argue that the use of process insights can be helpful without deconstructing God.

²⁹⁵ Mary Douglas explores these dynamics in her classic, *Purity and danger*. McFadyen does not discuss liminal phenomena in *Call*.

²⁹⁶ Rom Harré develops a social theory that balances the individual and collective views of the person. See Harré, *Personal being, Physical being, and Social being*.

²⁹⁷ Buber, *I and thou*, 2nd edn.

²⁹⁸ McFadyen, *Call*, p 23.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p 28.

³⁰⁰ McFadyen appears to hold creative and trinitarian doctrines together, meeting some of Rudman's criticism.

says McFadyen, are neither asocial nor presocial, but develop from relationship. In other words, a person is not first a 'thing' that then relates, as construed in materialism, but rather, from the imperative of relationship a person begins to understand his/her centred identity. Relationship and community are thus ontologically prior to the individual, although relationship and community also require a degree of individual uniqueness and incommunicability to exist, says McFadyen. The unique centre of each person is indispensable although it cannot exist in isolation from others.

If we lose the importance of relationship such that we posit individuals as self-constituting, then humans are isolated from God (this isolation being the main theological problem with the idea of the immutable and impassible God, see Chapter 2 of this thesis). McFadyen argues that this relationship means that God creates us with the freedom to respond, or not respond, to God's address: there is no determinism about grace. However, we are not free to remove ourselves from dialogue because we are contingent beings: we cannot change God's intentional address to us.³⁰¹ Thus we come to McFadyen's definition of sin: the image can be spoiled, but not destroyed: we can choose to 'be deaf' but we cannot stop God from 'speaking'.³⁰² In McFadyen's model the Fall represents the choice of self over God and of individual over relationship.

The dynamic nature of personhood understood dialogically challenges the barrenness of materialism and allows us to reconstruct a holistic alternative that is of more help to the marginalised person (dying, disabled, ageing, dependent, of ethnic minority background, or otherwise compromised materially). Persons are structures of response 'sedimented' (McFadyen's term) from all past dialogues;³⁰³ the context of the dialogue is clearly important, as is the existence of memories (history). Full personhood is awarded by social consensus to those whose dialogues make sense in the public sphere: *ie* there is some regulation or code of communication that arises from mutual understanding and respect, from being socially 'for others'. Christians call this other-centredness 'love', and its ultimate origin is God and the perfect nature of the undistorted divine address. It follows that the church is thus the redeemed community in which dialogue should take place 'properly'. It should be transformational of, and not destructive of, the other. In everyday terms this means that there is meaning to life because God *is*, and because God *speaks*. Persons do not necessarily

³⁰¹ There might be analogies here with Rahner's transcendentalism: the address of God is something like the horizon of absolute being; and reference to an unconditioned absolute is constitutive of reality in this worldview.

³⁰² Which resonates implicitly with Genesis 1:1: 'In the beginning was the Word'.

³⁰³ Some writers have suggested that sedimentation has rather fixed geological overtones, while maybe a better interpretation is 'fluvial' sedimentation, *ie* more dynamic, as on the floor of a riverbed. Paul Fiddes notes David Cunningham's view of McFadyen's sedimentation in *Participating in God*, p 23.

perceive this dimension of meaning and can often attempt to live in denial of it - Rose remarks that a good life is now defined psychologically (*ie* in terms of self-fulfilment), not morally and ethically.³⁰⁴ However, the existence of meaning that is not reducible to the activities of the self is of great importance for the discussion of finding meaning in death, and I will use the categories of Ricoeur's narrative theory to explore this further in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

3.2.2 *How is a self identified dialogically?*

In §3.1 I discussed some contemporary difficulties with describing the human 'self' or person, with a particular focus on addressing the issues of suffering and death that I have identified in a material culture. I was concerned to think about the question of exactly *who* or *what* suffers and/or dies, because I think this is key to understanding the pastoral problems faced *in extremis*. McFadyen's dialogical personhood may be a helpful way forward at this point.

McFadyen agrees with the consensus position outlined in §3.1 that the public recognition of the self is primary, while self-recognition is secondary, which again, constitutes a challenge to pure materialism.³⁰⁵ The body is very important indeed: it provides boundaries to the self, and also a physical and active centre for the 'sedimented relations' which can be identified by others; it is the result of genetics, development, and responses to the environment. The body, however, locates us physically but not socially, and so we cannot be reduced to a physicality. McFadyen says that the word 'I' describes a relative location, not a thing: it pinpoints a communication partner but can only be understood in the context of a matrix of persons.³⁰⁶ This understanding corroborates the idea of §3.1.3, that physical death and social death are not the same, without capitulating to a dualist position.

The self does not have a substantial personal core, as in materialist thinking, but is centred by holding a belief about oneself within the matrix of dialogue with others that is reinforced over time and after multiple interactions – a form of 'testing and refining' of the centred self by dialogue and dialectic. So, 'Self is not a thing people have within them, but a theory which they have about themselves which facilitates personal existence'.³⁰⁷ It is also true that the person is never fully transparent to itself – it depends upon feedback from others.³⁰⁸ This self transcends embodiment and experience because it is self-aware, and it carries a continuous identity

³⁰⁴ Rose, *Governing the soul*, p xiii.

³⁰⁵ There are interesting shifts and debates in society about the identification of the self – such as the move from reading marriage banns (based upon the local recognition of the whole person) to a more purely documented process of registration and identity in which no-one needs to know the marriage partners 'personally', provided the written information is in place; or the move towards biometric ID cards, which hold a mass of objective data.

³⁰⁶ McFadyen, *Call*, pp 76-86.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p 100.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p 164.

throughout the changes of life even though it is dynamic and not static.³⁰⁹ To some extent, however, self is formed by the *expectations* of others, which form part of the context of the dialogue, and therefore open up the possibility of distorted dialogues – another locus for the impact of language and story and memory upon the person. Distorted dialogues can be described as manipulating the other, while undistorted dialogues give space to the other. The marginalised person in a materialist culture is the subject of multiple distorted communications which say: ‘you have no (economic) value’. This is a serious issue for the dying person, not only in terms of resourcing treatment, but also in terms of articulating their experience socially.

McFadyen³¹⁰ notes the existence of both a deep self (the ‘I’) and a local self (the ‘I–Thou’), which become evident in different contexts – the deep providing a reserve of identity while the local can disintegrate. McFadyen notes that it is essential for there to be continuity between the deep and local self, so that a person has an integrated private and public life – otherwise there is serious internal and external confusion about who the person might be.³¹¹ This integration can only take place if there is some kind of consensus over what constitutes a meaningful communication, and again we are reminded of the conflict of cultures for the dying person. This idea of the deep and surface selves is developed by Michael Kearney³¹² in his work with terminal patients, which is based upon the Jungian theory of individuation. Kearney’s observation is that dying people need to contact the deep self to find peace and meaning in their death: not everyone is able to do this, especially if their carers avoid depth and collude with denial. Those who practise forms of mystical or meditative prayer (Christian, Buddhist, Sufi *etc*) are familiar with the ‘deep’ territory and often find the dying experience less frightening. Once again we are led to the consideration of transcendent meaning and to the necessity of persons encountering the liminal spaces in life in order to access meaning. These ideas form the basis of the narrative arguments in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

3.2.3 The death of the dialogical self

In writing about a time of serious illness, when suddenly there was no confidence about there being a ‘next week’, the historian Donald Nicholl speaks of ‘hitting the buffers’: losing the

³⁰⁹ The *ipse* and *idem* identities of Ricoeur come to mind here, see my Chapter 2, fn 153.

³¹⁰ McFadyen, *Call*, p 102.

³¹¹ This idea of deep and surface identity appears to resonate with Woodward’s critique of the fragmented self model: McFadyen’s point is that there needs to be some continuity of various surface persona with the deep identity, while the fragmented self model fails to grasp the importance of the referential deep self.

³¹² Kearney, *Mortally wounded: stories of soul pain, death and healing*, pp 54-56.

'horizontal' dimension to life and discovering the need to learn to live in the 'vertical'.³¹³ If McFadyen's personhood model of two-dimensional relationality is viable, then death or serious illness should not suddenly involve a massive reorientation from the horizontal to the vertical; rather, given the inevitability of death, we should ideally become aware of our relational multidimensionality in the midst of life. Materialist thinking militates against this awareness, as we have already discussed, by focusing exclusively on certain aspects of the horizontal, and seriously inhibits our ability to prepare for death. This idea of holding onto the vertical – or, perhaps more clearly, the transcendent – takes us into a discussion of how comfortable we are with liminal experience (see Chapter 5) and also, eventually, towards the development of the key idea (explained in Chapters 5 and 6) of understanding suffering as 'ontological impertinence': an experience of profound reorientation.

I discussed in Chapter 1 the broad understanding of spirituality in healthcare settings as being about meaning, significance and value. In McFadyen's model, meaning, need and freedom are never private, but are all experienced through dialogue:³¹⁴ the parallels between spirituality, personhood, and relationality are thus not hard to see. Based upon this consideration of McFadyen, Frankl, and others, I want to summarise the journey at this point to say that meaning in life is about the perceived continuing value of the self, but the self is experienced in the context of a social existence and so meaning does not just depend upon some inner 'thing'. It is in part a gift from others, including God. Full personhood is unavoidably spiritual and relational, but recognising meaning as existing primarily outside oneself³¹⁵ is extremely difficult in our society, which promotes self-fulfilment, self-expression, self-development, with 'self' being understood in an individualistic subjective manner.

How does a person die 'dialogically'? If personal meaning is developed *via* the exchange of information which changes us (through dialogue), then any problems or distortions in communication will damage the person. Complete incommunicability is impossible for a created and contingent being, because the divine address calls us into being. We can, once we are socially independent, choose to cut ourselves off from interpersonal communication; and physical or mental illness can cut us off from others in an involuntary manner, but the early physical and emotional dependence of the foetus, of babies, and of young children means that once we have been conceived, we can never really say that we are without others. We cannot escape our inherent relationality. (The importance of this given relationality will be explored

³¹³ Nicholl, *Beatitude of truth*, p 129. The biblical imperative for living 'in the vertical' is found in Jesus' instruction not to worry about tomorrow (Matthew 6:34).

³¹⁴ McFadyen, *Call*, pp 226-229.

³¹⁵ Meaning is not separate from oneself but is not wholly autonomous; it does depend upon mutual relationship, dialogue, feedback and reinforcement *etc.*

further in a discussion of Cavarero's work in Chapter 4, which in turn draws on Ricoeur.) Furthermore, the undistorted address of God is beyond our control and we cannot prevent God from speaking (although in freedom we can choose not to hear). The life, work, and particularly the resurrection, of Christ inform us primarily that the address of God is not interrupted by death but continues into the life to come: we remain persons in dialogue because of this vertical and transcendent dimension of communication. The logical extension of this argument is that personhood has an inviolable dimension, which survives not only death but any form of abuse or cruelty. This ultimacy of the person is surely what is recognised in, for example, legislation to protect human rights, or the American Constitution, and which is somehow held in the very being of God. If so, this notion also takes us back to a consideration of Whitehead's process thought, in which objective immortality indicates the eternal retention within God of all experience. Whether or not this kind of immortality is a just and sufficient 'compensation' for those who have suffered greatly is a matter of current discussion (see §6.3 and especially fn 555).

McFadyen discusses ways in which dialogue between centred selves can take place: one can manipulate another self; one can be manipulated; or the partners can truly seek one another in undistorted communication (this latter is conformity to Christ; being other-centred; sanctification). Distorted communication occurs when one treats another as an object rather than as a true dialogue partner; *ie* when the desire to change and be changed by the dialogue becomes lopsided or closed in some way – and arguably describes the experience of suffering. The question for us here is: when this damage to the person occurs, is this partial (or total) death? McFadyen speaks of death as being closed off from others; when no further growth as a person (through dialogue) is possible. For example, a person can be damaged by his/her sedimented communication history (*eg* past abuse, manipulations). To try to enter a healthy dialogue with this person, so that s/he can recover a sense of personhood, is a costly business, which we would call love, and requires a considerable level of self-giving and possibly (appropriate) self-disclosure. Can McFadyen's personhood help us to develop, in conjunction with narrative and process insights, a view of suffering that does not deprive a person of meaning and value even in the most extreme circumstances?

3.3 Enhancing the model of the dialogical person

In the mire of multiple personhood definitions, Fraser Watts offers some helpful and practical advice, which is especially appropriate for the complex area around suffering and death. He suggests that we need to maintain a broad view that holds together the biological and social:

science tends to emphasize the former, while contemporary theology focuses on the latter.³¹⁶ At first glance, Watts seems to be saying the same thing as McFadyen, who searches for the balance between the individual and the collective. However, Watts believes (although I am not sure that I agree) that McFadyen neglects the biological at the expense of the social, and that his dialogical theory is insufficiently embodied.³¹⁷ Watts mentions James Nelson's book *Embodiment* (on sexuality and theology) and also feminist writings as examples of theology that attempt to engage the body fully, but adds that (at the time of writing) this fusion is rare.³¹⁸ Stanley Rudman includes a short discussion of embodiment in his book on personhood and ethics, in which he mentions the importance of the body for women as a result of their social childbearing and nurturing functions, but also the way in which a masculine and dualistic society has hitched this holistic bodiliness to negative social status.³¹⁹ Rudman notes that feminist theologians have made an important contribution in identifying this issue but need to be careful not to turn it into a grand narrative in its own right.³²⁰ I want to argue that by using process theological insights to interrogate aspects of McFadyen's relational model, we can develop a way of thinking about the suffering and/or dying person that is pastorally very helpful and also successfully links the social, biological, and theological aspects together.

Is McFadyen's perceived lack of bodiliness simply his reaction to the prevailing materialism of our culture? In the introduction to *The call to personhood* he identifies excessive materialism as a problem in healthcare, saying: 'The most common form of this individualistic explanation [of the person] attends almost exclusively to the material reality of the individual's body...Therapy is then a matter of physical, usually chemical intervention...Counselling and other more personal forms of therapy will tend not to be offered'.³²¹ This has, until recently, been the usual experience of dying people in the hospital, while in the hospice there can often be an overcompensation of 'spiritual' care to counteract the 'medical gaze', manifested, for example, in the proliferation of complementary therapies. These therapies are often of dubious demonstrable physical benefit, but there is a vague and often strongly defended feeling that they help to improve 'wellbeing'. I discussed earlier (in connection with Rose,

³¹⁶ Watts, *Theology and psychology*, pp 68-70.

³¹⁷ *Ibid*, p 69.

³¹⁸ Watts, *The multifaceted nature of human personhood*, in Gregerson, Drees & Gorman (eds), *The human person in science and theology*, p 49. More attention is being paid to this aspect of theology since Watts wrote this article, particularly with the added dimensions of ecological theology and human sexuality issues. Sallie McFague is one such author; James Alison is another.

³¹⁹ Rudman, *Concepts of person*, p 109.

³²⁰ There is also a tendency for this imbalance to develop when dealing with the terminally ill – in some social contexts there can be a destructive power in victimhood or perceived victimhood that is not the other-centred power of the Cross portrayed in 1 Corinthians 1. Helen Luke is an early Jungian feminist who is aware of these dynamics and whose writings attempt a balance of the masculine and feminine, see for example, *Kaleidoscope*.

³²¹ McFadyen, *Call*, p 3.

Taylor and Illich) the possibility that the use of therapy can itself be a capitulation to materialism but in a disguised form, because therapy is also normally offered in the form of a 'professional' intervention – if so, the hospice might not be as countercultural as it first appears.

3.3.1 *The vertical dimension/the transcendent*

McFadyen describes the need for persons to relate in two dimensions – the vertical (God) and the horizontal (with others). It is possible to argue that a third dimension is also appropriate – meaning that the wider world in which we live and on which we depend is also somehow constitutive of our personhood. This argument returns us comprehensively to the debate about the God–world relationship explored in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

Process thinking is panentheistic, meaning that the creation is perceived to be held within God in some way, and so even the 'obvious' distinctions between living and non-living may be ontologically suspect in certain forms of argument. Fraser Watts, for example, notes that humans share an evolutionary path with 'nature' and are part of it – human experience, while mysterious, is grounded in the brain, which is a physical organ in the material world.³²² Watts adds that presumably divine action in the natural (*ie* non-human) world does not need to be revealed because there is no consciousness there; but although such action is not *perceived* it is not necessarily correct to assume that divine action does not take place. Miracles, continues Watts, need not be understood as flouting natural law, but rather as occurrences in which a theological explanation is more appropriate than a materialist one. One's definition of a miracle is clearly important. Robert Ellis explores this theme in his book on prayer: 'God's providence extends, in a direct way, over all of nature, over the corporate life of humanity, and over the destinies of men and women. Everything and every event is related to God's will and care'.³²³

3.3.2 *Dealing with dualism*

Ian Barbour finds process thought helpful in rejecting the perceived science/theology divide and in *Nature, human nature, and God* discusses research on the characteristics of systems that are of interest when thinking holistically about the nature of reality.³²⁴ He focuses on the

³²² Watts, *Theology and psychology*, pp 102-103. See also the books by d'Aquili & Newberg describing their research on the neurology of mystical states, *The mystical mind*, and (Newberg *et al*), *Why God won't go away*. They conclude that while science cannot 'prove' or 'disprove' God, it can prove that all spiritual experience is mediated by the brain, irrespective of what kind of reality the spiritual experience represents.

³²³ Ellis, *Answering God*, p 4.

³²⁴ Barbour, *Nature, human nature, and God*.

characteristics of self-organisation, indeterminacy, top-down causality, and communication. All challenge a materialist or causal view in some way and could be said to be the type of issues that lead to a paradigm shift in thinking.³²⁵ Barbour seeks a model of God that rejects the kind of divine intervention that violates the laws of nature, which by definition also means that in this model there is no rift in the types of reality, no body/spirit dualism. Process insights provide such a model, incorporating the four characteristics mentioned and also adding a sense of what Barbour terms 'interiority', which is of particular interest in the debate about the person.

Interiority refers to the retention of past experiences, which is an important feature of McFadyen's personhood model (described in terms of sedimentation), and also corresponds neatly with the process understandings of concrescence and of ultimate meaning (*ie* being held in the eternity of God in some way). Interiority involves both communication and emotion. Emotion is particularly interesting because it comprises non-sensory experiences and is not *generated* materially (although it is *mediated* materially, by the brain). Neurologists d'Aquili & Newberg have studied the science of mind experiences over many years, and have concluded that it is impossible to separate the mind from the brain (*ie* the conceptual from the biological); and also that there is good biological evidence for the existence of a transcendent reality, whatever that might be.³²⁶ Process thinking thus invokes a kind of multidimensional cobweb of events and relations within which our lives unfold and are integrated: a unified reality that has transcendent and immanent, material and non-material, aspects. The body (for Barbour) is the 'vehicle of relationality'³²⁷ with other persons (McFadyen terms it the location of sedimented relations).

3.3.3 *The use of narrative*

The use of narrative to access and describe life experiences is another common denominator in both process and dialogical thinking, which retains both immanent and transcendent aspects through its metaphorical nature, and is perhaps the only way we have of accessing interiority: it cannot be studied empirically in a comprehensive way. Barbour argues that science and theology can be held together if a person is understood as a 'multilevel, psychosomatic unity who is both a biological organism and a responsible self. We can avoid

³²⁵ Kvasz has written on the nature of the paradigm shift and its transcendent qualities, see *Theol. Sci.*, 2008, 6(1), 89-106. Kvasz says that there are several types of revolution in science that correspond with Barbour's four categories of relating science and theology by using the quality of transcendence.

³²⁶ See d'Aquili & Newberg, *The mystical mind* and Newberg *et al*, *Why God won't go away*. Ultimate reality may be 'God' or may be a mental state; research can never really establish which, since it is the brain that processes the experience. However, the effect of the experience of ultimacy on the brain can be studied.

³²⁷ Barbour, *Nature*, p 96.

both materialism and body–soul dualism if we assume a holistic view of persons with a hierarchy of levels'.³²⁸ Barbour's approach is narrative in character: a mixture of objective fact and subjective experience. Narrative is both derived from and constitutive of persons, and bridges myriad metaphysical divisions with ease, as a child realises when s/he seeks to understand abstract concepts.

3.3.4 Problems with power

McFadyen's dialogical model of the person also deals with issues of power: in short, the 'quality' of the dialogue between persons is a measure of its authenticity (*ie* Christ-likeness). Distorted dialogue devalues and can damage a person, maybe permanently; and the power balance between persons can influence or be influenced by their dialogue. In Chapters 5 and 6 I will think further about the power dynamics in the story of Job. Process thinking, by providing a God-model that addresses a number of the issues of classical theism relevant to the person created in *imago dei*, can illuminate this issue of power and thus the nature of the person: (i) God's power is not dominating (as in omnipotent magisterial power), but empowering of others; (ii) divine power is limited in process thinking by metaphysical necessity, not by God's choice (addressing the problem of impassibility and the charge of capriciousness); (iii) human freedom is therefore real: we are truly not determined and God is absolved of responsibility for evil.³²⁹

In summary, to adopt process insights about the nature of reality is beneficial for thinking about the person in multiple dimensions. It confronts the problem of how God can interact with a creation that is wholly 'other' and the need to speak of the miraculous violation of natural law; it addresses the problem of evil and suffering. It affirms the embodied person holistically and dynamically in relationship, and tackles perceptions of power. All these points are helpful in working towards a pastoral theology for death and dying.

3.3.5 Existential longing

If McFadyen is right, and personhood involves both a horizontal and a vertical (or transcendent) dimension, then it is not unreasonable for that vertical dimension to manifest itself in our lives in some way. Nicholl spoke of 'hitting the buffers' in crisis, which alerted him to his lack of awareness of the vertical dimension. Perhaps more commonly we are aware of an ill-defined existential longing, something in us that searches. This longing, often addressed

³²⁸ Barbour, *Nature*, p 71.

³²⁹ *Ibid*, chap 5.

futilely by consumerism in the global market economy, is the 'mark of infinity' upon us: our necessary desire for God.³³⁰ Silesius³³¹ warns his readers about the power of this inner longing:

*Crave nothing short of God; I say it clear and strong.
How holy you may be, your idol it will become.*

Perhaps we could say that in Christ we see one whose longing is perfect; and for ourselves, if our lives are lived and interpreted in a context of materialism, then life itself may become our 'idolatrous' goal, with death as the disastrous alternative.³³² I will return in Chapter 5 to Ricoeur's analysis of the root of this longing – our awareness of our mortality – and expose further the implied necessity of the transcendent for human being. Chapter 4 will build on the idea of personhood introduced in this chapter. A dialogical model of the person, adapted by process insights and open to narrative description, may offer a vehicle for improved pastoral care.

Personhood in such a model is never static, but ever changing under the ongoing dialogue with God and with others. This multifaceted dialogue thus contains both eschatological (the perfect response yet to be realised) and redemptive (the ever-renewed address by God) dimensions. The essential openness of this personhood model, to God, to the world, and to the future, presents a challenge to the material self and establishes the essential transcendence of being that gives hope to the dying.

³³⁰ See, for example, Clarke, *The philosophical approach to God*, pp 27-32; Sheldrake, *Befriending our desires*, esp chap 6.

³³¹ Silesius, *The cherubic wanderer*, Book 1, no 75.

³³² Given that d'Aquili and Newberg believe that our brains are hardwired to be dualistic, it is interesting to posit death as the 'opposite' of birth rather than life.

Chapter 4. Narrative and transcendent experience

I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit. (Job 7: 11, NRSV)

In this chapter I will argue that there is in postmodern Britain a cultural reaction against the categorial nature of materialism that has led to a renewed interest in story and narrative – and several examples of the therapeutic use of story are offered. By drawing on the work of Ricoeur, Niebuhr and others, I will outline some of the grounds for assuming a narrative character to the nature of reality, which in turn implies transcendent and relational grounds to the notion of personhood. This examination forms a basis for establishing connections between personhood and narrative, and then I take the further step of linking narrative to process thought to complete the networking of ideas about suffering persons that was initiated in Chapter 1.

The classic text on suffering in the OT is the telling of Job's story: in this *telling*, he eventually finds peace. Telling the story of one's life has a healing quality. It is cathartic, for example, for those who have undergone a severe trauma, or for people who have led a very public life and need to explain the hidden dimensions of that life which justify their apparently inappropriate actions. More modestly, therapeutic intervention at the hospice indicated that finding a way to record the past brought a sense of purpose and direction to the fraught pressures of the present, and the (often fearful) anticipation of the future. Mention has already been made of the Rosetta Life project, which seeks to capture the life stories of hospice patients by using arts: in music; in film; in poetry; in art or craft; and in digital media of various sorts.³³³ One of Rosetta Life's projects hit national fame for a brief period in 2005, when musician Billy Bragg helped cancer patient Maxine Edgington to write *We laughed*, a song inspired by a photograph of her with her 15-year-old daughter Jessica. This song was played on national radio and sold many copies. The lyrics proclaim the deep joy of a loving relationship and also a sense of loss (although definitely not self-pity) for the past times – one line of the song declares 'we never thought those days would end' – but there is also a calm resignation about moving into the future.

Although these projects provide a memorial for the dying person there seems to be more to them than simply 'leaving something behind'. The actual *process* of recording the memories

³³³ The organisation's website has already been listed at www.rosettalive.org, but details of the music projects can be found at www.rosettarequiem.org, last accessed 1501h on 27 September 2010.

and feelings is a powerful step towards the acceptance of death. The chorus of *We laughed* declares:³³⁴

*And the hardest part of living
is giving up what has been given;
and you know no-one could love you more,
whatever the future has in store,
I want you to remember that we laughed.*

And the song ends poignantly,

*Some things don't turn out as planned:
if I give you to our Father's hand,
I want you to remember that we laughed.*

One patient of the hospice at which I was chaplain was a gifted artist, and produced an exquisite *mandala*³³⁵ for her family which contained references to her marriage and daughter that would have been easily discernible to those concerned. She also wanted to write something for this (teenage) daughter – both a life story and an expression of her love – but in spite of repeated attempts was unable to finish this before it was too late. As chaplain she asked me to visit her at home the day before she died, but could not complete the written project: however, her artwork told her story perhaps more appropriately, since she was an artist and not a writer. Another patient, who had very limited artistic ability of his own, asked me to buy a sculpture for his wife that modelled their family of three. His family (himself, his wife and his daughter) was the most important thing that had happened to him and this was his way of telling that story to his wife as a permanent memorial. All these examples indicate the desire to record one's life story in some way. Psychologist Dorothy Rowe remarks in her study of death that '...our brains work in such a way that nothing is meaningful to us until we have fitted it into a story'.³³⁶

Anthropologists have researched the memorial activities of human beings and note this common desire to 'live on' after death – discussed in Chapter 3 in terms of being biologically dead but socially alive. But observations at the hospice suggest that there is much more to this phenomenon than simply a desire to be remembered, or a kind of 'human immortality'. The telling of the story has a therapeutic or healing value. I would like to explore some

³³⁴ CD *We laughed* produced for Rosetta Life by Cooking Vinyl, PO Box 1845, London W3 0ZA. Words reproduced with permission.

³³⁵ A *mandala* is a cyclical representation of life common to a variety of cultures. It is used in Buddhism for meditation and in Jungian interpretation indicates the desire for completeness.

³³⁶ Rowe, *What should I believe?*, p 5.

philosophical and theological dimensions of this storytelling process that may be useful in underpinning pastoral work with dying people.

There is some variety in the use of terms in this area. The use of *metanarrative* or *grand narrative* appears to be reasonably consistent across the literature and means something like a religious or political system that provides an interpretive framework for life or social events (eg Christianity or Marxism would be classed by most people as metanarratives). The terms 'narrative' and 'story' are often used interchangeably, and normally the meaning is evident from the context; but we can also discern 'levels' of story or narrative, which some writers attempt consistently to distinguish. For example, one level refers to an extended happening over time (eg a person's life, or the account of an organisation, or a war); while another refers to 'smaller' events that are linked together sequentially to form the bigger ones (eg the account of what happened yesterday). In this thesis I generally use 'story' in a personal context (eg someone's life story) and 'narrative' as a more technical description.³³⁷

4.1 Narrative selves and postmodernism

Postmodernism is complex and on the whole has characteristically defied systematic description. Gerard Loughlin offers a helpful overview: 'Postmodernism is not the dawning of a new age, but of a day without tomorrow...[it] is the idea that the once hoped-for future of the human race has arrived...[it] is the economics of the consumer market applied to all areas of human life...[it] is a fashioning of commodities'.³³⁸ He goes on to explain that when the old master stories of religion began to lose credibility, modernism reinvented master stories which it told with 'scientific rigour'.³³⁹ Unfortunately these new master stories generally lead to horrible futuristic scenarios that no-one wants, and so everyone begins to invent their own little master stories. This culture of multiple metanarratives, characterised by a high degree of autonomy, is postmodernism.

³³⁷ Some texts consulted for background on narrative and not referenced elsewhere include Bartholomew *et al* (eds) *After Pentecost*; Fiddes, *Freedom and limit, The novel, spirituality and culture*, and *The promised end*; Frye, *The great code*; Goldberg, *Theology and narrative*; Niebuhr, *Beyond tragedy*; Ricoeur, *On interpretation, Figuring the sacred*; Stroup, *The promise of narrative theology*; Vanhoozer, *Biblical narrative in the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, and *Is there a meaning in this text?*.

³³⁸ Loughlin, *Telling God's story*, pp 4-6.

³³⁹ One might be the 'pointlessness' of the evolutionary process; another, the power of humans to control the future (leading to ecological and political chaos).

4.1.1 *The lost transcendent dimension*

In Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis I discussed the residual dualism of postmodern western culture and the way in which such dualism impacts negatively the transcendent dimension of life. 'Modernity was the great period of boundary-drawing', notes Philip Clayton, adding that postmodernism is characterised by the *transgression* (not the *destruction*) of boundaries.³⁴⁰ This idea is a useful one because within postmodernism the old cultural patterns of modernism are both recognisable and opened up. Others echo these analyses: 'The greatest weakness of modern thought consists in the false identification that is constantly made between scientific thought and the effacement of all human relationships, their reduction to the simple objectivity of things', says René Girard;³⁴¹ while Alasdair MacIntyre³⁴² describes the social tendency of modernism to separate and divide and its philosophical tendency to reductionism: both tendencies are destructive of any sense of *telos* and contribute to a general sense of nihilism.

There is some evidence that westerners are tiring of this monochrome materialist worldview – for example, there is an increasing interest in spiritualities of all kinds,³⁴³ frequently couched in the language of holism and realism, and a renewed interest in narrative as opposed to analysis. Paul Ricoeur,³⁴⁴ deeply frustrated in the 1970s by the straitjacket of reductionism, developed over the next 30 years what became almost a systematic framework of thought that is often styled 'phenomenological hermeneutics' (meaning that it is interpretation based upon real life experience) and which hinged upon a narrative concept of reality. Hauerwas & Jones have recently (1997) gathered a set of essays on narrative and agree that the significant current interest is likely to be a response to the aridity of Enlightenment philosophy. They draw attention to the ubiquity of narrative claims and suggest that narrative and epistemology are linked: narrative is not simply a form of literary criticism but is arguably a basic conceptual category.³⁴⁵ Stephen Crites describes this insight as the 'narrative quality of experience' and notes in particular the ontological coherence that narrative lends to the events of a life over time. Grace Jantzen says 'Philosophers can generate universals in abstraction, but in so far as we hope to understand the world and the society which we inhabit, let alone offer

³⁴⁰ Clayton, *Boundaries crossed and uncrossable* in Vanhoozer & Warner (eds), *Transcending boundaries*, pp 91-94.

³⁴¹ Girard, *Things hidden*, p 124

³⁴² MacIntyre, *The virtues, the unity of a human life, and the concept of a tradition* in *Why narrative*, Hauerwas & Jones (eds), p 89.

³⁴³ See Hay, *Something there*,

³⁴⁴ Background on Ricoeur can be found in R. Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, J. McCarthy, *Dennett and Ricoeur on the narrative self*, Muldoon, *On Ricoeur*; and an edited selection of Ricoeur's work is found in Valdes (ed), *A Ricoeur reader*.

³⁴⁵ Hauerwas & Jones (eds), *Why narrative?*, pp 3-5.

constructive interventions, we cannot dispense with actual life stories, the narrative of individuals and their intersections'.³⁴⁶ With her usual perspicacity Dorothee Sölle cuts through the morass of western forensic thinking and comments, 'Contemporary attempts to restate religion or to state it anew simply do not make sense unless they take into consideration the centrality of experience'...'experience sets itself over against the empiricism of normality and the idealization of scientific learning in which the individual is reduced to a number, and over against "bending the knee to the altar of reason"'.³⁴⁷

4.1.2 *The return of the story*

The church is often popularly perceived as a modern and authoritarian construct and therefore unattractive in a postmodern setting. In response, organisations such as Bible Society and the Northumbria Community have started storytelling initiatives, developing narrative-based communication techniques for the traditional content of scripture. The revolt against prescriptive thinking has also taken place in other sectors, and the NHS worked on the development of a policy named *Caring for the spirit*,³⁴⁸ which placed a value on spiritual healthcare, while since the mid-1980s there has been a growing interest in 'narrative medicine', in which consultations have evolved from forensic and transactional encounters between experts and patients to dialogues about life in which patients' information is received less critically.³⁴⁹ Writers and speakers such as the psychologist Oliver James are openly challenging materialism;³⁵⁰ there has been outspoken (if transient) public criticism of the way in which consumer politics have obscured the 'things that really matter' during the global recession beginning in 2008; while the Reith Lectures of 2009 given by Michael Sandel discussed the need for our culture to develop a shared moral philosophy (we currently struggle with a fragmented morality combined with a legislated emphasis on individual rights and corporate standards, which is highly and often unhelpfully relativistic).³⁵¹

If narrative is truly a fundamental category, then the human fascination with stories, both in describing the deep things of reality and as relational tools, is easy to understand; but narrative perceived in this way may also provide a rationale for the deep desire of suffering and dying people to leave a story behind them, which thus has implications for pastoral care.

³⁴⁶ Jantzen, *On philosophers (not) reading history: narrative and utopia* in Vanhoozer & Warner (eds), *Transcending boundaries*, p 181.

³⁴⁷ Sölle, *The inward road*, p 33.

³⁴⁸ Although a chaplain in the NHS has recently informed me (24/12/10) that the initiative is now 'dead in the water', because of issues around chaplaincy funding.

³⁴⁹ See Greenhalgh & Hurwitz (eds), *Narrative based medicine*; S. Nelson, *Medical rites*, p 20; Brody, *Stories of sickness*, chap 1; Hauerwas, *God, medicine and suffering*, pp 62-66.

³⁵⁰ James, *Affluenza and The selfish capitalist*.

³⁵¹ The Reith Lectures 2009, *A new citizenship*, given by Michael Sandel. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00kt7rg>, last accessed at 1535h on 27 September 2010.

Narrative may provide the essential link between the very immediate lived materialism of daily modern life and the transcendent dimension of being that is often manifested as desire, longing, fear and anxiety and which we find it so difficult to name and to manage.

4.1.3 *Internal and external stories: harnessing the transcendent*

I would like to return to the idea introduced in Chapter 1 that one of the tensions around a dying person is that of articulating a transcendent experience in a dualistic materialist culture. Philosophical theologians have described this tension in various ways. R. H. Niebuhr locates its roots in what he terms the 'two-aspect' theory of history, in which we think in terms of 'internal' (*ie* personal) and 'external' (*ie* public) stories or histories.³⁵² Too often, he says, we relegate revelation and the sacred to the 'external' location and fail to understand such history as 'ours'. We think of ourselves as *observers* of, say, the gospel stories, and not as *participants* in them. This is quite unlike the way in which the NT writers make use of the OT as their own 'internal' history.³⁵³ Niebuhr develops the notion that internal and external histories exist properly in a dialectical relationship.³⁵⁴ Each is challenged and reshaped by the other, although this can only really happen if the histories are internalised. This dialectic is also explored by Ricoeur in *Time and narrative* (vol 3), in which he discusses the world of the text and the world of the reader: '...considered apart from reading, the world of the text remains a transcendence in immanence. Its ontological status remains in suspension – an excess in relation to structure, an anticipation in relation to reading. It is only in reading that the dynamism of configuration completes its course. And it is beyond reading, in effective action, instructed by the works handed down, that the configuration of the text is transformed into refiguration'.³⁵⁵ Thus the text, or the external story, is not a frozen and static thing that is merely *observed*, but can be 'refigured' by its user or reader. This dynamic and dialectic process has to be recognised as a form of participation.

Ricoeur speaks of a cycle of testimony and revelation.³⁵⁶ We tell a story, and in the telling the story is revealed to both teller and listeners, and transformation occurs – the way in which we approach the story changes. In a dialogue between Ricoeur and Lewis S. Mudge at the beginning of *Essays on biblical interpretation*, they discuss the 'I AM' discourses of Jesus in John's gospel. Ricoeur calls this the 'trial of truth' in the fourth gospel, which establishes the

³⁵² Niebuhr, *The story of our life* in Hauerwas & Jones (eds), *Why narrative?*, pp 30-40.

³⁵³ *Ibid*, p 35.

³⁵⁴ Holstein & Gubrium discuss the argument that narratives of the self are neither internal nor external, but both: storytellers are not 'narrative puppets'. There is also a dynamic and mutual interplay between context and story. *The self we live by*, pp 103-124.

³⁵⁵ Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 3, pp 158-159.

³⁵⁶ Ricoeur, *Essays on biblical interpretation*, p 17.

identity of Jesus through a process of testimony (lived and spoken) and reflection that is revelatory. The church must continue to reflect in this way upon the testimony of Jesus in a new context. This dynamic occurs not only in the history of the church and other groups, but also in individual life stories; and resonates with Niebuhr's internal/external picture and with McFague's model of dialogical personhood, in which persons are formed and shaped by their dialogues within a context. It seems likely that the perceived integrity of a history will determine its staying power or its sedimentation potential.³⁵⁷

Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After virtue*, observes the profound effects that this dialectic (between internal and external histories) can have in society. He argues (and we might perceive echoes of C. P. Snow's two cultures) that in the west a true scientific culture was largely lost and then resurrected from a skeleton knowledge, with the result that we possess fragments of a conceptual scheme that has lost its significant context. He then argues that the same thing has happened with morality. The problem is that we cannot see what has happened because the phenomenon is institutionalised, and since we have the trappings of morality without the context, the result is a contemporary morality that is a ghost of what it should be.³⁵⁸ It lacks integrity because we cannot understand what it is to do with us. The result is that moral decisions are extremely difficult to make and moral arguments easily become cyclical and self-referential. Ricoeur's analysis of our modern inability to 'hear' the Bible (a story of transcendence) is based upon a similar contention: we have lost our sensitivity (the 'first naïveté') to the symbolic language of scripture through our desire to control and atomise our context.³⁵⁹ Because scripture does not seem to address our concerns in a rational manner, we may stop listening to it altogether: 'something has been lost, irremediably lost: immediacy of belief', says Ricoeur, although he then speaks of the 'second naïveté', when 'by *interpreting...we can hear again*'.³⁶⁰

Christians thus *do* continue to believe that scripture describes reality – it is the story of the God–world relationship, although not in a scientific language. However, the vital point here is not the kind of language that is used, or even whether it is 'true' (although Christians believe that it is true), but rather that *it is part of our shared history*, and we cannot escape our history. We cannot live as if it were not so (*ie* we cannot pretend that historically there was not supposed a transcendent dimension to reality). We have together been irreversibly changed by the existence of this reality story as it has been told and retold. To attempt to separate our personal lives from any historical context is an inadequate (and reductionist) hermeneutical

³⁵⁷ McFadyen, *Call*, pp 72-73.

³⁵⁸ MacIntyre, *After virtue* (3rd edition), chap 1.

³⁵⁹ Mudge, *Paul Ricoeur on biblical interpretation*, in Ricoeur, *Essays on biblical interpretation*, pp 4-6.

³⁶⁰ Ricoeur discusses the first and second naïveté in *The symbolism of evil*, p 351.

strategy. If we do attempt it, the result is to disengage us from the shared stories of our world, which of necessity (because they are shared and not merely personal) have a transcendent universal dimension. Ricoeur, describing the way in which we pursue our own life stories, comments: 'In place of an ego enamoured of itself arises a self instructed by cultural symbols, the first among which are the narratives handed down in our literary tradition. And these narratives give us a unity which is not substantive but narrative'.³⁶¹

Christians tend to think in terms of non-believers refusing to engage with the story of faith and thus failing to discover meaning in life; however, the criticism can also be levelled that the Christian community refuses to engage properly with the world's story, and even its own story, by taking an overly dogmatic approach to doctrine as definitive of what it is to be a Christian – thus being too reductionist and too self-referential. In a recent article on 'aesthetic theology', Paul Fiddes considers the difficulty of regarding Christianity as culturally distinct from the world in which it is embedded. He describes the linked but different functions of systematic and narrative theologies: the former provides a grammar³⁶² or set of rules (Tolley suggests a landscape³⁶³) for interpreting the scriptural story, while the latter takes a less theoretical and more holistic approach to scripture: 'In short, literature tends to openness and doctrine to closure'.³⁶⁴ Fiddes explores the idea that the surrounding culture (he examines extrabiblical literature in particular) needs to be allowed to 'break in' to the Christian story, to open it to new insights and reshape the Christian community in each new generation so that the world and the church can speak the same language. This is a dynamic and dialectic process. Does it matter that some of these narratives with which we should interact are not 'true' (ie they are fiction)? Ricoeur argues that the division between what we call 'history' and what we call 'fiction' is a thin one indeed. History is interpreted as we order it into an account; while fiction can in fact change and impact a reader's life as s/he reads, interprets and internalises the story.³⁶⁵ Lindbeck notes, 'It need not be the religion that is primarily reinterpreted as world

³⁶¹ Ricoeur, *Life in quest of a narrative*, in Wood (ed), *On Paul Ricoeur*, p 33.

³⁶² Lindbeck, *The nature of doctrine*, p 81: 'Some doctrines, such as those delimiting the canon and specifying the relation of Scripture and tradition, help determine the vocabulary [of the rites, symbols etc of Christianity]; while others...instantiate syntactical rules that guide the use of this material in construing the world, community, and self, and still others provide semantic reference. The doctrine that Jesus is the Messiah, for example, functions lexically as the warrant for adding the New Testament literature to the canon, syntactically as a hermeneutical rule that Jesus Christ can be interpreted as the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises...and semantically as a rule regarding the referring use of such titles as "Messiah".'

³⁶³ See Tolley, *Aesthetic Christology and medical ethics*, p 162.

³⁶⁴ Fiddes, *Concept, image and story* in *Int. J. System. Theol.*, 2009, **11**(1), p 9.

³⁶⁵ Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 3, chap 8.

views change, but rather the reverse: changing world views may be reinterpreted by one and the same religion'.³⁶⁶

Ultimately the attempt to separate internal and external histories divorces people from belief, meaning and relevance: without an internal history that is linked to a bigger vision, we cannot really have a sense of a goal for life. Niebuhr comments that 'To be a self is to have a god',³⁶⁷ linking the need for story with the need for a sense of the transcendent with the notion of personhood, all in one. He feels that only a decision of the self can effect the transition from observer to participant and styles this as *metanoia*.³⁶⁸ It is a new way of looking at life, a complete change of perspective. Ricoeur, in his opus, *Time and narrative*, explores the connections between what he terms 'cosmic' (or universal) time and 'human' (or lived) time, which is the same kind of idea.³⁶⁹ Ricoeur notes that our awareness of the two kinds of time causes us existential anxiety: we recognise that cosmic time exists beyond us and without us, and our mortality becomes very evident. This anxiety is understood to drive us to leave in some way a mark of our human significance: the drive to establish a personal story or narrative in some way (though Ricoeur notes that this mark will still have to be interpreted by those who come after us, and we cannot control the act of interpretation). Ricoeur also notes the existence of historical time, which mediates between cosmic and human time. An example is calendar time, which allows us to place events in relation to one another: so we might be living through an event, but the context of that event is something else: historical time allows us to conceptualise both.³⁷⁰ I will examine the importance of the temporality of narrative for suffering further in Chapter 5, but here it is useful to note that we cannot actually exist on internal history: it is linked philosophically to the external or cosmic dimension. This has two important consequences for this argument about suffering persons: (i) that our human relationality is inescapable; and (ii) that transcendence is not something we can choose to buy into: it is a part of being human, however successfully we might live on the material plane for much of the time.

Logically, then, we are driven to say that personhood itself is dependent upon this link to 'godness' (whatever that godness might be: but certainly 'it' transcends the individual). Without this shared human search for meaning (*ie* the process of linking the personal story to

³⁶⁶ Lindbeck, *ibid*, p 82.

³⁶⁷ Niebuhr, *The story of our life*, in Hauerwas & Jones (eds), *Why narrative?*, p 39.

³⁶⁸ Niebuhr says that one cannot be both observer and participant (*ibid* p 41), which accords with relativity theory: that the presence of the observer affects the outcome. In other words, strictly there cannot be a disengaged spectator. This is McFadyen's view of the person: that we are called into dialogue with God (and others), whether or not we recognise that actuality.

³⁶⁹ Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 3, chap 4.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p 108.

something 'bigger' and with greater longevity), we cannot have a shared history: this is the felt plural misery of postmodernism, in which we have to make moral decisions and in which we undergo suffering and death. Hauerwas & Burrell argue that an ethical life can only be properly constructed in terms of a narrative, because then it includes this context of which we are a part: 'It is exactly the character of narrative that helps us to see that we are forced to choose between some universal standpoint and the subjectivistic appeals to our own experience'.³⁷¹ This appeal is to 'practical' wisdom in preference to systems and prescriptions, and Hauerwas & Burrell emphasise in particular the fact that the intelligibility of the plot is not the key thing. Narrative *exposes* rather than *explains*. It provides context, not causality.³⁷² Narrative is thus a suitable vessel in which to place questions that do not have an obviously causal answer: and the question about the origin of suffering, which is a part of the living and dying process, falls into this category.

4.2 Characteristic paradigms of narrative

In §4.1 we discussed the philosophical possibility that narrative is a fundamental category of reality; but this possibility can also be explored by theology and science. Three main world religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are essentially narrative in form; while investigations in neuropsychology by scientists such as d'Aquili & Newberg and Cozolino suggest connections between brain and mind and the nature of consciousness that lead to a narrative basis for brain activity. Cozolino³⁷³ has written a chapter entitled *The construction of the narrative self*, in which he describes the centrality of narrative in building and organising the brain during evolution. He says: 'Despite the number of voices in our heads and our changing feelings, thoughts, and sensations, we generally experience ourselves as stable and consistent through time. The stories we tell about ourselves have a unified agent – a single self that is the protagonist of our stories'.³⁷⁴ This unifying process sounds rather like McFadyen's sedimented personhood, but without the latter's explicit dimension of God: Cozolino views the self as a social construction, although he acknowledges the value of story and myth in human learning and (psychological) healing. D'Aquili & Newberg go further in insisting also that it is possible to

³⁷¹ Hauerwas & Burrell, *From system to story: an alternative pattern for rationality in ethics in Why narrative?*, p168.

³⁷² Psychologist Dorothy Rowe explains that when a traumatic event shatters someone's sense of 'self', the set of ideas that person holds about reality fall apart. Rowe believes that unless the person is sufficiently self-aware to recognise the ideas for what they are, then the default strategy is to construct a fantasy to make sense of it all. This fantasy, which may be a transient object, will contain ideas about the meaning of life and death. *What should I believe?*, p 50.

³⁷³ Cozolino, *The neuroscience of psychotherapy*, chap 8, pp 153-171.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p 156.

experience the transcendent as a unitary state, and to demonstrate that experience (of unified being) through tests of neurological activity. They note also that science will never be able to establish whether the transcendent experience actually exists or whether it is generated within the brain itself, because empirical science can only test the brain and not the transcendent. However, there is broad current agreement that narrative may be a fundamental activity of humans, in which case we should be able to identify some paradigmatic characteristics of narrative – as attempted here. These characteristics can be observed consistently in pastoral engagement.

4.2.1 The universal desire for coherence in a life story

People need to link their temporal experiences together diachronically and also to place them within a bigger picture. This insight is key to the development of my own argument about the meaning of suffering from a pastor's perspective. Ricoeur's exploration of the various types of time – human, cosmic and historical – is enormously helpful and will form a major part of the discussion in Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis. However, many others have explored the idea of needing a personal story for life, and I would like to acknowledge some of them here. We have already considered Niebuhr, who pinpoints the need for this sense of coherence over time; while Crites speaks of the resonance between the 'mundane' (personal) and 'sacred' (fundamental narrative) stories in the world, meaning that when we feel that our own story has points of identity with the 'big' stories of life then there is a sense of security.³⁷⁵ This desire for order seems to be a fundamental human need with ancient origins and has been explored variously. In his Gifford Lectures, Moltmann observes the vestigial desire of humanity to link temporality to eternity through ritual: 'Human experience and human acts must find their foundation and form in their correspondence to what is primal and divine if they are to be meaningful...it is only ritual which confers safety in a mysterious and chaotic world',³⁷⁶ he writes, adding later in the chapter that a focus on human history that is disconnected from its theological significance (as it is in modernity) will merely cause pain and stress to humanity.³⁷⁷

The chaos myths of the ANE are thought to have influenced the writers of the Genesis creation and flood narratives (in the sense of a monotheistic God controlling the disorder of the deep waters); and Revelation speaks hopefully of the eschaton as the time when there is no more sea (Revelation 21:1). This desire for order, safety and security is not just a theological concept. I have already referred to the neuropsychological research of Cozolino and d'Aquili & Newberg, which suggests that humans are hard-wired to find causality and order in the world

³⁷⁵ Crites, *The narrative quality of experience* in Hauerwas & Jones, *Why narrative?*, pp 70-72.

³⁷⁶ Moltmann, *God in creation*, p 104.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p 139.

as a basic survival mechanism; while anthropologist René Girard³⁷⁸ identifies the root of violence in human societies in a desire to order and control the unexpected. This tendency to violence is also noted by Ricoeur in his analysis of the truthfulness of testimony that is perceived as destabilising. A narrator becomes a witness when he testifies out of conviction: a witness may, in due course, become a martyr. 'The witness is the man who is identified with the just cause which the crowd and the great hate and who, for this just cause, risks his life'.³⁷⁹ I think we could say that the group does not want its self-referential and currently coherent narrative to be disturbed. Incidentally, once again we are reminded of the impossibility of separating one's internal and external histories.

The philosophers Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero have each explored the need of human beings to have stories, and as feminists approach the subject from the viewpoint of a minority, which is helpful when thinking of people who are suffering and thus misunderstood or even ostracised by society. 'The story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings', says Arendt, commenting on the life of the writer Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), who used storytelling almost as a life skill.³⁸⁰ Stories are, however, told not just to provide a kind of retrospective patterning, to insert events into a logical sequence for the sake of rational tidiness, but to yield a sense of the 'who' of a person in a manner that is inaccessible from a philosophical starting point, which latter only leads us to 'what' the person is (the classical subject): in other words, stories can indicate the fact that the whole (person) is greater than the sum of the parts. Cavarero argues that selfhood cannot be separated from the self's story, so to say 'who' I am requires a story.³⁸¹ McFadyen discusses the way in which the communication of the monological subject (*ie* the one who refuses dialogue) is about valuing causality and success above sociality and understanding.³⁸²

Arendt recognises this 'who' view of the person as a political act because it refuses to see people as things: derogatory speech tends to be directed towards 'what' and not 'who'.³⁸³ We

³⁷⁸ Girard, see for example, *The scapegoat*. Other texts by Girard include *Violence and the sacred*, *I see Satan fall like lightning*, and *Job, the victim of his people*; James Alison also draws extensively on Girard in discussing minority groups in *Faith beyond resentment* and *On being liked*. Bailie's *Violence unveiled* is also helpful.

³⁷⁹ Ricoeur, *Essays*, pp 129-130.

³⁸⁰ Hannah Arendt, in the foreword to Isak Dinesen, *Daguerrotypes and other essays*, p xix. Arendt quotes Dinesen as saying: 'All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.' Dorothee Sölle's three-part analysis of suffering (silence, articulation, transformation) and Ricoeur's similar treatment of lament suggest a theoretical basis for this observation, as explored in Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis.

³⁸¹ Cavarero, *Relating narratives*, p viii.

³⁸² McFadyen, *Call*, p 123.

³⁸³ See Arendt, *Human condition*, pp 181-182; McFadyen, *ibid*, chap 5. McFadyen's personhood model implies that dialogue can either affirm or reduce another person. Also discussed by Wendell, *The*

recognise other persons by the fact that we sense that they have a story – a narratable self – as we ourselves do; although we do not need to know the details of that story in order to assign to that being the status of personhood. We then depend upon one another to tell our stories, especially since we cannot narrate our own birth and early life events. In fact, Cavarero's thesis turns on the assertion that we are human because of our *desire* to have our story from the mouth of another person. This desire may arise, according to Cavarero, because at the moment of birth our lives have a unity that is subsequently lost because we cannot later recall it, and so our lives appear incomplete to us; we long to return to that sense of unity and desire others to fill the 'gaps' in the story for us.³⁸⁴ Ricoeur might understand this desire as an alternative description of the existential anguish we discover in the intersection of human and cosmic time.

This process is entirely dynamic: 'Life cannot be lived like a story, because the story always comes afterwards, it results; it is unforeseeable and uncontrollable, just like life',³⁸⁵ says Cavarero. If we try to make life happen like a story then it will change the story. This observation mirrors that of Niebuhr when he discusses internal and external histories and the impossibility of separating them by being a spectator rather than a participant.³⁸⁶ However, the meaning of the experience appears only retrospectively, after a process of interpretation, and not contemporaneously with the actual living. Thus story (or narrative) makes an excellent vehicle for dealing with the experience of apparently meaningless suffering.

4.2.2 *The universal identification of beginnings and endings*

A second universal paradigm is the search for story boundaries: beginnings and endings. In *Being and time* Heidegger asserts that 'Time must be brought to light and genuinely grasped as the horizon of every understanding and interpretation of being'.³⁸⁷ Although Heidegger cautions that time can be understood in various ways, nonetheless the notion that there might be time-related boundaries to the self is affirmed, and this theme crops up again and again in studies of the person. Heidegger discusses the effect of death on the self (Da-sein): he says

rejected body; Bishop (ed), *Religion and disability*; Mitchell & Snyder (eds), *The body and physical difference*; and Eiesland & Saliers (eds), *Human disability*, for material on the identity of the disabled.

³⁸⁴ Cavarero, *Relating narratives*, pp 36-43.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p 3.

³⁸⁶ It is interesting to note the parallels with the principle of quantum indeterminacy, which deals with the linked phenomena of micro- and macroscopic processes (rather like narratives at different levels). For example, there is the thought experiment of Schrödinger's cat, which animal (the macroscopic system) is shut in a closed box together with a mechanism triggered by the decay of a radioactive material (the microscopic system). Once decay starts (and there is a very high probability that it will), the cat will definitely die. The question is whether at any point the cat is alive or dead – it is technically both dead and alive until the observer opens the box to look. But after opening the box, the observer is implicated in the outcome of the experiment.

³⁸⁷ Heidegger, *Being and time*, p 15.

that we know that we must die, yet veil it from ourselves, and live in a fraught condition of certainty that death is possible at any moment combined with uncertainty about when that moment will be.³⁸⁸ He calls this an 'everyday entangled evasion of death' and denotes the self as Being-toward-death. In other words, we live knowing that one day we will die, and this knowledge makes us the kind of beings that we are; yet we are not dead yet. Kermode's fascinating 1960s study of fiction, *The sense of an ending*, discusses the notion of beginnings and endings with special reference to the apocalyptic genre. Kermode reiterates the coherence theme (see §4.2.1) by noting that events draw their significance from a grand unitary narrative, rather than from one another.³⁸⁹ His insight that men are born 'into the midst' of life, and need a beginning and an end against which to orient that life, echoes and expands the notion of Arendt and Cavareto that there is an innate desire for 'completion' or unity in the project of living.

Kermode³⁹⁰ distinguishes *chronos* (passing or waiting time; a time of expectation of the next event) from *kairos* (significant or crisis time; the time when something happens to punctuate the ongoing continuum), rather like having (*kairos*) time 'beads' on a (*chronos*) 'string' of time. Those working in bereavement services find that young children are unable to contextualise their experiences adequately because they have relatively few memories and only a nascent sense of *chronos* time and perspective against which to develop the meaning of any *kairos* event, let alone the permanent impact of a death. The result is that children interpret their experiences very concretely and their stories tend to be 'of the moment'. At the hospice I found often that a bereaved child would weep desperately at the loss of a parent, then immediately will run outside to shout and play because his/her friends have arrived. Humans need *chronos* to understand *kairos*.³⁹¹

Kermode senses that we project ourselves to and past the 'end' in the effort to conceptualise the whole: this whole simply cannot be scoped from the middle ('middest'), which is where we are temporally located. In fact, although we want to do so, we cannot pin down and objectivise the story because narrative (Ricoeur style) is dynamic and dialectic, depending always upon

³⁸⁸ Heidegger, *Being and time*, p 238.

³⁸⁹ Kermode, *The sense of an ending*, p 5. Note that although it is the grand unitary narrative that lends significance to the event, it does not mean that temporally separated events do not affect one another: see, for example, Moltmann's discussion of time as a network, rather than as linear progression, *God in creation*, pp 126 ff. See also the ideas discussed earlier in this chapter about needing to link one's story into a bigger story.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid*, pp 45-50.

³⁹¹ Interestingly, it has been observed that those with language impairment from birth also struggle with developing a good sense of *chronos* and *kairos*. A deaf child may enjoy Christmas celebrations but then struggle to grasp why the tree isn't decorated every week. As language develops, an understanding of time perspective also comes: the fundamental connection of narrative and meaning once again. See Gregory, *Deaf children and their families*, p 187.

the narrator and interpreter: this unrealised desire continues to drive us to seek more explanation and information. The 'end' of my story is ever *immanent*, and affects all other events, although it may not be *imminent*, or reifiable.³⁹² Every time 'something happens' to us, as an experience of *kairos*, we effectively speculate about whether it is the end; although it seems (from the experience of children) that we need to see and grasp the 'ends' of others before we can sense our own.³⁹³

Arendt, Cavarero and others have eloquently described the opacity of a person's beginning. I cannot remember my own birth or indeed my first year of life. This impenetrable bit of each person's life is essential for the project of unity and coherence but escapes us all because we have no memory of it. There is also a certain parallelism between *birth* (rather than *life*) and *death*: we cannot narrate either birth or death for ourselves, but depend upon others to do it for us. Life narration is rather different: indeed, we can narrate our lives with 'spin' if we want to do so. Sallie McFague observes with respect to all language that we are 'hermeneutical creatures',³⁹⁴ both in our understanding of what others tell us and in our expression of our own life experiences and their meaning. But the narration of birth and death is outside our control: we are inescapably linked with others in the stories of our lives, and indeed, cannot correct their accounts of us (reminding us of McFadyen's observation that we have no control over the dialogue or response of others, and that we are responsible for one another's personhood).

If it is true that humans are ontologically hermeneutical or narrative, and that we rely on others to provide parts of our narrative, particularly at the boundaries of existence, then a materialistic and reductionist approach to life will cheat us of meaning at these critical points by trying to pin down and reify what cannot be pinned down and reified. It is not surprising therefore that people often turn to ritual and poetry, rooted in metaphor and narrative, to express complex feelings about birth and death.

4.2.3 *The universal need to participate*

If narrative is descriptive of self or personhood, then participation is implicit in narrative. Why must this be? Because, following Buber, McFadyen, Harré, Cozolino, Arendt, Cavarero and many others, I have argued that persons are formed relationally. A person conceived in this manner cannot be a totally self-determined subject but must function and exist dynamically

³⁹² Kermode, *ibid*, p 6.

³⁹³ It may be worth noting that in John's gospel, Jesus first raises Lazarus from the dead; then he is himself raised; finally, after these transformational testimonies, we are called to trust that we too will undergo bodily resurrection.

³⁹⁴ McFague, *Metaphorical theology*, p55.

and relationally in his or her social context. Narratives, as ontologically determinative of persons, and persons, as 'narratable selves',³⁹⁵ must exist in a dialectical relationship with one another in this framework. Thus Hans Frei can say that character and circumstance are nothing without one another, and so 'Jesus is his story',³⁹⁶ and we can be transformed by his story to the extent that we are able to participate in it, dialogue with it, make it ours.

A person will always be unique because of this participation. The dynamic relationship in which we exist with others is also affected by our contingent circumstances,³⁹⁷ and a person is narratable because he or she is exposible to others who tell his/her story. McFadyen grasps this concept in a different manner – he speaks of the inescapable dialogues in which we exist, both with God and with others. We cannot fully tell our own stories: we need one another as narrators (the intangible occasions of birth and death have been discussed in §4.2.2).

Cavarero, a feminist philosopher, believes that the western tradition post-Descartes has become a male field of self-representation.³⁹⁸ By proposing the abstract and non-participative person (as 'what' rather than 'who'), men (subjects) have established the notion of success as dominance and universalism. Women (objects) have tended to focus on the finite and particular, of which uniqueness is an extreme form.³⁹⁹ In plain language, Cavarero generalises that women tell stories of lives (*ie* 'who'); while men discuss achievement ('what'). Yet, she insists, we can argue that a life is unique without being exceptional or powerful. Why does this matter? Because dying – and sometimes suffering – brings a story to an effective end in this life; and at the end of a life we want to know *who* we are, how we are distinguished from others: this lies not in the size of the footprint we leave behind but in its uniqueness, which is a given for every self.

Janet Finch, in a recent British study of names as indicators of kinship, remarks: 'My name has two dimensions. It marks me as a unique individual, and it also gives some indication of my location in the various social worlds which I inhabit...'.⁴⁰⁰ She continues later with a quote from Susan Benson, who writes on issues of naming and slavery: '...naming [is] a quintessentially social act...naming acts as a critical element in processes of social incorporation and the constitution of personhood'.⁴⁰¹ Benson continues, 'We are named by others and, in many naming systems, *for* others: in a critical sense, then names belong as

³⁹⁵ The term 'narratable self' is Cavarero's designation. Cavarero, *Relating narratives, passim*.

³⁹⁶ Frei, *Theology and narrative*, p 42.

³⁹⁷ See Loughlin, *Telling God's story*, p 70; Cavarero, *Relating narratives*, p 33.

³⁹⁸ Cavarero, *ibid*, p 49.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p 53.

⁴⁰⁰ Finch, *Naming names*, p 709.

⁴⁰¹ Benson, *Injurious names*, in vom Bruck & Bodenhorn (eds), *The anthropology of names and naming* pp 178ff.

much, if not more, to the givers of names as to those that bear them'. The dual dimensions of the person are identified by Finch as individuality and connection. In a subjective universe these appear to be opposites yet closer analysis shows they must be held in creative tension: this is the realm of narrative.

The notion of participation in narrative is particularly interesting for this study because of the nature of scripture. Scripture is often described in terms of 'transforming' narrative; the story of Jesus of Nazareth invites us always into participation, not least because of its parabolic form. This invitation is made even more explicit by Paul's frequent use of the incorporative style 'in Christ', or 'in him', when referring to the members of the church. Approaching the gospel is certainly not an objective reading experience. Loughlin reminds us of the instruction to John in Revelation to 'eat' the scroll (Revelation 10:8-11), followed by the commission to go and prophesy about (and to) many nations. The sequence is the paradigmatic one: a participation in the transforming narrative; and the integrity of that participation will determine the longevity (sedimentation) of the witness.

4.2.4 Interim summary of argument

I have emphasised three common desires in autobiographical storytelling which I think are identifiable in the stories told at the hospice and have sought to find support for these characteristics in the literature of narrative.

(i) To find coherence or an order for the plot. Recounting one's life story and emphasising the things of particular significance is valuable. Patients often found it helpful to 'account for' their lives prior to their illness, and this process is frequently repeated at the funeral service after death for the benefit of the bereaved.⁴⁰² There has been some anguished debate among Christian chaplains about whether a service based upon memorial material is actually a proper ritual for death. Some argue that the funeral should be a commendation of the deceased into the hands of God, and less focused on a celebration of the life that has now been completed. Clearly the choice is to some extent determined by the religious beliefs of the family concerned, and contemporary funeral services (outside the committed church congregation) are largely about commemorating a life. But is this an evasion of religious belief? I would argue that there is narrative justification for understanding a memorial celebration, which effectively recounts the life, as a vital pastoral tool that does actually connect the bereaved with a greater reality. The extent to which we might name that reality needs to be determined in the context of that family.

⁴⁰² See Davis, *A funeral liturgy: death rituals as symbolic communication*, in *J. Loss & Trauma*, 2008, **13**, 406-421.

(ii) To identify beginnings and endings. Patients were often keen to talk about where they were born and who were their parents. In addition, they often wanted to outline the process of the disease that had brought them to this place of anticipation of the end (noting that of course we can only anticipate the end; we cannot 'own' it). Once again, this was also important to the families after death, as was the palpable sense of relief once the funeral service was over: the 'end' had finally been achieved.

(iii) To narrate participatively. Stories did include personal achievements, but much more important were the friendships and family ties that characterised a life. It was also interesting that a patient's account and the accounts of others were often subtly different! Sometimes there would be an attempt to change the story of the life at a late stage. Efforts at reconciliation after long term family feuds might come into this category. Others would cling steadfastly to the story as given and refuse contact with certain people who wanted to be reconciled. Did the story narrate the life, or did the life narrate the story? Do we become the story we narrate for ourselves?

If we are 'beings unto death' and if every self has a story because reality is fundamentally narrative in character, then the instinctive desire to tell the story of one's life as the end approaches may be understood as a capitulation to a basic sense of personhood, and it may also help to resolve the dualistic tensions of postmodernism for the dying or suffering person.

4.3 Narrative and process thought: natural partners?

How does it progress this project if we understand the narrative nature of reality?

Philosophically, narrative offers an alternative to the dualism and separation of modern and some postmodern thought by offering unification without universalism. *Theologically* Christianity, which offers a religious account of reality, is narrative in form (as are Judaism and Islam). *Socially*, narrative is inclusive and offers a sense of *telos* to a fragmented world. *Scientifically*, Chapter 2 of this thesis considered the possibilities of using insights from process thought to argue for a single reality in which science and faith, the material and the transcendent, could coexist without demeaning any of them. I have already argued that process and dialogical personhood have some natural correspondence, and that dialogical personhood is narrative-like. Can we now find some correspondences between process insights and narrative that might help us in finding a meaningful location for suffering and death in today's culture?

4.3.1 *The sense of a journey or story that is also coherent*

Foundational to process thinking is, of course, the notion of development and change: the dynamic 'becomingness' of all reality. Transience with endurance is built into process thinking at every level. A key point in process thinking is that Whitehead understands God not as the external controller, or ultimate cause, but as the one who journeys intimately with us (and all things) in all life's uncertainty.⁴⁰³ The journey is itself as important as any arriving, because we are constantly challenged in the vagaries of life to respond to the lure of God: 'He is the lure for feeling, the eternal urge of desire'.⁴⁰⁴ God (in God's 'consequent' nature according to Whitehead) holds all reality in Godself, so we cannot be 'without God' in any of life's experiences, good or bad, and neither can there be a true epistemological separation between science and faith. Every experience we undergo has significance in being held eternally in God, adding to the great creative network of existence and affirming the contributive value of all things: 'he is the beginning and the end. He is not the beginning in the sense of being in the past of all members. He is the presupposed actuality of conceptual operation, in unison of becoming with every other creative act'.⁴⁰⁵

If we now return to our thinking on the character of narrative, then there are resonances with process thought in several places. First we might note the desire for forming a coherent whole out of our life experiences; to place the 'beads' of events onto the 'string' of story, and in so doing, to satisfy our desire for unity, meaning, and order. Process thinking accommodates the notion of a history very suitably, and some of its undergirding characteristics may be covertly traced in much later 20th century theology that is not labelled as process.⁴⁰⁶ For example, when Moltmann discusses the network of time,⁴⁰⁷ he observes that each present moment has a past and a future, which pasts and futures are themselves present moments in their turn. This sense of time resonates with a process model and demonstrates the connectedness of each instant and the relatedness of all things.

Furthermore, narrative theorists attach special significance to anticipation and memory, which again closely correspond to the process categories of prehension and concrescence. Kermode speaks of the 'tick' and 'tock' model of a story plot, which describes the anticipation at every moment of the next (and different) instant of existence, and notes that we desire meaning in

⁴⁰³ Whitehead, *Process and reality*, corrected edition, p 342.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p 344. The lure of God could be understood as the Spirit active in all creation. I am grateful to Richard Kidd for discussions on this theme.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p 345

⁴⁰⁶ Cooper, *Panentheism*, offers an overview of the influence of process thinking on many streams of theology.

⁴⁰⁷ Moltmann, *God in creation*, p 129.

the space between the tick and the tock, and especially when we are speaking of birth and death. When beginnings and ends are not fixed, there is an implication for the space between: the loss of certainty to which Heidegger refers in his discussion of *Da-sein* as being-toward-death.⁴⁰⁸ The result is that we constantly anticipate the end (hence the enduring and ubiquitous fascination with the apocalyptic genre); and in postmodernism the absence of an interpretive metanarrative means that all our ends are individual ones: we do not share a vision for what might come. In Chapter 1 I referred to Beverley McNamara's comment that we no longer live in anticipation of the life to come; we just live for as long as possible.

Others have commented upon the importance of memory for meaning in life. Stephen Crites says that memory allows us to escape the ignorance of the present moment by allowing us to build up knowledge of ourselves. Our very sense of self arises from memory and anticipation working in harmony: 'It is the narrative from of consciousness which allows for the holding together of a determined past and an indeterminate future in the present moment'.⁴⁰⁹ Loughlin notes that we can thus understand, say, the Eucharist, not just as a past remembrance but also as determinative of our present and our future; while the future determines our past as anticipation. Thus the present is narrativised from both the past and the future and we are indeed coherent.⁴¹⁰

The final correspondence between process and narrative in this section on journey and coherence is to do with finding that we are in touch with transcendent reality. It has already been observed that individual narratives (the 'mundane' stories of Crites⁴¹¹) which do not acknowledge their dependence upon a grand narrative (the 'sacred' stories) have a tendency towards nihilism. Not only is there no big story into which the individual story may fit, to lend an overall sense of *telos*, but self-determined and self-referenced narratives also destroy our dialogue, our relationality, and leave us asking only 'what?' and not 'who?'. We are thus degraded as persons, just as we degrade other persons by this overly subjective way of thinking, since we truly discover ourselves through others.

4.3.2 *The implications of relationality*

Narrative material dominates the whole Bible: indeed, the primary metaphor of scripture is that God speaks a Word (Nicholas Lash⁴¹² emphasises that God only speaks one Word (*ie* Jesus Christ, and that this idea is the (hermeneutical) key to reading scripture). Sallie McFague has

⁴⁰⁸ Heidegger, *Being and time*, pp 238-239.

⁴⁰⁹ Crites quoted in Loughlin, *Telling God's story*, p 65.

⁴¹⁰ Loughlin, *Telling God's story*, 239-241.

⁴¹¹ Crites quoted in Loughlin, *ibid*, p 70.

⁴¹² Lash, *Holiness, speech and silence*, pp 66-67.

similarly observed that parable – a form of narrative – is *the* dominant genre of the NT and has discussed the parabolic and metaphorical nature of theology (and indeed of reality) itself: she identifies Jesus Christ as the parable of God. This narrative approach addresses the ontological issue of the person from another angle: if Christ and his life are expressed in parabolic form, and if the incarnation is the ideal of true humanity, then by logical extension, life must be parabolic or narrative in form for us all. It also has implications for the reading of scripture, since the inherent ‘is and is not’ of metaphor that enables the description of new things by language also precludes the notion of the fixed meaning of scripture.⁴¹³

There are two main consequences of this observation about the narrative person in *imago dei* that are particularly significant for this project and which relate to process thought.

4.3.2(a) Contingency

The incarnation shows us that God is fully exposed to and engaged with the world in the way that we are. Jesus of Nazareth was not a man who lived in special circumstances. He was (we think) a relatively uneducated member of the poorer classes of society and was not preserved in any way from the excesses of the political and religious establishment of his time. God in Christ was subject to the contingencies of life on earth, and this information has been given to us in the form of narrative. Narrative does not explain; it illustrates and reveals. It is not reductive or forensic but suggestive and inclusive. Ricoeur says that it invents and discovers.⁴¹⁴ Narrative does not close off with boundaries, but opens up to a variety of interpretations: some of which will be inadequate because of the contingent nature of this world. If life is narrative in form, then life is also uncertain, lived between the tick and the tock; yet at the same time, life is patterned narratively for us in the incarnation and so we have the option of adopting that sacred story as a source of meaning for our mundane existences.

Process thinking can happily accommodate all these suggestions. In process thought there is no attempt to explain evil, suffering or disaster away as something that ‘should not’ happen; rather, process thought absorbs such events within the knowledge that nothing is outside the experience of God. Whitehead discusses the way in which God allows Godself to be affected by the context of the world. He says: ‘What is done in the world is transformed into a reality in heaven, and the reality in heaven passes back into the world. By reason of this reciprocal relation, the love in the world passes into the love in heaven, and floods back again into the world. In this sense, God is the great companion – the fellow-sufferer who understands’.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹³ McFague, *Metaphorical theology*, pp 54 ff.

⁴¹⁴ See Ricoeur’s overview of narrative compared with metaphor, in preface of *Time and narrative*, vol 1.

⁴¹⁵ Whitehead, *ibid*, p 351.

This vital insight for those who suffer is that God is also a sufferer, and so suffering is in some way normalised as part of life on earth. It can be given a meaning by relating it to the sacred story, but it cannot be explained causally. Though painful to admit, suffering is not a soluble problem, or an alien intrusion, but it just is. Narrative shares the pain and sorrow, and laments it in solidarity with the other sufferers of the world, without trying to link it to blame or fault.

4.3.2 (b) Participation

The other great insight of narrative is the necessity of participation. We heard from Cavarero and differently from McFadyen that we give our stories to one another; our selves are discovered through our interactions with other selves and are never solo projects. This is why a culture based upon categories of success, difference, dominance and separation in the classical manner can never be a just setting in which humans can live. Humans cannot be categorised in this way if our very being is narrative at its root.

The clue seems to lie in recognising participation. Narratives cannot be held 'outside' ourselves as objective existents, because they are inherently relational: we are dependent upon one another to tell the stories of our own lives. Thus we must participate – although the nature of grace is such that we have a choice about the degree of our conscious participation.

Process thought is participative: everything is held within the story that is God. Everything has meaning because it has significance in God's eternal being. Everything exists in network and relationship. It is the classical systems of hard monotheism that have established the invisible but institutional boundaries that slice through western culture and which encourage competitive and violent relations between persons to be the norm.

It might be possible to develop a reading of the progressive revelation in scripture in terms of this suggestion. In such a reading, the Genesis 2 story of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, from which the man and woman are forbidden to eat, represents the kind of destructive dualistic thinking that sets relative values on persons and makes a person into a 'what' rather than a 'who'. The 'founding act' of violence (in Girardian terms⁴¹⁶) of the slaughter of Abel by Cain (Genesis 4) is the result of this kind of divisive and anti-relational thinking. The Tower of Babel demonstrates the depth and extent of the problem: that we cannot tell and interpret one another's 'mundane' stories because we are not thinking as participants in the 'sacred' story; and so on. Along the way there are examples of a different way of life: Abraham linked relationally with his people; Noah and the inclusive Ark community; kings (dominating types) *versus* prophets (relational types); and then ultimately the Word is spoken with irresistible

⁴¹⁶ See Girard, *I see Satan fall like lightning*, chap 7.

power in the coming of Christ and the kingdom of love, which is the way that has eternal value and cannot be suppressed by death. Pentecost seals the healing of the divisions: the inaugurated restoration of the sacred narrative.

The story of Jesus is therefore not just to be read; but to be entered into. If we participate in this story then it can transform us, just as our dialogues with other people can transform our lives. The 'Jesus information' that we are given in the gospels is narrative for that reason: it cannot simply be read objectively. Jesus tells his disciples that the person who is not for him is against him: rather than assuming that Jesus means simply that people will either follow or persecute him, we could view it as an invitation to be transformed, to undergo *metanoia*, to find meaning even in our pain – and this matter is surely the task of the Christian pastor today. With this object in view, the combination of narrative, dialogical personhood, and process thought discussed in the first four chapters of this thesis seems to offer a potential platform on which to develop the idea of 'ontological impertinence' as a response to the challenge of meaningless suffering.

Chapter 5: Resituating suffering

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. (Job 42:5, NRSV)

5.1 The matter of 'meaningless' suffering

In Chapter 1, the issue of 'meaningless' suffering was raised in the context of terminal illness, and reference was made to Frankl's exposition of his Holocaust experience. The idea of suffering having *meaning*⁴¹⁷ requires careful handling since it is prone to misinterpretation, both theologically and phenomenologically.⁴¹⁸ Invoking a meaning does not mean that we should deliberately seek or prize suffering for its own sake in a misguided search for redemption through the inappropriate imitation of Christ; neither is the inference intended that suffering is to be understood as intrinsically 'good', or as having any kind of moral pedagogical value. Suffering may resist *rationalisation*, but it is not the *uninterpretable* act of an *uninterpretable* deity in terms of Christian theological narrative. It is important to emphasise that to interpret does not necessarily mean to analyse causally or mechanistically.

In previous chapters I have examined three main thought streams behind the resistance of liberal postmodern culture to understand suffering as a meaningful experience of life, as follows.

(1) *Models of God within traditional theism*. The argument outlined in Chapter 2 unpacks the way in which western culture has been influenced by Greek philosophical categories, and how this, in partnership with philosophical materialism, has impacted modern Christian theology. The result is an often unanalysed foundational belief in a remote and impassible deity, and an implicit working dualism about the nature of reality.

⁴¹⁷ I am grateful to John Colwell for his suggestion (personal communication) that it would be more accurate to speak of *signification* than of *meaning*. I understand Ricoeur to argue that *meaning* is about what we understand, think and feel (*ie* in this context, an embodied response to suffering), while *signification* is about that of which it is a sign (*ie* in this context, directing one to the transcendent dimension of suffering, see *Rule*, p 57). On balance I think that it is acceptable to retain the use of *meaning* in this thesis, since one of my concerns is to avoid potentially dualistic mind-body-spirit distinctions, and it is also the term adopted by many of the thinkers I have mentioned. However, the *signification* of suffering is indeed an important part of my overall argument. Robert Ellis has helpfully raised the question of *meaning* having intention, but Ricoeur argues that meaning is supplied both retrospectively and contextually.

⁴¹⁸ When delivering the Whitley Lecture 2009 on this subject, some listeners had serious difficulty with the suggestion that *all* suffering could be seen to have an ultimate meaning (for Christians, interpreted in terms of the paradigmatic work of Christ). It seemed offensive that some medical conditions and natural disasters in particular, might be perceived as meaningful. I have suggested that this difficulty is particularly acute within western (post)modern culture, which tends to seek universal causal interpretations of events, and especially with respect to the delivery of pastoral care.

In response I have suggested that the use of process insights as a type of narrative tool (rather than insisting on a comprehensive process theology, which raises other problems for Christians about the ultimate nature of God⁴¹⁹) may relieve some of the tension surrounding the matter of a God who may or may not ‘intervene’ in human affairs. Whitehead comments that God is ‘a being at once actual, eternal, immanent, and transcendent. The transcendence of God is not peculiar to him. Every actual entity, in virtue of its novelty, transcends its universe, God included’.⁴²⁰ Ricoeur’s philosophical approach seems to me to be a natural partner in this enterprise because it anticipates a single reality that can be accessed through narrative, and whose metaphorical nature is in itself transcendent in terms of meaning. Other useful links (for this thesis) between the thinking of the two philosophers include:

- (i) the importance of experience – in Whitehead’s scheme, all experience is eternally held in God, while Ricoeur’s method is deliberately phenomenological (see §5.2);
- (ii) the fundamental nature of creativity - Whitehead views creativity as a basic category, while Ricoeur analyses both metaphor and narrative as innovative of new meaning; and
- (iii) the unidirectional flow of time – Whitehead notes that ‘all things flow’;⁴²¹ while Ricoeur regards the direction of time as an irreducible dimension of reality.⁴²²

(2) *The enormously successful enterprise of western science*, interpreted as reductionist materialism and rational thought.⁴²³ While this approach yields excellent empirical results in many areas of life, it cannot logically accommodate transcendent experience, and struggles with the unavoidably metaphorical nature of some explanation. Reductionism as a philosophy has an enormous contemporary appeal and is difficult to expose and challenge because of its indigenous status in western culture.

⁴¹⁹ For Christians, Whitehead’s identification of polarities within the godhead can feel uncomfortably depersonalised, and questions may be raised, for example, about the particular historical event of the incarnation; while his emphasis on the principle of creativity feels rather like an ultimacy which potentially limits God (but see fn 420). On the other hand, his remarks that God is ‘the fellow-sufferer who understands’ (*Process*, p 351), or that God is the ‘chief exemplification’ of all metaphysical principles (*ibid*, p 343) are deeply incarnational and can be understood as compatible with the God of scripture and of religious experience.

⁴²⁰ Whitehead, *Process* p 93. Actually this comment to some extent combats the fears of fn 419, that process thinking presents God as limited. Whitehead is anxious to move away from the ‘doctrine of an aboriginal, eminently real, transcendent creator, at whose fiat the world came into being, and whose imposed will it obeys, is the fallacy which has infused tragedy into the history of Christianity...’ (p 342) and adds famously that ‘God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification’ (p 343).

⁴²¹ *Ibid*, p 208.

⁴²² However, Ricoeur does also discuss the way in which narrative can effectively ‘re-order’ events after they have happened, see for example, his discussion in *The human experience of time and narrative*, in M. J. Valdes (ed), *A Ricoeur reader*, pp 106-107, or in *Oneself as another*, p142.

⁴²³ Chapter 2 of this thesis discusses the difference between the strict exercise of science itself, and the wider application of its underlying philosophies to culture generally.

In response I argue with others that suffering cannot be ‘reduced’ to its component parts: indeed, I think this is what Frankl means when he insists that suffering need not be ‘meaningless’. Suffering is not *meaningful* when it can be causally attributed and *meaningless* when it cannot. Furthermore, suffering is not a generic experience, to be attributed in this manner: it is *messy* and lacks clear boundaries, and is highly *personalised* and contextualised.⁴²⁴ Thus we are taken into the realms of what it is to be a person, and a suffering person at that; and then we find that the paradigmatic story of Christ has suffering at its heart that is neither meaningless nor avoidable, but is foundational both for God and for humans in *imago dei*. Together these ideas provide an intellectual basis for thinking about suffering that is neither reductionist nor rigidly causal, but accepts the experience as a legitimate starting point rather than as a problem that needs to be unclothed. The legitimacy of experience is appreciated by both Whitehead and Ricoeur. Whitehead says ‘The best rendering of integral experience...is often to be found in the utterances of religious aspiration. One of the reasons for the thinness of so much modern metaphysics is its neglect of this wealth of expression of ultimate feeling’.⁴²⁵ Ricoeur’s method is explicitly phenomenological (see §5.2).

(3) *The human person described as an autonomous rational subject*. The individualism fostered by the liberal Enlightenment model of the person fits neatly into the dualistic and rational worldviews consequent on (1) and (2) above, but is a poor representation of real or ideal human being (see Chapters 3 and 4). Nonetheless this model of the person underpins our economic, legal, and social structures and, combined with the prevailing ‘cult of normalcy’,⁴²⁶ makes the person who is undergoing suffering into a social curiosity.⁴²⁷

In response, and as indicated in (2) above, a more helpful model is to understand a person less as a ‘billiard ball’ and more as a dynamic, interactive event.⁴²⁸ I have drawn upon relational models of the person and in particular have found McFadyen’s dialogical personhood to be helpful: it can accommodate holistic approaches to suffering; I believe it to be consonant with some useful process insights; and, furthermore, it is a natural partner to a narrative philosophy of reality, since a dialogue is a particular form of narrative.

In this chapter I will explore further some of the aspects of narrative (based upon the work of Paul Ricoeur) that make it such a useful category for a discussion of suffering, and ultimately

⁴²⁴ S. Nelson, Whitley Lecture 2009, p 9; see also arguments referred to therein by Hauerwas, Sölle, and Saunders.

⁴²⁵ Whitehead, *Process*, p 208.

⁴²⁶ Reynolds, *Vulnerable communion*, chap 2.

⁴²⁷ The suffering person may be identified by the community as a victim in a Girardian analysis.

⁴²⁸ There are parallels with models of the particle in Newtonian and quantum science.

for the profound reassessment of suffering within human experience, which I have termed ‘ontological impertinence’. Ricoeur’s view⁴²⁹ of the Cartesian subject is one of mistrust: he understands ‘self’ to be a gift from others, which implies that a self cannot be the foundation of its own meaning. The properties of language, with its natural ambiguities and creativity, bring into question the validity of the Cartesian model.⁴³⁰ Ricoeur’s approach is phenomenological, which implies a dimension that is not easily captured by rational objectivity. He believes that reality is essentially narrative in form, and if he is right, then it is not surprising that narrative therapy is so effective at times of crisis, when people ask questions about the foundation of life itself, which stray into the transcendent. The temporal and metaphorical characteristics of narrative will be of special interest.

5.2 A narrative possibility

Ricoeur’s method is sometimes called phenomenological hermeneutics – in other words, he brings together actual human experience with the interpretation of that experience. In so doing, he is responding to the nihilism and fragmentation of some earlier 20th century structural philosophies,⁴³¹ and indeed commentators often remark on Ricoeur’s sense of hope, expressed in terms of an ultimate philosophical unity, in his analyses of the human condition. I would like to note again the significance of this approach for interpretations of suffering that start from experience – like those of Frankl in the Nazi camps, and the patients in the hospice. Frankl’s logotherapeutic method⁴³² takes the experience of the sufferer seriously: he does not try to rationalise the suffering but instead he relocates it – at least during the therapeutic period – as the central experience of the person’s life, which is then used to redefine the rest. This pathway can be seen in the book of Job and there are many useful correspondences with Ricoeur to be explored (see §5.4.3).

In particular Ricoeur wants to affirm that what we *express* through language does bear a relationship to what actually *is*⁴³³ – that there is a genuine relationship between ‘sign’ and

⁴²⁹ See, for example, Ricoeur, *Essays*, pp 12-13.

⁴³⁰ Ricoeur’s discussion of the modern difficulty in ‘hearing the Word’ is useful here – he says that we have lost our sensitivity to symbolism in language because we want to control it. In other words, we want to have a bounded literal meaning of language rather than live with the creative possibilities of polysemy. Multiple meaning is seen as a liability and not a gift. Reality is understood literally, not because of the influence of science but because of a fear of the loss of autonomy, according to Ricoeur. In *Essays*, pp 1-12.

⁴³¹ See Muldoon, chap 1, and McCarthy, chap 4.

⁴³² Frankl encourages the patient to reorient his/her life in accordance with that person’s ultimate beliefs such that all experiences of life are seen as stages on a journey to that ultimacy.

⁴³³ Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 2, p159.

'referent', and that we are not committed to a limitless relativism. However, this relationship is not a causal or reductive one.⁴³⁴ I would like to focus here on a number of relevant aspects of narrative: its metaphorical nature, its temporality, holistic nature and 'truthfulness', and the way in which narrative constitutes the self in a reflexive manner.

5.2.1 *The metaphorical nature of narrative*

Metaphor is an aspect of language that, while well recognised, has proved exceptionally difficult to define. Janet Soskice offers the following: 'metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another'.⁴³⁵ She makes this definition deliberately broad and simple, adding that 'speaking' does not necessarily imply an oral transmission, and 'thing' does not have to be a material entity. The feminist theologian Sallie McFague (also known as Teselle) developed a whole 'metaphorical theology' that celebrates and deepens the 'is and is not' of metaphor (based on Ricoeur's analysis of metaphor) as a way of representing the mystery of the divine.⁴³⁶

Ricoeur's classic exploration, *The rule of metaphor*, was written in the 1970s. In it he establishes that words have an inner characteristic from which they and we cannot escape: it is known as *polysemy*, or the possession by a word of multiple possible referents.⁴³⁷ In everyday life we know this to be an accurate description of words, evidenced in the ambiguities and misunderstandings of everyday conversations, as well as in the interesting possibilities arising from translation from one language or dialect to another. There is no simple one to one correspondence between a word and its referent:⁴³⁸ any word is always interpreted contextually and used grammatically. On the other hand, there *are* boundaries to possible meanings: a word does not mean ONE thing forever, but neither does it mean ANYthing. This appreciation of parameters of meaning is one aspect of our shared culture. As social beings, we need to find descriptions of our world that are collectively understood. This line of argument leads Ricoeur to warn of the potential 'tyranny of the word'⁴³⁹ in theories of meaning; he urges us to see that in practice, words function in sentences, which are context-dependent.

⁴³⁴ Ricoeur, *Rule*, p 77. A sentence can never be reduced to the sum of its parts, and see fn 460 below.

⁴³⁵ Soskice, *Metaphor and religious language*, p 15.

⁴³⁶ See Teselle, *Speaking in parables* and McFague, *Metaphorical theology*. Ricoeur refers to the paradox of metaphorical process as correlating sameness and difference (*Creativity in language*, in *Philosophy Today*, 1973, 17, 108), and discusses it extensively in *The rule of metaphor*: '...the wonderful 'It was and it was not,' which contains *in nuce* all that can be said about metaphorical truth', p 265.

⁴³⁷ Ricoeur, *Rule*, chap 4.

⁴³⁸ Wittgenstein initially theorised that there was such a one to one correspondence, but later changed his mind. See Harré & Tisaw, *Wittgenstein and psychology: a practical guide*, p 5.

⁴³⁹ Ricoeur, *Rule*, p 51.

Ricoeur argues that from this attribute of polysemy arises the creative and dynamic potential of metaphor to expand language and understanding. Metaphor establishes similarities, but is never a matter of simply substituting one word for another: a true metaphor will always expand understanding and bring new things to light. A metaphor has 'is and is not' properties that take us into new territory. A metaphor has the ability to shock: 'For this is the function of metaphor, to instruct by suddenly combining elements that have not been put together before...It is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh', because it depicts the abstract in concrete terms.⁴⁴⁰ A metaphor is a metaphor for as long as it continues to surprise and instruct us; once we no longer feel that surprise (which Ricoeur describes as its 'impertinent attribution'), it is 'dead'; its creative dynamic is exhausted, and it can be put into a dictionary. Thus the 'leg' of a table was metaphorical once, but no longer startles us when it is used, and so we classify it as dead; but from this example we can begin to see how dependent all language is upon this ability to extend communally held meaning.⁴⁴¹

Because the metaphor introduces this semantic impertinence, the original reference of the word becomes less obvious and new meaning breaks in.⁴⁴² The suggested metaphor is either understood and becomes a successful innovation, or it is perceived as nonsense and is discarded. For example, if I were to say: 'the sunrise jumped froglike onto the world', then the reader has to consider what a sunrise and a frog have in common and decide whether our understanding of the event is expanded or not. In this case it is a nonsensical connection (sunrises do not arrive suddenly in a bouncy manner) and it does not help us. If, instead, I said: 'the sunrise flooded the world', we might be much happier; yet both statements are metaphorical, since sunrises neither jump like frogs, nor flood like rivers.

Ricoeur's analysis of the character of metaphor led him naturally to a consideration of narrative, culminating in the 1980s in his three-volume *opus*, *Time and narrative*. He identifies a function of narrative that is similar to metaphor – *ie* its ability to innovate semantically – which, in the case of narrative, is achieved by coming up with a 'plot': 'By means of the plot, goals, causes and chance are brought together within the temporal unity of a whole and complete action. It is this synthesis of the heterogeneous that brings narrative close to metaphor. In both cases, the new thing – the as yet unsaid, the unwritten – springs up in

⁴⁴⁰ Ricoeur, *Rule*, pp 24-38.

⁴⁴¹ Soskice (pp 72-73) offers a discussion of dead metaphors. McFague (*Metaphorical theology*, p 41) notes that when Jesus says 'this is my body', we no longer feel surprise or joy but do not hear the metaphor at all. She refers us to Turbayne, who describes three stages of metaphor: first it feels inappropriate; second, it is insightful; third, it dies.

⁴⁴² Discussed by Ricoeur in *Rule*, chap 7.

language'.⁴⁴³ Narrative plotment issues in a new understanding (we might say 'meaning' in everyday speech) of life events by providing them with a coherence that is derived from the larger whole (the worldview, context, or metanarrative).⁴⁴⁴ However, as with metaphor, meaning is never closed off: the narrative has fluid boundaries that depend upon the narrator, the reader or spectator, and the context itself, and which can always be reinterpreted.

Ricoeur says that understanding has two parts: first, grasping the new semantic impertinence and second, grasping a sense of the operation that moulds the bits into a whole.⁴⁴⁵ To clarify the significance of this insight for my own argument about suffering: we understand something new when we see both its differences from and its similarities to things that we already know, and when we can then fit it into our picture of life.

I will now suggest some key features of the experience of suffering. First, suffering is frequently perceived as an alien experience, and our desire and instinct intellectually is to reject it. Thus we log the discontinuity, the difference from, our 'normal' and expected experience. However, we may not be able to reject the suffering in a phenomenological sense: it is an actual experience, part of our new experienced reality, whether or not it is wanted. The result of this rejection will unavoidably be spiritual pain ('Why me?', coupled with an associated helplessness). If the suffering cannot be resolved phenomenologically (and it may sometimes be possible to deal with it at this level⁴⁴⁶), then we have to take the step of looking for points of identity with the suffering, which in effect is a reassessment of our own selfhood: '*I am now a person who suffers*'. This step is the one that sufferers find so hard, and especially when there is a poor grasp of any framework of ultimate meaning. It is very important to note here that we can never adequately occupy the suffering space of another, because the narrator and the interpreter both contribute to the possible meanings of a narrative. To say that someone's suffering has no meaning (for example, inherited disease) is already to try to isolate a single narrative interpretation, which may be philosophically impossible if Ricoeur has correctly painted the nature of language.⁴⁴⁷ It is certainly pastorally insensitive, because it dismisses the felt experience of the sufferer, *who may already have started to identify him/herself as a suffering person*. Thus such dismissal of the *experience* can come close to dismissing and objectifying that *person* through our analysis of the problem, and thus intensify

⁴⁴³ Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 1, p ix.

⁴⁴⁴ Discussed more succinctly in *The human experience of time and narrative*, in M. J. Valdes (ed), *A Ricoeur reader*, pp 106-107.

⁴⁴⁵ Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 1, p x.

⁴⁴⁶ A simple example might be the removal of a tooth to ease toothache: the suffering is acute while the tooth is in place but (in our culture) it can be resolved in the phenomenological plane.

⁴⁴⁷ If this is a robust vision of reality then there are also clear implications for ethics: decisions about right and wrong will be justified in contextual rather than forensic ways.

the pain. Once again, it is important to note that to say suffering has meaning does not mean that it is good, or that it does not hurt.

Furthermore, I note that Whitehead's process view of the prehension, concrescence and decay of all actual entities also has parallels with metaphorical process: a word is built from a previous existent, with which it has a creative relationship. New understanding occurs in this creative process; we grasp new territory; then we make it ours and the creativity eventually dies as the event perishes and the metaphor becomes concretised. Later I am going to locate the experience of suffering in this liminal place of creative transition.

5.2.2 *The temporality of narrative*

Ricoeur hypothesises that reality is narrative in form, and the hinge of his argument is the temporality that acts as a common denominator for all human experience and understanding. 'My basic hypothesis... is the following: the common feature of human experience, that which is marked, organized and clarified by the fact of storytelling in all its forms, is its temporal character. Everything that is recounted occurs in time, takes time, unfolds temporally; and what unfolds in time can be recounted. Perhaps, indeed, every temporal process is recognized as such only to the extent that it can, in one way or another, be recounted'.⁴⁴⁸ He identifies cosmic time (the time of the universe), and human time (time as we experience it), and notes that the deep anxiety of human existence arises because we are consciously aware of these two kinds of time.⁴⁴⁹ Furthermore, Ricoeur argues that the existence of succession is an irreducible phenomenon.⁴⁵⁰ Once again this is arguably consonant with a Whiteheadian process system.⁴⁵¹

In other words, we recognise that our human lives take place within a context of cosmic time that both precedes and outlasts us; and this knowledge makes us aware of our limitations, our mortality (and, if we allow it, it is also the source of our longing for God). The great human desire is for one's time to be significant within that bigger picture of time – *ie* for one's life to make a 'permanent' mark on the cosmos, to achieve a lasting dimension (in §3.1.3 and §3.1.4

⁴⁴⁸ Ricoeur, *On interpretation*, in *Philosophy in France today* (ed A. Montefiore), p 176.

⁴⁴⁹ Ricoeur's discussion of cosmic and human time can be found in *Time and narrative*, vol 3, chap 4. He also identifies a third kind of time, historical time, which mediates between the other two: historical time is the time of a calendar or diary, or narrative. Kermode observes that there is a need to 'speak humanly of a life's importance in relation to it [the time of the world] – a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end'. *The sense of an ending*, p 4. This is something like historical time.

⁴⁵⁰ Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 3, p 16.

⁴⁵¹ Whitehead considers succession both at a macro- and at a microscopic level. At the macroscopic level, he considers the passage of time to be asymmetrical (*ie* to have a direction). See summary, *Process*, pp 214-215.

the universal concrete extension of this longing in the form of *memento mori* was discussed). If we had no concept of this temporal limit, we might live more contentedly: but we would not be human. This paradox is basic to human existence.⁴⁵²

The link between the two kinds of time (cosmic and human) is described by Ricoeur as narrative: 'time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence'.⁴⁵³ Narrative emplotment identifies a beginning and an end (although beginnings and endings are always chosen by the narrator and have a relative character).⁴⁵⁴ A narrative supplies a sense of coherence to the events of someone's life: these events may be chance events or causal events, but the imposition of a temporal sequence gives a sense of order rather than chaos, and fundamentally, links human time to cosmic time. This process takes place whenever a person reflects on a specific life event and begins to see it as part of his/her life story, and indeed part of the wider cultural and historical story. 'A life is no more than a biological phenomenon as long as it is not interpreted,' comments Ricoeur.⁴⁵⁵

I would therefore argue that the very fact that a life can be recounted and interpreted releases it from the grip of the reductionism that presents such difficulties in the search for meaning. When someone suffers or dies, this tragic and chaotic event needs to be interpreted by being placed in a coherent plot. The crisis facing modern culture could be articulated as its impoverished ability to make the connections between the human and cosmic dimensions of suffering and death – we have managed to apply consumerism, an aspect of material thinking, to life itself such that we want more and more, and better quality, life always.⁴⁵⁶ Death brings an abrupt halt to economic, biological, or intellectual achievement and personal fulfilment. While death has perhaps always been the 'enemy', in modernism it has powerful new weapons. In terms of hospice pastoral practice, the difficulty is thus one of finding an emplotment strategy that makes sense within this consumerist worldview. We often say that in a non-religious culture there is no *language* to discuss the transcendent (the language of scripture and church is poorly understood in wider society, having been replaced by an

⁴⁵² Whitehead's objective immortality is at one level a response to this longing to have significance, but its adequacy to deal with felt issues of eternal justice is in question, and it also contains a theoretical weakness with respect to the continuity of the person.

⁴⁵³ Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 1, p 52. There is a slightly circular feel to this argument.

⁴⁵⁴ Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 2, p 20.

⁴⁵⁵ Ricoeur, *Life: a story in search of a narrator*, in *A Ricoeur reader* (ed Valdes), p 432.

⁴⁵⁶ We are reminded again of McNamara's remark that we used to live for the life to come; now we just want to live as much as possible. We have moved our focus from the church to the gym. Furthermore, some gospel preaching proceeds along the lines that if we believe in Jesus, then we shall receive eternal life, which, while biblically accurate (eg John 3:16), can be made to sound a bit like the terms and conditions of a contract.

unsympathetic reductive rationalism) and Ricoeur's narrative philosophy offers us a reason for why this is so catastrophic in terms of our 'hold' on reality itself.

5.2.3 *The holistic nature of narrative meaning*

One of Ricoeur's discoveries about metaphor is that it does not operate at the level of the single word, but in a sentence. The same dynamics apply to narrative: the whole story is 'more than' the sum of the events that are strung together by narrative ordering. Ricoeur says: 'Emplotment is never the simple triumph of "order"...The plots themselves coordinate distention and intention'.⁴⁵⁷ The various setbacks and joys of life are indeed 'just chance' *unless we narrate them*. Once we do begin to narrate, a superabundance of meaning becomes available to us: meaning that is greater than the sum of the parts. The generation of a narrative allows us to begin to interpret the events – and then meaning follows; although we note that the interpretation cannot be pinned down in a forensic manner, since it depends to some extent upon the reader. The intelligibility offered by Ricoeur is not simply logical or causal (though it may include these elements), but is connected with the frame of interpretation: but the work of interpretation is precisely where modern culture founders, because of its scientific concept of truth.

We could summarise by saying that narrative meaning is holistic and interpretive, while scientific meaning is causal and often reductionist. Ricoeur says: 'The essential difference distinguishing the narrative model from every other model of connectedness resides in the status of events, which we have repeatedly made the touchstone of the analysis of the self. Whereas in a causal-type model, event and occurrence are indiscernible, the narrative event is defined by its relation to the very operation of configuration; it participates in the unstable structure of discordant concordance characteristic of the plot itself'.⁴⁵⁸

If we really grasp the significance of this task of narrative then we are set free from the apparent cruelty of contingent existence, which leaves us saying that there is no purpose in life. Ricoeur suggests that the retrospective ordering of narrative can replace what we first perceived as contingency (at the time of the experience) with what we now, after interpretation, perceive as necessity. He says: 'The paradox of emplotment is that it inverts the effect of contingency, in the sense of that which could have happened differently or which might not have happened at all, by incorporating it in some way into the effect of necessity or probability exerted by the configuring act. The inversion of the effect of contingency into an effect of necessity is produced at the very core of the event: as a mere occurrence, the latter is

⁴⁵⁷ Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 1, p 73.

⁴⁵⁸ Ricoeur, *Oneself as another*, p 142.

confined to thwarting the expectations created by the prior course of events; it is quite simply the unexpected, the surprising. It only becomes an integral part of the story when understood after the fact, once it is transfigured by the so-to-speak retrograde necessity which proceeds from the temporal totality carried to its term. This necessity is a narrative necessity whose meaning effect comes from the configuring act as such; this narrative necessity transforms physical contingency, the other side of physical necessity, into narrative contingency, implied in narrative necessity'.⁴⁵⁹

In principle I think this idea of the inversion of contingency and necessity sheds light upon the dark fatalism of the questions: 'What did I do to deserve this?'; 'Why did God allow me to get cancer?' – since it opens up the individualism of the sequence of events by setting them within a broader worldview within which we can *respond to* (I do not say *understand*) the existence of evil and pain. I think it allows us to move away from the view that suffering must be caused by something, possibly God if we cannot think of another explanation, towards understanding that causality is a function of the hermeneutical process. This more nuanced response to life's desperate questions is not deductive, but unashamedly interpretative: but it is borne of the ability to reflect on one's life story, which can be seriously compromised in modernity. Jonathan Rée comments that 'Modernity...can be seen as a flight from temporality and personality – in short, from narrative'.⁴⁶⁰

5.2.4 Narrative truth or narrative fiction?

Such processes of course raise the issue of the nature of truth, and Ricoeur spends some time examining the similarities and differences between fictive and historical narratives, particularly the focus of Part IV of *Time and narrative*.⁴⁶¹ Since the reader completes the emplotment process in narrative, both fiction and history can generate a response within the reader that can alter his/her own life story. It is possible, however strange it might seem to a scientific culture, to be changed by a story of fiction. This ability to generate change is the power behind parabolic storytelling. If the reader/hearer appropriates that change, then there is a sense in which it is 'true'. The reader/hearer has realised the sense of that narrative; has made it into reality.⁴⁶² Ricoeur also notes that the material we regard as factual history is clearly subject to interpretation just as much as fiction, and the past can be reinterpreted and 'changed'. Truth

⁴⁵⁹ *Oneself as another*, p 142. Elsewhere Ricoeur suggests that the recollection of a story actually inverts the order of time by allowing the end to be understood in the beginning and *vice versa*, allowing us to 'read time itself backwards', relating initial conditions to consequences. See *The human experience of time and narrative* in *A Ricoeur reader* (ed Valdes), p 110.

⁴⁶⁰ Rée, *Narrative and philosophical experience*, in Wood (ed), *On Paul Ricoeur*, p 76.

⁴⁶¹ In Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 3.

⁴⁶² This incorporation is also the goal of homiletics, parable, etc.

cannot be easily defined as 'what happened' or 'what is', since these categories are always subject to interpretation.

For the purposes of the suffering person we may note the following:

(i) that we may be unable to discern a direct or clear 'cause' for the person's suffering in the way that we might say that a flat tyre developed from a puncture caused by a nail;

(ii) that the extent of another person's suffering may seem to us (as observers) to be disproportionate or even unrelated to their 'causal' pain, but this supposed disproportion does not invalidate the suffering in any way; and

(iii) a measure of healing may be found in terms of contextualising the suffering even if this context appears to us (the observers) to be 'untrue'. Thus a person in the hospice would often find his/her physical pain moderated by apparently unrelated interventions such as social or spiritual 'therapies'. Staff also found that narratives that were not strictly 'true' could still become part of the patient's life story. An example might be the common collusion by families with the idea that the terminally ill person would get home again: 'When you get home, we will...'. All parties would know that going home was extremely unlikely, yet it became a therapeutic intervention, giving the patient apparent 'options' about his/her future (*ie* that s/he would die, but might 'get home' first). Sometimes the patient did get home; often s/he did not, but still incorporated that story into the family narrative. Other 'untrue' narratives might relate to unconventional treatments, which everyone must have known were unlikely to help, but which became a huge part of a patient's routine and even shaped that patient's expectations of the future. Another manifestation of fictional narrative being incorporated into the family narrative may occur after death, and especially at the funeral, when a selective and nuanced biography of the person who has died is frequently adopted.

Later I will be suggesting that this time of suffering or terminal illness can be described as 'liminal' (see §5.3). It is a time on the threshold, a time of impermanence, when normal social function is suspended while a person re-evaluates him/herself. I would like to argue that in such liminal periods a person is more inclined to appropriate new mini-narratives into a personal narrative, whether or not they would previously have been perceived as 'true'. In the liminal phase, everything is reassessed and so the familiar landmarks of culture and society are less clear, opening up the person to new possibilities. In the context of this argument I want to suggest that when a person suffers, s/he is more likely to question the pervasive materialism of normal culture and to be open to transcendent dimensions of existence, which s/he may previously have dismissed as fictitious.

5.2.5 *The reflexive narrative self*

The same kinds of criteria apply to the understanding of the self in Ricoeur's narrative philosophy. The self is not an object but is accessed indirectly through the interpretation of stories. These stories are told by others as well as by ourselves, and it is in hearing and then reflecting on these stories that we come to know ourselves over time. McFadyen's dialogical self, 'sedimented' and cyclically reinforced in community, is a less philosophically abstract but otherwise very similar model of what it is to be a person.

The identity of a person is the answer to the question, 'who?'⁴⁶³ Our first instinct is to *name* the person, but Ricoeur is interested in what lies behind the name – though it is wise to keep in mind Cavarero's warning⁴⁶⁴ that we often end up describing 'what' a person is rather than 'who'. In the end this takes us back to the fundamental nature of metaphor in that a word (or a name) has an innate plurality of meaning and this nascent creativity expands the boundaries of intelligibility. In the biblical record of creation, in the beginning, God speaks. God later encourages humanity to name the creation. In so doing, we do not 'fix' objects, as we like to think we do, but rather we push at the limits of our understanding. If we can allow that God's word of creation might have analogies with the human use of language, then we could infer that neither does God 'fix' us as we are called into being: the metaphorical character of creation allows for the inclusion of 'risk' or 'openness'. This thought suggests that God does not have an itemised 'plan' for each life, but rather a dream of relational creativity that is process-like in its character. The superabundance of metaphorical meaning can, I think, be compared with the desire for ever greater beauty or creativity in process thought.

For the circumstances of the suffering and dying person, I offer the following points.

5.2.5 (a) The suffering person understood as a creator of meaning.

In the light of this discussion we can justifiably understand any person, but here specifically a suffering person, to be a *creator of meaning* (literally a poet, in Aristotelian terms). This creative function operates both dynamically, in relationship with others, and contextually, within an historical space. The meaning of an experience is not fixed (either by the sufferer or by the interpreters), but may have to be adapted and altered as the context or relationships change, and thus meaning is inherently metaphorical in character. Any proposed meaning will either be verified by its use within the context; or eliminated if that use is perceived to be invalid within the community. Thus a person who suffers has a choice: s/he can create a new

⁴⁶³ Both Arendt and Cavarero helpfully develop this idea, see Chapter 4 of this thesis.

⁴⁶⁴ Bruteau also discusses this tendency to respond to the 'who' question with 'what' answers, see *God's ecstasy*, p 27.

meaning for that suffering, or s/he can accept the verdict of the community on what is happening to him/her (as did Job initially). If the sufferer chooses to narrate his/her suffering, then s/he becomes extremely vulnerable because that narrative may or may not be validated by the community, just as a new metaphor is or is not comprehended. The result of this dynamic and reflexive process of offering a narrative will either confirm the suffering person in his/her suffering personhood or reject that suffering person in his/her experience.

I now suggest the following.

(i) If we accept the insights of René Girard, then the suffering person is in a dangerous position, *unless the whole community shares the suffering*.⁴⁶⁵ The 'unusual' person is the one who is likely to be **scapegoated** – noting that scapegoating is not necessarily physically violent and may be quite subtle. In the biblical record, once Job became ill, he was patronised by his still healthy and wealthy peers; in our society this patronising attitude can be meted out to the terminally ill, the disabled, the elderly and so on – and can be done so in a manner that seems to be compassionate.⁴⁶⁶ In reality it may degrade the personhood of the sufferer by failing to hear the alternative narrative offered and by imposing its own, socially acceptable, narrative, which Reynolds has called the 'cult of normalcy'.⁴⁶⁷ The corporate collusion of the community over its criteria of normality is institutional and thus very difficult to expose and to challenge.

(ii) Developing idea (i) further, I suggest that the **narratives of the community**, developed corporately and historically, can be oppressive and can silence the sufferer so that his/her narrative is not normally heard – maybe *cannot* be heard, because it does not 'make sense' within the culture. Thus the dominant reductionism sanctioned corporately in our culture prevents us from hearing or being able to articulate fully the experience of suffering, which eludes rational or causal description. McFague notes with respect to the use of parables (extended metaphors) that these story forms generate uneasiness and disorientation: '...not "liking" the parables is the appropriate initial reaction to them'.⁴⁶⁸

(iii) The element of **choice** for the suffering person is extremely important: s/he can choose to narrate, or not to narrate; to attempt to create meaning for the experience, or not. This latter choice - *ie* not to attempt to find meaning - can cause extreme psychological pain, as Frankl noted; by using ideas from Sölle and McFadyen we can attribute this pain to isolation, or

⁴⁶⁵ If suffering is 'normal', then clearly the parameters change – as in the death camps, or in Britain during WWII. However, scapegoating will tend to re-emerge, targeting a person who is different in some other way from the majority.

⁴⁶⁶ See S. Nelson, *A thousand crucifixions*, pp 11-12, and references therein to Taylor, Wendell, Bowers, Young and Lay.

⁴⁶⁷ Reynolds, *op cit*.

⁴⁶⁸ McFague, *Metaphorical theology*, p 47.

silenced dialogue, which intrinsically degrades human personhood. An environment that facilitates the choice is a liberating environment, while one that suppresses the choice is an oppressive one (this facilitating of choice is not to be confused with the ‘free’ choice of the consumer economy). The church is undoubtedly commissioned to be a community of liberation (for example, Luke 4:14-21): a place where the stories of outsiders are appreciated. This tradition of hospitality extends throughout scripture, sometimes explicitly (as in the Torah’s provision for aliens and widows *etc*); and sometimes through a more subtle exposition of God’s free and willing embrace of unlikely candidates (an obvious example would be Ruth⁴⁶⁹).

5.2.5 (b) The suffering person understood as signification.

I suggest that not only is the person (including the suffering person) a creator of new meaning; but s/he also acts as a sign (one who points ‘beyond’). Christians understand from scripture that persons image God in some way, although we also acknowledge that this image can be easily distorted. In McFadyen’s model, one such distortion is the way in which we participate in our various dialogues. We can actively effect, and passively receive, distortion through dialogue: either way our personhood is diminished from the *imago dei*.

In Kazoh Kitamori’s theology of suffering, in which he grounds the love of God in the ontologically more fundamental pain of God, his astonishing conclusion is that we will never understand our pain unless we see that it functions as a witness to Christ.⁴⁷⁰ In Chapter 2 of this thesis I explored other arguments that the suffering of Christ has this critical ultimate dimension (*ie* that suffering is part of the trinitarian God’s eternal experience), which profoundly affects the view we take of the suffering we experience in our lives here and now; and then considered the difficulties of reconciling this view with a hard classical theism.

The combined result of these considerations is that the suffering person could be uniquely significant, in that s/he points to the eternal and unavoidable pain of God that arises from God’s being in relationship with this creation. In other words, when a person is suffering, s/he points uniquely to the God revealed in Jesus Christ, in a way that s/he does not when life is

⁴⁶⁹ Trevor Dennis offers a fascinating exegesis of Ruth, noting her many disadvantages as a potential bride: she is a foreigner, elderly (in relative terms), widowed, childless (thus possibly barren), and poor. She has experienced enormous suffering and may reasonably expect to be excluded from the community in Bethlehem: arguably she will be a burden to Naomi there. In fact she is chosen as a bride by an upstanding man in the Israelite community (Boaz) and produces a son who becomes the grandfather of David. In all this she (the outsider) also restores Naomi (the insider) to prosperity. Comments at a meeting of the Yorkshire and Northern Baptist ministers, Cober Hill, February 2010.

⁴⁷⁰ Kitamori, *Theology of the pain of God*. Although this book was written in the aftermath of WWII it has never gained significant status – perhaps because of the uncongenial nature of his thesis in modern culture.

'easy'. Suffering has this signification because it triggers the narrative re-articulation of life that explodes beyond the causal, rational and material. In other words, it has the potential to initiate *metanoia*.⁴⁷¹ The corollary of this assertion is that suffering may facilitate the work of the Spirit, whose prerogative is the process of *metanoia* (if this sounds implausible then we can be reminded that it was the Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted). Suffering is not thereby directly attributable to the Spirit, which would render the trinitarian God susceptible to the accusation that God is capricious. Rather, this model avoids the good/evil dualism described in the early chapters of this thesis, with the associated issues about God's intervention. Instead, this view is compatible with a single metaphysical reality in which God allows creation to unfold. God is our companion, host, and fellow-traveller, rather than the director of operations. Whitehead's discomfort with traditional hard theistic models led him to comment that 'God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification;' and follows this by noting that God's nature is that of 'tender care that nothing be lost'. God, for Whitehead, is no less than the 'fellow-sufferer who understands'.⁴⁷²

Ricoeur and Soskice each credit Aristotle with the earliest recorded discussions on metaphor and use his work as a logical starting point.⁴⁷³ Briefly, Aristotle distinguishes between the language forms of poetics (as mimetic of human action) and of rhetoric (as persuasive argument), but argues that metaphor belongs to both forms. Aristotle's discussion of *mythos*, or emplotment, in the context of tragic plays leads him to attribute primacy to tragedy over comedy, because he believes that tragedy more closely imitates human actions (or reality, we might say). It is tragedy with which fundamentally we struggle: the essential question of human life. We narrate tragedy in order to find meaning and significance for it.

Ricoeur, along with others such as Kermode and Heidegger, locates our human existential discomfort in the intersection of human and cosmic time. Bringing together this sense of discomfort with the importance of tragedy, we find that the pain of suffering originates both from its temporality and its apparent incoherence. Human time is interrupted painfully by suffering, which projects us temporarily into the cosmic, where we do not normally dwell. If we cannot find a narrative for this 'interruption' of human time, which we might term 'liminal' (see §5.3 below), then we cannot accept it. This narrative occupies the space of Ricoeur's historical time, which mediates between human and cosmic time, and I would argue that therefore ***narrative is the language of liminal space***, the space of transition and of

⁴⁷¹ Kermode notes that every crisis is a beginning and an ending, *The sense of an ending*, p 96.

⁴⁷² Whitehead, *Process*, in Part V, *Final interpretation*.

⁴⁷³ See Ricoeur, *Rule*, Study 1, and *A Ricoeur reader*, p 425; Soskice, *Metaphor*, chap 1.

transformation, the space where the material and the transcendent can make meaningful contact.

5.3 Suffering understood as liminal temporality

In her study of the spirituality of dying persons, Rachel Stanworth finds it helpful to describe the person who is terminally ill and approaching death as occupying a *liminal* state – liminal meaning ‘border’ or ‘threshold’ territory – rather than as being at a terminus.⁴⁷⁴ This identification of liminal experience in dying is helpful in the context of palliative care. Cicely Saunders, for example, produced groundbreaking work on the perceived marginal status of the terminally ill (see §1.1); while Autton’s discussion of pain⁴⁷⁵ invokes transcendence as a coping mechanism (*ie* a person bridges the physical and the spiritual); Kearney uses imagination and myth therapeutically to facilitate the transition between the deep and the surface self;⁴⁷⁶ while Ainsworth-Smith and Speck observe ‘cones of awareness’ in the dying patient (see §3.1.4), in which the life perspective of the dying person narrows and focuses and becomes a very different space from the multiple dimensions of everyday life – a phenomenon sometimes labelled ‘decathexis’ in the medical palliative literature.⁴⁷⁷

5.3.1 Liminal experience

What is liminality? The concept became a useful category for anthropologists studying traditional cultures in the early 20th century, and is also used by psychologists and psychiatrists for describing altered mental states; however, relatively few theologians appear to have engaged with the idea explicitly.⁴⁷⁸ The anthropologist Arnold van Gennep⁴⁷⁹ classically identified the need of cultures to respond to change and decay by transforming and renewing themselves through ritual. For van Gennep, the task of ritual is to foster transitions between life states (*eg* puberty, childbirth, marriage, death, religious initiation), or between the strata of society. Ritual achieves this by putting boundaries around the transitional phase

⁴⁷⁴ Stanworth, *Recognizing spiritual needs in people who are dying*, chap 7.

⁴⁷⁵ Autton, *Pain: an exploration*, p 53: ‘...emphasis is placed upon the importance of personal transcendence...’ to endure pain.

⁴⁷⁶ Kearney, *Mortally wounded*, p 107, comments that individuation can be accelerated near death, as if there is a need for an awareness of a metaphysical reality before death occurs.

⁴⁷⁷ Kubler-Ross, *Questions and answers on death and dying*, p 13.

⁴⁷⁸ I have found, for example, a general study on religious conversion by T. L. Carson entitled *Liminal reality and transformational power*; reports of the work by R. Rohr, mainly in the field of male initiation (such as *The wild man’s journey*, *Everything belongs*, and *Hope against darkness*); and a short article by A. Hallstein on chaplaincy as ministry in liminal space.

⁴⁷⁹ van Gennep, *Rites of passage*, 1908.

and protecting the structures of the host society from the stresses of change.⁴⁸⁰ Van Gennep describes three phases of transition: the preliminal (separation from the old social status); the liminal or transitional period (in which I am particularly interested here); and the postliminal (reincorporation into society in a new status). The liminal phase is often perceived as being dangerous or 'unclean'; van Gennep speaks of the boundaries between sacred and profane being relative,⁴⁸¹ and observes that a person entering transition becomes 'sacred' with respect to the rest of the group. Those who are concurrently 'liminal' often experience a remarkable existential solidarity, as normal social distinctions are set aside.⁴⁸² Van Gennep notes that this transitional unity is often marked by acts of exchange or sharing, such as a common meal or the exchange of gifts, because these acts indicate a 'mutual transference of personality'.⁴⁸³ (There is an implicit link here with process philosophy, in which reality has a transient developing character. Liminality provides us with an 'extended transience' that is accessible to the conscious mind and which provides a mental no-man's land in which we can reflect.)

Victor Turner has explored further this phenomenon of entering the liminal state in traditional societies, and develops some interesting conclusions. He notes, with regard to the 'at-oneness' of the liminal or transitional group, that it often functions as a period of role reversal: 'the liminality of the strong is weakness – of the weak, strength. Or again, the liminality of wealth and nobility is poverty and pauperism...'.⁴⁸⁴ He questions why this should be so and concludes that under the controlled circumstances of ritual process this reversal allows a release from stress by removing the person from the arena of normal social expectation.⁴⁸⁵ This insight connects fundamentally with (chronologically much later) Girardian thought on violence and the sacred, in which a group releases its inner suppressed disharmony by scapegoating or lynching a representative victim, usually someone who is perceived to be different. The model could apply also to the process of dying, when the living find it hard to know how to speak to, or be with, the dying person unless suitable standardised behaviours are suggested.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁰ Ramshaw locates and expands the possible place of ritual in general ministry in her book, *Ritual and pastoral care*. See especially her sections on bonding the community, handling ambivalence and encountering mystery, pp 29-35.

⁴⁸¹ See M. Douglas, *Purity and danger*, for an exposition of the sacred and profane.

⁴⁸² In a different context, the liminal experience and its impact on social norms is discussed with reference to Jewish refugees in the forests during WWII by Weiner Weber, *The forest as liminal space*.

⁴⁸³ Van Gennep, *ibid*, pp 29-30.

⁴⁸⁴ We may be reminded of 1 Cor 1:10 ff in which God's power and strength, displayed in weakness and humility, is popularly perceived as foolishness – except when life is turned upside down by death or trauma.

⁴⁸⁵ V. W. Turner, *The ritual process*, pp 190-193.

⁴⁸⁶ Typically, visitors to someone who was dying at the hospice would ask: 'what should I say?'. This anxiety is acute when the patient is unable to respond fully and often recourse to reading favourite

Turner also notes that rituals involving such role reversals (or indeed, any rituals) reinforce structure in a society or community: liminal experience takes place in the 'gaps' in the structure, so 'structure' must facilitate spaces for 'no structure'. He concludes that 'society (*societas*) seems to be a process rather than a thing – a dialectical process with successive phases of structure and *communitas*'.⁴⁸⁷ (McFadyen's dialogical personhood, with its movement of sedimentation and dialectic, is a complementary way of thinking about the persons who make up such societies.) Moltmann uses Mircea Eliade's work on the revelatory nature of sacred space to note that primitive humanity did not understand time as linear history, as we do today, but rather lived both in the normal, transient, chaotic (and cyclical) time of everyday life, and also in ritual time, which rooted the community in meaning and linked it to the divine.⁴⁸⁸ Moltmann concludes that the contingency of history is always transformed into repeatable ritual. Something extraordinary happens and then it is commemorated (*eg* a birthday, anniversary, *etc*), so that we are not overwhelmed by the experience of chaos, but find stability in ritual – one way of coping with the existential anxiety observed by Ricoeur of humans caught in the intersection of cosmic and human time.

People starved of structure and *communitas* seek it in ritual liminality, comments Turner, which is the phenomenon that Richard Rohr has explored more recently in his experiments with male Christian initiation rites in the US.⁴⁸⁹ Turner, and later Rohr, have noted that where truly liminal experience has been lost (as in western European culture), there is a tendency to invent the 'liminoid' in its place: the liminoid experience might be found in such activities as holidays, film, art, music, accessing virtual space, or other 'leisure pursuits' (or even counselling or psychotherapy!), but although such experiences remove us from our normal social roles and allow a degree of escapism, they lack the characteristic irreversible transformation of a truly liminal process. When the liminoid experience is over, life is essentially the same as before. Any glimpsed existential dissatisfaction with the *status quo* remains (in other words, there is still the sense of searching, of lost meaning, of exhaustion with the demands of life. I wonder whether the denial that is common in the early stages of the contemplation of mortality is a manifestation of this liminoid activity: it is liminoid because there is no real transformation of the person, simply a desire to avoid the liminal territory. This denial is not the same as the appropriation by the suffering person of new (and possibly

stories, talking about the past, or prayer (if that has meaning for the family) is welcomed: all of which are ritualised.

⁴⁸⁷ Turner, *ibid*, p 193. *Communitas* is the at-one-ness of a group, such as that found in the liminal phase of initiation.

⁴⁸⁸ Moltmann, *God in creation*, pp 104-109.

⁴⁸⁹ Rohr, *Everything belongs*, p 53.

'untrue') stories (these could include religious metanarratives) to which I referred as characteristic of the liminal phase in §5.2.2.

Robert Moore⁴⁹⁰ identifies the key difference between liminal and liminoid as the absence in the latter of a ritual leader who guards the boundaries of the transitional space. He discusses the possible identification of the psychotherapist with a modern day ritual leader or guide through liminal and transformative space. Ann Hallstein has written about the work of the hospital chaplain as a ritual leader in liminal space, and draws parallels with the hospital as a possible setting for transformation (towards healing, in her study, since that is the 'aim' of hospitals).⁴⁹¹ This task could be even more appropriate for hospice professionals working with the dying, whose entry into liminal space is inevitable.

5.3.2 Liminality and transcendence

The comments of the previous section indicate the existence of a spiritual⁴⁹² dimension to liminal experience. By nature, the liminal cannot be articulated well within the material world: it is betwixt and between; it escapes precise definition and thus renders itself apparently unsatisfactory as a category of empirical explanation. However, religious faith is (or should be) comfortable with the liminal as the place of contact with the transcendent (whatever that may mean in each religious context). That frequently it is not (in the West) provides evidence of the remaining powerful hold of reductionist thought – and this human tendency appears to be deeply rooted, since Jesus continually warned his followers against various types of legalism in a culture unaffected by the technological revolution that has shaped ours. Recent neuropsychological research suggests that the human inclination for categorisation is hardwired into the human brain as a survival strategy.⁴⁹³ It is this kind of 'self'-ishness that we are called to overcome in community (and initiation seeks to tackle this trait), and in becoming disciples of Christ.

If the concept of liminality is to help people at the time of death, which itself is uncertain and may be sudden or slow, then, ideally, it should not be new and unexplored territory at that time. This conviction indicates precisely why members of traditional cultures, less protected

⁴⁹⁰ Moore, *Ritual, sacred space, and healing* in Schwartz-Salent & Stein (eds), *Liminality and transitional phenomena*, p 23; see also Moore, *Space and transformation in human experience*, in Moore & Reynolds (eds), *Anthropology and the study of religion*, p 136.

⁴⁹¹ Hallstein, *ibid*.

⁴⁹² When 'spiritual' includes matters pertaining to meaning, significance and value, as discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

⁴⁹³ Cozolino describes the autonomy of a person as 'a balance between the recognition of the needs of self and others', *The neuroscience of psychotherapy*, p 42. Newberg, d'Aquili & Rause, *Why God won't go away*, p 28, discuss the orientation/association area of the brain, which they believe distinguishes the idea of 'self' from 'not-self'.

than Westerners against the ravages of death in their midst, understand the liminal ritual experience as one that presages death in some ways and certainly as one that offers a heightened level of contact with the transcendent.

Our culture has invested extensively in the liminoid activity that fits conveniently into a materialist, consumerist and individualist worldview; but is far less comfortable with the liminal, which involves a struggle at the thresholds of experience; a commitment to community; and the existence of structure and ritual. Michael Meade writes at the turn of the 21st century that we inhabit an extended cultural funeral – huge shifts in expectation and procedure affect daily life, but ‘without spiritual vision and ritual structure we lose the capacity to handle death and embrace life fully. Instead, we build walls of denial to hold off terror and confusion and try to cover our helplessness with displays of force and greed...And the momentum of loss increases because a death unmourned becomes a lingering ghost that haunts the living...’⁴⁹⁴

Eliade argues that we need a means of renewal after a life ‘loss’: that the rituals of passage allow us to deal meaningfully with the joys and sorrows of life and give death a meaning. In ritual language, death is the opposite of birth (not life, as westerners commonly polarise it) and life includes both birth and death. This perspective is essential for meaningful existence, and it is what religious faith instinctively recognises and celebrates. Only in initiation is death given a positive meaning; as a transitional boundary rather than a terminus.⁴⁹⁵ Eliade draws our attention⁴⁹⁶ to the niche survival of ritual in our non-religious society within apprenticeships, Freemasonry, yoga, art, and film; and the enduring interest in stories of clichéd successes – fairy tales, heroes and so on. These examples represent the subconscious playing out of initiatory rites about the deaths and resurrections of normal life; no longer framed necessarily in the context of religion but operating nevertheless at a deep psychological level. He notes the imperative of a means of ‘renewal’ in the midst of life (which Christians would understand in terms of *metanoia* and salvation). Michael Meade adds that if rites of passage are not culturally available then they resurface in other ways – possibly as gang culture, addictive behaviour, crime and neurosis.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁴ M. Meade in the forward to Eliade’s *Rites and symbols of initiation* (new edn), p xviii.

⁴⁹⁵ Turner gives examples in his article *Death and the dead in the pilgrimage process*, in Reynolds & Waugh (eds), *Religious encounters with death*.

⁴⁹⁶ Eliade, *ibid*, pp 122-131.

⁴⁹⁷ Meade, *ibid*, p xx.

5.3.3 Liminality and suffering: the place of pilgrimage

It is impossible to develop a generic category for suffering (see the discussion of total pain in §1.1) because of its highly contextual nature. However, suffering persons usually find themselves disabled with respect to wider society: there will be some way in which they cannot be full members of the group, occupying a strange territory that has a liminal identity. Sölle believes this *isolation* to be a key characteristic of suffering (see §5.4.1).

Turner was interested in identifying ‘what was to Christian salvific belief and practice the homologue of the liminality of major initiations in tribal religions’.⁴⁹⁸ He decided that the sacramental Christian rites did not function in this way in a complex society like ours, but that the concept of pilgrimage did. He noted the following key differences between pilgrimage and initiation: pilgrimage is voluntary, reversible, individual, and dangerous. Initiation is essential, irreversible, social, and – although the rites may involve danger – the initiation group is ‘protected’ in terms of where it takes place, how long it lasts, and in having mature oversight. Thus Turner is inclined to describe pilgrimage as *liminoid*.

I want to differ from Turner, and to construct an argument that when suffering is able to be perceived as pilgrimage, as a place of transition, learning, or even growth, and as part of a ‘bigger’ journey rather than as an event in itself, then its features are more *liminal* than *liminoid*. Suffering can then be understood as a place of separation, where one is (involuntarily) set aside and can take stock of normal life. Suffering thus functions as an initiation (although not necessarily a socially recognised one) into a different paradigm of being. Taking such a view of suffering does NOT thereby logically imply that God – or ‘fate’ – is responsible for the suffering as a pedagogical experience: a common default assumption within religious faith of all kinds: rather, it is to value the journey and, with Frankl, to perceive one’s suffering as the unique task of one’s life, through which one discovers meaning and purpose. It is much harder to perceive these aspects of suffering if the experience is evaluated only in terms of a ‘medical’ or material model, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis.

Suffering is frequently described as a part of the variable journey of life. The metaphor is so common that we do not question it, and indeed we can readily see that the story of the journey of life is the narrative of life. So, to what extent is it pilgrimage, and is it liminal or liminoid? This distinction is important for developing models of pastoral care for those who suffer. I want to argue that suffering is in fact a true liminal experience, or at least, has the potential to be so. Here I will critique the characteristics that Turner has identified.

⁴⁹⁸ Turner, *Death and the dead*, pp 29-31.

(a) Voluntary or essential? Suffering is probably never a voluntary exercise,⁴⁹⁹ although we do have choices about our *response* to it. Several theologians argue that suffering has the sense of imposition about it.⁵⁰⁰ When we suffer, we are involuntarily placed in a class of ‘outsider’:⁵⁰¹ a liminal characteristic. Within a consumer worldview we assume we are entitled to a choice about our experiences, and so the imposition of suffering is psychologically rejected as ‘unfair’ or ‘meaningless’, lacking causal or consequential rationality.

(b) Reversible? Initiation is irreversible – either one has, or has not, been through the rite, and this is socially recognised to be the case. One’s status is either changed or not. Pilgrimage is perceived by Turner to have a voluntariness about it that means one can choose to go or not, or to stop part way through. However, in this case he is viewing pilgrimage as an elected journey, for example, to a shrine, as in the traditional Catholic understanding: ‘The plain truth is that pilgrimage does not ensure a major change in religious state – and seldom in secular status – though it may make one a better person, fortified by the graces merited by the hardships and self-sacrifice of the journey’.⁵⁰² However, if we take a more global view of pilgrimage as the journey of life, then suffering is one of the hazards that we encounter upon it. To experience the suffering is an irreversible experience. We cannot refuse to go through it; and almost certainly are changed profoundly by it.

I am arguing that if the focus of the journey becomes arrival rather than travelling, then it is possible that the suffering may leave us fundamentally unchanged. It may be that the atrophied transcendent dimension of modern life robs us of a sense of purpose *unless we arrive* (this is the materialist’s worldview), contributing to the painful conclusion that suffering is indeed ‘meaningless’ – because suffering prevents us from ‘arriving’ quickly and efficiently. Suffering distorts our perception of the life narrative’s ending: it may be different from the ending for which we had hoped, or the end may not be perceptible at all. The virtue of a worldview that affirms transcendence is that the ending does not have to be apparent to us as an immediate material consequence of the journey. In Christian terms, the project of personhood, or becoming more and more aware of ourselves as beings in the image of God, is one that is completed in death, which state is unavailable for empirical evaluation.

⁴⁹⁹ If we can choose it, then it lacks the characteristic of imposed powerlessness and is arguably not suffering in the strict sense.

⁵⁰⁰ See, for example, Hauerwas, *Suffering presence*, p 15; R. Niebuhr, *The responsible self*, p 60; Sölle, *Suffering*, chap 1; Wendell, *The rejected body*, pp 23-40, p 55; Young, *Face to face*, p 121, and discussion in S. Nelson, *A thousand crucifixions*, pp 10-11.

⁵⁰¹ C. Taylor, *The politics of recognition*, p 26, discusses the ‘due courtesy’ we owe other human beings; that we do not devalue another by judging his/her different experience.

⁵⁰² Turner, *Death and the dead*, p 30.

Nonetheless, we are aware of the goals and signposts of the personal journey and have a model for it in the form of the gospels.

(c) Individual or social? Suffering has an inescapable corporate dimension. Suffering can be imposed by others (see the discussion in §5.4), either deliberately (by inflicting pain), or involuntarily (by colluding with the exclusion of the sufferer in some way, and this collusion can be quite complex). Suffering is also, as we have seen, an inescapable part of being a person, and persons are relational and social.

(d) Exposed or enclosed? At first sight we might assume that suffering is 'dangerous' and exposes us; however, I believe it makes more sense to understand suffering as taking place in the 'sacred' space, separated from normal social life. Sufferers are isolated and refused. Dame Cicely Saunders, in an interview not long before her death, commented: 'I remember one patient, years ago, saying to me: "It's very strange; nobody seems to want to look at me." People do "cross the road" to avoid the bereaved and dying. In a way, they feel they're a failure because they've tried treatments that haven't worked, so, by the time they come to us, they've been quite battered, almost like social outcasts. They need to feel self-worth again. After being in the hospice, patients will sometimes say to us: "Now I feel I'm a person again"'.⁵⁰³

Non-sufferers do not fully understand how to approach or help those who suffer (for example, Job's friends in the OT story), and may not even be interested in doing so. The removal from sight (the 'sequestration') of sufferers is characteristic of a liminal process. If the sufferers emerge from the isolation, they are permanently transformed. Certain figures – doctors, priests, psychologists, gaolers – are delegated by society to be liminal guides to these suffering people, but most people do not associate with the sufferers.

Perhaps in summary we could say that suffering that is perceived as meaningful is truly liminal, since the person undergoes a transformation or a *metanoia*.⁵⁰⁴ Suffering that is perceived as meaningless is liminoid: its deep significance can be evaded, and the opportunity for *metanoia* is lost.

⁵⁰³ Interviewed in *The Daily Telegraph* by Cherie Booth on 5 September 2002.

⁵⁰⁴ Zadra comments that Turner distinguishes ritual as a 'generative structure within the processes of life', whereas a social ceremony is about demonstrating social status – *ie* ritual delivers something new while ceremony reinforces the existing status quo. There are parallels with the function of metaphor within language here, see §5.4.1 of this thesis and the discussion of the metaphorical nature of suffering. D. Zadra, *Victor Turner's theory of religion*, in Moore & Reynolds (eds) *Anthropology*, p 82.

5.3.4 Liminality and temporality

Turner draws our attention to the way in which traditional pilgrims will conduct rituals on arrival at their destination, but on the way are subject to 'hazards'. 'Pilgrimages, although rooted in atemporal paradigms, experience temporality in ways rather foreign to the protected milieus of initiation rituals', he says, adding that 'the former [pilgrimage] liminalizes time, the latter [initiation] space...'.⁵⁰⁵ The question is how these hazards on the way to the end are subsequently interpreted when the journey is recounted as narrative: are they just purposeless obstacles or do they in fact enhance the meaning of the journey? Ricoeur argues that narrative emplotment, which imposes coherence onto a selection of events, can effectively invert perceived necessity and contingency.⁵⁰⁶ He also argues that the re-telling of narratives allows us to take a different view of initial conditions and consequences, such that we can 'see' the beginning in the end and *vice versa*.

Narrative, the story of the pilgrimage, is thus the 'vessel' in which the fundamental conflict of human and cosmic time can be held, and is itself neither one nor the other. Narrative has the potential for effecting a change in the reader/interpreter (see the discussion in §5.2.4), which is also the property and function of liminal space. So we could suggest that narrative has characteristics of temporal liminality, and is therefore a natural location in which to name and undergo the experience of suffering – and we might call this particular form of narrative 'lament' (discussed further in §5.4).⁵⁰⁷ Conversely we could argue that suffering triggers the conceptual move into narrative space. From a pastoral point of view this means that being able to narrate the pilgrimage will be profoundly helpful in terms of locating meaning in the experience of suffering. Furthermore, if the person experiencing suffering is familiar with the concept and practice of pilgrimage, then the narration of his/her pain will be easier and more effective, because that person will be more comfortable with the occupation of liminal space.

The significance of this line of argument is that it offers an accessible alternative to the description of the world in material and reductionist ways. In practice the effectiveness of life story therapy in the management of terminal patients is evident; but there is also the possibility here that the introduction of the practice of pilgrimage – whether physical or narrative - in some way at an earlier stage of life might be extremely helpful to all persons. Pilgrimage has passed out of practice in most Protestant churches, but perhaps those in

⁵⁰⁵ Turner, *ibid*, p 31.

⁵⁰⁶ Ricoeur, *Oneself as another*, p 142, discussed above in §5.2.3.

⁵⁰⁷ There is a discussion of lament as 'alien time' (*ie* the perception of the linear sequence of time collapses when lamenting and suffering) by R. Klein in her essay, *The phenomenology of lament*, in *Evoking lament* (ed Harasta & Brock), pp 20-21.

pastorate need to explore new ways of introducing this aspect of spirituality because of its natural alliance to the transcendent.

5.4 Suffering: the central human experience?

Ricoeur suggests that '[w]e tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative'.⁵⁰⁸

Speaking on Radio 4 in early 2010, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks described how the Jews trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Nazi occupation decided to gather collections of stories and photographs of what was happening to them, and to hide them in the ghetto as a record of the Holocaust.⁵⁰⁹ After the war, the survivors of the ghetto were able to search for these firsthand documents, hidden in tin cans and milk churns and buried beneath the wreckage of the houses. This desperate act of concealment of documents was considered by Sacks to be one of hope, because the imprisoned Jewish victims held onto the beliefs that (a) the war would end and that there would be survivors of the ghetto, and (b) that the world would be willing to hear the stories of injustice, which would validate the suffering of the Jewish community.

This short account demonstrates the fragility of undistorted (in McFadyen's sense of undistorted) human narrative possibility. The development and offering of a narrative is not in itself enough. It has to be heard and evaluated, which has implications for the relationships between narrator and hearer. In particular, we would want to ask where the balance of power may lie – for example, does the narrative conform to cultural norms? If not, can it be truly heard? The suppression of narrative can occur in various ways – the narrator can be silenced by removal or disempowerment (this was the Nazi strategy); the narrative can be ridiculed or made to seem irrational (the Holocaust deniers); the surrounding cultural narratives may be so loud that they drown out the small voice (cultural apathy: it doesn't affect me).

When the dying or suffering person wants to articulate her/his narrative, s/he meets several obstacles. First, there appears to be a consensual silence in western culture about death and

⁵⁰⁸ Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 1, p 75.

⁵⁰⁹ *Thought for the Day*, Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, BBC Radio 4, 27 January 2010. Sacks refers to Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum, who realised that the Nazis were destroying evidence of the Holocaust while it was still taking place so that it could be effectively denied later. See the record of the talk at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/programmes/thought/documents/t20100127.shtml>, last accessed at 1520 on 17/05/10. See also Kassow, *Who will write our history?*

bodily impairment, both of which are perceived as failures in success. Second, there is a powerful metanarrative that suppresses serious engagement with the transcendent or non-rational aspects of human being. Third, there is a distancing of persons from sacrificial relationship because of the cultural focus on the autonomous self.

Sölle dialogues powerfully with these criteria in her liberation-focused theology of suffering.⁵¹⁰ Her critique discloses a western church that is deeply flawed in compassion (she uses the term *apatheia*), since it prefers cultural 'success' to a Christ-like identification with the victim, and she illuminates the irony of a 'Christianity [that] has become a stranger to pain'.⁵¹¹

She identifies three movements in the process of suffering that are consonant both with our own personal experiences and with the observation of the experience of others: first, a stage of mute shock; second, the articulation of the suffering (often as lament); and third, the transformation – or perhaps we might say, the enculturation – of suffering and sufferer. I would like to engage with these movements with reference to the ideas of Ricoeur, McFadyen and Whitehead.

5.4.1 Mute shock stage

Profound suffering initially robs us of words. We are forced inside ourselves and cannot communicate our pain. This is a deeply dehumanising part of suffering because we are isolated within ourselves – either because we are not allowed to 'speak' or because we cannot.⁵¹²

If we transfer this experience to McFadyen's personhood model, dialogue becomes impossible and we are reduced to a monological existence. We have no way of cyclically reinforcing through social dialogue the 'self' that we have been using and projecting to this point, and our personhood is felt to be compromised. A person is still, in this model, addressed lovingly by God, or s/he would cease to exist. However, if that person never works with a metanarrative of the transcendent, how can s/he hear or recognise this address? Even if the person does have a religious belief, s/he may still struggle to hear the address of the divine if the working image of God is devoid of vulnerability or pain.

The archetypal story of inexplicable suffering is given in Job, and Job notably sits initially for seven days in silence with his friends (Job 2:13), since no-one can believe that such an upright person has been stricken. In the biblical story, Job does then begin to speak, but speaking may

⁵¹⁰ As well as the key text *Suffering*, Sölle's books include *Choosing life*, *The window of vulnerability*, *The silent cry*, and *The mystery of death*. Pinnock has produced an overview of Sölle's thinking, *The theology of Dorothee Sölle*.

⁵¹¹ Sölle, *Suffering*, p 41.

⁵¹² Swinton examines the silent dimension of lament in *Raging with compassion*, chap 5.

not always be an option, depending on the context. We considered earlier the involuntary silencing of the Warsaw Jews by violent suppression. Another kind of silencing can take place by the passive withholding of compassion, which Sölle names as 'apathy',⁵¹³ ie the inability to empathise with another's suffering and a lack of understanding of one's own. Jean Vanier offers this disturbing anecdote: 'I once visited a psychiatric hospital that was a kind of warehouse of human misery. Hundreds of children with severe disabilities were lying, neglected, on their cots. There was deadly silence. Not one of them was crying. When they realize that nobody cares, that nobody will answer them, children no longer cry. It takes too much energy. We cry out only when there is hope that someone may hear us'.⁵¹⁴

So far the silence of suffering has been construed rather negatively, but I would like to analyse it a little more. Let us think of the 'shock' that occurs when a metaphor comes into play in language. The metaphor has the 'is and is not' quality that has the 'impertinence' to suggest likeness where there is none. *The power of metaphor to extend language arises from this shock 'out of' familiar territory.* In other words, metaphor makes us pause and see the world afresh; and in so doing, we may learn a new thing, and expand our comprehension (although there is also the serious possibility, especially in our scientific culture, that the metaphor will not enlighten us at all).

I think it is credible to argue four things:

- a) that Sölle's mute shock phase of suffering can be styled as a 'metaphorical experience' – suffering does come to us as something alien and new that causes us to re-evaluate the world;
- b) that suffering has the quality of 'metaphorical experience' in that it *is and is not* as we expect life to be;
- c) that suffering is metaphorical experience in that it brings together the human and divine: God is 'like us' in the suffering Christ, but unlike us in his transcendence and perfect love;
- d) that we are free to accept or reject the new insight into life that suffering as a metaphorical experience brings: just as we may either accept or reject a metaphorical association in language. This feature also images the work of God in its non-coercive persuasion, characteristic of process thinkers.

⁵¹³ Sölle, *Suffering*, p 36.

⁵¹⁴ Vanier, *Becoming human*, p 9.

5.4.2 Articulation (*lament*) stage

Sölle's second phase of suffering is that of being able to articulate the experience. The articulation may be very basic: a raw cry of pain is at least a start, because it breaks out of the solitary inner place of monologue by assuming that someone – maybe God? – will hear. In Job the phase of articulation, or lament, takes up a great deal of the book. Job expresses his pain to various listeners and receives advice from them. The advice from the three friends (comforters of Job) actually demonstrates their poor listening skills, since they are at pains to analyse Job's suffering and find a cause for it, which is usually expressed in terms of Job's sin or fault in some way. When Job is unable to identify such sin or fault in his life, this advice simply compounds his suffering and further isolates him from his community.

In this process we can see a typical Girardian dynamic: the suffering one is identified and targeted as the community's secret sinner, making the friends feel righteous and safe. They have not been afflicted, so they must be righteous. The effect is to push Job back into the isolation of suffering even further: he cannot articulate the sin that he has not committed and his pain is increased. This destructive cycle is repeated until something very interesting happens: the young man Elihu waits while his elders reason with Job. Only when they have finished does the young outsider suggest an alternative interpretation to Job for his experience – interestingly, the transforming discourse comes from another 'marginal' person rather than from the establishment elders.⁵¹⁵

In the hospice, being able to articulate – *ie* to talk freely about death to staff – was often very liberating for patients. Often the patient's articulation of pain was hampered by a concern for her/his loved ones, not wanting to hurt them. Families may collude with this evasion of reality because of the cultural taboo around death. For example, patients and families would often talk of 'when we go home', when there was actually no prospect of such a thing; or seek further and often unorthodox treatment when it was clearly unsuitable, in an attempt to evade the inevitable outcome, as noted in §5.2.4. Such evasions make it difficult for the patient to articulate – in McFadyen's terms, they are distorted dialogues, albeit for the best of reasons. Families could further impede the articulation of pain by analysing the disease causally: once biological and environmental factors were exhausted (genetics, smoking, occupational hazards), the analysis could become metaphysical: 's/he did not *deserve* this', implying that a transcendent justice and causality might be at work, since they had failed to make sense of the experience in any other manner.

⁵¹⁵ In terms of metaphor, the 'shock' factor is enhanced because this person is not expected to be 'wise'.

How might we analyse the phase of lament for this study? McFadyen speaks of the dialogue that leads out of personal isolation – of course, dialogue need not be understood to be vocal, but can be any relational experience – and by which we establish our humanity. If we are condemned to a self-referential existence then we do not live, at least, not as humans. McFadyen would argue that technically such an existence is impossible because of the call of God to each person; heard or unheard, but we know that in practice we can live as if there is no such address of God.

Furthermore, there is a significant narrative implication. If one can narrate one's suffering, which occurs in human experience but also draws its meaning from the cosmic dimension, is this to place it in Ricoeur's historical time – the time that links human and cosmic time? And if this is correct, could we even say that historical time has liminal as well as narrative characteristics? If so, then narrated suffering can be understood as a place of transformation on the pilgrimage of life, and this might provide helpful pastoral insights into spiritual pain, making use of the telling of stories.

5.4.3 Transformation stage

Sölle's third phase is transformation, or moving out of isolation into a new form of relationship with others. This transformation is about being able to articulate the experience of suffering and then to reincorporate it into life, so that it does not simply oppress and silence the sufferer.⁵¹⁶ In McFadyen's terms, dialogue is re-established between the suffering person and the community, although all parties will be changed by the experience: the new relationship will not be the same as the one that was disrupted by the impact of suffering on its 'victim', and some communities and some suffering individuals may of course be more receptive to re-establishing dialogue than others.

Sölle uses Job as a paradigm for this process. When Job moves out of silence into articulation and lament, initially his friends struggle to receive him back as a full dialogue partner. Their driving purpose is to attribute Job's suffering, and when they cannot, they give up. So, Eliphaz says to Job: 'Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it...hear it and apply it to yourself' (Job 4:7-8 and 5: 27b). Bildad and Zophar follow with similar advice: that Job must in some way be culpable before God. This dialogue is very painful to Job, because he does not believe that he has sinned such that he 'deserves' the suffering that befalls him. It does not make rational sense.

⁵¹⁶ Klein also addresses this dimension of lament, describing it as an '*irreversible shift* of life orientation', *The phenomenology of lament*, p 21.

If we apply McFadyen's model to these exchanges then we might label them as distorted dialogues, primarily because Job's access to the dialogue is limited. He is oppressed by the assumptions of his community about the nature of his presumed sin. As readers and interpreters, we have privileged access to the introductory material in Job 1 which tells us that Job has not in fact sinned: but the participants in the story do not know this. We know in advance, therefore, that the story is not about a causal or punitive relationship between sin and suffering; but Job and his friends have to work out their own interpretation, and capitulate to the assumption that Job has failed and needs to atone for his failure. This canalised⁵¹⁷ response to suffering seems to be fundamental to human social existence, no less so today in terms of illness and disability.

The story is no less an illustration of power dynamics in operation. The inexplicable suffering of Job undermines at a stroke his position as a blameless elder of the community and destroys the basis of his veneration by the people. The powerful one becomes powerless. His health, wealth and family are stricken. His friends are now the ones in power and the very tenor of the debates is one of 'polite' oppression of the now-vulnerable Job. They cannot hear Job's lament without judgement; and so he is not truly heard at all. The dialogue is distorted. Then in Job 32, Elihu, the young man who does not hold the social position of the three friends of Job, begins to speak. He offers a 'view from the margins' that is different. He describes the inability of humanity to understand God's ways: yet not in a fatalistic manner, for he also affirms the loving nature of God, hearing and caring for all people without oppression (Job 37:23b). He reveals a different possibility of relationship with God in his passionate defence of the Almighty.

Job's transformation occurs when he realises that suffering and joy in life are not about punishment and reward but different aspects of a faithful relationship with God. He begins to see God as a life partner rather than as a cosmic judge and dispenser of services: 'My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you' (Job 42:5). The restoration of Job is not a reward for his presumed sinlessness, but an aspect of his restoration to the community and to true dialogue. The new Job, the post-suffering Job, can witness more truthfully to the nature of a God of loving relationship than the righteous Job we meet at the beginning of the story. However, the community's worldview is profoundly challenged by this experience: if Job is restored, then what does that mean for the experience of suffering and the way in which God is perceived?

⁵¹⁷ Patricia Williams discusses canalised responses in *Doing without Adam and Eve*; the term refers to patterns of thinking and action that are fixed and difficult to challenge (like water flowing in the channel of a canal). The cross and resurrection of Christ, the truly innocent sufferer, powerfully exposes the inadequacy of this worldview.

We might want to use the term *metanoia* for this process – the individual undergoes a *metanoia* when s/he is ‘saved’ from desolation; but the community can also undergo *metanoia* when it actually hears the story of suffering and is able to include that person and her/his story within the community, thus expanding the limits of that community’s understanding. Metaphorically speaking, the experience of suffering shocks the community into stretching its cognitive boundaries; in Job’s case, about the nature of God and his relationship to people, a profound challenge to the prevailing worldview and arguably the task of the whole story of scripture.

5.5 Blame and lament: the ontological impertinence of suffering and the story of Jesus

In the final section of this chapter I would like to apply and adapt Ricoeur’s discussion of the difference between ‘blame’ and ‘lament’, which I believe illuminates the heart of the pastoral questions around suffering. Ricoeur says, ‘The whole enigma of evil may be said to lie in the fact that, at least in the traditions of the West, we put under the same terms such different phenomena as sin, suffering, and death. However, evil as wrongdoing and evil as suffering belong to two heterogeneous categories, that of blame and that of lament’.⁵¹⁸ In his discussion Ricoeur remarks that when humans violate cultural codes (*ie* when they sin), then guilt and blame are invoked; but lament occurs when suffering is undergone (as for Sölle).⁵¹⁹

Here I would like to make an overt connection with the critique of reductionism in Chapter 2 of this thesis, and say that I would broadly identify the work of blame as forensic in character, while the work of lament is both integrative and interpretive.⁵²⁰

Ricoeur finds three stages in lament which correspond fairly closely with the stages of suffering identified by Sölle, although neither theologian references the other. Ricoeur speaks of a first

⁵¹⁸ Ricoeur, *Evil, a challenge to philosophy and theology* in *Figuring the sacred* (ed M. I. Wallace), p 250.

⁵¹⁹ Eleven years earlier Ricoeur wrote (*Time and narrative*, vol 1, p 75), ‘The whole history of suffering cries out for *vengeance* and calls for narrative’ (already quoted in §5.4). Ricoeur’s approach to vengeance/blame/complaint seems to have shifted and become more nuanced over this period of reflection such that he understands lament as a different type of ‘protest’ from blame.

⁵²⁰ Claudia Welz, in *Trust and lament*, argues that Ricoeur (*Evil, a challenge to philosophy and theology*) criticises lament for reinforcing a victim mentality in a sufferer, and wishes lament ultimately to be overcome (pp 131-133). I am not sure that I agree with Welz, since I think Ricoeur criticises only the continued lamenting of the *injustice* of one’s fate (*ie* where some forensic and causal analysis has been applied and where the sufferer does not move on from that analysis but assumes that the causality is an ‘answer’ – which usually means that the sufferer is now complaining against God). The lament itself is a necessary transition (Welz affirms the nature of lament as a process) and Ricoeur rightly argues that lament can lead us to a dispassionate appreciation of God, a journey from what Welz terms an ‘inadequate’ to an ‘adequate’ form of lament (*ie* from one that complains against God to one that accepts God’s goodness and also accepts life as a mixture of good and bad, without blaming God).

stage of incomprehension; a second of complaint against God; and a third that occurs when we discover that the reasons for believing in God have nothing to do with the need to explain the origin of suffering. 'Suffering is only a scandal for the person who understands God to be the source of everything that is good in creation, including our indignation against evil, our courage to bear it, and our feeling of sympathy toward victims. In other words, we believe in God *in spite of evil*'.⁵²¹

The pastoral pathway encountered in the care of terminal patients often follows this kind of process. There is a search for culpability: was the cause of my sickness environmental? was it dietary? is it genetic? otherwise, is it the fault of God – or fate? This search for an empirical cause is common to those with or without religious faith in a modern liberal culture; however, the resolution of the search may be (though is not always) a very different process for those with Christian belief, for whom lament is part of the tradition – *if they can hear it*.

The paradigmatic life of Jesus Christ is one that embraces and reveals the true nature of suffering as the experience of the victim. Jesus as victim is truly and undeniably innocent: and if his incarnation is to show us anything then he has to be thus, to illuminate the profound reality that *suffering is not necessarily 'because of' anything we have done, or anything we might be*. There is no divine transaction that administers punishment in proportion to sin, or retribution in proportion to pain. Unmitigated suffering is visited upon the blameless second person of the Trinity: yet it is not for *no reason*; it is not *meaningless*. It is revelatory of the character of God in a broken universe, and it shows both God's complete empathy with those who suffer and the nature of the perfect response to the experience of suffering, which is to *break the cycle of blame*.

At this point I want to develop the idea that ***the characteristic of suffering can be described as ontological impertinence***. This characteristic has the potential to change us fundamentally from blamers (causal mentality) into lamenters (interpretive mentality). The intractable experiences of profound suffering that we find so difficult pastorally are in fact the gates to new meaning. Whenever the question 'Why me?' arises it is in fact a unique opportunity to

⁵²¹ Ricoeur, *ibid*, p 260. Dawkins (*River out of Eden*, p 96) notes that people often implicitly invoke a cause for suffering – 'We humans have purpose on the brain. We find it hard to look at anything without wondering what it is "for," what the motive for it is, or the purpose behind it'. He then uses this observation as an un-nuanced critique of religious belief. It is important that we do not fall into the trap of assuming that God 'causes' everything.

look at all the presumptions of life that hitherto led us to say that there is no meaning in what has happened.⁵²²

By using the analogy with metaphor, we might say that the original referent of our suffering (the presumed 'responsible' agent or event) founders, and allows the new meaning to emerge. Suffering offers access to the transcendent dimension of existence by confounding the 'human' referential experience: life no longer makes sense, and one is open to new possibilities in a manner that was not possible before. We seek for something that is similar and yet dissimilar to our own experience: and this is the 'unique opportunity'⁵²³ to refer our experience of suffering to that of the crucified God in our search for new meaning. Does our suffering make sense? Yes, now it does, for we have a new referent in the experience of Christ.

Only by the paradoxical combinations of power and weakness, life and death, divine and human in Christ is this successful referential activity possible. We are dependent not just upon Christ's work and person but upon the dynamic and imprecise nature, the sheer messiness, of the God-story given to us in Christ. If it were tidy then we would too readily make it our own and it would cease to be a useful referent – it would 'die', like the metaphorical table leg. On the other hand, if the God-story were less like ours then we would not make the connection at all: the comparison would be wide of the mark, like the froglike sunrise, and Jesus' life would cease to deliver the new meaning we desire and need for the resolution of our spiritual pain.

5.5.1 The ontological impertinence of the passion

Kitamori argues that we will never make sense of our suffering unless it testifies to the suffering of Christ. In the terms of the argument in this section, this means that we need to understand his paradigmatic life and the 'impertinence' of his passion as the referent for our own 'impertinent' pain. I would like to explore this argument within my suggested scheme by looking at the biblical account in Luke, as follows.

The cross is indeed the ultimate referent for our pain: but the cross is not a logical outcome in that it is not a right judgement, and there is no 'because' that is adequate to explain it. The cross was undeserved, and is quite clearly demonstrated to be so by the gospel accounts, which describe collusion and plotting against Jesus to achieve his death (James Alison speaks helpfully, after Girard, of exposing the 'intelligence of the victim'). The sentence of the cross is

⁵²² Here we are reminded of Frankl's belief: '...day by day life is asking us questions, we are interrogated by life, and we have to answer', in *The unheard cry for meaning*, p 110. Logotherapy, Frankl's technique, literally means 'therapy through meaning'.

⁵²³ Frankl says: 'When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task: his single and unique task...His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden'. (*Man's search for meaning*, p 99)

thus logically unrelated to the quality of the life (of Jesus), with which it is eternally associated. Our essential spiritual task in life is to appropriate this discontinuity, to become participants in this story rather than observers,⁵²⁴ and I will discuss this further in the concluding chapter (Chapter 6). The cross is the ultimate location for metaphorical meaning: it is the place where 'God died... and yet did not die'.⁵²⁵

In the crucifixion the human need to blame was made manifest: but it was not rational, because the victim was not guilty.⁵²⁶ Jesus was not responsible for the existential pain of the Jews but instead offered possibilities for healing it, both paradigmatically, through his personal ministry of compassionate signs (the miracles and healings of the gospels) and pragmatically, by establishing a way of life for all people that embraces healing and relational existence, the interpersonal dealings of which life do not focus on any kind of retributive justice, but on unconditional love. Thus in Jesus himself, in his life and in his death (and we shall come to the resurrection presently), the causal link between suffering and sin is demonstrated to be unsound when applied as a universal.⁵²⁷

On the cross Jesus did not become a 'blamer', but did the work of lament, which integrates and interprets the relationship of grace between God and humanity. He refused to dispense or to perpetuate violence in his response to the people's violent blaming of himself. In fact, he was largely silent during the period of accusation, responding only to certain specific questions about his identity and ministry, and these responses were careful ones. For example, in Luke 22:66-23:4, there are three interactions between Jesus and his accusers, as follows (text quoted from NIV).

[First]

(v 67) 'If you are the Christ', they said, 'tell us'.

Jesus answered, 'If I tell you, you will not believe me, (v 68) and if I asked you, you would not answer. (v 69) But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God'.

⁵²⁴ With reference to Niebuhr, in *Why narrative?* (eds Hauerwas & Jones), pp 21-44.

⁵²⁵ Moltmann, *Crucified*, p 253.

⁵²⁶ Bailie notes the human tendency to 'read in' a culprit in the crucifixion story, in his discussion of the corporate nature of our responsibility for the death of Jesus. 'The crucifixion's anthropological significance is lost if responsibility is shifted from *all* to *some*', he comments, meaning that the crucifixion itself – and also our reading of the narrative – reveals our common desire to scapegoat a victim. *Violence unveiled*, p 218.

⁵²⁷ This supposed link is also refuted by Jesus in his teaching; see John 9:1-3. In Mark 2, the healing of the paralytic arguably does not cement the relationship between sin and suffering but explores the power dynamics between Jesus and the establishment, and the nature of Jesus's authority.

[Secondly]

(v 70) They all asked, 'Are you then the Son of God?'

He replied, 'You are right in saying I am'.

[Thirdly]

(v 3) So Pilate asked Jesus, 'Are you the king of the Jews?'

'Yes, it is as you say,' Jesus replied.

The content of these confessions about Jesus's identity all originate from the accusers: Jesus does not put any words into their mouths at all. He does not inflame the debate by offering unpalatable assertions, although he does not deny what is true. The accusers have come to their opinion about his (presumed) divinity by seeing the works of Jesus and his popularity, both of which challenge their security, yet Jesus constantly warns his followers NOT to jump to conclusions based upon his healings and miracles. Mark's gospel is especially clear about the 'Messianic secret' but all the gospels are peppered with remarks that deflect attention away from the signs and miracles, and towards the (far more costly) lifestyle of compassion and service. The economy of Jesus is not a market economy, nor one that can be described by cause and effect, retributive justice, or any other reductive mechanism. It is about a process of self-giving love.

Outside the interviews quoted above, Jesus's words during his passion were largely words that broke into the blaming cycle and turned it to lament:

'...do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children' (Luke 23:28);

and, later,

'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34).

Critically, these words do not say that suffering does not hurt or does not matter, but they use the suffering to suggest a new way of life, which laments without blaming. In today's world this is roughly the equivalent of adopting a non-causal dimension to our explanation: taking seriously the evidence of experience as an indicator of the nature of reality. Importantly for my argument, it is the **ontological impertinence** of suffering, its 'metaphorical shock' quality, which allows this dimension to be accessed at all.

5.5.2 *The ontological impertinence of the resurrection*

Thinking about the resurrection is the next step in my argument. The risen Jesus is initially unrecognised in the various gospel encounters, yet in each recorded case he is eventually affirmed in his identity. Resurrected, he is both *like and unlike* the Jesus of Nazareth known to his followers prior to Good Friday.⁵²⁸ He is different enough for the impertinence to be felt; but similar enough for the likeness to the executed Jesus to become evident. The same process of impertinent attribution allows us to think about life and death, humanity and divinity, in a new way. The shock of seeing the dead Jesus raised to life triggers the cosmic re-evaluation of the world and of the nature of God that characterises the New Testament witness.⁵²⁹ The experience of death is retained within the experience of the resurrected Christ (he *is* and *is not* dead).⁵³⁰ The re-evaluation leading to *metanoia* causes the original referents to founder: so the apparent impossibility of emerging from death in some way is now challenged, although the changed nature of the risen Christ indicates that death is neither forgotten nor erased from his new existence.

Once again, the dialogues and events of the gospels *after* the resurrection are not characterised by *blame*: although neither is lament now the dominant genre. Instead, there is a movement towards transformation or *metanoia*: the adoption and incorporation of the shocking reality (the whole life, death and resurrection of Jesus understood as the Son of God) that opens up a new and creative way of understanding reality – and most particularly, provides a new way of interpreting the experience of suffering and of death that starts from the radically discontinuous *experience* of resurrection and completely passes under the radar of rational causality.⁵³¹ We cannot attribute a cause or reason for resurrection other than the unconditional grace and love of God: that he did not blame humanity for the death of Jesus, but rather gave further evidence of his desire to heal. In a rational scheme, if Jesus is the innocent victim and also God's Son, then his death at the hands of human beings should invite revenge, destruction, punishment. It does not: this shocking reality means that we cannot apportion blame. God is not against us, whatever we might do.

⁵²⁸ The 'like and unlike' category mirrors the 'is and is not' of metaphorical quality. Sallie McFague discusses the implications of the idea that Jesus is a parable of God (with parable being understood here as an extended metaphor) in (Teselle) *Speaking in parables* and (McFague) *Metaphorical theology*.

⁵²⁹ Larry Hurtado discusses the difficult conceptual transition made by the early believers from a position of strict Jewish monotheism to the acceptance of the divinity of Christ in *One God, one Lord*.

⁵³⁰ See Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, p 21: 'It is not as though the resurrection cured him of being slaughtered...[it] gives him back as the slaughtered one'; and Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, pp 269-291, discusses the eschaton as transformative of the present, not a total replacement of it.

⁵³¹ Sölle, in arguing for the need to validate our experience in terms of understanding life, says 'Experience sets itself over against the empiricism of normality and the idealization of scientific learning in which the individual is reduced to a number, and over against "bending the knee to the altar of reason",' in *The inward road*, p 33.

5.5.3 *The ontological impertinence of personhood*

The shock to our human conceptions of personhood and community from the referential life of Christ is no less profound. In Chapter 3 I explored the dialogical conception of personhood developed by McFadyen, in which persons are understood as formed through a process of communal dialogue. Experiences of call and response take place throughout life and become sedimented into a whole dynamic personal existence. A person cannot exist in isolation. This view of personhood challenges the autonomous subject so beloved of liberal western societies and also sits happily with the process insights that challenge the reductionism and remoteness of traditional hard theism. How then is Christian personhood to be viewed as ontologically impertinent?

I have argued (§5.4) that suffering is the central human experience, because the impertinence of suffering triggers the creative re-evaluation and transformation of the human being, leading to new meaning in the light of the matters that challenge us. In particular, suffering opens the gateway to the transcendent and expands our capacity for life beyond the material and causal. This type of personhood is offered to us paradigmatically and perfectly in Christ.

Sölle notes that Jesus does not overcome death simply in his resurrection.⁵³² Her concept of death is what she terms 'death by bread alone' – or an obsession with the material realm such that we give ourselves to social alienation. We are already dead if we cannot value others except as points of competition and comparison by which to judge our own achievements. Thus Jesus does not just overcome natural death in the resurrection: he also battles with and overcomes death wherever he meets it during his public ministry – by reconciling the outsiders with their communities, and by challenging those who exclude and alienate through social or religious convention. It is the suffering of the outsider that triggers this transformational activity, challenging people to re-evaluate reality.

In none of this does Jesus apportion blame, in the sense that he seeks judgement on, and punishment for, the excluders. His strategy is overwhelmingly to lament the hardness of heart of the people, and to teach a compassionate (compassion meaning literally 'to suffer with') alternative to those who will follow him. Thus we are called to become a transformational society of those who do not cut others down by blaming, but who express genuine lament for suffering and seek the transformation of the community. Such an approach would profoundly alter our society's attitude to incidents both of moral and of natural evil, seeing in them possibilities rather than problems. It would be a society characterised by healing and inclusion

⁵³² Sölle, *The inward road*, p 9.

rather than by competition and difference.⁵³³ It would be a model consonant with a process paradigm, in which all experience is held in God and has ‘value’ (although it is not necessarily ‘good’).

My conclusion is that it is precisely in these ontological impertinences that we may learn to lament instead of to blame. The possibility of new meaning and of *metanoia* is always open to us, both as individuals and as communities, and is in fact the only way to live in the dynamic tension of relationship. If we cease to respond creatively to suffering, then we are already dead: we live in a closed cycle of regret and bitterness that will close us off from new and healthy relationships with others.

5.5.4 *The impertinence of temporality*

In *The unheard cry for meaning*, Viktor Frankl develops the interesting process-like thought that everything is both transitory (it passes away) and eternal (once something exists, its existence is irreversible and has consequences: this is effectively a statement of objective immortality).⁵³⁴ We have no control, says Frankl, over the transitory or eternal nature of reality – but we do have control over the decisions we make in life and thus about *what* we commit to the eternal record, which record can be neither corrected nor lost. The present moment is the border between the future and the past and is also the borderline at which we decide what to commit to eternity. Frankl notes that we ‘rescue’ things from their transitory status and make them permanent by means of these decisions.

Frankl’s reasoning feels to me a little fatalistic, in spite of his protestations that by accepting our responsibilities for our decisions we can effectively ‘write’ our own eternity. Men and women often make decisions that they subsequently regret: this is life. It is a tall pastoral challenge to expect people to shoulder full responsibility for their (perhaps unwittingly) disastrous decisions and then to live content with the anticipation of eternal consequences, simply because the decisions, once made, are immutable. Such fatalism has no place in the story of the resurrection, which does not suggest a static timeless repository of events after death, but rather a pattern of transformative being that offers tremendous hope for healing and change (Christ is both dead and undead,⁵³⁵ see discussion in §5.5.2). Some thinkers suggest that judgement can be included as a hopeful and healing process within such a

⁵³³ Clearly this form of society would suggest political and civil applications, for example, in terms of legal process. A concrete example might be the Truth and Reconciliation process in post-apartheid South Africa.

⁵³⁴ This argument will be found in the chapter entitled *Temporality and mortality: an ontological essay*, pp 102-113 of Frankl’s *The unheard cry for meaning*.

⁵³⁵ See Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, p 20; Moltmann, *Crucified*, p 253.

dynamic eternity, and Paul Fiddes offers a discussion of this point in *The promised end*.⁵³⁶ A recent debate in process thought between David Griffin and Marjorie Suchocki concerns the nature of immortality.⁵³⁷ The idea of Whitehead's objective immortality (that every experience is *held in God* eternally and thus is significant) is sometimes thought to be unsatisfactory, because for those whose lives are characterised by failure or unhappiness these negative experiences are the total and miserable content of eternity, which offers little in the way of hope. Suchocki suggests a notion of subjective immortality instead, in which the *redemptive transformation in God of every experience of every person* takes place. One of the most obvious problems with this view⁵³⁸ is that there would be multiple versions of each person in eternity – many already 'there' (and increasing all the time) while the human person is still 'here' – which raises a question about how these multiple persons relate to one another. Another problem is that Whitehead's actual occasions are meant to be complete in themselves and so technically cannot take part in 'the future' (though see the first adaptation immediately below).

If we were to keep to Whitehead's basic model of objective immortality as a kind of narrative model of the life to come, I wonder whether two adaptations might help to address this problem of what we might call 'eternal regret'.

First, could we ask about the nature of an actual occasion's process of decay (or satisfaction). If we assume that the reality we experience is a good guide to the nature of reality (and Whitehead suggests that it is), then what is our experience of suffering like? I think we can say that initially, after the 'trauma', it is intense and acute; then the pain begins to be moderated (by articulation or lament, in Sölle's scheme); and finally we become able to live with the suffering or pain and it may become effectively unnoticeable unless specifically triggered (like the longer term stages of bereavement loss). The suffering or pain does not, however, disappear as if it had never been. It leaves a trace in our lives and in eternity. We are different because of it (Christ keeps his scars), and all our subsequent experiences are altered by it. The model is more like one of exponential decay of the experience, with an asymptotic final stage. This model seems to fit life experiences and also McFadyen's sedimentation model of personhood (fluvial rather than static). I think it might be possible to reflect helpfully on

⁵³⁶ Fiddes, *The promised end*, pp 192-212.

⁵³⁷ Griffin, review of Suchocki's *The end of evil*, in *Process Studies*, 1989, **18**(1), 57-69.

⁵³⁸ Several other problems are discussed between Griffin and Suchocki in this interesting article. Suchocki mentions the constraints of needing to develop a strict metaphysical argument without mixing it with 'intuitive imagination' (p 68). But perhaps by understanding process thought as a narrative tool, a metaphor or model of reality, rather than a logical straitjacket, we can deal theologically with this problem.

metanoia in these terms, and might form the material for some further thinking and research.⁵³⁹

The second possible adaptation to a Whiteheadian model of objective immortality is to redefine our 'failure' or 'unhappiness' as ontological impertinence, such that the retention of these experiences is not perceived as purely negative and meaningless; yet also I would like to hope for their transformative redemption in God. How might this redemption happen? Perhaps we cannot find an adequate philosophical answer unless we invoke a narrative understanding alongside the process thought. If we think of the transformation in God in eternity in the same way as we think of the signs and miracles of Jesus of Nazareth, then perhaps we can start to see a way forward. The signs and miracles redirect us: away from a tidy causal/retributive system and towards a total *metanoia* of what it is to be human in *imago dei* – a messy place defined by the weak power, the living death, the human divinity of Christ: the dynamic and imprecise God-story that we have been given and which we find so very difficult to appropriate for ourselves.

Once again, I would like to suggest that we are treading the ground between blame and lament. The accretion of events in the eternal record of a human person is unlikely to represent a perfect execution of life on earth! We often say, when referring to something that has not gone well, 'I'll have to live with it', but in practice either the memory or the consequences will result in damaging blame and negative judgement. In contrast, the gospel offers us a pattern of lament that recognises sin and suffering for what they are without diminishing their immediate destructive powers, yet through grace continues and transforms the story. Perhaps in eternity our redemption occurs through our ability to lament, to tell our stories justly, and to be heard by a community of others who know themselves to be redeemed.

There is a sense in which the story of Jesus suggests an imposition of temporality upon eternity; at least in the sense of a progression of events. Fiddes notes that we cannot imagine a God who understands suffering if God is not also somehow limited by time. Suffering that is known to be finite is not the same as suffering that seems to have no end. As humans we do not have that vantage point on suffering: in the very worst circumstances we hope only to have an end in death. Kermode remarks that 'If time cannot be felt as successive, this end ceases to have effect; without the sense of passing time one is virtually ceasing to live, one loses 'contact with reality'. So the prisoner invents a clock...'.⁵⁴⁰ If God does not share this pain

⁵³⁹ See also fn 555 of this thesis.

⁵⁴⁰ Kermode, *Sense of an ending*, p 160.

of the passing of time, then God is indeed remote from our suffering. Neither can we evade the problem by identifying suffering too particularly with the incarnation, because that would drive a division between the persons of the Trinity.

It is important to note that once again, it is the experience of suffering that triggers this re-evaluation. If our eternal records are blameless then perhaps we are indeed finished at death: otherwise, our stories will rumble on in the lives of those who labour under or transform our mistakes.

Ricoeur's discussion of human and cosmic time seems to be relevant here. He describes the relationship between human and cosmic time as being a temporal one: both can be narrated, and the limitations of human time are evident because of our awareness of the cosmic dimension (something like Frankl's eternal record). Not only is suffering the key impertinent event that triggers the consideration of the cosmic and makes us aware that there is a transcendent dimension to life over which we have no control; I would also like to suggest that we think in terms of our human narrative being able to impact the cosmic narrative – that the relationship is a dynamic and responsive one and firmly grounded in temporality. In this manner the unique incarnation of Christ shapes both the human and cosmic dimensions with reference to the other, and in this we can find a pattern for the meaning of our lives.

Chapter 6. Conclusion: meaningful suffering as ‘ontological impertinence’

He delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ears by adversity. (Job 36:15, NRSV)

In this conclusion I want to offer an overview of the way in which the preceding chapters identify and critique the modern western view of suffering as an ‘insult to normality’. I will do this by examining and critiquing culturally embedded views of the nature of reality and the nature of the person. Then I will consider the rehabilitation of suffering (from the discussion of Chapter 5) as a key experience in the formation of a person – effectively the deliverance of the ‘afflicted by their affliction’, to quote from Job. I will reflect on the experience of suffering in (post)modernity⁵⁴¹ in the light of Ricoeur’s hypothesis that reality is narrative in form, and develop my thesis that we can work with the idea that suffering is understood as an ‘ontological impertinence’, because suffering functions in life in a manner analogous to the way in which metaphor functions in language. Finally I will suggest some practical applications and indicate possible further research.

6.1 Job’s suffering: the ancient story illuminates the modern problem

I will begin with some remarks about how the book of Job might be used or misused, interpreted or misinterpreted, in the modern era, because I think that this exercise may helpfully highlight some of the difficulties experienced with the very concept of suffering in modern settings. I think this is an appropriate process because Job is recognised as the archetypal biblical story of suffering, and many of its insights are transferable to, and (more importantly) revelatory of, experiences of suffering today – Job is not a story of antiquity, but a parable for life. Most significantly for my argument, however, Job’s story in scripture has a happy ending, which neatly concludes his experiences and leave us with a sense of satisfaction that justice has been done. In spite of this feeling of appropriate closure and the universal appeal of this personal justice for Job, I argue that the ending functions as a red herring for modern westerners, because we interpret it rather doggedly from a post-Enlightenment perspective.

⁵⁴¹ With respect to my own reflections on suffering based upon working with hospice patients and the disability sector, postmodernity seems to be superimposed upon embedded modern assumptions about the nature of reality. The result is a new dualism of practical postmodern living (individualistic, anti-authoritarian) with an underlying view of reality that is still quite modernistic (God is other, omnipotent, impassible *etc*, combined with commitment to a functional matter/spirit dualism). See §6.3.

I would like to suggest, for the purposes of this argument, that the happy ending (Job 42: 10-17) be viewed less as ‘information-giving’ (although admittedly it does give summary facts and figures about Job’s family situation after his restoration) than as a rhetorical device along the lines of our more familiar ‘they all lived happily ever after’ – which tells us nothing *factually*, since no-one really lives forever; still less in eternal happiness. Rather, such epilogues indicate the functional end of the story (*ie* the narrator’s point has been made and the rest is irrelevant for him/her), but we are aware of a caveat about how we interpret the rest of the story drawn from the following insights of Ricoeur and Kermode. Ricoeur⁵⁴² observes that the reader’s desire is always to configure the events of a story and to make a consonant whole – so as we read, we interpret and catalogue and order the bits of the story into something that it might not have been; while Kermode⁵⁴³ draws our attention to the ontological difference between the ‘tick’ and the ‘tock’ of the plot (the *kairos* or significant points, the beginning and ending) by referring to the nature of the temporal space between them (the tick anticipates, the tock closes), which means that our expectations change as the plot develops. In short, the caveat is that we have to be aware of what we do, if we interpret the whole story from its ending. We interpret the story, and obtain the meaning we want to find – yet we cannot release ourselves from this privileged view of the past. The best we can do is to recognise that our personal contextualisation exists, even if we are not aware of our own interpretive criteria.

As Ricoeur notes, the beginning and ending of any narrative is a decision made by the narrator: it is relative.⁵⁴⁴ Ricoeur identifies the existence of a generic cosmic time⁵⁴⁵ in which the particular human narrative is set, and even if we do not know any details of that cosmic time (if we did, they might add to our interpretive possibilities with that narrative), we will recognise that the story is placed within a broader context and purpose.

So, if we return to Job, we do not know the details of any further conversations with God or his friends after the (supposedly final) resolution of his suffering in Job 42; yet such conversations comprise the majority of the narrative in the episode in which the storyteller is interested. As far as the narrator is concerned, Job’s story is finished once this extended experience of suffering is dealt with. In fact we know that Job’s life story carries on, since he did not die until later – but his continuing story does not explicate the matter of this suffering any further in the view of the storyteller.

⁵⁴² Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 2, pp 20-25.

⁵⁴³ Kermode, *The sense of an ending*, pp 45-47.

⁵⁴⁴ See Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 2, p 20.

⁵⁴⁵ Discussed by Ricoeur in *Time and narrative*, vol 3, see for example pp180ff.

Already some potential contemporary problems with the interpretation of Job are emerging which illuminate the material identified in the earlier chapters of this thesis: the issues of a modern dualism that struggles with transcendent reality; of forensic and reductionist thinking that damages human personhood and relationship; the desire for a causal explanation for suffering, and the consequent modern impulse to theodicy. Let me look at these problems in a little more detail.

(i) The recognition that the beginning and ending of Job direct our attention to the basic existence of cosmic time may be overlooked in a reductionist modern reading that more naturally focuses on the 'data' within the story. A modern reader may underestimate the significance of the explicit links to the cosmic dimension in the opening paragraphs (expressed as the discussion between God and Satan, which we are not obliged to take to imply a real conversation, but perhaps as indicative of the existence of good and evil in the universe); and may simply skim over the happy ending, which more implicitly alludes to the same thing: that this story has a whole worldview behind it that makes sense of what happens in the story itself. Another way of expressing this is to say that the transcendent dimension of the story may be compromised in modern understanding; but without the transcendent dimension the story can never make sense – and this is one reason why moderns struggle with suffering.

(ii) We like the implied (retributive type) justice of the happy ending because it feels right within our modern causal and forensic approach to morality and polity. Unfortunately the ending may completely mislead us with respect to the true message of Job. Reading Job in the manner of Gutierrez⁵⁴⁶ and Sölle⁵⁴⁷ places the focus not on the *material* resolution of his suffering (the pain and sickness is healed and the lost property is returned), but on (a) the relational dynamics between the various participants in the story; and on (b) the unconditional love of God, which is not bestowed according to any system of human 'deserving'. The purpose of Job's story in this kind of reading is to show that God does not simply mete out punishment to the guilty and blessing to the innocent. Job confounds this logic because he appears to be the punished innocent, which is internally inconsistent in an archetypal story read in a forensic manner. In this he prefigures Christ: the illogicality of the crucifixion, which renders it revelatory of our human imprisonment in retributive and categorical thinking,⁵⁴⁸ is discussed in Chapter 5.

⁵⁴⁶ Gutierrez, *On Job*.

⁵⁴⁷ Sölle, *Suffering*.

⁵⁴⁸ Arguably one way of interpreting the original sin of Genesis, in which the humans seek the forbidden knowledge of good and evil. After eating from the tree, the ensuing ability to categorise brings us only pain, bitterness and resentment of others: hell on earth, which separates us from one another in violent

(iii) The third issue, which may be more of a problem for the modern reader than it was for the original hearers, is that God is presented as the source of good and evil, both in the opening narrative section, in which God agrees to Job's testing by Satan, and in the epilogue (42:11, which speaks of 'all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him'). There is no real attempt at theodicy by the storyteller, for presumably it is not the major issue in the worldview of his hearers. God (the radical monotheistic God) was for them almighty and unfathomable, but could be trusted to be righteous. This view is not the modern approach, which seeks satisfaction in a rational causal association.⁵⁴⁹

All these points are fundamental for understanding the nature of our anxious struggles with the perceived meaninglessness of suffering today. I will now review the earlier chapters' analysis of the modern context in order to establish the grounds for the key argument of this thesis: ***that there is no 'meaningless' suffering,⁵⁵⁰ but rather, suffering has the character of 'ontological impertinence' and is (a) the primary vehicle for metanoia or personal transformation; and (b) the intrinsic mark of personhood in the image of Christ.*** Indeed, God delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ears by adversity.

6.2 The modern pastoral question: 'Why me?'

In Chapter 1 I discussed the contemporary pastoral experience of caring for dying people, and noted the psychospiritual anguish frequently associated with the perceived failure of death, particularly when that death was felt to be 'untimely'. The hospice philosophy of care both names and addresses the phenomenon of 'total pain', first defined by Cicely Saunders, with its complexity of physical, social, and spiritual components. I argue that *total pain* is a useful working explanation of the more evasive and theological concept of *suffering*, which latter is understood to be contextual, subjective, and dynamic in nature – and notoriously difficult to describe generically, since what is a mere irritation to one person may be torture to another. We do not occupy another's shoes.

competition. Girard identifies the murder of Cain by Abel as the foundational story of violence, but the taking of fruit from the tree is the act that introduces the possibility of violent mimetic desire.

⁵⁴⁹ Ricoeur comments briefly on the desire for theodicy in his paper, *Evil, a challenge to philosophy and theology*, in *Figuring the sacred* (ed Wallace), p 249.

⁵⁵⁰ I am aware that the assertion that all suffering has meaning would not be acceptable to everyone. Fiddes, for example, speaks of a residual brokenness of the world, of something 'strange', outside God's creative intention (*The promised end*, p 248). I would argue that if Frankl can find meaning in Auschwitz then we can conceive at least of the *possibility* that all suffering is meaningful in some way, although I would always acknowledge that it can be extremely difficult to find that meaning. Perhaps if we can accept that suffering always changes us, then we can also accept that it is never meaningless, which is not the same as saying that suffering is intrinsically good.

In hospice care, the physical and social components of total pain can often be resolved by practical intervention: but the psychospiritual elements can be elusive. Both patients and carers may struggle either to identify or to address the problem, or both, and frequently (and quite understandably) resort to variations of the essence of Job's complaint: 'Why me?' This tortured cry implies felt meaninglessness and a lack of rational comprehension about the experience. Behind the cry lies a commonly held damaged worldview, often suppressed and unacknowledged, but powerful nonetheless to cause existential pain related to vague concepts of judgement, guilt, and transcendent power.⁵⁵¹ It is the pastor's task to be aware of, and unafraid of, this complex dynamic as s/he accompanies the suffering person.⁵⁵²

The question of meaning, then, expressed as 'Why me?', is suggestive of a sense of personal betrayal. Implicitly or explicitly the questioner is comparing him- or herself to others and looking for a rational explanation for the suffering experience; implicitly also there is an appeal to cosmic justice, whether perceived as the act of a good God, or as some other rational and benign ultimate principle. If only the person can understand *why* s/he is afflicted, the suffering will become more bearable, as Frankl observed in the Nazi death camps. Those undertaking the pastoral care of suffering persons may find they are expected to address this request for meaning, or may even be implicated in the 'judgement' because they are the perceived representatives of God (or alternative ultimate other). They are the liminal guides of modernity, as discussed in Chapter 5. This place can be an uncomfortable, and indeed a powerless, one to occupy as a pastor, and without some ability to reflect theologically it will be unsustainable because suffering is offensive to our modern minds.

6.3 The underlying worldviews

In this thesis I have effectively broken down the question, 'Why me?', into two parts:

- (i) 'why' is a question about how reality is understood, and then how suffering is understood within that reality;
- (ii) 'me' is a matter of personhood – *ie* what does it mean to be human, to be this person in this situation?

⁵⁵¹ Patients do often express the question in terms such as: 'I have lived a good life, so why has God afflicted me?'. I have discussed some aspects of this question further in S. Nelson, *Medical rites*.

⁵⁵² It is often acknowledged in hospice environments that staff members need to have confronted their own mortality if they are to offer appropriate care: for then it is true accompaniment and not simply observation.

In Chapter 2, I addressed the question of the nature of reality, offering a critique of traditional 'hard' theism and agreeing with those who suggest that western society, although presenting itself as post-Christian, is still deeply influenced by an embedded Platonism that is still culturally associated with the Christian God. I drew on the work of Fiddes, Kitamori, Sölle and others to argue that this image of God – remote, powerful, perfect, impassible, interventionist – is not truly compatible with Christian scripture or religious experience, and is unhelpful when dealing with suffering, and that a more helpful model of reality could be developed by using Whitehead's process thought as a basis.

In Chapter 3, I examined the issue of personhood, which pertains to the second part of the key question, why me? The subject of personhood is massive and of enduring interest, with many possible approaches from many different disciplines. I chose to focus on Alastair McFadyen's 'dialogical' personhood,⁵⁵³ in which a person is understood as a dynamic product of interactive relationships (the primary one being the dialogue with God). This model addresses a number of key issues of interest to my thesis. Primarily it does away with the influential western view of the person as an autonomous subject and instead focuses on our mutual formation of one another in context and in relationship. This shift away from autonomy seems to me to be essential in any attempt to engage properly with the suffering of persons, because the immediate temptation of the individualistic mindset is to see that suffering person as 'other', which then compromises our ability to empathise and accompany; it also distances the suffering person from our own experience such that we do not humbly learn that we, too, are vulnerable.⁵⁵⁴

McFadyen's model does much more than to deal with our individualism. It portrays the person as an 'open' project. The person is formed and developed by his or her dialogues (or interactions) with others, each new exchange or encounter modifying what is already there. Far from being a descent into total relativity, the person begins to recognise him/herself, and to be recognised corporately by others, through his/her preferred and expected responses; and a personal character emerges in this interactive tension between individual and society which is reinforced cyclically over time. McFadyen describes this process of the formation of a person as 'sedimentation', as the 'layers' are laid down (although the layers are not immune to subsequent disturbance). It is important to note that a person is not 'fixed', although s/he might be 'predictable': there is always the possibility of change and development. The model is a very hopeful one, and also one that fits comfortably with the central Christian narrative of resurrection and of its devolved narrative of *metanoia*. In terms of incorporating suffering as a

⁵⁵³ McFadyen, *The call to personhood, passim*.

⁵⁵⁴ See Taylor, *The ethics of authenticity*, and S. Nelson, *Making ethical decisions*.

meaningful experience within a life, this feature of transformation is a useful one that I link both to metaphor and to process.⁵⁵⁵

McFadyen talks further in terms of call and response between persons in dialogue, and shows that dialogues may not be positive. If our dialogues are healthy, they will feed and build both ourselves and others; if they are distorted they will damage the persons engaged in them. It is possible to interpret aspects of suffering in this way, since suffering has a recognisable dimension of (i) being inflicted on the sufferer, and (ii) being inflated by other people – suffering is not just an internal experience.⁵⁵⁶ I have discussed Job's interactions with his friends, and how their dialogues shape his experience of suffering, in Chapter 5.⁵⁵⁷

McFadyen also identifies the constitutive dialogue for any human person as the one s/he holds with God, who calls us into being but allows us the freedom to respond (or not). This address of God to persons embraces the important transcendent dimension of life to which I frequently refer as a potential stumbling block in the modern search for meaning in suffering. God's address to us is whole and undistorted, and the Trinity offers us a picture of true dialogical relationship, in which none of the Persons is diminished or exalted above the others. Being made in God's image thus sets criteria for the way in which we dialogue with others.

Although McFadyen is cautious about the use of natural theologies in *The call to personhood*,⁵⁵⁸ there are potentially many identifiable points of correspondence with process thought. For example, McFadyen says 'Personal identity is therefore only a temporary

⁵⁵⁵ I wonder whether a dialogical notion of transformation of the person might be a helpful dimension within the process debate about the nature of immortality. Whiteheadian objective immortality suffers from the problem that bad as well as good experiences are preserved in God and, depending upon the particular person's circumstances, might offer little hope in an eternal life which consists of immortalised bad experiences. Subjective immortality may respond to this difficulty but in its turn implies the existence of multiple contemporary identities of the same person within God (see the discussion between Griffin and Suchocki in *Process Studies*, 1989, **18** (1), 57ff). The McFadyen model (see *Call*, pp 73-74 and p 115) proposes that all experiences contribute to full personhood yet only proposes one evolving identity. Can these insights be linked? As in §5.5.4, I wonder whether it is the notion of an experience being 'finished' that is the issue with the original Whiteheadian notion of objective immortality (see *Process* p 45, in which Whitehead says that the final satisfaction of an entity is intolerant of any addition – although it contains potential for a new 'becoming'). If experiences develop and decay (by prehension, concrescence and perishing) in an exponential fashion in the process model, then the influence of the experience after the point of satisfaction may approach zero and become infinitesimally small, but it never completely disappears. Thus the actual event tails into the future (and the past) and continues minutely to affect subsequent experiences/actual occasions. If one reflects on one's own personal (traumatic) experiences (assuming that experience is valid!), these experiences do not seem to have a linear resolution. Rather there is a time of intense pain, followed by a period of decreasing pain, and finally a plateau of residual pain with which one lives, but one never completely forgets the pain or returns to the pre-traumatic state.

⁵⁵⁶ See the summarised discussion in S. Nelson, *A thousand crucifixions*, pp 10-12, and references therein to Niebuhr, Young, Hauerwas, and others.

⁵⁵⁷ With due reference to the material by Sölle in her book, *Suffering*.

⁵⁵⁸ McFadyen, *Call*, see p 24 and pp 71-72.

'synthesis' of the past which is open for future formation (information) through that history's subsequent development or transformation. This may lead to a reinterpretation of the past as it is present in a sedimented identity and therefore, whether consciously or otherwise, in communication and relation too'.⁵⁵⁹ He goes on to talk about the importance of the future for redemption, 'In addition to the more mundane sedimentation processes through which past relations push persons into an evolutionary future, God's Word pulls persons into the divine future which so radically differs from the present that it seriously challenges our present identities, relations and social structures in the process'.⁵⁶⁰ Whitehead's dynamic model of networked actual entities, which come into being and then die away after a transient existence, to be replaced by others, bears some resemblance to McFadyen's view of the developing person with its transient stages as s/he is shaped dynamically by others. The divine lure of Whitehead is similar to the redemptive tug of McFadyen. The networked nature of reality is another common feature. The inherent creativity of both models and the possibilities for change or *metanoia* are both exciting and reassuring. The value of dialogue for McFadyen, such that every encounter either builds up or erodes the personhood of the other, is paralleled by Whitehead's desire that nothing be lost, but everything be held eternally within God.

But perhaps the most fruitful correspondence for the purposes of this thesis is that both McFadyen's personhood model and Whitehead's process thought are natural allies for Ricoeur's narrative philosophy. This alliance is enhanced by the pastoral observation that dying people in the hospice (as a specific subset of suffering people) benefited from the use of narrative therapy – telling the stories of their lives in some manner (Chapter 4), and setting these stories within a broader framework of meaning.

The hope is that to establish credible alternative models of reality and personhood, which share some important characteristics, can help us to think differently about suffering, but it is very important that in trying to address this existential pain we do not make sufferers feel that their experiences are dismissed or lessened, or that we suggest that suffering be ignored or denied. Discomfort, disorientation, isolation, and dysfunction will all still be present. Finding meaning does not do away with any of these very real dimensions of suffering, or with the pastoral demands they generate.

⁵⁵⁹ McFadyen, *Call*, p 115.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p 115.

6.4 Contemporary responses to suffering

By using the combined insights of process thinking, dialogical personhood, and narrative, I have tried to illuminate the conceptual problems that make it so difficult to discover meaning in our experiences of suffering in contemporary western society. In the UK since WWII, responses to suffering broadly fall into one of the following categories:

(i) to develop a theodicy – I believe this approach (which is probably a minority position in view of the lack of formal religious observance in the total population) may be flawed *if it is predicated upon a limited causal view of reality* in which an impassible God is the ultimate source of good and evil;⁵⁶¹

(ii) to assert that God does not exist – this approach denies both the extensive world traditions of religious belief and the experiential foundation of belief in the transcendent: it fails to take spiritual experience seriously;

(iii) to assent to a formal belief in God but actually to behave as if God does not exist – this is probably a majority position and in practical effect differs little from (ii);

(iv) to privatise and hide the suffering and to carry on as if it has not happened – this is a form of what Sölle calls *apatheia*, the inability to engage compassionately with the suffering of others or, indeed, oneself.

None of these responses works creatively with the experience of suffering: each rejects it as an alien intrusion into normal life. The prevailing view⁵⁶² is that suffering simply *should not be and that we do not deserve it*. It seems to me vital that pastorally we attempt to break this *impasse* around suffering. The paradox is that suffering happens to everyone in the course of a life, but our culture is unwilling to accept that and to develop or use strategies or metanarratives in which suffering can be held and contained, and be allowed to evidence meaning. Corporately we have colluded in the advance decision that suffering is a meaningless feature of the landscape of life, and therefore when it happens, we only experience it as meaningless, because it falls outside our parameters of meaning in a reductive and rationalistic liberal modernism.

⁵⁶¹ But it is possible to develop theodicies along (say) process lines and Fiddes does so in *Creative suffering*. The fact remains that theodicies can be blunt pastoral instruments (Hauerwas even describes theodicies as ‘parasitic’ strategies, see Hauerwas, *God, suffering and medicine*, pp 39-59), and should be used with great care lest they be seen to diminish the importance of the experience for the suffering person. Swinton (*Raging with compassion*) is also critical of theodicy, see especially chap 4.

⁵⁶² I can vouch for this anecdotally from working in the hospice.

It is my belief that not only is suffering a vehicle for the discovery of profound meaning, but that it presents a unique opportunity for the fulfilment of the project of personhood.⁵⁶³ *Counterculturally, this means that without suffering we cannot fully appropriate our humanity.* Because this suggestion challenges our normal expectations, it is essential to illuminate and interrogate the worldview that underlies those expectations in order to support this claim about suffering. By using process insights (not hard theism) and relational personhood (not subjective autonomy) together with narrative thought, it is possible to suggest another basis for human being within which suffering is no longer an insult to our dreams and self-actualisation, but (counterintuitively) the primary mechanism by which they are achieved. In other words, we are speaking of delivering the afflicted by their affliction (*cf* Job 36:15).

6.5 Key features of a framework for thinking about suffering as meaningful

From the analysis and discussion in Chapters 1–5, some key features can be identified for forming a framework in which suffering could be described as meaningful, as follows.

6.5.1 Transcendent experience as a challenge to materialism

In Chapters 1 and 2 I discussed the underlying dualism that characterises much popular thinking about the nature of religious belief. In a reductionist and materialist culture it is difficult, if not impossible, to find ways to authenticate religious experience. Because all experience is considered to be highly subjective it becomes impossible to quantify or prove. It is inaccessible to empirical scientific study, which is the cultural touchstone of authenticity. I noted (§1.1) that in the hospice, dying patients are confronted with the dilemma of straddling these two cultures: they are embracing a transcendent experience but have been equipped for life largely by the material world, which is suspicious of the transcendent and views death as the end of a person. These patients occupy a liminal space, in which modern westerners feel estranged and for which they are poorly prepared (see §5.3). The same criteria apply to all people who are suffering in any way: although an explanation in causal or material terms may be available, there are many occasions when it is not. The lack of access to the transcendent dimensions of life leaves sufferers feeling that their experience has no meaning, no point: it cannot be explained. Even religious people have to exercise their faith in an unsympathetic culture and may struggle fully to incarnate their beliefs.

⁵⁶³ I do not mean this in the weak sense of ‘character building’ but in a strong ontological sense.

In contrast, Whitehead considers experience to be a fundamental source of information about the nature of reality. Every experience is valuable and is given eternal significance in the form of objective immortality.⁵⁶⁴ In his final discussion of objective immortality in *Process and reality*, Whitehead portrays a reciprocal movement between the world and heaven: ‘the kingdom of heaven is with us today...What is done in the world is transformed into a reality in heaven, and the reality in heaven passes back into the world...Throughout the perishing occasions in the life of each temporal Creature...is the transformation of Itself, everlasting in the Being of God. In this way, the insistent craving is justified...that zest for existence be refreshed by the ever-present, unfading importance of our immediate actions, which perish and yet live for evermore’.⁵⁶⁵ If we shift to Ricoeur, then his method is often described as ‘phenomenological hermeneutics’: it is the interpretation of human experience. Both philosophers – Whitehead and Ricoeur – seek a unity of all reality that can escape the restraints of dualistic western thinking. Such a single reality allows us to address the difficulties which lead to the development of theodicies, particularly over the question of intervention by God: how can a spiritual being intervene in a material world?; how can God’s power be ‘manipulated’ by prayer?; how can God be the source both of good and of evil?

6.5.2 Creativity and change as a challenge to unchanging perfection

A second stumbling block for moderns is the innate dynamism of life. Although at one level we appear to embrace change, transience, and all that is new, at another we are deeply fearful, and this fear is reflected in our corporate avoidance of the liminal, the uncertain, the marginal. Our embedded Platonic worldview encourages us to think in terms of static eternal categories that are reflected in the world we see, and this influence affects us profoundly. Newtonian science also operates on such static categories and has been highly successful at describing the world in which we live.⁵⁶⁶ Suffering (including the specific experience of dying) acts as a profound discontinuity and disturbs our ‘normality’, pushing us into the liminal space between our pre-suffering and post-suffering states.

⁵⁶⁴ Objective immortality, as mentioned in fn 555, is the subject of debate. Some find the idea of objective immortality too static and fossilised to bear comparison to the Christian hope of resurrection and transformation through Christ. Although Whitehead insists on harmony – future occasions must be consonant with past and present occasions, which are themselves determinant of the future – perhaps it helps also to recall Ricoeur’s observation that the past is *interpreted* from the present, and that as interpreters we can impose coherence on events that might otherwise appear to be random and unconnected.

⁵⁶⁵ Whitehead, *Process*, p 351.

⁵⁶⁶ Whitehead says that this empirical stability and temporal-spatial order is characteristic of the current epoch, but might not be characteristic of every episode of existence. See *Process and reality*, pp 90ff. He believes that western philosophy has over-emphasised certain kinds of perception, giving priority to visual over visceral feelings (*ibid*, p 121ff).

Any explanation in which suffering is held to be meaningful will need to address this question of change. The traditional view of God as impassible and unchanging almost certainly translates logically into a God who cannot share our suffering. Fiddes⁵⁶⁷ argues that a God who does share our suffering must in some way also fully share the human inability to know the outcome of his/her suffering, which is partly what makes human suffering so serious, because we are very aware of our limitations. This problem leads Fiddes (after Hartshorne) to distinguish helpfully between the notions of God's *perfection* and God's *completion*, which latter allows for a dynamic relationship between God and the creature that can develop into the future. If we do not address this dilemma, then God's experience is that of an observer of suffering rather than as one who suffers with us – for part of the pain of suffering is the powerlessness of having it imposed upon us, being out of control. This insight is vitally important because it shows us why a worldview that upholds an interventionist model of God (a God who is 'complete' outside time and space but who can pop in and out of it as God wishes) subtly undermines the unity of the Trinity in the incarnation.⁵⁶⁸ We need a framework that is not constrained by a hidden notion of static perfection, if we are to regard suffering as anything other than an aberrant occurrence and to give it dignity and meaning. The three philosophers (Whitehead, Ricoeur and McFadyen) with whom I have engaged all offer some help here.

The process thinking of Whitehead is based upon the proposed transience of all actual entities: 'things' only appear to be solid and permanent because the process of change and renewal does not introduce any macroscopic variation that we can see. For Whitehead, creativity is a fundamental category, and the increase of variety in the world is the mark of God. This variety has to include the potentialities (the 'not yet' elements) of life, which contribute to the whole and facilitate change. Furthermore, Whitehead's insistence that God is always the 'chief exemplification' of all actual occasions (or entities) means that God participates fully in all experiences, good and bad. There is no division of spiritual and material in the stuff of reality.

Ricoeur argues that reality is narrative in form: narrative is dynamic, relational, contextual, and temporal by nature. Narrative is creative: new fields of meaning and understanding are introduced through the very nature of language itself, because hermeneutics is an open and contingent process.

⁵⁶⁷ See *The creative suffering of God*, p 91, for a clear explanation.

⁵⁶⁸ As typically (and not always helpfully) understood in the Philippian hymn, in which Christ 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form...' (Philippians 2:7).

McFadyen's dialogical personhood allows for a narrative understanding of humanity, in which people are formed and shaped by their dialogues – dialogues being a subset of their narrative interactions with one another. Once again, a person's nature is not fixed but dynamic, and is always open to the possibility of development, renewal, and change.

Suffering can thus be robustly validated as a dynamic and meaningful experience within these three frameworks. Such an understanding does not mean that it is necessarily a good or pleasant experience in and of itself, but that its interpretation must be handled with care. It is not interpretable within a 'cause and consequence' worldview (we are reminded that Ricoeur speaks of narrative as *revelatory* rather than *explanatory*).

6.6 Metaphor, metanoia and ontological impertinence

How can we address these necessary challenges of transcendence and change in a culture that is uncomfortable with these concepts? It is here that I want to make use of Ricoeur's suggestion that that reality is narrative in form. If he is right, then language may possess 'ultimate' properties. I want to put forward the suggestion that metaphor, which has the key property of generating creative meaning in language, can offer us a possible basis for finding meaning in suffering. What metaphor does in a sentence may mirror what suffering does in a person's life experience. I have used the term 'ontological impertinence' to describe this aspect of suffering, adapting Ricoeur's description of metaphor as 'semantic impertinence'.

Metaphor is an exciting aspect of language that offers us considerable possibilities as a vehicle for understanding suffering. As discussed in §5.2.1, metaphor is able to contain great tension. It is both like and not like that to which it refers. It is thus creative of new meaning, because it shocks us into re-assessing what we have previously assumed and then expanding our understanding beyond its earlier limits.

These properties of metaphor are potentially very useful in dealing with suffering. A person who suffers can be thought of as occupying a liminal space – one that is transitional between two recognised states. This liminality has many of the characters of metaphor. The person who suffers:

(i) is both *part of and not part of* normal society – Cicely Saunders has written of the way in which the terminally ill are ostracised by those who are well, and how this compounds their pain (and there are similar observations for those experiencing bereavement);

(ii) struggles to exist in the material/spiritual *dualism* of modernism – the suffering experience cannot necessarily be named and described in a causal or material fashion, in which case it cannot be found meaningful without recourse to the transcendent or spiritual dimension of being – and the sufferer is caught between the two aspects of the duality;

(iii) most importantly, both *is and is not him/herself* – s/he has to deal with an all-consuming experience of pain that disrupts his/her whole life, yet s/he is still the same person in the same social networks.⁵⁶⁹

It is these tensions that lead me to suggest that metaphor could be a helpful analogy for suffering. Not only does it hold the tension of the sufferer's liminal state, it also offers a way forward that is consonant with developing personhood.

A liminal state is a transient and separated condition; after passing through it a person re-enters society but with an altered status. For a suffering person this new status might be the satisfactory resolution of the suffering; it might be accepting and living with the suffering; it might be death. Any of these will resolve the psychospiritual pain that is so destructive; in all of them the suffering person is reabsorbed into pre-existing networks (if the person dies, s/he is still a social presence even if biologically dead, see §3.1.3).

Vital for the argument is the fact that the person is not unchanged by the liminal experience (here, the suffering). The liminal separation engendered by suffering gives the person space, just as in a rite of passage, to examine him/herself and reassess life in general as a result of the trials s/he has undergone. There is a discontinuity, a shock, a profound ontological impertinence, attached to the experience. ***This discontinuity allows something creative to occur and a new person, who is and is not the old person, can emerge.***

Theologically, we cannot separate this analysis from a consideration of *metanoia* in the NT sense. The Johannine expression is rebirth (John 3 and 1 John 5); while Paul refers to the 'renewal of the mind' (Romans 12:2); the changing of clothes representing the new self (Ephesians 4:24); the old and new self (Colossians 3:9-10); and uses many other metaphors to describe the complete re-evaluation of reality that takes place in the light of the teaching ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. This story of the incarnate God is comprehensively revelatory of human being and society: the fragmented and violent

⁵⁶⁹ Further research might consider Ricoeur's *ipse* and *idem* identities here. The *idem* identity is an abstract sameness and refers to how a person appears to others; the *ipse* identity (narrative identity) is about self-sameness (or self-constancy) and can accommodate change and development over a lifetime. It would be interesting to think further about the *ipse* and *idem* identities as the locations of ontological impertinence, and to link it with a consideration of Liebert's (Jungian) stages of spiritual development and possibilities for the pastoral use of Ignatian spirituality. Liebert, *Changing life patterns*.

tendencies of human nature are exposed through the terrible consequences of the betrayal, trial and execution of Jesus the innocent victim. In the light of this shocking discontinuity we have to re-evaluate who we are, what is important, and how we should live with this new experience behind us. Sallie McFague describes Jesus as the parable of God *par excellence*, and indeed he is.

The NT witnesses were forced into a re-evaluation of the being of Jesus in the light of the crucifixion and resurrection, and came to a new understanding of who he was, and of the nature of God. On the cross Jesus's cry of desolation ('My God, why have you forsaken me?') indicates a desperate questioning of his relationship with the Father as their mutual life-giving dialogue is terminated. This is the most extreme and shocking suffering: isolation, silence, physical pain, and most certainly not what we would expect in God's experience based upon the categories of hard radical monotheism. The crucifixion is indeed total pain, and penetrates to the heart of the Trinity. In the incarnation Jesus 'had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect...Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested' (Hebrews 2: 17-18). In the life of Jesus, suffering is revelatory of the nature of reality but it is also ontologically impertinent: it is not as we think it should be.

Holding that human beings are made in the image of God means that this kind of shocking suffering experience can also precipitate a re-evaluation within us, which has the potential for *metanoia* (noting always that we are never forced into belief, and that we are free to resist the creative possibilities of ontological impertinence). Indeed, if a person is constituted by dynamic processes of change, as McFadyen argues (and which also satisfies a process analysis), then perhaps *metanoia* is the very essence of life itself? If we stop changing and growing and responding, then do we also stop living? In small (or big) ways, do we continually need the shock of the new encounter to develop, change and grow into fuller personhood?⁵⁷⁰ From this basis we can see the truth of the wisdom that every small loss in life prepares us for the bigger losses of bereavement and death.

In 1 Corinthians 1: 27-28 we read that 'God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and

⁵⁷⁰ An interesting associated question for further research might be to use these arguments to consider the possible nature of the life to come: Sheldrake (*Befriending our desires*, pp 107-110) suggests that we will still experience change and growth after death, because we are created with an inner desire for God; and we can never exhaust the possibilities of God. Sheldrake suggests that 'God has no shoreline'. Once again, the potentialities of Whitehead are present, and the hymn to love from I Corinthians 13 springs to mind: 'when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears...Now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then shall I know fully, even as I am fully known'. Once again, the way in which we define 'perfect' is of course important: we do not need to understand it as complete or finished, but rather as totally self-consistent in love.

despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are'. These kingdom values are contrary to the values of the consumer society and are the things that we might in the West categorise as suffering (or at least, deprivation). Yet these very things are biblically, and in the teaching of Jesus, the marks of *metanoia*. Our minds are changed; we have re-evaluated life, and emerged as the same persons, but having appropriated the shock and tension in a creative development of the human being that could have taken place in no other way. The reference to the 'things that are not' resonates with the potentialities of Whitehead; the 'not-yet-ness' of reality which drives change and creativity.

Even if *metanoia* occurs, the meaning of the suffering may still not be obvious to the sufferer in the manner of an explanation. However, the process of liminal transformation removes a person temporarily from the purely material and rational milieu of 'normal' modern life and puts that person in touch with another dimension of existence: the transcendent. In this way the experience triggers awareness in the person of a context (the transcendent) within which their immediate life story is situated. The hope of meaning is thus ignited, even though the precise nature of that meaning may still be elusive. Knowing about the existence of the bigger picture is enough to begin an interpretation at some level, and then meaning is guaranteed to follow, although it may take time to absorb it.⁵⁷¹ Anxieties may be raised here about encouraging a fatalistic attitude in religious believers, but such fatalism is not characteristic of healthy developing personhood (fatalism is static rather than dynamic, monologically receptive rather than dialogically active in the creation of meaning), and is quite different from faith, which is 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Hebrews 11: 1).

We are returned to reflecting on the search for the meaning of suffering in a culture that prizes reductionist explanation. In Job we see that God is clearly identified as the source of the suffering of Job and also its cessation. God is the cause and effect as far as the OT writer is concerned: but within the ancient worldview of radical monotheism this did not detract from the 'God-ness' of God. It was neither a trigger for unbelief nor for an 'heretical' questioning of God's abilities as a deity. In the NT the major discontinuity is that the suffering happens *to* God, rather than to others at God's behest. ***The God concept itself is subjected to ontological impertinence between the OT and the NT, a shocking challenge that causes believers to re-evaluate their beliefs about God.*** Thus if we believe that we are made in God's image, we come to the unavoidable conclusion that a human person is actually defined by suffering after the NT revelation of God in Christ. Our modern society has instead made a causal scientific

⁵⁷¹ We recall that Ricoeur understands narrative as revelatory rather than explanatory.

worldview into an idolatrous ultimate,⁵⁷² but it is an ultimate that cannot address the question: 'Why me?'.

6.7 Pastoral practice

My initial interest in this whole area came from working in a hospice with patients who constantly asked 'Why me?', and who alongside that distress found life narrative a helpful therapeutic tool. I would like briefly to indicate some pastoral dimensions to the work I have done in this thesis.

6.7.1 Practical application

I have already expressed dissatisfaction with the too-ready use of theodicies. To someone who is suffering, theodicies seem like arguments for the sake of it; one's distress is not relieved by the bare academic justification of God (as Job realised). Furthermore, I have suggested (and found it confirmed in experience!) that a theodicy is often an inappropriate response to suffering. Suffering is complex, contextual, and frequently resists rationalisation. A theodicy can seem like a dry and insensitive distillation of events that bypasses the sufferer's human pain and dignity. Furthermore, a theodicy cements the underlying sense of suffering as an alien attack on human life, an experience that really should not be. I hope that I have shown that suffering is an essential part of growing in our personhood. Thus, as pastors, we need to accept the experience of suffering as the starting point for reflection, rather than seeking an explanation to 'get rid' of it.

The use of life storytelling as a therapeutic method was discussed in Chapter 4, and undergirded by discussion of narrative theory in Chapters 4 and 5. It is clear that this method works as an end of life strategy in helping patients to come to terms with dying (if there is time), by placing the story in a bigger context and by lending it coherence and order.

The narrative therapeutic methods employed by art and music therapists, or in simpler approaches such as making a memory box or life book, or even in writing letters to loved ones before dying, are effective if they can be used when someone is terminally ill. Yet modern westerners are uncomfortable with the liminal state, with the 'failure' of dying (especially when thought to be too young), and even with the practice of reflecting on one's own story

⁵⁷² This remark is not intended to be critical of science per se, but of the tendency of society to idolise the scientific process. See Maxwell, *Cutting God in half, passim*.

because of the dearth of active religious observance.⁵⁷³ What can pastors do to help people to deal with the crisis experiences that may drive *metanoia*?

Here I would like to return briefly to the idea of pilgrimage, addressed in §5.3.3. I discussed Turner's view of pilgrimage as liminoid and my own view that it can be truly liminal if taken contextually as a picture of the journey of life. I think that Turner may be discussing a limited view of pilgrimage understood as a finite physical journey (say, going to Walsingham), which would be completely appropriate to his discussion of rites of passage. However, there is also a different way of thinking of pilgrimage, in which it is understood as a microcosm of the journey of life itself. A (physical) pilgrimage offers a significant opportunity to reflect on one's life pilgrimage, and particularly gives a separate space (liminal) in which to absorb the effects of ontological impertinence. There is no better argument for encouraging experiences of retreat and of developing prayer as people meet challenges in life.⁵⁷⁴

I would like to mention the particular experience of using a labyrinth in the hospice setting. I have mentioned the phenomenon of decathesis in the terminally ill, in which the cone of awareness of the patient (the sphere of active engagement) shrinks and focuses down as the person's ability to deal with others is reduced and finally becomes the task of dying, which has to be done alone but hopefully in the company of a liminal guide – a particular type of pilgrimage, into the transcendent space of death.

Labyrinths give an opportunity to make a pilgrimage without leaving home. They are set out on the floors on churches or in the open air and allow people to walk and think. Lizzie Hopthrow, chaplain at The Pilgrims Hospice in Canterbury, became interested in the labyrinth and made a temporary one at her hospice, which was so effective with dying and bereaved persons that the hospice now has a permanent labyrinth.⁵⁷⁵ The labyrinth encourages one to set one's particular journey of life within a transcendent context. This kind of spiritual tool is not difficult to use and often appeals to people who find mental prayer difficult.

All these therapeutic practices accept the human experience as a valid starting point and then encourage its absorption into the story of the person's life, rather than attempting primarily to

⁵⁷³ Arguably the observed effect that religious people live 'happier' lives could be the result of the practice of reflection on one's life, common to most religions.

⁵⁷⁴ Noting the insights of Liebert and Jung, that stages of life need to be passed through on the way to maturity; yet suffering can speed this journey along. One can be mature at 15 or childish at 50.

⁵⁷⁵ See the article published in the *FT* on 8 May 2010 at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/094bdd9a-571e-11df-aaff-00144feab49a.html>, last accessed 1526h on 15 July 2010.

explain why God has allowed this suffering to occur. There are serious implications, of course, for the healing ministry as traditionally understood.⁵⁷⁶

6.7.2. *A warning: meaning or signification?*

Many people are deeply offended by the suggestion that all suffering can have meaning, especially when that suffering is intractable and cannot be ascribed to any source. Clearly a strategy that is pastorally insensitive, even if it is theoretically correct, is not much use. In *The rule of metaphor*, Ricoeur argues that meaning is what we understand, think and feel; while signification is that to which the sentence points. Are we really talking only about signification, and is that concept so intangible that it is no use? What might it mean here?

I am happy to apply Ricoeur's suggestions to my discussion as follows. The meaning of suffering is not, as I have discussed, explanatory or causal. Suffering is also highly contextual with respect to the personality of the one who suffers. Something that is painful for me may not be a problem to you. Suffering very much takes place within a life story, a narrative; it is not an abstract experience. How then can we think of what it *means*?

Sölle suggests not a definition but some characteristics of suffering. These included a sense of isolation, a sense of oppression (it is often imposed upon us rather than chosen), and a sense of loss of control. All these characteristics have (for us) to be interpreted within late modernism, in which the individual is conceived as the rational autonomous subject. In the hospice, the worst experience for many people was perceived as their loss of dignity, which registered much more highly as an anxiety than pain or even death. I argue that this perception is culturally conditioned and contextual. In asserting such I do not mean that the indignity (or whatever other phenomenon we focus on) is not really suffering. Rather, it means that it is a source of (total) pain in this time and place and culture. There are almost certainly aspects of the experience that will be painful in any setting, but we cannot easily separate these from one another. It is a complex phenomenon.⁵⁷⁷

This analysis tells us not that meaning is absent, but rather that the meaning of the suffering challenges the things in which we normally find purpose and value. What we understand, think and feel as a result of the suffering (analogously to Ricoeur's metaphor) is that the 'normal' parameters of life have been stretched for us. In particular, our sense of personhood is extended by suffering, because we are 'normally' conditioned to work with an operative view of the person that is culturally conceived as static and as perfect as possible. However,

⁵⁷⁶ Some of which are explored in S. Nelson, *A thousand crucifixions*, with respect to long-term disability.

⁵⁷⁷ See the discussion of total pain in Chapter 1.

our 'normal' assumptions are not an absolute measure of anything. Our challenge is to see things differently – and here the suggestion of suffering as ontologically impertinent comes into its own. Our view of life is drastically interrupted and we have to refocus, re-evaluate.

What about signification? To what does the suffering point? I gave some space in Chapter 5 to exploring the transcendent dimension of suffering: how being in a liminal place (which has the metaphorical characteristics of 'is and is not') puts us into more intimate conscious contact with the transcendent dimension of life – acting as a bridge between human and cosmic time. The conceptual dualism and categorisation of modern life is unpicked by the experience of suffering. If we have access to the story of the crucifixion then we can begin to appropriate the reality of that for ourselves: the divine/human nature of Jesus points to a liminal (or threshold) reality that is obscure to us much of the time, yet if made in his image this is the reality for which we hope for ourselves. Furthermore, there is more than a suggestion in the story of Jesus that in suffering a human person truly discovers his/her personhood, because of the revelatory nature of the ontological impertinence. I believe this to be the sense of Kitamori's assertion that we can only find meaning in our pain if it testifies to the pain of God (revealed perfectly in Christ). We can find this revelatory process of impertinence elsewhere. In our prayer experience we might speak of the 'dark night' in which we 'lose' God. John of the Cross, in his classical analysis of prayer, does not present this dark experience as a negative one, but as a necessary stage for those who are serious in their search for God. In the 'losing' we are committed to the abandonment of our previous expectations and images, and a re-evaluation must take place, such that God *is and is not* as we previously thought God to be. This darkness constitutes the only way in which our prayer relationship can grow: otherwise it becomes static and ultimately useless to us.

Thus I do not think that we can divide meaning from signification in this discussion of suffering, because that capitulates to the unhelpful dualism that I have been trying to address through questions about the nature of reality. We cannot have the transcendent dimension without the material, or *vice versa*. Both are necessary to realise our full personhood; but without the ontologically impertinent experience we might never be able to undergo the process of *metanoia* to which Christ calls us, and of which he is the narrative example.

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