UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER


Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences


Christian Theism in Anglican Theology, 1945-2014


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Doctor of Philosophy


April 2014


This Thesis has been completed as a requirement

for a postgraduate degree of the University of Winchester

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Rowan Williams, David Ford and others have drawn attention to the importance of the 'informal theology' of ordinary believers, its validity as representing genuine insights, and the risk of detachment that occurs if academic theologians do not take it into account. Jeff Astley has examined the phenomenology of informal theology (which he calls 'ordinary theology') and the processes that have been and can be followed in examining it. Largely, however, he has not surveyed the actual content of believers' informal theology.

This thesis examines the most basic, yet profound, theist concept, that of 'God', in historical, academic theology since the Second World War, and in contemporary informal theology measured by an exercise in practical theology. The historical theology consists of a review of academic and popular writings by professional United Kingdom Anglican theologians (as they have taken into account logical positivism, human suffering and scientific insights). This review is presented according to a series of eight themes. The thesis then describes the preparation and execution of a survey of the understanding of God on the part of a sample of Anglican church-attenders in Winchester, carried out by questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, together with analysis of the results.

Most importantly, the thesis then sets the results of this exercise in practical theology against the views of academic theologians, draws out areas of commonality and deviation, and offers a distinctive contribution in this respect. The writer's thesis is that the informal theology of ordinary believers coincides in most ways with academic theology over fundamental issues of understanding God. The practical research contributing to this thesis has revealed many ordinary believers' capacity to assimilate and hold a variety of views of God, and to do so in creative tension, sometimes despite paradoxes of apparent contradiction. The thesis sets out some proposals for further research, and makes some recommendations as to how the findings within the thesis could inform practice in the Church of England. However, its distinctive contribution to scholarship lies in its relating the content of some informal theology to a wide spread of Anglican academic theology, and its finding considerable spiritual and theological insight within a sample of ordinary believers.

**CONTENTS**

I confirm that this thesis is entirely my own work.

Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version: Anglicized Edition, Oxford, OUP, 1989.

Italics, emboldening and capital letters within quotations are original unless otherwise indicated.

References to 'Ramsey' are to Ian Ramsey, Michael Ramsey being differentiated.

References to 'Williams' are to Rowan Williams, Harry Williams being differentiated.

References to 'Ward' are to Keith Ward, Graham Ward and Pete Ward being differentiated.

References to 'Phillips' are to J. B. Phillips, D. Z. Phillips being differentiated.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# <u>PRELIMINARY</u>

This section introduces the thesis, describes the literature review that has taken place, and provides a methodology for the thesis, including the practical theology exercise that has taken place.

## Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The focus

Conceiving God has probably always been as difficult for some as it is natural for many. In the Jewish narrative, Jacob wrestled with God for God's blessing, was not vouchsafed God's name, but, despite the lingering mystery, still believed he had seen God's face.[1] Moses was granted the name, but it remained mysterious and ambiguous, 'YHWH';[2] he recounted that, at the delivery of the Ten Commandments, 'You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice'.[3] Solomon told God that 'even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you', but still prayed for his prayers to be answered';[4] and God was recognised as a 'God who hides himself'.[5] Paul wrote that 'now we see in a mirror, dimly. . . . Now I know only in part'.[6] The Christian tradition is of revelation to the extent of incarnation, and immanence in the prevailing presence of God's Spirit. Tom Wright notes that the common usage of the word 'God' as a proper noun is foreign to biblical practice, with 'YHWH' or a phrase such as 'Israel's god' preferred in Jewish culture, and often '*ho theos*' among early Christians.[7] So the mystery remains, and this thesis is an exercise in wrestling.

Wright is clear that:

> in every age sophisticated thinkers have been perfectly well aware of the problematical nature of pre-critical language about God and its referent: one distressing modern phenomenon is the spectacle of a would-be Christian positivism which imagines that god-language is clear and unequivocal, and that one can have the kind of certainty about it which Logical Positivism accorded to scientific or even mathematical statements.[8]

Nevertheless, the physical sciences are seen by many as providing convincing explanations of many phenomena often previously attributed to God. So challenges remain for many people of faith in the fundamental process of conceiving and speaking of God. This does not relate simply to traditional images of God, but to the very act of conceiving a Being for whom even the attribution of existence can seem nonsensical or meaningless. The issue has always confronted academic philosophers and theologians, and has come to the fore and entered the consciousness of many 'ordinary' believers in the wake of logical positivism and twentieth and

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[1] Genesis 32. 22-32.
[2] Exodus 3. 13-14.
[3] Deuteronomy 4. 12.
[4] I Kings, 8. 27-28.
[5] Isaiah 45. 15.
[6] 1 Corinthians 13. 12.
[7] Wright, N. T., *The New Testament and the People of God*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1992, pp. xiv-xv, 473.
[8] Wright, *The NT and the People of God*, p. 128.

twenty-first century cultural shifts.  Some popular theology writers have attempted to meet such needs of 'ordinary' believers,[9] sometimes to rebut claims by popular atheists.[10]

The expression, 'ordinary believers', refers to believers without academic theological training. Rowan Williams's term 'informal theology'[11] denotes the living theology of ordinary believers who think and speak about God, and has the same meaning as Jeff Astley's 'ordinary theology'.[12] 'Informal theology' will be examined at greater length in this thesis. 'Academic theology' refers to theology produced by professional academic theologians (including philosopher-theologians), usually working within higher education. The term 'popular theology' is used to refer to the writings of academic theologians who use their professional understanding and insights to address the needs of ordinary believers (and disbelievers) in ways that are sensitive to the instinctive and learnt positions that emerge within informal theology.  These distinctions are not rigid, and often there is overlap between different kinds of believers and different kinds of theologies. Whilst  'concepts of God' refers in this thesis to the mental images people have of God, 'conceiving and speaking of God' refers to the process of forming and expressing actual concepts of God.

This thesis focuses on conceiving God in the period since the Second World War. It offers an analytical review of academic and popular theology written by UK Anglican theologians (henceforth styled 'Anglican theology', but not implying that Anglican theologians write other than as independent professionals), and compares that theology with the informal theology of Church of England attenders, represented by empirical research with a sample group in Winchester. No comparable, categorised study of UK Anglican academic theology, no comparable empirical research into conceiving God, and no comparison with informal theology have been found such as this thesis undertakes.

The empirical research carried out for this thesis as part of practical theology (defined below in the Methodology chapter) has demonstrated a considerable variety of theistic (and deistic) views of God, an appreciation (conscious or unconscious) of analogy, and an ability to hold together abstract views of God and concrete images. The researcher's view, like that of David Ford, Williams and Astley, is that such informal theology has a validity that should be taken

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[9] Notably, Robinson, John, A.T, *Honest to God*, London, SCM, 1963.

[10] For example, Ward, Keith, *Why There Almost Certainly is a God: Doubting Dawkins*, Oxford, Lion, 2008, responding to Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion*, London, Bantam, 2006.

[11] Williams, Rowan, *On Christian Theology*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, p. xiii.

[12] Astley, Jeff, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology,* Farnham, Ashgate, 2002, pp. 1, 56.

seriously in the Church's worship and mission, however unsystematic, even unformed, it might be. Williams writes that suspicion of academic theology in the churches:

> overlooks the preconscious reflection, the 'informal' theology of prayer, art and holy action.  It's no use pretending that there is a real and recognizable religious practice that does not include this . . . . And what is more . . . the would-be professional theologian can so understand his or her task as to forget their practical and historical rootedness in the informal theologizing of the community as it develops.[13]

The writer of this thesis supports this position. The twentieth century saw greater participation by lay, as opposed to clerical, theologians in UK *academia*, together with a less denominationally confined approach, which broadened the Church's outlook; and the Anglican propensity to divergence is likely to encourage a variety of informal theology. Comparing academic theology with informal theology will indicate the degree of coherence or incoherence between the two.

The restrictions of the present study to UK Anglican theologians and to Church of England believers have been for pragmatic reasons. Certain branches of theology have been excluded: Christology and Trinitarian theology, because the thesis is mostly concerned with the concept of God as a single divine entity, rather than as understood in the Trinity; and the wealth of specific images of God, except when they have proved particularly important for conceiving God. Most importantly, this thesis does not deal directly with the existence of God, but rather with the conceivability of God and the ways God is conceived.

Contributions to philosophical theology about conceiving God have emerged mostly from the Catholic or 'central' sections of the Church of England. Although there have been some notable academic contributions from the Evangelical wing, such as those by Anthony Thiselton and Wright, there is greater Evangelical reliance upon Scripture and revelation as the basis for the givenness of concepts of God, particularly in popular theology. So Evangelical theology, apart from Thiselton's and Wright's , has not generally contributed to this thesis, as fundamental issues relating to the actual conceiving of God are not usually addressed.

The theological position of the author of this thesis may be described as, on the one hand, broadly Catholic Anglican (under the influence of upbringing, ministerial training and appreciation of liturgical drama), and on the other hand as liberal and in sympathy with the deist inclinations of Maurice Wiles and the non-realism of Don Cupitt. At the same time, the author is able to appreciate the power and usefulness of conventional, Catholic expressions of

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[13] Williams, Rowan, *On Christian Theology*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, p. xiii.

the Christian faith, not only for those whose appreciation is more realist, but also, for the author, as interpretable in 'poetic' or 'metaphorical' terms.

## 1.2  Historical background within the Church of England

Mark Chapman characterises the modern Church of England as searching for a source of authority: one search 'in the direct experience of God in the heart or in God's Word as set forth in Scripture'; and the other 'in God's appointed messengers, the bishops'.[14] These summarise two of the main influences upon the Church of England since the nineteenth century and during the period since 1945, those of its Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic wings. They have been complemented by modern liberal theology, with all three responding to feminist concerns and matters of sexuality, and influencing doctrine and liturgy – all of which have affected how the conceptualisation of God has developed. **Appendix 1** illustrates some of the ways in which the Evangelical wing and the Anglo-Catholic wing (represented, in this thesis, respectively, by Christ Church and Holy Trinity Church, in Winchester) have contributed to mainstream informal theology: for example, the Evangelical hymnody, informality of worship and *Alpha* courses, and the Anglo-Catholic centrality of the Eucharist and liturgical reforms following the Second Vatican Council.

The third strand of modern, broad or liberal theology, represented now by Modern Church,[15] has combated fundamentalist tendencies and relates theology to other disciplines.[16] 'Modernism' had its Anglican origins in *Lux Mundi* of 1889 and subsequent publications questioning established doctrine.[17] 1963 saw the publication of John Robinson's semi-popular *Honest to God*, seminal and salutary for the whole Church, which will figure later in this thesis. Not so much 'a "party" within the Church, but rather a genre of thinking', according to Martyn Percy,[18] liberal theologians pay considerable attention to the fundamental issue of conceiving God.

Despite benefits to the whole Church from more Evangelical and more Catholic teaching, issues of sexuality remain which set some followers of the two wings at odds with mainstream Anglican churches, sometimes uniting the two wings.  Part of the Evangelical wing in particular

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[14] Chapman, Mark, *Anglicanism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 2006, p. 3.
[15] Previously, among other titles, The Modern Churchmen's Union.
[16] Chapman, *Anglicanism*, p. 125.
[17] Moorman, John R. H., *A History of the Church in England*, London, A. & C. Black, 1953, pp. 394, 396 (referring to Gore, Charles, ed., *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*, London, John Murray, 1889).
[18] Percy, Martyn, 'The New Liberalism', Clatworthy, Jonathan, ed., *The New Liberalism: Faith for the Third Millennium*, Modern Churchpeople's Union, 1998, p. 12.

is opposed on biblical grounds to any accommodation of homosexuality; and sections of both wings oppose the ordination of women, on grounds of biblical tradition and/or authority in the whole Catholic Church. These tendencies have become more overt since the latter part of the twentieth century, influenced by the numerically superior non-UK Anglican churches, more progressively from the United States and more conservatively from Africa. Feminism's concern with the experience and full inclusion of women in the whole life and structures of the Church has produced a considerable body of theology. The process of persuasion and protest that began after 1945 reached partial fruition in 1992 with the General Synod approving the ordination of women to the priesthood, though with excepting provision for dissenting parishes.[19] The issues have resurfaced over the ordination of women as bishops, and polarised the wider debate about inclusiveness of theological and liturgical language.[20]

The 1928 revision of *The Book of Common Prayer*, never authorised (because rejected by Parliament), but much of it used in practice, led to experimental liturgical revisions that began in the 1960s:  the Series 1 and Series 2 rites, and the first use of contemporary English in the Series 3 rites. This culminated in *The Alternative Service Book 1980*, which was itself replaced ten years later by the various liturgies and volumes of *Common Worship*, with additional material commended by the House of Bishops.[21] Changes in Roman Catholic liturgy since the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council were influential during this period, with common texts and simplification of liturgical practice, as, to a lesser extent, were changes in other Anglican provinces and other denominations. Some change in hymnody also took place, most notably with a wealth of Evangelical hymns and choruses, some of which found their way into mainstream Anglican worship, but also with more sedate revisions and additions to the distinctively Anglican hymnodies, *English Hymnal* and *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.[22]

There has been a significant reduction, by most measures, of Church of England membership since the optimistic signs of the 1950s.[23] The move in 1970 to a new system of synodical government signalled greater lay participation and consensus,[24] the General Synod's role being to guard worship and doctrine alongside episcopal leadership.[25] Alongside decisions that some

[19] Furlong, Monica, *The C of E: The State It's In*, London, H&S, 2000, p. 136.
[20] Furlong, *C of E*, p. 349-51.
[21] Church of England, *Liturgical Revision*, http://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/introduction/litrevis.aspx, downloaded 21.08.13.
[22] Welsby, Paul. A., *A History of the Church of England 1945-1980*, Oxford, OUP, 1984, p. 160.
[23] Hastings, Adrian, *A History of English Christianity 1920-1985*, London, Collins, 1986, p. 444.
[24] Welsby, *History of the Church of England*, pp. 208-10; Davies, Rupert, E., *The Church of England Observed*, London, SCM, 1984, pp. 18, 29, 53.
[25] Furlong, *C of E*, p. 176.

consider perverse, like the rejection of unification with the Methodist Church in 1972[26] and, due to an insufficient majority in the House of Laity, the temporary rejection of women bishops in 2012,  positive contributions have included *Faith in the City*,[27] the 1985 report by the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, perceived by some as a critique of Government policy,[28] but producing enduring results.

Post-second world war trends within the Church of England that have exerted influence on its life, theology and worship can thus be summarised as Evangelicalism, Catholicism, Liberalism and Feminism, influencing the Church's liturgy and hymnody, ordained ministry – and theology. Other powerful influences have included the phenomena discussed below.

### 1.3  The influence of the Holocaust

Theological consideration of God's relationship with human suffering has inevitably been influenced by the Holocaust, which has led to some, particularly in process and liberation theology, to question God's impassibility, and to rework their theodicy. In informal Jewish theology, Elie Wiesel writes of horrific childhood experiences in Auschwitz and Buchenwald: 'I did not deny God's existence, but I doubted His absolute justice'; and 'What are You, my God . . . ? What does Your greatness mean . . .?';[29] a Rabbi concluded: 'It's the end. God is no longer with us. . . . Where is the divine mercy? Where is God'.[30] The Christian theologian, Robert McAfee Brown, describes how Wiesel witnessed three Jewish scholars' trial of God in a rabbinic court, at the end of which a unanimous verdict was given: 'the Lord God almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, was found *guilty* of crimes against creation and humankind'. Then, after an 'infinity of silence', the scholars turned to their evening service.[31] This ambivalence is an important part of Wiesel's theology, with rage against God being 'still a way of telling Him that He's there, that He exists'.[32] With unconscious, or possibly conscious, Christian allusion, Wiesel records how, when someone asked at a public hanging, '"Where is

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[26] Beeson, Trevor, *The Church of England in Crisis*, London, Davis-Poynter, 1973, pp. 9, 119, 127-34; Welsby, *History of the Church of England¸* pp. 149-50.

[27] Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City - A Call for Action by Church and Nation: Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas*, London, Church House, 1985.

[28] Worrall, B. G., *The Making of the Modern Church: Christianity in England Since 1800*, London, SPCK, 1988, p. 293; Furlong, *C of E in Crisis*, p. 130.

[29] Wiesel, Elie, *Night*, London, Penguin, 1981, pp. 44, 57, 78.

[30] Wiesel, *Night*, p. 88.

[31] Brown, Robert McAfee, 'Introduction', 1995, Wiesel, Elie, *The Trial of God (as it was held on Feburary 25, 1649, in Shamgorod)*, New York, Schocken Books, 1979, p. vii.

[32] Brown, 'Introduction', p. xvi (quoting Wiesel, Elie, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, New York, Schocken Books, 1982, p. 123).

God now?" . . . I heard a voice within me answer him: "Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows"'.[33] Indeed, one contemporary rabbi saw the parallel with Jesus's innocent death: 'The Golgotha of modern mankind is Auschwitz. The cross . . . was replaced by the gas chamber'.[34] Wiesel hints at 'the death of God' when he writes of 'those moments which murdered my God and my soul . . .'.[35] For Richard Rubenstein, although no-one can know for certain that God is dead, 'we do live in the time of the "death of God" [as] a cultural fact.'[36] He thus raises conceptual questions about the 'death of God' in Christianity, as in Judaism: whether it is God or the concept of God that has allegedly died; whether 'the death of God' is an objective or subjective 'fact'; and to what extent it relates to the death of Jesus. Indeed, it is not always clear when the academic and informal theologians surveyed in this thesis are referring to God as a single entity, or God in Christ,  particularly when considering the concept of God suffering.

Arthur Cohen argues that a constructive post-Holocaust theology must be consistent with the presence of evil and God's presence, and with God's relationship and involvement with the whole of creation. Otherwise, God ceases to be anything other than 'a metaphor for the inexplicable'[37] – or, it could be said, a god of the gaps. The Holocaust was thus influential in encouraging honesty in the theological tension over the enormity of earthly suffering, evident in liberation, panentheistic and process theologies.

## 1.4 Postmodernity

The Holocaust has contributed to the rejection of the grand narratives[38] of history and modernism, and of Enlightenment rationality in philosophy, theology and morality – this rationality more recently put in question by worldwide suffering, modern science, relative affluence and Western questioning of inherited morality.  'Postmodernity' refers to the situation that exists with this rejection, and, with 'modernity', is used in this thesis to refer to states of societal mind; 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' relate to the *promotion* of the

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[33] Wiesel, *Night*, pp. 76-77.
[34] Rubenstein, Richard L., *After Auschwitz: History, Theology and Contemporary Judaism*, Second Edition, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins University, 1992, pp 159-64 (quoting Matbaum, Ignaz, *The Face of God after Auschwitz*, Amsterdam, Polak and Van Gennep, 1965, p. 36).
[35] Wiesel, *Night*, p. 45.
[36] Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, p. 172 (quoting Rubenstein, Richard L., *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merill, 1966, pp. 151-52).
[37] Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, p. 192.
[38] Lakeland, Paul, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1997, p. x (quoting Jean-François Lyotard).

associated characteristics.[39] 'Postmodernism' often brings scepticism about conventional theology, together with opportunities for theological restatement. Gerald West and David Tacey use 'postmodernism' to refer to freedom from fixed conventions, presumably as framed in credal and inherited theology, to enable more contextual theology and useful divine images to be created.[40] Radical Orthodoxy speaks of 'the nihilistic drift of postmodernism', but views it as 'a supreme opportunity' for 'an indeterminacy that is not impersonal chaos but infinite interpersonal harmonious order, in which time participates'.[41] Thiselton looks for 'co-operation of temporal and spatial imagery [to] provide major "qualifying" dimensions which cancel out unwanted resonances otherwise set up by each piece of imagery alone' [to] address the postmodern condition'.[42] Ralph Norman finds a continuity of mysticism between the apophatic tradition and postmodernism in terms of the ineffability of God: 'God is beyond language itself'.[43]

So, although postmodernism has undoubted negative connotations for theology, it also has capacity for positive developmental opportunity. This opportunity arises from postmodernism's dethroning of science from a prior right to interpret the world, thereby liberating theology from a secondary role: modernism allowed only consideration of how people talk about God, whereas postmodernism allows the possibility of actually talking about God. Some academic theology that is examined will display postmodernist divergence from the received narrative. Current psychological freedom to create one's own theology, sometimes divergent from the conventional theological narrative, will to a limited degree be revealed by analysis of the questionnaires and interviews with a sample of Winchester churchgoers.

**1.5 This thesis**

Against this background, and following the Literature Review and Methodology chapters, this thesis will survey UK Anglican academic theology since 1945. This survey will be by themes

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[39] This accords with Paul Hedges's definitions: Hedges, Paul, 'A Reflection on Typologies: Negotiating a Fast-Moving Discussion', Hedges, Paul and Race, Alan, *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*, London, SCM, 2008, p. 28.

[40] Tacey, David, *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality*, Hove, Routledge, 2004, p. 154 (quoting Maitland, Sara, *A big-Enough God*, London, Mowbray, 1995, p. 155); West, Gerald O., *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic, 1999, p. 25-26.

[41] Milbank, John, Ward, Graham and Pickstock, Catherine, 'Introduction: Suspending the material: the turn of radical orthodoxy', Milbank, John, Pickstock, Catherine and Ward, Graham, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A new theology*, London, Routledge, 1999, pp. 1-2.

[42] Thiselton, Anthony C., *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, Edinburgh, T&TC, 1995, pp. 122-124, 146.

[43] Norman, Ralph, 'Rediscovery of Mysticism', Jones, Gareth, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 455, 460-62.

relevant and significant for informal theology: Analogy, God's immanence, God's passibility and other aspects of process theology, contextual and feminist theology in the context of cultural relativism, liberal theology since 1960, attempts to reclaim tradition, and pastoral theology. ('Cultural relativism' is not used in the thesis in any pejorative sense, but to indicate the relativity of cultural settings in which thinking and activity develop.) The thesis will then describe some examples and accounts of informal theology, before recounting the exercise in practical theology, with an assessment of informal theology derived from quantitative and qualitative analysis of questionnaire data and interview interpretation. Uniquely, this understanding of informal theology will be set against the themes of Anglican academic theology, some conclusions being drawn about the extent of coherence between the two kinds of theology.

The writer's thesis is that the informal theology of ordinary believers coincides in most ways with academic theology over fundamental issues of understanding God, largely differing only in the degree to which formal analysis takes place. The practical research contributing to this thesis has revealed many ordinary believers' capacity to assimilate and hold a variety of views of God, and to do so in creative tension, sometimes despite paradoxes of apparent contradiction. The thesis will set out some proposals for further research, and some recommendations as to how the findings within the thesis could inform the life and mission of the Church of England. However, its distinctive contribution to scholarship lies in its relating the content of some informal theology to a wide spread of Anglican academic theology, and its finding considerable spiritual and theological insight within a sample of ordinary believers.

## 2.1 Introduction

This literature review considers a wide sample of historical theological *surveys*, key texts published since 1945. The aim is to identify different approaches and methods in responding to issues raised in conceptualising and speaking of God in the light of changing linguistic, cultural and scientific understanding and attitudes. Joerg Rieger's work is included as being methodological and *about* theology, as well as addressing the important subject of the excluded sections of society. Astley's work, not itself a theological survey but a phenomenological examination of 'ordinary theology', is included as being closely related to the aims of this thesis, and to demonstrate that Astley has not covered the same ground as this thesis. All other works are theological surveys: the majority by individual authors; some collections of essays (from which relevant essays are reviewed); all from Protestant and Anglican writers except those by Fergus Kerr and Philip Kennedy; and including undergraduate text-books by Kennedy and Alister McGrath. The works are surveyed in approximate chronological order, apart from Astley's.

The review will provide a context for this thesis, and demonstrate its originality, in that no previous survey has been published of Anglican UK theology over the period, and no survey relating particularly to issues raised by conceiving of God.

## 2.2 John Macquarrie

Macquarrie's *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought* ranges across European and American theologians and philosophers.[1] Religion, he writes, should be: reasonable (i.e. without contradictions or conflicting with natural reason, science or commonsense); contemporary (i.e. chronologically not escapist, but relevant to the present day and current problems); comprehensive (i.e. relating to all aspects of religion rather than selective of particular aspects); and 'on the way' (i.e. recognising the need for further development).[2]

Macquarrie includes theologians who examined the Christian faith in a world of logical empiricism, Austin Farrer and Eric Mascall,[3] and some British 'post-liberal theology'[4]. He refers to the popular debate engendered by *Honest to God*, and characterises Robinson's later *Exploration into God* as espousing panentheism and 'the doctrine of a God who has indeed an

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[1] Macquarrie, John , *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought: The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology, 1900-1970,* London, SCM, [1963], 1971, pp. 15, 17.
[2] Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, pp. 373-74.
[3] Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, pp. 289-90.
[4] Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, pp. 340-44.

unchanging essence but who completes himself in an advancing experience'.[5] Lastly, in British post-war theology, Macquarrie refers to the balanced approach to secularisation offered in the work of Ronald Gregor Smith, for whom, Macquarrie, relates:

> God is not a metaphysical reality beyond history, but neither can he be reduced to a mythological expression for our co-humanity or anything of that sort. He is the 'more', the transcendent, that we encounter within history itself.[6]

Briefly, too, he mentions Ian Ramsey's 'application of analytic philosophy to the problems of theological and religious language'.[7]

Macquarrie finds, through the maelstrom of philosophical and theological views raging at the time, a trend in the direction of relativism, with 'absolute and final truth on the question of religion . . . just unattainable'. A course, he believes, must be steered between the extremes of 'absolute divine revelation' which is inevitably 'interpreted in fallible words', and dogmatic scepticism.[8] Finally, Macquarrie finds 1960s interest in God focused on God's activity in the world and human affairs, with God to be found in depth rather than height – all indicative of a 'humanistic thrust', as the principle of transcendence is discovered within 'man'.[9]

## 2.3 Heinz Zahrnt

Zahrnt, in *The Question of God*, acknowledges the profound changes confronting humankind and the need for theology to 'vindicate once again the language it uses about God'.[10] He raises issues represented by those he surveys, including some significant ones described here. Over Friedrich Nietzsche's 'God is dead', Zahrnt adopts Martin Heidegger's explanation, that its context is the end of the western metaphysics that preferred 'the world beyond the senses' as more real and determinative than 'the world of the senses': 'When Nietzsche now proclaims that God is dead, this does not merely signify that there is no more God, but that the basic structure of being as a whole is shattered.' Similarly, Zahrnt argues that atheism itself has become secularised in the modern world, as people 'have passed beyond the problem of God': 'How can one speak of God in a secularised world?'[11] Friedrich Gogarten and Dietrich Bonhoeffer confronted these issues in the context of human maturity, Bonhoeffer's writings

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[5] Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, pp. 386, 274.
[6] Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, p. 388.
[7] Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, p. 390.
[8] Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, p. 372.
[9] Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, pp. 393-94.
[10] Zahrnt, Heinz, *The Question of God: Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century*, London, Collins, 1969, p. 12.
[11] Zahrnt, *Question of God*, pp. 126, 130, 131.

from prison considering the possibility of an end to religion and the foolishness of relying on a 'God of the gaps',[12] and Gogarten emphasising secularisation as 'a post-Christian phenomenon, brought about by the Christian faith'. Zahrnt notes how '*supranaturalism*', based on Greek dualism, underlay the early days of the Church, but has now been challenged with the arrival of 'critical historical method'.  He considers that attacks on God:

> conceal a longing, a longing for a greater God – a God who is not merely comprehended in transitory ideas, images and concepts, who does not dwell in the gaps and deficiencies in our human knowledge, who does not encounter us merely at the margins and boundaries of life, ruling over a Christian enclave, a few acres marked off as belonging to the Church, but a God who is greater, vaster, more free, more sovereign, more universal, more awesome and more fruitful . . . .[13]

Zahrnt highlights Herbert Braun's conviction that God 'is certainly not considered as an Existent existing in himself, as a species definable by that term', but rather: 'the goal towards which I am being driven'; 'where the security and the obligation which I derive from my fellow man comes from'; 'a particular kind of common humanity'; 'where I have an obligation, where I am committed' unconditionally.[14]  Helmut Gollwitzer's reaction was concern 'for the meaning of theology as language about God', and that, for Braun, 'God and Jesus disintegrate into humanism'. Braun had indeed, in Zahrnt's words, 'carrie[d] [Rudolf] Bultmann's existentialist interpretation of the New Testament to its logical conclusion'.[15]

Paul Tillich demonstrated similar concern for intelligibility: 'You must save concepts before you can save souls'.[16]  Zahrnt describes Tillich's development of 'a new terminology and . . . a new conceptual tool . . . in order to recapture' 'the archetypal language of the Bible and liturgy' 'and make . . . [it] intelligible once again [in] "the changing experiences of individuals and groups, their varying questions and their categories of perceiving reality"'.[17] Zahrnt writes:

> The content of absolute faith, if one can speak here of a 'content' at all, is the *God above God*, that is, the God who lies beyond the symbol of  'God', who transcends all

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[12] Zahrnt, *Question of God*, pp. 131-40.

[13] Zahrnt, *Question of God*, p. 140 (quoting Gogarten, Friedrich, *Was ist Christentum?*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956, pp. 73, 206-07, 169).

[14] Zahrnt, *The Question of God*, p. 275 (quoting Braun, Herbert, *Die Problematik einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Unveränd. Nachdr, 1971, p. 17).

[15] Zahrnt, *Question of God*, pp. 277, 283.

[16] Zahrnt, *Question of God*, p. 299 (quoting Bartley, William W., *The Retreat to Commitment*', New York, Knopf, 1962, p. 73, quoting sermon by Paul Tillich).

[17] Zahrnt, *Question of God*, pp. 300, 302 (quoting Tillich, Paul, *The Protestant Era*, London, Nisbet, 1951, p. xxxvii).

conceptions of God, who is not a person and has no name and cannot be expressed in any image.[18]

By contrast with the foregoing, after the tendency, for two or three centuries, to 'magnif[y] man at the expense of God', Karl Barth restored a balance between 'man-encountering God and God-encountering man'. Analogy for Barth is only in a God-to-human direction, reliant totally on the grace of God. It is *analogia relationis* or *analogia revelationis*, and not *analogia entis*. On that basis, in Zahrnt's words, Barth 'revels' in analogy alongside revelation.[19]

Zahrnt's *The Question of God* surveys some Protestant twentieth century theologians, most of them German or of German origin, who confronted the philosophical and practical difficulties in conceptualizing God. He considers Barth's particular understanding of analogy and the nature and limitations of theological language. In this light, Zahrnt advocates the widest view of God beyond supranaturalism, as developed in an existentialist direction.

**2.4 Jaroslav Pelikan**

Pelikan's *Twentieth Century Theology in the Making* comprises a series of pre-war German essays surveying earlier twentieth century theology. Pelikan, a Lutheran turned Orthodox, raises various issues relevant to this thesis, and touches on matters that mark out the twentieth century in terms of a new, rational and sometimes radical approach within theology, not least in conceptualising God.

For Paul Althaus, God's eternity and ultimacy are seen not as just in a world above, but in the future, eschatologically: 'the eternal is the "ultimate" no longer simply in the sense of the essential present, beyond and outside time, but in the sense of the final end of time'. With the *parousia*, 'theology must remain conscious of the fact that it does speak here in parables';[20] what is applicable to the *parousia* and Christ in glory is applicable to God. The figurative nature of language about God is further highlighted by Pelikan's inclusion of Tillich, who explores the origins of the term 'myth' and associated allegorical, psychological and psychoanalytical theories, along with his own more positive symbolic-realistic theory. Tillich views myth 'as a symbol, built up from elements of reality, for the Absolute, the being beyond beings'. Myth,

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[18] Zahrnt, *Question of God*, p. 345.
[19] Zahrnt, *Question of God*, pp. 85, 86, 99-100.
[20] Althaus, Paul, 'Eschatology in the Philosophy of Religion and Dogmatic Theology', Pelikan, Jaroslav, ed., *Twentieth Century Theology in the Making*, London, Fontana, 1969, 1970, vol. I, pp. 278, 281.

even when religion tries to distance itself, says Tillich, is inescapable: 'the mythical is an element of all religion: *myth is a religious category*'.[21]

A mystical example of figurative language is provided by Hans Leisegang, quoting Meister Eckhart: 'The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is *one* eye, and *one* countenance, and *one* knowledge and one love'; and adding:

> Here all distinction between God and the world disappears. God is in all things, and all things are in God. Thus man too is in God, and God in him. But God himself, who is everything, also becomes, as a direct consequence of the fact that all recognizable distinctions are done away in him, and that he is the highest concept comprehending all others, a concept utterly empty of meaning, to which one can only ascend by a series of total negations, leading to complete nothingness.[22]

To this panentheistic example, Leisegang adds dependency of God upon humankind, with Scheffler's claim that 'without me God cannot live for an instant, and that if I became nothing he must necessarily expire', and Eckhart's, that 'if I did not exist, God would not exist'. Thus, says Leisegang, 'God needs man and man needs God for each to live his own true life'.[23]

Thus are raised issues of later twentieth century concern in conceptualising God: the figurative and mythical nature of language, panentheism and God's dependency.

## 2.5. Alasdair Heron

Although Heron's *A Century of Protestant Theology* includes years before 1945, the start of this thesis's period, the more prominent theologians considered remain influential. His intention is descriptive, with no overarching theory discernible.

Heron describes effects of the Enlightenment and reason: the questioning of biblical authority and the nature of miracles; and David Hume's and Immanuel Kant's challenges to arguments for the existence of God. From the nineteenth century German Protestant scene, he includes G. W. F. Hegel's concept of the Absolute Mind (or Spirit), and Ludwig Feuerbach's idea of God as a human projection.

Barth insists that 'there is absolutely no continuity, similarity or resemblance between God and man, no *analogia entis* . . . between God and ourselves . . .', but, rather, reliance upon the *analogia fidei*, God's self-revelation 'the key to his being as God'. Heron dislikes Bultmann's

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[21] Tillich, Paul, 'Myth and Mythology: The Concept and the Religious Psychology of Myth', Pelikan, *Twentieth Century Theology*, Vol. II, pp. 343-44, 346.
[22] Leisegang, Hans, 'The Concept of Mysticism', Pelikan, *Twentieth Century Theology*, Vol. II, p. 357.
[23] Leisegang,' Concept of Mysticism', p. 359.

contrasting programme of demythologization, arguing that 'Mythical talk about God misrepresents his real nature. . . by picturing him as "a being" among others, and fitting him into a supernatural world running somehow parallel to our own, and interacting with it'; and attributing to Bultmann an 'almost deistic position'.[24]

Heron acknowledges the challenges from Ludwig Wittgenstein's linguistic analysis and A. J. Ayer's logical positivism and verification principle. He surveys: the contributions from Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, D. Z. Phillips and Ramsey; the defences of natural theology by Farrer and Mascall; and developments in American theology from Reinhold Niebuhr and Tillich, with Tillich's understanding of God as Being-itself and the ground of all existence. He considers Charles Hartshorne's process theology, that suggested 'that God's being is in some ways absolutely perfect, but in other ways dependent upon a relation to what is other than itself',[25] with God thus combining an unchanging element with his actualisation in relationships. Robinson's *Honest to God*[26] Heron sees as representing 1960s secular, radical and political theologies.

Heron's book provides a summary and critique of twentieth century Protestant theology up to 1980, including theologians who responded to the challenges to conceiving of God presented by linguistic analysis and doubt about supernaturalism. It is descriptive in nature, and uncontroversial.

**2.6 Peter Hodgson and Robert King**

Langdon Gilkey's essay, 'God', (the relevant part of Hodgson and King's *Christian Theology*) opens by acknowledging the challenges to:

> the very possibility of an idea of God, its knowability, its coherence, and its meaning; to much of modernity such an idea is on a number of grounds an impossible idea and, as a consequence, the whole enterprise of a theistic religion appears as a futile, expensive, and even harmful activity.[27]

The greater awareness of the problem of evil in modern culture has led, he writes, to 'denial of the absoluteness and aseity of God', with God 'only one of a number of correlated and primal ultimate "factors" constitutive of finite actuality'.[28] Indeed, another trend, Gilkey writes, is to

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[24] Heron, Alasdair I.C., *A Century of Protestant Theology*, Guildford, Lutterworth, 1980, pp. 11, 77, 93, 103-04, 115.

[25] Heron, *Century of Protestant Theology*, pp. 122-23, 139, 146-47

[26] Robinson, *Honest to God*.

[27] Gilkey, Langdon, 'God', Hodgson, Peter and King, Robert, eds., *Christian Theology: an Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks,* London, SPCK, 1983, pp. 62-63.

[28] Gilkey, 'God', pp. 62-63, 72, 82.

emphasise God's self-limitation, with some autonomy on the part of his creation, which thus has the freedom to accept grace or not. Alfred North Whitehead's 'process' view is of God 'intrinsically related to the world of change' and sharing in 'the metaphysical categories of process: temporality, potentiality, change, relatedness, development, and dependency or passivity'. Gilkey describes liberation theologies ('eschatological', 'adversarial theologies') that look to 'the God of the future', but makes no explicit link between these theologies and process theology. Gilkey rejects both 'any . . . "process" views of God which deny that God is the source or ground of finite reality' and 'those forms of "orthodoxy" which have insisted on the active omnipotence or total sovereignty of God in the coming-to-be of finite events'. Yet the process of temporal change is the context for God being 'conceived [as] active in the coming-to-be of our temporal being, in its preservation over time, and in its movement through time into the future'.[29]

Thus, Gilkey's theology responds to the cultural trends of the day, and particularly the perception of a transient and changing world.

**2.7 Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson**

Grenz and Olson's *20th Century Theology* stresses the importance of retaining balance between divine transcendence and immanence for 'a proper relation between theology and reason or culture'.[30] Their account is thematic, describing theology's response to the intellectual postmodern despair engendered by twentieth century conflict.

They move from nineteenth century immanence to twentieth century 'transcendence in neo-orthodoxy', with Barth's and Emil Brunner's emphasis on revelation. They explore Bultmann's existentialist interpretation through 'transcendence of the kerygma'; and Tillich's ontologically-centred apologetic theology, with the 'ground of being' or 'being itself' the antidote to anxiety about non-being. Process theology is viewed eschatologically, with: 'the present world [seen] in the light of what it will become'; science and theology reconciled by locating God in the processes of change and evolution; and God and the world interdependent, God working in the world through persuasion and suffering with the world. Process theology, Grenz and Olson write, escapes pantheism, but embraces panentheism: 'one cannot conceive of God apart from

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[29] Gilkey, 'God', pp. 79, 81-85.
[30] Grenz, Stanley J & Olson, Roger E, *20th Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age*, Carlisle, Paternoster, 1992, pp. 11-12.

the world'. But their critique of process theology is over the loss of God's transcendence, unchangeability, control of creation and potency in the face of evil.[31]

Grenz and Olson view the 1960s as a time of 'fads' in theology, in its radical search for a new kind of immanence, often inspired by Bonhoeffer, with his understanding of God as transcendent, yet 'the Beyond in the midst of our life', and his insistence that 'we should find God in what we do know, not in what we don't'.[32] They describe Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton's short-lived 'Death-of-God' Movement as characterised by Hamilton's insistence that 'We are not talking about the absence of the experience of God, but about the experience of the absence of God', leading to Altizer's Christian atheism, with God's immanence in humanity dispersing all transcendence. With pastoral intention, Robinson's *Honest to God* found God in the depth of our being and of personal relationships, the transcendence of God representing the ultimacy of these phenomena, and being found within immanence. But from theological desperation, write Grenz and Olson, a theology of hope arose, God's transcendence being reasserted within the systematic and Trinitarian theology of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg.[33]

However, after the 1960s, immanence reasserted itself in black and liberation theology, at some expense to transcendence, the authors asking: 'Does God have any existence above and apart from human history?' Feminist theology then questioned the habitual masculine presentation of God, with Rosemary Ruether requiring female as well as male metaphors, and identifying Tillich's 'ground of being' with 'the primal Matrix' or 'God/ess', identified with the whole of nature. The authors cite criticisms of Ruether as creating a new dualism between transcendence and maleness on the one hand and immanence and femaleness on the other.[34]

By contrast, Grenz and Olson recover from Karl Rahner God's nature as of 'absolute mystery', 'holy mystery', neither an individual nor impersonal, but personal in an analogical way, with God's personhood 'left open to the ineffable darkness of the holy mystery' and God remaining 'the absolute person'.[35] Hans Küng's concept of God would 'transcend-while-preserving' both traditional theism and panentheism, avoiding both 'naïve anthropomorphism' and deism,[36] leading to a new conception of God based on a dialectic of love, instead of Hegel's dialectic of

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[31] Grenz & Olson, *20ᵗʰ Century Theology*, pp. 63-99, 114-30, 137-38, 142-44.
[32] Grenz & Olson, *20ᵗʰ Century Theology, p.*152 (quoting Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, London, Fontana, 1959, p. 104).
[33] Grenz & Olson, *20ᵗʰ Century Theology*, pp. 146-64, 172-99.
[34] Grenz & Olson, *20ᵗʰ Century Theology*, pp. 209-10, 224, 228, 232-33.
[35] Grenz & Olson, *20ᵗʰ Century Theology*, pp. 244-45, 248-49.
[36] Grenz & Olson, *20ᵗʰ Century Theology*, p. 264 (quoting Küng, Hans, *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, New York & London, Doubleday, 1988, p. 237).

knowledge, with God in the world, transcendence in immanence, and traditional immutability and impassability needing reconsideration.[37]

Grenz and Olson capture historically and constructively the abiding tension between transcendence and immanence, and in particular the trends in the direction of immanence, particularly liberation and feminist theology. Their reference to some 1960s 'fads'[38] is unfortunate in view of genuine British efforts to relate the Christian faith to those for whom traditional concepts were difficult.

## 2.8 George Newlands

Newlands's intention in *God in Christian Perspective* 'is to work out a modern restatement of the Christian doctrine of God', denying that we are left with 'a framework of philosophical positivism which simply lets us say nothing about God [and is] useless for constructive theology'. Rather, 'Love is . . . the central characteristic of God in himself and in relation to the created order'.[39] This theme Newlands earlier explores in *Theology of the Love of God*, a largely incarnational theological work that explores many of the fundamental puzzles for theology, such as the personal agency implication of attributing love to God, the metaphorical nature of our language for God and the possibility of a category mistake in attributing personal attributes to a transcendent God.

Important as analogy is for speaking of God, 'the doctrine of analogy is not then a means of knowing God but an analysis of the words we use to name God'. While recognising the apparent remoteness of some theological discourse from the 'problems of how to speak of a living God who is both creator of time and active in times',[40] he analyses classical concepts such as *ousia*, *hypostasis*, substance and person, and considers various aspects of God's personal nature.

Thus Newlands explores concepts that are inherent in this thesis and the difficulties of speaking of God in the modern and post-modern world. He expresses dissatisfaction with some traditional expressions of God's being and nature, and sets out his understanding of the role of analogy in speaking of God.

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[37] Grenz & Olson, *20th Century Theology,* pp. 264-66.
[38] Grenz & Olson, *20th Century Theology*, p. 146.
[39] Newlands, George, *God in Christian Perspective*, Edinburgh, T&TC, 1994, pp. 3, 42, 40.
[40] Newlands, George, *Theology of the Love of God*, London, Collins, 1980, pp. 54-55, 46, 90.

**2.9 Gregory Baum**

Baum's edited work, *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*[41] comprises a partly historical and partly thematic collection of essays that illustrate twentieth century theology.

Ruether describes the work of the Jewish Irving Greenberg, for whom the issue of adequacy of language about God is broadened from philosophical concerns to pragmatism over gross human suffering:

> The failure of human projects of redemption . . . is experienced as an absence of the divine presence in the modern world. We live in the time of the silence of God. . . . We have entered into a time of profound silence that no longer knows how to speak adequately of God. The test of adequate language about God has become the burning children of the crematoria. [42]

Harvey Cox, distancing himself from his earlier insistence[43] that God is present in the 'secular', as opposed to 'religious', spheres of life, now believes that 'current religious movements have vigorously reclaimed many of these "secular" spheres as places where the holy is present within the profane'.[44] Susan Ross's feminist essay mentions Elizabeth Johnson's 'retrieval of the Wisdom tradition [to] aid in expanding the human vision of the divine'.[45] The essay on black theology, womanist theology and disadvantaged American groups refers only obliquely, despite an underlying assumption, to God being aligned with the dispossessed.[46]

Michael Scanlon describes the postmodern emphasis on what he calls 'gnoseological humility' in the apophatic tradition, sharing with the mystical tradition 'the profound experience of divine "alterity" – the most radical otherness there is – lead[ing] to silence, to a "fear and trembling" that overwhelms any attempt to grasp God in human language'.[47] The transcendence of God relates to difference, not to distance. Scanlon then describes Jacques

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[41] Baum, Gregory, ed, *The Twentieth Century: a Theological Overview*, London, Chapman, 1999.
[42] Ruether, Rosemary Radford, 'The Holocaust: Theological and Ethical Reflections', Baum, *Twentieth Century*, p. 79.
[43] Cox, Harvey, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, London, SCM, 1965.
[44] Cox, Harvey, 'The Myth of the Twentieth Century: The Rise and Fall of "Secularization", Baum, *Twentieth Century*, p. 140.
[45] Ross, Susan A., 'The Women's Movement and Theology in the Twentieth Century', Baum, *Twentieth Century*, p. 191.
[46] Hopkins, Dwight N. and Thomas, Linda E, 'Voices from the Margins in the United States', Baum, *Twentieth Century*, pp. 204-18.
[47] Scanlon, Michael J., 'The Postmodern Debate', Baum, *Twentieth Century*, p. 233.

Derrida's interpretation of apophatic theology as a '"hyperessentiality" in which God is presented as God beyond being or Being beyond being or God beyond God'.[48]

Baum is concerned to identify how theology has responded creatively to current human and philosophical issues. These issues are only partially addressed (for instance in response to suffering and to social disadvantage), and the instinctive, fundamental philosophical difficulties with conceiving God are not tackled.

## 2.10  Joerg Rieger

Rieger's *God and the Excluded* arises from his concern that theology has often failed to 'connect' with the marginalized and excluded sections of society. Theologians, he suggests, are located somewhere between God and the excluded, with their blindness towards the excluded risking a blindness towards God. Rieger aims to reorientate theology to everyday life and the excluded, to enable theology to rediscover God and contribute to restructuring the Church and society. He regards modern theology as having four turns, which he addresses as Self, the Wholly Other, Language and the Text, and Others.[49]

Turning to Self, Rieger, like Friedrich Schleiermacher, stresses experience at the heart of understanding God. God must be totally Other, yet language must relate to human experience. Rieger concludes that it is the middle classes that are 'at the heart of the modern world and modern theology', and that church inclusivity can easily turn out to be inclusivity just of those who conform.[50]

In relation to the Wholly Other, we cannot rely solely on revelation or faith, but, since 'theological reflection needs to face its ultimate limit: we do not own God'; or, quoting Barth, 'God shatters every syllogism,' with 'God' 'signif[ying] *a priori* the fundamentally Other'.[51]

The third 'turn' is to Theology and Postmodernity, with George Lindbeck as exemplar, stressing the primary importance, above reason or experience, of how a religion uses language, grounded in Scripture, to express itself. Rieger's concern is that what he and Lindbeck deem the post-liberal, postmodern approach should appeal to excluded as well as educated classes,

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[48] Scanlon, 'Postmodern Debate', p. 234.
[49] Rieger, Joerg, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology,* Minneapolis, Fortress, 2001, pp. ix-x, 1-3.
[50] Rieger, *God and the Excluded*, pp. 34, 37.
[51] Rieger, *God and the Excluded*, pp. 50, 48, 52.

and questions whether this approach can embrace 'the excluded, particularly those excluded by the structures of the global economy'.[52]

His fourth 'turn', to Others, insists that 'there is a close connection between respecting other people and respecting the divine other'. Feminism is an area for demonstrating inclusivity, particularly feminism in a context of 'Third World' suffering.[53] Loyalty to God and loyalty to the stranger go together in church tradition. Experience of God comes from encounters with God in the tensions of life and communal experiences, like glimpses of truth in worship that includes the marginalized.[54]

To use Hans Frei's categories, *God and the Excluded* is 'an exercise chiefly *about* rather than *in* theology';[55] it is methodological, rather than substantive in content. Rieger combines concern for the excluded with experience (including suffering) as a foundation of theology. However, his theology of difference, or otherness, relies on experience of the numinous. Despite his concern for the less educated, and recognition of the problem, he offers no solution for those without such experiences:

> 'Nobody seems to be more aware of the current dilemma of theological reflection than those who have been excluded from the mainstreams of theology. For those at the margins of society and the church, there are few illusions left, and here the most challenging questions are raised.'[56]

The thesis will consider further the need for theology to relate conceptually and linguistically to ordinary people with their reactions to traditional theism based on modern interpretations of the world.

**2.11 Gareth Jones**

These essays from Jones's *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology* are most relevant.

Although Garrett Green's essay, 'Modernity', considers Bultmann's and Tillich's existentialism, the effects of the Second Vatican Council, liberation, black and feminist theologies, and the challenge from postmodernism, it does not expand in terms of conceptualising God.[57] John De Gruchy describes Bonhoeffer's preference for God being spoken of 'not on the boundaries but at the center, not in weakness but in strength', rather than as 'a *deus ex machina who is only*

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[52] Rieger, *God and the Excluded*, pp. 72, 74.
[53] Rieger, *God and the Excluded*, pp. 99, 102.
[54] Rieger, *God and the Excluded*, p. 110.
[55] Frei, Hans, *Types of Christian Theology,* Yale, Yale University, 1992, p. 1.
[56] Rieger, *God and the Excluded*, pp. 100-101.
[57] Green, Garrett, 'Modernity', Jones, ed., *Blackwell Companion*, pp. 177-78.

*called upon when everything else has failed'*.[58] James Byrne relates Bultmann's decision that, since we cannot speak of God in himself, and do not want to lapse into silence, 'every assertion about God is simultaneously an assertion about man and vice versa'. Tillich, on the other hand, while also concerned for the Christian message in the modern world, proceeded on the basis of a '"theonomous culture" in which concern for the unconditioned and ultimate is retained (thus "ultimate concern")'. Byrne outlines the development of Tillich's systematic theology, based on the principle of 'correlation' and on a reappraisal of the major 'symbols' of the Christian tradition. In terms of 'God', correlation implied 'an analysis of the ontological question as asked by the human condition and a corresponding analysis of the symbol "God", which is theology's answer to this question'. 'God is being-itself, beyond both essence and existence . . . .'[59]

Ralph Norman touches on the ineffability of God, God being 'beyond language itself', and traces the history of this aspect of mysticism through the apophatic tradition and into postmodernism.[60] Bruce Marshall focuses on Rahner's statement that 'the "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity, and conversely'. 'God in his saving action "for us"', explains Marshall, 'is the same as (or identical with) God "in himself", the Trinity *ad extra* is the same as the Trinity *ad intra*'. This is important in Marshall's thesis, as is Trinitarian definition, because 'On the ability to identify God largely depends the sort of relationship it is possible to have with God'.[61] (Although Marshall does not say so, the reverse might also be true). Karen Kilby's consideration of Rahner focuses more on his concept of *Vorgriff* ['defined as 'pre-apprehension'] *auf esse,* the basis for Rahner's belief in every person's natural awareness of God to some degree.[62] Mark McIntosh recounts Hans Urs von Balthasar's attributing to the processes of human aesthetic perception 'an awareness of the enrapturing power of Being', of which 'the visible form (the Beautiful) of the concrete universal (Being)', can only be perceived in Christ. This crystallises von Balthasar's Christocentric approach, together with his emphasis on beauty as implicit in the nature of God. The principle behind the incarnation defines von Balthasar's theology: 'The divine act of existence is . . . constrained by no putative laws of

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[58] de Gruchy, John W, 'Bonhoeffer', Jones, ed., *Blackwell Companion*, p. 369.
[59] Byrne, James M, 'Bultmann and Tillich', Jones, ed., *Blackwell Companion*, pp. 378, 380, 383, 384.
[60] Norman, *'*Rediscovery of Mysticism', pp. 455, 460-62.
[61] Marshall, Bruce, D, 'Trinity', Jones, ed., *Blackwell Companion,* pp. 187-88, 191, 193-97.
[62] Kilby, Karen, 'Rahner', Jones, ed., *Blackwell Companion,* pp. 344-45.

"divine essence" but rather the divine essence is itself the eternally constituted event of the free, mutual self-giving of the Divine Persons'.[63]

Robert Russell's and Kirk Wegter-McNelly's 'Science', portrays the epitome of theology's engagement with the contemporary world, attributing to Ian Barbour: 'models that are analogical, extensible, coherent, symbolic, and expressed through metaphors'; and his conviction that religion 'serv[es] non-cognitive functions missing in science, such as eliciting attitudes, personal involvement and transformation'.[64]

Jones's work is impressive in its presentation of a great variety of material, but does not explicitly develop the subject matter in the direction of informal theology.

## 2.12 David Ford

In a series of *The Church Times* essays on British academic theology,[65] Ford records what he describes as the 'trauma' for British theology in the first half of the twentieth century from logical positivism and analytical philosophy, whose reductionism challenged with such questions as 'But how can you prove . . .?' and 'But what do you really mean by . . .?'. Ford surveys under generic headings the work of British theologians who have worked against this background. In 'Networks and Movements', he highlights some who have pursued themes associated with 'movements', such as liberation theology, feminism, 'Sea of Faith' and 'Radical Orthodoxy'. These essays provide a succinct summary of contemporary theology, fully aware of the difficulty presented for some by conventional theological concepts.

Ford's *The Modern Theologians* draws on Frei's types of Christian theology,  identifying five types of theology (though reversing Frei's order), three of which he finds relevant to modern Christian theology:

- primarily Christian, but engaging seriously with the world for greater understanding and reinterpretation, for example, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Tom Torrance, Donald MacKinnon, Michael Ramsey and Williams;

- balancing Christianity with modernity on a more even basis, for example, Tillich, Edward Schillebeeckx and Küng; and

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[63] McIntosh, Mark, 'Von Balthasar', Jones, ed., *Blackwell Companion*, pp. 390, 394.
[64] Russell, Robert John and Wegter-McNelly, Kirk, 'Science', Jones, ed., *Blackwell Companion*, p. 514.
[65] Ford, David, *Church Times,* 4th, 11th, 18th and 25th May & 1st and 8th June 2001, pp. 14-15, 14-15 & 19, 16-17, 14-15, 14-15, 12-13, 14, respectively.

- taking modern philosophy as a way of integrating Christianity with an understanding of modernity, for example, Pannenberg and Bultmann, on the basis of existentialism.[66]

These distinctions are indicative of the twentieth century struggle to make sense of Christianity amid advances in the natural sciences, fresh philosophical approaches that have infected both academic and popular mindsets, and a less subservient and more questioning public attitude.

Elements of the book relevant to this thesis include commentary on Bonhoeffer's use of analogy and his concern about a 'god of the gaps',[67] and Tillich's strategy of mediating between contemporary culture and historical Christianity.[68] Peter Sedgwick's chapter on British Anglican theology touches on the concept of God in Farrer, and to a lesser extent MacKinnon.[69] Gavin D'Costa describes John Hick's liberal, pluralist, theocentric (as opposed to Christocentric) approach.[70] Philip Clayton deals with particular issues within science, with panentheism as a means of reconciling theology with scientific accounts of the world.[71] Celia Deane-Drummond includes a critique of Richard Dawkins's writings on genetic natural selection and Keith Ward's response,[72] but was published just too soon to deal with Dawkins's *The God Delusion*[73] and Ward's response in *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God*.[74]

Sedgwick's chapter on British Anglican theology highlights Farrer's 'investigation of biblical symbolism and imagery.' He quotes Farrer: 'Poetry and divine inspiration have this in common, that both are projected in images which cannot be decoded, but must be allowed to signify what they signify of the reality beyond them'.[75] Its salience is in indicating the limitations of language, and the potential of images or symbols to communicate what is otherwise incommunicable.

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[66] David Ford, ed. *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, Oxford, Blackwell, 3rd Edition 2005, p. 2; Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, pp. 2-3.
[67] Floyd, Wayne Whitson, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer' and Roberts, Richard H., 'Theology and the Social Sciences' Ford, ed., *Modern Theologians,* pp. 50, 376.
[68] Kelsey, David H., 'Paul Tillich', Ford, ed., *Modern Theologians*, pp 65-66, 73-74.
[69] Sedgwick, Peter, 'Anglican Theology', Ford, ed., *Modern Theologians,* pp. 183, 185.
[70] D'Costa, Gavin, 'Theology of Religions', Ford, *Modern Theologians*, pp. 628-629, 633-34.
[71] Clayton, Philip, 'Theology and the Physical Sciences', Ford, Modern *Theologians*, pp. 342-47.
[72] Deane-Drummond, Celia, 'Theology and the Biological Sciences', Ford, ed., *Modern Theologians,* pp. 360-61.
[73] Dawkins, *God Delusion*.
[74] Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God*.
[75] Sedgwick, 'Anglican Theology'*,* p. 183 (quoting Farrer, Austin, *The Glass of Vision*, London, Dacre, 1948, pp. 44, 148).

*The Modern Theologians* is thematic, rather than systematic, providing an introduction to a range of influential twentieth century theologians and a range of ways in which theology has responded to some twentieth century demands. Although some of the essayists deal explicitly or implicitly with conceptualising God, informal conceptualising and difficulties in speaking of God do not figure where they might have done, in the 'Theology and Spirituality'[76] and 'Pastoral and Practical Theology' chapters.[77]

**2.13 Philip Kennedy**

Kennedy's works surveyed here are text books, but are included as surveys of theology. In his basic *A Modern Introduction to Theology*, he recounts the history of the concept of God from the earliest times. The greatest challenge to Christianity's view of God as omnipotent and omni-benevolent he reckons to be horrific human suffering since Hiroshima in 1945.[78]

As Kennedy ranges across the rise of modernity and the Enlightenment, he mentions: seventeenth century English deism; Kant's rejection of dogmatic metaphysics, ontological and *a posteriori* arguments for the existence of God, and the possibility of knowing God; and Nietzsche's 'God is dead'. For Hegel, God is 'neither immovable nor unchangeable', but 'immanent in the world as a spiritual process', for 'Without the world God is not God.'[79] . Feuerbach went further, believing that Christianity is the product of psychological projection, so that, 'to speak of God speaking, forces divine revelation to conform to human nature and physiology'. Küng similarly states 'that in belief in God human beings . . . extract their human nature and see it as something outside themselves, separate from them'.[80]

Kennedy is sympathetic to Gustavo Gutiérrez's liberation theology; and to Mary Daly's 'if God is male, then the male is God': avoiding male pronouns to refer to God 'is not a matter of appeasing feminists. It is a matter of idolatry. . . . by definition . . . the recognition as absolute . . . that which is finite'.[81]

Kennedy deplores designations of God based on pre-modern thinking:  'The task of completely revising language about God in the light of [modern] cosmology has barely begun'. The failure

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[76] McIntosh, Mark A., 'Theology and Spirituality', Ford, ed., *Modern Theologians,* pp. 392-407.
[77]Pattison, Stephen and Lynch, Gordon, 'Pastoral and Practical Theology', Ford, ed., *Modern Theologians,* pp. 408-25.
[78] Kennedy, Philip, *A Modern Introduction to Theology: new questions for old beliefs*, London, Tauris, 2006, pp. 33, 6.
[79] Kennedy, *Modern Introduction*, pp. 59, 71-72 & 78, 85, 106, 99 (quoting Hegel, Goerg, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden. Werkausgabe*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970, vol. XVI, p.192).
[80] Kennedy, *Modern Introduction*, pp. 99-100, 103, 104-05 (cf. p. 108) (quoting Küng, Hans, *Christianity: Its Essence and History*, London, SCM, 1994, p. 12).
[81] Kennedy, *Modern Introduction*, pp. 194, 212-13.

ever to depict God adequately is because 'Whatever theologians state about God is muttered against the profound silence of a much deeper and inescapable nescience'.[82] Theology, he says, 'is always stammering because the object of its discourse, God, is ungraspable, atemporal, indecipherable and extraphenomenal': 'The greatest theologians of the twentieth century were the most negative', in 'being vividly aware that God is best discussed in terms of what God is clearly not', and were 'attentive to the problem suffering causes for fatuous discourses that God is good and cares for people.' Bonhoeffer's awareness of suffering led him to believe that 'only the suffering God can help', and recognised the possibility that, having come of age, the world no longer had need for the 'working hypothesis' called 'God', with the possibility of religionless Christianity, in which Christ was 'really the Lord of the world'.[83] Moltmann's wartime experience led him to conclude that 'God suffers in response to human suffering', although differently from creatures, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye has reached similar conclusions about the suffering of God, whose 'womb becomes agitated at the sight of suffering and meanness' – the basis of her African liberation theology.[84]

Kennedy observes that atheists and theists can agree with Tillich's statements that 'God is not anything! . . . The being of God is being-itself', that is, not a being alongside other beings. Kennedy writes: 'The recognition that Christological and theological terms are symbolic is a lynchpin of Tillich's thought', and 'for liberal theologians . . . it becomes difficult . . . to regard Christian teachings as true and credible if they are regarded as facts on a par with empirically demonstrable evidences'.[85]

For Gordon Kaufman, God is 'a symbol and . . . "cultural construct"', the word 'God' being problematic because of its connotation of transcendence, and therefore removed from the reaches of human experience.  Eventually, Kaufman replaces the traditional idea of God as a transcendent Father-Lord-Creator with God as 'a serendipitous creativity *in* the world',[86] including the cosmological Big Bang. Despite the attractiveness of this, Kennedy objects:

> If God is in the world, God will die, because everyone and everything in the world is
> finite, as the Second Law of Thermodynamics instructs. As ingenious as Kaufman's

[82] Kennedy, *Modern Introduction*, pp. 229, 230, 231, 238.

[83] Kennedy, Philip, *Twentieth-Century Theologians: a new introduction to modern Christian thought*, London, I.  B.  Tauris, 2010, pp. viii, 11-12, 96 (quoting Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 122 [though Kennedy's note says 'p. 322']).

[84] Kennedy, *Twentieth-Century Theologians*, pp. 201-3, 291.

[85] Kennedy, *Twentieth-Century Theologians*, pp.110-12 (quoting Tillich, Paul, *Systematic Theology*, London, SCM, 1997. vol. 1, p. 235).

[86] Kennedy, *Twentieth-Century Theologians*, p. 211, 217 (quoting, Kaufman, *God the Problem*, Cambridge, Harvard University, 1972, p. 148).

works are, it will probably prove difficult for people to love, worship and take as the
ultimate focus of their lives, the abstract metaphor of Serendipitous Creativity.[87]

Cupitt, says Kennedy, is not an atheist, but has 'renounced . . . a Greek understanding of God
and a Platonic understanding of reality' with their respective implications of 'God as other and
beyond'.[88] 'Cupitt latterly thinks that God is a religious ideal and symbol . . . .For Cupitt . . . Life
is God . . . . To love life is to love God'.[89] Thus Cupitt is led to apophatic theology.[90]

There is commonality between these two works, in that both suggest that Christian theology,
including its concepts of God, are so culturally rooted in the past as to be unfit for purpose in
the twenty-first century. The earlier, *Modern Introduction*, is the more radical, more
castigating in its view of theology as held for the most part within the Christian Church. The
second is more accommodating, in terms of the search for alternative approaches. Both
encapsulate the twentieth and twenty-first century challenges to theology from modernity in
*academia* and in the popular mind. They portray the challenge to inherited concepts of God,
culturally conditioned in cosmological, philosophical, geographical and gender terms, and the
beginnings of some twentieth century solutions.

**2.14 Alister McGrath**

McGrath's *Christian Theology*, like Kennedy's work, is for entry theological study, summarising
the main theological categories over Christian history, and the debate between philosophy and
theology: the arguments for the existence of God, the apophatic and kataphatic approaches,
analogy, metaphor and accommodation.

When McGrath turns to wider theological movements, feminism, liberation theology, black
theology, postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy, brief hints are offered of alternative ways of
conceiving God: as female as well as male; as being on the side of the poor; as 'concerned for
the black struggle for liberation'; as emphasising once more 'the *particularity* of the Christian

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[87] Kennedy, *Twentieth-Century Theologians*, p. 221.
[88] Kennedy, *Twentieth-Century Theologians,* p. 272 (referring to Cupitt, D, *The Last Philosophy*,
London, SCM, 1995, p. 145).
[89] Kennedy, *Twentieth-Century Theologians*, p. 272 (quoting Cupitt, D, *About Us Only Sky: The
Religion of Ordinary Life*, Santa Rosa, Polebridge, 2008, p. 4); *Life, Life*, Santa Rosa, Polebridge,
2003; *The Way to Happiness*, Santa Rosa, Polebridge, 2005, pp. 2-3; *The New Religion in
Everyday Speech*, London, SCM, 1999; *Kingdom Come in Everyday Speech*, London, SCM, 2000;
and *Only Human*, London SCM, 1985, p. xi.
[90] Kennedy, *Twentieth-Century Theologians*, p. 281.

faith, in reaction against the strongly homogenizing tendencies of liberalism';[91] and as the subject of a self-confident Christianity, free of modern and postmodern secularisms.

McGrath tackles Moltmann's theory of a suffering God in reaction to wartime horrors. He progresses to the death of God, originated by Friedrich Nietzche, followed by Hamilton's 'experience of the absence of God'. Paul van Buren, on the basis that the word 'God' had ceased to have meaning, 'sought to ascertain how the gospel might be stated in purely atheological terms'; and Altizer suggested that, even if belief in God could not be retained, it was still possible to speak of God being Jesus in order to give authority to his words and deeds. Process theology, pioneered by Whitehead, found God in the processes of change in the universe, with his omnipotence redefined in terms of influence within the world process.[92]

So, McGrath describes some of the intellectual challenges for conceptualising God in the post-war period, and theological responses that have been made.  However he does not explicitly describe the decline in theism during this period, or propose any remedies that would prove persuasive in the world of ordinary believers

**2.15 Fergus Kerr**

Kerr's *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* contains biographies of ten twentieth century Roman Catholic theologians with varying degrees of conformity to Vatican norms,[93] two of whose work is relevant to this thesis, addressing the philosophical issues arising from conceptualising God.

Although 'there is no question of "a natural intuition of God as an original apanage of the human mind"', Henri-Marie de Lubac contends that, in contrast to Thomist natural theology with God as the conclusion of an argument, a preliminary and underlying idea of God, however tenuous, is necessary in order to develop one's thinking about God. He identifies the apophatic approach as a 'classical form of Thomism'; Kerr adds that 'The idea of God, which is not a concept, is a reality: "the very soul of the soul; a spiritual image of the Divinity, an *eikon*"'.[94] Through de Lubac, Kerr offers insight into the psychology of belief, highlighting the sequence of initial perception, concept formation and the development of language.

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[91] McGrath, Alister E, *Christian Theology: an Introduction,* Oxford, Blackwell, 4th edition, 2007, pp. 203-04, 92 ,93.
[92] McGrath, *Christian Theology*, pp. 211-16, 221-22.
[93] Kerr, Fergus, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2007, pp. vii-viii.
[94] Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, pp. 78-79 (quoting Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, London, DLT, 1960, pp. 42-44, 48, 50, 43).

With Rahner, God's 'absolute fullness of being' makes for incomprehensibility and mystery for human finitude. However, this produces true human perspective: being is 'bestowed . . . by the mystery', and 'essential human capacity for truth' is established by the mystery of transcendence.[95]

## 2.16  Jeff Astley

Astley's concern in *Ordinary Theology,* is 'to take seriously the beliefs of "non-theologically educated" churchgoers and other Christian believers, and of those outside the churches', to which, he says, insufficient attention has been given, even by practical theology. His expression, 'ordinary theology' ('informal theology' in this thesis), denotes the 'theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education'.[96]

Astley's work is fundamentally different from any other considered in this literature review, but is directly relevant to this thesis. Within the discipline of academic theology, it deals with informal theology, and stands at the interface between the two. It is a work *about* theology, however, more than about the *content* of ordinary theology. Astley outlines the ways and context in which religion and religious content are learned, and analyses the difference between knowing about God and knowing God.  He moves to ordinary theology, mentioning some deistic responses in a survey about God, some feminist tendencies and Don Cupitt's commending of 'democratic ordinariness'. He outlines some appropriate research and study methods for ordinary theology. Astley defends ordinary theology against charges that being 'Too Concrete and Anthropomorphic' in terms of images of God necessarily diminishes theology.[97]

Astley's *Exploring God-talk*[98] is wholly different, written not for academic study but as a study tool for individuals and groups who wish to take further their basic study of Christianity. Although an exercise in practical ordinary theology, it is not for ordinary believers, being couched in academic language and exploring concepts like metaphor, model, myth, analogy and mystery: this is a serious handbook with a pastoral slant. *Exploring Ordinary Theology,*[99] is

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[95] Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 100 (quoting Rahner, Karl, *Theological Investigations XIII*, 1975, pp. 229, 236, 238).
[96] Astley, Jeff, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, listening and learning in theology,* Farnham, Ashgate, 2002, pp. viii, 1, 56.
[97] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, pp. 29-33, 45-46, 50-51, 129-32.
[98] Astley, Jeff, *Exploring God-talk: Using Language in Religion*, London, DLT, 2004.
[99] Astley, Jeff and Francis, Leslie J., *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013.

an edited compilation, with Leslie Francis, of essays describing the experiences and language of ordinary believers. It includes three essays relating directly to the subject of the thesis, two by Astley, one general and one about the relationship between ordinary and academic theology, and one by Tania ap Siôn about the concepts of God implied on a cathedral prayer board (to be described later in the 'Informal Theology' chapter, where Astley's work will also be considered further).

## 2.17 Conclusion

Although it is not possible to draw hard lines between one and the other, Frei's distinction between 'an exercise chiefly *about* theology' and an exercise '*in* theology'[100] is useful in considering the works included in this literature review. Many of the writers discuss theology's response to changing philosophy and culture on the matter of conceptualising God or at least concepts of God. This includes Ford, McGrath, Baum and, with, his examination of responses to logical empiricism, Macquarrie. Gilkey's essay in Hodgson and King offers an historical account of concepts of God, and of current difficulties presented by the natural sciences and current theological thinking, although he does not deal with linguistic issues.

Concepts are relative to their contexts, both historical and geographical, as Gilkey suggests with respect to liberation theology.  Grenz and Olson, Kennedy and McGrath mention Moltmann's concept of a suffering God that emerged from wartime experience, offering a reminder that, if some concepts of God 'fail' with the passage of time or changes in human experience, then difficulties in actually *conceiving* are likely to arise, although other concepts, like that of a suffering God, may thrive. Robinson, in *Honest to God*, seems to acknowledge this, with the popularity of his book indicating its contextual relevance. Concepts are inescapable in a consideration of conceiving of God with informal concepts as important as credal, ontological statements.

The literature under review, even the most academic writing, is addressing that fundamental issue of human nature, how to speak of God, who by definition is beyond human definition, description or even comprehension.  Some post-1945 theologians have moved in an apophatic direction, almost to the post of atheism. It may be a similar, more instinctive, conclusion that has led sections of humanity generally not to bother trying to speak of God.  General awareness of 'image' and 'symbol' as characteristics of language – and essential to theological language – may have been partially lost, even though other visual images and 'icons' figure prominently in daily life, particularly in advertising. The theologians whose work has been

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[100] Frei , *Types of Christian Theology*, p. 1.

included in this literature review have responded in different degrees to this academic and pastoral challenge, particularly Macquarrie to philosophical trends. Rieger has described theology based on experience, and communicating with excluded and less educated sections of society.

Although Darren Marks and his contributors[101] respond to social events and issues, and David Fergusson[102] to issues of belief, unbelief and disbelief, their work has not been included, since they do not constitute surveys of theology.

Astley's work is included as most directly relevant to the subject of this thesis, especially when he deals with the conceptualisation of God by 'ordinary' people doing their ordinary theology. However, Astley largely does not examine the *content* of informal theology or examine in detail the relationship between difficulties in conceptualising God on the part of academic theologians and ordinary believers.  So there is no evidence that the topic of this thesis has already been explored in the way that is now envisaged – either by Astley or by any other writer who has been surveyed. It is therefore hoped that this present thesis will make an original contribution to this field of investigation.

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[101] Marks, Darren C, ed., *Shaping a Global Theological Mind*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008.
[102] Fergusson, David, *Faith and Its Critics: A Conversation*, Oxford, OUP, 2009.

# Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Introduction

This methodological description will set out:

- the approach to historical theology;
- practical theology and the empirical research study:
  - gathering sociological evidence;
  - considering writings about 'informal theology';
  - the questionnaires and interviews ; and
  - the models of quantitative and qualitative research being used; and
- intentions by way of conclusions.

## 3.2 The approach to historical theology

A major part of this thesis consists of historical theology, which, although limited to UK Anglican theology, includes references to other theologians whom this research has found to be influential to UK Anglican theology, including Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, Tillich, Hick and Rahner. Popular theology is, in view of the immensity of this field, limited to that emanating from theologians of more or less liberal tendency, more conservative popular theology generally not addressing the basic conceiving of God.

For Colin Gunton, historical theology is: 'that discipline whose task is to expound the course of Christian theology through time, within its different historical and cultural contexts', with two assumptions:

> that there is no such thing as pure objectivity, but that all interpretation involves some kind of provisional judgement that arises from the personal involvement of the scholar in the subject matter [and that] our doctrinal past is best understood if its representatives are taken seriously as living voices with whom we enter into theological conversation.[1]

He notes the inter-relatedness of systematic theology, asking, with relevance for this thesis, 'whether the formation of Christian theology in the early days with the assistance of concepts borrowed from Greek philosophy is helpful or harmful as we attempt to articulate Christian theology systematically today'.[2] This is consistent with McGrath's observations that: 'Christianity often unconsciously absorbs ideas and values from its cultural backdrop'; that 'there is a *provisional* or *conditional* element to Christian theology, which is not necessitated by or implied in its foundational resources'; and that 'certain ideas which have often been regarded as Christian ideas may turn out to be ideas imported

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[1] Gunton, Colin, 'Historical and systematic theology', Gunton Colin E., ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, Cambridge, CUP, 1997, pp. 5-6.
[2] Gunton, 'Historical and systematic theology', p. 3.

from a secular context'.[3] Context is important for this thesis, in terms of the changing British cultural assumptions that underlie the development of UK Anglican theology from 1945 to the present.

Grace Davie, among others, describes how UK church attendance has declined significantly and progressively since 1945, as has underlying Christian belief, though less dramatically.[4] These shifting cultural factors have lent impetus to theological writing and the search for Christian restatement for a post-modernist age of conscious and unconscious deconstruction and scepticism in some academic and popular thinking. Note has been taken of the responses of academic theologians in this respect, as they have taken a more provisional and contextual approach than was shown in past times.

### 3.3 Practical theology

The term 'practical theology' in this thesis includes not only the features outlined below but also the researcher's exercise in empirical research. It is distinguished in this thesis from pastoral theology, the latter being identified here not as a branch of practical theology but as theology written with particular pastoral intent.

James Woodward and Stephen Pattison explain that, in the German Protestant tradition, where, they say, the term 'practical theology' originated in the late eighteenth century, this branch of theology extended beyond matters of pastoral care 'to specialist interest in worship, preaching, Christian education and church government', with the purpose of 'apply[ing] theological principles to these activities'. So practical theology is 'concerned with how theological activity can inform and be informed by practical action in the interests of making an appropriate, effective Christian response in the modern world'. 'Practical theology' thus 'impl[ies] a more mutual, dialogical process (with, for example, mission and evangelism) than the simple application of theological truths and conclusions in practice'.[5]

Pattison and Gordon Lynch settle for five characteristics of practical theology:

> (1) reflection upon lived contemporary experience;
> (2) adoption of an interdisciplinary approach;
> (3) critical dialogue between theological norms and contemporary experience;
> (4) preference for liberal or radical models of theology;

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[3] McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p.108.
[4] Davie, Grace, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994, pp. 45-56, 105-8, 112-114; 'Social Surveys' Appendix.
[5] Woodward, James and Pattison, Stephen, eds., *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, pp. 2, 3.

(5) need for theoretical and practical, transformation [presumably individual, ecclesiastical and societal].[6]

A summary of the authors' exploration of each, and a comment in terms of this thesis follow.

- (1) implies the theologian's own experience or others' experience (gained from empirical research or reading). This present thesis arose from the researcher's perception of some attitudes in the Christian community and will be shaped by research within that community.

- (2) implies the use of human sciences like psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science and cultural studies. This thesis uses informal sociological survey methods.

- (3) implies a 'deductive, applicationist approach', with data used inductively and directly to inform theology, and with interaction and mutual affect between experience and traditional theology. This thesis explores relationships between academic, popular and informal theology over the period in question.

- (4) generally implies a greater emphasis on certain forms of theology. This thesis explores whether more liberal or radical forms of theology offer respite for any who have difficulty in conceiving God.

- (5) implies an expectation of a positive effect. This thesis provides useful insights for the Church of England's pastoral and liturgical practice.

In summary, all of Pattison and Lynch's characteristics of practical theology are reflected in this thesis.

Similarly, the thesis reflects the principles included in John Swinton and Harriet Mowat's definition of practical theology as:

> dedicated to enabling the faithful performance of the gospel and to exploring and taking seriously the complex dynamics of the human encounter with God. . . . [It] takes seriously the idea of performing the faith and seeks to explore the nature and in particular the faithfulness of that performance.[7]

Swinton and Mowat distinguish practical theology from applied theology on the basis of practical theology's role in challenging the Christian community's practices to ensure they 'remain faithful to the "script" of revelation'.[8] This is intriguing, since the challenge might have been to ensure faithfulness to

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[6] Pattison and Lynch, 'Pastoral and Practical Theology', p. 410.
[7] Swinton, John and Mowat, Harriet, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, London, SCM, 2006, p. 4.
[8] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 6.

human experience: the conundrum is not explicitly resolved, but is soluble, though at risk of some circularity, by interpreting 'the "script" of revelation' as referring to revelation as interpreted in the light of human experience. Interaction between revealed theology and human experience occurs in this thesis, as a balance is struck between experiences of conceptualising God over two thousand years and of conceptualising God over the last mere seventy years.

Woodward and Pattison write that the work of practical theology is 'to help generate concepts, norm, and actions that will be of practical utility and make a difference . . . help[ing] to direct and shape the concrete service of the Christian community in the world'. The authors' description of the way theology had to adjust to the horrors of the Holocaust, for example with Moltmann's idea of the 'crucified God', finds echoes in this thesis.  They advocate flexibility, interdisciplinary learning and skill in 'selecting and interpreting evidence from many sources', including historical and textual methods, empirical surveys and questionnaires 'to establish the nature of contemporary beliefs and behavior [sic]'; with reflection and articulation; and  a process of induction, to complement deduction, so that principles or general truths are formulated on the basis of observations.[9]

a. Sociological evidence

The first stage of practical theology in this thesis was examining sociological evidence of the background to the demise of much traditional Christian belief during the period in question. This includes academic sociological and historical writings, together with direct source material from opinion polls, surveys and statistical data.  Although most does not relate to detailed beliefs, reference has been made to overall trends.

b.  Informal theology

The second stage was to survey writings about, and examples of, informal theology, with a chapter devoted to this topic.

c. Questionnaires and interviews

Astley stresses the validity of ordinary theology, and the opportunities presented by research interviews and questionnaires, provided that they are accompanied by self-reflection and genuine listening on the part of the researcher.[10] The interview and analysis process followed

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[9] Woodward and Pattison, *Blackwell Reader*, pp. 7-10.
[10] Astley, Jeff, 'The Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology', p. 4.

the principles established beforehand and listed in **Appendix 2**, and corresponds with the process of questionnaire and interview briefly described by Pete Ward.[11]

A process of questionnaires and interviews has been followed with a sample of thirty-two Church of England attenders. The limitation of restriction to Winchester was recognized, with Winchester not socially typical of Britain, containing no large areas of multiple deprivation, despite areas of partial social housing, and little ethnic diversity.[12] The relatively high average level of education and above-average average age within the largely self-selected sample lent strength to the survey approach, in that participants quickly grasped the purpose of the research, mostly had significant experience to draw on and were confident in expressing their views. As far as possible, objectivity by the researcher characterised the questionnaire and interview process and the recording and evaluation stages. To this end, the work of Riet Bons-Storm[13], Ian Fraser[14] and Ellen Clark-King[15] offered helpful pointers. The questions included in the questionnaires and interviews were drawn from the historical and informal theology surveys.

To some extent, the selection of those, all lay-people, interviewed was determined by which clergy indicated willingness to participate and by which individuals within the church communities agreed to be interviewed.  A few participants were recommended to offer themselves by others who had taken part. The sample included participants from churches of different traditions of 'churchmanship' and from churches in socially different parts of Winchester.  Although comparative data was obtained from Winchester City Council about indices of affluence and deprivation, it did not prove possible to relate them usefully to participants' residences or their church's parishes, given the considerable fluidity over church attendance in Winchester.

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[11] Fiddes, Paul S., 'Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?', Ward, Pete, ed., *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans, 2012, p. 22.

[12] Winchester City Council, http://www.winchester.gov.uk/data/economic-social-data/index-multiple-deprivation-2010/, and 'Around 92% of Winchester's population is 'White British' (approximately 10% higher than England & Wales average)', http://www.winchester.gov.uk/data/census/census-2011/ethnicity-amp-religion/ both downloaded, 11.04.2014.

[13] Bons-Storm, Riet, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women's Silences in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1996.

[14] Fraser, Ian M., *Reinventing Theology as the People's Work*, Glasgow, Wild Goose, 1980, revised 1988.

[15] Clark-King, *Theology by Heart: Women, the Church and God*, Peterborough, Epworth, 2004, pp. 5, 7, 9, 10.

Participants were offered individual or group interviews, although all opted for individual interviews. The questionnaire and the topics for interview are in **Appendices 3 and 4**. The process with each participant consisted of:

i.      a questionnaire, to provide some quantitative data and to help participants focus on the issues;

ii.      a semi-structured interview. This featured:

         opening with an introduction about the process, and an early reference to a point of interest within the questionnaire responses;

         the researcher ensuring that, in the course of the dialogue, most of the of the planned points were covered;

         opportunity for participants to tell their stories of faith (after the pattern of Bons-Storm[16]), with prompting to ensure they included their history of meaningful and non-meaningful concepts of God, and ease and difficulty in conceiving of God; and

         principles adapted from a set enunciated by Fraser as:[17]

- never to transpose the burning concerns of people into some alien sphere of thought;

- never to rob people of their own language in favour of an in-language which does not communicate with them where they are; and

- always to take seriously the complexity of situations.

d.  Quantitive and qualitative analysis

The questionnaires lent themselves to quantitative analysis, with tabulation of personal data and responses to questions. Little correlation between personal factors and responses was discernible, but interesting trends emerged, as described in the 'Questionnaires and Interviews' chapter. Although judgement was needed in grouping unexpected answers for statistical purposes, scope for undue subjectivism on the part of the researcher was much less with quantitative than with qualitative analysis.

Stressing the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research and the variety of approaches to qualitative research, Swinton and Mowat write:

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[16] Bons-Storm, *Incredible Woman*, pp. 36-45,
[17] Fraser, *Reinventing Theology*, p.68.

> Qualitative research . . . assumes that human beings are by definition 'interpretive creatures'; that the ways in which we make sense of the world and our experiences within it involve a constant process of interpretation and meaning-seeking . . . with 'the world' . . . the locus of complex interpretive processes within which human beings struggle to make sense of their experiences including their experiences of God. Identifying and developing understandings of these meanings is the primary task of qualitative research.[18]

Narrative is a key aspect of qualitative research, and 'narrative knowledge . . . legitimate, rigorous and valid'. However, though narrative-based, qualitative research must be 'careful and rigorous'. It will include knowledge of the other, knowledge of phenomena and reflexive knowing. All three kinds of knowledge have been applied in the course of the practical theology for this thesis. The experiences, narratives and actual believing and disbelieving of British residents will be 'knowledge of others', and have been discovered from sociological writings, opinion polls and, most important, questionnaires and interviews. Knowledge of phenomena was discovered tangentially, as common patterns of believing in God emerged from reactions to particular events, like those involving suffering. Reflexivity involved awareness of the assumptions that the interviewer risked bringing to the process, and is: 'the process of critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher throughout the research process that enables [him] to monitor and respond to [his] contributions to the proceedings'.[19]

It has been important to hold in mind what Swinton and Mowat, following Lincoln and Guba, call 'constructivism'[20] – that is, recognising that truth, knowledge and perception are constructed by human beings and their communities, that 'reality' is open to a variety of valid interpretations and 'can never be accessed in a pure, uninterpreted form'. This researcher has therefore been mindful 'that the researcher will be involved in the research process not as a distant observer, but as an active participant and co-creator of the interpretive experience,' and that 'within the constructivist paradigm the boundaries between the researcher and the subject of the research process are blurred and interconnected'. The remedy in this research analysis has therefore been constant self-awareness, or 'personal reflexivity' and sensitivity to people and situations, particularly through interviews and qualitative analysis.[21]

The researcher was not aware of interviewees being over-accommodating in accepting the researcher's interpretation of their informal theology, as Astley suggests might occur, and tried

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[18] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, pp. 44, 29-30.

[19] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, pp. 38, 31, 33-34, 59.

[20] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 35, following Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G., *Naturalistic Enquiry*, London, Sage, 1985; similarly, Clark-King, *Theology by Heart*, p. 5.

[21] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, pp. 35, 59-66.

to ensure that no view remained unrecorded, whether or not particular informal theology was 'faithful to Christian norms'.[22]

A model of research process for this thesis was provided by Swinton and Mowat's own example, and included:

- questionnaires relating to basic understanding of God;

- a series of in-depth interviews, recorded and transcribed;

- the researcher immersing himself in the texts, themes beginning to emerge and themes being collected;

- thematic analysis of each transcript;

- data being collated and final reflection and writing started, the texts being compared and contrasted in a search for patterns; and

- drafting and rewriting the text.[23]

Swinton and Mowat refer to a need for 'theoretical sensitivity', a term drawn from B. G. Glaser, referring to:

> a personal quality of the researcher.  It indicates an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data. . . . [It] refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn't.[24]

Despite this advocacy of sensitivity, however, it has been important for the researcher to maintain proper objectivity,[25] even in the analysis of data.  The researcher has tried to avoid over-generalisation, as considered by Swinton and Mowat, particularly in the light of the relatively small size of the sample of interviewees and the limited context of one small, southern city. So the results can be treated as a useful 'snapshot', pointers to an understanding of how some ordinary believers may be viewing God: they are not the result of a truly scientific survey. Yet research only has purpose in general application, and indeed the very nature of practical theology would suggest that the thesis should have the potential for some practical impact and usefulness. The keys to resolving this dilemma and to testing for transferability are, for Swinton and Mowat, '*identification* and *resonance*'.[26] It will be for others, if

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[22] Astley, 'Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology', pp. 6-7.
[23] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, pp. 117-19.
[24] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 57 (quoting Strauss, A. and Corbin, J., *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, Newbury Park, Sage, 1990, p. 42, referring to Glaser, B.G., *Theoretical Sensitivity*, Mill Valley, Sociology, 1978).
[25] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 61.
[26] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 46-47.

so minded, to establish whether other people in the same context and other contexts can *identify* with the findings of the research and find *resonance* with its conclusions.

## 3.4 Intentions by way of conclusions

The thesis brings together research conducted according to the methodologies of historical theology and practical theology, analogous to 'pure' and 'applied' mathematics, and compares them for validity in terms of each other. The drawing of conclusions has been more cerebral, with importance attached to retaining as much objectivity as possible and avoiding projection of presumed conclusions.  The intentions have been:

- to produce some conclusions about the extent to which the understanding and expectations, positive and negative, (including logical and philosophical difficulties) described by academic theologians match the actual, informal theology of ordinary believers, and vice versa; and

- to highlight some areas of theology and pastoral practice where there are practical implications for the Church of England.

# HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

In this section, post-1945 UK Anglican theologians are explored thematically.  The fundamental need for **Analogy** in relation to God's nature and relationships with the world leads into a consideration of God's **Immanence** and thus into issues raised by **Process Theology and the Passibility of God**.  **Cultural Relativism's** effects within theology include **Feminist Theology**, and it has contributed to **Liberal Theology Landmarks since 1960**. Alongside this, efforts to **Reclaim Tradition** and in **Pastoral Theology** have been to meet the needs of the Church and its members.

## Chapter 4: ANALOGY

### 4.1. Language about God

Language, the basis of theology, is indispensable in our conceiving of God. Yet Ayer's

verification principle, in his logical positivist *Language, Truth and Logic*[1] (just preceding the

period of this thesis), casts doubt on the meaningfulness of metaphysicical and theological

language. However, Wittgenstein's emphasis on 'language games'[2] allows religious language to

acquire linguistic respectability within the religious language game. Gerald Loughlin implies a

language-game in the Christian community: what is important is 'learning a language,

assimilating a culture, entering a textual world'.[3] He characterises the issue as:

> turn[ing] on where theology stands to view the world:  outside or inside the religious
> text or semiotic system.  Is the signification of 'God' determined by the reality to which
> it refers or the experience it symbolises, or does its meaning depend upon how it is
> used, and thus how it helps to shape the experience of people within the Church?
> Does its meaning depend upon something outside the Christian system (extratextual),
> or upon the system itself (intratextual)?[4]

Lindbeck answers that the way to determine what 'God' signifies:

> is by examining how the word operates within a religion and thereby shapes reality
> and experience rather than by first establishing its propositional or experiential
> meaning and reinterpreting or reformulating its uses accordingly.[5]

D. Z. Phillips questions whether the same criterion of rationality applies both within and

without religion: 'the reality of God cannot be assessed by a common measure which also

applies to things other than God'. Asserting that God is no thing is, he argues, not the same as

asserting that God is nothing; and enquiring about the beginning and end of God's existence is

'ungrammatical', nonsensical.[6] William Alston wonders if 'a certain nonstatemental way of

understanding the content of religious beliefs' lies behind D.Z. Phillips's position, such that

assertions ostensibly about 'a reality that transcends the natural world' are in fact 'expressing

attitudes towards the world of nature and human life', and are, particularly in worship,

expressive of worship of God rather than 'referring expressions' about 'some object called

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[1] Ayer, A.J., *Language, Truth and Logic*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1936.

[2] Wittgenstein, Ludwig,  *Philosophical Investigations*, London, Blackwell, 1953.

[3] Loughlin Gerald, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology*, Cambridge, CUP, 1996, p. 94.

[4] Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, p. 39.

[5] Lindbeck, George A., *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, London, SPCK, 1984, p. 114.

[6] Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, pp. 93-94 (quoting Phillips, D. Z., 'Religious Beliefs and Language Games', *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 85).

God'.[7]  However, Alston concedes a half-way position, with just some theological vocabulary dependent upon participation in Christian community understanding, such as 'grace', 'love', 'spiritual' and 'glory', with *wider* concepts, such as truth and existence,  being more fundamental and drawing on language also used in a non-theological sense.[8] Either way, for Loughlin, coming to belief in God is not so much a matter of reasoning, as 'learning a language, assimilating a culture, entering a textual world. . . . Criteria of rationality, intelligibility and meaningfulness are not universal'.[9]

Alston considers removing from language about God human elements that conflict with God's immateriality or atemporality, thus arriving at a position of partial univocity. An example is allowing an attribution to God of psychological 'willing', while removing the temporal human stages of decision-making and action.  Alston's partial univocity relies on 'metaphorical, symbolic, model-dependent' language to deal with what remains after the univocal core has been identified, with metaphor, or model, a phenomenon between univocity and the pure *via negativa*. However, his construing some statements about God (such as 'God comforted me in my distress') as more about the human effect than the divine origin, as he tries to salvage some assertions about God as literal rather than metaphorical, is more questionable, since it is difficult to see how the literalness applies to God.[10]

William Alston points out that Jesus made unselfconscious, metaphorical use of the term 'Father', rather than engaging in prayer to an abstract 'source of the being of everything other than himself'.[11] Janet Martin Soskice insists on the indispensability of metaphor and the Christian inability to translate concepts of God into 'supposedly imageless speech'.[12]

Basil Mitchell, 'a professional philosopher who is a Christian',[13] consciously writing in the wake of logical positivism, observes that some non-sense is profound, and wishes to move from pure

[7] Alston, William P., 'Religious Language', *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford, OUP, 2005, p. 226.
[8] Alston, 'Religious Language', pp. 226-27.
[9] Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, pp. 94-95.
[10] Alston, 'Religious Language', pp. 234-40, 242.
[11] Alston, 'Religious Language', p. 242.
[12] Soskice, Janet Martin, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1985, pp. 67-71.
[13] O'Donovan, Oliver, 'The Reasonable Man: An Appreciation', Abraham, William J. and Holtzer, Steven W., eds., *The Rationality of Religious Belief: Essays in honour of Basil Mitchell*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1987, pp. 2-3; and Hebblethwaite, Brian, 'Basil Mitchell: Anglican Philosopher', *Theology*, Vol. CXII, July/August 2009, p. 266.

logical positivism to a more useful linguistic analysis of theological statements,[14] in defence of traditional theism. Considering whether the grace of God is an active force in the world or an expression of human attitude or praise, he explores the attribution of activity to God; he concludes that a psychologist or a sociologist would not detect the presence of divine activity, but would provide *alternative* descriptions to theological descriptions of what a believer might describe as the effect of God's grace in the world.[15] As in the 1981 Doctrine Commission report,[16] he agrees that predicates applied to God, such as 'father', 'loving' and 'wise', are analogical. However, as much of the original, non-analogical, meaning as possible should be allowed to stand, so far as is compatible with other descriptors that are thought to apply. Thus, for example: 'That God is incorporeal dictates that "father" does not mean "physical progenitor", but the word continues to bear the connotation of tender, protective care'; and God's wisdom 'does not . . . have to be learned, since he is omniscient and eternal'.[17] Brian Hebblethwaite comments: 'Mitchell brings out both the experiential source of Christian talk of God's grace, and also the analogical nature of the language used to speak of it'.[18]

After considering the concepts of analogy and metaphor, this chapter will turn to those post-1945 UK Anglican theologians who have offered the most sustained contributions on them.

## 4.2 Analogy and Metaphor

Strictly speaking, 'analogy' refers to the relationship between the two subjects being compared, and 'metaphor' to the figure of speech itself. 'Analogy' is 'a form of reasoning in which a similarity between two or more things is inferred from a known similarity between them in other respects';[19] or, in theological usage:

> the relationship between two or more different uses of a word such that the use is neither equivocal (the meanings on each occasion are utterly diverse and unrelated) nor univocal (the meanings are the same).[20]

However, for most purposes, 'metaphor' and 'analogy' have come to have similar meaning, and are generally used interchangeably within this thesis. Gunton, Thiselton and Donald

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[14] Mitchell, Basil, ed., *Faith and Logic: Oxford Essays in Philosophical Theology*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1957, pp. 3-7.
[15] Mitchell, Basil, *The Justification of Religious Belief*, London, Macmillan, 1973, pp. 16-18; Mitchell, *Faith and Logic*, pp. 153-56, 173-74.
[16] Mitchell, Basil, 'I Believe: We Believe', *Believing in the Church: the Corporate Nature of Faith: A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England*, London, SPCK, 1981, p. 19.
[17] Mitchell, *Justification of Religious Belief*, p. 19.
[18] Hebblethwaite, 'Basil Mitchell', p. 263.
[19] Hanks, Patrick, ed., *The Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, London, Collins, 1986, p. 52.
[20] Ford, David, ed., *Modern Theologians*, p. 763.

MacKinnon are happy with interchangeability, although Soskice and Sue Patterson are ranged against it.

Thiselton describes metaphor as, as 'provok[ing] the hearer into some kind of reaction' and into seeing something in a new light,[21] and Dan Stiver as 'exemplif[ying] something like Gilbert Ryle's "category mistake" . . . at one level in order to establish meaning at another'.[22] Gunton cites Nelson Goodman's delightful 'teaching an old word new tricks' and 'an affair between a predicate with a past and an object that yields while protesting';[23] and Anthony Kenny emphasizes the 'irrational', though expressive, nature of much metaphor:

> Metaphor . . . is . . . taking a word which has a role in one language-game and moving it to another. The predicates which we apply to God – predicates, for instance, concerning knowledge and love – are taken from other language-games, and used in the absence of the criteria which give them their meanings in the language-games in which they have their home.[24]

Soskice's starting-point is Aristotle's simple explanation as the 'transferred use of a term that properly belongs to something else', with metaphor not always replaceable by literal statement, but a linguistic figure of speech that 'can be extended . . . until the length of our speaking of one thing in terms suggestive of another makes us forget the "thing" of which we speak'.[25] A metaphor (such as 'leaf of the book' or 'flow of electricity') becomes dead when it has ceased through usage to have metaphorical connotations with the source of the metaphor.[26]

Over-extension of divine metaphors can be detrimental to overall understanding of God, as sometimes with theories of the Atonement (for instance, with redemption, being over-extended by the notion of compensating a present owner) or, for Stiver, with God as father being taken to imply masculinity.[27] Thiselton writes similarly of the risk of imbalance, or preoccupation with a single metaphor, for instance 'that God is a stern father; that the Church is . . . mother'. This highlights the risk of 'forget[ting] that it *is* metaphor [and being] seduced

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[21] Thiselton, Antony C., *Language Liturgy and Meaning*, Nottingham, Grove Books, 1986, p. 26.
[22] Stiver, Dan, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996, p. 118.
[23] Gunton, Colin E., *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1988, p. 28 (quoting Goodman, Nelson, *Language of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Oxford, OUP, 1969).
[24] Kenny, Anthony, *The Unknown God*, London, Continuum, 2005, pp. 16-17.
[25] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, pp. 6-9, 15-23.
[26] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, pp. 71, 83.
[27] Stiver, *Philosophy of Religious Language*, p. 118.

into speaking nonsense'.[28] Soskice's preference is for 'incremental theories' of metaphor (such that additional meaning is added) rather than 'substitution theories' (such that the matter could be expressed otherwise equally effectively) or 'emotive theories' (such that the only addition is emotional). Relevant factors include the speaker's intention, the hearer's reception, the context, the mutual beliefs of speaker and hearer and the patterns of inference the hearer employs.[29]

For Wright, metaphors: are '*more* basic within human consciousness than apparently "factual" speech'; 'invit[e] the hearers into a world where certain things can be seen more clearly through this lens'; and enable true words to be spoken in relation to God, 'a reality which cannot be reduced to terms of the metaphor itself'.[30] Patterson requires a 'correspondence between proposition and reality', and, viewing analogy-making as a secondary language-game based on a primary one which provides the subject matter with worldly reference, proposes that a secondary language-game directed at God itself becomes the primary one when the world's total dependency on God is appreciated. It can only be from a position of realist faith, rather than from analysis of the use of language, that 'within Christianity predications of something to God must assume ontological primacy over predications of the same thing to a creature or aspect of the world'. [31] Her priority of faith over reason is akin to a Christian language game.

Soskice's distinction between analogy and metaphor, roughly followed by Kenny,[32] enables her to argue, with Aquinas, that saying God is one, wise or good is analogical as a form of literal speech, not enlarging the description; whereas saying God is heavy or sweet or happy is metaphorical, 'generat[ing] new perspectives'.[33] For Alston, also writing from a Thomist perspective, even 'pure perfection terms' like 'goodness', which seem to be applicable to human beings and God alike, cannot be so applied because their modes of application are different, remaining inadequate in describing God, but being used literally, he says, of both humans and God.[34] However, the legitimacy of all these distinctions is uncertain, since analogy, particularly in the case of God, does enable the speaker and hearer to gain understanding that

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[28] Thiselton, *Language Liturgy and Meaning*, p. 25.

[29] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, pp. 31, 44.

[30] Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 40 and 61-80, and Wright, Tom, *Simply Christian*, London, SPCK, 2006, pp. 129-30, 135, 164-68.

[31] Patterson, Sue, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, Cambridge, CUP, 1999, p. 97-98.

[32] Kenny, *Unknown God*, pp. 38-39.

[33] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, pp. 65-66.

[34] Alston, 'Religious Language', p. 242.

would not otherwise be available – it is not tautological to say that God is one, wise or good. However, the limitations of all language for God are reiterated by Julian Hartt:

> The philosophical theologian is not licensed to cruise the world hoping to bag similitudes of Deity. God is truly not like anything we know and of ourselves. . . . The proper ontological categories . . . rightly used provide an <u>orientation</u> upon Deity rather than a <u>description</u> of the divine nature.[35]

Despite the arguments of those who separate analogy and metaphor, for practical purposes there is little between them. What these writers have reinforced is the essential and effective nature of both.

### 4.3 Analogy and images for Austin Farrer, Eric Mascall, and Donald Mackinnon

Mascall's intention is 'to vindicate, against the generally positivist attitude of Anglo-Saxon philosophy . . . , a fundamentally and unashamedly metaphysical approach to theism'. He does not use the term 'language game', but the key to understanding theistic language is 'to enter into the linguistic community of those who affirm [God's existence and nature]'.[36] Understanding comes by 'get[ting to know God better . . . as a matter of personal experience'[37] – in other words, by faith backed by analogy. Farrer and Mascall are both committed to Thomist-inspired analogy, vital and inescapable, even for those Farrer describes as 'revelationists', since God 'shares no identical characteristic with anything else', and so anything said about the transcendent God has of necessity to be said in words that apply literally only to the finite world.[38] Mascall invokes Aquinas, 'with God's fundamental attribute . . . of self-subsistent being', and 'his existence . . . identical with his essence'. He distinguishes Anselm's '*cogitari*' ('be thought') in '*aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest*' from 'be imagined' or 'be visualised', stressing that, although we cannot imagine God, we can conceive God: 'We know *that* God is rather than *what* he is'. And God 'is not merely the *ens maximum*, the greatest being that exists, but the *maxime ens*, that which completely *is*'. For Mascall, the loss of a referent through emphasis on the supra-temporal, eternal nature of God's existence

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[35] Hartt, Julian, 'Austin Farrer as Philosophical Theologian: A Retrospective and Appreciation', Eaton, Jeffrey C, and Loades, Ann, eds., *For God and Clarity: New Essays in Honor of Austin Farrer*, Allison Park, Pickwick, 1983, p. 17.

[36] Mascall, E.L., *The Openness of Being: Natural Theology Today*, London, DLT, 1971, pp. vii (cf. p.14), 32.

[37] Mascall, E.L.. *Word and Images: A study in Theological Discourse*, London, DLT, 1957, Libra Edition 1968*, pp. 78-80, 83.

[38] Farrer, Austin, *Finite and Infinite: A Philosophical Essay*, Westminster, Dacre, 1943, second edition 1959, pp. 1-2, 7; Farrer, Austin, *Reflective Faith*: Essays in Philosophical Theology, London, SPCK, 1972, p. 65; 'revelationists' probably referring to Barthian and Neo-orthodox theologians.

makes the concept of analogy difficult,[39] although analogy remains the solution to the problem of how 'to speak about the ineffable and to describe the indescribable',[40] since 'our attitude is confidently realist'.[41] Rebutting Robinson's contentions in *Honest to God*, Mascall stresses that '*any* mental picture of God may be a hindrance if it is taken univocally in its unqualified sense . . .'.[42] Analogy, he concludes, satisfactory for describing the relation between God and the world, has to be a combination of analogy of proportionality (when a term applies to both, but in ways proportional to their natures) and analogy of attribution (when a term applies literally to one, but by association with the other).[43]

Analogy for Farrer is at play even when he asserts that 'it is only through, in, and as creative activity that the infinite can be grasped by the finite'.[44] God's activity is, for Farrer, of a Thomist double-agency nature, as God acts both to create the world and also acts through finite events, including human activity.[45] However, just as the analogies of activity and will cannot be checked with the referent, so with God as personal:

> We find ourselves withheld from thinking of God as 'a Person' *simpliciter*; we have to think of Him as a somewhat in a certain not exactly defined relation to personality. Of course we may if we like say 'God is a Superperson *simpliciter*; but that is merely to cover the mental hiatus with verbal plaster'.[46]

God, Farrer asserts, must be *at least* personal, although, as with other divine attributes, this can only be verified on the basis of individual or collective understanding and experience of God: 'in the case of supernatural divine revelation, nothing but the image is given us to act as an indication of the reality'.[47] It is indeed revelation, or inspiration, upon which Farrer fastens for a solution, even with the circularity entailed by uncertainty as to whether the inspiration is genuinely divine. Hick describes Farrer's position:

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[39] Mascall, E. L., *He Who Is*, London, DLT, 1943, Libra Edition, 1966, pp. 10-13, 99-100.
[40] Mascall, *Word and Images*, pp. 1, 101-103, 105-108; Mascall, E.L., *Existence and Analogy: A Sequel to 'He Who Is'*, London, Longmans Green, 1949, chapter 5, pp. 92-121 (reproduced, Mascall, Eric L., 'The Doctrine of Analogy', *CC*, no. 4, summer 1951, pp. 38-57).
[41] Mascall, 'Doctrine of Analogy', pp. 40-41.
[42] Mascall, E.L., *The Secularisation of Christianity: An Analysis and a Critique*, London, DLT, 1965, Libra Edition, 1967, p. 117.
[43] Mascall, 'Doctrine of Analogy', p. 50.
[44] Farrer, *Finite and Infinite*, p. 26.
[45] Farrer, Austin, *Faith and Speculation: An Essay in Philosophical Theology*, Edinburgh, T&TC, 1988, pp. 52-67, especially p. 66; and Hebblethwaite, Brian, *The Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*, Leuven, Peeters, 2007, p.3.
[46] Farrer, *Finite and Infinite*, p. 28.
[47] Farrer, *Glass of Vision*, p. 58.

> When we look at the world with the perceptiveness of a poet, not imposing our cultural categories upon it but letting it affect us in its unique concrete particularity, our minds are led through the world by a rational path to its infinite creator and sustainer.[48]

Farrer speaks of 'a process of images which live as it were by their own life and impose themselves with authority',[49] even though no image can be final: 'When we proceed to live the promises [of God's grace] out, the images are crucified by the reality'.[50] Stephen Platten writes that Farrer's 'argument is always in the direction of remythologisation – images may need to be reborn, but certainly they are not dispensable . . .'. However, the question remains as to 'whether such images are directly God-given, as Farrer suggests, or rather whether they arise from man's analogical imagination'.[51]

Mascall's appreciation of analogy means that his language about God can be spiritual and 'poetical', as, for example, he writes about the inner life of God in Trinity. God is 'a personal Being of unimaginable splendour, bliss and love', for which 'we may well find the poets more helpful than the theologians'. Nevertheless, God is immanent as well as transcendent, because, if it were not for God's 'incessant creative action', every finite being 'would collapse into non-existence through sheer insufficiency'. Thus, for Mascall, transcendence alone can easily lapse into deism, and immanence alone into pantheism.[52]

With regard to 'poetic image', Farrer regrets a contemporary general lack of contemplation, and a reliance upon technical knowledge rather than a wondering appreciation that can lift minds to higher and more intense existence.[53] Platten and Edward Henderson are, however, concerned: that to 'allow such imagination to become the preserve of a religious élite would be to create a modern Gnosticism of a kind which was quite the opposite of Farrer's intention',[54] with a risk that the ability to know God might be seen as requiring 'some special

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[48] Hick, John, 'Foreword', Farrer, *Reflective Faith,* p. xiv.

[49] Farrer, *Glass of Vision*, p. 113.

[50] Henderson, Edward Hugh, 'The God who Undertakes Us', Hein, David and Henderson, Edward Hugh, eds., *Captured by the Crucified: The Practical Theology of Austin Farrer*', New York and London, T&TC, 2004, p. 68 (quoting Farrer, Austin, 'An English Appreciation', Bultmann, Rudolf and Five Critics, *Kerygma and Myth:* London, SPCK 1953 and New York, Harper, 1961, p. 122).

[51] Platten, Stephen, 'Diaphanous Thought: Spirituality and Theology in the Work of Austin Farrer', *ATR*, 69, no.1, January 1987, pp. 33-34, 45.

[52] Mascall, *He Who Is*, pp. 52-53, 126-132.

[53] Farrer, *Reflective Faith*, pp. 37-38.

[54] Platten, 'Diaphanous Thought', p. 44.

cognitive ability with which some are and some are not blessed'.[55] Insisting on the indispensability of metaphor, Gunton deplores assertions that 'meaning and truth are successfully conveyed only by means of concepts of an intellectual kind which have been purified as completely as possible from all imaginative or pictorial content'.[56]

For Mackinnon, *The Book of Common Prayer* exemplifies the limitations of images when it addresses God as 'high and mighty, king of kings, lord of lords', risking 'a levelling down of the transcendent to the form of a magnified, supra-human reality' after the model of a Henry VIII. He describes the difficulty of knowing how our experiential concepts relate to God's being, and the difficulty with the concept of God commanding – with the irony that God commanded that no images be created of God (even verbal images, we may infer), so that silence is the only appropriate response to God's (anthropomorphic) command.[57] However, MacKinnon commends analogy as a middle way between agnosticism and anthropomorphism, with anthropomorphism 'the worse offence against the metaphysical'.[58] As Paul Murray observes, 'theology must endure a discipline of silence even to the extent of it bordering on a "healthy agnosticism" at times'.[59] Silent in the face of the *'Deus absconditus'*, he recognises that even the notion of the hiddenness of God employs a metaphor, since God's hiddenness is not liable to discovery in the normal sense.[60] Metaphor 'is perfectly compatible with the allowance that such speech is intentionally referential',[61] although the problem of reference remains:

> Illusion it may prove in the end to be; but, if it does, it will prove itself so, because we seek by our sometimes deliberate, sometimes hardly noticed, verbal innovation to approach the frontiers of the ultimate, the unknown, though supposedly . . . not finally unknowable.[62]

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[55] Henderson, Edward Hugh, 'Valuing in Knowing God: An Interpretation of Austin Farrer's Religious Epistemology', *Modern Theology*, 1, no. 3, April 1985, p. 167.

[56] Gunton, *Actuality of* Atonement, p. 17.

[57] MacKinnon, Donald. M., *Themes in Theology: The Three-fold Cord: Essays in Philosophy, Politics and Theology*, Edinburgh, T&TC, 1987, pp. 12, 14, 17-18; originally broadcast 1974 and 1975, published as 'The Inexpressibility of God', *Theology*, vol. 79, July 1976, pp.200-206.

[58] MacKinnon, Donald M., *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays*, London, Lutterworth, 1968, p. 44.

[59] Murray, Paul D., 'Theology in the Borderlands: Donald MacKinnon and Contemporary Theology', *Modern Theology* vol. 14, no. 3, July 1998, p.368 (referring to MacKinnon, Donald M., *Borderlands of Theology*, p. 95, and *The Problem of Metaphysics*, London, CUP, 1974, p. 118).

[60] Chapter 5 of MacKinnon., *Themes in Theology*, pp. 69-70; originally *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, Spring 1984 (untraceable).

[61] MacKinnon, *Themes in Theology*, p. 75.

[62] MacKinnon, *Themes in Theology*, p. 75.

The *'summum analogatum'* for MacKinnon is 'the presence of God to his creation', 'the relation to eternity of the historical action' of *kenosis* and the Cross.[63] He is seeking a 'kind of awareness', in the way that an artist may portray a scene on the basis of analogy,[64] or, writes Sedgwick (with Farrer, concerned 'to develop a theology of transcendence which denied the force of the claims of logical positivism'), 'a metaphysics which would thrust against the limits of language'.[65]

MacKinnon's particular contribution to this thesis – including his influence on Williams and John Milbank – is his emphasis on the inadequacy even of analogy to come close to God. His final resort, therefore, is to silence and the hiddenness of God, alongside God's action in Christ.

### 4.4 Analogy for Radical Orthodoxy

Milbank summarises the basis of Radical Orthodoxy's approach to God thus: 'It is only Aquinas's agnosticism which really exemplifies the principle that there is no *ratio* [i.e., 'proportional relationship'] between finite and infinite, and upholds the ontological difference'.[66] God's transcendence cannot be prejudiced, and reciprocity in human relationships with God appears only by the Holy Spirit within the Christian revelation. But, once established, reciprocity leads to participation on an analogical basis, analogy originating in God and drawing the Christian community nearer to God's own knowing. 'Analogy leads us to participation in the life of God',[67] is Steven Shakespeare's summary.

Graham Ward expands upon analogies, described as 'webs of relation and differences'. As in reciprocity, 'we *receive* analogy', and are able to do so because 'we are ourselves analogical in being *made in the image of*' and because 'the process of discipleship is anagogical. The analogical relations and the anagogical process are themselves nothing other than the operations of the divine within creation.'[68] By this means, Catherine Pickstock adds, human knowledge is 'able to draw analogically towards God's manner of knowing'; God is not inscrutable, but 'super-abundantly knowing', so that 'we can know something . . . of God's

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[63] MacKinnon, Donald M., *Explorations in Theology 5*, London, SCM, 1979, p.67.
[64] MacKinnon, *Problem of Metaphysics*, pp. 162-163.
[65] Sedgwick, 'Anglican Theology', Ford, ed., *Modern Theologians*, pp. 181, 185.
[66] Milbank, John, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997, p. 9.
[67] Shakespeare, Steven, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction*, London, SPCK, 2007, p. 11.
[67] Oliver, Simon, 'Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: from participation to late modernity', Milbank, John and Oliver, Simon, eds., *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2009, p. 23.
[68] Ward, Graham, 'The Beauty of God', Milbank, John, Ward, Graham and Wyschogrod, Edith, *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty*, Harrisburg, Trinity, 2003, pp. 58-59.

knowing of Himself . . .[and] analogically predicate knowledge of God'. God, writes Pickstock, 'is pure Mind without remainder', 'a more spiritual kind of knower than human beings', but with knowledge 'more concrete than ours', because, with Aquinas, 'God's mind, although immaterial, is mysteriously commensurate with matter, since God creates matter' and therefore knows it.[69]

It seems that 'analogy' in Radical Orthodoxy is more than the 'analogy' that other theologians use as virtually a pseudonym for 'metaphor', but defines not only in adjectival terms with respect to the subject of metaphor, but also adjectivally of human beings themselves, in nominal terms of what human beings receive, and adverbially of how the process works. There is an air of mystery, and God's transcendence is well preserved. Key words for Radical Orthodoxy's approach to God are Aquinas's 'participation' and 'analogy', although the Thomist principle of analogy tends to be assumed more than discussed.

### 4.5 Existentialist analogy for John Macquarrie

Macquarrie recognises the non-literal, evocative and sometimes paradoxical nature of language about God,[70] with analogy-avoiding theological language being dismissed as 'mumbo-jumbo'.[71] He operates on two planes, existentialist philosophy and traditional Christian imagery and spirituality.

The notion of gracious Being enables God to be seen as both transcendent and immanent, and this, he writes, enables *analogia entis* 'neither to assimilate God to man nor yet to put an unbridgeable gulf between them'.[72] Affinity between God and goodness is implied in the analogy between the emotion that the conception of good evokes in us and the emotion that God evokes.[73] Although not literally true of God, 'good' is more appropriate than 'not good', and represents Being as the 'prior enabling condition of all goodness'. Divine and human relationships may be analogical, as with 'As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him'.[74] The analogues of king, judge and shepherd emphasize dependency, disclose Being not as Being is in itself but as Being relating to us, and emphasize theological statements' 'existential-ontological character'. Although all beings have the capacity to be

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[69] Pickstock, Catherine, 'Radical Orthodoxy and the Mediations of Time', Laurence Paul, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy? – A Catholic Enquiry*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, pp. 70 -72.
[70] Macquarrie, John, *The Faith of the People of God: A Lay Theology*, London, SCM, 1972.
[71] Macquarrie, John, *God-Talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology*, London, SCM, 1967, p. 214.
[72] Macquarrie, John, *Principles of Christian Theology*, London, SCM, 1966, revised 1977, p.138.
[73] Example of Thomist analogy by attribution.
[74] Psalm 103.13, example of Thomist analogy by proportionality.

symbols of Being, some symbols take on particular historical significance, such as the Cross, fatherhood, the suffering servant and even Christ himself.  As Macquarrie says, his symbolism is similar to traditional analogy, but with more stress on existential response and less on similarity. He rejects a totally univocal approach to symbolism, since such an approach would imply treating Being as a being, but is cautious of equivocality, since such symbolism would then offer no insight into Being. So there must be a balance, and sometimes an acceptance of paradox.[75] Even abstract attributes are difficult to apply to God, including immutability (in the light of process theology) and supranaturalism and omnipotence (in the light of scientific progress). 'Omnipotence' is 'an evocative image or symbol rather than a philosophical concept that can be precisely analysed'. All attributes applied to God are 'approximate and symbolic', with a balance retained between, for example, God's omnipotence and love, which together constitute the creativity by which God confers being on a 'letting-be' basis,[76] which, H. P. Owen points out, only God, as opposed to Being, could do.[77]

Paul Fiddes notes Macquarrie's dialectical theism,[78] and indeed Macquarrie balances: 'being and nothing'; 'the one and the many'; 'knowability and incomprehensibility'; 'transcendence and immanence'; 'impassibility and passibility'; and 'eternity and temporality'.[79] 'God', in Macquarrie's existentialist understanding, is 'the word which the religious man uses for the transcendent source of grace', grace being the remedy for mankind's despair and estrangement – though, as Macquarrie recognises, this gives little content to the notion of God.[80] He rejects Tillich's concept of 'the ground of being' as implying a substratum or substance 'supposed to underlie the phenomenal characteristics of beings',[81] and notes ambiguity in Tillich's using 'being' in two senses, in 'being itself' and in 'the ground of being'.[82] It is unclear, as Fiddes comments, whether 'being' for Macquarrie is the only non-analogical language applicable to God, or another example of symbolic language.[83] The transcendence of

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[75] Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, pp. 139-42, 145.
[76] Macquarrie, John, *God and Secularity*, London, Lutterworth and (edition referred to) Philadelphia, Westminster, 1967, pp. 117-27.
[77] Owen, H.P., *Concepts of* Deity, London, Macmillan, 1971, p. 140, referred to by Long, Eugene Thomas, 'John Macquarrie on God', *PRSt*, vol. 7, no.3. Fall 1980, p. 220.
[78] Fiddes, Paul, 'On God the Incomparable: Thinking about God with John Macquarrie', Morgan, Robert, ed., *In Search of Humanity and Deity: A Celebration of John Macquarrie's Theology*, London, SCM, 2006, p. 180.
[79] Macquarrie, John, *In Search of Deity: An Essay in Dialectical Theism*, London, SCM, 1984, pp. 175-84.
[80] Macquarrie, John, *Studies in Christian Existentialism*, London, SCM, 1965, pp. 9-10.
[81] Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, pp. 109-110.
[82] Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious* Thought, p. 367, footnote 2.
[83] Fiddes, 'On God the Incomparable', p. 188.

Being is not transcendence in the sense of standing above the world, but implies immanence, since all things share in Being, with humanity having the special feature of awareness of this.[84] Macquarrie is charting a course between classical transcendence and the 'the organic model' of immanence, by which the relationship between God and the world is more 'symmetrical', more reciprocal and mutual. By this approach, there is a strongly implied element of God needing the world, as well as the world needing God, with God in some ways vulnerable and affected by creation as well as affecting it, the approach bordering on panentheism. In support of this organic model, Macquarrie cites Hosea's image of God as husband and Christ as the head of the body.[85]

Macquarrie rejects the possibility of 'an "I-thou" meeting between God and man' through personal revelation, because a meeting between persons requires some physicality, reciprocity and mutual knowledge, none of which is possible in relation to Being.   And, although personal language is more appropriate than impersonal in relation to God, both are inadequate. Even when God is thought of as a person, it is 'a strange metaphysical kind of person without a body', who '"dwelt" metaphorically beyond the world . . .'.[86]  Avery Dulles is 'disturbed by Macquarrie's apparent reluctance to assign personal attributes to God',[87] although it is describing God as a person that Macquarrie rejects, not the use of personal language for God. Macquarrie operates on two parallel planes of the intellectual-abstract and the spiritual-devotional, and asks: 'who ever addressed a prayer to necessary being?'[88] Rather, 'In any actual theology, the bare language of existence and Being becomes clothed, so to speak, in the concrete symbolism of a particular religious faith', with Christ such a symbol.[89] This is exemplified when Macquarrie reverts to traditional imagery and anthropomorphism: 'God does not dwell apart, but takes the risk of meeting men in the midst of the world.  This good news about God must also be incarnated in the world's language'.[90]

In equating God with 'holy being', Macquarrie provides an ontological meaning for 'God' in terms of being, and an existential meaning in terms of faith commitment.[91] Existentialism, the

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[84] Macquarrie, *Studies in Christian Existentialism*, pp. 88-90; *Principles of Christian Theology*, pp. 120-21.
[85] Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity*, pp.53-54, *Principles of Christian Theology*, p. 120; *Thinking about God*, London, SCM, 1975, pp.111-112.
[86] Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*,  pp. 93-94. 116.
[87] Dulles, Avery Cardinal S.J.,, 'A Roman Catholic Response to *Principles*', Morgan, ed., *In Search of Humanity and Deity*, p. 79.
[88] Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity*, p. 23.
[89] Macquarrie, *Studies in Christian Existentialism*, pp. 95-95.
[90] Macquarrie, *God and Secularity*, p. 87.
[91] Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, p. 121.

dominant philosophy of the time, articulates Christian theology, but recognizes the danger of resorting to spirituality to fill logical gaps. Theology and spirituality are complementary:

> While theology aims at conceptualisation (though it never quite dispenses with images), the language of spirituality is closer to poetry than to science, and makes free use of image, metaphor and symbol.  Theology may try to conceptualise God as 'necessary being', or in some other way, but one could hardly pray or sing a hymn to necessary being. So spirituality is more likely to think of God as shepherd or king or even as spouse, concrete images that are not literally applicable, but which evoke the appropriate personal responses in the approach to God. But eventually spirituality may lead beyond all words and images to a silent adoration which gathers up all the separate images and responses into an inexpressible fullness.[92]

## 4.6 Non-verbal analogy for David Brown

In his later writing, Brown turns to metaphor as a non-verbal aspect of art, with landscape and abstract paintings having the potential to embody truth claims about God's relationship with the world. The abandonment of some one-to-one correspondence in some twentieth century art, he says, is an effective way of presenting metaphysical or religious claims.  He writes:

> What in effect we discover is religious art moving away from the use of explicit Christian symbols and towards an alternative, more neutral set of *metaphors* – based predominantly or exclusively on form and colour alone – where the artists' intention has in effect become to offer a new version of natural theology, with truth claims made about the existence of God and his relation to the world by means of these new metaphors.[93]

Art and theology both have:

> symbolic worlds where the relation between symbol and literal fact is at last acknowledged to be a highly complex one. That complexity is underscored by a much canvassed modern analogy, the far from simple relation between music and representation.[94]

Brown's use of 'metaphor', and 'analogy' with these non-verbal references is a reminder that conceptualising God and speaking of God are not the same thing: conceptualising does not have to be verbalised, and may remain experiential and internalised, with any consequent expression sometimes being artistic. However, the *non-verbal* reference of 'metaphor' and 'analogy', applied to symbolic art, makes use of these terms itself metaphorical or analogical. He gives examples where deliberate Christian symbolism may be discerned through subjective interpretation, examples that awaken a sense of God in the beholder, and examples where

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[92] Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity*, pp. 186, 188.
[93] Brown, David, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience*, Oxford, OUP, 2004, pp. 91-92 (italics added).
[94] Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, p. 92.

God's immanence, transcendence or creative and sustaining nature is, consciously or unconsciously, in view. Icons in particular, he says, emphasise transcendence by their style, but provide access for worshippers through God's immanence.[95]

When Brown states that 'God is omnipresent; so is literally neither "in" or "beyond" the world, but everywhere or nowhere equally', he fails to notice that 'present', and therefore 'omnipresent' too, must be just as metaphorical when applied to God as the other adjectives he is describing. When he refers to 'the way in which God can come sacramentally close to his world and vouchsafe experiences of himself through the material', he seems to accept the metaphorical nature of the two verbs applied to God. So with transcendence and immanence, since:

> God is neither quite 'beyond' the world nor 'in' it. More is really being said about how God is consequently perceived, and what that means for our relationship with him. It is my conviction that both perspectives are in fact essential for any adequate theology.[96]

### 4.7 Models and Qualifiers for Ian Ramsey and Anthony Thiselton

Ramsey's *Religious Language* opens with believers claiming that God is indescribable and ineffable, yet talking a great deal about him, and describing him as transcendent yet immanent, and impassible yet loving. He acknowledges the suspect meaningfulness of any of this if Ayer's verification principle is accepted.[97] But Ramsey's aim is to justify language about God as expressing mystery rather than factual knowledge.[98] 'Religious language', he writes, 'is odd', a key to 'disclosure' or 'discernment', when the penny drops and sense is made of otherwise unusual and incomprehensible situations. Questionably, he claims 'God is Love' to be tautological, though an effective and meaningful way of expressing emotional and voluntary commitment to God. Equally questionable is Ramsey's reference to 'Love' as the 'logical synonym' for 'God'. However, when he insists that description of God as loving must be qualified as 'God as infinitely loving',[99] he is presumably implying that human love is not pure love.

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[95] Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, pp. 135, 40, 81.

[96] Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, pp. 80, 87, 37.

[97] Ramsey, Ian T., *Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases*, London, SCM, 1957, pp. 13-14 (referring to Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*).

[98] Ramsey, Ian T., *Christian Empiricism*, London, Sheldon, 1974, pp. 59-66.

[99] Ramsey, *Religious Language*, pp. 91 (or 'peculiar and complex language', Ramsey, *Christian Empiricism*, p. 66), 26-27, 46-47.

Although Ramsey dismisses analogy in favour of models, analogy is, as Macquarrie and Jerry Gill observe, what he is about,[100] restating analogy, with elements of *analogia entis* and *analogia gratiae* in the form of disclosure and resulting commitment. His 'models' are accompanied by 'qualifiers', with expectation of 'disclosures' to derive from and contribute to the models. Models:

> must arise in a moment of insight or disclosure. . . . There must be something about the universe and man's experience in it which, for example, matches the behaviour of a loving father . . . something about certain cosmic situations which matches those situations in which men find themselves in the presence of a judge or a king.[101]

A model must 'fit' like a shoe, without being so tightly fitted to the phenomenon as to pinch, and be able to match a wide range of phenomena and needs – what Ramsey calls 'the method of empirical fit'.[102]

Soskice distinguishes model from metaphor: 'An object or state of affairs is said to be a *model* when it is viewed in terms of some other object or state of affairs'. A model need not be a metaphor, or even linguistic, as with a model train or 'the mechanism of the computer being used to explain the supposed action of the brain'. However, if the model is developed from electrical circuitry into neural programming, a shift to metaphor has occurred, since programming does not have the same sense in computer and brain contexts. Similarly, in theology, she says, fatherhood is a model that can develop our understanding of God, but talk of God's loving concern for his children is a development into metaphor.[103]

Retaining 'immutability' and 'impassibility' for God means that experience of change becomes, Ramsey says, a 'model', and the negative of it the 'qualifier'. Abstract characterisations of God like 'Unity', 'Simplicity' and 'Perfection' are extrapolations from their opposites, derived from our experience of multiplicity, complexity and imperfection – all examples of 'negative theology' based on models with their essential qualifiers – with  God as love not a negative contrast, but an extension from human experience.[104]  Donald Evans categorises Ramsey's qualifiers as universalising qualifiers (like 'universally loving'), perfecting qualifiers (like 'infinitely loving') and negating qualifiers (like 'im-passible').[105] But theology remains

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[100] Ramsey, Ian T., *Models and Mystery*, London, OUP, 1964, p.7; Macquarrie, *God-Talk*, p. 198; Gill, Jerry H., *Ian Ramsey: To Speak Responsibly of God*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1976, p. 88.
[101] Ramsey, *Models and Mystery*, pp. 15-16.
[102] Ramsey, *Models and Mystery*, p. 17.
[103] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, p. 55.
[104] Ramsey, *Religious Language*, pp. 50-60, 89.
[105] Evans, Donald, 'Ian Ramsey on Talk about God', *RelS*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Sept. 1971, pp. 217-222.

'ground[ed] in permanent mystery', and dependent on 'a cosmic disclosure' to reveal 'the topic of any and every theological utterance',[106] and constituting 'the most consistent, comprehensive, coherent, and simple discourse from as many models as possible'.[107]

Ramsey argues that 'we may attribute "personality" to God if there occur . . . cosmic situations of a disclosure kind, whose patterns are isomorphic with disclosures of personal reciprocity' (such as 'kindness and loving concern').[108] With other models that he cites (such as father, judge, king, shepherd), he relies on suitable, sometimes complex, qualifiers to make human personality models more appropriate to God, so that the personality of God proves to be 'totally integrated, invariably displaying positive qualities, etc.'[109] God 'integrates a *variety* of cosmic disclosures', for example, through personal encounters, appreciation of nature, aesthetic wonder, acceptance of duty.[110] The apparent incompatibilities that sometimes occur between models, for instance between God as impassible and loving and between God's justice and mercy, are resolved for Ramsey, in William Austin's view, by the fact that each results in a separate disclosure (presumably of different aspects of God's nature).[111] However, certain qualifiers could negate certain models (as with Flew's parable of the invisible, intangible, insensible gardener[112]), or undermine value or risk tautology, such as with 'infinitely' or 'perfectly', as in 'perfectly loving'.[113] 'Necessary existence'[114] is particularly opaque, other than as a philosophical notion which logical positivism would question.[115] Even Ramsey acknowledges that the merit of negative qualifiers is meditative and 'evocative',[116] which seems to underline the suspect logical character of qualifiers.

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[106] Ramsey, *Models and Mystery*, p. 61; similarly, Ramsey, *Christian Empiricism*, pp. 66-70.
[107] Edwards, David L., *Ian Ramsey, Bishop of Durham: A Memoir*, London, OUP, 1973, p. 43; source of quotation not given, but it matches Ramsey, Ian T., 'Talking about God: Models, Ancient and Modern', Dillistone, F.W., ed., *Myth and Symbol*, London, SPCK, 1966, p. 84 (reproduced Ramsey, Ian T., ed., *Words about God: The Philosophy of Religion*, London, SCM, 1971, p. 210).
[108] Ramsey, I.T., *Prospect for Theology*, 1969, probably unpublished, but quoted Edwards, *Ian Ramsey, Bishop of Durham*, p. 43.
[109] Edwards, *Ian Ramsey, Bishop of Durham*, p. 43.
[110] Evans, 'Ian Ramsey on Talk about God', pp. 131-135.
[111] Austin, William H., 'Models, Mystery, and Paradox in Ian Ramsey', *JSSR*, Vol. 7, Spring 1968, pp. 48-49.
[112] Flew, Antony, Hare, R. M. and Mitchell Basil, 'Theology and Falsification', Flew, Antony and MacIntyre, Alasdair, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, London, SCM, 1955, pp. 96-108.
[113] E.g., Ramsey, *Words about* God, p. 8.
[114] Ramsey, *Christian Empiricism*, pp. 8, 68-69; *Christian Empiricism*, pp. 69-70
[115] Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, pp. 114-15.
[116] Ramsey, *Religious Language*, p. 53.

Furthermore, Ninian Smart suggests that, if qualified models are only 'techniques of engineering disclosures' and 'their cognitive side disappears', they do not 'correspond to the way most religious folk conceive their own statements, [and do not constitute] an *analysis* of the way religious language works'.[117] David Edwards records: R. B. Braithwaite's difficulty in introducing Christianity to non-Christians without the all-important disclosures; R. W. Hepburn asking 'how . . . we know when such disclosure is or is not veridical'; and several critics noting the possibility of disclosures simply reflecting the predispositions of those experiencing disclosure.[118]

Thiselton warns against being unduly restricted by a picture or model one has adopted as a way of handling reality. Language 'hands on an inherited tradition which then makes it easier or more difficult for a later generation to raise certain questions, or to notice certain aspects of life'.[119] The transmission and reiteration (and, he could have added, reinforcement) of corporate memory occurs through a range of verbal and non-verbal means,[120] with only fresh visions and insights enabling us to reverse or refine the content of these pictures.[121] This seems akin to accepting the limitations inherent in analogy.

For Thiselton, words such as 'God', 'love' and 'salvation':

> draw their meaning *in the first place* from the role which these words play in the lives of Christian believers . . . . As Paul van Buren puts it, 'To examine the word (i.e. "God") in isolation from its context in the life of religious people is to pursue an abstraction'.[122]

Thiselton supports Wittgenstein's observation that words can have different connotations in different contexts,[123] and Bultmann's contention that it is sinful to speak of God without

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[117] Smart, Ninian, '*Models and Mystery*. By Ian T. Ramsey', *MLR*, Vol. 60, April 1965, p. 237.
[118] Edwards, *Ian Ramsey, Bishop of Durham*, pp. 29, 38 (without a precise source); pp. 45-46 (quoting Hepburn, R.W., *Philosophical Books*, vol.6., Jan. 1965, pp. 21-22); 46-47 (quoting from *Theoria to Theory*, April 1967, untraceable).
[119] Thiselton, Anthony C., *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein*, Carlisle, Paternoster, 1980, p. 137; Thiselton, Anthony, 'Knowledge, Myth and Corporate Memory', *Believing in the Church*, p. 52 (quoting Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, p. 137).
[120] Thiselton, 'Knowledge, Myth and Corporate Memory', p. 53.
[121] Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, pp.137-38, 404, 432.
[122] Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, p. 123 (quoting van Buren, P.M., *The Edges of Language*, London, SCM, 1972, p. 71); cf. Thiselton, *Language Liturgy and Meaning* , p. 13.
[123] Thiselton, *Language Liturgy and Meaning*, p. 11.

reference to 'the concrete existentialist (*existentielle)* position of the speaker'.[124] Context, for

Thiselton, is thus hugely important.

In the context of post-modernist and deconstructionist approaches to biblical interpretation,

he commends the telling of a variety of stories:[125]

> No *one* analogy, metaphor, or overlapping language-use, can ever be adequate if
> language about God or Christian experience is to be intelligible. We need a *number* of
> fixed points in everyday experience from which *cross-bearings* can be taken, in order
> to map out semantic areas which would otherwise lie beyond the edges of our
> conceptual map.[126]

Repeatedly, Thiselton dwells on the indispensability of metaphor, image, analogy, model,

symbol, parable, picture and myth for biblical and hermeneutical linguistic expression, despite

their limitation:[127] 'The reality . . . transcends the language that is used', and 'attempts to

speak of God [are] like the attempt to cup hands around the ocean';[128] any personal model

'needs to be *qualified by divine transcendence and hiddenness*' and understood analogically.

However, 'While cerebral concepts and factual reports *reflect already-perceived actualities*,

metaphors and narratives *create possible ways of seeing or understanding* the world and

human life'.[129] What are needed, following Ramsey, are '"qualifying" dimensions which cancel

out unwanted resonances otherwise set up by each piece of imagery alone'. And the imagery

that conveys the promise is the transcendence prominent in the Bible and, in the incarnation,

the immanence of God.[130]

Thiselton is not interested in the complexity of Thomist analogy, possibly reflecting his more

Evangelical outlook than that of most of the theologians surveyed here. He insists that all such

linguistic devices assume meaning within the context of individual and collective Christian

belief (like a Wittgensteinian language-game) but that their meaning before God's

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[124] Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, p. 224 (quoting Bultmann, R., *Faith and Understanding*, London,
SCM, 1969, pp. 53-54).

[125] Thiselton, Anthony C., *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, London, Harper Collins, 1992, p. 116
(quoting Crossan, J.D., *The Dark Interval Towards a Theology of Story*, Niles, Argus, 1975, pp.
40-41).

[126] Thiselton, *Language Liturgy and Meaning*, p. 6.

[127] For example, Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, pp. 9, 14, 27, 67, 344-78; *Two
Horizons*, p. 253 (quoting Miegge, G., *Gospel and Myth in the Thought of Rudolf Bultmann*,
London, Lutterworth, 1960, pp. 98-99; Bultmann, R., 'New Testament and Mythology', Bartsch,
H.-W., ed., *Kerygma and Myth*, Vol. 1, London, SPCK, 1962, p. 10).

[128] Thiselton, 'Knowledge, Myth and Corporate Memory', p. 69.

[129] Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, pp. 72-73, 370 (referring to Ricoeur, Paul, *Essays
on Biblical Interpretation*, London, SPCK, 1981, pp. 89, 107-109), 351.

[130] Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, pp. 146-47.

transcendence is limited, and they must be qualified and sometimes escaped in favour of fresh insights. His default position is traditional language, such as in 'Love derives from God because God chooses not to be self-contained but deeply involved with others' and Trinitarian theology.[131]

**4.8 Church of England Doctrine Commission Reports**[132]

The first Doctrine Commission report of 1938, outside the period of this thesis but relevant as background, was, Geoffrey Lampe[133] and Paul Avis[134] explain, appointed to find a common statement of Anglican faith in the wake of various theological disputes. The Convocations welcomed the report, though not as a declaration of the Church's doctrine.[135] It contrasts two anonymous statements, that: 'God is that living Being who is at once the ultimate existence and the supreme and all-inclusive good', which it says is 'an initial statement of what God is in Himself'; and 'God is that which we can, and must, worship', which, it says, is a statement 'of what God is in relation to us'. The report defines God as 'perfect Goodness, perfect Beauty and perfect Truth', 'Holy Love', the initiator and fulfilment of 'all moral effort', 'ultimate Existence', 'Personal', and 'Creator'.[136] The logical relationships between these descriptors are unclear, with scant distinction between philosophical attributions and expressions of faith. In relation to 'The Living God', an 'Appended Note'[137] neatly balances revelation and reason as mutually dependent, but with 'Divine action' remaining prevenient. 'Though essentially orthodox', Avis writes, the report 'reveals a remarkable hospitality to symbolic interpretations'.[138] But linguistic issues are not explored.

*Christian Believing*, published nearly forty years later,[139] Avis describes as 'a useful compendium of liberal consensus in Anglican theology at the time'.[140] Stephen Sykes refers to

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[131] Thiselton, Anthony, C., *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, William B., Grand Rapids and Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2007, pp. 49, 451.

[132] No doctrine reports concerning the nature of God proved available from Episcopal Church of Scotland, Church of Ireland or Church in Wales.

[133] Lampe, G.W.H., 'Introduction' to *Doctrine in the Church of England: The Report of the Commission on Christian Doctrine Appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in 1922*, London, SPCK, 1938; reissued with this new Introduction London, SPCK, 1982, p. xvii.

[134] Avis, Paul, 'Great Britain', McGrath, Alister E., ed., *The SPCK Handbook of Anglican Theologians*, London, SPCK, 1998, pp. 23-24.

[135] Lampe, 'Introduction' to *Doctrine in the Church of England*, pp. xviii-xxi, lvi.

[136] *Doctrine in the Church of England*, pp. 40-41.

[137] *Doctrine in the Church of England*, p. 44.

[138] Avis, 'Great Britain', p. 24.

[139] *Christian Believing: The Nature of the Christian Faith and its Expression in Holy Scripture and Creeds: A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England*, London, SPCK, 1976.

[140] Avis, 'Great Britain', p. 24.

the Church of England's acknowledgement of the different approaches to the Creeds being held in 'creative tension'[141] (probably referring to Robinson's recent *Honest to God* and Wiles's *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*[142]). Much of the divergence of approach to the Creeds relates to the nature of the language, and the variety of approaches to the underlying concepts.  Such concepts, the report suggests, can be viewed as valid within their historical context, and may be symbolic, replaceable in principle, or even of little relevance for living the Christian life.[143] Language is limited when it comes to matters of God, and religious language communicates most effectively within the religious community. The *via negativa* is implied as the necessary complement to positive statements about God such as biblical images, in view of God's transcendence and the inadequacy of all language. Earlier work, particularly Ramsey's, is recognised:

> Even a word like 'Creator' . . . is only an image derived from human experience, and has to be heavily qualified when applied to God, in order to make clear that it cannot be used of him purely in the way we use it of human creativity. Our images then are models. The human realities to which they ordinarily refer reflect in a limited and earthly way something that is in an eternal and unique manner true of God.  If we are to use any model properly, we have to be aware of the ways in which the earthly reality does or does not apply.[144]

The use of positive statements about God 'in their ordinary literal or univocal sense' is to 'make God in our image and fall into idolatry'; their use 'in an entirely different or equivocal sense' leads us into having 'no reason for using one word rather than another, and we are lost in agnosticism'. A partial solution, the report says, is the principle of analogy, which, 'though applicable only to abstract concepts, can provide a useful logical check against saying either too little or too much'.  The joint part of the report expresses dislike of the term 'poetic' as a description of religious language, as being vague, sometimes misleading and interpretable as 'suggesting that religious beliefs have no definite content', so that any interpretation might be valid 'so long as it commends itself to the individual spiritual judgement'.[145] However, Wiles

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[141] Sykes, Stephen, *The Integrity of Anglicanism*, Oxford, Mowbrays, 1979, pp. 33-34; *Christian Believing*, p. 38; Bishop John Baker (involved with all relevant commissions apart from 1938) describes the position similarly, conversation, 26.11. 2010.
[142] Wiles, Maurice, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine: The Hulsean Lectures 1973*, London, SCM, 1974.
[143] *Christian Believing*, pp. 35-38.
[144] *Christian Believing*, pp. 17.
[145] *Christian Believing*, pp. 18-19.

disagrees: 'language about God . . . is necessarily indirect – even poetic in character, a word with which I am much less unhappy than the report as a whole'.[146]

The 1976 report was never passed to the General Synod or officially commended, but 'was . . . quietly and rapidly buried',[147] although the writer of this thesis recalls some debate taking place in dioceses and deaneries.

Another Commission was convened in 1978, soon after the challenge to orthodoxy posed by *The Myth of God Incarnate*, and reported in 1981 with *Believing in the Church*. Mitchell points to 'the use of metaphors, analogies, images', which provide 'a genuine, although limited understanding of the truth which these figures point to', and describes as reasonable and natural the development over time of a variety of interpretations.[148] Thiselton points to Christianity's anthropomorphic way of describing God as personal, which, for many, 'brings us to the heart of what may be said to constitute myth', and similarly refers to the use of 'analogy, model, metaphor or symbol', where 'the reality . . . transcends the language that is used'.[149] Similarly, John Baker refers to the danger of 'using as propositions hallowed traditional language which is really poetic, analogical or symbolic'.[150] This report concentrates on the process of believing, rather than the content of belief.  So it does not apply the role of analogy, etc., to aspects of Christian theology, or demonstrate how judgements can be made about which analogies are appropriate. The report was debated in the General Synod and commended for study in the Church.

Whereas the foregoing reports concentrate on 'what it means for Christians . . . to believe', *We Believe in God*, from 1987, is the first of a series focusing on 'what Christians believe'. The report acknowledges that theology must take account of challenges from science, suffering, and logical positivism, and recognises that much 'imagining, describing or thinking' about God will prove with time to have been incomplete or incorrect. However, 'Revelation enables us to speak reliably and with confidence of God', tempered with the need for an element of the *via negativa*, since not even Scripture can be exhaustive and final in its description of God.[151]

Ramsey's influence of is again evident in the importance attached to models which, as in science, are 'procedures for enabling us to think about the unobservable', which, 'whether

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146 Wiles, M.F., 'Chapter 6', *Christian Believing*, p. 126.
147 Lampe, 'Introduction', *Doctrine in the Church of England*, p. lx.
148 Mitchell, 'I Believe: We Believe', pp. 19-21.
149 Thiselton, Anthony, 'Knowledge, Myth and Corporate Memory', p. 69.
150 Baker, John, 'Carried about by Every Wind', *Believing in the Church*, p. 265.
151 *We Believe in God: A Report by The Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England*, London, Church House, 1987, pp. 1, 19-20, 23, 29, 30, 26.

boldly pictorial or philosophically abstract, are creative precisely because they are not literal descriptions', and which can constantly be checked against our human experience – though not against a referent. Models and religious images can collapse or die, though without implication that God has died. The report offers the masterly simple 'There is rarely any experience of God which is not at the same time experience of something else', and combines realism and pastoral sensitivity in:

> We should not hesitate to use deeply traditional images in hymns, poetry, liturgy and art, as well as evolving new ones.  But at the same time we do not suppose that the sign is identical with what it signifies. Any one of those images is limitless in what it can bring us to be and to understand and to do, as we live with it as an expression of God's relation to us, and of ours to him.  Such pictures reinforce and supplement one another, and none can capture the whole reality of God.[152]

Although the report values anthropomorphic biblical imagery (such as judges and parents), it recognises the inherent dangers (from corruptible judges and failing parents). More reliable, the report suggests, are impersonal metaphors (such as sun, rock, tower or fire), which cannot be taken literally, which are not so open to misunderstanding and which better convey God's eternity. However, the report misses the potentially destructive effects of these phenomena (all metaphors of strength), and fails to grasp the pervasive problem of how to check analogies against their referent. The distinction between univocal analogy and univocity is recognised, in suggesting that it is possible to use the same words (including personal language) about God in ways other than about human beings. Although 'the hand of the Lord' and 'The Lord is my shepherd' are metaphorical in nature, that is not the case, it is claimed, with 'talk of God as all-knowing, faithful or loving'. When Charles Wesley wrote of 'love divine, all loves excelling', 'he was not using human love as a "metaphor" for divine love, but stretching the use of "love" in its human context to represent the perfect love of God'.[153]

The report rejects the notion that the languages of devotion and metaphysics are at odds with the language of (analytical) philosophy, and defends the poetic language of devotion as expressing an alternative world-view through worship. Traditional doctrinal formulae can be difficult, particularly for Western Christians, but in contemplative prayer the interplay between and with the persons of the Trinity can become real. Within worship, the report argues, a personal relationship with God is presupposed, 'though the meaning of the word "personal" is very evidently stretched beyond its everyday uses'. While largely unacceptable in critical

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[152] *We Believe in God*, pp. 27-30.
[153] *We Believe in God*, pp. 41-43.

biblical study, allegory remains acceptable in devotional practice,[154] which accords with the trend in the various reports to view poetic language as appropriate for worship but inappropriate for much theology.

In 'The Suffering of God',[155] God is seen as suffering whenever God's children do not follow his purposes and whenever God's creatures suffer. However, Ward points out,[156] the impassibility of God has not been as completely discarded as the chairman claims in his preface, since the passibility to which the report refers is largely, though with some ambivalence, confined to the person of Christ.[157] It is curious, as Ward also notes,[158] that emphasis on the passibility of God does not lead to a consideration of process theology.

The series of reports responds to the need for linguistic clarity, but is clearly set in the context of the Church's life of faith and worship. Whether consciously or unconsciously, there is a reiteration of many of the concerns and solutions offered by Farrer, Mascall,[159] and Ramsey, particularly over the principle of analogy (and related expressions) at the heart of religious language. Little, if anything, was new, and none of the reports had an immediate or dramatic effect on the life of the Church. Although some issues, like the authentication of analogies and process theology, are sidestepped, the progression of thinking marks the Church of England's formal acceptance of essential principles about religious language.

### 4.9 Conclusions

The 1938 Doctrine Commission report happily offers an array of descriptors of God, without considering their linguistic nature or Ayer's recent challenge to meaningfulness; despite omissions, later reports follow the movement of academic theology. Mitchell, Farrer and Mascall develop the concept of analogy for twentieth century theology: God is transcendent, and only analogy can come close to enabling useful description. God is not less than personal, but this can only be grasped on the basis of experience. Thus the existential quality of analogy is detected, with its dependency on response. Closely allied is the matter of context, with the Christian community the place where religious language is most meaningful. Macquarrie emphasises the need for balance in all things, including transcendence and immanence,

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[154] *We Believe in God*, pp. 43-46, 107-112, 64-65.

[155] *We Believe in God*, pp. 157-160.

[156] Ward, Keith, 'The God of the Doctrine Commission: a Critique of *We believe in God*', *KTR*, 11, Spring 1988, p.1.

[157] *We Believe in God*, pp. ix, 158-160.

[158] Ward, Keith, 'God of the Doctrine Commission', p. 1.

[159] Mascall was consulted during process before *Christian Believing*, Bishop John Baker, conversation 26.10.2010.

incomprehensibility and knowability, and dwells on the existential nature of theological expression. Ramsey's substitute for analogy is 'model', by which he too responds to logical positivism, and relates to the world of science; what is significant about models is the need for qualifiers, which, while logically suspect, have the effect of making models similar to analogies and metaphors. Ramsey also introduces the concept of disclosure, by which models achieve a kind of verification, though with an inevitable risk of over-subjectivism.

George Woods advocates 'the creative power' of analogies, always imperfect, which we invent, modify, discard and use, and which 'express sameness in difference and difference in sameness'. Even 'transcendent' is analogical, with its literal meaning of climb[ing] over an obstacle, and so is 'experience', based upon our experience of ordinary physical objects. Analogies for God based upon impersonal concepts are unhelpful, with analogies drawn from personal being more likely to be more illuminating.[160]

Radical Orthodoxy's use of 'analogy' emphasises the mystery of the transcendence of God, as does MacKinnon's response of silence before the hiddenness of God. Metaphor and analogy are indispensable for theology to begin to describe the indescribable, not an abuse of language, as some rationalists have claimed, consigning metaphor to a rhetorical function, but essential for true insights to be expressed. In order to avoid intellectual and cultural poverty, Gunton writes, 'The first lesson to learn is that rationalism is one thing, the claims of a reason that wishes to encompass life in its richness quite another'.[161] On this basis, true rationalism has to encompass insights that can only be expressed in metaphor and analogy.

Aquinas's use of the term 'analogy' drew on Aristotle and sought a middle way between the univocal and the equivocal; but his approach is not always totally consistent, leading some to view him as having described rather than defined analogy.[162] So his espousal of analogy does not imply that he would necessarily have dismissed metaphor if he had been writing today. Despite distinguishing between analogy and metaphor, Soskice still views metaphor as the more creative option, due, perhaps, to its borrowing wording from one language-game for use in another. There is in fact considerable interchangeability of terminology, and it is possible to attempt over-precision over terms that are used by different theologians to suit their particular emphases. So, for example, Farrer wishes to emphasise continuity with Aquinas, and Ramsey with the world of science. While Soskice's analysis originates in her linguistic

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[160] Woods, George F., 'The Idea of the Transcendent', Vidler, A. R., ed., *Soundings: Essays Concerning Christian Understanding*, Cambridge, CUP, 1962, pp. 52-53, 55-57, 64.
[161] Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, pp. 29-30, 1-2.
[162] E.g., Stiver, *Philosophy of Religious Language*, p. 24.

concerns, Gunton is relaxed about precise definition, viewing metaphor as 'such a pervasive feature of our language that any tight definition would very likely exclude many respectable instances'.[163]

Indeed, a careful observation of most writing and conversation reveals that the use of analogy or metaphor is rife in common parlance. In this thesis, and despite Soskice's concern, mentioned above, they will be taken as interchangeable. They are a means of using language applicable in one situation or experience to refer to another, and so extend the degree and value of description and understanding. So they are creative in purpose, and effective, provided culture and experience lead to the understanding that was intended.  Some analogies and metaphors are wholly or partly ineffective because they do not communicate in the way intended: their content may be anachronistic, or have been over-extended to the point of being counter-productive or nonsensical. It is only by revelation or faith on the part of the users that metaphorical assertions about God can find a point of reference, correspondence or verification. Mitchell detects a possible loss in society of imaginative skills, although the popularity of modern imaginative literature[164] indicates otherwise.  Even for some without religious faith, but who are able to grasp truth by 'poetic', 'illustrative' or non-literal means, the medium of analogy or metaphor provides the best and only way to 'approach' the depths of human experience, and God. Analogy has in this chapter been shown to be indispensable for academic theology.  Whether or not this is true also for informal theology will be demonstrated.

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[163] Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, p. 28.
[164] E.g., Tolkien, Pullman and Rowling.

## Chapter 5: IMMANENCE

**5.1 Transcendence and immanence**

The tension over the centuries between transcendence and immanence is exemplified as Williams illustrates how humans are aware of God by existential perception and in personal communication, divine initiative, and transcendence with immanence:

> God is first and foremost that depth around all things and beyond all things into which, when I pray, I try to sink.  But God is also the activity that comes to me out of that depth, tells me I'm loved, that opens up a future for me, that offers transformations I can't imagine.  Very much a mystery but also very much a presence.  Very much a person.[1]

Williams's understanding, in Rupert Shortt's words, is that 'God is transcendent; but he transcends his transcendence, expressing his unknowable "essence" in his "energies" – this, his manifestation in the world'.[2] He dismisses both concepts of a deist watch winder and a constantly interventionist god, and speaks of 'an eternal activity which moment by moment energises, makes real, makes active, what there is' – all of this 'in orderly and cohesive ways', such that the world 'makes sense, interlocks, balances, works together . . . with what we mean by natural laws', based on divine rationality.  This he views as a tradition shared by Augustine, Aquinas, the divine energy of Eastern Orthodox tradition that penetrates creation, and Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'charged with the grandeur of God./It will flame out like shining from foil shook'.[3]  Williams continues more challengingly:

> Can we imagine certain circumstances in which the action of God in relation to one of these coherent bits of the world is, to use a rather weak analogy, that much closer to the surface than it habitually is? We may not be able to understand what the rule of that is, or the regularity of it, but if what is sustaining every reality is the energy, the action, of God, then is it so difficult to believe that from God's point of view and not ours, there are bits of the universal order where the fabric is thinner, where the coming together of certain conditions makes it possible for the act of God to be a little more transparent? And when we talk of miracle, it's that.[4]

This raises the question of the nature of a rationality that is discernible to God but not to humankind. Unless the argument is based on incompleteness of human perception – which would indicate a new kind of 'god of the gaps' approach – this identification of miracles implies a very interventionist God, challenging scientific rationality and universality (which conforms

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[1] Shortt, Rupert, *Rowan's Rule: The Biography of the Archbishop*, London, H&S, 2008, p. 14, citing (untraceable) broadcast interview with Melvyn Bragg.
[2] Shortt, *Rowan's Rule*, p.79.
[3] Shortt, Rupert, *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation*, London, DLT, 2005, p. 7.
[4] Shortt, *God's Advocates*, p. 7-8.

with Williams being critical of scientism). For Williams, one aspect of God is 'what we have not yet understood, the sign of a strange and unpredictable future'.[5] God is neither distant nor interventionist: rather, 'God's relation . . . is his own accessibility, the resource that is there in God for any situation which makes it possible for that situation to be transfigured or taken forward', with 'the glory and energy of God pretty near the surface'.[6] Williams describes how we sense God's prompting, warning, reassuring or guiding, not by 'the fabric of the finite order being interrupted, but rather 'with certain configurations of finite agencies, the texture of the environment . . . more clearly transparent to the simple act of divine self-communication'.[7] It is not always clear whether Williams is offering ontological or spiritual insights, and he would probably not differentiate.

God's 'need' for human beings, Williams says, is not need in the ordinary sense, but a 'need' for us to be what we are, to be.[8] Concerned to respect God's aseity, he queries what kind of 'need' this can be, removed from the norm of human relationships. However, we exist through 'unconditional generosity', without intention of anything in return, 'God['s] . . . eternal happiness overflow[ing] into the act of creation'.[9] So the way to describe God's need lies in analogy, which he takes further: 'There is nothing that as it were stays at home while bits of the godhead go out to understand things and enjoy and love things . . .'.[10]

**5.2 Balance in other theologians**

Macquarrie goes further in postulating an element of God needing the world, as well as the world needing God, with God (more than in Christ) in some ways vulnerable and affected by creation as well as affecting it, the approach bordering on panentheism. He charts a course between classical transcendence and the immanence that he describes as 'the organic model', by which the relationship between God and the world is more 'symmetrical', more reciprocal and mutual, with various biblical pointers, such as those previously cited. David Jenkins, too, takes a middle position, not ruling out the possibility of divine intervention, but questioning its

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[5] Higton, Mike, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams*, New York, Church, 2004, p. 49 (quoting Williams, Rowan, *The Wound of Knowledge*, Second Edition, London, DLT, 2002, p. 58).
[6] Shortt, *God's Advocates*, pp. 8, 7.
[7] Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, p. 46 (quoting Williams, Rowan, 'Reply: redeeming sorrows', Phillips, D. Z., ed., *Religion and Morality*, New York, St Martin's, 1996, p. 144).
[8] Williams, Rowan, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin*, Norwich, Canterbury, 2002, p. 26.
[9] Williams, Rowan, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, Norwich, Canterbury, 2007, pp. 12-13.
[10] Shortt, *God's Advocates*, p. 19.

compatibility with God's loving and gracious nature revealed in deciding to become one of us. He points out that serious questions of theodicy are raised when God does not intervene: God is 'not the mastermind of vast construction activity . . . moving to a predetermined and preconceived end.  He (and She and It . . .) is more like a master artist (and a mistress artist) . . . committed . . . to an infinite creative activity', characterised by freedom and risk.[11] For Jenkins, God's fulfilment in Christ relates only to God's fulfilment *'under the conditions of materiality and history'*. So it is unacceptable to replace transcendence with immanence: such replacement, Jenkins says – with teasing paradox – 'is destructive of man via the demotion of God.  Transcendence without immanence makes nonsense of God, immanence without transcendence makes nonsense of man'.[12] In other words, human kind needs a transcendent context in order to be fully human, as was the case with Christ.  Kenneth Leech too retains a balance, though with a conviction about immanence that fuels his social action. 'God is at the same time both unapproachable and close, beyond our vision and within our hearts', he writes. He contrasts 'conventional religion' with true Christianity thus:

> The god of much conventional religion is a being who dwells . . . above and beyond the world. He may express 'interest' in it and in us from time to time, but he is essentially uninvolved. . . . The God of Christian prayer is an involved God, a social God. . . . God is involved in humanity. . . . God is not private, but personal and social, Being in relationship. That is the meaning of the symbol of the Trinity.[13]

For Wiles, the matter of immanence through intervention is subsumed into the one great divine creative act, to the extent that a suspicion of deism arises, and a risk that the concept of divine relationship with humanity might disappear except as a human projection.

**5.3 Radical Orthodoxy**

Radical Orthodoxy's approach to God, despite variations in emphasis between proponents, is, overall, very different. As already noted, Milbank insists that there is no 'proportional relationship' between finite and infinite, but, rather, ontological difference.[14] Similarly, at root, 'between God and humanity there is no reciprocity: God in his transcendence can receive nothing from us', even though 'we only receive existence, life and reasoning from God in

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[11] Jenkins, David E., *God, Politics and the Future*, London, SCM, 1988, p. 109; *God, Miracle and the Church of England*, London, SCM, 1987, pp. 4-6, echoing Vanstone, William Hubert, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God*, London, DLT, 1977, pp. 47-49.

[12] Jenkins, David E., *The Glory of Man*, London, SCM, 1967, pp. 100 (italics added) and 104.

[13] Leech, Kenneth, *True Prayer: An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, London, Sheldon, 1980, pp. 11, 7-8.

[14] Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, p. 9.

returning ourselves to God', with God's giving being part of our participation in God. It is only when, by the Holy Spirit, we are caught up into the reciprocity between Father and Son, that a reciprocity between God and us is established.[15] The basis for this is Aquinas's Platonic theory of participation, by which, Pickstock writes, 'he regards our capacity for thought not as a ruefully humiliated endeavour, but as a partial receiving of divine intellection on a transcendental level'.[16] Although the principal of God's participation in creation and creation's in God is as important for Ford as for Radical Orthodoxy theologians, for him it occurs in the form of 'corporate participation in the incarnate, crucified and risen Jesus Christ, and, through him, in the Trinity'.[17]

Milbank has little place for immanence on God's part apart from in Christ. But Radical Orthodoxy sometimes uses 'immanence' and 'immanent' to refer to the created order rather than to an aspect of God. So, James Smith finds transcendence to be, in Radical Orthodoxy, an essential feature of material reality: the relationship between Creator and creation is that of participation, 'in which the immanent and material is suspended from the transcendent and immaterial'. Smith explains that 'suspension' has a dual meaning, that, firstly, 'the created, immanent order is *linked* to the transcendent divine', and, secondly, that the created order 'is always interrupted by the transcendent, the site for the in-breaking of the transcendent'. So, for Milbank, once the difference is abandoned, transcendence disappears, leading to nihilism and postmodernism. Some within Radical Orthodoxy see immanence not as a feature of God's life or activity within the created order, but as offering the potential for the created order and humans to be united with God by participation. Smith explains Radical Orthodoxy's ontology of participation on the basis of a strong doctrine of 'transcendence as an essential feature of material reality', with 'theological materialism' the result. He writes: 'Nature' – which "is" only insofar as it participates in God – is suffused with the divine and hence with grace'.[18] Milbank, Pickstock and Graham Ward write: 'Participation . . . refuses any reserve of created territory [later described as 'a zone apart from God'], while allowing finite things their own integrity'.[19] However, measured in terms of its ability to offer to ordinary Christians an intelligible system for conceptualizing God and a rationale for their actual experience of God's immanence, Radical Orthodoxy, with its enigmatic nature, is unlikely to succeed.

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[15] Milbank, John, 'Beauty and the Soul', Milbank, John, Ward, Graham and Wyschogrod, Edith, *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty*, Harrisburg, Trinity, 2003, pp. 7-8.
[16] Pickstock, 'Radical Orthodoxy and the Mediations of Time', p. 71.
[17] Ford, David F., 'A Response to Catherine Pickstock', *SJT*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2001, pp. 423-24.
[18] Smith, James K. A., *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology*, Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2004, pp. 74-75, 185, 97, 185, 76, 121-22.
[19] Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy*, p. 3.

## 5.4 Russell Stannard

A totally different approach is taken by three scientist theologians.

The particle physicist, Russell Stannard's, unexceptional view of God is expressed in popular style. His starting point is the impenetrability of the divine, with 'a frontier of the knowable: beyond lies that which, to the human mind, will never be completely understood'. So, for example, Stannard does not want to eliminate on grounds of logical impossibility the notion of God 'as someone to whom all of time – past, present and future – is known', on a par with a scientist plotting the history of a particle against the passage of time.[20] God is 'both in time and outside of time'.[21] Stannard proposes that, if the Big Bang proves to be merely an event in a perpetually oscillating universe, then the universe, and God too, might have always existed. Indeed, on the basis of the possibility of particles being present in a number of different places at the same time, we should not write off the possibility of the same principle applying to God, with the idea of God's being available for every person thus being vindicated.[22]  God's understanding of each human being is such that he is able to predict what people will do in particular circumstances (as with long-married couples), without undermining human freewill. Freewill might be preserved by the indeterminacy of sub-atomic movement (by Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle), in contrast with the determinacy that operates at less minute levels. God might even use chaos theory to enable 'random quantum probabilities at the atomic level . . . [to be] magnified by the chaos theory mechanism to produce significant changes at the macroscopic level where we humans operate'.[23] Furthermore, after the pattern of relativity theory, it is possible that God's foreknowledge and human freewill 'derive from incompatible or complementary viewpoints', for both of which Stannard provides biblical evidence,[24] after the pattern of scientists examining brain activity being able to predict a person's next action, without undermining that person's freewill to decide on that action.[25] God may have 'the ability somehow to take in the whole of four-dimensional reality from some "external point" of view lying beyond the confines of that four-dimensional world', giving meaning to God's transcendence. It might even be useful to pray about a past event of which the outcome is

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[20] Stannard, Russell, *Science and the Renewal of Belief*, London, SCM, 1982, pp. 132, 142-43.
[21] Stannard, Russell, *Doing Away with God? Creation and the Big Bang*, London, Marshall Pickering, 1993, p. 52.
[22] Stannard, *Science and the Renewal of Belief*, pp. 144-45.
[23] Stannard, Russell, *The God Experiment*, London, F&F, 1999, p. 40.
[24] Stannard, *Science and the Renewal of Belief*, pp. 179, 183; cf. Stannard, *Doing Away with God?*, p. 50; Stannard, *God Experiment*, p. 40.
[25] Stannard, *Doing Away with God?*, p. 122.

unknown, on the basis of an all-knowing God, aware of the forthcoming prayer, being able to take it into account in determining the outcome'.[26]

Although preferring a stronger basis of process theology, Joseph Bracken approves Stannard's attempt:

> To reconcile the opposing viewpoints represented by classical metaphysics and process-oriented modes of thought, God knows the future of the cosmic process in its fullness but does not by that fact predetermine it. This is possible only because God exists beyond time in eternity.[27]

Stannard offers a novel exposition of Trinitarian exposition, as 'God over us, God with us, God in us', with God as Father 'an amalgam of the Hebrew creator and the Greek sustainer of the universe'.[28] The principle that love must have an object was, prior to creation, satisfied by God's 'inner self-relatedness', by which Stannard presumably means God's as yet unrevealed Trinitarian nature. 'Creation, therefore', Stannard writes, 'marked not so much the start of God's relationships, as the outward expression of the inner structure of his own being', with the person of Jesus the second inevitable outworking of God's love. Evil in creation is the foil to God's goodness, such that the goodness would not be recognized if the evil were not there, by a matter of 'logical necessity'. Later, Stannard recognizes that this may not do justice 'to the sheer power and depth of evil', but still relies on his doctrine of logical necessity: although God is wholly good, God is forced by 'some logical imperative' 'into allowing evil to have a place in his created world', with God's omnipotence undiminished by this *logical* necessity. But the evil that Stannard considers is largely humanly generated, and his theodicy tends to relate evil natural occurrences back to human failures.[29] Stannard accepts the Anthropic Principle ('the Designer of this world has bent over backwards to make it user-friendly!'), provided that neither the Anthropic Principle nor the argument from design is limited in such a way that they appear to be defending a limited 'God-of-the-gaps approach'.[30] In a section entitled 'God's involvement in suffering' Stannard does not consider the possibility of God being affected in

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[26] Stannard, *God Experiment*, pp. 212, 213.

[27] Bracken J., S.J.,'Space and time from a neo-Whiteheadian perspective', *Zygon*, March 1, 2007, 42(1), p. 46.

[28] Stannard, *Science and the Renewal of Belief*, p, 149; *Doing Away with God?*, p. 43; *God Experiment*, p. 37.

[29] Stannard, *Science and the Renewal of Belief*, pp. 163, 172, 81, 82-83, 87-90; *God Experiment*, p. 83.

[30] Stannard, *Doing Away with God?*, pp. 98-99, 108.

any way by human suffering, so much as God's responsiveness to prayer and God's experience through Jesus.[31]

## 5.5 Arthur Peacocke

Peacocke prefers a 'top-down' approach in biology and theology, rather than the tendency towards analysis and reductionism.[32] Rather than seeking God's involvement at the microscopic level of evolution, Peacocke focuses his attention on God's 'top-down' interaction – 'indirect, through a chain of levels acting in a "downward" way'.[33] God is immanent, constantly creative through 'natural processes of the world unveiled by the sciences' and often through 'chance' within the 'law-like framework' of the created order.  So there is no need to seek gaps for God's creative activity,[34] since the necessity should have faded with the movement away from a purely mechanistic understanding of the cosmos towards, with Darwin, 'a more developmental and organismic framework of thought', with gaps now seen theologically as impertinently limiting God.[35] For Peacocke, although God is not present more at specific times or places, some events are perceived more as acts of God than others: the more personal the event in which God is immanently present, supremely the Incarnation, the more able that event is to express God's nature. Peacocke describes randomness in relation to molecular, genetic mutations, not necessarily observable at a macroscopic level,[36] even though the effects are seen as phenomena of the universe and cosmos.[37] Presumably, the reason for randomness not being regarded as a theological 'gap' is that microbiologists deem it *necessarily* random and inexplicable, not subject to future deterministic explanation, although Peacocke is critical of John Polkinghorne's apparent consignment of God's activity 'to those, to us, unclosable gaps in the predictability of the natural world'.[38] Hugh Montefiore identifies Peacocke's position with deism, since it would be a remote God who relied on chance and necessity, which 'may produce creativity but . . . cannot produce purpose'.[39] On the contrary, Peacocke argues, the interplay of chance and law give rise to the complexity expected by the

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[31] Stannard, *God Experiment*, p. 99.

[32] Peacocke, Arthur, *God and the New Biology*, London, J. M. Dent and Sons, 1986, p. 1.

[33] Deane-Drummond, 'Theology and the Biological Sciences', p. 364.

[34] Peacocke, Arthur, *Paths from Science towards God: The End of all our Exploring*, Oxford, One World, 2001, pp. 136-37.

[35] Peacocke, A. R., *Science and the Christian Experiment*, London, OUP, 1971, p. 130.

[36] Peacocke, *God and the New Biology*, pp. 100-101, 106, 62-63.

[37] Peacocke, Arthur, *Creation and the World of Science: The Bampton Lectures, 1978*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1979, pp. 70, 95.

[38] Peacocke, Arthur, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming – Natural, Divine and Human*, London, SCM, enlarged edition, 1993, p. 154 (quoting Polkinghorne, John, *Science and Providence: God's Interaction with the World*, London, SPCK, 1989, pp. 31, 32).

[39] Montefiore, Hugh, *The Probability of God*, London, SCM, 1985, p. 98.

laws of thermodynamics and chemical kinetics, and underlies 'the increase of sentience and freedom of the individual organism' which leads to such qualities in humanity.[40] Moreover, evolutionary science and a theistic view of God's constant and continuing creative involvement coincide in making deistic theory irrelevant.[41] With self-limited omniscience, God does not know the whole future; and, indeed, the indeterminacy of some sub-atomic events just does not exist, for God to influence the natural order at either a micro- or macro-level. Within the natural order there is a 'genuine degree of open-endedness and unpredictability required for the interplay of chance and law in its creative processes and, eventually, for real human freedom to emerge'.[42]

Peacocke suggests that 'the notion of top-down causation from the integrated, unitive mind/brain state to human bodily action', together with 'unity of the human mind/brain/body event', provides a useful model of God's interaction with the world. (Regrettably, he unnecessarily confuses the model by identifying mind with brain, thus mixing the categories of a concept and a physical entity.)[43] The model illustrates God 'exerting continuously top-down causative influences on the world' as a total system, and interacting with the world without breaching the laws of nature.[44] This then is the basis for 'transcendence-in-immanence', by which God's agency comes into play 'all the time' in relation to 'the whole physical causal nexus'. Thus Peacocke finds some affinity with process theology, with God having two poles or aspects, which he associates with Whitehead's 'a primordial nature and a consequent nature' and Hartshorne's 'God's abstract essence and God's concrete actuality', and which he interprets as representing God's Creative Love and God's Responsive Love. Where Peacocke departs from process theology is in insisting that God is the Creator of actuality, and not just an influencer of occasions.[45] He tends in a panentheistic direction: everything is in God and God is in everything, but God transcends everything in time and space, as Beethoven is in his Seventh Symphony during every performance but unable to interfere in the performance.[46] He finds panentheism exemplified in Augustine, as a means by which God can be interacting with the world without breaking the laws of science.[47] However, he prefers the panentheistic

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[40] Peacocke, *God and the New Biology*, p. 98.

[41] Peacocke, *Science and the Christian Experiment*, p. 129.

[42] Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, pp. 154-56.

[43] Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, pp. 136-37.

[44] Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, pp. 158-59, 161; cf. earlier Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, p. 134.

[45] Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, pp. 139-41.

[46] Peacocke, *God and the New Biology*, pp. 96-97.

[47] Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, pp. 158-59 (quoting Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.7).

model of a woman's creation of an embryo within herself (in contrast to the man's external contribution), and finds biblical material in rough support of this approach.[48]

Communication is part of God's essence, God having endowed humanity with the ability to discern his word in creation. God's causal effectiveness is analogous to an input of information, or, as Peacocke prefers, 'a "communication" by God to the world of his purposes and intentions through those levels of the hierarchy of complexity capable of receiving it'. This indicates a movement beyond physical intervention, even at a micro-level, to moral influence. However, defining God as 'the continuing, supra-personal, unifying and unitive influence upon all-that-is' suggests a wider influence than any directed just at human or sentient beings, and indeed, Peacocke frequently insists that 'God's action is on the world-as-a-whole'.[49] There may here be a hint of process theology's portrayal of God 'luring' humans in particular directions.

Peacocke follows Michael Langford[50] in describing God's involvement as like the role of a mountain leader, in first planning the expedition (creative and sustaining), then leading the party safely (final cause and general providence) and then handling emergencies, predictable in general though not in detail (special providence and miracles). The reference to miracles is problematical, with Peacocke himself uncertain as to whether miracles should be viewed as divine interventions. He resists expectation of intervention as a requirement of theism, since it implies that God is exterior rather than immanent, and undermines the rationality and regularity of God, almost as if God regrets the law that he created. However, he allows 'very rare occurrences' where supposed interventions manifest 'the existence of "higher laws" or a "profounder rationality" than have yet to become clear to us'. This ambivalence is unhelpful, even if any implied gaps are 'necessary' gaps. It would be reasonable for him to insist that God would always be acting within the framework of laws he has created, and that any *apparent* departure would *always and necessarily* reflect an inadequate human comprehension of the fullness of those laws. Indeed, Peacocke proceeds to highlight the moral objection to a God who sometimes intervenes but does not do so to avert natural and human-made disasters as evidence that he does not intervene at all.[51]

In summary, Peacocke stresses the 'top-down' nature of God's interaction with the world, taking the world-as-a-whole as God's starting point, rather than the world at its micro-level. Chance plays a part alongside law in nature, but identified as the location for *necessary* gaps in

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[48] Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, pp. 141-44 (referring to Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34, Genesis 1:26-27, Proverbs 8, Wisdom 9).
[49] Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, pp. 161-164.
[50] Langford, Michael J., *Providence,* London, SCM, 1981.
[51] Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, pp. 135, 182-83, 143.

our understanding. Locating God's activity in gaps would conflict with the 'top-down' approach. Panentheism, on a model of pregnancy, offers much in expressing God's relationship with the world.  God is self-limiting, and even suffers with creation.[52] On a personal model, God 'communicates' with humanity and individuals as part of his 'top-down' interaction and discloses himself at a variety of levels (in nature, inspiration and guidance, for instance), and supremely in the Incarnation.

## 5.6 John Polkinghorne

Polkinghorne, a theoretical physicist, writes:

> There is no particular difficulty scientifically in envisaging God as outside space and time . . . 'looking down' on the whole evolution of the universe laid out before him. However so atemporal a deity is too close to the God of the Greek philosophers for Christian comfort. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who is active in the affairs of men, who suffers when his people suffer, cannot be so wholly above the struggle of life.[53]

Thus God is eternal and unchanging on the one hand, but self-limiting and self-emptying on the other, with Christ's ascension implying that in Christ 'humanity is taken into the divine nature. As part of that mystery the Eternal accepts the experience of temporality'.[54] Polkinghorne recognizes 'the utility of both personal and impersonal models of divinity, one for expressing the experiences of revelation, the other for expressing the insights of natural theology'.  Thus, he says, a healthy tinge of deism is restored, and 'we do not have to choose between the dangerously anthropomorphic[55] God of the Bible and the dangerously remote God of the philosophers, for both are models of aspects of the complexity of the divine nature'.[56]

Wiles's deistically-inclined subsuming of God's activity into a single creative act preserves God's consistency against impressions of capriciousness or interference with the laws of nature. However, Polkinghorne believes that God is by this 'in danger of becoming no more than the abstract ground of possibility'. It would be inconsistent with the freedom God has given human beings not to have similar freedom himself. So he prefers to view God as

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[52] Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, pp. 113-34.
[53] Polkinghorne, John, *One World:  The Interaction of Science and Theology*, London, SPCK, 1986, p. 34.
[54] Polkinghorne, *One World*, p. 34.
[55] 'Dangerously anthropomorphic' through modern eyes, whereas premodern insight would have instinctively made the distinctions.
[56] Polkinghorne, John, *Reason and Reality: The Relationship between Science and Theology*, London, SPCK, 1991, p. 28.

continuously interacting with the world, with his personal nature entailing specific responses to particular individuals, tailored to particular circumstances.[57] God's and our freedom to act 'opens up the possibility of a complementary metaphysic in which the mental and the material are related as poles of the world-stuff in varying degrees of indeterminate/determinate organization'. Thus the modern scientific view of the world does not render the possibility of God's providential action incoherent, but allows 'location of his action in the flexibility of process'. Given this flexibility, there may be scope for miracles, which are simply 'the providential in unusual circumstances',[58] not contrary to the laws of nature, but 'more profound revelations of the character of the divine relationship to creation'. 'The God who interacts with the history of the universe must be a dipolar God, possessing a temporal pole as well as an eternal pole', and 'neither God nor man is perceived as caught in the grip of relentless causal rigidity'.[59]

So Polkinghorne finds place for the action of God in the total flux of the cosmic process in nature, demonstrated by the uncertainty of modern quantum physics, the 'modern theory of exquisitely sensitive dynamical systems (rather inaptly called "the theory of chaos")'. But this would not extend to God's being, since, 'in the traditional language of the theologians of the Eastern Church, God acts in the world through his energies, not his essence.' Revelation may be understood – rather as for Williams – as 'a reference to events or people particularly transparent to the divine presence, rather than understood as some mysteriously endorsed knowledge of what otherwise would be ineffable'.[60]  And perfection may reside:

> not in the absence of change, but in perfect appropriateness in relation to each successive moment. It is the perfection of music rather than the perfection of a statue. I do not think that God is necessarily simply eternal, so that he can only relate to time in a holistic way.[61]

Polkinghorne's preferred understanding of God's timelessness embracing our past, present and future is as 'an unfolding process within which God is certainly at work but, in Peacocke's striking phrase, as "an Improviser of unsurpassed ingenuity" rather than as the composer of a

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[57] Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, pp. 5-7, 41-43, *Science and Theology: An Introduction*, London, SPCK, 1998, p. 67 and, *Science and Christian Belief: Theological Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker*, London, 1994, p. 54.

[58] Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, pp. 2, 24-25.

[59] Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, pp. 93, 3, 13.

[60] Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief*, pp. 27, 54; *Reason and Reality*, p. 2.

[61] Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief*, p. 59.

fixed musical score'. Thus, Polkinghorne concludes, 'God has a relation to time which makes him immanent within it, as well as eternally transcendent of it'.[62]

God's omnipotence is, in Polkinghorne's view, limited to the extent that 'he can only will what is in accord with his character', God being '*internally* constrained by the consistency of his own nature'. 'The rational God must respect reason', which includes mathematical logic and not implying that 2 + 2 = 5; the faithful God will not intervene arbitrarily; and the world a loving God relates to will not be totally subservient. Polkinghorne acknowledges that the crediting of these qualities could be seen as 'restor[ing] the Platonic world of pre-existent forms as constraints upon divinity', and that they could be seen as mere tautologies.[63] But he fails to notice the paradox of the alternative constraint of these rationalities having been devised by humanity before being applied to God.

In earlier works, Polkinghorne recognises our limited understanding of human psychic life,[64] and comes close to locating God's activity in a gap, when he suggests that the medium for God's interaction with humanity might be the Jungian archetypal world of the unconscious, sometimes with psychosomatic effect. Despite his desire to the contrary, Polkinghorne sometimes exerts his scientific understanding of flexibility and indeterminacy to find gaps where God's activity might be located.  For instance, he rejects praying for an alteration to the seasons of the year as ridiculous, but accepts the possible usefulness of praying for rain because God's immanent action 'will always lie hidden in those complexes whose precarious balance makes them unsusceptible to prediction'.[65] This tendency is even clearer later, when he proposes the possibility of God interacting with his creation through 'information input', which he associates with the work of the Holy Spirit**,** and predicates on possible 'holistic laws of nature presently unknown to us but capable of eventual scientific discovery'.[66] He still considers some gaps for God legitimate when he writes, on the basis of 'top-down intentional causality', of intrinsic "gaps" (an envelope of possibility) in the bottom-up account of nature to

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[62] Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief*, pp. 60 (quoting Peacocke, *God and the New Biology*, p. 98), 61.
[63] Polkinghorne, John, *Science and Creation: The Search for Understanding*, London, SPCK, 1988, pp. 51-52.
[64] Polkinghorne, *One World*, p. 70.
[65] Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, pp. 9-10, 34, 32.
[66] Polkinghorne, John, *Serious Talk: Science and Religion in Dialogue*, London, SCM, 1995, pp. 83-84.

make room for intentionality causality . . . . There is nothing unfitting in a "God of the gaps" in this sense . . . .'.[67]

By 1998, Polkinghorne rejects limiting God's influence to the depths of the human psyche, since this would neglect God's work before human beings existed and rely on 'a separate realm of spiritual encounter, divorced from the physical/mental reality of a dual-aspect monistic world, in which providence can act'.[68] Any god of the gaps, he says 'is well and truly dead'; rather, God is to be found everywhere.  He effectively enlarges on this when he separates as different categories of statement: the origin of the world in the big bang; and God's creating the world, God being understood 'not as working with or against the grain of physical law, but as the guarantor of that law . . . sustain[ing] the world in being'. Thus, the concept of God is in no way threatened by theories of the world's physical origin, since 'He is the ground of physical process, not a participant in it',[69] and 'the author and producer of the play, not a particularly striking actor upon the stage'. Aquinas's first cause he interprets as representing 'logical hierarchy rather than temporal priority', so that God is not 'an originating cause in the remote past . . . but . . . the fundamental cause in and of the present'.[70]

Polkinghorne, like Peacocke, recognizes the dipolarity of God as a positive gift from process theology: 'There must be both temporal and eternal poles to divinity'. There is a simultaneity about God in his temporality, such that 'God is not a localised observer in the chosen frame but omnipresent within it. . . . [Across time,] God will experience every event, *as, where and when it happens*, and know all such events in their correct causal interrelations.' But, as Polkinghorne concludes one of his later books, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that he is still seeking gaps. His proposals of 'active information' and of causality seem to suggest that there is a need for specific *loci* or conduits for God to play a part, rather than a more overwhelming need to see God at work in the whole.  Polkinghorne would see this latter need as tending in a panentheistic or even deist direction.  But it is difficult to see how justice can be done to the notion of God without such a tendency.  Indeed, sometimes his concepts are totally holistic.[71]

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[67] Lennox, John C., *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried* God, Oxford, Lion, 2009 edition, pp. 189-90 (quoting Polkinghorne, John, 'The Laws of Nature and the Laws of Physics', Russell, John, Murphy, Nancey and Isham, C. J., eds., *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, Vatican City, Vatican Observatory, 1999, p. 438).
[68] Polkinghorne, John, *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, New Haven, Yale University, 1998, pp. 54-55.
[69] Polkinghorne, *One World*, pp. 60, 65-67.
[70] Polkinghorne, *Science and Creation*, pp. 13, 11.
[71] Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, pp. 69, 71-72, 74.

Polkinghorne's science and theology sometimes interact, but are not interwoven. Here is his strength: for all his lapses towards gaps for God, he respects the category distinction between the two disciplines and views them largely as alternative descriptions of how things are. He is reluctant to understand God's activity as a way of interpreting the unfolding of the created order and events within it, as too close to deism. Yet he maintains the proper duality of God's eternity and temporality, and 'a world kept in being by the divine Juggler rather than by the divine Structural Engineer, a world whose precarious process speaks of the free gift of Love'.[72]

**5.7 Summary**

The trend among these theologians is towards balance between immanence in the context of transcendence, with reluctance to attribute intervention to God. However, Williams – for whom ontological definition is inseparable from spiritual insight – implies that divine activity is part of God's nature, and comes closest to God breaking into the world. The most reluctant over intervention is Wiles, for whom such involvement is subsumed into one creative act. For Milbank, concerned to avoid diminishing transcendence, the concept of divine need for humanity and for human response, or even for reciprocity, is suspect, as is even God's immanence apart from Christ (although some Radical Orthodox writers use 'immanence' with reference to the created order). For Radical Orthodoxy, there is no place where God is not, with the possibility for all things of participation in the divine.[73] Of the three scientists surveyed, Stannard finds no need to rethink 'God'. Peacocke approximates to Wiles's deistically-inclined position, in that God's immanence is recognisable by events that are not by direct intervention but by a 'top-down' chain of creative processes, and by a similar means of 'communication'. There is ambivalence, however, when Peacocke posits the possibility of 'higher laws' by which rare interventions might occur, although an adequate theodicy would be difficult if God intervened sometimes but not in the face of evil. Microbiological randomness may play a part in this, but certainly not as a gap for God's activity, since gaps, for Peacocke, would 'impertinently' limit God's field of operation. God is, however, deliberately self-limiting, and Peacocke tends in the direction of process theology and panentheism, without accepting either entirely. Peacocke cannot accept Polkinghorne's seeming consignment of God's activity to apparently unclosable gaps in the predictability of the natural order. Polkinghorne in his earlier writings is more ready than Peacocke to find locations for God's activity, such as the subconscious mind, sub-atomic indeterminacy or yet-to-be-discovered of laws of nature. This tendency diminishes later, as Polkinghorne more definitely

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[72] Polkinghorne, *Science and Creation*, p. 67.
[73] Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy*, pp. 3-4.

rules out gaps for God, though he sometimes reverts. Despite some sympathy, he criticises process theology for marginalizing God's role and providential care. Thus is represented from this sample of theologians the inevitable dichotomy between transcendence and immanence with their implications for the way God interacts with the creation. The study of informal theology and the exercise in practical theology will demonstrate the degree to which God's immanence figures in the understanding of ordinary believers.

## Chapter 6: PROCESS THEOLOGY AND PASSIBILITY

Process theologies, in their diversity, unite in attributing to God involvement in, and being affected by, the world's temporal processes. This implies temporality, mutability and even passibility, which conflict with conventional theology. However, process theology has resonance for academic and informal theologians for whom the Incarnation reflects the wider nature of God; and the notion of God's passibility for those who take this principle further in terms of Jesus's suffering and the whole gamut of suffering in the world.

### 6.1 Norman Pittenger

Pittenger, the main Anglican UK proponent of post-war process theology following his 1966 retirement in England from America, acknowledges the influence of Whitehead and Hartshorne.[1] His position is that:

> any model or picture or concept of God which is to make sense must be one that includes his self-identification with a processive world, his serious use of time and his existence as sharing in temporal succession (even if not exactly as we finite creatures know it), his being as active and alive, his relationship with all that is not himself, his freedom from decision amongst relevant possibilities, his 'dipolar' nature as including both abstract existence and actual concrete selfhood, his expressing or revealing himself in particular events which thus acquire 'importance', and (above all and first of all) his character as sheer Love-in-action.[2]

Earlier, he presents process theology in contrast with a deist approach and in the context of the self-sufficient scientific evolutionary world-view, writing:

> A conception of God as essentially immutable being, with no continuing relationship to his creation save a logical one, is patently inadequate to the facts which we now have available about the world in which we live.[3]

He is responding to the constantly changing, dynamic nature of the world and of humanity, including Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary theme; and to the inter-relatedness of the 'occasions' of the world, society and events, such that 'we are not able to make sharp distinctions of an ultimate and definitive kind'. The 'occasions' (a Whitehead expression) of past events, contemporary exterior factors and the 'lure' of the future together create the present. For Whitehead and Pittenger, it is the way these factors are 'brought to a focus . . .

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[1] Pittenger, W. Norman, *Goodness Distorted*, London, Mowbray, 1970, p. 33; *Picturing God*, London, SCM, 1982, pp. 22, 29-44. Whitehead's influence is most explicit in Pittenger, Norman, *Process-Thought and Christian Faith*, Welwyn, Nisbet, 1968.

[2] Pittenger, Norman, *Unbounded Love: God and Man in Process, with study guide*, New York, Seabury, 1976, p. 13.

[3] Pittenger, W. Norman, *The Word Incarnate: A Study of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ*, Welwyn, Nisbet, 1959, p. 147.

and make their impact' that amounts to causation, with the whole causative process 'characterised' by God's 'subjective aim'. God takes into himself all that has occurred, whether good or evil, and is 'ceaselessly working towards the most widely shared good'.[4] Our experience of God is based on worldly experiences, with God the ultimate extension and fulfilment (or 'supreme instantiation') of those experiences. Expressed like that, his conceptualization would sound almost Platonic, were it not for its object being set so firmly in this world, and his distancing the conceptualization from the element in Greek philosophy that 'often made deity a metaphysical "monster", irrelevant and meaningless to . . . human experience'. There is mutuality of relationship between God and the world on the basis of love, with mutual influencing and affecting: 'God is in real and internal relationship with [the] world, not in a merely logical and external relationship'. His independence is restricted to self-consistency in unfailing goodness, just-ness and faithfulness to purpose,[5] with aseity not a primary attribute.[6] Process theology Pittenger sees as the natural outworking of the Christian presentation, with its emphases on God's 'becoming', rather than 'being itself', suffering and persuasive. God thus becomes 'supremely the cosmic Lover'.[7]

However, process theology is at odds, not only with the deistic streak in concepts such as 'unmoved mover' and omniscience, but also with conventional theism's insistence on God as absolute and transcendent. Pittenger interprets God's transcendence not as remoteness but as inexhaustibility of 'God's resources of loving care and concern', Charles Wesley's 'pure unbounded love'.[8] But process theology accords with classical theology, Pittenger claims, in not limiting God's creation to an event, or the start of an époque before which God 'existed entirely alone in majestic isolation'. He cites evidence from scholastic theology and from F. W. Dillistone in support of his view that creation is a doctrine of dependence upon God, who possessed 'a formless concentration of energy' before and after the creation of the world; and he interprets *ex nihilo* as referring to a prior 'absence of that particular occasion with its potentialities'.[9] The more conventional theology with which Pittenger contrasts process theology, he suggests, is often deistically inclined, for instance when 'God is . . . related only

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[4] Pittenger, *Process-Thought and Christian Faith*, pp. 7-8, 12-13, 14-16, 32.
[5] Pittenger, Norman, *Catholic Faith in a Process Perspective*, New York, Orbis, 1981, pp. 6, 7, 9-10.
[6] Pittenger, *Process-Thought and Christian Faith*, p. 27.
[7] Pittenger, Norman, *The Lure of Love Divine: Human Experience and Christian Faith in a Process Perspective*, New York, Pilgrim, and Edinburgh, T&TC, 1979, pp. 79-81; *Picturing God*, pp. 15, 60.
[8] Pittenger, *Process-Thought and Christian Faith*, p. 24; *Unbounded* Love, p. 17.
[9] Pittenger, *Picturing God*, pp. 69-71 (quoting Dillistone, F. W., *The Christian Faith*, London, H&S, 1964, page unstated).

"logically" to the world and is entirely unaffected by what goes on within it'.[10] Panentheistic process theology obviates the need for postulating occasional divine interventions, once God's constant presence and involvement in the world is recognized.[11] As Pittenger submits, following Hartshorne, it also accords with the common Christian concept of human service for God.[12] God, Pittenger writes, 'calls us into partnership with him',[13] into partnership as 'surrogates' or 'agencies', though not, hubristically, as 'substitutes'.[14]

It is in this loving relationship, with the relativity that it incurs, that, for Hartshorne, God's perfection is to be found. God's creative activity (which is an indispensable part of his nature, such that there never was a time before he created) is a matter of self-expression, stemming of necessity from the divine nature itself. For Pittenger, God 'does not need to "intrude" into the world, for he is already there – or rather . . . the world is "in" him who is the circumambient Reality "outside" whom nothing can exist'; there is thus no intrusion, or even a 'divine rescue expedition' in Christ.[15]

Pittenger writes that God cannot be an exception to the societal, relatedness nature of the world; otherwise he would be 'irrelevant and utterly unrelated'; in fact, 'God is participant in process too, and God is supremely related'. He is the chief cause, alongside creaturely cause, and the supreme effect, influenced by what happens in the continuing activity of creation. We affect God, who rejoices or suffers, is enriched or is deprived. 'We count for God', with the mutuality of relationship characteristic of true love. Providence and omnipotence are not coercive, but lovingly maximise opportunity; omniscience does not limit free choice, but sees the relevant possibilities. Pittenger describes humanity as 'a "becoming" movement towards fulfilment' and God as 'luring, enticing, inviting, soliciting his children towards their own best good', with an identical approach to the world at large. The divine Love operates by persuasion rather than coercion, and is how Pittenger would redefine omnipotence. (However, it can be noted that coercion is hardly a mark of conventional theology, and that it is a fine dividing line between persuading and coercing, as with modern advertising.) Omniscience he redefines within 'the new model, in which time is taken seriously', as avoiding any sense of determinism (although theologians have not generally claimed omniscience was deterministic), but rather knowing the possibilities for the future. 'Omnipresence' refers to 'the availability of the divine

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[10] Pittenger, *Goodness Distorted*, p. 37.

[11] Cf. Pittenger, *Word Incarnate*, p. 149 and *Process-Thought and Christian Faith*, p. 41.

[12] Pittenger, *Goodness Distorted*, pp. 37-38.

[13] Pittenger, Norman, *God in Process*, London, SCM, 1967, p. 17.

[14] Pittenger, Norman, *After Death: Life in God*, London, SCM, 1980, p. 34.

[15] Pittenger, *Word Incarnate*, pp. 55-56, 154.

Love to all people at all times and in all places and in any circumstances.[16] While Pittenger's reinterpretations may represent Christian truths and be pastorally useful, they do not reflect the conventional meanings of 'omnipotence' 'omniscience' and 'omnipresence'; it would be preferable for process theology to deny or assert these attributes for God, rather than trying artificially to accommodate them.

God's activity, for Pittenger, respects the characteristics within creation, with the past effective on the present and integral possibilities for the future. God is active throughout, but particularly so with invitations or lures as each event (or 'occasion') develops, while respecting human freedom to choose. God is not unaffected, and each 'occasion' 'makes a difference to God and in God', with joy, anguish, suffering, and new opportunities for God resulting. God's love turns things to good account, and 'In God's "consequent nature" – that is, in deity as affected by what goes on in the creation – there is nothing more than "the kingdom of heaven"', with a resulting stream of loving influence back into creation.[17]

**6.2 Arthur Peacocke and John Polkinghorne**

For Peacocke, God is constantly creative through 'natural processes of the world unveiled by the sciences',[18] with God's agency as transcendent-in-immanence constantly active in relation to 'the whole physical causal nexus'.[19] Thus Peacocke finds some, but not total, affinity with process theology, and interprets God's two poles[20] as representing God's Creative Love and God's Responsive Love; he is open to the idea of God suffering within the processes of the world through the implications of love.[21] Where he departs from process theology is in insisting that God is the Creator of actuality, and not just an influencer of occasions.[22] Peacocke tends unmistakably in a panentheistic direction: everything is in God and God is in everything, although God transcends everything in time and space. Allusion has already been made to Peacocke's analogy of Beethoven being in every Seventh Symphony performance,[23] yet unable to interfere in the performance. He finds panentheism exemplified in Augustine, as a means by which God can be interacting with the world without breaking the laws of

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[16] Pittenger, *Goodness Distorted*, pp. 88, 89, 32, 5; *Picturing God*, pp. 83-85; cf. Pittenger, *God in Process*, p. 100.

[17] Pittenger, Norman, 'The Divine Activity', *Encounter*, 47, no. 3, Summer 1986, pp. 262-64.

[18] Peacocke, *Paths from Science towards* God, pp. 136-37.

[19] Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, p. 140.

[20] Whitehead's primordial nature and consequent nature; Hartshorne's abstract essence and concrete actuality.

[21] Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, pp. 113-34.

[22] Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, pp. 140-41.

[23] Peacocke, *God and the New Biology*, pp. 96-97.

science.[24] Even so, as already noted, he prefers a model based upon the human female's creation of an embryo within herself.[25]

John Polkinghorne acknowledges the scope in process theology for 'divine interaction with a person or a proton', thus avoiding the problem of the pre-human millennia, but detects some difficulties. He characterizes process theology as relying on series of events, which he describes as showing 'discrete "graininess"' and which he says quantum physics, with its continuous development and sharp discontinuities, does not display. He believes that process theology's reliance on God's persuasion, with 'the event itself lead[ing] to its own completion', makes God's role marginal, rather than reflecting true providential care;[26] and that it concentrates on present enrichment at the expense of hope for God's action and the future, including life after death.[27]  He prefers Ward's solution of 'a God whose internal complexity is such that he can embrace both the necessary and the contingent', with 'divine complementarity of being and becoming', so that God, through the process of creation and *kenosis*, makes room for something other than himself.[28] Nevertheless, Polkinghorne finds that 'the flexible openness of process [is] the locus of God's interaction with his creation, without there being an improper bridging of the ontological gap between the Creator and that creation'. Although God remains omnipotent, 'it is not in accordance with his will and nature to insist on total control'.[29] Even chance has a role in the world as God has created it, with 'the antinomy of chance and necessity within the freely evolving creation that he allows to be', accounting, for instance, for the cancer that God has allowed but does not determine. God is a God of process, within 'the precariousness of the divine creativity'.[30] God's relinquishing total control and omniscience 'requires us to take God's temporality very seriously', and insist that 'his hand is positively active in all that happens'.[31]

**6.3 God's passibility**

While potentially controversial in the context of later Christian understanding of God's immutability, feeling and suffering are not unknown in ancient Jewish theology.  James Atwell points to the Yahwist's attribution of intense sorrow that he had made humans and animals

[24] Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, pp. 158-59 (quoting Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.7.
[25] Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, pp. 141-44 (referring to Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34, Genesis 1:26-27, Proverbs 8, Wisdom 9).
[26] Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, p. 56.
[27] Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief*, pp. 65-8.
[28] Polkinghorne, *Science and Creation*, p. 61.
[29] Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief*, p. 81.
[30] Polkinghorne, *Science and Creation*, pp. 63-64.
[31] Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief*, p. 81.

which caused God to inflict the Flood, and Hosea's of strong emotion with 'How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . . My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender'.[32]

Panentheism and God's passibility begin to emerge for Pittenger in 1959, writing that God is:

> *'in' the world* – or better, the world is 'in' him – since his wisdom, goodness, and power are continually operative through the created order . . . . And in so doing, God is himself affected by the creation in which he works: he is not aloof, not utterly unchanging and unchangeable being.[33]

As Pittenger rightly points out, to portray God 'as in no sense thus affected would be alien to the general biblical picture'.[34] Indeed, 'The Jewish-Christian tradition', he writes, 'has never really been content with an "unmoved mover" as the final principle of explanation', or with God being 'described in substantial terms of a kind which leave [sic] little room for his boundless energizing activity in the world'.[35]

Despite Pittenger's general acceptance of God being passible as part of his immanent involvement, he remains cautious, distinguishing between the physiological-psychological suffering of human experience and a kind of suffering 'which is more like the deepest and most intimate compassion or sympathy' and more attributable to God.[36] Even so, God: is 'affected' by the world; shares in the evil in the world; is a fellow-sufferer; turns every occasion to good account if at all possible; and wins victories over evil only in ways consistent with his loving nature and respect for freedom. God has to overcome worldly obstacles of selfish recalcitrance, arising from the 'radical freedom' that characterizes the world. The persuasion needed of God to accomplish his will 'requires a subtlety of divine operation rather than a direct and immediate manipulation of created or creaturely occasions'.[37]

Polkinghorne too espouses the concept of a suffering God – a fellow sufferer, but not overcome by suffering, as focused in Christ's passion. He resolves the tension between God suffering and Christ suffering when he writes: 'The dialectic of a suffering God finds its historical expression in a crucified Messiah'. He respects Brown's caution about too easy an anthropomorphism, but suggests that God, with divine temporality, must share the uncertainty that Jesus experienced about the vindicating outcome of suffering. Over issues of

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[32] Atwell, James, *The Sources of the Old Testament: A Guide to the Religious Thought of the Hebrew Bible*, London, T&TC, 2004, p. 54, citing Genesis 6. 5-8, Hosea 11. 8-9.
[33] Pittenger, *Word Incarnate*, p. 147.
[34] Pittenger, *After Death*, p. 32.
[35] Pittenger, *Process-Thought and Christian Faith*, p. 21.
[36] Pittenger, *Word Incarnate*, p. 149.
[37] Pittenger, *Goodness Distorted*, pp. 38, 32.

theodicy, with the mystery of suffering and apparently random healings, Polkinghorne concludes that 'in his great act of creation, God allows the whole universe [including humanity] to be itself',[38] or, more picturesquely, that 'Not all that happens is in accordance with God's will because God has stood back, making metaphysical room for creaturely action'.[39]

For Newlands, God 'must be able simultaneously to suffer with those who are in distress and to rejoice with those who rejoice' to be worthy of belief.[40] However, in accordance with Newlands's principle of analogy as a means of analysing our descriptions of God, noted above:

> to speak of God as suffering is to use language analogically. But not all elements of our talk of God are analogical, certainly not analogical in the same way. . . . To speak of God as suffering is no more and no less intelligible than to speak of God as not suffering, not subject to change, not affected by happenings in the world. We cannot escape the anthropological pole of theology simply by resort to negative theology.[41]

Newlands recognizes a danger of the paradoxical concept of God suffering turning into nonsense when pressed too far, when he writes:

> We must be very careful about how we use analogies in relating language concerning Jesus to language concerning God. . . . We may perhaps use the events concerning Jesus as paradigmatic clues given by grace to the understanding of God . . . . We cannot however simply extrapolate from the man Jesus to the divine nature as if there were some authorised one to one correspondence, whether through analogy of grace or being.[42]

For Jenkins, 'The embodiment of the pattern of personalness of God is the pattern of the personalness of Jesus Christ', so suffering must have a real place in the former. God must suffer: 'For if God does not suffer, but produces his purposes out of suffering [presumably creaturely suffering, including Christ's] by a divine condescension proceeding from absolute detachment, then it is exceedingly difficult to see how he can be regarded as other than a cosmic monster'. He goes further, arguing that, on the basis of the suffering of Jesus, who, in Jenkins's words, experienced atheism, God did likewise. Jenkins is ambivalent, however, retaining the 'traditional theistic notion of the impassibility of God', with God's love responding to need but not in essence being changed in the process. Nevertheless, God's

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[38] Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief*, pp. 63 (quoting Brown, David, *Continental Philosophy and Modern Theology,* Oxford, Blackwell, 1987), 45, 83.
[39] Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, p. 13.
[40] Newlands, *Theology of the Love of God*, p. 98.
[41] Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective*, p. 83.
[42] Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective*, pp. 115-16.

'godness' includes 'God's practical capacity for involvement and identification', and, therefore, God suffers.[43]

There is similar ambivalence when the 1987 Church of England Doctrine Commission report, turns briefly to 'The Suffering of God':[44] God suffered and still suffers whenever his children do not follow his purposes or his creatures suffer. However, as Ward points out,[45] the impassibility of God is not as completely discarded as the chairman claims. The possibility that the report acknowledges is largely confined to the person of Christ, though with some ambivalence on the point at the end of the discussion.[46] As Ward notes,[47] it is curious that the evident interest in God's passibility does not lead to considering process theology, with its appeal to some in making speaking of God more accessible.

Bill Vanstone describes the popular impression that 'God is pure activity, always subject and never object, "impassible"'; that God is wholly self-dependent, controlling every situation, with 'no dependence, no waiting, no exposure, nothing of passion or possibility . . .'. Alternatively, God might be 'passible', which in the light of other analysis, he would probably define as 'liable to suffering', rather than simply 'suffering'. Applied to God, it would imply that '"it is in the nature of things" that God should be exposed to or affected by or dependent upon that which happens in the world', with 'a relationship of mutuality or fundamental interdependence between God and the world', and needing the world 'in order that the passible, affective, receptive aspect of His nature may be fulfilled'.[48] Indeed, in his earlier illustrations of diligent model making and the surgeon's heroic work, Vanstone highlights the mutability and vulnerability of creator figures.[49] But there is a shift of emphasis, with Vanstone coming to believe that such interdependence and mutual necessity would result in the concept of God losing distinctness, with 'God and the world becom[ing] merged into one complex interacting reality; and the differentiation of one part of that reality as "God" becom[ing] almost arbitrary'. So, for Vanstone, God is definitely impassible, with no possibility of God being dependent upon, exposed to or affected by the world, but rather with God always 'the active and initiating subject, never the receptive object'.[50]

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[43] Jenkins, David E., *The Glory of Man*, London, SCM, 1967, pp. 106-10.

[44] *We Believe in God* (1987 edition), pp. 157-160.

[45] Ward, 'God of the Doctrine Commission', p. 1.

[46] *We Believe in God*, pp. ix, 158-160.

[47] Ward, 'God of the Doctrine Commission', p.1.

[48] Vanstone, W. H., *The Stature of Waiting,* DLT, 1982, pp. 64-65, 89-92.

[49] Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's* Expense, pp. 32, 62.

[50] Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting,* pp. 92-93.

There is a contrast in Jesus, who 'places Himself in men's hands and becomes exposed to whatever they will do', and who, 'in handing Himself over, in passing of His own will from action to passion, enacts and discloses that which, at the deepest level, is distinctive of divinity, distinctive of God'.[51] The contrast and apparent contradiction are justified, Vanstone argues, by a conclusion that neither assertion nor denial of God's passibility is adequate, and that God is *Deus non passibilis sed passus*. However, his conclusion relies on some faulty linguistic analysis. Among his comparative examples, he claims that 'laudable' means 'expects to be praised' whereas in fact it means '*can* be praised'. This leads him to claim that 'Unpardonable insults are sometimes forgiven', which is incorrect, since 'unpardonable' means '*cannot* be pardoned'. So his so-called paradox of an unlovable child finding itself loved is based on faulty logic, leading to the self-contradiction inherent in *Deus non passibilis sed passus*.[52] It is true that in Jesus God may be said to be *passus*, and in the context of Trinitarian theology the full phrase is legitimate. However, it would have been better presented simply as such, rather than with the extensive attempt at linguistic justification in relation to God as a basic concept. Nevertheless, in insisting on *Deus non passibilis sed passus* and elsewhere,[53] Vanstone makes very clear that his sympathy with process theology (although he does not use the expression) is limited.

John Milbank goes further, with no place at all for God-in-his-entire-being suffering with humankind, and moves straight to the suffering of Christ: 'Evil cannot fully see itself as evil, therefore only the uncontaminated good, God himself, can fully suffer evil – not in eternity, which is beyond suffering, but in the human creation: hence the necessity for the *Deus Homo*'.[54] To suggest that God, separately from Christ, suffers, would be to diminish divine transcendence.

**6.4 Summary**

Pittenger, as the only thorough exponent of process theology and panentheism in this study, is responding, in a way that Peacocke and Polkinghorne do more cautiously, to the nature of the world order as currently experienced, to find God not in any niche but in the whole worldly process. God is immanent not through intrusive events but by constant involvement, with his

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[51] Vanstone, *Stature of Waiting,* p. 89; cf. p. 111.
[52] Although quoted as if an established tag, Internet search has not revealed any source beyond Vanstone.
[53] Vanstone, *Stature of Waiting,* pp. 89-94, 111.
[54] Milbank, John, 'Postmodern critical Augustinianism: a short summa in forty-two responses to unasked questions', Milbank and Oliver, *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, p. 55 (this chapter, *Modern Theology*, 7(3), 1991, pp. 225-37).

influence occurring through hidden persuasion, through 'luring'. This is undoubtedly at some expense to traditional transcendence, although some would contend that such transcendence is no longer an intelligible concept. Others would argue that Pittenger is reacting unnecessarily to a deistically inclined theism.  Polkinghorne in fact sees process theology as something of a threat to conventional theism by lessening God's involvement and activity.

Ward sympathises with process theology's principles, pointing out the difficulty for Thomist immutability from the essential theist understanding of God who is personal, acts and therefore changes in response to and in relation to his creation.  He sees 'a trend towards holding God to be temporal, capable of suffering and bliss, dynamic and creative'.[55]  Yet Ward retains two essential aspects: 'Only if God is temporal, can he be a free creator of a universe of free creatures; only if he is eternal, can he possess that necessity which is the foundation of the intelligibility of the world; only if he is dipolar, can he be both'. In process theology, he sees a risk of God becoming a mere spectator of the world he includes, himself part of a creative process he cannot control, 'wedged helplessly between creativity . . . and the countless actual occasions which project the world into the future'. We do not want God to be a monarchical tyrant or just the remote designer of the machine, but neither do we want him to be 'the helpless experient of all [the world's] feelings, a "fellow-sufferer" who never himself appears to act'. The world must certainly be accorded autonomy, but God must be seen as actually acting, controlling and guiding.[56]

For Milbank, the idea of God suffering is totally contrary to his emphasis on transcendence. But with others there is sympathy, but also reluctance to jettison either God's impassibility or overall transcendence, with reliance on the theological paradox of God suffering only in Christ, despite the many Old Testament clues to the concept of God suffering with his people. Nevertheless, process theology constitutes a strong response to human need for a personal God to whom one can relate.  God thus presented is viable as the object of relationship, religion and prayer, as Pittenger certainly realises, and is more likely to be an object of religious experience than (to caricature) an abstract, theoretical being.[57] Whether it is Milbank or Pittenger's approaches which proves to be echoed within informal theology will be considered.

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[55] Ward, Keith, 'Recent Thinking on Christian Beliefs, II. The Concept of God', *ExpTim*, 88, no. 3, December 1976, pp. 69, 71.

[56] Ward, Keith, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1982, pp. 230, 209.

[57] Pittenger, *Process-Thought and Christian Faith*, pp. 33-35.

## Chapter 7: CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY

### 7.1 Introduction

'Cultural relativism' is used in this thesis, not in any pejorative sense, but as a neutral, descriptive term for the nature, relative to each other, of different temporal, ethnic and social cultures, and for the assumptions and expressions that emanate from those cultures. Thiselton provides an example of how its insights can be contentious. Cultures contribute to different theological presuppositions and outlooks (as Thiselton would accept), or are a basis for different, sometimes new, self-consciously contextual theological expression (with which Thiselton would have difficulty – see below). It is the basic, often unstated, assumptions that propel many liberal theologians into restating Christian doctrine.

It has already been shown that Mascall, Loughlin, Soskice and the 1976 Doctrine Commission report, among others, note the importance of participation in the religious community for effectiveness of religious language. Thiselton writes that 'the meaning of "God" is seen *in the first instance* by the role which it plays in the actual life of the Christian community, including the tradition of life and experience which nourishes it',[1] and concludes that, once language is adapted to the needs of its users, 'it hands on an inherited tradition which then makes it easier or more difficult for a later generation to raise certain questions, or to notice certain aspects of life'. Transmission and reiteration of corporate memory occur through a range of verbal and non-verbal means,[2] and only by fresh insights do we reverse or refine their content.[3]

There is close kinship here to Wittgenstein's concept of language games, which provide some protection against the implications of logical positivism, since an overall demand for verification or falsification is weakened if particular language has a symbolic purpose among a particular group of people. However, it is phenomena like logical positivism and the scientific revolution that have radically shifted intellectual culture. More particularly, the relationship between Scripture (i.e. the language of the community) and human experience is explored by Williams, where he contests Lindbeck's: 'Intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text'. Williams views this as over-simple, pointing out that Scripture cannot be detached either from its historical

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[1] Thiselton, *Language Liturgy and Meaning*, p. 13 (quoting van Buren, *Edges of* Language, pp. 70-71).

[2] Thiselton, 'Knowledge, Myth and Corporate Memory', *Believing in the Church*, p. 52 (quoting Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, p. 137), p. 53.

[3] Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, pp.137-38, 404, 432.

settings or from continuing interpretation on the basis of experience and fresh circumstances.[4] This chapter will focus on three theologians who have assumed cultural relativism in their writing, one (Thiselton) who is resistant to cultural relativism, one whose cultural relativism has led towards liberation theology, and several whose response has led to feminist theology and inter-faith theology.

## 7.2 Dennis Nineham

Nineham notes that, when religions speak of God, the meaning of the metaphor is governed by its literal use at any given time and place, unchanging though God may be. Although basic human nature and emotions are not greatly affected by cultural change,[5] 'religion is not an entirely transcultural phenomenon', having 'language and beliefs about God in any community . . . inextricably tied in with its language and beliefs about everything else'. Nineham quotes Cupitt's observation of the way in which a Muslim, when speaking of God, is speaking of God only as known through Islam, and 'does not suppose that true belief in the one True God, Allah, is abstractable from this very detailed context'.[6] To Cupitt's awareness of cultural relativism he adds emphasis on the inadequacy of the gospel evidence for a full and accurate account of Jesus: 'the great cultural gap which is fixed between his day and ours', and the doubtfulness of 'an unchangeable fundamental structure of the human spirit'[7] over the ages. Although he is referring to perceptions of Jesus, it is reasonable to infer a similar approach to perceptions of God.[8] The cultures of the Old and New Testament ages, he insists, are so different from that of today, for example with different understandings of history and miracles, that theist claims cannot be substantiated from the biblical sources.[9] This cultural relativism Brown interprets as indicating 'the stronger version of the deist claim', namely, 'not merely that there is no evidence for an interventionist God, but that on *a priori* grounds we know that there could be no such evidence'. Brown's own position is 'that one has either to accept an interventionist God or abandon rational justification of belief in God . . .'.[10] However,

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[4] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp. 29-31, 33, 40 (quoting Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, p. 118).

[5] Nineham, D. E., *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, London, Macmillan, 1976, pp. 1-2.

[6] Nineham, D. E., *Explorations in Theology 1*, London, SCM, 1977, pp. 150-151 (quoting Cupitt, Don from unpublished broadcast talk entitled 'Justification of Belief in God').

[7] Nineham, Dennis, 'Epilogue', Hick, *Myth of God Incarnate*, pp. 192, 200; reaffirmed, Edwards, David, *Tradition and Truth: The Challenge of England's Radical Theologians 1962-1989*, London, H&S, 1989, pp. 299-300.

[8] Nineham, D.E., *The Study of Divinity: An Inaugural Lecture*, London, SPCK, 1960, p. 22-23 begins development of theme.

[9] E.g., Nineham, *Use and Abuse of the Bible*, pp. 21-22, 57, 110.

[10] Brown, David, *The Divine Trinity*, London, Duckworth, 1985, pp. 5, 26-32.

Brown's accusation of deism is not supported by any citation from Nineham, and it does not follow from a conclusion that the biblical sources no longer form a foundation for theism that theism is irrational or impossible. Indeed, Nineham mentions some of the other sources that contribute to personal Christian faith, largely derived from Christian community life, other writings and art.[11]

He is unwilling to limit God, or allow any kind of positivism to rule out *a priori* the validity of 'well-based belief in God and his relations with his creatures', and makes theistic assumptions that God 'intended' things for the Church, 'produced the community' and 'made events significant'.[12] However, he writes cautiously: 'We may only believe that he has intervened in history in certain exceptional events if he has given us good ground for thinking he has done so'. Moreover, he has sympathy for those who 'are puzzled about a God who makes, if not salvation, at any rate present reconciliation and communion with Himself, dependent on ability to answer certain relatively vexed historical questions in a particular way' (by which, he means 'interpreted within the terms of the Bible itself and at variance with the understanding of most modern contemporaries'), with the risk of 'some *sacrificium intellectus*'.[13]

Nineham explores this further in terms of the Incarnation, which can be accepted (even by Bultmann) as God intervening *par excellence*, or else accepted as 'story' in continuity with Old Testament narratives, in contrast with 'history', with matters of historicity becoming less important than experiential interpretation, described as 'imaginative objectification'. He sympathizes with those who cannot conceive of God 'under the forms of traditional supranaturalism', with a separate divine realm that 'perforates this world [by] supranatural intervention'. He wants to retain God objectively, and yet changing culture makes it difficult now to comprehend God in the way that biblical generations could do. He favours 'pictures', but does not provide any new ones. When he writes of God calling us into relationship with him, it is in the context of God possibly calling us into a different kind of relationship from those of biblical times, even possibly, as Bonhoeffer suggests, calling us 'to live and act *etsi deus non daretur*'.[14]

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[11] Nineham, *Use and Abuse of the Bible*, p. 217.
[12] Nineham, Chapter 2. *Christian* Believing, p. 85.
[13] Nineham, *Use and Abuse of the Bible*, pp. 81, 93, 181.
[14] Nineham, *Use and Abuse of the Bible*, pp. 175-79, 183-86, 188, 246 (quoting Robinson, John A.T., *But That I Can't Believe!*, London, Collins, 1967, pp. 13-15), 254 (quoting Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 121).

Nineham's growing self-acknowledged scepticism,[15] is largely due to this increasing insistence on the changing nature of culture. His reluctance to espouse explicit divine intervention lays him open to Brown's charge of deism; but, without systematic explanation, he remains theistic. He can describe the Bible as in the providence of God and 'a kaleidoscope of writings, traditions and fragments . . . reflecting . . . some vivid experience of life, usually, though not always, life *touched by the hand of God*';[16] he assumes the possibility of a happy relationship between God and human beings.[17] There is tension, therefore, between Nineham's scepticism based on cultural relativity, and his faith.

**7.3 Maurice Wiles**

Wiles goes further, with his revisionism predicated on substantial cultural relativism, with a huge shift between the biblical and pre-modern era and the present. Even within early Christianity, he notes cultural tension between the Platonic view of a transcendent, eternal and changeless God, and the Jewish tradition of God's involvement with his people with Christian conviction of God's decisive action in Jesus. Wiles highlights the modern tension between scientific understanding of the world, and attempts to identify and locate God's action.[18] Our understanding of God tends to reflect what is problematical, so that:

> Where death, disease and natural disaster are frequent and little understood features of human existence, faith is liable to stress the contrasting character of God as wholly removed from all such change and suffering. But where such occurrences are seen rather as part of an inexorable and impersonal law of the universe, then it is God's character as free, personal being that is most firmly apprehended and insisted on by the person of faith.[19]

These assertions seem over-stark. It is sometimes in more dangerous environments and historical periods that God's presence and involvement, or his potential involvement through intervention, are most keenly felt – as in liberation theology. Moreover, with a modern, scientific approach to suffering, there is sometimes less active faith, as in much western twenty-first century society. Nevertheless, it is true that expectations of God vary across time and cultures, and in accordance with developing understanding of self and the world.[20]

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[15] Edwards, *Tradition and* Truth, p. 297.

[16] Nineham, *Use and Abuse of the Bible*, pp. 239, 193 (italics added).

[17] Most graphically, Nineham, *Use and Abuse of the Bible*, p. 245.

[18] Wiles, Maurice, *God's Action in the World: The Bampton Lectures for 1986*, London, SCM, 1986, pp. 3-5.

[19] Wiles, *God's Action in the World*, p. 5.

[20] Wiles, *God's Action in the World*, p. 11.

Culture is implicit when Wiles writes of the importance of human response in appreciating God:

> We cannot . . . speak significantly of God or of his acting in an objectified way, wholly separated from the human response, and it is therefore the total relationship which must be assessed in determining whether our understanding is true to a properly personal conception of God.[21]

This subtle distinction depends upon the believer being able to take a self-observing role. Illustrating his point by reference to the vastly differing expectations of God's activity between different people and across the centuries, Wiles instances the mediaeval clergy who attributed local disasters to punishment for profaning the Sabbath or excessive fondness for chess, and *The Book of Common Prayer*'s attribution of plague and sickness to God's punishment.  So changing expectations of God are not reliable sources *about* God, and Wiles insists that believers reflect on the *nature* of their faith as well as on the fundamental question of whether there is 'an absolute or universal referent of any kind towards which the varied forms of religion point'. Anthropology reveals, he says, 'that human knowledge of anything and everything is limited and relative, and 'the very recognition of that all-pervading relativity involves the fleeting grasp of something beyond relativity, of an objectivity that we envisage but cannot attain.'[22]

**7.4 David Brown**

Brown occupies a middle position over cultural relativism, and his approach develops over time.

Earlier, in combating deism, Brown rejects Nineham's understanding of cultural relativism, that biblical miracles were understood contemporarily as '"signs" and "wonders" rather than as violations of natural law [in] a world where uniformity of nature was not expected'.[23]  Brown denies: that one is prisoner to one's own culture; that arguments have no value outside the thought and conditions of their time; and that there is no commonality of interpretation and understanding across cultural divides. Indeed, some degree of common experience must exist, for instance across national, racial and cultural boundaries: otherwise, there would have been no Christianity in Anglo-Saxon Britain, and there would be none in China or Africa today.

Later, Brown finds tradition a developing phenomenon, and is open to the prospect of other expressions of Christian truth through the use of imagination.  In the context of

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[21] Wiles, Maurice, *Working Papers in Doctrine*, London, SCM, 1976, p. 143.
[22] Wiles, Maurice, *Faith and the Mystery of God,* London, SCM, 1982, pp. 7, 8, 10.
[23] Brown, *Divine Trinity*, p. 27, drawing on Nineham, *Use and Abuse of the Bible*.

postmodernism, he writes: 'Theology (and revelation) always operates in intimate relation with developments within culture as a whole'.[24] He is concerned to place Christianity satisfactorily in the context of modernity and postmodernity, and to widen human experience of God beyond the confines of the Church and the ostensibly religious to include nature, the garden and the built environment,[25] the human body, music and dance.[26] In effect, he is acknowledging cultural relativism and the need to respond to new cultural expectations. To give just one example, he writes:

> In the modern developed world there is now . . . a huge mismatch between the Church and how people . . . experience the divine. It is not that the latter have ceased to believe in the supernatural or only identify it in a very crude way . . . but that, when they attend a church service, the ritual no longer seems to evoke any immediate or intuitive response. In part this is perhaps a good thing, as the Church can scarcely claim to have a distinctive gospel unless there are elements that sit ill with existing presuppositions. . . . That is one reason why the exercise in natural religion upon which I have been engaged . . . seems to me of no small moment.[27]

Brown outlines the scope within nature for experiencing God:

> God is found in nature and gardens, in buildings and place, in music and bodies . . . . Contemporary Christian theology seems willing to concede at most only an instrumental or utilitarian value. Buildings, for instance, are discussed wholly in terms of their usefulness for worship; gardens, as though exercise or relaxation were the only issues. That seems to me quite wrong. A God active outside the control of the Church needs to be acknowledged, and the implications heeded. That entails a careful listening exercise, the final result of which cannot be predetermined in advance. So, for example, I fail to see why the Christian should not concede genuine experience of God to be mediated through the structures of mosques and temples.[28]

Although Mark Laynesmith may be over-stringent in his critique that it is unclear how one can be sure 'that *this* body (or garden or building or art work) is really revelatory of *God*',[29] Brown himself refers to exaggerations of aspects of God's nature that have sometimes occurred in bodily portrayals, as when stereotyping Christ as the Byzantine Pantocrator.[30] He notes that aspects of nature that people now find inspiring would once have been sources of dread, but

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[24] E.g. Brown, David, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change*, Oxford, OUP, 1999, pp. 5-6 (with a similar trait, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth*, Oxford, OUP, 2000), p. 33.
[25] Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, p. 247.
[26] Brown, David, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary*, Oxford, OUP, 2007.
[27] Brown, *God and Enchantment of* Place, p. 407.
[28] Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, p. 2.
[29] Laynesmith, Mark, '*David Brown, God and Enchantment of Place. Reclaiming Human Experience*', *MB,* Vol. 46, No. 4, Oct. 2005, p. 57.
[30] Brown, *God and Grace of Body*, p. 34.

denies that 'all such responses to nature are really entirely determined by historical and cultural setting, and therefore can provide no independent access to truth about God'.[31]

Some twentieth century abstract art, abandoning one-to-one correspondence, is an effective way of presenting metaphysical or religious claims, including claims about God's relationship with the world.  So one thing that art and theology have in common is 'symbolic worlds where the relation between symbol and literal fact is at last acknowledged to be a highly complex one. That complexity is underscored by a much canvassed modern analogy, the far from simple relation between music and representation'.[32]

At first, Brown only reluctantly recognizes cultural relativism.  But, with time, he relates Christianity to particular interests within twenty-first century society – a form of culturally relativist practice that is responsive to societal changes.

**7.5 Anthony Thiselton**

Thiselton is generally questioning of approaches based on cultural relativism. Adapting language to the needs of users 'hands on an inherited tradition which then makes it easier or more difficult for a later generation to raise certain questions, or to notice certain aspects of life'.[33] Only by fresh visions and insights can the content of verbal and non-verbal pictures be reversed or refined. His position is clearest with regard to Latin American, African and feminist liberation theology. He is aware of the 'pre-understanding', that everyone brings to the biblical hermeneutical process, based upon individual subjectivism, and upon cultural and political expectations and predispositions.[34] But, rather than sympathizing with cultural relativism, he challenges positions founded upon what he calls 'socio-pragmatic hermeneutics', with an emphasis on political praxis. This can only be resisted by 'socio-critical hermeneutics [which] seeks to unmask uses of texts which service self-interests or the interests of dominating power-structures', and so leads towards theology which is truly critical, Cross-centred and liberating.[35]

> Do the hermeneutical systems constructed or utilized by liberation theologies or by feminist approaches function *pragmatically to filter out from the biblical text* any signal which does anything other than affirm the hopes and aspirations of a given

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[31] Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, p. 86.
[32] Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, p. 92.
[33] Thiselton, 'Knowledge, Myth and Corporate Memory'*,* p. 137.
[34] Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, pp. 137-38, 404, 432, 112-14.
[35] Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, pp. 6-7, 14-15.

social group; or do they embody a *genuine socio-critical principle which unmasks oppression as part of a larger trans-contextual critique*?[36]

Later, Thiselton addresses the matter of God directly in combating Cupitt and the 'Sea of Faith' Network, which he characterizes as viewing religion 'as a human creation, in which "God" is subsumed within human consciousness as a projection of value'. He approves David Hart's summary of the 'Sea of Faith' position as that 'there is nothing beyond or outside human beings, neither God nor some other notion like "Ultimate Reality" that gives life and meaning and purpose. We do that for ourselves!' Thiselton supports, too, Anthony Freeman's rejection of any form of 'projection' of God, for example in Canaanite polytheism and post-modernism. And he quotes Cupitt himself, who identifies God with Kant's 'categorical imperative' and explains: 'God *is* the religious requirement personified, and his attributes are a kind of projection of the main features as we experience them.' Of Cupitt's later post-modernist stage, Thiselton writes: 'All talk of God as an internal symbol or focus for "unifying" a value system, will have vanished', and, taking a cue from Derrida, he substitutes 'abyss' for 'sea' as representing his view of Cupitt's position.[37] Thiselton emphasizes the gradual, but considerable, shift within Cupitt's theology, and this present thesis will return to his account when Cupitt is under consideration. Thiselton offers a critique of postmodernity as it has come to replace the intelligible order that was the framework and product of modernity. He rejects cultural relativism and any liberation theology that results from a relativist position.

**7.6 Liberation theology**

Leech offers probably the most significant UK Anglican liberation theology, contextual in the sense of being set in the context of his pastoral concern and experience, including experience with some of the most disadvantaged of society. He stands in the Oxford Movement tradition of fostering the mysterious and the mystical alongside social action. He draws from the apophatic tradition of the mysterious, essentially indefinable nature of God, with light emerging in the individual and collective spiritual journey toward God. In defiance of the prosaic, fact-concerned, conceptual, western approach, he espouses approaching God through spirituality, approving Nicholas Lash's statement that 'it is the theologian's task to make it

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[36] Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, p. 410.

[37] Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, p. 81-82 (quoting Hart, David A., *Faith in Doubt: Non-realism and Christian Belief*, London, Mowbray, 1993, p. 7), 82-83 (quoting Freeman, Anthony, *God in Us. A case for Christian Humanism*, London, SCM, 1993, pp. 15, 26), 83 (quoting Cupitt, Don, *Taking Leave of God*, London, SCM, 1980, p. 85), 85.

difficult to speak of God'.[38] Silence, standing before God until the end of time and recognizing God's glory are paramount.[39] The route is through the darkness that precedes illumination, as with St John of the Cross, Thomas Merton and even Barth.[40] Leech's conviction 'that there is no part of the world from which God is absent' is the foundation of his social commitment.[41] This awareness of the social nature of God, with 'humanity . . . called to share in that divine life',[42] may be the basis of some process theology, with 'the experience of God in Jewish and Christian history . . . that of a God who is known in the midst of the turmoil of human struggle'.[43] However, Leech's theology is never completely one of process: for all God's identification with humankind in the Incarnation and 'rais[ing] manhood into God', the relationship for Leech is never reciprocal – it is God's initiative that prevails. But 'The Church is social and involved because God is social and involved'.[44]

Leech's constant assumption is that God is the scriptural God of justice, who expects his followers to work for such justice on earth. Indeed, his liberation theology is paramount when he writes, 'The liberating God of the Exodus calls this oppressed and fragile people to serve that ultimate Freedom [from economic, political slavery and captivity to idols and false gods] which is Godself'.[45] He declines to trivialize God by attaching specific concepts, apart from drawing attention to God's social nature and God's feminine, as well as masculine, characteristics, as will be seen below.

**7.7 Feminist theology**

Feminist theology is contextual in responding to new awareness of the implications of equality between the genders; when emanating from an oppressed group, it is a significant form of liberation theology.

Ann Loades writes of those women wanting to overturn the masculine Christian emphasis who 'scavenge' within Scripture and tradition for feminine references to God; she points out that nowhere in the Old Testament is God actually called 'Mother', and that some patristic and

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[38] Leech, Kenneth, *Doing Theology in Altab Ali Park: A project in Whitechapel, East London 1990-2004*, London, DLT, 2006, p. 203, without details of source.
[39] Leech, Kenneth, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care*, London, Sheldon, 1986, p. 19; *Doing Theology in Altab Ali Park*, p. 56.
[40] Leech, Kenneth, *Soul Friend: A Study of Spirituality*, London, Sheldon, 1977, pp. 160-67; cf. Leech, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care*, p. 23.
[41] Leech, *Doing Theology in Altab Ali Park*, p. 119.
[42] Leech, Kenneth, *The Social God*, London, Sheldon, 1981, p. 7.
[43] Leech, *True Prayer*, p. 11.
[44] Leech, *Social God*, p. 8.
[45] Leech, Kenneth, *The Eye of the Storm: Spiritual Resources for the Pursuit of Justice*, London, DLT, 1992, p. 45.

mediaeval allusions to femininity in Christ relate more to androgynous features than to pure femininity. 'Fatherhood in God and Church clearly continues to provide some women with the nurture they need, but it is clearly failing many', she writes. However, '"Motherhood" in God' language would help only if churches using it constituted themselves in such a way as to 'repair the damage to women'.[46] This seems to imply that truth about God relates to helpfulness of language and to coherence with ecclesiastical practice, rather than to objective reality or revelation.

Sara Maitland's approach is different. Although she is now a Roman Catholic, *A Big Enough God* originated in lectures given near the end of her Anglican period.[47] She places less emphasis on church practice. God has neither biology nor, therefore, gender, she argues, and believing God to be female is as 'ridiculous', she says, as believing God to be male. Rather than denying the fatherhood of God, she wishes to extend the range of images and metaphors. She unabashedly uses feminine pronouns for God, but in conjunction with masculine language: 'Of course she is Father. She is Father Almighty. . . . God is Mother . . . God is like me; God and I are mothers together; we understand each other; motherhood is deified in her Motherhood, and so am I'. The ideal would be for 'men to seek God through female images' and *vice versa*.[48]

Daphne Hampson, originally Anglican,[49] has left the Church, considering herself post-Christian. However, in her view, feminism has dealt a severe blow to the patriarchal nature of Judaism and Christianity with the constant male imaging of God by Jesus and in art. She alludes to the 675 Council of Toledo's description of 'a motherly father' 'who both begets and bears his son', but sees problems with attributing female qualities to God, in that it either enlarges our concept of maleness, or limits understanding of women to bearing and nurturing. She is wary of Sallie MacFague's substituting alternative, gender-neutral, metaphors for God, since the syncretistic result is unlikely to be recognizably Christian, and dislikes the confusing use of both

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[46] Loades, Ann, *Searching for Lost Coins: Explorations in Christianity and Feminism*, London, SPCK, 1987, pp. 90-93 (mentioning Isaiah 42.14, 46.4, 49.15, though with God's love contrasted with a mother's potential faulty love, Psalm 22. 9-10, Job 10.10-12 (references to Wisdom and the Spirit), Matthew 23.37), 91-92, 97-98.

[47] Maitland, Sara, *A Big Enough God: A Feminist's Search for a Joyful Theology*, New York, Riverhead, 1995, Preface, un-numbered page.

[48] Maitland, *Big Enough God*, pp. 75, 24, 75, 2, 18, 19, 21 (quoting her 1993 radio meditation).

[49] According to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daphne_Hampson, recommended on http://www.daphnehampson.co.uk/Daphne_Hampson_Homepage/Home.html, both downloaded 06.06.2013.

personal pronouns.[50] Thus Hampson proceeds beyond 'renaming' to more radical 'reshaping', to 'articulate . . . differently and non-anthropomorphically what one means by God'. 'It' may be preferable even to 'She' for what, with Mary Daly, Hampson calls 'deep Reality'. But there is confusion when she claims that prayer is no longer based on anthropomorphic relationship or dialogue, but then returns anthropomorphically to 'knowing oneself as loved and upheld'. And it is unclear what is meant by Catherine of Sienna's apparently idolatrous 'My real me is God', that she commends. Although Hampson still 'believes[s] the word God to refer' (though not to an entity), she claims: 'Theology is predicated upon our perception of God, not on revelation, and the act of perceiving becomes crucial'. As for Loades, this is a matter of the subjective usefulness of language, rather than objective truth.[51]

A more moderate example of feminist theology is provided by Angela Tilby. Although 'Father' can imply over-control and encourage over-dependency and immaturity, as well as appearing to deny feminine attributes, it also, like 'shepherd' and 'king' implies protective leadership, exasperation along with perseverance. Projecting the strong, male qualities of society, including those of monarch, law-giver, architect, engineer, scientist or poet, fails to reflect human reality and tragedy and the Cross.[52] Although sympathetic to addressing God as 'Mother', though not instead of 'Father', she finds motherhood language too generalized, 'tightly linked to the biological processes of mothering and being mothered' and thus limiting God's femininity and preventing God being imagined as a young girl or old woman. Tilby's feminist understanding emphasizes 'vulnerability and collaboration' as being as much part of the divine nature as 'power and control' – though without making clear why the former qualities are particularly feminine.[53] There is little risk here of the essentialism that would result in identity-based theology based on over-generalization.

Clark-King is more self-consciously feminist, but also realistic about the extent of feminist theology's coherence with the informal theology of the Newcastle women whose views she records. When these women describe their images of God as a powerful, elderly, male figure, Clark-King recognizes the dilemma of 'how to honour the lived experience of the working-class

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[50] Hampson, Daphne, *Theology and Feminism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1990, pp. vi, xi, 1-2, 92-83, 151-55, 159, 93 (quoting Moltmann, Jürgen, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, London, SCM, 1981, pp. 164-65), 157-59 (quoting MacFague, Sallie, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, London, SCM, 1987, p. 136), 162.
[51] Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, pp. 165, 167 (quoting Daly, Mary, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*, London, Women's Press, 1986, pp. 403-404), 169-70, 150.
[52] Tilby, Angela, *Won't You Join the Dance?: A discovery of the Christian Creeds*, London, SPCK, 1985, pp. 41-42.
[53] Tilby, Angela, *Science and the Soul: New Cosmology, the Self and God*, London, SPCK, 1992, pp. 254-55, 248.

women in the pews while also holding on to the best theological insights of the academy'. She recognizes that human experience inevitably filters divine revelation, with 'interference from our own preconceptions and limited vision' affecting all speaking of God. On the other hand, human beings, male and female, having been made in the *imago Dei*, 'all human lives have the potential to reveal something of the grace and nature of God'. There is, in other words, a reciprocal relationship between God and humanity over revelation.[54]

She approves Mary Grey's statement that: 'A metaphysic of connections sees the doctrine of God as Trinity, not in anthropomorphic terms as three males . . . but as an attempt to image a God in movement, in process, a God whose whole being is to be in relation, to be relationality's core'. Relationships are, for Clark-King, at the heart of women's lives and roles, and 'feed into the women's spirituality and their understanding of God' as the source of 'the perfect relationship' and 'unconditional love' to fuel their daily needs and duties. Although 'middle-class, affluent, socially successful academics [might wish to say that these women's needs] could be met by a female image of God – a strong, womanly presence that provides both affirmation in the present and a model of becoming for the future', this would only 'undermine the self-validation . . . they gain from their relationships with their Father/Lover God and trivialize their understanding of their own spiritual experiences'.[55]

Clark-King's preference is for *adding* female insights to the Church's traditional imagery and doctrine. The Newcastle women were generally comfortable with male imagery for God, and anxious at the prospect of other usage in worship – typically of many believers in not distinguishing conceptually between God and the Father. They did not feel excluded from God by their female-ness, or find male images oppressive. Indeed, some of them took comfort from pseudo-romantic relationships with God, in the mediaeval mystical tradition. However, other images occasionally appeared, such as: an (*inanimate*) 'big armchair that just encircles you and is . . . peace, safeness . . . always the same, . . . comfort'; someone's (*female*) mother-in-law, 'always at the door with her arms open'; and (*abstract*) colour and light. Clark-King's own relationship with God she characterizes as one of friendship, built on a sense of likeness rather than of the difference implied by romance.[56] In all these portrayals, illustrated by the women's spiritual experiences, Clark-King relates:

> God remains both immanent and transcendent. God can be encountered in the
> emotions and sensed as a personal presence, yet he is also outside the rules that

[54] Clark-King, *Theology by Heart*, pp. 57, 15, 203.
[55] Clark-King, *Theology by* Heart, pp. 93 (quoting Grey, Mary, *The Wisdom of Fools? Seeking Revelation for Today*, London, SPCK, 1993, p. 59), 91-119, 118, 86.
[56] Clark-King, *Theology by Heart*, pp. 60, 63-66, 127, 68, 71-71, 76, 189, 66-67, 127, 202.

govern the rest of the material universe . . . talked of both in anthropomorphic terms and as belonging to the realm of the supernatural, set apart from all other forms of interpersonal encounter.[57]

Some of the women had strong experiences of the presence of God, who, though 'in a different place from us', in his transcendence is encountered most easily in the sacred spaces of worship, and of the immediate efficacy of prayer, particularly in times of desperation. God, for them, 'is not in the same room with them, nor in the same world. However, neither is God inaccessible or uninterested in the minutiae of the lives of his people. He is able to intervene . . . and can alter the laws of nature'. Feminist theology, Clark-King writes, tends to favour God's immanence over transcendence, with the latter 'dismissed as irrelevant, or inimical, to ethical practice'.[58]

Clark-King's *Theology by Heart* is distinct in this chapter, as a work of practical theology. Stating her own feminist position, she recounts the spirituality of a particular category of women who find the use of female language for God unacceptable, and male language not disadvantageous. The masculinity, however, is tinged with gentleness in the context of relationality that reflects both the Trinity and the women's own lives. She recollects the apophatic tradition, the inadequacy of all language for God and her preference for the 'choral theology' of different voices based on different experiences. Immanence, so important for feminist theology, takes a different form for the Newcastle women, retaining a transcendent character, but in personal relationship with a supportive God.[59]

Leech quotes Mother Julian's 'fullest expression of the concept of the *femininity* of God: "God is as really our Mother as he is Father', and even 'Our precious Mother Jesus . . ."'. This, Leech says, is on the basis of scriptural, patristic and mediaeval images, as 'a . . . corrective to the masculinity of God-symbolism', bringing tenderness and homeliness to our understanding of God.[60] He cites with approval several contemporary prayers that include phrases such as:

> Thou who are Wisdom and Word,
> Whom once the world adored
> for Mother love and compassion,
> We now call the 'Father' and 'Lord' . . .
> Still in the world we seek thee,
> Mother beyond compare; . . . .

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[57] Clark-King, *Theology by Heart*, p. 127.

[58] Clark-King, *Theology by Heart*, pp. 150, 135.

[59] Clark-King, *Theology by Heart*, pp. 192-93, 186-88, 196.

[60] Leech, *Soul Friend*, p. 147 (quoting Mother Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 59, 60, 61); cf. Leech, *True Prayer*, pp. 23-24.

and

> Mother of all, Giver of Life . . . .

and

> Transforming Womb of God,
>
> Conceive in us.[61]

The Church of England's Doctrine Commission report, *The Mystery of Salvation*, recognizing that both genders were created in God's image in the Genesis account, acknowledges the oppressive effect of masculine language for God, and accepts that 'Christian theology has never supposed that God actually is male'. However, the Report records the stylistic difficulties in using other or additional pronouns, and the theological losses in substituting the non-relational Trinitarian terms 'Source', 'Word' and 'Spirit', or the partial terms, 'Creator', 'Redeemer' and 'Sanctifier'. 'Parent' and 'Child' are felt to depart from the way in which Jesus 'perceived and expressed his own relationship with God', and the report recommends retaining traditional Trinitarian terms, while using additional terms for the persons of the Trinity and Christian disciples when possible.[62]

## 7.8 Inter-faith theology

Awareness of the God-claims of faiths other than Judaism and Christianity has led to a variety of Christian responses. Alan Race prefers to exclusivism and inclusivism a pluralist approach,[63] by which:

> the transcendent Ultimate Reality, though beyond human categories, is nevertheless glimpsed and experienced authentically according to different cultural religious histories, theologies and patterns of religious life. Backing this up is a critical-realist interpretation of religious language whereby our concepts and interpretations are

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[61] Leech, Kenneth, *True God: An exploration in spiritual theology*, London, Sheldon, 1985, pp. 375-78 (quoting *She Prays: prayers by women*, Alfred Willetts and St Joan's Alliance, 1981, and *One World*, 47, World Council of Churches, June 1979, p. 17).

[62] *The Mystery of Salvation: The Story of God's Gift: A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England*; London, Church House, 1995, pp. 46-47, 48, 49.

[63] As originally proposed, Race, Alan, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, London, SCM, 1983, pp. 10-137.

largely metaphorical by nature and therefore orientated on Ultimate Reality in an indirect manner.[64]

Quoting Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Race is confident that 'the fact that God saves through [various] forms of faith . . . corroborates our Christian vision of God as active in history, redemptive, reaching out to all men to love and to embrace them'. Moreover, the indirect nature of all assertions about God means that Christianity 'need not automatically rule out similar assertions in another religion'. All religions, Race argues, distinguish 'between the "unknowability" and the "knowability" of Ultimate Reality. . . which allows for the hypothesis of Ultimate Reality to be experienced and conceptualized in different symbolic/iconic forms according to cultural history'.  Indeed, without moving to a position that disregards difference within religions, Race raises the possibility that God's will may be that many religions might continue in the world, on the basis of a variety of revelations of Ultimate Reality on a par with Christianity.[65] This is cultural relativism at its widest.

Paul Hedges believes that pluralism is *inclusivist* in that 'it puts other faiths in a position related to your own pluralist view'.[66] D'Costa, however, believes pluralism is *exclusivist* as 'a form of secular agnosticism' with 'its own intolerant, illiberal, exclusivist logic' that allows no alternative, single-religion interpretation.[67] Race considers a similar objection to his pluralism that it is dependent upon the '"totalizing" universal rationality that characterized the Enlightenment just when such tendencies are being questioned' (presumably, although Race does not say so, by postmodernity): an objection he dismisses as not undermining the contextual influence of history and culture.  He does not address another, related, possible objection: that attachment to pluralism is culturally determined, and may well not be acceptable to adherents of some religions in their historically determined cultures. However, he usefully observes that pluralism 'follow[s] through the consequences of philosophical observations about how knowledge comes to human consciousness and then applies this in the realm of (plural) religious consciousness'. Race proposes 'ineffability' as a term to encompass the focal point for all traditions (including the 'emptiness' of Buddhism), emphasizing the inadequacy of any image of God, culturally conditioned as it must be, for 'God's ultimacy', but avoiding equating the approaches of different religions. The crux of the

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[64] Race, Alan, *Interfaith Encounter: The Twin Tracks of Theology and Dialogue*, London, SCM, 2001, pp. ix-x.

[65] Race, *Interfaith Encounter*, p. xiii (quoting  Cantwell Smith, Wilfred, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*, London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1981, pp. 171, 32, 29-30, 33, 21).

[66] Hedges, 'A Reflection on Typologies: Negotiating a Fast-Moving Discussion', pp. 19-20.

[67] D'Costa, Gavin, 'Theology of Religions', p. 638.

matter, for Race, is that, being 'aware of the limitations of our religious symbolic language', Christians have to question any assumption 'that the Christian faith (or any other) is "the one true religion"',[68] and therefore, it can be added, *any* closed assumptions about God or God's self-revelation. However, this is not without its critics: D'Costa, for instance, says that, in proposing 'to emphasize God rather than Christ, [Hick] is in danger of severing Christology from ontology and introducing a free-floating "God" divorced from any particular revelation', whereas in fact: the Abrahamic faiths 'have all tended to center [sic] on revelatory paradigms for the discourse and practice', and Hicks's model of 'an all-loving God' is not found in Buddhism and Confucianism; and the model quickly departs from the notion of an ontologically personal God if all personal qualities are deemed to be metaphorical.[69] The first objection can be countered by pointing out that the 'free-floating' notion of God is proposed precisely to surpass individual revelatory dispensations, and the second that this is precisely the ontological problem that is raised over theism, irrespective of inter-faith concerns.

The Church of England's Doctrine Commission's report, *The Mystery of Salvation*, recommends a position that it believes is beyond Race's alternatives of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. However, its alternative position in fact tends towards inclusivism, agreeing that God works within other religions, but then claiming that this is by God's Spirit, with salvation through Jesus Christ still the ultimate goal.[70] This is a retreat from pluralism towards the Church's traditional position,[71] and provides less scope for inter-faith dialogue with its insistence on the ultimacy of Christ.

Race cites areas of agreement between representatives of a wide variety of traditions which made up the Snowmass Monastic Interfaith Dialogue in 1984-86, by which 'Ultimate Reality':

- is experienced under the names of 'Brahman, Allah, Absolute, God, Great Spirit';
- 'cannot be limited by any name or concept';
- 'is the ground of infinite potentiality and actualization'; and

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[68] Race, *Interfaith Encounter*, pp. 34, 35, 39, 167.

[69] D'Costa, 'Theology of Religions', pp. 633-64.

[70] *The Mystery of Salvation*, pp. 147, 171-72, 181, 184; Hedges, 'A Reflection on Typologies', p. 21.

[71] Papal Encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, Vatican, Vatican Polyglot, 1990, quoted by Race, *Interfaith Encounter*, p. 26; cf. p. 36..

- 'can be experienced not only through religious practices but also through nature, art, human relationships, and service of others.[72]

Whatever the underlying theory of inter-faith theology, contemporary informal Christian theology has probably been influenced by such agreement, and by greater awareness of other faith systems, stemming from increased global mobility and the profile of faiths beyond Christianity within the UK. Positive aspects are the recognition of the value, validity and compare-ability of varying faiths and cultures, balanced in both cases by recognizing the distinctiveness of each culture and faith and their developing nature.[73] While recognizing distinctiveness, Hart has traced a trail of non-realism through the histories of Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, and, presumably in relation to all faith traditions, argues that 'in speaking of "God", we are celebrating the lofty but human ideals that we have ourselves constructed within the world of our imaginations and articulated with our poetic powers'.[74]

**7.9 Summary**

This review has argued that cultural relativism as a factor appears inescapable, particularly for Nineham and Wiles, but also for Brown, with his efforts to relate the Christian message to the artistic and similar inclinations in humanity when conventional religious practice has lost its cultural appeal, and even, implicitly, for Thiselton, when he focuses on religious language being most useful within the cultural community of the Church. Thiselton does not satisfactorily explain why cultural relativism is incompatible with 'theology which is truly critical, Cross-centred and liberating'.  It is questionable to what extent he and Brown are confronting the very real problems that twenty-first century Christianity faces: of presenting itself other than in, for some, hopelessly anachronistic terms, rooted in biblical and other pre-modern texts and liturgy; or of inducting people into these ancient modes of expression and understanding. There are some ordinary believers, as Clark-King, demonstrates, for whom conventional language and concepts are the way they experience and couch their faith. However, to some extent for Brown, and certainly for Tilby and Leech, this form of presentation is not inevitable.  Feminist theologians, particularly Leech, have demonstrated

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[72] Race, Alan, 'Interfaith Dialogue: Religious Accountability between Strangeness and Resonance', Hedges and Race, *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*, pp. 167, 93.
[73] A position supported by Paul Hedges, for whom faith systems other than Christianity are 'not anti-Christian because they are not opposed religious systems', but 'simply other forms of discourse': Hedges, 'A Reflection on Typologies', p. 28.
[74] Hart, David A., *One Faith?:Non-realism and the World of Faiths*, London, Mowbray, 1995, pp. 41-148, 154.

how socially constructive theology and practice can flow from a full acknowledgement of shifts in culture, with relevant Christian action resulting on behalf of those in need of liberation. The feminist theologians surveyed have demonstrated an ability to provide elements of systematic theology with their concerns also being addressed. It may be that the way forward is 'choral theology', as Clark-King advocates, according with the spirit of postmodernism and cultural relativism, and with a broad acceptance of different modes of theological expression from different quarters. This includes, as for Clark-King, academia and ordinary believers, but also different ecclesiastical and cultural tradition, recalling reminders of the inadequacy of all theological language.  The challenge from inter-faith theology is whether pluralism is compatible with, or undermining of, individual religious traditions, particularly, for Christian theology, its specific tradition. But recognizing the Abrahamic faiths' common scriptural and the common etymological roots of 'Eloah' and 'Allah' (with 'Allah even used for God' among some Arab Christians)[75] broadens professional and informal theologians' concepts of God beyond their immediate cultural contexts.  The cultural contexts to which theology must now be relative if to remain relevant and Catholic are various and broad. It will be important to note the cultural context of the survey that forms part of this thesis.

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[75] Hanks, ed., *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, p. 38; *CRJ*, volume 25, number 1, 2002.

## Chapter 8: LIBERAL THEOLOGY LANDMARKS SINCE 1960

### 8.1 Introduction

There is no clear dividing line between theologians who consciously describe and respond to aspects of shifting background culture, described above, and many liberal theologians, who are also responding to perceived cultural changes, albeit with less emphasis on the cultural changes themselves.  Robinson's *Honest to God* is, *par excellence*, an example of a phenomenon that could be placed in either chapter. The following theologians, however, in the author's opinion, have constituted landmarks in liberal theology since 1960.

### 8.2  J. B. Phillips

Phillips sets the scene for later twentieth century liberal theology, aiming 'to expose the inadequate conceptions of God which still linger unconsciously in many minds, and which prevent our catching a glimpse of the true God; and . . . to suggest ways in which we can find the real God for ourselves'. He outlines some popular false images of God as:

- conscience, with its fallibility;
- a guilt-inducing figure to replace parents, perfection that rejects the imperfect;
- a 'Grand Old Man' out of touch with modern knowledge and more suited to the Old Testament than to love;
- a god in an exclusive religious 'box'; and
- a god against whom we have a grievance for letting us down.[1]

Rather, for Phillips, God is 'unfocused', unlimited by time or space, yet 'a Person with whom we can establish some personal relationship' and who can have personal claims on us. Clues as to this reality appear through spirituality, goodness and artistic and natural beauty, and above all Christ. From Christ we derive an understanding of God as '"the Father", in Nature and Character and Operation', though with the proviso that fatherhood is analogical.  Phillips implicitly rejects any idea of a god of gaps: 'We can never have too big a conception of God, and the more scientific knowledge . . . advances, the greater becomes our idea of His vast and complicated wisdom'.[2] When Phillips writes of 'The Limitations of Science', he is not so much finding gaps for God to fill as drawing attention to the need for complementary disciplines to answer the 'whys' in addition to science's answers to the 'hows'. He believes that a God who intervened in human affairs would undermine human freedom. His response to human

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[1] Phillips, J. B., *Your God Is Too Small*, London, Epworth, 1952, pp. 8, 11-60.
[2] Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small*, pp. 61-62, 64-87, 88, 18, 123-24.

suffering is almost dismissive, being based upon innocent suffering being simply beyond human comprehension, with natural disasters perhaps not as bad from God's point of view as they appear from ours: 'To imagine that God looks upon physical death as many men do, or to think of him as impressed by numbers, violence or size, is simply to think of God as a magnified man – a monstrously inadequate conception'.[3]

Thus Phillips rehearses ancient theological quandaries in popular, contemporary style, and without knowledge of the storm of revisionism that was about to break. Such revisionist references to God in *Soundings*[4] (to which reference has been made in relation to 'Analogy') and *Objections to Christian Belief*[5] are now largely unexceptionable, but both books reflect the climate within the influential academic section of the Church of England from which *Honest to God* emerged.

**8.3 John Robinson and *Honest to God***

a. Spatial concepts

*Honest to God* appeared between these aforementioned two books, out of Robinson's conviction 'that there is a growing gulf between the traditional orthodox supernaturalism in which our Faith has been framed and the categories which the "lay" world . . . finds meaningful today'.[6] In a later sermon, Robinson – subsequently supported by Alistair Kee[7] – outlines four human projections of the 'utterly transcendent personal reality', which he believes have become stumbling blocks for many:

- mythological projection, presenting God as if human;
- supranaturalist projection, with God 'a super-Person living in a realm "above" or "beyond" this one';
- metaphysical projection as Reality and our existential connection with Reality; and
- confinement to religion, requiring religiosity before faith.[8]

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[3] Phillips, J. B., *God Our Contemporary*, London, H&S, 1960, pp. 43, 126-134.

[4] Vidler, ed., *Soundings*, 1962.

[5] Vidler, A. R., ed., *Objections to Christian Belief*, London, Constable, 1963 and Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965,

[6] Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 8.

[7] Kee, Alistair, 'Mystery and Politics: The Explorations Continue', James, Eric, ed., *God's Truth: Essays to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Honest to God*, London, SCM, 1988, p. 111.

[8] Robinson, John A.T., *Where Three Ways Meet*, London, SCM, 1987, pp. 159-66.

By the 1960s God 'up there' as part of a three-decker universe has been replaced by a God who is spiritually or metaphorically 'out there', writes Robinson, and abandoning both idols may be the only way of making Christianity meaningful.[9] Some, like Colin Buchanan[10] and Trevor Hart,[11] counter with the inevitability of spatial imagery for communicating God's otherness more effectively than Robinson's alternative, 'ground of our being'. Robinson does not recognise that removing all spatial imagery from concepts of God would imply a necessity to remove all non-literal imagery, and leave a sparse theology. Cautious about personhood, Robinson explains, 'Reality at its very deepest level is personal', and God – lapsing into spatial imagery – 'Love . . . the ground of our being, to which ultimately we "come home"'.[12]

b. Alternative concepts

Robinson is rightly nervous about a *deus ex machina* God who 'is constantly pushed further and further back as the tide of secular studies advances', and sympathetic to Julian Huxley's view of God as the 'last fading of a cosmic Cheshire cat'. So Robinson wonders, with Bonhoeffer and Tillich, whether we should live without God as a working hypothesis, and whether this would mark the end of theism.[13] He substitutes – although later he recognises both height and depth approaches as of value[14] – imagery that Paul Tillich drew from depth psychology, quoting Tillich's well-known passage, starting:

> The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is *God*. . . .
> And if that word has not much meaning for you . . . speak of the depths of your life, of
> the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without
> reservation.[15]

For Hart, 'ground' and 'Being' are as much the product of imagination as more conventional expressions,[16] and John Lawrence argues that spatial references do not preclude a sense of

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[9] Robinson, *Honest to God*, pp. 11-13, 17.

[10] Buchanan, Colin, '*Honest to God*: In Its Time and Since', Slee Colin, ed., *Honest to God: 40 Years On*, London, SCM, 2004, pp. 14-18.

[11] Hart, Trevor, 'Behaviour and Belief: The Reduction of Religion to Ethics?', Slee, ed., *Honest to God: 40 Years On*, pp. 95-97.

[12] Robinson, *Honest to God*, pp. 48-49,

[13] Robinson, *Honest to God*, pp. 37 (quoting Huxley, Julian, *Religion without Revelation*¸ London, Ernest Benn, 1927, p. 58), 38-39.

[14] Robinson, John, A. T., 'The Debate Continues', Edwards, David L., ed., *The Honest to God Debate: Some reactions to the book 'Honest to God'*, London, SCM, 1963, pp. 235-36.

[15] Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 22 (quoting Tillich, Paul, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, London, SCM, 1949 and Harmondsworth, Pelican Books, 1962, pp. 63-64).

[16] Hart, 'Behaviour and Belief', pp. 92-93.

God everywhere and within us.[17] Indeed, Jenkins argues that 'height' may have more psychological validity than 'depth', as a challenge to 'stretch' ourselves, and thus 'not all that irrelevant psychologically, metaphysically or theologically'.[18]

Robinson proposes 'ultimate reality' as a more promising start for theology than trying to prove the existence of God: 'One cannot argue whether ultimate reality *exists*. One can only ask what ultimate reality is like'.[19] The concept of 'ultimate reality' is unclear, however, and an intention of seeking its nature of questionable legitimacy. Both Herbert McCabe[20] and Jenkins[21] justifiably take Robinson's statement as part of an argument that ultimate reality is self-evidently existent; but for Robinson this does not follow, but rather, the nature of ultimate reality is to be sought by seeking 'the ground of our being'.[22] Jenkins rightly points out that concepts such as 'ultimate reality' are no less, but also no more, logically difficult than traditional theistic language.[23]

<u>c. Transcendence and Immanence</u>

Perhaps the concept of transcendence needs restating.  Following Tillich, Robinson detaches transcendence from 'the projection of supranaturalism' and redefines it as the depth and ground of this world.[24] (Sometimes Tillich's 'supranatural' means the same for Robinson as 'supernatural', as McCabe agrees;[25] later he prefers 'supranatural' to refer not to the reality of God, but to the human projection.[26])  The risk is of total immanentism, which Robinson identifies – questionably – with pantheism and pantheism with determinism, so that immanentism implies determinism; the difference between the biblical (presumably transcendent) and immanentist outlooks is that the former 'grounds all reality ultimately in personal freedom – in Love'. This strange argument feels like an attempt, near the end of *Honest to God*, to restore some validity to conventional theology.  'All true awareness of God is an experience at one and the same time of ultimacy and intimacy, of the *mysterium*

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[17] Edwards, ed., *The Honest to God Debate*, pp. 156-57 (quoting Lawrence, John, *Frontier*, Summer 1963).

[18] Jenkins, David, 'Concerning Theism', Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate*, p. 203.

[19] Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 29.

[20] Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate* pp. 169-170 (quoting McCabe, Herbert, O.P., *Blackfriars*, July/August 1963).

[21] Jenkins, 'Concerning Theism', pp. 198-99.

[22] Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 29.

[23] Jenkins, 'Concerning Theism', p. 202.

[24] Robinson, *Honest to God*, pp. 41, 44, 55-56 (quoting Tillich, Paul, *Systematic Theology, Volume II*, London, Nisbet, 1953, p.8).

[25] Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate* p. 173 (quoting McCabe, *Blackfriars*, July/August 1963).

[26] Robinson, 'Debate Continues', p. 35.

*tremendum et fascinans*', Robinson writes, recognizing 'the infinite qualitative difference between the Creator and the creature, between the holy God and sinful man'.[27] However, his understanding of transcendence is unclear, with Lawrence pointing out that human relations pointing to something beyond themselves is somewhat different from the customary understanding of God's transcendence.[28]

### d. Reactions to *Honest to God*

Edwards records something of the immense public and academic reaction, both positive and negative, that *Honest to God* provoked. Many 'ordinary' correspondents expressed misgivings or anger, or gratitude and sympathy.[29] For some, experience of God was real, even if conventional theology was not,[30] and for some, including clergy, the book came as an encouragement of faith.[31] Robinson's diocesan bishop explains in *The Evening Standard* how traditional locational language for God, while presenting no problem for him, 'often fails to register and gives rise to misconceptions' in the factory, college and university audiences which he addresses.[32]  Conversely, C. S Lewis, Mascall and Nineham all write that most Christian lay people have abandoned the anthropomorphism of God in a localized heaven and do not conceive God as spatially located. They consider that these people use the terms imaginatively, being alive to the symbolic and non-literal character of spatial metaphors (with all pictures presenting problems if taken univocally).[33] The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre reports a trend in theology that 'retained a theistic vocabulary but acquired an atheistic substance',[34] and Mascall, McCabe and the non-Christian David Boulton  imply that Robinson may be left with no more than a humanistic account of God.[35]

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[27] Robinson, *Honest to God*, pp. 130, 131, omitting some unexplained inverted commas.

[28] Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate*, pp. 159-60 (quoting Lawrence, *Frontier*).

[29] Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate*, pp. 7-44, 48-81.

[30] E.g., Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate*, pp. 59-62.

[31] E.g., Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate*, pp. 63-64, 68, 74-80.

[32] Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate*, p. 33 (quoting *Evening Standard*, 9th April 1963).

[33] Responding to Robinson John, 'Our Image of God Must Go', *Observer*, 17th March 1963, three days before publication of *Honest to God*; Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate*, p. 91 (quoting Lewis, C.S., *Observer*, 24th March 1963); Mascall, *The Secularisation of* Christianity, 1965, Libra Edition 1967, p. 117; Nineham, Dennis, 'What Happened to the New Reformation?', James, *God's Truth*, p. 155.

[34] MacIntyre, Alasdair, 'God and the Theologians', Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate*, pp. 215, 223.

[35] Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate*, pp. 93-94 (quoting Mascall, E. L., *Observer*, 24th March 1963); pp. 105-106 (quoting Boulton, David, *Tribune*, 12th April 1963), 168, (quoting McCabe, Herbert, O.P., *Blackfriars*, July/August 1963).

Bultmann reckons it is possible 'that this existential knowledge of the depth and ground of all being may be contained, and as it were concealed, in all the traditional conceptions of God', even though they do not provide 'an existential relationship to God'.[36] By subsuming 'the depth and ground of all being' within 'traditional conceptions', Bultmann escapes the category mistake that would occur if he implied that it was possible to have such an 'existential relationship' with the concept of 'the depth and ground of all being':[37] it is to the personal God that one relates rather than a concept. Alan Richardson questions the helpfulness of 'ultimate reality' and 'ground of being', writing that 'One cannot pick a quarrel with the Ground of Being [or] go to the stake for it either'.[38] Probably with Friedrich Schleiermacher in mind, Cupitt places Robinson in the tradition of sense-experience as the means of knowing God, and his 'religion too immanent, too human and too little distinct from culture' and wanting to find an alternative 'way of overcoming religious heteronomy . . . while yet maintaining the transcendent . . .'.[39] Hebblethwaite accepts that Robinson was no atheist, and draws attention to the difference between his and Cupitt's theologies, with Robinson 'maintain[ing] the heart of theism in the context of modernity' against Cupitt's 'purely naturalistic view of the context of human life'.[40]  The difficulty in communicating the subtleties of theology is illustrated by O. Fielding Clarke's response about the difficulty of addressing something with personal attributes which is not another being. However, his charge of 'non-sense', if 'not heresy',[41] indicates a failure to recognise the subtlety and provisionality of Robinson's grappling with real 1960s difficulties over the concept of God in the face of logical positivism and the growth of popular science.

e. Longer-term reactions

Forty years after the publication of *Honest to God*, Wright again questions Robinson's assumptions about people's inability to accept more traditional presentations of Christianity, citing evidence of contemporary popular faith and the lack of any sociological survey in

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[36] Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate*, p. 136 (quoting Bultmann, Rudolf, *Die Zeit*, 10th May 1963, translated by Clarke, Frank).
[37] Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate*, p. 136.
[38] Richardson, Alan, 'God: Our Search or His?', Richardson, Alan, ed., *Four Anchors from the Stern: Nottingham Reactions to Recent Cambridge Essays*, London, SCM, 1963, pp. 5-9.
[39] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, pp. 35-39, 8.
[40] Hebblethwaite, Brian, *The Ocean of Truth: A Defence of Objective Theism*, Cambridge, CUP, 1988, p. 66.
[41] Fielding Clarke, O., *For Christ's Sake: A reply to the Bishop of Woolwich's book HONEST TO GOD and a positive continuation of the discussion*, Wallington, Religious Education Press, 1963, pp. 15-16, 18, 19.

support of his contentions.[42] He locates Robinson and his problems within a particular cultural English background that tends towards a deist or semi-deist position, with a gap between God and humanity that is occasionally overcome by divine intervention.[43] Wright stresses the place of revelation, '*not* to leap over the ontological or moral gap between a remote Deist God and ourselves, but to enable us rightly to recognize the laughter and the tears, the celebration and the judgment, of the true God'.[44] In similar vein, Williams draws attention to Robinson's paucity of reference to the activity of God, including activity in relation to one who prays.[45] It is probable that in 1963 Robinson would have seen such an approach as inimical to his general thesis, but also conceivable, in view of developments in *Exploration into God* and his reported later regret over the *Honest to God* episode,[46] that he would have later accepted these criticisms. Cupitt is unclear as to whether Robinson's position in *Honest to* God is realist or non-realist, but concludes that his longer term position was one of realism.[47]

f. *Exploration into God*

In his later *Exploration into God*, Robinson is still reluctant to accept the inescapability of analogy:

> The sifting process of linguistic analysis has been one of stripping down an idol . . . . Any ways of speaking about [God] that are suggested in order to fill the word with content for a particular age or culture are not substitutes for it. None of these can be made into God without becoming idols.[48]

Responding to the challenge of verifiability, he seeks 'meaning' for God-related language in subjective (or 'existentialist', as Robinson prefers), Christ-inspired, experience, conviction and a relationship. Struggling as to with whom this relationship might be, he resorts without clear conclusion to various 'pointers' as to how God might be experienced without being defined. Alluding to Martin Buber's 'I-Thou' approach, he writes 'that the utterly personal "Thou"-relationship in which God is known is (to use Buber's metaphor) the umbilical cord of man's very existence', adding that the cord has to be cut and replaced by 'a free relationship of moral

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[42] Wright N. T., 'Doubts about Doubt: *Honest to God* Forty Years On', *JAS, 2005,* 3 (2), p. 184.
[43] Cf. Vernon, Mark, 'The best policy – for a theological shake-up', *Church Times*, 26 April 2013, p. 22, where the same view is attributed to Wright, that 'Robinson was in thrall to a deistic view of God that stems from the Enlightenment'.
[44] Wright, 'Doubts about Doubt', pp. 192-93.
[45] Williams, Rowan, '*Honest to God* in Great Britain', Robinson, John A. T., *Honest to God: 40th Anniversary Edition*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2002, pp. 168-69.
[46] Gomes, Peter J., '*Honest to God* and the Dangerous Ethic', Slee, ed., *Honest to God: 40 Years On*, p. 73.
[47] Cupitt, Don, 'John Robinson and the Language of Faith in God', Slee, ed., *Honest to God: 40 Years On*, pp. 42-43, citing Robinson, *Where Three Ways Meet*, p. 190.
[48] Robinson, *Exploration into God*, p. 60.

and spiritual responsibility'. 'The "Thou" of God' he adds, 'is to be met as much through nature as through history', since one can have an 'I-It' or an 'I-Thou' relationship with both people and things. He draws a fine line between the 'personalist' approach of a 'Thou relationship' and his belief that 'the conception of God as a Being, a Person . . . will . . . come to be seen as a human projection'. He questions whether 'the nature of the ultimate must necessarily be framed in terms of the existence of a divine Being', and writes that 'to represent the spiritual reality (in its transcendent aspect) as a Being in another realm is to make it unreal and remote for vast numbers of people today'. Robinson draws a comparison with the natural way in which the devil is generally demythologized by most people, suggesting that 'a God who . . . depends on ontological existence [probably meaning 'definition'] for his reality is merely inviting secularism'.[49] The import of 'secularism' is unclear: it could be taken as the positive outcome of abandoning a 'god of the gaps', with potential for theism then to interpret the secular presentation as a whole, rather than treating it as a hostile ideology.

g. Summary

Robinson proposed an alternative set of imagery offering fresh metaphysical and existential insight. However, despite the public debate that *Honest to God* engendered, the extent to which the issues were ones confronting people remains uncertain. Indeed, it was not intended as popular theology as Robinson and Williams later acknowledge,[50] relying, as it does, upon familiarity with certain twentieth century philosophers and theologians. Although some would disagree,[51] for Williams by the 1980s, *Honest to God* 'seemed a museum piece', although he concedes that Robinson's concern at the practice of 'treat[ing] God as a member of the class of things . . . in the universe' remained apposite, and that the challenge remains for theology of restating classical theology 'without reinstating a fundamentally mythological idiom for speaking of the divine action'.[52] It is now legitimate to ask whether even this caveat is necessary, provided there is overt recognition of the inevitability of analogy. Indeed, the *Observer*'s headline, 'Our Image of God Must Go', shortly before *Honest to God*'s publication, did not assert that '*any* image of God "must go"', as Edwards says some imagined was Robinson's position.[53] Twenty-five years after the event, Nineham indicated that 'What people need is some approach to envisaging realities such as God, creation and providence

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[49] Robinson, *Exploration into God*, pp. 62-72, 23-26 (cf. *Honest to God*, pp. 48, 53.42-43), 36-38.
[50] Robinson, *Explorations into God*, London, pp. 9-10; Williams, '*Honest to God* in Great Britain', p. 163.
[51] Including Cheetham, Richard, 'Foreword', Slee, ed., *Honest to God: 40 Years On*, pp. vii-viii.
[52] Williams, '*Honest to God* in Great Britain', p. 178.
[53] Edwards, *Tradition and Truth*, p. 31.

imaginatively in a way which does no violence to the rest of what they know to be true'; 'to be fully convincing', a description of God in terms of depth 'must be supplemented by a plausible account of how the personal and gracious character of innermost reality manifests itself in practice and makes a difference to the quality and outcome of life at the historical level'.[54]

Robinson's theology is experiential, immanentist and existentialist, although he reluctantly accepts the risk of turning theology into a form of hubristic anthropology in which the concept of God is superfluous. It is possible to find shades of panentheism in *Honest to God*, when Robinson contrasts 'the depths of our individual being (however shallow) and the unfathomable abyss of all being in God', and when he refers to God as the 'depth and ultimate significance' of 'the conditioned relationships of this life'. It later becomes explicit, in *Exploration into God*, when he presents panentheism as a respectable alternative to traditional theism, and approvingly describes the subtleties of mutual indwelling: 'In this way of thinking there is a co-inherence between God and the universe which overcomes the duality without denying the diversity'.[55] Robinson avoids pantheism: 'God is love' and 'love is *of* God', but it is not the case that love is God;[56] and Michael Ramsey and John Packer were unfair in arguing that Robinson had moved towards pantheism.[57]

Taken overall, Robinson's liberal writing can be seen to be a child of its time, reacting to preserve Christianity in the face of modernist materialism and scepticism. His attempts to demythologise result in alternative mythology or existential non-realism, whereas accepting and explaining the analogical nature of all theological language is likely to have more positive effect.

**8.4 Maurice Wiles**

Wiles's revisionism sometimes leads to charges of deism. He stresses the unknowability of God, and describes the appeal of Platonism's transcendence and mystical approach to the new Christianity: 'the ideal forms of the eternal world', with the Good or the One at the apex of this

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[54] Nineham, Dennis, 'What Happened to the New Reformation?', James, Eric, ed., *God's Truth:* pp. 154-55.
[55] Robinson, *Explorations into God*, pp. 50-53, 60, 84.
[56] Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 53 (quoting 1 John 4.16, 4.7); cf. Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate*, pp. 170-171 (quoting McCabe, Herbert, O.P., *Blackfriars*, July/August 1963); Robinson, *Explorations into God*, p. 87.
[57] Ramsey, Michael, *Image Old and New*, London, SPCK, 1963, p. 6; Packer, J. I., *Keep Yourselves from Idols: a discussion of the book* Honest to God *by John. A. T. Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich*, London, Church Book Room, 1963, p. 7. Richardson probably has *Honest to God* in mind when he levels the same charge as Ramsey's and Packer's, *Four Anchors from the Stern*, p. 6.

world. This, says Wiles, lies behind the first Article of the Church of England's describing God as 'without body, parts or passions', which Wiles interprets as implying, respectively: transcendence and excluding anthropomorphism; emphasising monotheistic unity; and neither lacking nor desiring anything, though without denying concern and love. For the Fathers, he writes, the ineffability of God does not preclude theology, but rather implies 'the indirectness and the incompleteness' of the endeavour. But 'once human reason has acknowledged its inability to reach up to God, it may be the more ready to accept that God has chosen to disclose himself'.[58] Wiles finds the seeds of a theological revolution even within the Cappadocian Fathers, who found the 'divine *ousia* ['being'] . . . both inaccessible and unknowable', and preferred 'the divine activity (ἐνέργεια) which alone impinges directly upon mankind', with 'the term godhead (θεότης) . . . expressive of the divine activity rather than the divine nature'.[59]

While anxious that nonsense should not find respectability as paradox, Wiles nevertheless recognises the inevitability of paradox, and even incoherence, for theology to proceed. The West, he says, places incoherence between God (who is 'pure actuality') and the world, with resulting problems over how and why God creates. Conversely, on the basis of divinization, the East places incoherence within the Godhead, the ultimate paradox being the distinction between the divine essence and the divine energies. This, he says, is a similar conclusion to that within process theology, where 'God is dually transcendent and there is a distinction (but not division) between his primordial and his consequent natures'.[60]

Wiles's starting point for examining the epistemology of our understanding of God is that 'The infinite God is infinitely resistant to our finite systematizations'; or, put differently, it is 'the extreme difficulty of reasoning from experience of the world to affirmation about a transcendent God', particularly with the 'infinite qualitative difference between him and us'. To believe otherwise, he suggests would be both 'an invalid *metabasis eis allo genos*[61] and the grossest impiety'. The only alternative is a Barthian reliance upon God's self-revelation, but the medium of revelation and our means of assessing it are still dependent upon the ordinary world, leading to some circularity of argument. So, for Wiles, theology can speak not of the transcendent God, but only of 'the effects of God as experienced'.[62] God is:

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[58] Wiles, Maurice, *The Christian Fathers*, London, H&S, 1966, pp. 13-14 and 16-23.
[59] Wiles, Maurice, *The Making of Christian Doctrine: A Study in the Principles of Early Doctrinal Development*, Cambridge, CUP, 1967, pp. 176-77.
[60] Maurice, *Remaking of Christian* Doctrine, pp. 31, 109, 118-20.
[61] Change to another kind (of subject), similar to a category mistake.
[62] Wiles, *Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 108, 22, 23-24, 25-26.

that reality of which we are aware when we have an experience of ultimate concern and which we cannot know by any other route. There is a reality other than the human experiencing, but we are only able to speak of it indirectly by speaking of those experiences within which we are aware of its effective presence.[63]

Existentialist theology, writes Wiles, has tried not to replace objectivity with subjectivity, but to overcome the distinction between the two, so that God's constant relationship with consciousness is through the totality of human lived experience. However, a problem remains for Wiles, in that experience of God is not self-evidently experience of God, and is coloured by cultural and religious tradition and psychological factors. So, although varied experiences may be genuine, it remains difficult to distinguish the true from the false. But Wiles does not limit understanding to human experience, and affirms the possibility of some knowledge, however indirect and analogical, from considering the effects of God.  He believes in 'God's one act . . . of creation . . . as a continuing and still unfinished process', in contrast with a God who leaves his creation to its own devices.[64] Since, for Wiles 'there is no going back on the Christian conviction of creation *ex nihilo*', there must be a suspicion that he is collapsing God's sustaining activity into the original creative act, and thus moving towards a deist position, so that divine relationship with humanity becomes merely a human projection.

Wiles is nervous at the prospect of God having a special connection with the call of individual Old Testament figures and Christians, as undermining 'our normal understanding of the relative independence of causation within the world'. 'Talk of God's activity  is . . . a way of speaking about those events within the natural order or within human history in which God's purpose finds clear expression or special opportunity'.[65] Later, he describes how science's removing the 'God of the gaps' 'has made possible the reaffirmation of a more profound concept of God as the transcendent ground of there being a world at all'.[66] But now he is explicitly conscious of the potential charge of deism, and accepts that his position is deistic 'in so far as it refrains from claiming any effective causation on the part of God in relation to particular occurrences', but not so 'in that it allows for a continuing relationship of God to the world as source of existence and giver of purpose to the whole'.[67] Sensitive to the prospect of his emphasis on God's original and general creative role undermining personal understanding of God's activity, Wiles acknowledges that God's relationship with humanity 'must never be

[63] Wiles, *Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, p. 27.
[64] Edwards, *Tradition and Truth*, p. 287.
[65] Wiles, *Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 33, 37, 38.
[66] Wiles, Maurice, *Working Papers in Doctrine*, London, SCM, 1976, p. 134.
[67] Wiles, *Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, p. 38.

understood in sub-personal terms'.[68] Indeed, if '"the ultimate" or "the divine"' is where we are grounded, 'it cannot be wholly alien in character from what it is to be a person',[69] and personal terms and concepts for God can never be out of place.[70] 'Act of God', Wiles writes, does not refer to efficient causation, but creates a new reality: 'certain occurrences within the world [commonly seen as providential or miraculous] are acknowledged and experienced as having a special and intimate relation to that ultimate source of love'. Rather than manipulating events, God enables people to 'glimpse his purposes of love and be inspired by that vision', such glimpses and inspiration being very real forms of action.[71]

With the passage of time, Wiles's deistic streak is modified, and although he still requires God as the source of all existence, he also recognises that 'the doctrine of creation out of nothing must indeed seem a strong candidate for radical modification' in the light of modern insights. He proposes that God may have created the world with independence from himself, deliberately limiting the scope of his activity, but not thereby nullifying his omnipotence. To declare this impossible would purport to limit God's creative work. This involves 'a qualification of the concept of power by that of love', as the basis of the autonomy of his created agents and a reciprocal relationship between God and his creatures (as advanced by some process theologians). This amounts to 'the gift of freedom to finite beings', in contrast with Paul's 'disastrous' insistence that God, the potter, can do what he likes with the clay. God's impassibility remains important, and 'God is never, as we are, affected by forces of events which come entirely from outside the sphere of his own influence'. This is not undermined by God's self-limiting, since any suffering on God's part because of what we do 'is not the result of something that has happened wholly apart from God'. It is not clear, however, how this qualification preserves God's impassibility.[72]

Wiles outlines how God brings the world round to his intentions as 'the gradual emergence of our world as . . . a purposeful occurrence',[73] citing Macquarrie's analogy of a strong chess player who always brings the game back to his purposes, and John Lucas's of a Persian rug maker who adjusts his work at one end to the mistakes of his children at the other end  (both reminiscent of Vanstone's account of the boys turning accidents to good account in making

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[68] Wiles, *Working Papers in Doctrine*, p. 143.
[69] Wiles, Maurice, *Faith and the Mystery of God*, London, SCM, 1982, pp. 12-13.
[70] Wiles, *Working Papers in Doctrine*, p. 143.
[71] Wiles, *Faith and the Mystery of God*, pp. 27-29.
[72] Wiles, Maurice, *God's Action in the World: The Bampton Lectures for 1986*, London, SCM, 1986, pp. 16, 21-25, 36-37 (quoting Romans 9. 20-21).
[73] Wiles, *God's Action in the World*, p. 54.

their model of a waterfall[74]). These analogies, Wiles writes, preserve human freedom in distinction from God's actions, but outline how different ways of describing the same phenomenon (like Farrer's double agency) relate to one another without treating God 'as just one more causal agent alongside others'. Wiles's analogy is of Solomon building the temple and instructing a workman to build the temple. At an individual level, to postulate God both calling for and engineering the response would exemplify bad theology as well as logic: 'divine grace and human freedom are [not] competing explanations, [with] the more one ascribes to the former, the less can be ascribed to the latter'. The particular psychological and social factors that come together to contribute to someone's conversion to Christianity, for instance, 'may better be seen as characteristic aspects of a world that in its totality constitutes God's action rather than as particular or discrete acts of God'. Although it would seem wrong to deny God the freedom enjoyed by human beings to respond and intervene within a personal relationship, Wiles's reminder is that analogy is being used, that God is not a person, and that divine self-limitation is operative in respect of 'personal' interventions as in other ways. Denying God the freedom to act without causal restraint in the world 'may not in fact be to depersonalize him but to be rather a corollary of the kind of world God has in fact chosen to create'.[75]

So, says Wiles, we are led to 'general statements about the kind of world God has created rather than to claims about particular, specifiable acts of God in history.' This avoids theodicy-related problems over non-intervention, and God's self-limiting omnipotence makes 'miraculous' intervention unlikely.[76] Vincent Brümmer questions this,[77] but fails to grasp how Wiles, almost mystically, sees the master-act and the subacts as parts of the same continuing creative process, without any need for causation between them. Indeed, for Edwards, the modern believer 'who accepts the revelation by science of the regularities in nature has to acknowledge that the Creator has so arranged things that he is not needed like a technician who is often being called back to fix a faulty machine'.[78]

Wiles has devised a total integrated scheme of a single creative act in the created universe, and in human acts that are free by virtue of God's self-limitation. The theory may be speculative, but it has its own integrity. Attributing happenings to God's direct intervention in

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[74] Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, pp. 30-35.

[75] Wiles, *God's Action in the World*, pp. 56, 61-62, 96, 76, 79-80.

[76] Wiles, *God's Action in the World*, pp. 62, 67-68; Edwards, *Tradition and Truth*, p. 289.

[77] Brümmer, Vincent, 'Farrer, Wiles and the Causal Joint', *Modern Theology*, 8:1 January 1992, pp. 1-14.

[78] Edwards, *Tradition and Truth*, p. 115.

the world represents alternative imagery that may be just as 'true' for its adherents as more complicated theorising is for Wiles and his sympathisers. Edwards's preference is for retaining the possibility of the miraculous events of the Bible as 'signs', 'mysterious and ambiguous, needing interpretation by faith if "the finger of God" is to be discerned in them. . . . We may say "God did that" while from another angle it is equally right to say that "nature did that"'. Indeed, when Edwards writes that 'There is such a fear of mythology in religion that it is thought right to insist that in reality God never intervenes',[79] what is most significant is the reference to mythology, since, if mythology is given its true weight, it is possible to insist with one way of speaking (the mythological) that God does intervene, and at the same time insist with another way of speaking (the rationalist, scientific) that God does not, or even that the concept is meaningless. It is almost as if theism and deism can co-exist, possibly as part of the paradox and incoherence to which Wiles refers, inevitable in the face of God's ineffability.

**8.5 Don Cupitt**

Early on, Cupitt states his problem: 'If theology's basic concepts ever become clear and specific, it is falling into idolatry: if they are refined away, theology falls into vacuity':[80]

> We think about God through human imagery, and yet deny its adequacy: we must so think, and we must so deny. The clues to the interpretation of monotheism are the old polemic against idolatry, and the insolubility of the problem of analogy.[81]

Thus is anticipated Cupitt's life-long struggle with theism, which culminates in his post-modernist rejection of any objective realism, and even any metaphysical realism, for God in favour of a purely subjectivist, spirituality-based approach. Spirituality and religion remain as undergirding for ethics and 'aestheticized' Christianity. By this stage Cupitt can claim: that 'God is love' inevitably implies 'Love is God';[82] that 'God is not an infinite substance, but simply self-outpouring process, like the Cosmos, and like solar living'; and that God is to be found in the welter of human critical processes in humanistic, postmodern human experience.[83]

Even in Cupitt's early, modernist stage what is most creative is what here will be called his 'dual approach', which Gavin Hyman refers to as his 'two Gods idea', quoting Scott Cowdell about Cupitt's '"working God" of religion . . ., alongside the ineffable transcendent God . . .

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[79] Edwards, *Tradition and Truth*, pp. 118, 115.
[80] Cupitt, Don, *Christ and the Hiddenness of God*, London, Lutterworth, 1971, p. 67.
[81] Cupitt, *Christ and the Hiddenness of God*, p. 8.
[82] Cupitt, Don, *Theology's Strange Return*, London, SCM, 2010, p. 37.
[83] Cupitt, *Theology's Strange Return*, pp. 18-19, 41-44.

upon which the "working God" is projected'.[84] Qualifying descriptors for God with words such as 'Eternal' and 'Heavenly' accords with classical negative theology which 'does not distinguish theism from atheism', preferring 'to say that God is nothing rather than that he is anything, because atheism is nearer the mark than even the most refined analogical theism'. Even the notion of existence for God, Cupitt finds inappropriate; and 'If God were not thus elusive he would not be God'. He considers the possibility that theology itself may be not only contingently impossible because of the limited nature of human cognitive powers, but logically impossible because of God's absolute nature. This is exemplified in the intractable and paradoxical contrast between the immutability and cosmic nature of God on the one hand, and the personal, interventionist side of God on the other, and that between the deistic need for God to be impassible and the theistic need for patripassianism (or at least God suffering in Christ).[85]

Cupitt's dual approach becomes apparent as he asserts a distinction between theology on the one hand and a religious view of God on the other: 'theology can toy facetiously with the notion of God, but only religion can actually present him'. 'Faith', he adds, 'may enable a man to apprehend an object which otherwise he could not have apprehended, but it does not create that which it apprehends'. So 'theism . . . is bipolar' and 'the practical business of religion is transacted in anthropomorphic imagery which believers know to be objectively inadequate, and yet consider very important'. If a complete justification of our language about God could be found, 'it would overthrow theism'. 'God does not *happen* to be hidden in such a way that he *might* be exposed. He *is* his hiddenness.'[86] What Cupitt is rejecting are: the realist notion of God's existence shared by theists and atheists; the factual question as to whether God exists; and the monotheist view of God as supreme intelligence and intelligible supreme reality. Reaching an impasse with both the affirmative and the negative approaches to God, Cupitt concludes that 'God will be spoken of . . . not in a cosmological or metaphysical way, but in the context of the spiritual life and as that about which the spiritual life revolves'.[87] Religion, says Cupitt, lives in a constant state of flux between images and iconoclasm (the second of which he sees as little different from agnosticism), with a 'crucial distinction . . . between . . .

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[84] Hyman, Gavin, 'Postmodern Theology: The Apotheosis or Scourge of Liberalism?', Chapman, Mark E., ed., *The Future of Liberal Theology*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002, pp. 194-95.

[85] Cupitt, *Christ and the Hiddenness of God*, pp. 21-23, 26 (quoting Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, p. 227), 29-30, 60, 105-106, 111-12.

[86] Cupitt, *Christ and the Hiddenness of God*, pp. 41-43, 56, 201-03, 206.

[87] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, pp. 15-16, 20, 78, 51.

the God of practical, institutional religion, on the one hand; and the God who is pure transcendent spirit on the other'.[88]

Cupitt finds God to be:

> a unifying symbol that eloquently personifies and represents to us everything that spirituality requires of us. The requirement is the will of God, the divine attributes represent to us various aspects of the spiritual life, and God's nature as spirit represents the goal we are to attain. Thus the whole of the spiritual life revolves around God and is summed up in God. God is the religious concern, reified.[89]

It is now a short step to God as a moral imperative (over which Thiselton draws attention to Kant's influence[90]) such that 'God *is* the religious requirement personified'. However, someone's religious life cannot depend on any exterior imposition, but must be autonomous, with no 'extra-religious reality of God', and the aspects of God's nature – will, simplicity, eternity, etc.[91] – are psychologically useful in cultivating moral and religious lives. 'Realism is long dead and gone: we live in a time when religion has become fully human, when theology is like art . . .'.[92]

Ward finds Cupitt's God an oppressive, demanding deity: the 'spiritually ideal being who cannot exist' should give way to the Christian God who does exist and is the creator of free beings.[93] Ward cannot reconcile a realist view of an immense, cosmic God with an idealist view of God as a unifying and spiritual symbol, but fails to see that Cupitt is effectively rejecting the first as unconnected with religion and espousing the second as religion's essence.

Williams doubts whether Cupitt can actually be refuted, but summarises Cupitt's analysis of 'God' as:

- the Ineffable, the sum of what is unknown to us – which Williams accepts as the basis for mysticism;
- the Ideal, the personification of the spiritual requirement – with which Williams takes issue; and

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[88] Cupitt, Don, *The Leap of Reason*, London, Sheldon, 1976, pp. 77, 114.
[89] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, p. 9.
[90] Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, pp. 87-88.
[91] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, pp. 85, 96, 100-103.
[92] Cupitt, Don, *The Sea of Faith: Christianity in Change*, London, BBC, 1984, p. 245.
[93] Ward, Keith, *Holding Fast to God: A Reply to Don Cupitt*, London, SPCK, 1982, p. 31.

- the mythological person to whom prayer is addressed – which Williams accepts as *praeparatio evangelica*.[94]

In 'the Ideal', Williams detects the functional nature of Cupitt's view of God, with '"God" . . . introduced into moral discourse as a rhetorical device to break the impasse of a threatened solipsism', but wonders how this can happen if the word is *known* to be a rhetorical device. A functional use of 'God', says Williams, quoting Robert Spaemann, and with shades of Anselm, 'annuls the very concept of God: that for which God fulfilled a function would be greater than God'. However, Williams's main concern is over what he perceives as a sharp disjunction between the contemplative and the ethical, between the Ineffable and the Ideal, and over whether Cupitt wants to bridge this gap. Cupitt, with his dual approach, probably believes that it is impossible to penetrate beyond the idealist, ethical understanding of God. However, Williams is right that Cupitt claims that 'God can (*must*) have no "extra-religious reality": he is not to be spoken of outside our speaking about religious forms of life, he is not neutrally demonstrable, not *there* independently of religious will'.[95]

From about 1986, Cupitt's approach becomes postmodernist. As Thiselton comments (and as an examination of *Life Lines*[96] and *The Long-Legged Fly*[97] confirms), 'by this stage all talk of God as an internal symbol or focus for "unifying" a value system, will have vanished'.[98] The cultural relativity of language, concepts and imagery is important for Cupitt, and over time God has become (in Catholic terms) 'in principle, a publicly knowable inferred entity', and (in Reformed terms) 'an entity that can be inferred only on the basis of faith'.[99] Cupitt's theory is functional and subjective:

> God-talk has a purely empirical meaning. . . . The God of speech is experienced as a personal being, who spoke with an audible voice. The God of writing was a transcendent inferred entity. The God of language is a symbol of where words come from. He is a symbol for the continuously upsurging creative movement of language itself . . . .[100]

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[94] Cupitt, Don, *The World to Come*, London, SCM, 1982, p. 70; Williams, Rowan, '"Religious realism": on not quite agreeing with Don Cupitt', *Modern Theology*, 1.1, October 1984, pp. 3-24, reproduced, Williams, Rowan, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, London, SCM, 2007, pp. 240-41.

[95] Williams, 'Religious realism', pp. 239 (quoting Spaemann, Robert, 'The question of the meaning of "God", *ICR,* vol. 1, 1972, p. 39), 244 (quoting Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, p. 96).

[96] Cupitt, Don, *Life Lines*, London, SCM, 1986.

[97] Cupitt, Don, *The Long-Legged Fly: A Theology of Language and Desire*, London, SCM, 1987.

[98] Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, p.85.

[99] Cupitt, Don, *Creation out of Nothing*, London, SCM, 1990, pp. 117-19,123-24, 148-49.

[100] Cupitt, *Creation out of Nothing*, p. 151.

What Christ experienced on the cross was 'deferral of the objective reality of God', which has been reflected in meditation and art over the centuries, and 'opens the space in which the modern world comes to birth', by allowing people to view themselves from the human-only and self-reliant point of view.[101] Now, by 1997, Cupitt is having second thoughts about his earlier kind of non-realism, which he mischievously says was 'difficult even for ordinary people, and therefore quite impossible for church leaders, to understand'. His solution is to 'aestheticize' religion, to 'see religious living in terms of artistic practice and symbolic expression' rather than a matter of supernatural beliefs. God is then seen 'as a spiritual ideal, a reference point, an ideal, and a focus of aspiration', and once more Cupitt in effect returns to his dual approach, suggesting a separation of 'the God of religion from the god of the philosophers'. Thus, although some sort of belief in God may yet prove useful, the question of whether God exists can be abandoned. Ironically, 'I still pray and love God, even though I fully acknowledge that no God actually exists', he writes. And the way to religious progress is 'by deconstructing all the binary contrasts' so as to 'bring realism to an end, with an effect that is it as if God and the self have been melted together': 'a dissolving of the soul', 'union with God', 'but which others describe as "atheism"'. 'The dissolution of God, and our attainment of perfect union with God, are one and the same thing.'[102]

The move from a liberal stance within modernism to a postmodern position is complete. Hyman summarizes this progression from liberal theology, to his non-realist interpretation, to postmodernism and then to expressionism by 1990.[103] By 2010, God as a potential entity has more or less disappeared, with the idea of God now 'a device to think with . . . to show us how to become ourselves'.  But Cupitt retains a mixture of projection and anthropomorphism, with his requirement for 'a continual pushing of the God-ideal higher and higher, so that God stays firmly ahead of us and continues to lure us forward . . . one full jump ahead of us, *and* unattainable'.[104] However, by 2010, Cupitt's assessment is that, in the secular West, 'God comes down as immanence; God is now the endless, all-inclusive world of human striving and human symbolic exchange that produced us and within which we live and move and have our being'.[105]

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[101] Cupitt, Don, *After God: The Future of Religion*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997, pp. 68-69.

[102] Cupitt, *After God*, pp. xii, xiv, 34, 28, 85, 87, 55-56.

[103] Hyman, Gavin, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism*, Louisville, John Knox, 2001, p. 23.

[104] Cupitt, Don, *The Fountain: A Secular Theology*, London, SCM, 2010, pp. 41-43.

[105] Cupitt, *Theology's Strange Return*, p. 21.

Indeed, Cupitt writes, 'God's job is done', 'so that he can fade himself out'.[106] More than that:

> We ought to go on believing in God (in a way) long after the death of God. There never actually *was* a god, but that doesn't matter because in these matters that sort of ontological worry is now a waste of time. What does matter is our new postmodern realization that we couldn't have got where we are today *without* God. So we should feel grateful to God, and honour the past to which we owe everything. Indeed, we should love the god [sic] who over many millennia fully created us, and himself died in doing so.[107]

There is a strange anthropomorphic element here, as Cupitt relies on 'poetic' references to God, which he would probably class as part of the religious life that he still values. Similarly, he says: 'Either God must progressively hand over everything to man and himself retreat into obscurity or die; or alternatively, God himself must actually *become* man. Perhaps the second of these solutions is in Christianity a hyperbolic version of the first'.[108]

As Hyman states, Cupitt later abandoned 'his own transcendent realm'[109] in favour of subjectivist relativism. By a 2009 interview, Cupitt has given up God in a metaphysical sense in favour of anthropocentric spirituality and religion. Jesus, Cupitt says, is a pioneer of modernism in putting human relations first, and we too must find God in ourselves. He has now removed himself from communion (by which he probably means from receiving Holy Communion).[110] What is not clear is why he should have found a need to do so, given his accompanying protestations about the usefulness of Christianity as an ethical base, given his retention of 'aestheticized' Christianity, and given his earlier dual approach, which allowed a religious approach to continue alongside a recognition of its non-realism and the futility of striving after God's transcendent existence.

Hebblethwaite, in his critique, equates the non-realist position with one of non-theism,[111] which raises issues of whether it is possible for non-realist and realist Christians to co-exist within the Church. This could undermine Hebblethwaite's position that without an objective God, Christianity not only would but *ought* to collapse. Human beings and the Church – and even some sort of grace of an unknowable God – might be subtler than that. Indeed, as is apparent from his 2010 writing, even the non-realist, postmodernist Cupitt still finds theological language, including the name 'God', pragmatically useful, even indispensable, in

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[106] Cupitt, *Theology's Strange Return*, pp. 33-34.
[107] Cupitt, *Theology's Strange Return*, p. 34.
[108] Cupitt, *Theology's Strange Return*, p. 88.
[109] Hyman, 'Postmodern Theology', p. 196.
[110] Cupitt, Don, interview by Alan Macfarlane, 16th February 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ADIkdu3mU8&feature=share, downloaded 19.12.2012.
[111] Hebblethwaite, *Ocean of Truth*, p. 141.

communicating what is most important and most dear. Indeed, by 2010, Cupitt seems to be combining his postmodernism with attempts to rediscover the Christian tradition. Cupitt's dual approach could offer a way towards unifying the different approaches of the more realist and less realist kinds of believers, by providing a basis for maintaining a common spiritual life of worship and conduct: 'So far as everyday religious practice and utterance are concerned the non-realist may well be indistinguishable from the realist'.[112]

## 8.6 George Newlands

Newlands's *God in Christian Perspective* has figured in the Literature Review. His revisionism is less pronounced than that of others previously considered in this chapter.

He recognises the 'problems of how to speak of a living God who is both creator of time and active in times', the transcendence-immanence paradox. Whatever knowledge we have of God has come from God (though Newlands does not clarify how we verify this knowledge), has had to be adapted to the limitations of human minds, may extend our present conceptualisation into the unfamiliar, and will depend upon an analogical relationship. Analogy is implied when Newlands writes that love is 'a term through which we interpret the activity of God by comparison with human experience of and reasoning about love'. The title 'Theology of the Love of God' clearly indicates his conviction that 'God is in his essential nature love', as demonstrated in Jesus Christ, and that this is the key to creating a viable concept of God, provided it is given 'substantive content'.[113] Indeed, love for Newlands is:

> [God's] unity of being, being which is involved in a constant process of complete self-giving which is also complete self-affirmation, in God himself and in his relations with the world. To use the traditional formulations, aseity is at the same time proseity, the economic and essential trinity are one.[114]

When Newlands writes that 'To speak of God . . . as the loving God is to speak of God as characteristically a personal agent', this is not to minimise God's transcendence, but to make God's love not less than human love. God's love will have the 'texture' of 'ultimate concern, providential care, reconciling grace', and it will reflect a range of human concepts of human love. God is not less than a personal agent, but, by transcendence, more than a personal agent.[115] For Newlands, there is no easy analogical step from the various kinds and levels of transcendence experienced in human life, for instance in aesthetic, moral and cultural matters and personal relationships. This is because God is unique, but our language, paradoxically, is

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[112] Cupitt's 'Response', of Edwards, *Tradition and Truth*, p. 284.
[113] Newlands, *Theology of the Love of God*, pp. 90, 53, 23, 9, 15, 17.
[114] Newlands, *Theology of the Love of God*, p. 32.
[115] Newlands, *Theology of the Love of God,* pp. 54-55.

not. Divine transcendence is wide, to be discovered in appreciation of God's creative activity and grace, in peace in the natural order and in awareness of God's overcoming suffering and death. 'Transcendence' speaks to Newlands of mystery and of freedom from 'our temporal conceptions of what pertains to deity'. Although creative, 'God is independent of space and time except as he chooses to be involved in space and time'. His transcendence is hidden, and analogies from the natural, including personal, world are in the end inadequate. Newlands's speaking of God's *hidden-ness* being '*manifested . . .* in his inconceivability', and of 'Christology point[ing] to this metaphysical opacity of God in creation and redemption'[116] displays a considerable degree of paradox. So does his assertion that, though God is hidden, activity by God should not to be ruled out because it cannot be measured.[117] He explains that divine creativity is no extension of human or other natural creativity, nor the first link in a chain of causes, but rather 'the basis of all creaturely activity, both separate from such activity and co-operating in, with and under all creativity in the created order', though without 'a causal-mechanistic' involvement.[118] This relates to God's immanence, which Newlands insists must be taken in the context of transcendence, to avoid 'the assimilation of God uncritically with contemporary structures of society'. Human experience of God's immanence is objective through the biblical record and subjective through experiencing forgiveness and reconciliation.[119]

Over the notion of God suffering, Newlands remains open-minded:

> To speak of God as suffering is to use language analogically. But not all elements of our talk of God are analogical, certainly not analogical in the same way. . . To speak of God as suffering is no more and no less intelligible than to speak of God as not suffering, not subject to change, not affected by happenings in the world. We cannot escape the anthropological pole of theology simply by resort to negative theology.[120]

However, while accepting his latter statement, one may question the equivalence he attaches to speaking of God suffering and speaking of God not suffering. There is something foundational about the latter, from which the former is an – albeit attractive – departure. When he explicitly comments on process theology, he is consistent in remaining open-minded, despite sympathy with it in comparison with classical impassibility.[121]

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[116] Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective*, pp. 66-69, 191, 193-94 (italics added).
[117] Newlands, George, *Traces of Liberality: Collected Essays*, Bern, European Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 42.
[118] Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective*, p. 71.
[119] Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective*, pp. 76-77.
[120] Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective*, p. 83.
[121] Newlands, *Theology of the Love of God*, pp. 100-101.

God, while personal and not less than personal,[122] is not a super-person: there is personality *in* God, rather than personality *of* God. Nevertheless, Newlands also refers to God several times as a person, and sometimes as 'person' (with no indefinite article): 'As person he is a living, speaking, acting, communicating being acting through events in human history. He has all the optimum personal characteristics of human beings with none of their disadvantages. God is the one person for whom to be is to love *par excellence*. As transcendent person he has all the capacities of the creator'. By use of metaphor, God can be said to create; although God does not have a body, he does have 'a mind, or something like it, which allows mental functions. He lives, plans, creates, fulfils, relates, communicates, supports', which, he writes, is why 'it is convenient – even essential, for nothing else will do – for us to use the term person'.[123]

Newlands considers the classical attributes of God, such as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience and eternity, uncontroversially interpreting each of them with cognizance of God's essential nature of love. Love is certainly at the heart of 'the sacrifice not just of Jesus but of God on the cross'.  Newlands says that, on the one hand, 'God is the subject and object of sacrifice . . .', but that, on the other hand: 'This does not mean that God dies: not the death of God, but death in God is at the heart of the divine mystery'. Newlands recognises the danger in such paradox, with: 'We must be very careful about how we use analogies in relating language concerning Jesus to language concerning God. . . . We may perhaps use the events concerning Jesus as paradigmatic clues given by grace to the understanding of God. . . . We cannot however simply extrapolate from the man Jesus to the divine nature as if there were some authorised one to one correspondence, whether through analogy of grace or being.'[124]

Newlands and Allen Smith perceive 'an urgent need . . . to re-imagine God'.  God's hospitality is portrayed not as a contribution to comfort, but as 'dynamic', inviting human commitment to hospitable action in asserting human rights. The authors portray God as 'pure hospitality, unconditional love' itself, and hospitality as 'a trace of transcendence', although they then qualify this, with '*God is FOR hospitality: God is not hospitality as such*.' 'Hospitality' they write, 'can be conceived as a mode of God's being in action. . . . For God, to be is to act hospitably'.[125]

Newlands is cautious about natural extensions into process theology and divine suffering. In seeking adequate descriptions of God, he turns, more readily than other liberal theologians, to

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[122] Newlands, *Theology of the Love of God*, p. 96.

[123] Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective*, pp. 95, 68-69, 98.

[124] Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective*, pp. 99-103, 111, 115-16.

[125] Newlands, George and Smith, Allen, *Hospitable God: The Transformative Dream*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010, pp. 8, 9, 66, 111, 98.

the revelation in Christ, in whom he finds illustration of God's love and interaction with humanity.

**8.7 Summary**

Phillips sets the scene in popular style in 1952, by drawing attention to a growing awareness that some views of God are consistent neither with God's transcendence nor with the profound challenges of human experience. Deeper challenges to convention quickly follow, most notably, with huge public exposure, the extraordinary phenomenon of *Honest to God*. Although some of Robinson's historical and philosophical claims are questionable, he brought to a wide public many of the liberal concerns that were current in theological circles, particularly in the writings of Tillich, Bultmann and, depending on interpretation, perhaps Bonhoeffer. Although he underestimates general levels of understanding about spatial and personal references for God, he highlights issues that accord with some popular concern. Some of his theology tends in a deist direction, which is an even stronger trend within Wiles, whose writing is more cogently argued and more persuasive. God for Wiles is utterly transcendent, and largely known through God's effects and human experience, particularly through the single process of creation, original and continuing. It is this single creative process that accounts for what is often erroneously presented as experience of divine intervention. God does not manipulate events, but enables humans to glimpse his purposes. This includes God's self-limiting in the creative act, so as to generate human freedom. Wiles's message in this respect will be difficult for many Christian people, particularly in terms of the clear interventionist programme within the Bible.

For Newlands, humanity is dependent upon God for any knowledge we might have of God in his transcendence, and supremely so through the person of Jesus. Thus, although understanding is likely to be analogical, it is the product of revelation. Newlands is not afraid of paradox, for instance when he writes of God's hidden-ness being manifested in his inconceivability, and over the issue of God suffering. He insists on the retention of God's transcendence, and on placing God's immanence firmly within that context.

The most thoroughly liberal approach of those surveyed here is that of Cupitt, from whom there is a clear development of thinking from his 1970s and 1980s work through to his final post-modernist position of the twenty-first century. The theme he develops early on runs through most of his work, at least until the latest stage, and is here called his dual approach, distinguishing between theology and a religious view of God. By the first part of this, he considers the logic of God's transcendence, moves beyond analogy and the *via negativa*, and

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concludes that attempts to describe God are logically doomed. By the second part, however, he finds in religion, even faith, a possibility for spirituality and personal ethics, which reintroduce the notion of God as the psychologically useful summation of human aspirations. As Cupitt moves into his postmodernist stage, cultural relativity of language becomes important, with God viewed pragmatically as a symbol of language's creativity and of human striving. He wishes to retain Christianity in an 'aestheticized' form, in other words like an art-form, an expression of this striving, with God solely comprehensible in his immanence.

There is a progression of liberal theology from Phillips to Cupitt in reaction to western cultural and linguistic development and popular thinking. In reaction to the twenty-first century postmodernist trend, Cupitt's dual approach offers a promising outline for the Christian community, in providing a basis of intellectual respectability for those for whom communication with and worship of God is logically difficult, while enabling those without such difficulties to retain their basis of faith. The practical theology within this thesis will demonstrate whether such thinking has appealed to the sample of informal theologians.

## Chapter 9: RECLAIMING TRADITION

Many post-war UK Anglican theologians maintain or reclaim tradition in their approach to God. The eight theologians surveyed offer an academic rationale for their positions.

### 9.1 Austin Farrer

For Farrer, knowing God is 'to accord to some real being a conscious recognition': 'we cannot say even as much as this, without implying something about the logic or the structure of the thought affirmative of God'. The corollary is that '"To know", or "to acknowledge as real", when used of finites and when used of God, cannot mean two utterly different things'.[1] Platten describes 'Farrer's conviction that God and man, whilst separated by the necessities of the divine transcendence, nevertheless are related intimately'.[2] Alongside his development of Thomist analogy, Farrer's reliance for knowing God is upon faith, as in this striking imagery:

> We can love a god whom we know by faith alone; and . . . the veil remains. All we have to say is that the veil, however impenetrable, is not blank. It is painted with the image of God, and God himself painted it, and made it indelible with his blood, when he was nailed to it for us men and for our salvation. We know him through the image, and by faith . . . .[3]

Faith is similarly implied when he writes:

> Nothing can give substance to our thought of God, but an experience which employs our activity in relation to God, where that activity is something other than thought itself; always allowing . . . that our activity in the matter is passive towards a prior activity of God.[4]

Farrer's apparent retreat from reason towards fideism[5] has puzzled philosophers, and among them Mitchell. He quotes Farrer's 'No progress is possible so long as it is supposed that faith is or contains an elementary, or an implicit, or any other sort of philosophy which believers are bound to defend, since upon it their confidence reposes',[6] and comments that 'Farrer, it seemed, had become a sort of fideist, content to rest the truth of Christianity upon the

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[1] Farrer, *Faith and* Speculation, p. 21.
[2] Platten, 'Diaphanous Thought', pp. 30-50.
[3] Farrer, *Glass of Vision*, p. 61.
[4] Farrer, *Faith and Speculation,* p. 28.
[5] Farrer's possible fideism is explored, MacSwain, Robert Carroll, *'Solved by Sacrifice': Austin Farrer, fideism, and the evidence of faith*, *A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of St. Andrews, 2010*, (http://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/bitstream/10023/920/3/Robert%20Carroll%20MacSwain%20PhD%20thesis.PDF), particularly pp.13-110, downloaded 27.02.2014.
[6] Farrer, *Faith and Speculation*, p. 14.

believer's sense of being nourished by the tradition in which he has been raised'.[7] Faith is certainly implied as a requisite of theology when Farrer writes:

> However orderly our spectrum of the sciences, we cannot put theology in.  Is it between the green and yellow? It is not. Beyond the infra-red or ultra-violet? No. The theologian is not picking a colour from the rainbow; he is looking at the sun. A system of the sciences helps us to compose the picture of finite being.  But all finite beings are on one side, and infinite Being on the other, of the great divide.[8]

So, theology is not 'among the ways we have of viewing our environment, except by an equivocation,'[9] but rather the way of referring to the infinite, a separate exercise both in process and in subject matter. The reference to 'looking at the sun' is a matter of faith-based theology, not philosophical analysis. The distinction is unclear between the intellectual process of conceiving and speaking of God, and the more 'voluntary' and affective process of believing in and relating to God, which can degenerate into emotionalism unless the intellectual basis is secure. Nevertheless, Farrer espouses revelation and inspiration as essential for imagery,[10] inter-dependent with faith, which is essential to validate analogy and imagery at the God-ward end.

## 9.2 Eric Mascall

Mascall is a staunch defender of orthodox, Catholic theology, offering no new images of God, but drawing attention to the inescapable and historic use of analogy in describing God. He unashamedly identifies 'the supernatural' with 'another world', and 'another world' with 'a beneficent Creator, upon whose will "this world" is dependent for its existence and preservation and in union with whom his own beatitude will consist'.[11] Mascall's language about God the Trinity is almost poetical, as he explains that the Trinity is not a doctrine, but God, and that the concept of 'three divine persons eternally united in one life of complete perfection and beatitude' is 'the secret of God's most intimate life, into which, in his infinite love and generosity, he has admitted us'.  God, he continues, is 'a personal Being of unimaginable splendour, bliss and love'; and, 'if we want to acquire some remote understanding of the wonder and glory of the Christian God, we may well find the poets more helpful than the theologians'.[12] There are few concessions from Mascall over language or the

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[7] Mitchell, Basil, 'Two Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion', Eaton and Loades, eds., *For God and Clarity*, p. 177.
[8] Farrer, *Faith and Speculation*, pp. 20-21.
[9] Farrer, *Faith and Speculation*, p. 21.
[10] Farrer, *Glass of Vision*, p. 57.
[11] Mascall, *Secularisation of* Christianity, p. 191.
[12] Mascall, E. L., *The Christian Universe*, London, DLT, 1966, pp. 51-53.

means of approach to God, because, like Farrer, he recognizes analogy as the expressive means to those ends.

Mascall clearly has linguistic analysis in mind when he writes: 'My chief desire . . . has been to vindicate, against the generally positivist attitude of Anglo-Saxon philosophy . . . a fundamentally and unashamedly metaphysical approach to theism'.[13] The language becomes meaningful in relevant communities:

> For a linguistic empiricist to declare . . . that he cannot give any intelligible meaning to the sentence 'God exists' may indicate nothing more than that he has never made a serious effort to enter into the linguistic community of those who affirm it. . . . When religious people, including theologians, speaking carefully and responsibly, make statements containing the word 'God', they do understand what they are saying'.[14]

For Mascall, there are rational grounds for concluding that material beings 'owe their existence to the incessant creative activity of transcendent self-existent being'. However, the limited information about God as a transcendent being that is available 'is supplemented by revelation, that is to say by a deliberate self-communication by God to men'. It seems that it is by faith that specific, analogy-based information becomes available. Mascall uses the term 'mystery' to refer to God and Christian doctrine, which believers must gradually contemplate and penetrate in order to gain understanding. Indeed, 'the gradual formulation of the Church's dogmas in more and more precise terms went hand in hand with a growing understanding of the necessarily analogical character of the terms and concepts employed'. It will depend upon, quite simply, 'get[ting to know God better . . . as a matter of personal experience'[15] – in other words, upon analogy backed by faith.

**9.3 David Jenkins**

Despite his Christological notoriety, Jenkins is a defender of conventional theism,[16] with a commitment to discovering God in the breadth of human experience, from 'an interpenetration of reality and experience which is both intellectual and emotional and associated with a way of life and worship', and not just from 'a narrowly intellectualist way of knowledge'. Thus 'God is known to be God because he establishes himself as God in the experience, response and tradition of those who understand themselves, their hopes and the world in relation to him'. From this, says Jenkins, stem the objectivity of God and the givenness of knowledge about God. The logic behind both parts of this claim is not stated, and it is

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[13]Mascall, *Openness of Being,* pp. vii, 14.
[14] Mascall, *Openness of Being*, p. 32.
[15] Mascall, *Word and Images,* pp.122-23, 78-80, 83.
[16] Jenkins, 'Concerning Theism', pp. 194-206.

presumably a statement of faith. He refers to the 'destructive effects of analytic and scientific biblical criticism', however valid in itself, when it is separated from corporate and individual spirituality and taken as wholly and solely normative. 'God' can then become a 'mere concept or language-object' and separated from believers' stories of God. Attempts thereafter by believing theologians to restore something of the faith tend to be 'very often solipsistic and almost always individualistic, [in endeavouring] to restore an existential awareness of "being" or of "God"', at the expense of an objective sense of a transcendent God.[17] Tillich and Robinson may well have been in mind.

Lecturing at Cuddesdon College around 1967, having explored linguistic approaches to 'God', he adapted the Wool Marketing Board's slogan to 'There is no substitute for God'[18] – in other words, there is no other way of capturing what we want to express. Jenkins, as has already been seen, is ambivalent about passibility in God, but tends towards God's immanence including capacity for suffering. But he also writes of 'the unchangeable reliability of God', 'transcend[ing] all change and process', with God's 'personalness' not restricted by 'process and change'. Replacing transcendence with immanence is 'destructive of man via the demotion of God. Transcendence without immanence makes nonsense of God, immanence without transcendence makes nonsense of man'. In other words, human kind needs a transcendent context in order to be fully human.

Jenkins's retention of the traditional duality of transcendence and immanence, with, effectively, the love of God responding to need but not in essence being changed in the process,[19] leads to his phrase, 'transcendence in the midst', with 'a saving and fulfilling power present in all human situations and for all human beings'. Immanence includes a concern for the poor and dispossessed, with 'God as the Disturber' of his people in the interests of true reconciliation, peace and justice. God, therefore, is 'not the mastermind of vast construction activity . . . moving to a predetermined and preconceived end. He (and She and It . . .) is more like a master artist (and a mistress artist) . . . committed . . . to an infinite creative activity', characterised by freedom, with the attached risk.[20] If God's nature were such as to intervene in material things, but God did not do so in the face of great evil, then, Jenkins writes, such a god would be 'at the best a cultic idol and at the worst the very devil', and at variance with

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[17] Jenkins, *The Contradiction of Christianity*, p. Jenkins, David, E., *The Contradiction of Christianity: The 1974 Edward Cadbury Lectures in the University of Birmingham*, London, SCM, 1976, pp. 85-87.
[18] The thesis author's recollection.
[19] Jenkins, *Glory of Man*, pp. 99, 104, 107-10.
[20] Jenkins, *Contradiction of Christianity*, pp. 6, 12-13 and 51; *God, Politics and the Future*, pp. xi, xiii, 73, 93, 107, 109 (cf. Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, pp. 47-49).

God's loving and gracious nature revealed in the decision to become one of us. The miracles of Christ's birth and resurrection relate to 'a mysterious collaboration and convergence between the intervening power of God and human responses of faith, obedience and activity'.[21] Jenkins's approach to God is largely conventional, with some ambivalence about God's passibility.

## 9.4 Keith Ward

<u>a. Language and experience</u>

Ward writes: 'Traditional images of God seem to have lost their appeal in modern American and European culture'. Because people tend toward literalism, he writes, God is assumed to be such that science could describe, but then turns out to be redundant; so the only hope is to return to the roots of religion for reconsideration.[22] As W. D. Hudson objects, Ward moves rather too easily 'from philosophical analysis to credal exposition . . . as though the latter sufficed to solve the problems raised by the former'.[23] Indeed, Ward does rely on faith to move between these two 'expositions', and, like Mascall, sets considerable store by the communal and prayer-based aspect of religious language. For instance, he describes the various 'approaches to the discipline of prayer' as 'a search for a true reality and value with which man can be in some way united'.[24] When Hudson complains that Ward's credal approach causes him to 'have lost logical contact with [the] concept [of God] altogether',[25] it is because he has not grasped that Ward is not attempting a disengaged logical analysis, but an analysis of language used in a faith community:

> Language about God . . . is revelatory, enshrining paradigmatic revelatory experiences; it is charismatic, functioning in ritual contexts to relate one to sacred powers; and it is exemplary, specifying a set of roles or attitudes which are appropriate responses to reality, and which extend to the whole of one's experience.[26]

However, he also writes:

> To speak of God . . . is to affirm a transcendent depth to the world. Knowledge of God . . . is achieved through a specific sort of cognitive and reactive attitude to reality, which makes the being of God manifest. God is known in and through the world, as the depth

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[21] Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England*, pp. 4-6.

[22] Ward, Keith, *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2002, pp.1-3.

[23] Hudson, W.D., 'The Concept of God. By Keith Ward', *Mind*, Vol. 86, no. 342, April 1977, p. 311.

[24] Ward, Keith, *The Concept of God*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1974, p.31.

[25] Hudson, 'Concept of God. By Keith Ward', p. 311.

[26] Ward, *Concept of God*, p. 37; cf., regarding prayer and worship, pp. 42-43, 60.

and meaning of the world, encountering the man who is open to reality. . . . What one encounters . . . does not appear in one absolutely definite and clear form . . .'.[27]

This is because, in Ward's view, what people encounter, individually or collectively, is dependent upon 'cognitive and conceptual abilities', with experience conditioned by interests and ways of thinking.[28] Images of God emerge thus:

> Concepts which spring from situations in which some transcendent reality is mediated become images which one can use to evoke specific reactive attitudes and emotions, and which may be in some sense confirmed and amplified by personal experiences.[29]

Images, like the Judaic 'king', 'shepherd' and 'father', are 'anthropophanic' rather than 'anthropomorphic',[30] since 'God manifests the divine in human form, but that is not a form which defines the essential divine being'.[31] 'Father' is metaphorical, 'to designate it as the primal cause of all being', not gender-specific, but having arisen in response to an understanding of the male as the source of life.[32] But, for Ward, it was the inadequacy of Judaic imagery that precipitated the imagery associated with the Incarnation.[33]

There is probable variety in people's intentions in reciting 'I believe in God', ranging from 'there is a person looking after me', to 'an ineffable infinite reality of supreme value underlies all things'. The polysemic nature of religious language, he writes:

> does not lie in what it says about past history or about supernatural realities, but in how it enables one to live in the face of a disclosure of an eternal reality in time . . . . People may differ about its exact factual content, while agreeing on the more important matter of what sort of human attitudes it specifies, and what sort of life it enables one to live in the light of a discernment of ultimate value and meaning.[34]

With its echoes of Cupitt, this general statement offers legitimacy, surprising in Ward, to a variety of understandings of 'God'.

b. Transcendence

The notion of transcendent reality is, for Ward, logically possible, because 'existence' does not imply 'spatial', and because we are familiar with other non-spatial entities 'in our experience

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[27] Ward, *Concept of God*, p. 80.

[28] Ward, *Concept of God*, pp. 80-81, 112.

[29] Ward, *Concept of God*, p. 49.

[30] Ward, Keith, *Images of Eternity: Concepts of God in Five Religious Traditions*, London, DLT, 1987, pp. 84-86.

[31] Ward, Keith, *Religion and Creation*, Oxford, OUP, 1996, p. 13

[32] Ward, Keith, *God, Faith and the New Millennium*, Oxford, Oneworld, 1998, pp. 31-32.

[33] Ward, Keith, *The Turn of the Tide: Christian Belief in Britain Today*, London, BBC, 1986 (an enlarged version of a series of radio talks), pp. 117-119.

[34] Ward, Keith, *A Vision to Pursue: Beyond the Crisis in Christianity*, London, SCM, 1991, p. 3.

of feelings, sensations and thoughts'. Michael Durrant complains that, when Ward refers to 'reality', he assumes there is a single reality to which human awe and wonder is directed, arguing that 'reality' needs to be complemented by 'of something', and on its own is not a description of anything.[35]  This complaint seem justified, and, even with Ward's usual (though not universal) juxta-position of 'transcendent' and other elaboration,[36] the intention of 'reality' remains unclear. Ward recognises that describing God as purely transcendent is insufficient, since humans could not know of God's existence if totally beyond the universe. Yet, he reasons, 'it is partly because God transcends every spatio-temporal manifestation of his being that he is said to be one', and vice versa – although he has difficulty with the idea of God being one, for the doubtful reason that that would imply God to be one among others.[37]

That personal attributes such as wisdom, power and purpose can be attributed to a divine mind, analogous to human minds, Ward finds possible only by the Thomist principle of analogy of proportionality. Although it is not possible to check proportionality in relation to God's mind, it is legitimate to imply by and infer from, for instance, 'God is wise' that 'there is a reality which orders things necessarily in accordance with intelligible laws'.  Rather than telling us about God, 'God is wise' 'locate[s] the use of the term God in contexts of causality, order and purpose, as the reality which is postulated or disclosed in such contexts', and identifies the one described as holy, perfect and good as also 'the principle of intelligibility in the universe'.[38]

Considering God's infinity, Ward differentiates between 'inclusive infinity', which embraces all things within God, and 'exclusive infinity', which excludes all things finite, and, believing neither adequate, reconciles the two approaches in 'dynamic infinity'.  Similarly, he intertwines the terms 'existent' and 'self-existent', with 'self-existent' defined as 'uncaused' and 'self-determining', and with only one such self-existent possible. Other interesting definitions appear, such as 'a being without which there would be no possibilities' and 'the self-explanatory being'. And he supports, when it is the result of prayerful meditation (rather than logical analysis), Anselm's '"that than which no greater can be conceived", the self-existent and perfect cause of all'. He examines several interpretations of omnipotence, and concludes that 'an omnipotent being is one that can do anything logically possible'. With omniscience, Ward concludes that God's knowledge is far more than intellectual knowledge, and, despite God being without senses or nervous system, must include feelings, even though these are 'unlikely

[35] Durrant, Michael, 'Keith Ward. *The Concept of God*', *RelS*, Vol. 11, No. 4, Dec. 1975, pp. 492-94.
[36] Ward, *Concept of God*, p. 61, 49.
[37] Ward, *Concept of God*, p. 106.
[38] Ward, *Concept of God*, pp. 136-37.

to be very similar to human feelings'. It is incoherent to speak of God as perfect, but senseless to speak of God as imperfect.[39]

Ward's attitude to Platonism is hard to fathom. One the one hand he says that abandoning Platonic concepts leaves one:

> free to conceive [God] as the uniquely self-existent individual, containing all possibles in his own being (and so being 'complete' in the sense that all possible reality is exhaustively specified in him), and being immutable and necessarily existent.[40]

On the other hand, he still retains 'the five properties of aseity, necessity, unity, immutability and completeness' as 'the metaphysical perfections of the Divine being'. This sounds potentially Platonic. The impression is reinforced by Ward's conceiving God as 'the Mind which is the source of all possibles, and therefore of all actuals', though the Mind is 'very different from human minds', with God 'conceivable on the analogy of a cosmic mind, in some sense omnipotent and omniscient'.[41] It is reinforced again when he states that God, as the maker of heaven and earth, is 'trying to convey that the world is the expression of a reality beyond it', and that 'the world of finite things is seen most truly when it is seen as the expression of a source and origin which is its essential truth and reality'.[42]

Ward ponders why, if God is self-sufficient, he should create a world, and how, if necessary and immutable, God can exercise freewill to do this. He concludes that, although there is no necessity for God to create the world in order to be God, God 'can only determine his own being as self-giving love if he creates and responsively relates to some world', and therefore cannot be totally self-sufficient, but has 'a form of suffering-with creatures'. Paradox is inevitable: God has control over what for us is the future, not because it is not future for God, but because 'he is everlasting, and his necessary nature [as omnipotent] at each moment of change controls what shall be in the next moment'. But God also relates to time – he possesses temporality 'as an uncreated and necessary property, which is the condition of his uniquely originative creativity'.[43]

In his popular theology, Ward guides the reader through bodily and mental anthropomorphism and the *via negative* to – with a hint of panentheism – 'God as the one unlimited reality which

[39] Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*, pp.1-3, 27-28, 30, 35, 37, 127-28, 132, 65-66.

[40] Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*, p. 66.

[41] Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*, pp. 65-66; Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God*, p. 18.

[42] Ward, Keith, *The Living God*, London, SPCK, 1984, pp. 6-8.

[43] Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*, pp. 73, 85-86, 139, 199, 149-50, 162-63.

includes us and the whole universe within itself'. He describes language about God as 'something like the language of poetry', which is not intended to increase knowledge about the world, but, in various ways, 'to evoke in us a certain attitude or way of looking at things or feelings about things'. The religious way of looking at the world is an alternative way, alongside the scientific, the artistic and the moral.[44] In relation to Hebrew scripture, Ward writes:

> What is the prosaic reality behind the poetry? It is remarkable that the biblical writers make no attempt at all to answer this question.  In particular, they do not offer a superior, more abstract or philosophical concept which discloses a reality hidden behind these very personalistic symbols for the devout.[45]

Thus 'poetic' statements do not always have to be probed and analysed, but convey their meaning in ways more than the purely intellectual.

c. Conclusion

Ward's writings in academic, semi-popular and popular genres are generally consistent, although becoming less analytical and more constructive with the passage of time, all with faith assumed as the foundation of theology. Unusually for a British post-war theologian, he hardly mentions analogy. But he draws on art forms as a means of expressing aspects of God, though with warnings about literalism of interpretation (citing Michelangelo's ceiling and William Blake's Great Designer in 'The Ancient of Days').[46] His use of expressions like 'reality' is unhelpful, particularly with a lack of adequate explanation: 'reality' is probably part of his faith-based vocabulary that has crept into his analytical discourse. Nevertheless, for Ward, the notion of the existence of one God is logically acceptable, and accessible on the basis of revelation and discernment, based on interpretation of life and the world, with the language used dependent upon individual and collective experiences and understanding.  Ward often refers to transcendence, without mention of 'immanence' as a countering aspect of God's nature. He summarizes his position thus:

> God is an individual, and existing being, with an immutable and necessary nature, who possesses the greatest actual set of valuable properties at every time, and who possesses power, knowledge, happiness, wisdom and goodness to a maximal degree. He is the one and only self-existent being, the creator of everything other than himself. He is the free creator of a universe which realizes a unique set of values, in which he

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[44] Ward, *Living God*, pp. 1-3, 6-8.
[45] Ward, *Images of Eternity*, p. 86.
[46] Ward, *Living God*, pp. 1-2; Ward, Keith, *God, Chance and Necessity*, Oxford, Oneworld, 1996, p. 102; *God*, pp. 9-14; with 'The Ancient of Days' ironically appearing, despite Ward's strictures, on the dust-jacket of *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*.

shares, by a complete and direct knowledge and a fully responsive guidance towards its fulfilment.[47]

## 9.5 David Brown

Brown's interventionist theism is set in the context of modern deism, which, despite its attractiveness, he finds wanting. He accepts that some divine activity is non-interventionist, including sustaining the world, and moral and aesthetic principles. Even changes effected in people by prayer may not be interventionist, though here he takes refuge in the possibility of telepathy or Jung's collective unconscious. More promisingly, he then identifies two types of experience of God as personal, in personal relationship and as personal presence, for which deism, he says, has no adequate explanation.[48] God, for Brown, is a God who intervenes, reveals himself and communicates. He proposes dialogue to describe God's method of revelation, such that, rather than 'ever imposing a particular viewpoint on a recipient', God prefers it to be internalised or 'experienced as the recipient's own insight'. God, he writes anthropomorphically:

> will adapt his mode of discourse to the matter best calculated to persuade the recipient freely, and at the same time base any further response in the light of the recipient's previous reaction . . . . Even if God does not wish to force a point on an individual, God must surely be able eventually to get a point across over the course of an individual's life. All it requires is persistence . . .'.[49]

Immanence and transcendence remain important for Brown, although:

> In the final analysis both words are only metaphors: God is neither quite 'beyond' the world nor 'in' it. More is really being said about how God is consequently perceived, and what that means for our relationship with him. It is my conviction that both perspectives are in fact essential for any adequate theology.[50]

Despite this insight that transcendence and immanence are themselves metaphors, he does not recognize that, within his later statement, that 'God is omnipresent – so is literally neither "in" or "beyond" the world, but everywhere or nowhere equally', the adjectives 'present' and 'omnipresent' are as metaphorical when applied to God as are other adjectives.

Immanence, for Brown, implies 'sacramentality', such that 'God can come sacramentally close to his world and vouchsafe experiences of himself through the material'. Transcendence and immanence each need the other 'if transcendence is not to slip over into absence, or

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[47] Ward, *Holding Fast to God*, p. 40.
[48] Brown, *Divine Trinity*, pp. 10, 23-26.
[49] Brown, *Divine Trinity*, p. 72.
[50] Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, p. 37.

immanence into endorsement of this world and nothing more'.[51]  Brown's non-verbal, art-related understanding of 'metaphor', 'symbol' and 'analogy' has already been noted, with this usage implying that the terms themselves are then used in an analogical way. As well as drawing attention to the difference between conceptualising and speaking of God, Brown helpfully suggests that the divide between conceptualising God and *experiencing* God can often be narrow: there is no category mistake in claiming that a God who transcends human conception can be encountered through experience; and the fact that God in his totality cannot be experienced does not entail that the divine may not be experienced in part.[52]

Although Brown's outlook is consistently conservative towards the nature of God, in other ways, a huge shift of approach is evident between his earlier and later writings. His earlier concern, with his sights particularly on Wiles, Nineham and Cupitt, is to defeat deism on its own terms.  Latterly, however, his approach is more subtle. Recognizing the indispensability of metaphor and symbolism, he notes the metaphorical status even of 'transcendence' and 'immanence'.  He is more accommodating to the intellectual, even spiritual, needs of the modern and postmodern world, and seeks out 'sacramental' encounters with God in nature, place, body and art. While remaining cautious of experience as a rationale for theism, he nevertheless places great weight on the reality of experience of God and God's interventions.

**9.6 David Ford and Dan Hardy**

Ford and Hardy are considered together, in view of some joint authorship, based on a common outlook cemented by familial relationship.

a.  Limitations of language

The community context is important, as Ford acknowledges the varied understanding of 'God', and concludes that:

> it is sensible to take as candidate for 'God' one which is actually believed in by a community where ideas of God have been discussed and tested over the centuries.  So my most general working definition of the divine is 'what is worshipped'. . . . One basic task of theology is to 'think God' in such a way as to do justice to what intelligent believers in God actually believe.[53]

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[51] Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, pp. 80, 88, 40.
[52] Brown, *God and Grace of Body*, p. 3.
[53] Ford, David F., *Theology: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 1999, pp. 34-35.

Augustine, Ford recalls, saw God as more intimate to us than we are to ourselves.[54] However, the revelation to Moses as 'I am who I am' or 'I will be what I will be' implies 'at least that God is free to be God in the ways God decides: there is no domesticating, there is "always more", and God can go on springing surprises in history',[55] such as in the Incarnation. And the revelation to Moses, withholding human control by declining a name: 'is more like a riddle, a refusal to offer a self-definition, and an encouragement to question, explore, and find out more as one lives in line with the promise'.[56]

Ford is sympathetic to the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's concern at the 'insidious and subtle dangers' of idolatry, with a need to 'be most alert against temptations to domesticate God, wrongly identify God, reify or objectify God, use language inappropriately of God or relate God inappropriately to ethics or to creation'; and to Levinas's suspicion of theology, because it 'thematises or objectifies what it should not', because it 'suggests it is possible to . . . have cognitive access to the life of God', because it 'argues analogically from the world to God', because it 'tends to confuse creation with causality'. Ford supports Eberhard Jüngel, who similarly finds modern atheism right in finding God not to be within the world's horizon and so not to be necessary in any worldly sense'; who finds instead a God who is 'more than necessary', of whom communication, relationship and revelation are characteristic; and who thus sees the death of God on the cross as representing the absence of God upon which he and Levinas agree.[57] Barth's influence is apparent, with preference for revelation through incarnation as a starting point, rather than natural theology.

With this perspective, it is for each theologian to work out God's attributes and how to interrelate them in a context of worship. Ford cites Paul Ricoeur's distinction and balance between the affirmative way through analogies and the negative way of recognising the inadequacy of all affirmations. From Thomas Traherne and Barth, Ford derives key perfections that he attributes to God: love and wisdom represent 'core aspects of personhood, fundamental forms of self-transcendence'; love being 'more to do with will and affectivity, wisdom more with intelligence and judgement, and both shaped through desire and vision'. He finds these two perfections well based in scripture and tradition, strongly resonating with human experience, applicable to God by analogy and at the same time mysterious and suited

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[54] Ford, David F., *The Future of Christian Theology*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, p. 58 (quoting Augustine, *Confessions,* III.6.11).
[55] Ford, *Theology*, p. 36.
[56] Ford, *Future of Christian* Theology, p. 72.
[57] Ford, David F., *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*, Cambridge, CUP, 1999, p. 46, 55, 56.

to apophatic recognition of inadequacy. [58] God, Ford and Hardy write, is 'the very embodiment of . . . overflowing abundance and generosity'; neither constricted as 'rigid, over-ordered and over-ordering' nor 'an absolute equilibrium – beyond all change and exchange, unaffected and invulnerable'. Indeed, the scientific recognition of randomness in the spread of energy, the behaviour of sub-atomic particles and genetic variation is liberating for theology, which can increase its perception of 'the basic condition for overflow and abundance' – though without lapsing into a complete randomness, which, they say, 'would . . . be a denial of God', as well as contradicting science's position. [59] Although their approach could be seen as accommodating theology to current scientific understanding, it could equally be argued that the ongoing divine revelation includes the process of scientific gain.

b. Transcendence and immanence

The authors find balance between immanence and transcendence in the Trinity:

> Taken as a unity, the Trinity continually dispels illusions and fantasies about God.  It applies a corrective to any one type of language, whether talk about the transcendence of God in analogies, or sacramental and historical accounts of God's character and presence, or subjective, experiential witness to the immediacy of God. So the Trinity is a comprehensive 'negative way', refusing to let one rest in any image of God. [60]

In commenting on the historical tension between transcendence and immanence, Ford and Hardy note the refuge of deism, 'still influential in the British tradition', and, in contrast, how the concept of the passibility of God has developed in reaction to modern atheism's rejection, in the name of human freedom and maturity, of an overbearing, transcendent God. [61]  Hardy's transcendence-immanence presentation of God is complex: God is 'indefinite depth' with 'dynamic order' and has a tendency to approach humankind; [62] 'the order and the energy of God' can be focused by human beings through worship and shared with humankind; and there is 'full differentiation in God, and between God and the world, while still retaining full relationality in God and between God and the world.' God 'can be called an "energy event"',

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[58] Ford, David F., *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*, Cambridge, CUP, 2007, pp. 236-37, 215, 239-40.
[59] Ford David F. and Hardy, Daniel W., *Living in Praise: Worshipping and Knowing God*, London, DLT, 2005 (revised version of Ford David F. and Hardy, Daniel W., *Jubilate: Theology in Praise*, London, DLT, 1984), p. 138, 150, 147-48.
[60] Ford and Hardy, *Living in Praise*, p. 69-70; cf. Ford, David F., 'Holy Spirit and Christian Spirituality', *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Cambridge, CUP, 2003, p. 269.
[61] Ford and Hardy, *Living in Praise*, pp. 78 (probably true of general British culture, but not British theology), 80.
[62] Reminiscent of Tillich, *Shaking of the Foundations*, p. 63.

since 'God's "nature" is not comprised of "pure" activities, but of such activities *practised* with at least one *particular* other, with the expectation that a fullness of the activities requires the contribution of this other . . .'.[63]

If this is intended as ontological, then it is very anthropocentric, almost to the point of making humankind indispensable for God and God's being, maybe as the inevitable consequence of Hardy's creative emphasis on relationality, since, to our knowledge, it is only human beings who can relate to God.

c. Glory

For Ford and Hardy, God's glory has the logic 'of overflowing, creative love, which freely perfects its own perfection and invites others to join this life through praise. The only affirmation of God that is adequate is his self-affirmation', with 'God's culminating self-affirmation in Jesus Christ . . . involv[ing] a transformed understanding of God's glory'. However, they do not examine the biblical import of 'glory', or what it is that humans attribute to God when they glorify God (for comparison, it not being natural to speak of *beautifying* God). They quote Hopkins's 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  It will flame out, like shining from shook foil', and 'Glory be to God for dappled things,'[64] where God's glory is discerned in immanence as well as in transcendence.

d. Conclusion

The implications of von Balthasar's notion of 'theodrama', approved by Ford,[65] will be developed in the 'Informal Theology' chapter.

Hardy daringly extends the notion of God's being to God's well-being, directed towards humanity – though with inherent risk of anthropocentricity. From both Ford and Hardy comes an emphasis on God's contribution to the human conceptual process. Both, particularly Hardy, stress theological statements as genuinely referential.

Deism Ford views as historically paving the way for atheistic humanism,[66] and it is not unreasonable to infer from this a parallel in some individual people's mental sequences. There may be a collective sequence to be found in Charles Taylor's 'theology of pedagogy' which Ford cites:

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[63] Hardy, Daniel W., *God's Ways with the World: Thinking and Practising Christian Faith*, Edinburgh, T&TC, 1996, pp. 15, 19, 16, 28-29.
[64] Ford and Hardy, *Living in Praise*, pp. 11, 21-22.
[65] Ford, *Future of Christian Theology*, pp. 24-27.
[66] Ford, *Future of Christian Theology*, pp. 52-53.

'God is slowly educating mankind, slowly turning it, transforming it from within . . .'. It is a slow pedagogy that can also include leaps and breaks with some earlier forms. 'We might see God as the supreme tennis player, who responds to our bad moves with new ways of countering them.' This is a conception of providence that (whatever we make of its tennis metaphor) encourages a drama-centred theology.[67]

There are shades here of the development of wisdom and the transforming potential of written wisdom, Wisdom being identified with God, as in the book of Job, and with Christ, as in 1 Corinthians 1.24.[68] This way of conceptualizing God grows in significance and develops throughout Ford's writing.

**9.7 Rowan Williams**

<u>a. Popular theology</u>

Williams's ability to communicate theologically with a range of people is exemplified by a broadcast interview with Melvyn Bragg demonstrating a blend of personal-ness and divine energy and initiative on God's part:

> God is . . . that depth around all things and beyond all things into which, when I pray, I try to sink. But God is also the activity that comes to me out of that depth, tells me I'm loved, that opens up a future for me, that offers transformations I can't imagine. Very much a mystery but also very much a presence. Very much a person;[69]

and in a letter to a child with its blend of expectations of transcendence, immanence, communication, creativity and initiative in God:

> Dear Lulu – Nobody invented me – but lots of people discovered me and were quite surprised. They discovered me when they looked round at the world and thought it was really beautiful or really mysterious and wondered where it came from. They discovered me when they were very very quiet on their own and felt a sort of peace and love they hadn't expected.
>
> Then they invented ideas about me – some of them sensible and some of them not very sensible. From time to time I sent them some hints – specially in the life of Jesus – to help them get closer to what I'm really like.
>
> But there was nothing and nobody around before me to invent me. Rather like somebody who writes a story in a book, I started making up the story of the world and eventually invented human beings like you who could ask me awkward questions!

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[67] Ford, *Future of Christian Theology*, p. 54 (quoting Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, Belknap, 2007, pp. 668 and 671).

[68] Ford, David F., *A Long Rumour of Wisdom: Redescribing Theology*, Cambridge, CUP, 1992, pp. 10-11, 20-21.

[69] Shortt, *Rowan's Rule*, p. 14.

with Williams adding: 'And then he'd send you lots of love and sign off.'[70]

In a radio interview with Diana Athill, expectation of experience of the infinite is shown:

> But I guess that what it may come down to . . . is a feeling that, when you open up in silence to what is there, there *is* something that's there that's not yourself, which you struggle to find images and words for, which comes into focus for me as a Christian dramatically and decisively in one set of stories.  But behind that is an infinite hinterland. You open up, you are silent, you seek to absorb what there is.  And I suppose that's at the root of serious religious practice.

Then, after Athill expressed misgivings about trying to explain or create story about the

creator, an account of finding the infinity of God in depth (interestingly, rather than in height):

> I'm not sure that I want to explain [the creator] in that sense. . . . I think I'd rather say, for me, looking into that extraordinary fact, is looking, as it were, down and down and down and down into something which doesn't have a bottom, which doesn't have a final point of explanation, but seeing that that very infinity somehow opens out on to what I call God, who is not therefore an explanation in the sense that you identify in the laboratory what causes what, but the context, the environment in which everything makes sense, the bottomless resource of action, and, well, I would say, intelligence and love as well, which surges up . . . .[71]

b. Transcendence and intervention

Thus, in Williams's spirituality, concepts and words give way to silence in the face of infinity, which then emerges as initiative with positive attributes. Similarly, his understanding (in Shortt's words) is that 'God is transcendent; but that he transcends his transcendence, expressing his unknowable "essence" in his "energies" – that his, his manifestation in the world'.[72] Williams himself refers to the divine as 'not *an* other, within a system of interlocking or negotiating agencies', and as having 'no "envy"', for 'there is by definition nothing to compete for, so that it actually becomes possible to imagine the divine as the source of unqualified gift'.[73] Interviewed by Shortt, Williams dismisses the concepts of initial watch-winder and constantly interventionist god, and speaks of 'an eternal activity which moment by moment energises, makes real, makes active, what there is' – all of this 'in orderly and cohesive ways', such that the world 'makes sense, interlocks, balances, works together, . . . with what we mean by natural laws', based on divine rationality.  This he views as within a

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[70]*Daily Telegraph*, 22nd April 2011, http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/damianthompson/100084843/a-six-year-old-girl-writes-a-letter-to-god-and-the-archbishop-of-canterbury-answers/, downloaded 15.08.2011.

[71] BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme, 27th December 2010, transcribed by the writer of this thesis from a recording.

[72] Shortt, *Rowan's Rule*, p.79.

[73] Williams, Rowan, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement*, Harrisburg, Morehouse, 2000, pp. 182-83.

tradition shared by: Augustine; Aquinas; the Eastern Orthodox divine energy that penetrates creation; and (as with Ford and Hardy) Hopkins's 'charged with the grandeur of God . . . '.[74] The divine energy may sometimes be particularly apparent, when, as previously quoted: 'the action of God. . . is . . . that much closer to the surface than it habitually is'.[75] This, along with definition of God as 'what we have not yet understood, the sign of a strange and unpredictable future',[76] begs the question of the nature of rationality discernible to God but not to humankind, with risk of a 'god of the gaps' approach and a challenge to scientific rational universality.

Williams seems to show a tendency towards process theology when he perceives God as being in personal transitional events. However, he believes contradiction arises if God, the source of all existence yet changeable and capable of suffering, 'bestows on [lesser agents] a life on the other side of the ontological frontier such that they may modify not only each other but their source'.[77] And in *Arius* he refers to 'the error of "process theology"' as taking the relationship between God and the world 'to be definitive or constitutive of what it is to be God'.[78]

c. Ontological spirituality

We sense God's prompting, warning, reassuring or guiding, not by 'the fabric of the finite order being interrupted', but rather 'with certain configurations of finite agencies, the texture of the environment [being] more clearly transparent to the simple act of divine self-communication'.[79] As elsewhere, it is not clear whether Williams is making ontological assertions or offering spiritual insights, raising the question whether this indicates an unacceptable imprecision or a successful theological blend of philosophical and spiritual insights. For instance, he writes that 'God is the agency that gives us back our memories, because God is the "presence" to which all reality is present'.[80] Although this sounds like a defining description, when he enlarges on it, it becomes more pastoral:

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[74] Shortt, *God's Advocates,* pp. 7-8.

[75] Shortt, *God's Advocates*, p. 8.

[76] Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, p. 49 (quoting Williams, Rowan, *The Wound of Knowledge*, Second Edition, London, DLT, 2002, p. 58).

[77] Williams, Rowan, 'God', pp. 75-89, Ford, David, F., Quash, Ben and Martin Soskice, Janet, eds., *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, CUP, 2005, p. 83.

[78] Williams, Rowan, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Second Edition, London, SCM, 2001, p. 345, note 22.

[79] Williams, Rowan, 'Reply: redeeming sorrows', pp. 132-48 of Phillips, D. Z., ed., *Religion and Morality*, New York, St Martin's, 1996, p. 144, quoted by Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, p. 46.

[80] Williams, Rowan, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, London, DLT, 1982, p. 23.

> So to be with God is to be (potentially) present to, aware of, all of one's self and one's past; which is why, as St John repeatedly reminds us, presence to God can be excruciating, and some will hate and reject the possibility. But when that God is revealed and embodied and 'specified' in Jesus, the victim who will not condemn, we can receive it.[81]

Referring to Aquinas's consideration of whether God enjoys himself, William speaks of 'a God who is not only loving and intelligent, but . . . wholly in love with his own loving and intelligence, because it's the supremely delightful and wonderful reality that can be conceived'.[82] He writes too of 'God's joy in being God', which 'diffuses itself and works itself through in the life of what is not God'. This is in the context of God's 'need' for human beings, which, Williams makes clear, is not need in the ordinary sense, but a 'need' for humans to be and to be what we are.[83] In the context of God's aseity, this non-human 'need' can only be 'because of an utterly unconditional generosity', with no intention of anything in return. 'God is, in simple terms, sublimely and eternally happy to be God, and the fact that this sublime eternal happiness overflows into the act of creation is itself a way of telling us that God is to be trusted absolutely . . .'.[84] At this point, Williams could simply have acknowledged the imperfect nature of analogy, but rather, blending ontology with spirituality, extends the imagery: 'There is nothing that as it were stays at home while bits of the godhead go out to understand things and enjoy and love things . . .'.[85]

The explanation lies in Williams's stated intention of holding 'the analytic and the impressionistic together in one interpretative process . . . attempting to keep the devotional and the critical'.[86] Indeed, he proposes a methodology[87] of celebratory theology, communicative theology and critical theology.[88] Celebratory theology concerns worship, communicative theology relates to other cultural and even political environments, and critical theology develops from communicative theology and can appear as apophatic or even, with

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[81] Williams, *Resurrection*, p. 29.

[82] Shortt, *God's Advocates*, p. 19.

[83] Williams, Rowan, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin*, Norwich, Canterbury, 2002, pp. 28, 26.

[84] Williams, Rowan, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, Norwich, Canterbury, 2007, pp. 12-13.

[85] Shortt, *God's Advocates*, p. 19.

[86] Williams, *Resurrection*, p. xiii; Higton discerns politics too in Williams's mix of theology and spirituality: Higton, Mike, *Difficult Gospel*, p. 9.

[87] Based upon Schleiermacher's poetic, rhetorical and scientific or 'descriptively didactic' categories.

[88] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp. xiii-xvi.

Cupitt, 'atheous' theology. Theology is 'mobile', allowing the three styles to interact with each other, as occurs with his own easy movement between the philosophical and the spiritual.

d. Language

Humility, for Williams, is essential, with liturgy a matter of '"giving over' our words to God' rather than 'seek[ing] to retain distance or control over what's being spoken of'. Surrendering language to God means that 'speaking of God is speaking to God and opening our speech to God's'.[89] Detached theology is not possible:

> God cannot be for us an object at the mercy of our scrutiny, because God is always active, never just there over against us like objects in this world. The very activity of our thinking minds is what it is because God is activating them here and now.[90]

Williams, under Eastern Christian influence, is cautious about analogy. Nicaea and its later refinements provide the grammar of speech about God, 'warning against canonizing in theology the tempting idioms of human personal interaction, requiring us to strain beyond these if we are to begin to hold to any sense of the radicality of divine gift'. He adds:

> To say that in God there is absolute identity of nature, will and action is indeed to say something that challenges the claims of understanding and impels us towards the apophatic moment in our theology: it means that the divine nature cannot be abstracted from God's active relationship with the world.[91]

On the other hand, God, whose 'proper name is indeed "I will be what I will be"' needs no clerical protection against wide interpretation, with talk of God sometimes chaotic and even odd.

> The moment at which a person senses for the first time that he or she has the liberty for such speech should be for us a moment of revelation, of truth-telling about a God who risks the divine truth in opening the mouths of fallible people; because to be God *is* to be the generosity of self-communication.[92]

Williams recommends 'informal theology' being taken seriously within a process of dialogue within the Christian community, and dismisses too ready a reduction of 'the disturbingly wide range of meanings and resonances that exist in the "primary" religious talk of story and hymnody''.[93]

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[89] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp. 6-8.
[90] Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, pp. 9-10.
[91] Williams, *Arius*, p.267, 242.
[92] Williams, Rowan, 'Teaching the Truth', pp. 30-31 of John, Jeffrey, ed., *Living Tradition: Affirming Catholicism in the Anglican Church*, London, DLT, 1992.
[93] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 9.

God is to be discovered in the significant experiences of life. In his closeness to the '9/11' tragedy, Williams found 'in God's refusal to interfere with created freedom' a test of 'theological principles about tragedy', with a risk that, in 'try[ing] to make God useful in crises . . . we take the first steps towards that great lie of religion: the god who fits our agenda'. His response is theological caution: 'God always has to be rediscovered. Which means God always has to be heard or seen where there aren't yet words for him.'[94] However, Williams is less cautious over individual 'psychological' events with God: 'in the event which attacks and upsets my self-image'; in both positive emotional breakthroughs and negative breakdowns into despair or mental illness; in 'points of intense communion with someone, points of apparently unbridgeable distance between me and others'. 'It is after experiences like this that people say 'I've seen God', 'when they've seen and felt themselves and their world going into a kind of refining fire'.[95] And this God, 'seen' variously by artist, contemplative and schizophrenic, is, says Williams, the one Christian God. However, two issues are raised here: whether people 'see' God in the intense experiences of life, including the negative ones; and whether is it helpful to characterize schizophrenic, contemplative and artistic views of God as equally 'true' in the sense of according with the collective understanding of the believing community, even with Williams's liberality of response to informal theology.

<u>e. Conclusion</u>

Williams blends the analytic, the ontological, the impressionistic, the spiritual and the pastoral, with significant influence from eastern Christianity. He aims to meet people where they are, values the concepts and language of ordinary believers, and believes that theology should be experiential. Although his language is sometimes esoteric, almost incomprehensible, at other times he successfully bridges the gap between philosophical theology and ordinary people. Above all, God must be God, 'to which every action in some sense refers, that which every action manifests or fails to manifest; and, as such, an agent who cannot be compared with other agents'.[96]

**9.8 Radical Orthodoxy**

Radical Orthodoxy, *par excellence*, sets out to reclaim tradition, aiming to be radically orthodox by meeting secularism with a radical return to orthodox roots, the Creeds, the Fathers, Augustine and Aquinas. It rejects liberal theology and rather, 'in the face of the secular demise of truth . . . seeks to reconfigure theological truth'. 'The central . . . framework . . . is

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[94] Williams, Rowan, *Writing in the Dust: After September 11*, London, H&S, 2002, pp. 6-9.
[95] Williams, Rowan, *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses*, London, DLT, 1994, p. 119-21.
[96] Williams, 'God', p. 78.

"participation" as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God.'[97] Milbank 'allows for no entirely autonomous realms of secular discourse (even where these do not directly concern God or redemption)'.[98] He mentions Radical Orthodoxy's affinity with some more 'Catholic' aspects of Luther, its alliance to the *nouvelle theologie*, and its finding in Aquinas support for the non-autonomy of philosophy, ethics and politics.[99] Radical Orthodoxy rejects the dualism of separate sacred and secular realms, since:

> the sacral interpenetrates everywhere, and if it descends from above, this descent is also manifest through its rising up from below. Thus to say there is only the sacred is equally to say that, for now, within the *saeculum*, there is only the secular, which is nonetheless only human time through its sacral intimations.[100]

Milbank proposes a role for Radical Orthodoxy as mediating between the Anglo-Saxon linguistic concentration (which he finds arid and leading to a notion that we are '"trapped" inside language') and French phenomenology (based on intuitive experience). Radical Orthodoxy's mediation can occur particularly through its emphasis on 'the mystery of liturgy – liturgy which for theology is more fundamental than *either* language or experience, and yet is both linguistic and experiential',[101] though without being limited by either.

Pickstock approaches human access to truth by reference to Aquinas, who, she says, 'declares that God has an idea of matter and of material things as limited participations in His own Mind. It is thus the Platonic notion of participation which perhaps surprisingly allows a more elevated notion of matter'.[102] The human mind has the capacity to know, by participation, even something of the mind of God by virtue of correspondence with it. Laurence Hemming believes that this misrepresents Aquinas to support the Radical Orthodoxy contention about the relationship of human knowledge to God's knowledge.[103]

James Hanvey applauds Radical Orthodoxy for its attempt to reunite faith and reason by a return to God by 'a form of Neoplatonist strategy which they claim is central to the tradition,

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[97] Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy,* pp. 1, 3.

[98] Milbank, John, The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy', Hemming, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy?*, p. 34.

[99] Milbank, Programme of Radical Orthodoxy', pp. 35-36.

[100] Milbank, Programme of Radical Orthodoxy', p. 37.

[101] Milbank, Programme of Radical Orthodoxy', p. 43.

[102] Pickstock, 'Radical Orthodoxy and the Mediations of Time', p.70.

[103] Hemming, Laurence Paul, '*Quod Impossibile Est!* Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy', Hemming, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy?* pp. 79-80, 85, 92-93..

whereby all being, hence truth and knowledge, is grounded in the divine mind'.[104] Milbank and

Pickstock, James Smith observes, disapprove of Scotus's univocity of being (paradoxically

implying for them a separation of creation from God and thus a secular order, leading to

nihilism) and prefer Aquinas's priority of God's being, with analogy.  Smith traces Radical

Orthodoxy's positive relationship with Plato in terms of participatory philosophy and antipathy

to immanentism. Radical Orthodoxy believes that, for Aquinas, parts of the created order can

be understood only to the extent that they are participating in their Creator, and therefore

that, 'As a result, no secular account of things can possibly be true'.[105]

Radical Orthodoxy, Hanvey writes, needs to 'return to the eternally generative task of

theology: that is, how to speak. . . . If theology cannot make of God an object, then theological

discourse must speak in order to disclose presence', particularly within worship, liturgy and

community. 'If theology simply remains within the academy, if falls under the illusion of its

own competence and power; it becomes a language in the present of self, not of Other'.[106] In

fact, Radical Orthodoxy is unlikely to resonate with non-academic-theologian believers, and it

is not clear that the espousal of the pre-modern concepts within the creeds and the Fathers as

the counter to modernity is a promising start for those for whom modern assumptions cause

difficulty in conceptualizing God. Furthermore, its hegemonic attitude on behalf of theology

towards other, respected disciplines smacks of a certain *hubris* that is unlikely to appeal to

those whose disposition already includes an element of scepticism towards theology in the

face of challenges from scientific and other disciplines.

## 9.9 Summary

Important for all these theologians, are transcendence (particularly in Radical Orthodoxy) and

immanence (less so for Radical Orthodoxy), as fundamental to the nature of God and God's

relationship with the world, all moving easily between philosophical analysis and faith. This

feature will figure in the comparison to be made between academic and informal theology.

Farrer and Mascall both look to analogy to legitimise theology. Philosophers have criticized

Farrer's alleged fideism, but fail to recognize that faith is the basis for his conviction that, from

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[104] Hanvey, James, S.J., 'Conclusion: Continuing the Conversation', Hemming, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy?*, p.151.
[105] Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, pp. 98-103, 160.
[106] Hanvey, 'Conclusion, pp. 168-69.

God's transcendence, relationship with humankind occurs, with theology a legitimate way of describing how things are, alternative to other disciplines. Mascall too, with analogy in the background, and unashamed of his metaphysical theology of God as transcendent yet revealing himself in relationship with humanity, defends his position against logical positivism. Jenkins, while retaining a transcendence-immanence balance, particularly protects transcendence, as indicated by his rejection of interventionist theology and ambivalence about process theology and divine passibility.

Ward's mixed references to 'reality and 'transcendent reality' lead to a conclusion that he is probably using these expressions 'poetically', deriving more from faith than linguistic logic, as may also be true of 'inclusive infinity' and 'exclusive infinity, 'existent' and 'self-existent'. Brown explicitly rejects deism, and his theism, with God 'personalizing' his approach to individual believers, is so interventionist that God's transcendence would be at risk, apart from his demand for balance between immanence and transcendence. He uses the terms 'metaphor', 'symbol' and 'analogy' in relation to non-verbal expression: a useful reminder of the variety and significance of human experience and expression of the divine.

Ford and Hardy explore God's overflowing love and glory, set within the context of the worshipping community, through which God's order and energy are focused and shared with humankind. With pastoral concern, Ford recognizes the limited stretching of many Christian's minds in relation to their faith, and Hardy a general public loss of understanding that words about God are more than a human construct. Ford approves von Balthasar's concept of 'theodrama', perhaps offering the prospect of the 'presentation' of the whole Christian 'enterprise' being viewed as a kind of art-form, which might allow those for whom theological language is figurative to retain faith with integrity. For Williams, supremely among the theologians surveyed, ontology and spirituality merge on the basis of faith, theology being impossible without both component parts. His proposition that God's immanent involvement is sometimes 'closer to the surface' can be seen as miracle deriving from spirituality, but may be an unnecessary challenge to scientific rationality. Indeed, whenever Williams locates God's miraculous action in gaps in current human understanding, there is risk of reversion to a god of gaps. However, his theology has real reference, and is always humbly subject to God himself; theology cannot for Williams be abstracted from creation, but is by divine gift. His pastoral sense is visible in his dialogues; and informal theology, in all its variety and oddity, must never be disparaged or disregarded.

# Chapter 10: PASTORAL THEOLOGY

The term 'pastoral theology' is used here in a sense different from its usage to refer to a form of practical theology. Many theologians surveyed so far demonstrate pastoral concern. This chapter surveys a selection of Anglican theologians, some already included, whose pastoral concern has led them by popular writing to help ordinary believers conceptualise God. In so doing, they have revealed their own concepts of God. Where particular theologians have already been included, the references here are to their writings with these intentions.

## 10.1  C. S. Lewis

Perennially popular, with apologetic and pastoral intent, Lewis's unsystematic theology is concerned for ordinary readers. He writes that 'An essential part of the ordination exam ought to be a passage from some recognized theological work set for translation into vulgar English. . . . . Failure on this paper should mean failure on the whole exam. . .'.[1]

The faith that Lewis found after First World War army service was theistic, though not initially Christian: 'The God to whom I surrendered was sheerly non-human . . . a Person . . . . The primal and necessary Being, the Creator, has sovereignty *de facto* as well as *de jure*. He has the power as well as the kingdom and the glory'.  Lewis's theism eventually took a conventional Christian theological form,[2] as in his apologetic *Mere Christianity*.[3] Since he cannot be as materialistic as could be construed, he must be tending in a Platonist direction when he claims:

> But if God is the ultimate source of all concrete, individual things and events, then God Himself must be concrete, and individual in the highest degree. Unless the origin of all other things were itself concrete and individual, nothing else could be so; for there is no conceivable means whereby what is abstract or general could itself produce concrete reality.[4]

Indeed, Lewis prefers to designate God 'a particular Thing', 'the only Thing' who has created other things.  However, God's mode of existence is very far from that of other things, in that it is of a necessary and eternal kind: 'He is the opaque centre of all existences, the thing that simply and entirely *is*, the fountain of facthood'. He is not 'universal being', but rather '*the*

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[1] Lewis, C. S., 'Version Vernacular', *ChrCent*, vol. LXXV, 31st December 1958, p. 515, reproduced, Hooper, Walter, *Undeceptions: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, London, Bles, 1971, pp. 283-84.
[2] Lewis, C. S., *Surprised by Joy: The shape of my early life*, London, Bles, 1955; edition cited, London, Fontana, 1959, pp. 184-85, 189.
[3] Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity*, London, Fontana, 1952 (originally, 1952 as broadcast talks, 1942-44), pp. 39-42.
[4] Lewis, C. S, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, London, Fontana, 1960 (originally, 1947), p. 91.

Absolute Being – in the sense that He alone exists in His own right.'[5] Walter Hooper writes that Lewis was 'a thoroughgoing supernaturalist'.[6]

To a degree, Lewis's Platonist tendency appears in his children's novels,[7] where he postulates another world of activity, which encapsulates theological concepts allegorically (without God ever being mentioned). However, this tendency is clearest in the dream recounted in *The Great Divorce,* where the other world (with God only implied) is a parallel one of heaven and hell, which inter-relate with earth, in that people can return from the alternative world to earth:[8]

> Earth, I think, will not be found by anyone in the end a very distinct place. I think earth, if chosen instead of heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell: and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself.[9]

There is little doubt that Lewis, despite his 'experience' being a dream, views heaven with its contents and people as more solid than earth, with scope for him to grow there into a 'Person'.[10] 'Solid' is a repeated key-word, and is allied to his use of 'concrete'.

Lewis's Platonist tendency is again illustrated when he writes:

> Total Reason – cosmic or super-cosmic Reason – corrects human imperfections of Reason. . . . If we attribute a sense of value to the ultimate Reason, I do not think we can suppose it to be totally different from our own sense of value. . . ;

and in:

> The good is uncreated; it never could have been otherwise; it has no shadow of contingency; it lies, as Plato said, on the other side of existence. . . . We . . . know what lies beyond existence, what admits no contingency, what lends divinity to all else, what is the ground of all existence, is not simply a law but also a begetting love, a love begotten, and the love which, being between these two, is also imminent [sic] in all those who are caught up to share the unity of their self-caused life. God is not merely good, but goodness; goodness is not merely divine, but God.[11]

In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis nails his colours clearly to the Platonist mast, when he 'emphatically embrace[s]' the principle that 'God commands things because they are right' rather than that 'certain things are right because God commands them', which he believes

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[5] Lewis, *Miracles*, pp. 92, 91.
[6] Hooper, Walter, ed., *Christian Reflections by C. S. Lewis*, London, Bles, 1967, p. vii.
[7] Particularly, Lewis, C. S., *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, London, Bles, 1950.
[8] Lewis, C. S., *The Great Divorce: A Dream*, London, Bles, 1945, e.g., pp. 20, 22, 61, 91.
[9] Lewis, *Great Divorce*, p. 8.
[10] Lewis, *Great Divorce*, e.g., pp. 116, 22, 27, 66, 69, 73.
[11] Hooper, *Christian Reflections by C. S. Lewis*, p. 80.

would imply an arbitrary morality on God's part.[12] And in *Reflections on the Psalms*, he refers to 'the eighteenth century terrible theologians who held that "God did not command certain things because they are right, but certain things are right because God commanded them . . . in effect mak[ing] God a mere arbitrary tyrant'.[13] For Lewis, writes David Baggett, 'there are objective standards of morality that God recognizes and cannot violate'.[14]  However, John Beversluis believes that Lewis's position is not always so definitely Platonist.  He notes Lewis's willingness to countenance the possibility that the words 'good' and 'almighty' might be accorded meanings different from the ordinary when applied to God (in order to defeat the argument that God cannot be both good and almighty if he allows pain).[15] To this can be added Lewis writing:  'What seems to us good may . . . not be good in His eyes, and what seems to us evil may not be evil'.[16] Thus Lewis sometimes seems to deny the concept of Platonic universals, and some ambivalence about Platonist qualities comes to light.

A disparity in morality appears between human love and 'eternal love', where the former can lead to the latter, but with a break of continuity with 'something in it which makes it easier to stop at the natural level and mistake it for the heavenly'. To this Lewis's narrator replies: 'I don't know that I dare repeat this on Earth . . . . They'd say I was inhuman; they'd say I believed in total depravity: they'd say I was attacking the best and the holiest things'.[17]

Although cautious about miracles, which he views as within the processes of nature, Lewis believes 'that accounts of the supernatural meet us on every side, illustrating 'God's universal activity'.[18] By inference from Lewis's commentary on the virginal and ordinary conceptions, he probably shares Farrer's theory of double agency: 'For what He did once without a human father, He does always even when He uses a human father as His instrument'.[19]

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[12] Lewis, C. S., *The Problem of Pain*, London, Bles, 1940; edition cited, London, Fontana, 1957, p.88; similar sentiments, Hooper, *Christian Reflections by C. S. Lewis*, pp. 55-56 (referring to Lewis's essay, 'On Ethics', probably 1943 or earlier).

[13] Lewis, C. S., *Reflections on the Psalms*, London, Bles, 1958; edition cited, London, Fontana, 1961, p.54.

[14] Baggett, David, 'Is Divine Iconoclast as Bad as Cosmic Sadist? Lewis versus Beversluis', Baggett, David, Habermas, Gary R., and Walls, Jerry L., eds., *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness and Beauty*, Downers Grove, Inter-Varsity, 2008, p. 118.

[15] Beversluis, John, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 1985, p. 104 (quoting Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, p. 14).

[16] Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, p, 25.

[17] Lewis, *Great Divorce*, p. 88.

[18] Lewis, C. S., 'Miracles (1942)', pp. 5-16, Hooper, Walter, ed., *Undeceptions*, pp. 7, 11.

[19] Lewis, 'Miracles', p. 11.

Lewis emphasises God's transcendence, and, unlike other theologians, sees in society 'no danger of Deism but much of an immoral, naïve and sentimental pantheism'.[20] Lewis finds pantheism to be popular, both historically and as a form of abstraction at the last stage of the divine gradually losing its anthropomorphic characteristics; however, he rejects it as relating to 'what man says about God, and not what God does about man'.[21] He is scornful of anthropomorphism (which he claims the Church condemned in the second century), not recognising it as an inescapable element in much analogy for God.[22] At other times, he is aware of theology's poetic nature, including its need to be metaphorical and pictorial.[23] Indeed, he subscribes to the greatest anthropomorphism, viewing God 'as a Person'[24] (although, shortly before, he has denied that God is a person, preferring to reserve that noun for Trinitarian definition).[25] Yet Lewis agrees that 'God is *beyond* personality', '*more* than a person' and thus 'super-personal'.[26] As Fiddes points out, Lewis is here 'recognizing a necessary apophaticism or negative way in all theological language'.[27] Lewis adopts the theme of *perichoresis* to illustrate his understanding of the inner nature of God in Trinity, with God 'not a static thing – not even a person – but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama.  Almost . . . a kind of dance.'  For Lewis, 'Almost certainly God is not in Time. His life does not consist of moments following one another', so that God has all eternity to listen to each individual human prayer.[28] This, writes Will Vaus, helps Lewis avoid the challenge to human freewill that arises 'from thinking that God is progressing along a timeline like us' though able to see ahead.[29]

Lewis seeks to limit God's omnipotence in *The Problem of Pain* in an attempt to mitigate God's culpability.  However, as Beversluis points out,[30] Lewis's account is unhelpful, since he confuses physical impossibility, which is liable to all sorts of qualifications which are likely to reduce it to less than total impossibility, with logical, or 'intrinsic', impossibility, which is well recognized as

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[20] Lewis, C. S., 'Rejoinder to Dr Pittenger (1958)', Hooper, *Undeceptions*, p. 146.
[21] Lewis, 'Miracles', pp. 86-87.
[22] Lewis, C. S., 'Must Our Image of God Go? (1963)', Hooper, *Undeceptions,* p. 149; 1944 paper, Lewis, C. S., *They Asked for a Paper: Papers and Addresses*, London, Bles, 1962, p. 160.
[23] Lewis, *They Asked for a Paper*, p. 161.
[24] Lewis, *They Asked for a Paper*, p. 193.
[25] Hooper, *Christian Reflections by C. S. Lewis*, p. 79, from 1943 article.
[26] Lewis, C. S., *Beyond Personality: The Christian Idea of God*, London, Bles, 1944, p. 15, (reproduced without italics, Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 136).
[27] Fiddes, Paul S., 'On theology', MacSwain, Robert and Ward, Michael, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, Cambridge, CUP, 2010, p. 92.
[28] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 148-49; cf. p. 100 (Fiddes, 'On theology', p. 91, believes that Lewis is the first writer to picture the Trinity, as opposed to angels or Christ, as a dance); 142.
[29] Vaus, Will, *Mere Theology: A Guide to the Thought of C. S. Lewis*, Downers Grove and Leicester, Inter-Varsity, 2004, p. 52.
[30] Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, p. 105.

beyond divine omnipotence. In fact, Lewis's argument is difficult to follow, when he turns to a consideration of the extent of God's self-consciousness: this, he believes, on a parallel with human self-consciousness's dependency on 'an environment of other selves', is a reality within the 'society' of the Trinity. Thus, 'God is Love, not merely in the sense of being the Platonic form of love, but because, within Him, the concrete reciprocities of love exist before all worlds and are then derived to the creatures'. Lewis contrasts God's love with the various forms and limitations of human love.[31] Human love is conditioned by need, whereas:

> God has no needs. . . . God's love, far from being caused by goodness in the object, causes all the goodness which the object has, loving it first into existence and then into real, though derivative, loveability. God is Goodness. He can give good, but cannot need or get it.[32]

And if this sounds like aseity, Lewis then shows more ambivalence on the matter, with an unexpectedly kenotic explanation:

> If God sometimes speaks as though the Impassible could suffer passion and eternal fullness could be in want, and in want of those beings on whom it [sic] bestows all from their bare existence upwards, this can mean only . . . that God of mere miracle has made Himself able so to hunger and created in Himself that which we can satisfy. If He requires us, the requirement is of His own choosing. If the immutable heart can be grieved by the puppets [sic!] of its own making, it is Divine Omnipotence, no other, that has subjected it, freely, and in a humility that passes understanding.[33]

Elsewhere, his attachment to God's impassibility is equally clear: 'But the reason why God has no passions is that passions imply passivity and intermission. . . . He cannot be affected with love, because He *is* love'.[34] Similarly, over praise: 'The miserable idea that God should in any sense need, or crave for, our worship . . . is implicitly answered by the words "If I be hungry I will not tell *thee*" ([Psalm] 50, 12)'. Thus praise is born not of some need on God's part, but of spontaneous creaturely reaction.[35]

However, all the insights of *The Problem of Pain* are put to a severe test, as Beversluis observes,[36] with Lewis's wife's death. His concept of God is at risk: 'The conclusion I dread is not "So there's no God after all," but "So this is what God's really like"'. In response to being told that his dead wife was in God's hands, he bitterly observes that the hands of God in which she resided had proved hurtful: 'What reason have we, except our own desperate wishes, to

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[31] Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, pp. 14-17, 38.
[32] Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, p. 38.
[33] Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, pp. 38-39; cf. p. 40.
[34] Lewis, *Miracles*, pp. 96-97.
[35] Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, pp. 79-82.
[36] Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, p. 144.

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believe that God is, by any standard we can conceive, "good"? . . . The word *good*, applied to Him, becomes meaningless: like abracadabra'. Having toyed with the idea of God as 'the Cosmic Sadist', he prefers the idea of God as 'the great iconoclast', who shatters 'my' idea of God because it is not a divine idea or sacrosanct. He courageously realises that his personal involvement in suffering should be causing no radical change in his understanding or his faith, as the basis has not changed: 'I've got nothing that I hadn't bargained for'.[37] This would have been part of his recovery of faith.

## 10.2  J. B. Phillips

As outlined above, Phillips pioneered twentieth century popular theology, with a declared intention in *Your God Is Too Small* of helping ordinary people revise their understanding of God.[38]

God's transcendence and immanence are balanced as he explains that God is 'unfocused', unlimited by time or space, 'a Person with whom, despite vastness, we can establish some personal relationship' and who can have personal claims on us. Clues as to this reality appear through spirituality, goodness and artistic and natural beauty, and above all in Christ. Phillips's implicit rejection of any idea of a god of gaps has already been noted. He is non-interventionist, reasoning that God's intervening in human affairs would undermine human freedom. However, he goes further, arguing that human concern about innocent suffering and natural disasters may simply reflect limited human understanding.[39] This inadequate response, itself in danger of 'a monstrously inadequate conception', displays less pastoral sympathy and has implications for the seriousness of the God's suffering in Christ.

## 10.3 Harry Williams

Harry Williams, on the other hand, draws attention to another kind of false god, 'the God . . . of the Book of Common Prayer [who] seems sometimes to be a merciless egocentric tyrant, incapable of love', who has to be cajoled into forgiveness by the 'repeated and elaborate protestations of guilt' in the general confession, whose forgiveness has to be confirmed by four scriptural quotations, with our unworthiness  again having to be expressed in the Prayer of Humble Access[40] – the latter fault, it can be added, being replicated in the  general confessions of Morning and Evening Prayer and within the options of the 2000 *Common*

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[37] Lewis, C. S., *A Grief Observed*, London, F&F, 1961, pp. 8, 24-25, 26, 28-29, 38, 55, 32.
[38] Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small*, pp. 8, 11-60.
[39] Phillips, *God Our Contemporary*, p. 132, and as described in Liberal Theology Landmarks chapter.
[40] Williams, Harry A., 'Theology and Self-Awareness', Vidler, ed., *Soundings*, p. 79

*Worship*. He makes a similar point in *Objections to Christian Belief*, when he describes how human guilt can be induced when 'feelings of a harsh pitiless authority get associated with [God]'; or we share H. G. Wells's Mr Polly's view of God as 'A limitless Being having the nature of a schoolmaster and making infinite rules, known and unknown, rules that were always ruthlessly enforced and with an infinite capacity for punishment, and, most horrible of all to think of, limitless powers of espial'.[41]

Indeed, the incompleteness of all analogies for God (such as 'my father, my king, my judge, my lover, my friend, the first cause who upholds all things by the word of his Power and who directs all things by the operation of his Providence') is emphasised by perceived failures on God's and people's part to care for us and order things aright for us. This is a reminder that human conceptualising of God is likely to be affected by individual emotion, with 'large areas of my being as yet impervious to my critical reason, and where in consequence [my] analogies [for] God are evoking me [sic] by means of all those people in the forgotten past under whose control and care I have been'.[42] It is also easy, by habit rather than decision, to conceive of God as one being among others, such as in declaring 'for God, King and country', with a risk that this God may be an available substitute when more desirable aims fail, or may be threatened by the arrival of new knowledge and understanding – in effect, though Harry Williams does not use the expression, a god of gaps.[43] He discovers that the God to which he was at one stage attached was a neurotic idol-god, a god which needed to be loved and the centre of the attention through its adherent's constant devotions; that was 'my subconscious projected on to the heavens'; that allowed no rivals in affection; that was of 'pathological parentage'; and from which the true, gracious God had to deliver him.[44]

## 10.4 Bill Vanstone

In relation to God, Vanstone included in three main books, born of his theological and pastoral experience:

- the theme of God's creativity, yet vulnerability;

[41] Williams, H. A., 'Psychological Objections', Vidler, A. R., ed., *Objections to Christian Belief*, London, Constable, 1963 and Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965, p. 43.
[42] Williams, 'Theology and Self-Awareness', p. 76.
[43] Williams, H. A., *The True Wilderness*, London, Constable, 1965, pp. 113-15.
[44] Williams, H. A., *Some Day I'll Find You: an autobiography*, London, Mitchell Beazley, 1982, pp. 130-33, 253.

- the theme of passibility or impassibility; and

- 'There is a reality who so transcends and enfolds the dying of my body and its return to dust and ashes . . . And the name of that reality is God . . .'.[45]

Vanstone recounts an incident that clearly carried for him immense symbolism of the nature of God's love and nature. Two boys became absorbed in creating from plaster, twigs and other materials a model of a waterfall area they had visited. Careful planning, adjustments and adaptations took place, assessing whether additions looked right, with 'In everything . . . the possibility both of "difficulty" and of "coming right"'.[46]

> Having expended to the full their own power to make, they became the more attentive to what the model itself might disclose. They came to discover that which they were making, and to be affected by that which they discovered. The once contemptible sticks and stones now had a certain power over those who were using them – a power to effect or negate the completion of that which was being made, and so to satisfy or frustrate those who were making it. The two boys became vulnerable in and through that which, out of virtually nothing, they had brought into being. They became concerned for the safety of their models.[47]

It is analogous for God's act of creation: activity and waiting, giving of power over the creator, giving of value and status in relation to the creator, self-giving in time and energy to the point of hunger and tiredness, efforts of love which give value. God's love, for Vanstone, transcends human love, but is not altogether different from it. Authentic love is precarious, vulnerable, and entails surrender of power,[48] as he illustrates with a story about a surgeon carrying out some delicate brain surgery for the first time:

> In the outcome the operation was a triumph: but it involved seven hours of intense and uninterrupted concentration on the part of the surgeon. When it was over, a nurse had to take him by the hand, and lead him from the operating theatre like a blind man or a little child. This . . . is what self-giving is like: such is the likeness of God, wholly given, spent and drained in that sublime self-giving which is the ground and source and origin of the universe.[49]

This analogy, echoing the Genesis creation account of God needing to rest after his creative labours, is highly anthropomorphic and takes *kenosis* to a new level.

Although Vanstone seems to be attributing passibility to God, he in fact resists such an attribution, as described in the 'Process and Passibility' chapter. The evil in the world,

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[45] Vanstone, W. H., *Fare Well in Christ,* DLT, 1997, p. 146.
[46] Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's* Expense, p. 32.
[47] Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, p. 32
[48] Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, pp. 33-35, 102, 39, 49, 52.
[49] Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, p. 62.

Vanstone writes, does not imply some kind of dualism or being willed by God, but rather is the outworking of the precariousness of creation in its otherness from God. But, he says, 'the Creator . . . leaves no problem abandoned and no evil unredeemed'.[50] Vanstone's pastoral theme is of God's kenotic, suffering love in Christ.[51]

## 10.5 David Ford

An important part of Ford's conceptualisation of God is as Wisdom, a theme which develops from his inaugural lecture[52] through to *The Future of Christian Theology*, marrying theological insight with curricular concern. Ford approves Taylor's 'theology of pedagogy', with God 'slowly educating mankind . . . transforming it from within'.[53]

God 'desires us' and 'desire[s] to relate to us', responding to 'our deepest desire to be desired'; the mutual desire between God and Jesus demonstrates that God is not totally self-sufficient. Albeit pastorally affirming, it is not clear whether the concept of 'desire' is ontological or paradoxical. Although the object of human desire, God is mysterious, with, ironically, the mystery increasing with familiarity, in the way that two people in longstanding relationship find that boundaries and secrets remain and are best retained.[54] Ford, avoiding foundationalism,[55] writes:

> I believe in the God who created the universe and who cannot therefore be known like an object within the universe. There is no standpoint from which God can be inspected. This God is free in relation to creation, and is free to be God in ways which are new to us. Raising Jesus Christ from the dead fits with a creator God who is free to surprise us. So my framework is one in which this God is God. It is tested every day of my life, intellectually and practically, and I have a very limited understanding of it, but I do not believe there is any bigger or more fundamental framework by which to judge it.[56]

An opportunity for the believer to discover the inner *perichoresis* and hospitality of the 'self-distributing' God lies within the experience of meals with friends and strangers[57] – with well-recognised scope for parochial, pastoral practice. However, Ford comments that '"mind-stretching" is not a term most Christians would apply to their learning of the faith', and also that, where congregational study is fostered:

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[50] Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, pp. 63-64.
[51] Vanstone, *Stature of Waiting,* pp. 89-94; cf. p. 111.
[52] Ford, *Long Rumour of Wisdom*, pp. 10-11, 20-21.
[53] Ford, *Future of Christian Theology*, p. 54 (quoting Taylor, *Secular Age*, pp. 668, 671).
[54] Ford, David F., *The Shape of Living*, London, HarperCollins, 1997, pp. 33, 28-29, 48, 41-42, 78-81, 105-6.
[55] Reliance on basic, self-justifying beliefs.
[56] Ford, *Shape of Living*, p. 161.
[57] Ford, *Shape of Living*, pp.166-68, 174-75.

the content can easily bypass the deepest questions posed through academic theology and other disciplines [that] go to the heart of both Christianity and of late modernity. The failure to make appropriate connections here is especially dangerous in a society with modern communications and widespread education in other areas, but for those called to love God with all their minds it is also a radical failure in integrity.[58]

Lastly, Ford's espousal of von Balthasar's notion of the 'theodrama' by which God, as the principal character, has been, is and will be involved with the world, holds promise for Christians, versed in the faith, for whom all theological concepts are intensely analogical. He describes von Balthasar's drawing on Hegel's distinction between drama, epic and lyric: with epic being an objective, fact-based, account which describes God as 'He'; with lyric being subjective, self-concerned, addressing God as 'thou'; and with drama embracing both. Drama, such as that of the total story of God's creation, redemption and continuing sanctification, 'is able to embrace the objective and the subjective, to maintain a sense of plot and purpose without suppressing individuality, diversity and the complexity of levels, perspectives, motivations and ideas', and maintain a balance of epic and lyric. Ford illustrates this theme of 'theodrama' in terms of John's Gospel, introduced and summarised in the prologue, and then filled out in the rest of the gospel.[59] Such an approach is consistent with his (and Hardy's) essential context of the worshipping community for theology, the place where pastoral care is exercised.

## 10.6 Rowan Williams

Williams's esoteric reputation is justified by some of his writings, but also belied by his ability at other times to communicate with children and ordinary people, as exemplified by his sensitive responses cited in the 'Reclaiming Tradition' chapter. His constant location of the ontological within the spiritual may reflect many ordinary believers' position. He recommends serious attention to 'the disturbingly wide range of meanings and resonances that exist in the "primary" religious talk of story and hymnody', against the risk of:

> breaking off one of the most crucial conversations he or she is likely to be involved in, conversation with an idiom *deliberately* less controlled, more concerned with evocation and suggestion. The theologian needs to affirm theologically the propriety of different styles, and to maintain exchange and mutual critique between them. . . . [The theologian should] look to the plurality of style and genre in Scripture as a model of the collaborative enterprise that speaking of God *can* be.[60]

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[58] Ford, *Long Rumour of Wisdom*, p. 15.
[59] Ford, *Future of Christian Theology*, pp. 24-30.
[60] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 9.

Indeed, by God's very nature, God needs no protection against diverse interpretation, and talk of God can be chaotic or odd.[61]

However, one concept of God from informal theology that Williams rejects is that of 'dreadful, stifling, omnipresence . . ., the all-seeing eye in the middle of heaven', based upon the Psalmist's 'O Lord, thou has searched me out and known me.  Whither shall I go then from Thy presence?'  The resulting despair, he says, is connected with the 'primitive dread of knowledge without love'. Rather, writes Williams, God's 'ecstasy', demonstrated in the Incarnation, is to 'enter into the morass of human subjectivity and human motivation' by an 'unparalleled act of "imagination"'.[62] Even the concept of 'Father Almighty' can represent an immature projection of our desire for 'an all-powerful father to look after me', an authority figure to solve our problems; or a projection of 'an idealized mother, always accepting and soothing'.  Rather, Williams defines God's 'almightiness' more benignly as God's 'capacity to do something fresh and different, to bring something new out of a situation . . . patiently struggling to make himself clear to human beings, to make his love real to them'.[63]

**10.7 Angela Tilby**

In *Let There Be Light*, Tilby likens the difficulty of seeing God to looking in a broken mirror: the mirror should be capable of reflecting God's image in 'me', 'but the capacity has been lost through the damage'.[64]  So the task is to reassemble the bits of image, and the way she presents her image of God is indeed in fragments born of different experiences, scattered through her writings. She recounts the theological confusion in the minds of some young people, as measured in surveys, and deplores 'the ever-yawning gap between theologians and ordinary clergy, and between academically-minded clergy and ordinary Christians', with intelligent lay people's 'grasp of Christianity remain[ing] childish and stunted'.[65] 'Religion', she writes, 'can function in our age of facts as a therapeutic fantasy', and some believers can even combine religious practice with agnosticism or atheism.[66] So, for some, in reciting a creed:

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[61] Williams, Rowan, 'Teaching the Truth', Jeffrey John, ed., *Living Tradition: Affirming Catholicism in the Anglican Church*, London, DLT, 1992, pp. 30-31.
[62] Williams, Rowan, *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses*, London, DLT, 1994, pp. 14 (quoting Psalm 139. 1 & 7), 16.
[63] Williams, Rowan, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, Norwich, Canterbury, 2007, pp. 15, 20, 16.
[64] Tilby, Angela, *Let There be Light: Praying with Genesis*, London, DLT, 1989, p. 95.
[65] Tilby, Angela, *Teaching God*, London, Collins, 1979, pp. 182-83.
[66] Tilby, *Won't You Join the Dance?*, p. 18.

We imagine God. 'God' stands for all that we can think of as powerful and good. He is a focus for our hopes and aspirations. Of course we know that he does not really exist. But 'believing' in him helps.[67]

Doubt, for Tilby, is an important concomitant of faith, whereas, particularly in relation to God, belief within the ecclesiastical tradition has too often become 'the rational acknowledgement of the obvious', rather than, as in the biblical and credal tradition:

commitment to what is beyond all other forms of knowing. . . . The God who is part of our mental furniture cannot be God. He is an idol. The God who undergirds a rational picture of the universe is only a concept of our minds. What faith seeks cannot be proved or disproved by argument. That which faith seems must be bigger than all our thoughts about him.[68]

The concepts of God held by different categories of people vary widely, including: the sophisticated mental construct 'allowed' to exist by a scientist; the object of unquestioning and unintellectual faith; the object of the word 'God' which arouses 'embarrassment, anger, awe, nostalgia, assurance, dread, bitterness, hope, shame, revulsion, bewilderment, wonder . . . indifference'; 'a presence and also a heart-rending absence'. In God's apparent absence, as in the Nazi death camps, Tilby records, some 'discovered in their suffering a new and darker revelation of God, and worshipped'.[69]

And so Tilby turns to specific images of God. Attention has already been given to her feminist theology, in the 'Cultural Relativism' chapter. But God can be limited in other ways apart from gender, for instance as a supporter of the nuclear family at Christmas and Mothering Sunday and of nature at Harvest, and as being 'on our side' at Remembrance Sunday – in other words, as a protector of the *status quo* and a safe idol. In contrast, Tilby says: 'The God of the creeds is neither safe nor tidy. He is the big God, without face or name or shape. He is a difficult God to live with,' and displays cruelty as well as glory, absence as well as presence.[70]

Tilby's association of God's omnipotence with fatalism on the part of some believers[71] may be exaggerated, except in relation to a few. There is a trace of process theology as she refers to the biblical images of God at war with human sinfulness, yet not in total control, and calling for men and women to fight for him. Another such trace appears as she writes:

God is creating worlds, God is creating me. I am unfinished and so is the world. I can place myself within 'the heavens and the earth' of God's activity and know that God is

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[67] Tilby, *Won't You Join the Dance?*, p. 18.
[68] Tilby, *Won't You Join the Dance?*, pp. 25-26.
[69] Tilby, *Won't You Join the Dance?*, pp. 31-34.
[70] Tilby, *Won't You Join the Dance?*, p. 47-49.
[71] Tilby, *Won't You Join the Dance?*, p. 42.

not static, God creates change, and the God who creates change in the stars is the God who changes me.[72]

The splendour in nature naturally evokes awe; but there is also waste and arbitrariness, causing ambiguity for Tilby about God as creator.[73] Commenting on Genesis 1.1-5, she writes of 'a balance of power and restraint', and of 'an explosion and a holding back, a divine energy and a sacrifice of divine omnipotence'. Creation is thus gentler than might sometimes be portrayed, even (though she does not use the word) luring: 'The universe is given permission to be: "Let there be light."' In keeping with this, human beings are given freedom and are not predetermined. Again, Tilby seems to be moving in a process direction when she writes that 'Time is real to God, as real as it is to us'. She acknowledges: 'Christian theology tells us that God is eternal and changeless. This immutability is often presented as part of God's perfection'; but then, although she says that perfection comes for humans 'by being willing to be subjected to perfection', she backs away from making the connections with God's nature. God is not the 'workaholic', 'relentless' figure depicted by:

> Unresting, unhasting and silent as night
> Nor wanting, nor wasting, though rulest in might,

but, rather, a God who rests on the seventh day; not just 'a detached God who rejects the creativity of work', nor just 'a God who can *only* work . . . a slave-driver, an insecure God whose demands on us are endless'. So – although the logic is not entirely clear – God 'comes to us in our strength', and God 'seeks to know us in our vulnerability'.[74] Later she comes nearest to an explicit process approach, writing, with a degree of paradox, that, for a universe where chaos is now thought to be prevalent, God:

> accompanies creation through its process, a creative, dynamic God, closer to the God of the Scriptures than the kind of God whose mind is investigated by Stephen Hawking.[75] This is the God who invests in becoming, an artist rather than an engineer. A God who can be seen as a young God, rather than the traditional Ancient of Days.[76]

Tilby considers concepts of God that seem to 'fit' the various scientific scenarios of history, such as the one who: set in motion the Newtonian universe; who is the ground of all being yet inaccessible to human beings; fits the Einstein universe of relativity; 'plays dice with the seething potentialities of the quantum world'; is of the quasi-pantheism of the quantum vacuum itself striving for self-realization, also of the quantum world; is born at the beginning

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[72] Tilby, *Let There be Light,* p. 7.
[73] Tilby, *Won't You Join the Dance?*, pp. 45-46.
[74] Tilby, *Let There be Light*, pp. 7, 8, 57, 111, 118.
[75] Tilby is probably referring to a God who is the scientific explanation of everything.
[76] Tilby, *Science and the* Soul, p. 180.

of the universe and struggling alongside it even into final entropy of big-bang cosmology; has enormous energy and experiment in a universe of chaos. Alternatively, God may be conceived as the immanent '*soul* of the universe', either as the source of everything or as coexisting with the universe and giving shape to matter through time.[77]

Tilby is not a systematic theologian: her theological insights are scattered through her books, and not always presented with total coherence, but are born of pastoral sensitivity and presented in language, sometimes paradoxical, suitable for ordinary believers. Her sympathy with process tendency is unobtrusive, but she is aware of the difficulty for the Christian community with its biblical and conventional transcendence, Platonic metaphysics and, sometimes, modern determinism. She speaks of her own previous sympathy with pantheism, but also of her concern that the sort of God who is part of nature cannot be free, because controlled by nature, with human beings not free either.[78] It may be objected to this that this subjugation of God is not a necessary implication either of the more subtle panentheism or of process theology, although process theology does risk 'flattening' the dialectic tension, potentially creative, between God's transcendence and immanence.

### 10.8 Mark Oakley

Williams identifies Oakley as standing in the liberal strand of theology, concerned 'to turn the soil of tradition, and 'work[ing] on the borderlines of spirituality and philosophy or the arts or sciences'.[79]

Oakley contrasts two categories of people within the Church: 'those who want to *resolve* the mystery of God . . . to spell out the facts as they are believed . . .'; and 'those who, instead . . . seek to *deepen* it. . . . [who] are willing . . . to say "I don't know", to embrace the evocative multi-layered languages of poetry and music in their search for God, who have come to believe that truth is not the same thing as the elimination of ambiguity'.[80] God is:

> both *omninominabile* and, at the same time, *innominabile*. That is, all true words speak of the Holy One who is, but no word or name can ever contain, capture, control or reveal him in his fullness – least of all, we learn in prayer's stillness, one uttered by me.[81]

There is paradox in claiming that 'God's hiddenness . . . is not closure and self-concealment but a persistent revealing of God's self for the nurture of those he loves', and that 'strangely, he

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[77] Tilby, *Science and the Soul*, p. 237.
[78] Tilby, *Science and the Soul*, pp. 180, 238, 239-40.
[79] Williams, Rowan, *Anglican Identities*, London, DLT, 2004, pp. 82-83.
[80] Oakley, Mark, *The Collage of* God, London, DLT, 2001, p. 8.
[81] Oakley, *Collage of God*, p. 9.

hides himself in order to make himself more known'. Sometimes God's activity goes unrecognized when it conflicts with 'tidy expectations'. Oakley is drawn to R. S. Thomas, for whom 'man . . . is always about to comprehend God; but inasmuch as he's a creature and finite he will never succeed . . .'.[82] Oakley's strength is in describing how we can and cannot discover God, rather than in describing God's nature, which he sees as an impossible task: 'as we try to articulate God we discover his elusiveness, his receding before us. God gives us just enough to seek him, and never enough to fully find him', since 'to do more would inhibit our freedom that is so dear to him'.[83]

He implies that an appreciation of God's transcendence is necessary for human faith to be balanced and healthy, rather than self-absorbed or parochial on the basis of immanence alone. When we encounter God, 'We become aware of our idolatrous ability to drag God down to our own level with all its cultural and individual limitations'. Rather, 'we *relate* to God and our relational language consequently takes on the nature of the language of love, awe and tears'; and 'relating to God . . . can only be done in the context of both nearness and distance'. 'Even our proudest doctrinal statements . . . need to humble themselves', 'fighting', as they are, 'for truth in a variety of figurative literary forms in the hope that something of the divine nature might be caught inside them'.[84] Indeed, Christianity's strength is in its figurative and poetic language and in the imaginative and the symbolic.

In his earlier writing Oakley was able to take a relatively relaxed position towards non-realism, accepting breadth of understandings of God and names for God on the part of realists and non-realists:

> Can non-realists use language about God in a non-referential way and still remain within the Christian tradition? Personally, I do not see why not. All of us have our own interpretative skills when praying to and talking about God, no matter how unconscious we are of them. The non-realist worshipper is not different from the religious believer in this respect.[85]

He aligns himself with 'critical realists', who have deserted 'the Celestial Controller', but are reluctant to 'deny totally God's existence *in re*': 'To use a Kantian framework, the fact that God is in the category of the noumenal . . . rather than the phenomenal . . . does not make God less

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[82] Oakley, *Collage of God*, pp. 17, 11-12, 15-16 (quoting Thomas, R. S., 'Abercuawg', Anstey, Sandra, ed., *R. S Thomas: Selected Prose*, Poetry Wales**,** 1983, p. 153).
[83] Oakley, Mark, *Spiritual Society, Secular Church?: Private Prayer and Public Religion*, *The Seventeenth Eric Symes Abbott Memorial*, London, King's College, 2002, p. 9.
[84] Oakley, *Collage of God*, pp. 35, 153.
[85] Oakley, Mark, *God – To Be or Not to Be*, Number MT2, Farmington Papers, Oxford, Farmington Institute for Christian Studies, 1994, p. 3.

real'.  'We need to acknowledge the inevitable anthropological character of all that we say and think about God . . . .  Relativism does not necessarily imply non-realism.'[86] Later, he is less tolerant of non-realist theologians, particularly Cupitt, arguing that they have emphasized the importance of symbol and myth, and the limitation of reality to the earthly and human, to a degree that has almost caused God to be lost. Oakley does not accept non-realists' non-objectivity of God, writing that 'Scepticism about metaphysics is not the next step in revision of concepts of God that do not relate to our understanding and experience'.[87]

Oakley is aware of a yearning within humanity for God, which the Church's formularies may not answer, but which its more 'poetic' and 'cultural' products may do. He quotes Williams: 'God always has to be rediscovered.  Which means God always has to be heard or seen where there aren't yet words for him'. Oakley likes Meister Eckhart's delightful description of God as 'like a person who clears his throat while hiding and so gives himself away'.[88] This typifies Oakley's priority in theology and its pastoral application. He never contradicts the traditional credal formularies, but sits lightly to their use.

## 10.9 Summary

Out of their pastoral concern, several of these theologians express anxiety about the lack of theological development opportunities for the variety of ordinary believers, and about gaps between professional theologians, the clergy and ordinary believers. This appears to have been borne out by the enthusiasm, sometimes well informed, of many who consented to take part in the survey for this thesis, and desire on the part of some for further exploratory opportunity.

Lewis's intention is apologetic, although his writings are notable for his personal, if idiosyncratic, Platonist-leaning exploration of God. Philips raises important questions about limitations in popular conceptions of God, but, despite his pastoral intent, takes an unsympathetic position over human suffering. Harry Williams and Vanstone, like Lewis, draw on personal life experiences – Harry Williams from a false, neurotic image of God; and Vanstone from understanding of God's fragility and mutuality of dependency with humankind, although he ultimately retreats from God being passible.

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[86] Oakley, *God – To Be or Not to Be*, p. 4.
[87] Oakley, *Collage of God*, pp. 40-41
[88] Oakley, *Spiritual Society, Secular Church?*, pp. 5-6 (quoting Williams, Rowan, *Writing in the Dust: After September 11*, London, H&S, 2002, p.5), 9 (quoting Meister Eckhart, quoted, Yancey, Philip, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, New York, Harper Collins, 2000, p. 116).

Ford's more academic contribution introduces von Balthasar's interpretation by theodrama, with its potential for widening the scope for analogy in relation to the whole of the Christian 'presentation'. Williams champions the role of ordinary Christians in formulating valid, if unusual, theological concepts, but, like Harry Williams, rejects overbearing images of God. Tilby too accepts the need for breadth in concepts of God, beyond the safe and domestic, focussing on the variety of scientific, historical and natural *loci* in which God must be discovered; to this end, she flirts with process theology and with God's mutability. Lastly, Oakley attends more to the ways of discovering God than to actual concepts of God, and his writing is characterised by unashamed 'poetic' paradox coupled with theological realism.

These theologians have in common a healthy reliance on their own hard-won spirituality to achieve their pastoral relevance and effectiveness, a kind of spirituality that is also demonstrated by academics who engage with the 'Informal Theology' described below, and by the informal theologians, or ordinary believers, whose views were captured in the questionnaires and interviews described later.

# PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

This Practical Theology section turns to the practice of informal theology. The first chapter contains a review of writings in the field about the place of informal theology in relation to academic theology, and records some observations in practical informal theology. The second chapter is an account of the exercise in practical theology carried out for this thesis, and contains evaluations of the results of this exercise that used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with a sample of ordinary believers/informal theologians.

## Chapter 11: INFORMAL THEOLOGY

After describing the nature and place of informal theology, this chapter sets out to record some prominent features and instances: in some observations of recent popular UK views of God; in relation to new approaches to God; and with some exemplar approaches. It next reviews the phenomenon of Contextual Bible Study, as an example of rooting Bible study in participants' experience, particularly of social disadvantage; then the work of a principal proponent of informal theology, Jeff Astley.  Finally, it considers the concept of poetry or drama as a possible means of providing scope for believers of all theological persuasions and positions on the academic-informal spectrum to make common cause in worship, prayer and spiritual life.

### 11.1  The nature of informal theology

As well as describing and analysing what academic theologians and ordinary believers think, this thesis attaches great importance to informal theology, or, in Astley's term, 'ordinary theology', understood as the theology of 'ordinary' believers without formal theological education. It includes, for Williams, 'the "informal" theology of prayer, art and holy action', with professional theology having its 'practical and historical rootedness in the informal theologizing of the community as it develops'.[1] Pastoral practice must be broad enough to encompass all positions on the spectrum between academic and informal theology, all degrees of awareness of analogy, and insights from ordinary believers. Williams writes:

> A person shaping their life in a specific way, seeking discipline and consistency in relation to God, is: theologising . . . .   The believing artist or hymnographer is likewise engaged in a theological task . . . . The deep suspicion with which churches habitually regard theologians . . . overlooks the preconscious reflection, the ordering of experience, that is constantly going on in the Church, the 'informal' theology of prayer, art and holy action. [There is a risk that] the would-be professional theologian can so understand his or her task as to forget their practical and historical rootedness in the informal theologising of the community as it develops.[2]

Religious discourse must remember that it utilises 'a sufficient imaginative resource for confronting the entire range of human complexity'. Thus, for theology, integrity can only be retained by refusing to claim too much as the basis of authority: 'In other words, religious and theological integrity is possible as and when discourse about God *declines the attempt to take God's point of view* (i.e. a "total perspective")'.[3]  Humility is essential for theologians, who:

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[1] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. xiii.
[2] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp. xii-xiii.
[3] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 6; cf. p. 13.

can fall into the assumption that the mode of critical austerity in their utterances is something to which other people's speech should conform; or else . . . seeks prescriptively to reduce the disturbingly wide range of meanings and resonances that exist in the more 'primary' religious talk of story and hymnody. . . . The theologian needs to affirm theologically the propriety of different styles, and to maintain exchange and mutual critique between them.[4]

Those theologians surveyed in this chapter are engaging in that conversation.

Williams supports the validity of experiences in worship (most graphically in glossolalia), and of 'apophasis, the acknowledgement of the inadequacy of any form, verbal, visual or gestural, to picture God definitively, to finish the business of religious speech . . . and the expression of this recognition in silence and contemplation'. Above all, it is prayer that enables theology to step aside from totalitarianism in religious language 'by articulating its own incompleteness before God'. Thus language about God is possible with integrity only on the basis of some kind of relationship with God, such language needing to be surrendered or given to God.[5]

Laurie Green too is clear that theology is not just for the professionals, but for 'those who know God best' and 'in the hands of the whole Christian community'. The Divine is to be sought within all our experience' as a 'prime motive' for what amount to exercises in informal theology, rooted in the context of locality and culture; his emphasis is on 'discerning . . . the presence and activity of God in the world and adoring God there', and, from that, 'learn[ing] more about God's nature and action' and moving to 'the transformation of ourselves and society', what he calls 'value-committed theology-in-action'. He commends the relationship to current culture employed by Paul with local Greek expectations, by Aquinas with analogy and by Tillich with existentialism.  God will thus be both in culture and the traditions of the faith, and each will learn from the other.[6]

Margaret Kane derives from her theological work in the north-east of England a conviction that theology is not simply an intellectual matter', but arises from reflection on experiences in the context of God, so that 'theology is essential to every Christian and to the church'.  'Most people', she writes, 'have some sort of theology . . . some sense of the transcendent (though they may not call this God), and everyone has some feeling and searching after what is beyond their immediate grasp'.[7]

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[4] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 9.
[5] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp. 11, 13, 8.
[6] Green, Laurie, *Let's Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology*' London, Mowbray, 2009 (originally written 1989 before revision), pp. 134, ix, 80-81, 113-14, 148-52.
[7] Kane, Margaret, *What Kind of God: Reflections on Working with People and Churches in North-East England*, London, SCM, 1986, p. 81.

Ian Fraser champions the validity of lay theology arising from experience more than book-learning. He approves the ironical cartoon of a layman saying to a laywoman: 'If I didn't happen to know that you have had no theological training I would have said that your last remark was something of very great significance'. Theology, Fraser says, can consist of groups of people in vastly differing situations across the globe seeing 'what God is doing and asking of them'. And he follows Williams and Ford in insisting that 'theology and spirituality must not be separated'. He deplores the restriction of theology to professional theologians that he believes has taken place, with the 'withdrawal from the mainstream of life; and the lack of lively contact with the language and daily experience of so many people'[8] that he sees in academic education. He applauds what he sees as theology having now become a shared, community activity, involving specialists and non-specialists together. He quotes with approval Father Ed de la Torre,[9] who, Fraser says, pronounced:

> You really need to hear the peasants and farmers telling in their own way the theological perceptions they are coming to. I cannot go as deep or speak as clearly as they can. You see, I am an educated cripple – I had seminary training.[10]

Fraser decides that 'the theological specialist has no **special** [or **separate**] access to knowledge of God', because theology is equally available to all: 'God is made known not by the convincing force of intellectual argument, but by the way life is lived'. Within the Church, 'illiterates now make perceptive contributions to the church's theological understanding'. Indeed, sometimes the 'cripple',[11] needs the non-specialist to make up the theological skills the specialist lacks. He writes :

a.  Theology for living cannot be got from books. Books are an auxiliary aid to what can only be learned through doing God's will.

b.  . . . People in the thick of life, struggling to make sense of it in difficult/hopeful situations, who search the scriptures together as a source of light, have the equipment to do theology . . . .

c.  Theology is not a matter for the drawing board . . . or the wind-tunnel . . . .[12]

Despite the value that Fraser attaches to the process of informal theologising, he does not tackle the issue of fundamental, Christian, theological *content*, or the difficulties some have in conceptualising and speaking of God.

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[8] Fraser, *Reinventing Theology*, pp. 11-12, 33, 15, 37.
[9] Who became governor of Pampanga, Philippines.
[10] Fraser, *Reinventing Theology*, p. 28.
[11] Fraser, *Reinventing Theology*, pp. 28-31, 11-12.
[12] Fraser, *Reinventing Theology*, pp. 9-10.

Melody Briggs reports Andrew Village's survey of a sample of Anglican reactions to a Gospel healing story.[13] The most significant variables relating to interpretation included education, personality type, experience, and charismatic practice, with education playing a significant part in shifting readers from literal to more liberal biblical views, while age and gender had no significant effect.[14] Some of those Village surveyed were willing to countenance modern biblical scholarship: 'my impression . . . is that the kind of scholarship associated with modernity, with its heavy emphasis on rationality and rejection of the supernatural, does not play well in many congregations'.[15] From Village's advocacy of a tolerant acceptance of a variety of interpretations and of the value of interpretative communities can be extrapolated a similar approach towards concepts of God.[16]

A poignant example, quoted by Davie and Astley, is that of the survey respondent who, to the question 'Do you believe in a God who can change the course of events on earth', answered, 'No, just the ordinary one'– displaying theological profundity in a legitimately sceptical response, and perhaps reflecting common informal belief tending in a deist direction – just as does some academic theology, such as that of Wiles.[17]

**11.2 Recent popular English concepts of God**

Past assumptions, writes Cole Moreton, were that 'God is English' or even 'God is an Englishman',[18] God emerging after World War I as:

> part Father Christmas, part W. G. Grace, a thoroughly decent, sporting sort of chap to have woven into your language, culture, society and governance at every level. He now avoided confrontation wherever possible, preferring compromise and influence to the terrible alternative [war] that He knew so well. . . . still a moralist, still ready to oppose

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[13] Mark. 9. 14-29.

[14] Briggs, Melody, 'The Bible and Lay People: An Empirical Approach to Ordinary Hermeneutics. By Andrew Village', *HeyJ*, Volume 50, Issue 1, 27.11.2008, p. 179, citing Village, Andrew, *The Bible and Lay People: An Empirical Approach to Ordinary Hermeneutics*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007, pp. 51, 160.

[15] Village, *Bible and Lay People*, p. 24.

[16] Briggs, 'Bible and Lay People', citing Village, *Bible and Lay People*, p. 117.

[17] Davie, *Religion in Britain*, pp. 36-38, 41, 75-76, 79, 1, 79; Astley, Jeff, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, listening and learning in theology,* Farnham, Ashgate, 2002, pp. 45-47 (quoting Abercrombie, Nicholas, Baker, John, Bret, Sebastian and Foster, Jane, 'Superstition and Religion: The God of the Gaps', Martin, David and Hill, Michael, eds., *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain: 3*, London, SCM, 1970, p. 106).

[18] Moreton, Cole, *Is God Still an Englishman?: How Britain Lost Its Faith (But Found New Soul*, London, Little, Brown, 2010, pp. 17-19 (quoting the 1589 Bishop of London and George Bernard Shaw, respectively).

the heathen and the foreign, and if a selfless sacrifice was needed then He was ready to make it . . . .[19]

The 1950s, and the immediate post-war period, were, in Davie's words, 'an Anglican decade, in which the social role of the church was confirmatory rather than confrontational. The sacred (at least in its Anglican forms) synchronized nicely with the secular in this predominantly conservative period'.[20] Chapman *et al.* find a connection between the British monarch and concepts of God, with the 1953 coronation:

> significant for what it reveals about the 'high' God of the time. It symbolizes the continued relevance of the traditional Christian expressions of a God who promotes order and embraces the whole nation. . . . distant, stern and presiding; a Judge or Monarch. He supported virtues of duty, obligation and obedience. . . . was not expected to intervene in the affairs of the world, although . . . undeniably in charge.[21]

Such, these authors, say, is the abiding influence of *The Book of Common Prayer*, with its emphasis on God as Father and Judge and the need for repentance. 'This high, sovereign God' continues to appear in state openings of Parliament, remembrance services and the like.[22] (To this can be added a parallel between a *constitutional* monarchy and a quasi-constitutional status to which God is currently often relegated, with no expected power, but invoked on ceremonial occasions.)

Moreton also refers to 'a strong tradition of dissident faith in England, proposing a God whose bounty is for all the people, not just the people in power', but usually 'pushed to the fringes of society and not allowed near "the English God". . . the God defined and promoted by the Establishment'.  Moreton says this Establishment God lingered into the 1960s and '70s; however, in some English quarters, such as Cathedrals, this God remains in the twenty-first century in popular civic and royal events. Moreton's landmark in questioning this model is not, as with most commentators, the publication of *Honest to God*, but, rather, the arrival of David Jenkins as Bishop of Durham, his alleged Christological views and his criticism of the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and the National Coal Board management.  By now, Moreton reports, 'the English God was looking confused.  The traditionalists and the radicals had swapped places. Was He supposed to fight injustice and comfort the poor, or pore over His company accounts and wave a wad of cash?'  Alongside this development, as Moreton

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[19] Moreton, *Is God Still an Englishman?*, pp. 20-21.
[20] Davie, *Religion in Britain*, p. 31.
[21] Chapman, Mark, Naguib, Shuruq and Woodhead, Linda, 'God-change', Woodhead, Linda and Catto, Rebecca, eds., *Religion and Change in Modern Britain*, London, Routledge, 2012, p. 175.
[22] Chapman, Naguib and Woodhead, 'God-change', p. 175.

illustrates throughout, are the theological assumptions of charismatics, fundamentalists and extreme evangelicals, in whose understanding God often engages in direct emotional intervention with individuals through dramatic preaching, expecting instant conversion of life and a commitment to a particular form of corporate church life. This God, for Moreton, is far removed from the liberal God of either the Establishment or of social protest.  But the final death of the Establishment God Moreton identifies with the funeral of Princess Diana in 1997: when 'He had been up there in Balmoral with the Queen', recommending 'discipline, decorum, routine. That was not what the majority of the people . . . wanted. Indeed, the folk religion that followed Diana's death 'was culturally post-Christian', and God, perceived as either present or absent, was peripheral. Thus emerged 'a new, looser, wider way of relating to God', who became 'a more generous, more feminine, more compassionate deity with His – and Her – arms flung open to everyone'.[23]

**11.3 New approaches to God**

For ordinary Christians, Chapman *et al.* claim, the earlier high doctrine of God has been displaced by trends associated with evangelical and charismatic Christianity or with liberal, mainstream movements.  In the former, 'God was principally at work in the heart', even as 'an intimate friend, even a lover', to the detriment of cerebral theology, and with hymns of more contemporary idiom, often displaying intimacy with Jesus or the Father.[24] (Such thinking is, of course, not new within Christianity.) Other Anglican hymnody, however, began to redefine God differently, with the 1969 *100 Hymns for Today*: depersonalising God with 'God of Concrete, God of Steel'; and projecting on to God calls for social action in 'Sing we a song of high revolt', and for us to 'revolt and fight/with him for what is just and right/to sing and live Magnificat/in crowded street and council flat'.[25] Here, doctrine became secondary to social action, characterised by the 1985 *Faith in the City* report.[26] This, with *Honest to God*, the work of Jenkins and Cupitt and the feminist movement, encouraged an inclusive and less sharply defined picture of God.[27] An isolated example of a hymn reflecting liberal theology, also in *100*

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[23] Moreton, *Is God Still an Englishman?*, pp. 23-24, 77-81, 104-107, 158, 222, 248 (Moreton does not reflect any reversal that may have occurred with the subsequent funeral.), 249 (cf. pp. 284-85), 250.

[24] Chapman**,** Naguib**,** and Woodhead, 'God-change', pp.  175-76.

[25] By Jones, Richard G. and Kaan, Fred, reproduced, *Hymns Ancient and Modern New Standard*, Norwich, Hymns Ancient and Modern, 1983, pp. 819, 921.

[26] The Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City: a call for action by Church and nation*, London, Church House, 1985.

[27] Chapman**,** Naguib**,** and Woodhead, 'God-change', pp. 177-80.

*Hymns for Today*, is 'Father, Lord of all Creation',[28] echoing Tillich with 'Ground of Being, Life and Love'[29]. Sydney Carter's 1960s songs contributed to a freshening of popular understanding,[30] and, generally, much 1960s, 1970s and 1980s liturgical language reflected the British God becoming less stern and remote, more accessible and intimate.

For Callum Brown, this marked 'the end of Christianity as a means by which men and women, as individuals, construct their identities and their sense of "self"'. Whether 'the death of Christian Britain' can be extrapolated from the incontrovertible decline in church allegiance and explicit Christian belief remains to be seen, with growth occurring in some parts, and marks of a Christian state remaining; and, as Brown himself recognises, quantitative research cannot take into account informal or 'folk' religion.[31] Furthermore, Brown insists that the decline in religion does not imply the:

> death of churches, for . . . they will continue to exist in some skeletal form with increasing commitment from decreasing numbers of adherents. Nor is it the death of belief in God, for . . . it may well remain as a root belief for people.  But the culture of Christianity has gone in the Britain of the new millennium.[32]

Davie describes the late twentieth century 'Re-emergence of the Sacred', with a multiplication of evangelical Church of England parishes and groups; with environmental concerns bridging the gap between the secular and the sacred and the emergence of New Age spirituality. Davie, like Brown, also describes what she terms 'common religion', the consequence of 'privatized religion' by which individual Christian's beliefs, though shaped by the Church's culture, become idiosyncratic, even superstitious, with a drift from Christian orthodoxy.[33] These are factors that influence 'informal theology', as already exemplified in the wider definitions of God implied in some of the surveys mentioned above.

### 11.4 Liturgy

One significant change that has confronted Anglican believers is the gradual, though still partial, shift from *The Book of Common Prayer* and its derivatives to modern language liturgies, including the Church of England's *Common Worship*, accompanied by other Eucharistic

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[28] By Fred Kaan, *Hymns Ancient and Modern New Standard*, p. 801. It also echoes Bonhoeffer by addressing Jesus as 'the Man for Others', Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 165 (although the translation here is different).
[29] E.g., Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume I*, p. 124.
[30] http://www.stainer.co.uk/carter.html, downloaded 28.10.2013.
[31] Brown, Callum, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding secularization 1800-2000*, London, Routledge, 2001, pp. 1-3, 11.
[32] Brown, *Death of Christian* Britain pp. 197-98.
[33] Davie, *Religion in Britain*, pp. 36-43, 75-84.

liturgical changes. Some of these changes can be interpreted as reflecting and encouraging a shift of emphasis from God's transcendence to God's immanence, although Bishop Michael Perham is definite that no doctrinal shift was to be engineered by the Church of England's Liturgical Commission.[34] In defence of the partial shift from 'thee' and 'thou' language, John Fenwick and Bryan Spinks point out 'that, although Cranmer did indeed address God as 'thou', he also called Mrs Cranmer 'thou' and his horse 'thou':[35] a personal, even intimate, form of address. However, 'thee' and 'thou' had largely disappeared from common English usage by the end of the twentieth century,[36] and became a purely 'hieratic language' for most people even earlier.  The change from this and associated language began in the Church of England in 1971,[37] to a mixture of continuing acclaim and regret,[38] the regret often associated more with perceived detriment to God's 'otherness', than with any loss of the intimacy possibly implied by the second person singular (comparable with the French '*tu*').  Still there is no consensus in favour of *Common Worship*'s 'modern' version of the 'Our Father'.[39]  However, Clifford Longley writes: 'The idea that God must be addressed in different, more dignified and more archaic language than everyday speech . . . unduly emphasises the transcendent at the cost of the immanent'[40] – although such language does also emphasise difference.

The issue for Alana Harris is whether historic liturgy safeguards, in David Martin's words, 'a massive prior objectivity, historically given, (within which) the self can be forged', or whether more informal liturgy with everyday language would facilitate what Kierkegaard calls 'deeper immersion in existence' and drawing near to God.[41]  As the debate progressed, opposition came from: the Dean of Guildford, who contrasted a new rite with historic liturgy as

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[34] Conversation with Bishop Michael Perham (a member of the Church of England Liturgical Commission, 1982-2001), Gloucester, 23.07.2013; Perham, Michael, 'The silent music of our praise', Papadopulos, Nicholas, ed., *God's Transforming Work: Celebrating ten years of Common Worship*, London, SPCK, 2011, pp. 28, 29.

[35] Fenwick, John. R. K. and Spinks, Bryan D., *Worship in Transition: The Twentieth Century Liturgical Movement*, Edinburgh, T&TC, 1995, p. 149.

[36] Except in pockets, in the researcher's West Riding recollection.

[37] Fenwick and Spinks, *Worship in Transition*, pp. 149, 151.

[38] The researcher's pastoral experience and a few of the interviews for this research.

[39] E.g., *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*, London, Church House, 2000, p. 36.

[40] Harris, Alana, '"The Prayer in the Syntax?": The Roman Missal, the Book of Common Prayer and Changes in Liturgical Languages, 1945-80', Garnett, Jane, Grimley, Matthew, Harris, Alana, Whyte, William and Williams, Sarah, eds., *Redefining Christian Britain: Post-1945 Perspectives*, London, SCM, 2006, p. 36 (quoting Longley, Clifford, 'The Language of Prayer', *Tablet*, 17.11.1979, p. 1114).

[41] Harris, '"Prayer in the Syntax?"', pp. 37 (quoting Martin, David, *Christian Language and its Mutations: Essays in Sociological Understanding*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002, pp. 141-42); Kierkegaard's expression from Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 47.

'transforming the divine into the ordinary and reducing the vision of the city of God to the likeness of a landscape in suburbia';[42] Fenwick and Spinks, who felt that 'the obsession with intelligibility has driven out the glory, mystery and holiness';[43] and Simon Reynolds, who wrote that 'clarity of meaning was prized above rhythm, allusion, metaphor, or tracing the poetic contours of texts'. The Anglican 'Parish Communion' movement, liturgical changes (particularly the presiding priest facing the congregation across the altar) and the reordering of some churches may have contributed to cultivating a sense of God's immanence. Reynolds contrasts 'the principle intentions of the Church's worship [of] an invitation to glimpse something of the otherness of God', and 'a liturgical climate where divine immanence, and accessibility of meaning, is the principal emphasis'.[44] It can be added that, although 'accessibility of meaning' and 'divine immanence' are separate issues, modern liturgy may engender popular confusion between them. Fenwick's and Spinks's negative view that 'The westward celebration of the Eucharist creates a closed human circle from which God is excluded'[45] misses the points that: the celebration is by the people together, priest and other ministers included; God is evoked in the midst as well as beyond; and the Last Supper did not exclude God. Indeed, Perham believes that westward facing presidency can contribute to a sense of unity without loss of the transcendent, particularly if accompanied by effective hand and eye movements by the presiding priest.[46] Fenwick and Spink's position presents an example of how liturgical change and multiplicity of practice are capable of varied interpretation by different people.

More recent Church of England liturgy includes less compulsory penitential material than the *Book of Common Prayer* liturgy, although Perham is clear that this reduction was not consciously intended, but resulted from attempts to return to early church practice and simplicity.[47] Along with this has arisen a higher incidence of sitting for prayer, even penitential prayer, in Anglican churches, which may be having a subliminal effect in encouraging a less deferential, or more 'comfortable', relationship with God. Standing as the norm for prayer, as in Jewish worship, (with the *Common Worship* Eucharistic Prayer B even including the words 'we thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you'[48]) may

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[42] Bridge, Tony, Letter to Editor, *Times*, 23rd November 1979, p. 15.
[43] Fenwick and Spinks, *Worship in Transition,* p. 173.
[44] Reynolds, Simon, 'Believing in a God who sings', Papadopulos, *God's Transforming Work*, pp. 93, 91.
[45] Fenwick and Spinks, *Worship in Transition*, p. 173.
[46] Conversation with Perham.
[47] Conversation with Perham.
[48] *Common Worship*, p. 190.

encourage a sense of human maturity and responsibility before God, as well as greater awareness of the Christian community around.

Recent Church of England liturgy contains few concessions to more recent theology, except the frequent substitution of 'keep you in life eternal'[49] for 'bring you to everlasting life',[50] reflecting, consciously or unconsciously, a more existentialist and less eschatological view of God's presence. Although formal doctrinal change may not have been intended, the *Common Worship* Eucharistic Prayers[51] have produced an interesting variety of theology. Prayers A, B and C are not new in *Common Worship*, and are conventional in their Trinitarian approach to God, with varying emphases on Jesus and his sacrifice.[52] Prayers D to H are new in *Common Worship*, and contain mostly conventional theology. Prayer D contains the non-immanentist imagery of 'your face is turned towards your world . . . Your Word goes out to call us home to the city where angels sing your praise'.[53] Prayer G is the most creative, describing God as 'our light and our salvation . . . From the beginning you have created all things [perhaps tending, wittingly or unwittingly, towards Wiles's view of creation as a continuing divine activity] and all your works echo the silent music of your praise'.[54] Prayer G also contains the only concession to using female metaphors for God, with 'As a mother tenderly gathers her children, you embraced a people as your own',[55] and the only use of the name 'Mary', in contrast with 'a woman' in Prayer A, 'the blessed virgin' in Prayer in B, and no mention in the other prayers.

Neither the collects within *Common Worship* offer any new theology, nor the authorised Additional Collects.[56] Jim Cotter[57] devised a huge set of alternative, unofficial collects,[58] remarkable for the forms of address. Nearly all incorporate the word 'Presence', mostly 'Living Presence', but also a wide variety of other epithets, which fall in to a number of groups. These

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[49] E.g., *Common Worship*, p. 171.
[50] *The Book of Common Prayer*, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, p. 303.
[51] *Common Worship*, pp. 184-205.
[52] Perham draws attention to other ways Trinitarian theology is prominent in *Common Worship*, Perham, 'silent music of our praise', pp. 21-22.
[53] Gooder, Paula and Perham, Michael, *Echoing The Word: The Bible and the Eucharist*, London, SPCK, 2013, pp. 79-80.
[54] Phrase drawn from St John of the Cross, Gooder and Perham, *Echoing The Word*, 2013, p. 92.
[55] Gooder and Perham, *Echoing The Word*, 2013, p. 93. Reference to Matthew 23.37, Luke 13.34, both echoing Deuteronomy 32.11, Psalms 17.8, 36.7, 57.1, 63.7, 91.4.
[56] *Additional Collects*, London, Church House, 2004.
[57] A Welsh Christian writer who describes himself: 'I have been exploring , as a pilgrim soul, what it might mean to unfold afresh my spiritual and religious inheritance . . . to try and connect that tradition with the experiences of being gay, undergoing . . . serious depression, and . . . living with leukaemia', http://www.cottercairns.co.uk/, downloaded 13.09.2013.
[58] Cotter, Jim, *Unfolding the Living Word: New Kyries, Canticles, Gospel Acclamations and Collects for Holy Communion Year A, B & C*, Norwich, Canterbury, 2012.

include: adjectives expressing transcendence, such as 'Mysterious', 'Holy' and 'Shining'; some expressing immanence or relationship, such as 'Loving', 'Transforming', 'All-embracing' and 'Open-hearted'; and a few indicating more definite involvement, such as 'Rescuer, Liberator' and 'Saving, healing and liberating'. Others ascribe particular attributes to God, such as 'Disturber of false peace and uneasy truce'. Others seemingly refer to Christ, such as 'Breather of the Air', 'Lion of wrath' and 'Wounded, glorified Healer', but then prove probably not to be doing so when Jesus is explicitly mentioned later, so might reflect process theology. Cotter's collects, following the abstract 'Presence', usually revert to more picturesque or anthropomorphic language as they proceed. An earlier set of collects by Janet Morley, previously Anglican, includes some explicitly feminist prayers, e.g., addressing God on Mothering Sunday as 'God our mother', and a version of a psalm beginning 'I will praise God, my Beloved, for she is altogether lovely'.[59]

**11.5 Some exemplar approaches to informal theology**

a.  David Tacey

David Tacey (an Australian psychologist) charts a revolution in spirituality for many young people, who believe that 'Within the true self God is to be discovered and engaged',[60] indicating a subjectivism that, while familiar to mysticism, is foreign to much objectivist theology and conventional self-repression.[61]  Tacey quotes Maitland as having 'no problem about the existence of God', but as having 'a problem with much of the language that is used about God'. This accords with Tacey's view that the notion of God, without the image that was toppled by science, is becoming acceptable within postmodernity, 'because it is an archetypal idea, and such ideas are eternal and enormously valuable'.  The God of tradition, he says, is dead, being associated with humanly-invented objectivity, unattainable moral perfection and 'a persecutory superego'.  Former sacred images always need renewal; while images (to which he probably has a univocal outlook) must die, 'the holy is always above and beyond our formal categories, and no matter how familiar we seek to make God we have never succeeded in capturing God'.[62]  Tacey is firmly on the side of theological immanentism and panentheism, rather than of supernaturalism and interventionism:

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[59] Morley, Janet, *All Desires Known, expanded edition*, London, SPCK, 1992, pp. 9 and 91; Perham explained, conversation, that one collect was used in *Common Worship* as Trinity 3 Post-Communion Collect.
[60] Tacey, *Spirituality* Revolution, p. 82.
[61] Tacey, *Spirituality Revolution*, p. 83.
[62] Tacey, *Spirituality Revolution*, pp. 82, 83, 160, 154 (quoting Maitland, Sara, *A big-Enough God*, London, Mowbray, 1995, p. 15), 155-56, 162.

This is not to say that spirituality's God is not transcendent and sublime, but that this transcendence is imagined differently, not through miracles and magic, but through the radical presence of divine being. God is not conceived as an extrinsic or outside super-reality, but as a mystery at the core of ordinary reality.[63]

Tacey envisages God as 'as a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere'. He maintains tradition with: 'God is radically present with us and closer even than our own breath'.[64]

b. Terry Pratchett, Richard Harries and Margaret Kane

Pratchett may be partly right that 'the majority of people in this country use the term God as a marker for our inborn sense of awe at the majesty and apparent order of the Universe . . . includ[ing] a number of scientists'.[65] Harries describes how a popular view of God as unfeeling despot and 'male boss', prompts some to reject formal religion in favour of their own spirituality.[66] Kane found informal theodicy in north-east England, in a common belief that 'God was either powerless or immoral in allowing things to go on as they were'; thus, neither 'a remote, all powerful, impassive God' nor 'a soft indulgent God who takes no account of injustice' would suffice, but only 'a God who suffers in the sufferings of humanity'. Some images of God, which should recapture previous experience of God, rather than attempting definition, no longer resonate, others amount to idols if they are taken as actual descriptions, and some are, 'wrong', in that, like 'husbandman' and 'vinedresser' they relate to an agrarian society, with even 'Lord', 'Master', 'King', and 'Father' tending to perpetuate outdated attitudes in an urban/industrial society. However, the new models Kane proposes, such as wind and fire, are hardly new.[67]

Other unconventional images of God have already been noted, as by Clark-King: an old man, a comforting armchair, a welcoming mother-in-law, colour and light.[68]

c. Tania ap Siôn

A good test of some informal theology might be the anonymous prayer requests, uncluttered by research intervention, at a cathedral. ap Siôn analysed 1156 prayer requests left at Bangor Cathedral between 2005 and 2009. Her first categorisation reveals nine views of God's activity

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[63] Tacey, *Spirituality Revolution*, p. 164.
[64] Tacey, *Spirituality Revolution*, p. 165.
[65] Pratchett, Sir Terry, Letter to Editor, *Times*, 4th September 2010, p. 23.
[66] Harries, Richard, *God Outside the Box: Why spiritual people object to Christianity*, London, SPCK, 2002, pp. 3-6, 10.
[67] Kane, *What Kind of God*, pp. 8, 39, 21, 118-21, 128-29.
[68] Clark-King, *Theology by Heart*, pp. 63-68, 77, 81, 127.

in the world, as 'gift-bestower, confidant/e, intervener, protector, intermediary, revealer, strength-giver, helper (general) and comforter', with the order here representing the greater incidence to lesser.  'Gift-bestower' refers to gifts such as love and peace; 'confidant/e' to active unburdening to God; 'intervener' implies miraculous intervention (though sometimes qualified by references to God's will); 'protector' refers to matters such as sickness and danger; 'intermediary' to God's potential role in human relations; and 'revealer' to understanding and guidance[69]. ap Siôn concludes that this illustrates belief in a God 'actively involved in human concerns'[70] at an individual and global level, particularly when human control of a situation is limited. For comparison with those surveyed for this thesis, her survey needs treating with some caution, since the nature of the background faith of those leaving prayers is not demonstrable.

d.  Francis Spufford

The novelist Spufford's informal theology includes an account of God's apparent absence in not intervening in response to emergency prayers.[71]  Then he describes an incidence of discovery of God as he meditates in a church:

> I feel what I feel when there's someone beside me. I am being looked at . . . known . . . seen from inside, but without any of my own illusions . . . seen from behind, beneath, beyond . . . . On one level I can feel that this is absolutely safe. A parent's safe hold is nothing compared to this. I'm being carried on the universe's shoulder. But on another level, it's terrifying . . . . This is utterly exposed.[72]

He acknowledges a likely physical basis of his experiences, but grasps the possibility of dual explanations of the same events: 'These explanations . . . of how my feelings might have arisen . . . don't explain my feelings away [or] that there was nobody there for me to be feeling them about'.[73]

> It's elusive and it's a foundation. It's a wisp of a presence, as deniable as vapour, which you feel is holding the house up.   It's a presence which may well not be there, but which can draw out of you, when you feel it, a trust that is the thing that precedes all things, us included; that it is first, and last and largest and lowest; that it exists without

[69] Remainder not discussed.

[70] ap Siôn, Tania, 'Ordinary Prayer and the Activity of God: Reading a Cathedral Prayer Board', Astley and Francis *Exploring Ordinary Theology,* pp. 147-55.

[71] Spufford, Francis, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Still Makes Surprising Emotional Sense*, London, F&F, 2012, pp. 53-56.

[72] Spufford, *Unapologetic*, p. 63.

[73] Spufford, *Unapologetic*, p. 65.

terms and conditions. That you can come to it in need and know what you're forgiven. That it shines.[74]

Despite these shades of Tillich's existentialism and Schleiermacher's experientialism, this is not subjectivist: Spufford is adamant that God is not a puppet for manipulation or projection of messages, expectations or (like polytheism) superhuman attributes. In company with most theologians, Spufford insists that God will not be 'fixed, bounded, tied down' or 'stay within the limits of . . . your imagining', but is always exceeding expectations. Conversely, God is 'God of everything', everything with whatever degree, humanly viewed, of goodness or badness, beauty, utility and desirability; and omnipresent in time and space, even in the acute suffering of humanity.  Here Spufford is immanentist, since 'Power is not exercised from the top of any hierarchy. It does not radiate from any local point within the universe . . . . It works entirely through presence'. Being unrivalrous, God's power is unlike any human kingly semblance, and one can never 'be humiliated by Him (Her, It) . . . He is as common as the air. He is the ordinary ground. And yet a presence. And yet a person'. But later, as Spufford grapples with theodicy, the approach becomes more deist and reminiscent of Wiles: God doesn't intervene to avert calamity; 'He's pretty damn remote, withdrawn from the whole thing as a condition of existing at all – He still bears a maker's responsibility for what goes on inside [the cosmos]'. Although God's love 'need not be exhausted by the human definition of love . . . it must not contradict it either, if He is to be worth worshipping.'[75]

e. Contextual Bible Study

Contextual Bible Study's roots are in African and American practice, particularly as promulgated by the South African theologian, Gerald West, who describes Bible study within a particular (black South African) culture. Contextual Bible study 'takes place within the framework of liberation hermeneutics', and includes: starting from 'the experienced reality of the organized poor and marginalized, their language, categories, concepts, needs, questions, interests and resources'; 'read[ing] the Bible communally . . . [with] power relations . . . acknowledged and equalized as far as possible; using  scholarship and local critical resources; and commitment to social transformation'. However, West reports, 'The biblical and theological resources for those struggling with the God of life against the forces of death were not always apparent'.[76]

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[74] Spufford, *Unapologetic*, p. 73.
[75] Spufford, *Unapologetic*, pp. 76, 79  77-78 , 81-83, 85-86, 90-91, 88, 97.
[76] West, Gerald O., *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic, 1999, pp. 25-26, 35.

West describes a process of dialogue between questioning believers and local biblical scholars that resulted in contextual Bible study, and then to a scholarly consideration of the political-philosophical tensions underlying this kind of work. Referring to 'the various postmodernisms and poststructuralisms within biblical studies', and their usefulness in 'encourag[ing] . . . critical attitudes towards all philosophical traditions', West views postmodernism as a way in which biblical scholars can be allowed 'to abandon their quest for the certainty of the "the right" reading in favour of the more human concern for useful readings and resources'.[77] However, he does not consider appropriate or inappropriate understandings of God for particular cultural settings, in the way that liberation theology has done.

Green's immanentist trend, noted above, includes a rabbinic story about a traveller from village to village asking where he could find God, but constantly dissatisfied with conventional answers. He discovered, however, that sometimes he had met God, and 'he knew that God was within himself and within other people'. Green concludes that God is to be found 'where you are', 'in servanthood', 'at the edges', 'in the issues', 'in repentance' and 'in the ordinary'.[78] Green refers to the apophatic approach, and to analogy, symbolism, poetry, symbol and myth.[79] Generally, his approach is intensely pastoral, addressing the needs of those wishing to find or deepen faith through contextual Bible study, God becoming available existentially through situations and relationships. However, a consequence is that anyone without the kind of experience represented by his story, or any other relevant experience, may be left bereft of God.

The background is Green's inner-city parish work and training of clergy, where basic questions were raised as 'What is the nature of theology? . . . Why has theology become the preserve of specialists?' He speaks of the importance of 'theology from the roots up, which actually derives from the context in which it is set and incarnated, and which is discovered and mined out by those already experiencing the full subtleties of that context'.[80] Green recognises the invaluable importance of informal theology, when he says, referring to groups drawn together from churches for contextual Bible study:

> It is to be hoped that group members will be trying to express the values that they hold dear, and this will all help uncover something of the innate theology [which he probably does not mean literally] with which they have come to the group. For although few, if any, will call themselves 'theologians' as yet, they will all be carriers of an implicit theology by which they already operate their faith in the daily routes of life.

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[77] West, *Academy of the Poor*, pp. 57-58.
[78] Green, *Let's Do Theology*, pp. 159-65.
[79] Green, *Let's Do Theology*, p. 182.
[80] Green, *Let's Do Theology*, pp. vii, ix.

> Even members who would not normally call themselves Christians may find that they are imbued with some sort of 'popular faith' or 'folk religion', which is their attempt to express something about God which they feel, but perhaps have great difficulty in articulating and defining.[81]

Green recognises the considerable 'gap of language, or culture, of expectation and perception' between biblical and present cultures, making for difficulty in 'making sense of what was in the minds of those who lived during those early Christian centuries'. However, taking his example involving the social sciences, recognising that 'God-talk' is, for many, now dispensable, he maintains that only 'God-talk can work with the raw material which, within his example, the social sciences have unearthed 'to look for the deepest meanings and sense the relationship that the transcendent God has with it all'.[82]

## 11.6 Jeff Astley

Astley is the strongest exponent of 'ordinary' theology, with his desire 'to take seriously the beliefs of "non-theologically educated" churchgoers and other Christian believers, and of those outside the churches', which, he says, have not received much academic attention, even from practical theologians. 'Ordinary theology' denotes 'the theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education'. [83] It is what this thesis, with Williams, calls 'informal theology'. Astley's starting point for authentic belief is subjectivist rather than revelatory:

> We have to accept that *what we value* determines which of the concepts of God on offer we are willing to adopt, which sort of God we will regard as 'worthy of worship'. . . For . . . [a] God to be my God, I would have to recognize in the narrative a character of supreme worth.[84]

This resembles Graham Shaw's emphasis on our responsibility for our concepts of God: 'The only reality of God lies in the use of that word by human beings'.[85] Astley writes that informal theology may 'work' for those who own it, and even be, for them, 'salvific – healing, saving, making them whole . . . help[ing] people spiritually and religiously'; but 'not . . . every part of the unsystematic bricolage that makes up most Christians' ordinary theology works in this way'; and even some, though apparently helpful, may get in the way of a spiritual life and

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[81] Green, *Let's Do Theology*, p. 45.
[82] Green, *Let's Do Theology*, pp. 80-81.
[83] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, pp. viii, 1; cf. p. 56.
[84] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, p. 44.
[85] Shaw, Graham, *God in Our Hands*, London, SCM, 1987, p. ix (quoting Shaw, Graham, *The Cost of Authority*, London, SCM, 1983, p. 282).

finding meaning. So Astley suggests that the *whole* of someone's belief system must be salvific if it is to continue to be held.[86]

Astley explores whether informal belief can be 'too concrete and anthropomorphic', rather than abstract. He records James Fowler's findings of the proportion – albeit small – of adults still at a concrete stage of 'Mythic-Literal Faith', and surmises that 'many other adults will regularly utilize concrete thinking in their theology, although developmentally they are able to operate at a more sophisticated level'.[87] Astley believes that:

> it is more important that Christians endorse the personal metaphors, analogies and narratives that are employed by the Christian tradition to render the 'moral' and 'personal' character of God, than that their non-literal or mythic status be appreciated. To affirm that God is human – or even male – is certainly to make a theological mistake; but it is not as big a mistake as denying that God is *in any sense* a 'father' (creator, provided, carer, guide) to us.[88]

This may be so. But the researcher's pastoral observation is that many who are sceptical about Christianity are reacting to concretistic views of theological doctrine beyond which their capability for abstract thinking, demonstrated in other parts of intellectual life, indicates they could move. This is confirmed by the experience of those, including one of the interviewees for this thesis, who found relief in reading *Honest to God*. For that reason, it is reasonable to infer that Christians should grasp the importance and nature of analogy. Astley highlights the disabling effect of refusing 'to apply any analogies or metaphors to the deity, particularly when speaking of the *character* of God . . . . That way total agnosticism lies.'[89] He offers an exercise in such practical theology, an example of how intelligent believers can begin to bridge the gap between ordinary and academic theology, a study tool for individuals and groups who have undergone basic courses in Christianity and want to explore theological concepts like metaphor, model and myth, analogy, truth and mystery.[90]

Ordinary theology reflects personal spiritual experiences, which, like ripples on a pond, gradually . . . affect the surface at the edges, namely . . . academic theology. Ordinary and

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[86] Astley, 'The Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology', pp. 1-3.
[87] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, pp. 129-32 (citing Fowler, James W., *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1981, p. 318).
[88] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, p. 129.
[89] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, p. 130.
[90] Astley, *Exploring God-talk: Using Language in Religion*, pp. 18, 40.

academic theology should be viewed as a 'continuous spectrum, the extremes of which are more easy to distinguish than are the intermediate (or "mixed") forms'.[91]

> I hold that the difference between ordinary and academic theology is only a matter of degree – no pun intended.  Even academics normally begin by doing theology in an ordinary way, and this ordinary theology often continues to underlie their more academic theological expressions.  And, historically speaking, the academic mode of theology owes much of its origin to – and develops alongside – this less conceptual, technical or systematic form of theology, which begins as a 'cognitive disposition and orientation of the soul' that represents the 'wisdom proper to the life of the believer' and becomes a personal, autobiographical and aphoristic 'irregular dogmatics'.[92]

Conversation between the two is, he writes, 'essential for the *full* critical development of theology', and 'crucial to those whose cognitive and spiritual make-up means that they really want or need this sort of conversation with academic theology'.[93]

Astley has not covered the ground envisaged for this thesis, not having sought individual views of God or of how individuals' concepts have changed during their lifetimes. Nor has Astley compared those shifts of view with the shifts in professional theology over the same period, to discover what degree of correspondence there has been.

**11.7 Theology as Poetry or Drama**

Sophistication of theological language has less importance if the whole Christian presentation of God is a 'poetic' presentation of the indefinable. Ford comes close to this position, approving of von Balthasar's notion of the 'theodrama', as has been described in the 'Pastoral Theology' chapter. This brings von Balthasar close to the possibility of the whole Christian presentation of God as a dramatic art-form. Jane Garnett and her colleagues also come close when they explore the concept for Christianity of 'performance', in the sense of drama or liturgy.  The term 'performance' can easily lead in unhelpful directions modelled on plays or concerts, such as that of repetition or linguistic effort, or be narrowed to refer to human activity, liturgy or leading worship.[94] But Stanley Hauerwas captures the fuller essence with:

> This is a deep misunderstanding about how Christianity works. Of course we believe that God is God and we are not and that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit but that this

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[91] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, pp. 86-87.

[92] Astley, 'The Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology', p. 1 (quoting Farley, Edward, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1983, p. 35; Farley, Edward, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1988, p. 88; Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/1, Edinburgh, T&TC, 1975, pp. 277-78).

[93] Astley, Jeff, 'Ordinary Theology and the Learning Conversation with Academic Theology', Astley and Francis, *Exploring Ordinary Theology*, p. 47.

[94] Garnett et al., eds., *Redefining Christian Britain*, pp. 75-76.

is not a set of propositions — but is rather embedded in a community of practices that make those beliefs themselves work and give us a community by which we are shaped. Religious belief is not just some kind of primitive metaphysics, but in fact it is a performance just like you'd perform *Lear*. What people think Christianity is, is that it's like the text of *Lear*, rather than the actual production of *Lear*. It has to be performed for you to understand what *Lear* is — a drama. You can read it, but unfortunately Christians so often want to make Christianity a text rather than a performance.[95]

So, although Christianity can be *represented* in drama or liturgy, what is being addressed is the concept of Christianity as a whole *being*, figuratively, a drama or dramatic 'world' or 'system', into which people can step to find God, without needing commitment to any degree of realism or myth. The concept can be seen as supported by Wright's view of metaphors as 'mini-stories, inviting the hearers into a world where certain things can be seen more clearly through this lens'; or 'ways in which . . . words in relation to the creator and redeemer God can be truly spoken'.[96]

The concept is illustrated by a 2009 BBC television series of advertisements for Radio 3, in which people in the street encountered glorious music when they entered a circle on the pavement with the words 'Please Step In – BBC Radio 3', the music ceasing when they moved away. So people could encounter a whole new world by accidentally or voluntarily stepping into the circle, but resume more prosaic, alternative outlooks when moving away. The catchphrase in each advertisement was 'Step into our world'.[97] The circle does not represent the Church, but rather the whole Christian theological enterprise, with the latter not a Platonist Narnia entered and exit-ed through a secret door,[98] but rather a mental and spiritual construct in which we can participate by our 'presence'.  Like all images, it is an incomplete description – human beings do not move neatly from one 'world' to another and back again, and whatever 'worlds we inhabit' constantly overlap. However, the image might bridge some of the differences that characterise the Church as a human-inhabited institution. Unlike the theatre, there is no audience: all are players. Despite the risk of accentuating any sense of superiority at the two ends of the spectrum, the model has the potential to draw together into one worshipping community all Christians, wherever they stand on the spectrum of realism,[99]

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[95] Hauerwas, Stanley, *Bonhoeffer: The Truthful Witness*, http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/interviews/hauerwas.asp, downloaded 30.01.2013; partly quoted by Garnett et al., eds., *Redefining Christian Britain*, p. 74.
[96] Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 135.
[97] BBC television advertisement for Radio 3, Red Bee Media, 2009, sample at http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/thework/897977/, downloaded 04.02.2013.
[98] Lewis, *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.
[99] Including non-realists like Hart, who, like his mentor, Cupitt, accepts, the usefulness of worship (even creeds) for non-realists, with liturgy and ritual 'our attempt to gather together

whether or not they believe that 'God' refers, whether their inclinations are subjectivist or objectivist, and whether their theology is informal or academic.

The Australian poet, Les Murray, also comes close to a similar interpretation with:

> Religions are poems. They concert
> our daylight and dreaming mind, our
> emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture
> into the only whole thinking . . .
> and *God is the poetry caught in any religion*,
> caught, not imprisoned. Caught as in a mirror
> that he attracted, *being in the world as poetry*
> *is in the poem,* a law against its closure.
> . . . .[100]

Spufford seems to sense this when he recounts his experience of discovering joy and unhappiness, guilt and mercy in Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, which, he says, 'is not some wishy-washy metaphor for an idea I believe in, [but] the thing itself. My belief is made up of, built up from, sustained by, emotions like that. That's what makes it real'. It was not, he continues, that a deity micro-manages the universe to the extent of providing 'a timely rendition of the Clarinet Concerto', but that Mozart 'had succeeded in creating a beautiful and accurate report of an aspect of reality'.[101]

**11.8 Summary**

Mark Oakley records Voltaire as having commented that 'God made man in his own image and man returned the compliment'. Oakley's response is likely to be representative of that of many when he adds: 'I could see now [in the face of another's suffering and death] how I had crafted God just as I wanted him, but he was not big enough to contain the experiences I had never felt before'.[102] Thus he emphasises both the inevitability of all human understanding of God within informal theology being influenced to some extent by earthly experiences, for instance of parenting, but also the need for that understanding to develop – often widen – in response to further experiences, including suffering.

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with our chosen community of spiritual "soul friends" and give expression together in symbolic form to our deepest spiritual yearnings', Hart, *Faith in Doubt*, pp. 69-70, 77-78, 87.
[100] Murray, Les, 'Poetry And Religion', http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/poetry-and-religion/, downloaded 03.02.2013 (italics added); partly quoted by Oakley, Mark, Sunday Worship, Radio 4, 03.02.2013, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01qdr2f, downloaded 03.02.2013.
[101] Spufford, *Unapologetic*, pp. 15-17, 19.
[102] Oakley, *Collage of God*, pp. xiv.

Among the writers surveyed here, there is commitment by theory or actual practice to the validity and value of informal theology, most graphically in Spufford's extraordinary, unsystematic and sometimes contradictory, but moving and colloquial, account of Christianity. Williams's advocacy of humility in theology extends to a willingness to listen, without relying totally on ecclesiastical tradition or authority.

Sociologists have traced a shift in popular understanding of God, at least on the part of some believers, since 1945, moving from images relating to earthly monarchy and formality in the direction of some reflecting immanence and inclusivity. The current decline in church membership, with a greater sense of the church as an identifiable community, could have propelled Christian images of God in an exclusivist direction, such as sometimes arises with sects. However, the sexuality debates may well push the images further in an inclusivist direction. Spufford gives voice to an increasing awareness – encouraged by modern scientific awareness – that God is unlikely to be interventionist, but is immanent to the point of identification with and involvement in the world, including its suffering.

In any attempted analysis of hymns and prayers in church use, it would be impossible to remove the influence of hymnody and liturgy compilers and choosers, most of whom would not be ordinary theologians. This thesis has therefore relied on interviews to produce hymn and prayer-related references, and on analysing the extent to which modern language in worship has hindered or enhanced a sense of God's presence. Clues have been sought as to whether images from worship have been formative or reflective of believers' informal theology. It is likely that late twentieth and twenty-first century Anglicans have been unconsciously influenced by the changes that have occurred, including the movement from the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* through to the 2000 *Common Worship*, the recovery of the centrality of the Eucharist in many churches and the growth of much informal worship and music. Most notable in respect of the Eucharist is a shift of emphasis from God's transcendence and human unworthiness in *The Book of Common Prayer* to God's immanence and human self-sufficiency symbolised by nave altars, westward facing priests, less penitential material, the use of 'you' and 'your' and, more recently, a preference for sitting for much prayer instead of kneeling[103] or standing.

Throughout, one theme is prominent in informal theology, as it is in the experience of the practical theology respondents for this thesis, that of God as 'Presence'. Experience, on this basis, counts more than abstraction in informal theology, as 'lived' theology. 'Presence' was a

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[103] Rowell, Geoffrey, 'There's nothing wrong in kneeling before a loving God', *Times*, 31st July 2004, p. 45, where kneeling for penitence, supplication and adoration is commended.

frequent form of abstract description of God on the part of the respondents, thus turning abstraction back into a form of experience.

## Chapter 12: QUESTIONNAIRES AND INTERVIEWS

**12.1 Introduction**

The informal theology described or invoked by writers surveyed in the previous chapter is now complemented by an account of practical theology.

An initial sample of 31 people completed questionnaires and were interviewed by the researcher, with one further questionnaire included, although returned late. The sample was recruited by some parish clergy following the researcher's presentation to the Winchester Deanery Chapter, and by an item in a circular email from Winchester Cathedral to those, not just from the immediate Cathedral community, who had requested emails on 'Education and Spirituality' topics. So there was a considerable degree of self-selection by those who participated. All attended Winchester Anglican churches, although some also attended elsewhere: the six 18-35 year old undergraduate students and army recruits also attended home churches;[1] some attended more than one Winchester church; and a number of Cathedral attenders sometimes attended churches in the Hampshire villages of their residence, so that there was some rural Anglican representation. While roughly balanced in gender, the sample is not fully representative of the over-18 UK population by age, location, educational attainment, race, social class or affluence. Despite particular efforts, it was not possible to recruit anyone of a non-white background. The sample did include a few people the researcher assessed as being from less affluent backgrounds. However, the process was what Pete Ward calls an 'attempt to discover an authentic voice [or voices] rather than a representative or reliable sample', to 'capture the authentic voice of the participant . . .'.[2]

The process followed that set out in the 'Methodology' chapter. All those interviewed received, completed and returned questionnaires, with arrangements then being made for individual interviews to be held, most in respondents' homes, some on church or Cathedral premises, and two in the researcher's home. No respondent accepted the alternative of a focus group or group interview. All but two interviews were recorded, with transcripts then being available for analysis; the researcher made brief notes throughout all interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, in that the researcher had a list of topics to be covered, but opened each interview by reference to some item or items in the respondent's questionnaire, with the order of proceeding varying but with most topics covered in all interviews. Most respondents expressed appreciation of the process, with a significant proportion indicating

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[1] 3 Church of England, I Methodist, I Baptist, 1 Evangelical
[2] Ward, ed., *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, p. 8.

afterwards that their thinking had developed through the process, and some requesting a follow-up study course.

The format of the questionnaire is in **Appendix 3**, and the researcher's list of interview topics in **Appendix 4**.

**12.2 Quantitive Analysis of Questionnaires**

All questions were open, with narrative answers sought, the categories below being largely derived from the responses during analysis.

Of the 32 respondents:

| GENDER | Male | 13 |
|---|---|---|
| | Female | 19 |

| AGES | 18-35 | 6 |
|---|---|---|
| | 36-45 | 2 |
| | 46-55 | 2 |
| | 56-65 | 10 |
| | 66+ | 12 |

| EDUCATION (highest) | O Level/GCSE | 2 |
|---|---|---|
| | A Level | 4 |
| | Diploma[3] | 8 |
| | First degree | 9 |
| | Higher degree | 9 |

---

[3] Probably some diplomas vocational, some degree level

| PRESENT OR PREVIOUS WORK | Professional[4] | 17 |
|---|---|---|
| | Student | 5 |
| | Clerical/ Administrative | 5 |
| | Army | 2 |
| | Artistic | 1 |
| | Home | 2 |

| CHURCH(ES) ATTENDED[5] | Cathedral | 15 |
|---|---|---|
| | St Paul's | 3 |
| | University | 1 |
| | Christ Church | 1 |
| | University and Christ Church | 1 |
| | University and Cathedral | 1 |
| | University, Christ Church and Cathedral | 1 |
| | St Mark's and Cathedral | 1 |
| | All Saints' | 1 |
| | Holy Trinity | 3 |
| | St John's | 1 |
| | John Moore Barracks | 2 |
| | St Bartholomew's | 1 |

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[4] Following higher education and training
[5] Summary of each church's self-description in **Appendix 5**.

*On average, apart from prayers and services, how many times a day do you think of God?*

| 1-5 times | 17 |
|---|---|
| 6-10 times | 2 |
| 10+ times | 5 |
| Indefinite answer | 6 |
| No answer | 2 |

*On average, how often do you pray each week, at church, at home, or elsewhere?*

| 1-6 times | 10 |
|---|---|
| 7-14 times | 12 |
| 15+ times | 6 |
| Frequently | 2 |
| No answer | 2 |

*Do you associate God with any particular earthly places, or not?*

| Yes | 25 |
|---|---|
| No | 5 |
| Unsure | 2 |

*If you do, what place or places do you associate God with?[6]*

| Churches and holy sites | 22 |
|---|---|
| Countryside, etc. | 19 |
| People | 4 |
| Everywhere | 3 |
| Solitary places | 2 |
| 'Thin' places | 2 |
| Garden | 2 |
| Starry nights | 1 |
| Home | 1 |
| Spiritual books | 1 |

b. Questions about how you envisage God

*When you think about God, do you have a mental picture, or not?*

| Yes | 11 |
|---|---|
| No | 18 |
| Unclear | 3 |

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[6] Of these, many gave several places, some specific places.

*If you do, how would you describe that mental picture?*[7]

| | |
|---|---|
| Abstract | 11 |
| Father-figure | 6 |
| Light | 4 |
| Force, power | 1 |
| Anchor for thoughts | 1 |
| Amorphous cloud in sky | 1 |

*Do you think of God as female, male, both or neither?*

| | |
|---|---|
| Neither | 14 |
| Male | 10 |
| Male with female aspects | 3 |
| Both/both & neither | 4 |
| Unsure | 1 |

*If you don't think of God as female or male or both, how do you think of God?*

> 16 answered, with other abstract descriptions, e.g., immanence, presence, life essence, protection, controlling intelligence, human shape but not recognisable as human.

*Do you think of God as vast, tiny, both or neither?*

| | |
|---|---|
| Vast | 20 |
| Both | 4 |
| Both & neither | 1 |
| Neither | 7 |

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[7] Some answered, despite having responded 'No' to the previous question.

*Where do you think God is?*

| | |
|---|---|
| Everywhere | 16 |
| Beyond and within | 6 |
| Out there | 1 |
| Everywhere and nowhere | 1 |
| Everywhere and 'thin' places | 1 |
| High in the sky | 1 |
| High in heaven | 1 |
| In the spiritual dimension | 1 |
| Unsure | 4 |

*Which, if any of these, best describes God's location: up there, down there, out there or in here?  Or none of these?  If none of these, can you suggest an alternative?*

| | |
|---|---|
| Out there and in here | 10 |
| Everywhere | 10 |
| All of them | 3 |
| Everywhere and nowhere | 1 |
| Up there | 4 |
| None of these | 2 |
| In human hearts | 1 |
| In infinity | 1 |

*Did God create the world?  If so, how?*

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes, by big bang &/or evolution | 13 |
| Yes, unclear how | 13 |
| Yes, with some theological expression | 5 |
| No | 1 |

*Is God within nature, or outside it?*

| | |
|---|---|
| Both | 17 |
| Outside | 5 |
| Inside | 5 |
| Unsure | 4 |

*Do you think God needs us?*

| | |
|---|---|
| No | 13 |
| Yes | 11 |
| God wants us | 1 |
| Unsure | 6 |

*Do you think God understands our problems?*

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 28 |
| Probably | 3 |
| No | 1 |

*Do you think God suffers with us?*

| Yes | 23 |
|---|---|
| Probably/possibly | 6 |
| Risk of anthropomorphism | 1 |
| Not literally | 1 |
| No | 1 |

*Does God speak to human beings or not?*

| Yes, by a variety of means | 26 |
|---|---|
| Probably/possibly, by a variety of means | 2 |
| No | 2 |
| Unsure | 2 |

c. Anything else you would like to say

There were 13 various expressions of faith and comments about prayer, the problem of evil and the difficulty of saying anything about God. Relevant comments are generally subsumed into the overall account, below, but a few particular ones are:

> We're hitting some deep theology here . . . ours is a faith of paradoxes . . . I have to try as best I can to understand intellectually my experience of God. But I know I'll never make it (and there are times when the poets and songwriters will speak to me more deeply than the theologians).

> I think I think that we can't put labels on God. We don't have the vocabulary, understanding or anything. I am not trying to make him remote, I don't think He is. . . . But we want to confine him within our own limited understanding – and I don't think we can – or even should.

> I believe that some of the traditional attributes of God conflict. E.g. I struggle to comprehend how an omnibenevolent God can be omnipotent and omniscient at the same time in [the] light of the problem of evil.

> My ideas of God are very unformulated.  Because he is infinite, vast, a mystery, I think they have to be but I also wonder whether I am a little lazy.

> I'm sorry my answers are so vague and not much help, but we're so small and the idea of God is so enormous that I can't hold it and express it in words – the words slither away.

**12.3 Commentary on the analysis of the questionnaires**

More respondents held 'evangelical' theological views than those associated with (Evangelical) Christ Church, and more held 'Catholic' views than those associated with (Anglo-Catholic) Holy Trinity: there was considerable breadth of view on the part of many participants. The researcher had no preconceptions about relationships between personal factors and theological responses, but was interested to discover any that existed. However, it has not been possible to detect any relationship at all between the backgrounds of respondents and their responses, age, education, work or even tradition of church attended, or in terms of respondents' daily thinking of God or weekly prayer patterns. The only exception to this related to gender, about which comment is offered below. The incidence of more picturesque views of God, for instance, is not associated with levels of education, and understandings of God's creation of the world are not associated with any particular age groups.

There was a high incidence of association of God with earthly places, particularly with general and specific ecclesiastical and natural locations. A majority had no mental image of God, with a clear majority of that majority offering an abstract portrayal, such as: 'Pure beauty/love, not really in a form as we'd see it here', and 'God is universal and transcendent. He is too great to be understood and cannot be visualised. Any description must include omnipotence, music, art, beauty and compassion'. Several identified God with light, sometimes very graphically, such as one person, for whom 'He often appears as a bright light, which reappears when I have "got the message"'[8]. However, six offered graphic descriptions of a father-figure, sometimes embellished as a kindly, elderly man with a beard. At the time, none identified the images as analogical, although, as will be seen, it became clear that at least some were doing so. Although none identified God as female, a minority identified God as male, with around half preferring God as neither or both, or as male with some female aspects. Predictably, a clear majority envisaged God as vast rather than tiny, although a few opted for 'both'. A clear majority located God as 'everywhere', a few implying both transcendence and immanence, and a few others offering abstract locations, but with two locating God as 'in the sky' or 'high in heaven'. One respondent represented the majority with the response: 'I'll settle for "out there" and "in here" as ways that transcendence and immanence can make personal sense to me. But . . . "out there" probably comes more naturally'. Half located God as both inside and outside nature, although there was no clear correspondence with previous location of God as 'everywhere'; roughly equal proportions preferred 'inside' or 'outside'.

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[8] Another questionnaire example is described, the interviews analysis, below.

The question about God's creating the world elicited some uncertainty: although nearly half expressed no difficulty with the idea of God creating by the natural means identified by modern physics and biology (and others may have done so if pressed), many others were uncertain as to how God had created. One envisaged God's creation as a continuing process:

> I fully accept the findings and speculations of modern science and see no difficulty in reconciling that with faith in a divine creator. I don't have any conception of what that creative act is. I do believe that Creation is happening continuously and is not something that took place in the past.

One denied that God created the world or universe.

Over God's relationship with humanity, a high proportion believed God understands our problems, one commenting: 'Yes. He knows our thoughts even before we think them and He lived as a human being, how could he not?' Nearly as high a proportion believed God suffers with us (although some, unsurprisingly, identified God's suffering with Jesus's). Comments included: 'I believe God suffers when he sees man's inhumanity to man' and (from two people) 'Yes, as a parent suffers with a child', with one suggesting that to claim otherwise would be to limit God. Similarly, a high proportion stated that God speaks to human beings – by a variety of non-vocal means, such as the Bible, prayer, events and other people. A small minority was unsure about God's relationships with humanity, and one denied any relationship as represented by these questions. There was uncertainty over the question about God needing humanity. Half thought God does (with two amending the criterion to God *wanting* us), some answering: 'Yes, as God created everything for a purpose . . .'; 'Yes!! As his hands, ears, voice . . .'; and 'Yes . . . to spread the word of salvation'. Almost as many were clear that God does not need us ('Why should we be special?'); and several were unsure, one commenting: 'Not in [a] sense we may understand. Or at least not in an emotional sense. He possibly would get bored without us!' Another commented, 'God does not need us (in the modern sense) but we are part of Him', adding somewhat Gnostically, 'We all have within us that divine spark which is part of God and comes from Him'.

Points of interest include:

- the lack of discernible relationship of concepts of God with any of the preliminary aspects of the respondents (noting the generally high level of educational attainment);
- considerable abstraction (as, for example, beauty, love, presence, energy or a force) in concepts of God on the part of most;

- the lack of resonance with locating God 'up there' or 'down there', etc. (of concern in Robinson's 1960s *Honest to God*);

- the degree of support for the semi-panentheistic view of God being in nature, with one saying that humans are part of God;

- the general and easy acceptance of a relationship, visualised along human-to-human lines, between God and human beings;

- the degree of support for themes articulated by process theology, particularly the concept of God suffering;

- the degree of support for the concept of God needing humanity (as advanced by Williams and Macquarrie); and

- the support from one person for the concept of God's continuing creative activity (as suggested by Wiles).

## 12.4 Qualitative Analysis of the Interview Transcripts

a. Abstract thinking

In this sample of informal theology, a considerable degree of abstraction was evident, particularly in the basic conceiving and describing God, which may reflect the relatively high level of education of the sample. Around eight were explicit about the inadequacy of image and language to describe God, one speaking of the inappropriateness of words 'to try to describe God . . . outside words . . . not confined in a definition of words', and several warning of the danger of anthropomorphism. Many more implied similarly by offering abstract concepts of God, with 'a Presence' and 'everywhere' (or, in one case, 'everywhere and nowhere') being frequent descriptors, sometimes accompanied by the word 'person', although in other cases 'person' was resisted as too anthropomorphic. A few described God in terms of light, in a clearly figurative sense, with one speaking of 'energy and light' in a non-physical 'protected realm'; another spoke of 'partly light as something shining, but also light meaning enlightenment' and, in the questionnaire, had likened God to 'a half-hidden light that I almost glimpse, like a light behind a screen, but if I try to concentrate on it, it disappears'. One respondent spoke of imagination being enlarged by the need 'to get away from the stereotype of the man with the white beard . . . in the sky, which is a sort of child's view'. However, a small minority retained a very univocal attachment to concepts and images that others accepted as necessarily metaphorical. In particular, a respondent gave in the questionnaire a mental picture of 'a father figure . . . a man in the clouds, with a beard, on a throne . . .

surrounded by angels and bright blinding light'; however, at interview, she was more measured, clear that 'we can't comprehend God', perhaps indicating that the previous picture was presented as a non-literal image. An equally concrete description was given, from a contrasting background, by an early retired graduate professional: the questionnaire described God as 'an amorphous cloud high up in the sky containing a creature "God"'; probed at interview, the respondent claimed that God was God just of our solar system, with the possibility that one day space explorers might find God, described thus:

> My picture and vision of it [sic] is one that possibly has arms and legs . . . and they would extend from a body that's rectangular in shape, so that sort of gives a humanlike appearance, and it has a . . . strange head . . . not two eyes and a mouth . . . something a bit different from that.

This person's distinctive image was accompanied by later implications of a virtually total lack of interaction with the respondent or humankind, with only one of the traditional images that were explored with most respondents (see below) striking any chord.

### b. Direct experience

Although direct experience of God was not directly addressed, some respondents recounted less or more subtle forms of 'contact'.  One, for example, described God as 'source of all initiative, source of all ingenuity . . . an influence that's always with me, always available, experienced perhaps', but also expressed ambivalence as to whether this God could be 'a person'. One respondent described an experience of amazing peace with a warm inner glow while ironing and gazing out of a window on a sunny day, with a certainty that this was God; although the respondent seemed to discount the natural warmth from the ironing and the sunny day, there was a later recognition that 'we probably all mould God to suit ourselves . . . to some degree'. Two others spoke of experiences of unexplained 'great warmth' that were attributed to God's presence. Another – the only man to recount an experience of this kind – described once feeling that just he and God were present on 'a calm beach after a storm . . . the waves coming up and going back'. Two respondents spoke of 'thin places', where the boundary between earth and heaven is said to be blurred, and one identified the garden as such, where 'another area of consciousness' had been experienced; two others spoke or particular encounters in Christian healing centres, and one of these of 'God incidences', in which God was identified with what others might call helpful coincidences in life. Another spoke of a vigil experience in a cathedral: 'I can only say it was me and God in God's living room'.

### c. Theism, deism and concepts

As indicated, there was general reserve about attributing personhood to God. However, three went further, explicitly or implicitly indicating deist tendencies. One person: couldn't conceive of God as 'a person who looks into every single being on earth'; agreed with an unnamed philosopher who said that 'God is like a sort of security blanket, or a big brother . . . who will sort things out for us, because we're frightened'; admitted to preferring transcendence to immanence and to being closer to deism (even atheism) than theism; but continued to search and attend church regularly. Another shared a tendency, attributed to the modern Church at large, of understanding God as non-interventionist, since there is no evidence of intervention, but curiously, in the same breath, spoke of God 'operating' (i.e., being active). The third, who gave the distinctive 'rectangular' view of God quoted above, was clear about God as 'almost like an overseer without any physical interaction, mental interaction'.

In order to explore theism more thoroughly, four traditional descriptors for God were posited for responses. When the researcher did not raise a descriptor in earlier interviews, the survey sample was in effect reduced by this number for these images.

i.  Father

| | |
|---|---|
| Not raised by interviewer | 2 |
| Helpful | 21 |
| Ambivalent | 3 |
| Unhelpful | 5 |

Of those who found the image helpful: three were concerned to broaden the image to include parenting and/or motherhood, and one to emphasise that 'father' was real enough to be considered more than a metaphor; several explicitly mentioned their own good experiences of their fathers, and three their poor experiences (with one spontaneously recognising the possibility that the fatherhood of God might have been adopted as a compensation: 'Who knows what goes on deep in our psyche?'). Positive qualities that were mentioned included helpfulness, guiding, unconditional loving and (by a young student) allowing self-determination.

All three of those ambivalent mentioned or implied their own poor experience: two referred to 'distant' fathers, and one to a father who was always trying to catch the respondent out (although the respondent was quick to add that God was not to be construed as compensation). This person found her experience of her mother's

outstanding love a better model for God's love; but some ambiguity remained, with her saying 'So that helps in understanding what the Father's love is like', and, in the questionnaire, unequivocally describing God as male.

Five respondents indicated particular difficulty with the notion of God as Father: one because the term is 'male and patriarchal'; two due to their own poor experience of their fathers; and two offering no explanation.

Although 72.4% of the respondents found the image 'Father' helpful, 27.6% did not. On the basis of this small sample, experience of poor human fatherhood (on the part of five) is more likely to coincide with difficulty or ambivalence (on the part of eight) over the image of God as Father than with finding positive compensation in the image. Several saw compensation as a theoretical possibility, but only one came even near to acknowledging it as a factor in her concept of God: 'Well, it used to be a terrifying concept. But I suppose I've learnt over the years to see God as the father I didn't have, to have the qualities that I've needed. I don't see them as wholly male, ironically'.


ii. King

| Not raised by interviewer | 0 |
|---|---|
| Helpful | 13 |
| Ambivalent | 10 |
| Unhelpful | 8 |

Those who found the image helpful sometimes spoke predictably of God's power, activity in creation, authority, control and strength. Those who were ambivalent were concerned at the inadequacy of the term, to some extent in the light of human theories and experience of monarchy (one 'not a monarchist' and one who claimed republican tendencies). The reasons why the image was unhelpful varied: one, old fashioned and too anthropomorphic; four, too hierarchical (one contrasting Jesus's humility); two because of republican tendencies; and two giving no reason.

With 'King', a majority (58%) did not find the image clearly helpful. In a few cases, there was mention by the researcher and/or respondents of the chequered history of human monarchy (including presidency) and/or of the constitutional nature of the British

monarchy. As with 'Father', it was historical and modern experience of human monarchy, along with other issues of appropriateness, which seems to have caused difficulty for some respondents, indicating a tendency on the part of some towards a degree of univocity.

<u>iii. Shepherd</u>

| Not raised by interviewer | 13 |
|---|---|
| Helpful | 15 |
| Ambivalent | 1 |
| Unhelpful | 2 |

Most responses were positive, with attributions of leadership and care, but with a few qualifications: the retention of human freewill; not expecting individual attention; the image being more applicable to Jesus; and the image being too small. Two gave the positive illustrations of being 'shepherded' by a Hindu neighbour in a time of depression, and of the heroic work of some nomadic Moroccan shepherds. The ambivalent respondent and those who found the image unhelpful gave no clear reasons.

On the basis of the sample (discounting those with whom it was not addressed), 'shepherd' was clearly the most favoured of the three images.  This could relate to the fact that shepherding was beyond the experience of most respondents, unlike the previous images, so without the challenges that experience of shepherding might have evoked in a farming environment.

<u>iv. Great – an adjective, therefore a concept rather than an image</u>

| Not raised by interviewer | 5 |
|---|---|
| Helpful | 22, though with some reservations |
| Ambivalent | 0, though note reservations |
| Unhelpful | 4 |

Clearly more popular than any of the images except 'Father', with which it was roughly equal in popularity, it proved to have wide interpretation. Five responses referred to great size, but two denied that the reference was to size. Those favouring the concept used

terms such as 'powerful', 'marvellous', 'majestic', 'awe-full', 'mighty', 'worthy', 'above mortals and our life-span', 'cool' and having 'omnicity'[9].

Several expressed reservation about the adequacy of 'Great', with its loose meaning in common parlance. Indeed, the reasons why respondents found the concept unhelpful was its overuse almost to the point of meaninglessness, and its failure to express God's relationship with the respondent.

From the evidence of the three images, the strong support for 'Father' and 'Shepherd', coupled with significant resistance to 'King', suggests a preference for an intimate relationship with God, although a few, as instanced above, found it inconceivable that God should be interested in the affairs of billions of people. The researcher had unwittingly chosen three male images, and regrets not offering a female one, such as that of a mother nurturing her young.  The strong support for 'Great' suggests recognition of God's transcendence. What is evident is a general conception of God as transcendent, but with whom one can relate. Relationship does not of itself imply immanence, although the respondents did show other evidence of immanence, particularly the frequent references to 'Presence' and 'Everywhere', and the relating of experiences of God. Two people unwittingly subscribed to panentheism, one even possibly pantheism with 'I believe he is in and is everything, including me'. Some unconscious process theology was implicit when one respondent reflected:

> I don't necessarily believe that God is perfect . . . . I think he's very human, more human than we like to admit. . . . There's many people that believe that God is this absolute perfect being . . . he was made that way, he's always been perfect.   But actually I think perfection is something that you earn . . . perfection is something that develops. [The respondent draws a parallel with Thomas Edison making many trial light bulbs before producing a 'nearly perfect design'.] . . . I actually think God is quite similar, and I think that through creating his creation he's actually developing himself, and therefore . . . will become more knowledgeable, more wise with every step he takes.

These two examples are not typical of the sample, but are indicators of the breadth of views expressed.

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[9]  Word coined to include omnipotence, omniscience and omni-presence.

## d. Theodicy

When, without the word usually being used, theodicy was addressed, a universal theme was the reality of human freewill accounting for much suffering. A small number attributed even 'natural' disasters to human freewill, on grounds of human ability to avoid or prevent disasters oneself or for others, with one respondent particularly insistent on human freewill echoing God's own freewill. Common were sentiments like 'It's the way the world is/is made', 'The world is imperfect' or 'life realigning itself' to explain natural disasters, although no theories were offered as to why God had made the world this way.  The idea that God might, out of his omnipotence, have decided voluntarily to deny 'himself' the power to intervene and allow human freewill, when advanced occasionally by the researcher, found no support. However, many thought God could intervene but refrained from doing so to avoid compromising human freewill, or even in some undefined sense freedom of the world at large, in a non-deterministic world. One respondent would 'much rather have what it is now, rather than some kind of sterile environment, where everyone is safe but then doesn't have their own freewill'. One went so far as to attribute natural disasters to the earthly disruption that followed from original sin, which 'broke the world, and so now we have famines, we have droughts, we have tsunamis, floods, earthquakes, tornados, any kind of natural disasters, because of ourselves breaking the bond between us and God'.

Some linked human suffering with the notion of God suffering with humankind, and many, in one case a journalist, with graphic conviction, were clear of God's presence in the midst of episodes of human suffering. There was occasional reference to good emerging from tragic situations. The uncertainties and, sometimes, contradictions that prevailed in handling this topic only served to confirm the similar struggles of academic theologians with theodicy.

## e. Shifts in view

Each respondent was given an opportunity to recount any shift in understanding of God during adult years, mainly in relation to the Church's changing liturgy and hymnody. The majority did not grasp the issue being considered, reported no shift of view or described a shift from childhood views.   However, eight were more forthcoming, and had all noticed a shift from what amounted to more transcendence to more immanence. One respondent, with some theological self-education, had spotted significance in the verbal changes between *The Book of Common Prayer* and *Common Worship* Eucharistic liturgies and between the eastward and westward presidential positions. Two commented on the greater familiarity with God in newer

liturgy, one with appreciation of God being at hand to help, the other with regret at 'unwelcome mateyness' from the loss of 'thee' and 'thou' language. One spoke of God having become 'more personal and more immediate, rather than distant'. One spoke of the guilt-based relationship of *The Book of Common Prayer* and the comparative lightness and love of replacement liturgy, which nevertheless retained depth. The same person deplored the assumed intimacy of some Evangelical worship. One 18-35 person reported a shift from 'a big guy on a throne . . . [to] more of an entity and a spirit that lives in everything and is everywhere at once', and another, older, person a shift from a more abstract understanding to one with 'more substance' based on art, with newer liturgy emphasising 'God working through God's people'.

Although most in this sample had not made theological connections with liturgical changes, it cannot be assumed that there have been no unconscious effects; indeed, it is difficult to believe that there have not been.[10] And eight respondents had to some degree or other made a connection with a subtle shift from more transcendence to more immanence in liturgy and its celebration. Although the matter of changes in hymnody was raised in almost every interview and views were expressed in response, no respondent was conscious of any significant influence over concepts of God.

f. Conclusions from the Interviews

During interviews, and especially when some respondents indicated awareness of the metaphorical nature of much religious language, the researcher sometimes posed the possibility that the whole of the Christian 'presentation' might be an expressive 'poetic' system of a picturesque nature, but this found no resonance. A few respondents commented on the value of poetry and other artistic media to express ideas about God, and a few expressed awareness of the metaphorical nature of some or all images of God and of liturgy.

Some were explicit in their realist assumptions, for example, with 'Yes . . . there is definitely something out there'. Overall, there was a general attachment to theism, although a few recognised their tendency towards deism. Some balance of transcendence and immanence characterised most respondents, though with a predominance towards God's transcendence coupled with a supportive relationship with humans. Among the images that were presented,

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[10] No research evidence on this matter has been identified.

'King' stands out as being of only moderate usefulness, with a significant proportion not finding it helpful, despite its connotations of transcendence.   Although it is prominent in Scripture and Tradition, it may be a metaphor that is 'dying', correspondingly with the political and social shifts that surviving human monarchies are undergoing. It that proved to be the case, there would be massive implications for traditional theology.

## 12.5 Some conclusions from the whole process

'It's a very loose church. . . . we agree on very little. . . . Start talking to our members and you'll find we hold a thousand different views'. So said a fictional Bishop of Southwark.[11] Certainly this research has uncovered a variety of basic views in Anglican churches of Winchester, but also some interesting commonality. Only a few respondents were conscious of their images of God having been influenced by liturgical change. Hymns were hardly mentioned with reference to God, despite explicit mention by the researcher in most cases, and versions of Scripture not at all.

Common features, derived from the questionnaires and interviews together, include a general, though not total, preference for abstract terms in describing God, and transcendence on God's part (with transcendence and impassibility probably recognised by those who were ambivalent about the notion of God's needing us).   However, the transcendence was balanced by immanence, represented by God's presence – omnipresence – with human beings.  Although transcendence was also complemented by God's relationships with humans, there was considerable reticence about God being a person, with a conscious recognition, at least on the part of some, of the metaphorical, nature of all images for God.  The expectation of relationship was characterised by a general, though not complete, preference for the images of 'Father' and 'Shepherd', but also by a majority believing that God understands our problems, suffers with us and 'speaks' to us. Only a minority identified God as distinctly male. The majority believed God to have created the world, with the majority of that majority understanding creation as having taken place (or, in one case, as continuing) by the means described by modern science.

In view of Clark-King's discovery of the support for a male image of God by a sample of working-class women, and Davie's observations that women concentrate more on 'the God of love, comfort and forgiveness' and men more on 'the God of power, planning and control',

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[11] Hare, David, *Racing Demon*, London, F&F, 1990, p.3.

some comparative analysis has been carried out on the data from the current questionnaires and interviews. Clark-King's discovery is partially supported by the current analysis, in that 52.63% of women thought of God as male, compared with 30.77% of men. Combining the proportions believing that God understands our problems and the proportions that God suffers with us, as indicators of God's love, 94.74% of women supported these beliefs, compared with 73.90% of men. Every woman who viewed God as male also viewed God as loving (although most other women did so as well). So, a significantly higher proportion of women than men in the sample viewed God as both male and as loving and understanding. Measuring the proportions understanding God as powerful, planning and controlling was more difficult, and combined three factors: quantitative analysis of 'whether God created the world'; qualitative interview analysis as to whether God as 'King' was viewed in this light; and qualitative interviews analysis over theodicy and divine intervention. The combined scores from these three factors were 57.89% of women and 56.41% of men viewing God as powerful and controlling. However, removing the nearly 100% scores for God creating the world by some means or other, the scores are reduced to the more realistic levels of 36.84% of women and 38.46% of men viewing God as powerful and controlling. However, it should be noted that power and control were not strong elements in most participants' beliefs. No significant correspondence has emerged between the various factors analysed to indicate, for instance, that men who did not view God as understanding tended to view God as controlling. So, Clark-King's and Davie's observations are roughly, but not dramatically, supported by the present research. Using the same factors, it is clear that there is no pattern of correspondence with the different age groups of the participants.

The preference for abstract concepts coincides with Village's finding that literalism in interpreting the Bible declined with increasing education, especially theological education, except amongst evangelicals.[12] Most of the Winchester sample was comparatively well educated, and only one participant's worship was restricted to the church describing itself as Evangelical, the others who attended this church also attending others. The evidence suggests that this sample of believers have been sufficiently influenced by the prevailing postmodern climate to freely express their views, however, in some cases, unusual or divergent. The emphases on divine transcendence, immanence and interaction suggest balance on the part of most respondents, but with freedom for individualistic expression. There is evidence of considerable intellectual and spiritual sophistication on the part of many within this sample of

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[12] Village, *Bible and Lay People*, p.67

informal theologians, who showed an overall ability to hold creatively together, in paradoxical tension, competing concepts such as immanence and transcendence, person-hood and more than person-hood, images and abstraction.

# **CONCLUSIONS**

This concluding section contains just one chapter, in which conclusions are drawn, particularly about the relationship between post-1945 academic theology and the informal theology of the survey sample of ordinary believers. Some proposals for further research are made, along with some recommendations for consideration over the practice of the Church of England.

## Chapter 13: SOME CONCLUSIONS

### 13.1 Introduction

The thesis has surveyed different accounts and genres of academic Anglican UK theology, including popular theology, since 1945. It has turned to practical theology, taking into its purview some sociological studies and the results of an exercise involving questionnaires and interviews with a sample of Winchester Church of England members. The Anglican propensity towards divergence of views, with a liberal attitude to conformity with councils, creeds and doctrine, encourages variety in academic and informal theology. Comparisons will be made between academic theology on the one hand and informal theology on the other, particularly from the Winchester survey. The reference of words like 'resonate' is to the juxtaposing by the researcher of concepts or insights from academic theology and informal theology, after the pattern outlined by Christopher Rowland and Zoë Bennett with reference to Scripture, approached with critical awareness, and practical theology.[1]

At least two-thirds of respondents had lived through most of the period under investigation, and had therefore been aware, and potentially affected by, the shifts in religious belief and behaviour that had taken place since 1945. The 80% of Britons believing in God in 1956 had shrunk to 76% in 1975; the 71.82% describing themselves as Christians in 2001 to 59.3% in 2011, and, most relevantly, the 43% believing in a personal God in the 1940s and 1950s to 30% in 2012. However, in 2013, although only 13% of the population believed in a personal God, 59% believed in a least one spiritual being and 30% in God as a universal life force – figures which seem to indicate a spirituality that could be associated with a wider description of God.[2]

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[1] Rowland, Christopher and Bennett, Zoë, '"Action is the Life of All": The Bible and Practical Theology', *Contact*, no. 150, 2006, pp. 8-17.

[2] Bruce, Steve, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002, pp. 71-72; Sigelman, Lee, 'Multi-Nation Surveys of Religious Beliefs', *JSSR*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Sept. 1977, p. 290; Office for National Statistics, *Focus on Religion*, October 2004, http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/search/index.html?newquery=focus+on+religion, leading to focusonreligion_tcm77-73363(2).pdf – Adobe Reader, both downloaded 16.01.2013; Office for National Statistics, *Religion in England and Wales 2011*, released 11.12.2012, http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-religion.html, downloaded 19.01.2012; British Religion in Numbers, *Western European Religion*, www.brin.ac.uk/news/2012/western-european-religion/, posted 16.03.12, downloaded 15.01.2013; YouGov-Cambridge Survey Results, Fieldwork 24th February – 6th March 2012, http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/6xufjlailj/Eurozone%20Crisis%20-%20Cross-Country%20Report_06-Mar-2012_F.pdf, downloaded. 15.01.2013 ('Personal God' not defined).

The context, therefore, for the practical theology within this thesis is a general diminution of belief in a personal God, but a persistent sense of God, drawn more widely. Within the context of Church of England membership being reduced within the lifetime of most respondents by over half between 1950 and 2011,[3] it is reasonable to assume that the respondents have an increasing sense of their identity as active, rather than nominal, Christians, which would explain the candour of the whole sample. For the respondents, 'speaking of God in public', or at least with the researcher, was not affected by the taboo of not doing so, described by Chapman *et al.*[4] Garnett and her colleagues describe 'the "subjective turn" in religiosity – which has postulated a definitive movement from collective, mostly church-based spirituality towards privatized, individualized beliefs and personalized practice', along with demand for 'authenticity' and 'self-fulfilment'. All this is likely to have impinged on the spirituality and practice even of regular church attenders.  So too will have what Garnett *et al.* call 'habitual religious experiences [which] lodge in the memory of the believer and become available for personalization and re-activation as a necessary underpinning for meaningful choice and an integrated identity'.[5] In other words, for some churchgoers, traditional elements of religion can be re-discovered as meeting subjective, individualized needs.

Fortuitously, the proportions of men and women among the respondents corresponded roughly to the proportions of men and women believing in God in 1989. As has been noted, particular analysis has been undertaken to relate the proportional tendencies between the genders to observations by Clark-King that, in her solely female sample, women preferred a male image for God, and by Davie, that women concentrate more on 'the God of love, comfort and forgiveness' and men more on 'the God of power, planning and control'. The current analysis partially supports Clark-King's, with a higher proportion of women than of men viewing God as male – though with only 52.63% of women nowhere near Clark-King's assessment of 'predominan[ce]'.[6] Davie's contention is clearly supported by 94.74% of women, compared with 73.90% of men, preferring a 'loving' image of God, with a higher proportion of women than men in the sample viewing God as both male and as loving and understanding. However, the analysis does not support Davie's contention about men preferring an image of

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[3] Guest, Olson and Wolffe, 'Christianity: loss of monopoly', p. 62, with boundaries and 'membership' not fully defined; Archbishops' Council Research and Statistics, *Statistics for Mission*, London, Archbishops' Council, 2013, with membership defined by Parochial Electoral Rolls.

[4] Chapman, Naguib and Woodhead, 'God-change', p. 173.

[5] Garnett et al., eds., *Redefining Christian Britain*, pp. 21-27. Cf. Bruce, *God is Dead*, throughout; Barley, Lynda, *Christian roots, contemporary spirituality,* London, Church House, 2006, pp. 6-7.

[6] Clark-King, *Theology by Heart*, p. 65.

God as powerful, planning and controlling, with scores for both genders similar; and these characteristics figured highly for very few respondents.

## 13.2 Religious language and culture

The issue of the meaningfulness or validity of religious language, addressed by Ayer and Mitchell, and fundamental for theology, was not raised by any respondents, despite their questioning natures. Some of the dialogue of the interviews would have been of limited comprehensibility to someone from outside the Church. This accords with Mascall's, Loughlin's, Lindbeck's, Thiselton's and Ford's emphasis on the importance of the community context for understanding theological language, and is comparable with D. Z. Phillips and Lindbeck's more pronounced suggestion, in Loughlin's account of them, that 'coming to belief in God is not so much a matter of reasoning, as of "learning a language, assimilating a culture, entering a textual world . . ."'.[7] One respondent, an amateur hymn-writer, keenly valued the place of the poetic in hymns, and also recognised the inevitability of paradox in theology, matching the thinking of Macquarrie, Wiles and Ward.  He clearly also valued the 'poetic' as an effective means of communicating what Mascall refers to as 'the wonder and glory of God [for which] we may well find the poets more helpful than the theologians'; this accords with, in Ward's words (with Ford writing similarly), 'something like the language of poetry'.[8] Nevertheless, the researcher found no resonance, in the instances of proposing the idea, with the whole Christian 'presentation' being of a 'poetic' nature or even a 'world' one can enter, as expressed by the 1987 Doctrine Commission report and as 'theodrama' by Ford.[9]

Culture changes occur within society and the Church, and Nineham, Cupitt and Wiles draw attention to the potential effect on understanding God, not least across the temporal gap since biblical times. Respondents' views unconsciously reflected this in several ways. Particular images for God resonated to different degrees with different people.  Respondents who described having grown up in a less than satisfactory family 'culture' did not necessarily find 'Father' the most useful descriptor; and many found 'King' an unsatisfactory image, interpreted from a current standpoint. More significantly, in temporal terms, eight respondents reported shifts in their understanding of God through the vagaries of life, but particularly as a result of changes in church liturgy, with the resulting understanding tending more in an immanentist direction, with greater divine love, less judgement, and a greater

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[7] Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, p. 94.
[8] Ward, *Living God*, pp. 1-3.
[9] Ford, *Future of Christian Theology*, pp. 24-27.

degree of abstraction. One respondent echoed Harry Williams's dislike of the constant reiteration of guilt in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Most academic theologians and philosophers have accepted the inescapability of analogy, metaphor or model to express the inexpressible. Trying to differentiate the literal or metaphorical nature of images was indicative of the different language games that were possible, as suggested by D. Z. Phillips.[10] Most respondents preferred abstract concepts for God, with a majority saying in their questionnaires that they had no mental picture, and 11 out of 32 offering abstract mental pictures, such as omnipotence, beauty, love, a force or energy. This reflects the general trends in the British population, indicated above, in terms of a wide and often abstract understanding of God, although the respondents' majority retention of a personal relationship with God is at variance with the social trend. For comparison, Edwards writes that 'in deepest reality the natural processes of creativity from the one Source are sustained by the one Force, the Source and Force called God'.[11] Lewis would not agree with this priority, at least by the standard of his contention that 'what is abstract . . . could [not] produce concrete reality' (although he goes on to write of '*the* Absolute Being').[12] There was no hint in any of the responses of Platonism or dualism (in theological or ethical terms) akin to Lewis's, although many would share the value he implicitly attaches in his Platonic trend towards the poetic and picturesque. Some respondents unknowingly reflected Williams's depiction of God as 'an eternal activity which . . . energises, makes real, makes active . . .', and Polkinghorne's description of God 'act[ing] in the world through his energies, not his essence'[13] – both drawing on Eastern Christian tradition.  The word 'analogy' was hardly used, if at all, by respondents, but 'metaphor' was used or implied by a significant number, particularly in expressing the impossibility of describing God adequately. These respondents were, unknowingly like Mackinnon, finding analogy the middle way between anthropomorphism (which several mentioned as a risk) and silence (which some saw as a possibility).[14] Some respondents' anxiety about anthropomorphism accords with Lewis's concern,[15] although, unlike Lewis, they tended to recognise the need for a degree of anthropomorphism for analogy to succeed; it accords too with Ward's concern (with various tentative solutions) about

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[10] Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, p. 94.
[11] Edwards, David L., *Yes: A Positive Faith*, London, DLT, 2006, p. 125.
[12] Hooper, ed., *Christian Reflections by C. S. Lewis*, p. vii.
[13] Shortt, *Rowan's Rule*, p.79; Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, p. 27.
[14] MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays*, p. 44.
[15] Edwards, ed., *Honest to God Debate*, p. 91 (quoting Lewis, C.S., *Observer*, 24th March 1963).

whether attributes such as wisdom, power and purpose can be attributed to the divine mind.[16]

Most respondents recognized the provisionality of language, comparable with Wiles's

conclusion that God is 'infinitely resistant to our finite systematizations',[17] even if no worked-

out theory of analogy was articulated. Two explained that:

> I have to try as best I can to understand intellectually my experience of God. But I
> know I'll never make it (and there are times when the poets and songwriters will speak
> to me more deeply than the theologians); and

> we're so small and the idea of God is so enormous that I can't hold it and express it in
> words – the words slither away.

Here are similarities with Williams's 'struggle to find images and words [against] an infinite

hinterland'.[18]

But the precise differentiations made by some academic philosophers and theologians

between 'analogy', 'metaphor' and other verbal devices were not exemplified by any

respondent. There was one example of Alston's partial univocity, when a respondent

suggested that 'Father' was too real to be just metaphorical. This was similar to the partial

univocity that the 1987 Doctrine Commission report suggested was applicable just to some

terms for God, including 'all-knowing, faithful or loving',[19] although the example of 'Father' is

more concrete. The majority of respondents who found the concept of 'Father' helpful did so

with the same connotation as did Mitchell, namely, that of protective care, rather than that of

'physical progenitor'.[20] One particular image explored with respondents, that of 'king', showed

signs of beginning to lose its usefulness on grounds of inappropriateness, some respondents

perhaps preferring abstractions to convey God's transcendence. In connection with 'King',

MacKinnon writes of the danger in *The Book of Common Prayer* of 'a levelling down of the

transcendent to the form of a magnified, supra-human reality'.[21]  The loss of usefulness of

'king' detected during the interviews was of the kind recognised in the 1987 Doctrine

Commission report, but was different from the 'death' of a metaphor outlined by Soskice, for

whom an expression ceasing to have metaphorical connotations is through familiar usage, as

with a 'flow of electricity'.[22] No respondent showed signs of the dangerous phenomenon

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[16] Ward, *Concept of God*, pp. 136-37.
[17] Wiles, *Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 108, 22, 23.
[18] BBC Radio 4 *Today*, 27th December 2010.
[19] *We Believe in God*, p. 42.
[20] Mitchell, *Justification of Religious Belief*, p. 19.
[21] MacKinnon, *Themes in Theology*, p. 18.
[22] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, pp. 71, 83.

described by Thiselton of a person becoming fixated with one particular metaphor.[23] Evidence about individual respondents' appreciation of the analogical use of language has largely, though not entirely, to be inferred from their general approach to images of God; however, there is no evidence that particular difficulties with specific images, like 'Father' or 'King' are associated with any individuals having difficulty with analogical usage generally.

Brown applies 'metaphor' to non-verbal aspects of art, with some paintings, particularly icons, communicating God's transcendence and immanence'.[24] Two respondents spoke of art in similar terms, but another was less receptive. One found in statues of the Virgin in France 'a great presence . . . very strengthening and protective . . . a sort of guiding strength . . . . A little bit of a feeling I get from these icons in [Winchester] Cathedral here. . . . I feel like I can feel the Kingdom of Heaven there'. Although later she explained that in the icons the sense of presence was that of Christ, the thinking coincides with Farrer's, when writing of God having painted an image in blood on the veil between God and humanity.[25] Another, who specialised in photography, said: 'You can come to a photograph open minded, and relax, and you allow it to speak to you; then the presence of God can become more evident'. However, the third, with a fine art qualification, denied that her very graphic image of God ('high in the heavens, sitting on his throne above . . . attended by angels and archangels . . .') was like a picture, the image being understood as three-dimensional and a picture as only two-dimensional. This reserve coincides with that expressed by the Doctrine Commission in 1987 about the limited applicability of images in hymns, poetry, liturgy and art,[26] and Ward's caution about literal interpretation of art.[27] However, the acceptance of graphic images of God (on a throne, etc.) by a number of respondents contrasts with a common dismissiveness towards such images, including that of Tom Wright.[28] The evidence from this limited survey suggests that, balancing the respondents' majority abstract thinking and contentment with a conventional relationship with God, Nineham is right that God may be calling us into a different kind of relationship from that which obtained in biblical times. There is, however, a tension in the evidence from the respondents, as there is in Nineham, between these two approaches.[29] Brown's assertion that art and theology have 'symbolic worlds' in common, 'where the relation between symbol and

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[23] Thiselton, *Language Liturgy and Meaning*, p. 25.
[24] Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, pp. 40, 81.
[25] Farrer, *Glass of Vision*, p. 61.
[26] *We Believe in God*, p. 30.
[27] Ward, *God*, pp. 9-14.
[28] Wright, Tom, *Simply Christian*, London, SPCK, 2006, p. 51.
[29] Nineham, *Use and Abuse of the Bible*, pp. 254, 193, 239.

literal fact is at last acknowledged to be a highly complex one'[30] would find resonance with a respondent who spoke of the danger of applying analytical process to the kind of figurative language contained, in, as an example, Sydney Carter's songs. The respondent reported:

> a tendency to . . . say 'Exactly what do these words mean?' . . . and at this point [Evangelicals] start backing off the imagery, and they start often just setting biblical passages. Now that's a false reading of what's going on. . . . [taking] a highly analytical view of something that is fundamentally poetic.

In all respondents who recognised the communicative value of art in its various forms, there was unknowing support for the views, not only of Brown, but also of Thiselton, with his insight into the way in which corporate memory is transmitted and reiterated through verbal and non-verbal means, influenced at each stage by fresh insights.[31]

### 13.3 '*Honest to God*', Images of God, God of the Gaps and Cupitt

Robinson's seminal *Honest to God*, something of a turning point in popular British theology, was heavily influenced by the existentialist tendencies of Bultmann and, above all, Tillich, with the latter in particular seeking new concepts for God in a post-supranaturalist Western culture. Existentialism, while not directly addressed in the questionnaires and interviews, did not figure at all in the responses, probably reflecting the loss of its erstwhile appeal. It can therefore safely be inferred that Macquarrie's existentialist Christian interpretation and that of others would not find particular resonance. Indeed, Macquarrie himself values spirituality that includes concrete images for God, such as were explored with respondents, while he recognised their ultimate inadequacy[32] – as did some of the respondents.

Many respondents' implicit acceptance of the place of analogy in theology, outlined above, meant that Robinson's alleged stumbling blocks of mythological, supranaturalist and metaphysical projection did not figure in their accounts of God. Nor did the allegedly difficult concept of God 'out there',[33] with a majority locating God as 'everywhere' (or similar), and those with more literal descriptions of location finding no problem with their understanding. Neither 'ultimate reality' nor Tillich's 'ground of being' with allusions to depth psychology figured in any accounts. The concept of transcendence appeared frequently in the survey responses, either explicitly or implicitly, but not with any need, such as Robinson finds, to develop its significance in worldly terms, or with any conflict with immanence, but rather as a

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[30] Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, p. 92.
[31] Thiselton, *Two* Horizons, pp.137-38, 404 & 432.
[32] Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity*, p. 188.
[33] Robinson, *Honest to God*, pp. 11-13.

prelude to a balanced faith, as Oakley envisages.[34] *Honest to God* seems on the evidence of the responses to be confirmed as a product of its time and generally no longer of immediate relevance, although Robinson's emphasis on love as a fundamental concept was replicated by many respondents. The predominance of transcendence in the responses accords with Lewis's preference, and most respondents would probably fulfil Lewis's and Mascall's expectation that most people's use of spatial imagery for God is imaginative in nature. Mascall explicitly mentions 'Father' and 'Shepherd' as examples of images that both ordinary Christians and academic theologians recognise, implicitly or explicitly, as analogical.[35] The respondents' comments support this, with no evidence that any viewed these images as other than figurative, with one or two respondents specific on the point (for instance that God's fatherhood involves no literal procreation), but with one indicating partial univocity, as described above. Certainly, the respondents were all realist in their theology, as Cupitt concludes was Robinson.[36] Indeed, Cupitt's conclusion is supported by Robinson's affinity for Buber's 'I-Thou' relationship in terms of God;[37] personal relationship with God was assumed by all but one, or perhaps two, respondents.

Similarly, and despite Nineham's sympathy for those for whom supranaturalism is a problem, the respondents showed no evidence of issues over supranaturalism, with most respondents simply offering abstract descriptions of God, or else, in a few cases, unselfconsciously offering more concrete descriptions. On the other hand, some would certainly appreciate Nineham's advocacy of imaginative 'pictures' for God that are attuned to the prevailing temporal culture, like a 'half-hidden light', an 'amorphous cloud', a warm inner glow.[38] Parallels can be seen with Clark-King's discovery in Newcastle of images of a comforting armchair, a welcoming mother-in-law, colour and light,[39] the 'armchair' evoking Williams's image of 'that depth . . into which . . . I try to sink'.[40]

Like Phillips,[41] a preponderance of respondents was aware of God's vastness, coupled with the possibility of a personal relationship with God, and an understanding of creation having occurred through natural means. Despite Polkinghorne's explicit dismissal of any God of the gaps, with God as 'the guarantor of [the physical] law . . . sustain[ing] the world in being', he

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[34] Oakley, *Collage of God*, pp. 35, 153.
[35] Mascall, *Secularisation of Christianity*, p. 117
[36] Cupitt, Don, 'John Robinson and the Language of Faith in God', pp. 42-43,
[37] Robinson, *Exploration into God*, p. 60.
[38] Nineham, *Use and Abuse of the Bible*, p. 254.
[39] Clark-King, *Theology by Heart*, pp. 127, 202.
[40] Shortt, Rupert, *Rowan's Rule*, p. 14
[41] Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small*, p. 8.

still shows a slight tendency to seek particular *loci* for God's activity.[42] Among the respondents, however, there was no hint of a God of gaps. Indeed, there were signs that most respondents took a holistic view of God as underlying the whole of existence and the created order: their general preference for abstract terms for God; the preference on the part of nearly half for God's creation being by 'natural' means identified by science; and the semi-pantheistic support for God being in nature. There was no support for the alternative figurative descriptions of God's location considered in *Honest to God*, and there was no indication that those who reported experiences of God's particular presence saw God's presence or activity as limited to those occurrences. However, for one person, who had ongoing difficulty with faith, the God with whom the person had difficulty certainly seemed to be of the gaps, God being described as 'a sort of security blanket, or a big brother . . . who will sort things out for us, because we're frightened' – projections of the kind deplored by Williams.[43] Respondents' generally holistic conceiving of God meant that there was little risk of God being eclipsed by new knowledge or understanding, as envisaged by Harry Williams.[44]

No respondent had progressed in Cupitt's direction of acute subjectivism and projection of God as a summation of values. One respondent had read one of Cupitt's books, but had dismissed his thesis on grounds of his assumption that the existence of God was on a par with the existence of a table. No respondent came anywhere near Cupitt's questioning the notion of existence for God, his total rejection of theological realism alongside retention of spirituality and religious practice, or his reifying of 'religious concern'.[45] God was too real in the experience and theology of most respondents to be merely a working hypothesis,[46] or, in Cupitt's post-modern terms, simply 'a transcendent inferred entity'.[47]

## 13.4 Human relationship with God

Although most respondents with a mental picture of God gave abstract descriptions, a high proportion also assumed some sort of relationship with God, expecting from God: understanding of problems; suffering with (or, in one case, 'suffering for') human beings; and/or speaking to humans. Expectation of relationship with God does not imply a sense of immanence, although some respondents did have such a sense (a topic to which this chapter

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[42] Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, p. 74.
[43] Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, pp. 15, 20.
[44] Williams, *True Wilderness*, pp. 113-15.
[45] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, p. 9.
[46] Robinson, *Honest to God*, pp. 38-39.
[47] Cupitt, *Creation out of Nothing*, p. 151.

will return). The person-hood of God, important for Newlands among many others,[48] arose one way or another in most interviews, with one respondent in particular representing a dilemma that others felt:

> I think that he is a person, but I don't think he's formed . . . as soon as you see him as a form, you make him small.  I think he is a person, but I just don't think he's person as you and I are.

This recognition of at least partial analogy reflects Farrer's conclusion that God, while not a person, has to be thought of 'as a somewhat in a certain not exactly defined relation to personality',[49] and Ricoeur's (quoted by Thiselton) that the '*personal model . . . needs to be qualified by divine transcendence and hiddenness*'.[50] From an existentialist background, Macquarrie shows similar refusal to describe God as a person, and even reticence in ascribing personal qualities to God.[51] No respondent advanced Polkinghorne's idea of 'impersonal models of divinity' (alongside personal models) to express 'the insights of natural theology'; but there would have been overwhelming support for Polkinghorne's dislike of pure abstraction instead of interaction with the world.[52] One respondent represented others in recognising that the very love of God is of a different order from even the best human love:

> I think that God's love, yes, is like my mother's love, but so much bigger that I can't possibly get my head round it. I've tried to think about it, but it does my head in. I can't grasp that at all.

This example of analogy by proportionality accords with Ramsey's insistence that even 'love' in connection with God has to be qualified as 'infinite love' in order to be appropriate, with tautological expressions like 'infinite love' straining language for the sake of expressing commitment.[53] It is comparable too with Macquarrie's view that it is better to ascribe 'goodness' to God, despite its inadequacy, than to describe God as 'not good'.[54]

Despite such reservations about univocity over God's qualities, there was strong support for the concept of human relationship with God, and thus, implicitly, little support for Macquarrie's rejection of 'an "I-thou" meeting' because of the lack of physicality, reciprocity

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[48] Newlands, *Theology of the Love of God,* pp. 54-55.
[49] Farrer, *Finite and Infinite*, p. 28.
[50] Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, pp. 72-73, 370
[51] Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, p. 116.
[52] Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, pp. 6-7, 41-43; *Science and Theology*, p. 67; *Science and Christian Belief*, p. 54.
[53] Ramsey, *Religious Language*, p. 47.
[54] Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, p. 138.

and mutual knowledge.[55] Indeed the examples, above, of awareness of God's person-hood and love indicate resonance with some facets of Radical Orthodoxy. The respondents' general preference for God's transcendence above immanence coincided with Radical Orthodoxy's view that immanence 'tends to remove the mysterious diversity of matter in assuming that appearances do not exceed themselves'. Their general understanding of creation as part of God's activity, even though the physical methodology was often not defined, also pointed in Radical Orthodoxy's directions of not treating any of the 'diverse worldly phenomena . . . apart from God'.[56] There was much evidence, too, of awareness of the interpenetration of the sacred and the secular, similar to the position of Radical Orthodoxy, particularly in the appreciation of religious art. Although the Eucharist was addressed with the respondents in respect of liturgical change, there was no evidence of the particularly high place for the Eucharist advanced by Radical Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, most respondents assumed the Eucharist to be central to Christian life, with one person perceiving and regretting a shift in a direction of more liturgical immanence. No respondent took the concept of metaphor as far as Radical Orthodoxy's particularly high doctrine of analogy, as more than metaphor and defining the whole relationship between humans and God and even between human beings.[57]

As in the 1987 Doctrine Commission report (highlighted by Ward), there was no echo of process theology in its fullness, for example with polarity in God between God's essence and God's actuality; and references to God suffering sometimes related to Jesus.[58] However, resonances with process theology were evident:

- from the respondent who asserted God's perfection as being a developing phenomenon: 'through creating his creation, he's actually developing himself';
- in the description of God as 'source of all initiative, source of all ingenuity . . . an influence that's always with me . . .', comparable with Norman Pittenger's view of God as a luring influencer of occasions;[59]
- in echoes of Pittenger's insistence on a mutuality of relationship between God and humanity[60] from the half of respondents who, with various

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[55] Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, p. 116.
[56] Milbank, Ward and Pickstock, *Radical Orthodoxy*, p. 3.
[57] Ward, Graham, 'Beauty of God', pp. 58-59.
[58] *We Believe in God*, pp. 158-160.
[59] Pittenger, *Goodness Distorted*, p. 32.
[60] Pittenger, 'Divine Activity', pp. 262-64.

> interpretations, concluded that God needs human beings; and, most significantly,

- from the clear majority who believed, again with various intentions, that God suffers with humans.

Just a few respondents shared Wiles's deist tendencies, particularly as there was a general reluctance on most respondents' part to espouse divine intervention, apart from in the Incarnation. But this was offset by the theism indicated by the popularity of images such as 'Father' and 'Shepherd', by which the respondents shared Wiles's conviction that God's relationship with humanity must not be viewed in less than personal terms.[61] Although there was a general sense of God being in relationship with humanity, God's immanence was a weaker theme than God's transcendence. So, on that basis, Brown's strong emphasis on God's intervention, or his patent anthropomorphism,[62] would not resonate strongly.

### 13.5 Creation and Experience

Farrer writes that that 'it is only through, in, and as creative activity that the infinite can be grasped by the finite'. He follows Aquinas's 'double agency' thinking, whereby God's creative activity extends to human activity within finite events.[63] All but one respondent believed that, by some means or other, God created the world, in tune usually with Peacocke's insistence on God's creativity being 'unveiled by the sciences' along with elements of chance,[64] but also with Farrer's clarity that theology and the sciences have separate aims.[65] So those surveyed were generally aware, at least unconsciously, that natural and supernatural causation are not mutually exclusive, that causation can be viewed in a variety of theistic and deistic ways, and that faith is still possible. One person's conviction that God's creative work is continuing in the present echoed Mascall's doctrine of God's 'incessant creative action'.[66] However, there was no kinship with Wiles's theory of immanence through intervention being subsumed into the one divine creative act,[67] since the resulting risk of divine-human relationship being supplanted by deism was far from the theology of the respondent in question. Implications of 'double agency' arose in two contexts: in the matter of how God speaks to us, when 'through other people' (or the equivalent) was cited alongside the Bible, prayer and events; and in the matter

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[61] Wiles, *Working Papers in Doctrine*, p. 143.
[62] Brown, *Divine Trinity*, p. 72.
[63] Hebblethwaite, *Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*, p. 3.
[64] Peacocke, *Paths from Science towards God*, pp. 136-37.
[65] Farrer, *Faith and Speculation*, pp. 20-21.
[66] Mascall, *He Who Is*, p. 126.
[67] Leech, *True Prayer*, pp. 7-8.

of God needing us, with several people suggesting that God's purpose was for us to act as his caring and/or evangelistic agents. This accords with Pittenger's idea of God calling us into partnership.[68] Although no respondent explicitly supported the 1976 Doctrine Commission Report's contention that the notion of 'Creator' 'has to be heavily qualified when applied to God',[69] the common recognition that God's creativity is exercised by the means described by science could have led to some, if pressed, recognising a need for qualification of 'Creator'. As will be seen when dealing with theodicy, below, there was an almost universal rejection by respondents of intervention by God, out of respect for human freewill; this accords with Wiles's contention that 'We cannot . . . speak significantly of God or of his acting in an objectified way, wholly separated from the human response . . .'.[70] Although miracles were not specifically raised with respondents, they did not figure as violations of natural law in any responses, as Wiles envisaged them.[71]

Some respondents graphically reported experiences of God's presence. Wiles accepted the possibility of experiences of God, but with God *lying behind* such experiences, so that we are able to speak of God only indirectly by describing the experiences. While the respondents with such experiences may not consciously have made this subtle distinction, or consciously recognised the possibility of cultural conditioning, they did not identify God with the actual experiences themselves. No respondent claimed actually to have experienced a direct call from God (as opposed to new understanding from spiritual experiences), of the kind about which Wiles is nervous.[72] Clearly, respondents with vivid experience of God's presence would support Brown's rejection of a logical incompatibility between such experience and asserting God's transcendence.[73] There was some correspondence between the respondents' conviction that God is everywhere and experiences of God's particular presence; and a general correspondence with Milbank's conviction that 'the sacral interpenetrates everywhere, and if it descends from above, this descent is also manifest through its rising up from below'.[74]

**13.6 Immanence and the location of God**

Although only a few respondents used the words 'transcendence' or 'immanence', awareness of God's transcendence was a prevailing theme in questionnaire and interview responses. For

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[68] Pittenger, *God in Process*, p. 17.
[69] *Christian Believing*, pp. 17.
[70] Wiles, Maurice, *Working Papers in Doctrine*, London, SCM, 1976, p. 143.
[71] Wiles, *God's Action in the World*, p. 96.
[72] Wiles, *Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 27, 38.
[73] Brown, *God and Grace of Body*, p. 3.
[74] Milbank, 'Programme of Radical Orthodoxy', p. 37.

instance, a large majority viewed God as vast, omnipotent, omnipresent, initially creative and, often, beyond description. This accorded with Mascall's (and many others') theology, as did two respondents' awareness that their sense of transcendence bordered on deism. Stannard's Trinitarian expression of 'God over us, God with us, God in us' found echoes in the majority of respondents who located God as everywhere and both within and outside nature.[75] Polkinghorne too concludes that God is to be found everywhere, 'the ground of physical science, not a participant in it'.[76] No respondent showed awareness of the metaphorical nature of transcendence and immanence, highlighted by Brown,[77] or, by extension, of the metaphorical nature of presence and omnipresence.

Most respondents demonstrated a necessity for both transcendence and immanence and the balance advocated by, among other theologians, Jenkins, Brown and Leech. Newlands in particular stresses the importance of transcendence, to prevent immanence slipping into identification with society.[78] They had no difficulty holding the two together, and few postulated either of the two extreme positions of a deist watch winder or a constantly interventionist god, between which Williams steers a course, preferring 'an eternal activity', as quoted above.[79] There was a clear appreciation of immanence, expressed in several ways, and most simply in God's omnipresence, which prevailed as 'everywhere' in answering the question of 'Where do you think God is?', and in choosing a location for God between 'up there', down there', 'out there' of 'in there' (or a proposed alternative). Immanence was directly implied by six answers of 'beyond and within', and by thirteen of 'out there and in here', 'everywhere and thin places' or 'in human hearts'. Several recounted vivid experiences of the presence of God, in some cases involving experiences of warmth or light, and these accorded with Ramsey's concept of 'cosmic disclosures'.[80] 'Presence' was also one of the abstract terms used of God in various contexts.

Amid the lists of earthly places with which some respondents associated God were, for two respondents, 'thin' places, a concept shared by Williams when he considers the possibility of 'the fabric [being] thinner' and 'the act of God [being] a little more transparent' as incidents of miracles.  Some of the places with which respondents associated God were of the variety exemplified by Hopkins's 'grandeur of God . . . like shining from shook foil', commended by

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[75] Stannard, *Science and the Renewal of Belief*, p. 149.
[76] Polkinghorne, *One World*, p. 67.
[77] Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, p. 37.
[78] Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective*, p. 76.
[79] Shortt, *God's Advocates*, pp. 7-8.
[80] Evans, 'Ian Ramsey on Talk about God', pp. 131-135.

Williams and Ford with Hardy,[81] such as different aspects of countryside, hills and beach. There may be signs here of influence from contemporary environmental awareness and eco-spirituality. There is certainly unconscious agreement with Brown's conviction that 'God is found in nature and gardens, in buildings . . .', and a willingness, with Brown, to find God in areas beyond the Church.[82] Some respondents also shared Williams's sense of God prompting and reassuring, not by interruption of the normal order, but through the environment,[83] describing their experiences of God's presence or 'speaking'. Although Radical Orthodoxy's understanding of immanence as referring to the created order might resonate with some of the respondents, there were no indications of rapport with its denial of immanence to the essential nature of God (as opposed to immanence in Christ).[84]

**13.7 Vulnerability on God's part**

Despite his emphasis on human freewill, Wiles, with his deist tendency, insists that God is impassible.[85] Ramsey writes of believers talking a great deal about an indescribable God, transcendent yet immanent and impassible yet loving,[86] and Pittenger understands transcendence as of 'exhaustibility [of love and concern], not . . . remoteness'.[87] However, Macquarrie contemplates a more symmetrical and reciprocal relationship between God and humankind than traditional attributions of immutability and impassibility imply, and therefore some vulnerability.[88] A clear majority of respondents was clear that God suffers with us (some of these with Jesus in mind, but others clearly referring to God as a single divine entity). Associating God with Christ in relation to suffering is, of course, inescapable for Christians, as Jenkins makes explicit, though with ambivalence on his, Newlands's and others' parts about the nature of God's suffering.[89] Of the half of respondents who thought that God needs us, some explained the need as answering God's purpose or for us to act as his agents – with shades of double agency – though others were less certain, hinting that God's goodness might be at risk. This practical need appears different from ontological need or need for human worship, such as Lewis rejects, with firm commitment to God's impassibility.[90] God's need, in

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[81] Shortt, *God's Advocates*, pp. 9, 7; Ford and Hardy, *Living in Praise*, pp. 21-22.

[82] Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, p. 2.

[83] Williams, 'Reply: redeeming sorrows', p. 144.

[84] Smith, *Introducing Radical* Orthodoxy, pp. 74-75, 185.

[85] Wiles, *God's Action in the World*, pp. 22-25.

[86] Ramsey, Ian T., *Religious Language,* pp. 13-14.

[87] Pittenger, *Process-Thought and Christian Faith*, p. 24; *Unbounded* Love, p. 17.

[88] Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity*, pp. 53-54, *Principles of Christian Theology*, p. 120; *Thinking about God*, pp. 111-12.

[89] Jenkins, *Glory of Man*, p. 107; Newlands, *Theology of the Love of God*, p. 98.

[90] Lewis, *Miracles*, pp. 96-97.

the respondents' view, was different from Williams's understanding of a need for us simply to be what we are, 'because of an utterly unconditional generosity', God's happiness overflowing in humanity's favour.[91] The way in which, by these means, some respondents echoed Pittinger's and process theology's insistence on a mutuality of relationship and influence between God and humanity has already been noted. Macquarrie's and Pittenger's concept of reciprocity leads in the direction of panentheism, supported also by Peacocke,[92] with just one respondent speaking of our being in God and God in us. If the question to respondents about God needing humanity is taken as representing the wider question of why God created the world, then comparison can be made with Ward's conclusion that, without any necessity, God created and relates to the world out of his self-giving love, extending to 'a form of suffering-with creatures'.[93] As has been noted, there was ambivalence on the part of the respondents about God needing humanity, with at least one explicitly concerned at the risk of *hubris* in concluding that God needs us, but some others sensing, whimsically but with insight, that God might be bored without us, or, slightly panentheistically, that we are part of God or that something of God is in us.

God's immutability was particularly challenged by one respondent, who commented: 'I think it's easier for people to believe in a God who never changes. I actually don't believe in an immutable God. I think he does change, because I think you can't be loving unless you do', giving the example of a parent who comes to accept a child's different way of thinking. Here Pittinger's position is unconsciously espoused, with immutability on God's part viewed as 'inadequate to the facts . . . about the world', particularly science's evolutionary theory.  More particularly, his and Polkinghorne's emphasis on God's suffering as 'the deepest and most intimate compassion or sympathy', being 'affected' by and sharing in the world's suffering, though not overcome by suffering,[94] was echoed by the majority of respondents who, in different ways, had decided that God suffers with humanity. It is interesting that this majority easily exceeded the number of those who felt God needs us, where there was much greater uncertainty.  This may reflect the traditional Christian emphasis on Christ's suffering, even though Jesus's dependency on his apostles and disciples is also a clear Gospel theme. Polkinghorne's additional assertion of uncertainty on God's part about whether suffering was always vindicated, as Jesus himself experienced,[95] was not matched in any response, although

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[91] Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, pp. 12-13;  *Ponder These Things*, p. 26.
[92] Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, pp. 141-44.
[93] Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*, pp. 73, 85-86, 139, 199.
[94] Pittenger, *Word Incarnate*, pp. 147, 149.
[95] Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief*, p. 63.

those who were unsure about the extent of God's omniscience (particularly in the context of human freewill) could be inferred as sharing Polkinghorne's view.

However, two respondents were less certain, one writing:

> Whether [God] shares all suffering exactly as we experience it is a different question, because we must assume that in some cases at least He is more aware that it will eventually be turned to a good that we cannot see.

Several were unsure about aspects of God's suffering, and in one case the effect. This person had described a life of considerable disturbance and mental pain, and had just answered the question 'Do you think God understands our problems?' with 'Most definitely. Firsthand experience.' She then answered the following question 'Do you think God suffers with us?' with 'Again, most definitely. *It doesn't lessen the pain'*. Another respondent, in a medical profession, shared Pittenger's distinction between God's suffering (as described above) and the physiological/psychological nature of human suffering,[96] answering the question about God suffering with 'Not suffers literally, but understands our pain and suffering and is compassionate'; another spoke of the danger of anthropomorphism in attributing suffering to God. The contrast between respondents is indicative of the tension between the emotional 'sense' of God suffering in response to human need, and the intellectual 'sense' that suffering is incompatible with God's transcendent nature. The contrast corresponds with the tension between liberation theology borne of human suffering and its rejection in the name of conventional theology. It coincides also with Newlands's view that 'to speak of God as suffering is to use language analogically', since to claim that speaking of God either suffering or not suffering is unintelligible.[97]  However, most respondents would have difficulty with Milbank's locating God's suffering only in Christ;[98] and the preponderance of respondents believing God suffers with us is in keeping with Vanstone's illustration of the vulnerability of creator as well as the created, in his model-making parable for God's handing over of power.[99]

**13.8 Theodicy and human freewill**

One respondent well expressed the issues, reporting a 'struggle to comprehend how an omnibenevolent God can be omnipotent and omniscient at the same time in [the] light . . . of evil'. In similar vein, Jenkins, while recognising the unacceptability of a god who could

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[96] Pittenger, *Word Incarnate*, p. 149.
[97] Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective*, p. 83.
[98] Milbank, 'Postmodern critical Augustinianism', p. 55
[99] Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, p. 32.

intervene in disasters but did not, concludes that intervention would be incompatible with God's loving nature, demonstrated in the granting of freedom within creation.[100]

Among respondents, there was consistent protection of human freewill, with, for some, the risk of compromising it the reason why they believed God does not intervene; they would support Polkinghorne's assertion that 'neither God nor man is . . . caught in the grip of relentless causal rigidity'.[101] There was no explicit concern about omniscience, which doctrine Shaw sees as an insidious means of social control.[102] On the other hand, there was no resignation in the face of overwhelming divine power as Clark-King found in Newcastle,[103] the contrast probably reflecting the differing fortunes and sense of personal power on the part of very different constituencies. The respondents shared a general belief in a non-deterministic world, such that much earthly suffering (including, for a few, natural disasters), was attributed to human freewill. Despite opportunities to do so, no respondent elaborated in terms of the compatibility or otherwise of freewill and a divinely deterministic world, such as in the scientist Stannard's various theories;[104] and no-one advanced any theory in any way like his, of the logical necessity of evil to highlight God's goodness.[105]

A few respondents envisaged good emerging from tragedy in God's economy, some out of a sense of God's presence in disastrous situations, thus echoing Macquarrie's, Lucas's and Vanstone's confidence in this respect.[106] Some respondents showed affinity with Peacocke's and Pittenger's rejection of divine intervention, on the basis of rejecting also a God who sometimes but not always intervenes to avert disasters; they were more in accord with Nineham's reluctance to acknowledge intervention unless God has given good grounds.[107] One said of intervention: 'I'm not sure it's consistent with his nature, actually.   Clearly he could, but . . . that would take away the freedom that humans have'; this matched Polkinghorne's theory of God's omnipotence being constrained by God's own nature as respecting reason and rejecting arbitrary intervention.[108] One 18-35 respondent suggested that God's non-intervention, like that of a human father, was out of respect for his mature children. However, even when the researcher suggested the idea in a few cases, only one respondent offered any

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[100] Jenkins, *God, Politics and the Future*, p 109
[101] Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, p. 13.
[102] Shaw, *God in Our Hands*, pp. 40, 42-45.
[103] Clark-King, *Theology by Heart*, p. 69.
[104] Evans, 'Ian Ramsey on Talk about God', pp. 131-35.
[105] Stannard, *Science and the Renewal of Belief*, p. 172.
[106] Wiles, *God's Action in the World*, p. 54; Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, pp. 30-35.
[107] Nineham, *Use and Abuse of the Bible*, p. 81.
[108] Polkinghorne, *Science and Creation*, pp. 51-52.

solution approximating to Polkinghorne's idea that, without sacrificing omnipotence, God, with voluntary curtailing of power, is not in total control.[109] This respondent said of natural disasters:

> I . . . don't think he can stop them. I don't think he has the power. I believe that he's very creative and all this . . . . I don't think, physically like that, because actually that is the world he's created . . . and things have got to go wrong.

Indeed, two respondents who found the image of 'King' unhelpful wanted to dissociate God from power. Several attributed natural disasters to the way things are, 'to do with the created order which . . . has a limited life', resonating with Polkinghorne's image of God, 'in his great act of creation . . . allow[ing] the whole universe to be itself'.[110] But none advocated Polkinghorne's place for chance.[111]

Wiles associates frequent occurrences of natural disasters with God as immutable; and associates understanding such occurrences as natural and inexorable, with God as a free, personal being.[112] The majority of respondents saw natural disasters as a natural outworking of the natural world, and some respondents seemed to fulfil Wiles's second association. For example, someone who put natural disasters down to 'just the world taking its natural course', having an inner freedom of development within its evolutionary process, had an understanding of God's freedom even to the extent of God's being 'an amazing God, not necessarily one that is completely good'. However, not all respondents made the second association. For instance, the respondent quoted above ('I . . . don't think he can stop them . . . .') did not attribute to God a 'character as a free, personal being'. And another respondent who viewed natural disasters as part of the natural order tended towards a cerebral and analytical view of God rather than a relationship with God, such that 'God's character as a free, personal being' seemed of less importance than God's transcendence (though this was coupled with the suffering of Jesus).

It was clear that the respondents, like the academic theologians, were nonplussed so far as theodicy is concerned, and could only offer tentative and incomplete explanations, avoiding, like Williams, any glib creating of ' the god who fits our agenda', but constantly seeking to rediscover God.[113]

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[109] Pittenger, *Word Incarnate*, p. 147.
[110] Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief*, p. 83.
[111] Polkinghorne, *Science and Creation*, p. 63.
[112] Wiles, *God's Action in the World*, p. 5.
[113] Williams, *Writing in the Dust*, pp. 7-9.

## 13.9 Liberation and Feminist Theology

Although Leech's full liberation theology[114] did not figure directly in the questionnaires and interviews, awareness of the mystery and indescribability of God was certainly a feature of many responses, as outlined above, along with awareness of the horror of past and present suffering and the challenge it presents to Christian theology. A majority of respondents believed that God suffers with humanity.

The respondents shared Maitland's view over God's gender, that identifying God as female is as 'ridiculous' as believing God to be male.[115] Although 43.8% identified God as male, and 65.6% as neither male nor female or with male and female characteristics, none insisted that God was female. No respondent used female pronouns alongside male ones, however, in the way that Maitland and Leech do, or tried to find neutral words for God.[116] The respondents, both female and male, identifying God as exclusively male were in accord with Clark-King's universal experience with working-class Newcastle women; and six respondents described a kindly elderly man with a beard, which accorded with images recorded by Clark-King, particularly Edith's.[117] Some respondents were, like Tilby,[118] unhappy about attributing overbearing power and authority to God by describing God as King. In terms of roles, the 'unconditional love' that Clark-King sees as a vital model for women's relationships[119] and Ward's suggestion that 'Father' is metaphorical and not gender-specific[120] were exemplified by the respondents who found experiences of their mothers' love better models for God's love than their fathers'.

For one respondent, the change from 'thee' and 'thou' language in liturgy had a wider liberating effect that 'led to me being perfectly happy with God as our Mother as well as our Father'. This apparent *non sequitur* can plausibly be explained by the change of language having been the trigger that liberated the respondent from the gender assumptions that he had hitherto associated with 'thee' and 'thou' applied to God. On the other hand, a female respondent, who lives and works in a mainly male world, said that 'I just can't see it [sic] being a female'.

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[114] E.g., Leech, *Eye of the* Storm, p. 45.
[115] Maitland, *Big Enough God*, p. 24
[116] E.g., Leech, *True God*, pp. 374-78.
[117] Clark-King, *Theology by Heart:* pp. 63-67, 127.
[118] Tilby, *Won't You Join the Dance?*, pp. 37-39.
[119] Clark-King, *Theology by Heart*, p. 118.
[120] Ward, Keith, *God, Faith and the New Millennium*, pp. 31-32.

**13.10 Implications for academic theology**

This thesis is an exercise in what Astley calls the correlation and conversation 'between the learner's ordinary theology and the contributions of a more "extraordinary" theology, largely derived from the academy [or] ecclesiastical theology' (which latter theologies may, of course, not always coincide, particularly when academic theologians branch out into experimental areas of thinking). Trained theologians (believing or not) are themselves informal theologians first (believing or not), and theological educators, Astley asserts, 'should *begin with ordinary theology*', inviting the learners' informal theology as a starting point. However, Astley does not stay at the academic nexus, considering the conversation only a prelude to an ordinary Christian's potential progression to academic theology, but senses an obligation for the academic to 'occupy the mediatory role of a *translator*, fluent in both languages, whose primary task is to convey the sense of academic theology . . . in a tongue that is "understood [sic] of the people"'.  Astley complements Green's references to the importance of 'resonances' and 'sensitivities' by commending the notion of spiritual imagination to link theology with experiences, for example in creating divine metaphors. Thus, with 'ordinary theology . . . rich in figurative language . . . and the concepts of academic theology [based on] metaphors, models, analogies and narratives', a common linguistic background emerges as a basis for 'hermeneutical conversation'[121] and for a perpetual circle of influence.

There is considerable commonality between the informal theology revealed in this research and academic theology, in that only one theme displayed by the respondents was not replicated by academic theologians (as outlined below).  The commonality includes: the inadequacy of language; awareness of analogy/metaphor; the personhood of God; and attempts to achieve a balance – with varied results – between transcendence, immanence and involvement/relationship, and between deism and theism. Awareness of analogy enabled most respondents to hold together 'poetic' images and general scientific understanding without difficulty, just as is the case for academic theologian.

The distinction between informal theology and academic theology therefore largely arises from the 'technical' philosophical, linguistic, historical and biblical training that enables academic theologians to pursue further the fundamental issues that they share with informal theologians, and which enables dialogue with non-theological scholars. It is at this point that

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[121] Astley, 'Ordinary Theology and the Learning Conversation with Academic Theology', pp. 46-52.

academic theology can become remote from informal theology and the immediate needs of 'ordinary' Christians. However, with respect to ordinary believers, there is an intermediary tier of parish clergy and other teachers. Just as in other disciplines, such as medicine or architecture, theological academics need to be in initial and continuing dialogue with practitioners in order to resource them for their work, and for their work to be informed by practitioner experience. However, although practising doctors and architects can, if necessary, treat unconscious patients and produce buildings for uncommunicative clients, albeit less satisfactorily, a parish priest always needs continuing communication with conscious parishioners: even physical, sacramental ministry is largely dependent upon verbal and sensual communication. So there are two crucial stages of communication in theology: initial and continuing academic training of practitioners: and ongoing two-way communication between priest and people and by academics directly with people. Clergy, along with writers of popular theology, share informal theology with ordinary believers, but are also filters for academic theology. The practical theology in this thesis illustrates the commonalities and breadth of views that can emerge from listening to informal theologians, as do others' examples cited here, such as that of Clark-King. Richard Pratt points out the importance of listening, since 'all religious authority . . . is dependent on the assent of the believer', and quotes '*vox populi, vox dei*'.[122] He goes further, supporting Astley's suggestion that Christian orthodoxy 'may be partly based on empirical facts about the beliefs that are *actually held* (widely, consistently and regulatively) by [the Christian] community', with consequent shifts over time in what is considered orthodoxy – 'the traditional notion of the *consensus fidelium* . . . reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council as a criterion for the authentic faith of the church'.[123] Respectful listening to informal theology by each 'extraordinary', or academic, theologian, is the key to the 'ordinary' (informal) theologian within himself or herself:

> Inside every extraordinary theologian is an ordinary one that he is usually trying to keep hidden in there, or that she just hasn't yet noticed. We shall understand our own scholarly and academic theology much better if we attend to our own ordinary theological background and origins with more sympathy, more respect and more self-understanding.[124]

### 13.11 Final thoughts about informal theology

The enjoyment that respondents derived from the questionnaire and interview process in this research, with several expressions of desire for further study, demonstrated a desire for

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[122] Pratt, Richard, 'Ordinary Theology', *Theology*, London, SPCK, March-April 2009, p. 112.
[123] Pratt, 'Ordinary Theology', p. 114, referring to Astley, *Ordinary* Theology, pp. 156-57.
[124] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, p. 148.

learning opportunities to tackle the taxing, fundamental issues of theology, as opposed to the more common Bible and thematic study. It confirmed the lack of 'mind-stretching' opportunities for many adult Christians' learning identified by Ford and Hardy and Tilby, along with a failure to grapple with 'the deepest questions posed through academic theology and other disciplines'.[125] Hardy detects, even among many Christian people, a loss of the universal referential nature of words about God, so that faith and its expression are accepted as being a human construction.[126] There is therefore much scope for research into informal theology, so that academic and practitioner theologians' work can be informed by the patterns and trends that are revealed, and to inform the Church's development of liturgy and other practices. Consultation with the Church of England's Education Division[127] has revealed that no research is currently undertaken or commissioned in this respect.

It may be that informal theologians display something of the balance that is sought but then lost by some academic theologians. An example is process theology, with some basic tenets, like divine mutability, finding affinity in some respondents, who might, however, like Ward, baulk at the loss of omnipotence and transcendence that is implied; and might, like Peacocke, baulk at God being just an influencer, rather than the creator of actuality.[128] Similarly, with panentheism, many respondents had a strong sense of God's presence and participation in the world, but only one showed any conviction that the world and humanity are in God. 'Presence' was so common an expression on the part of respondents, as it is in the Cotter's unauthorised collects, which therefore coincide in that respect with much informal theology.[129]

The respondents' informal theology was marked by insight and subtlety. There was a preference for abstract descriptors for God, an anxiety at anthropomorphism and a ready acceptance of in inescapability of metaphor and the 'poetic'. Transcendence was more prevalent than immanence, with elements of deism and a general reluctance to countenance divine intervention. However, this did not undermine the personal-ness of God, God's relationship with creation or the idea of God's suffering with humanity. So there was no evidence of progression in Wiles's deist or Cupitt's extreme subjectivist directions. The concerns of *Honest to God* were shown to be no longer relevant, with existentialism not figuring in responses, and 'supranaturalism' and expressions of God's location not constituting problems. God being generally conceived as 'everywhere' and all-pervasive meant that the

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[125] Ford, *Long Rumour of Wisdom*, p.15; Tilby, *Teaching God*, pp. 182-83.
[126] Hardy, *God's Ways with the World*, p. 55.
[127] By email, 5-10.01.2014.
[128] Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, pp. 140-41.
[129] Cotter, *Unfolding the Living Word*.

respondents were not afflicted by a 'god of the gaps'. Although a significant proportion of respondents accepted a male identity for God, a higher proportion viewed God as gender-inclusive or gender-neutral. It was notable that a high proportion of individual respondents were able to hold together a variety of concepts of God, even with some tension between them: for instance over God's gender and, more fundamentally, God's transcendence with capacity for relationship. Michael Ramsey, responding to *Honest to God*, dr attention to human capacity to hold together 'poetic' theological language with acceptance of earthly reality.[130] The respondents' leaning towards transcendence with involvement and relationship, according a lesser place to immanence, is of particular significance, resonating with some more 'traditional' theology, such as aspects of Radical Orthodoxy, and resonating less with more immanentist theology, such as process theology. This particular holding together of transcendence with relationship is not obviously common to any trend in academic theology.

Oakley's categorization of Christians into 'those who want to *resolve* the mystery of God' and 'those who . . . seek to *deepen* it'[131] may be too simple: although some respondents tended in one direction and some in the other, both trends were evident in most, with a predominance – in this largely self-selecting group – towards the latter. An issue that was not addressed in the questionnaires and interviews was inter-faith theology and the alternatives of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism on the part of Christianity,[132] and occasional allusions by respondents were insufficient for drawing conclusions.

Although there were some common features among the respondents, not least their relatively privileged environment, a variety of experiences and understandings was apparent, leading to different concepts of God. This confirms Ward's assertion:

> Concepts which spring from situations in which some transcendent reality is mediated become images which one can use to evoke specific reactive attitudes and emotions, and which may be in some sense confirmed and amplified by personal experiences.[133]

Three prominent examples of experiential variety were: the different appreciations of the image of 'Father' in the light of childhood experiences; a seasoned journalist's vivid sense of God's presence in disaster areas; and another's experience of God's presence in another person (of a non-Christian faith) during a period of profound loneliness – the latter reminiscent of Williams's example of God being in an event of despair.[134] Williams has warned against

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[130] Ramsey, *Image Old and New*, p. 9.

[131] Oakley, *Collage of God*, p. 8.

[132] E.g., *Mystery of Salvation*, p. 147.

[133] Ward, *Concept of God*, p. 49.

[134] Williams, *Open to Judgement,* p. 119-21.

disregarding the kind of 'disturbingly wide range of meanings and resonances'[135] that can been seen in the respondents' informal theology. Despite some respondents' past – and in at least one case, continuing – deep-seated tribulations, none showed signs of the neurotic projections on to God of which Harry Williams and Williams write.[136]

The sample of respondents was drawn from worshipping communities, so that a greater or lesser degree of faith can immediately be predicated. As with a philosopher, or a philosophising theologian like Farrer, responses such as theirs might be characterised as fideistic;[137] however, in all cases, faith was accompanied by reason as part of informal theology, with attempts to reconcile tradition with reason and experience. The respondents were following Ward and Williams in blending spirituality with reason: 'the analytic and the impressionist . . . the devotional and the critical'.[138] It was not possible to detect any correspondence between approaches to God and age or 'churchmanship' (so far as indicated by church(es) attended); however, the partially self-selecting origin of the respondents (and the congregations from which they were drawn) may have produced a more questioning and open-minded group that was not totally representative of their congregations. The limitations arising from a small Church of England sample drawn from a small, southern, English city are recognised. However, the respondents were from a variety of social and educational backgrounds, with all demonstrating sensitivity to some of the theological issues involved in conceiving of God. Inevitably, there has been more emphasis on the comparison within this chapter on the resonances between academic and informal theologies than on lack of resonance. There are whole areas of 'technical' academic constructive theology for which little similarity is likely to be found in informal theology, such is the nature of the academic task. The varieties in academic theology include the more Evangelical, with a greater emphasis on revelation and on Christology, the more Catholic and the more Liberal, the latter two categories frequently overlapping. However, there is clear evidence that, across the board, academic theology is working and re-working the fundamental issues of the nature of God, some of them, like theodicy, insoluble, that are recognised by all Christians. On the part of both theologies, academic and informal, there is evident what Oakley calls 'a deep yearning within humanity for God, which the Church's more 'poetic' and 'cultural' products may answer.[139] Farrer writes: 'Poetry and divine inspiration have this in common, that both are

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[135] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 9.
[136] Williams, R., *Open to Judgement*, p. 14; Williams, H. A., 'Psychological Objections', p. 43.
[137] MacSwain, Robert Carroll, '*Solved by Sacrifice'*, pp. 13-110.
[138] Williams, *Resurrection*, p. xiii.
[139] Oakley, *Spiritual Society, Secular Church?*, p. 5.

projected in images which cannot be decoded, but must be allowed to signify what they signify of the reality beyond them'.[140] The evidence suggests that at least a sample of ordinary believers, uncluttered by literalism in understanding theological language, recognises the role of image and symbol. On that basis, although idols 'have mouths but do not speak; eyes but do not see',[141] God is perceived with no mouth or eyes, but yet as speaking and seeing. Undetectable, God relates to us:

> If I go forward, he is not there;
> or backward, I cannot perceive him;
> on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
> I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.
> But he knows the way I take . . . .[142]

Above all, it has been important to detect informal theology that is 'from the heart' because rooted in experience, albeit on the back of, and in the language of, traditional theology. The 'authentic voice' (authentic voices) as opposed to 'a representative or reliable sample', has been obtained,[143] and set alongside voices from academia, with comparisons drawn. Although the concept of theology as drama or poetry hardly figures explicitly in the practical theology responses, it remains possible that such a concept could provide a medium by which Christians of all stages of belief and all levels of theology and scepticism could share the same faith and communal practice. It may be that the notion of Christianity as drama, or poetry, or a way of thinking into which world one can step (and step out), presents a way to achieve the comprehensiveness represented by the 'choral theology' advocated by Clark-King, by which all can listen to one another and sing in harmony.[144]

Further research into informal theology of all kinds is likely to be useful in indicating trends of which academic theologians and practitioner church leaders should be aware, and in directing areas for systematic support and resourcing for the Church. This could be particularly useful in gauging understanding of and attitudes to the Church's worship, for example about *Common Worship*, particularly the Eucharist, such as proposed by Ford.[145] Specific areas for future research include:

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[140] Farrer, *Glass of Vision*, p. 148.

[141] Psalm 115. 5.

[142] Job 23. 8-10.

[143] Ward, ed., *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, p. 8.

[144] Clark-King, *Theology by Heart*, pp. 212-15.

[145] Scharen, Christian, 'Ecclesiology "From the Body": Ethnographic Notes toward a Carnal Theology' (quoting Ford, *Self and* Salvation, p. 138; Ward, ed., *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, pp. 52-54).

- the responses of a larger sample of people from different socio-economic strata and of greater diversity, to ensure that the respondents views in this research are typical of a wider social spectrum;

- relating informal theology to biblical images and to levels of familiarity with the Bible;

- enquiring into Christological and Trinitarian issues within informal theology;

- noting respondents' ambivalence over the image of 'King', more detailed investigation of the import and usefulness of a wider variety of images of God, and drawing out the implications for liturgical texts and popular theological writing; and

- investigation and comparison of informal theology in other mainstream English Christian churches and in English Judaism and Islam.

It is respectfully recommended that church leaders give credence to the validity of informal theology for the ordinary believers in question, and for informing the direction that mission, pastoral interaction, liturgy and hymnody might take. In particular, the following have emerged from this research as important areas in this respect:

- being aware of trends in understandings of God within the population at large and, on the basis of this sample of respondents, thinking church members, and providing opportunities for the development of informal theology, sometimes moving into academic theology, on the part of such members and enquirers;

- for this purpose, conducting or commissioning 'market research' in relation to proposed developments of liturgy and mission;

- noting a preference for abstraction in identifying God and God's 'location', for God's transcendence above all, as well as for God's immanence, but not for divine intervention;

- despite the importance of the 'Kingship' metaphor for Christian tradition, avoiding over-reliance and over-emphasis on this metaphor, at least *pro tempore*;

- retaining an expectation of a personal relationship between God and individual people, with a strong expectation of God 'speaking' to us (on a double-agency basis), understanding our needs and suffering with us; and

- together with an emphasis on transcendence, fostering a sense of the 'poetic', alongside an acceptance of the principles of modern science, so that the nature of what is 'poetic' or 'symbolic' is made explicit.

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**13.12  This thesis**

This thesis set out to:

- survey UK Anglican academic theology since 1945 according to themes that have proved relevant and significant for informal theology;
- describe some examples and accounts of informal theology;
- recount an exercise in practical theology, assessing informal theology through quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results of a local survey; and
- while recognising the limited nature of survey, draw some conclusions about the extent of coherence between academic and informal theology, and make some proposals to inform the Church of England's life and mission.

All aspects of this original piece of research have been completed.

This thesis has demonstrated that ordinary believers' informal theology mostly coincides with academic theology over fundamental issues of understanding God, differing only in the degree to which theological analysis takes place. Many ordinary believers are able to assimilate and hold a variety of views of God, and to do so in creative tension, sometimes despite paradoxes of apparent contradiction. For some people, despite a desire to develop such thinking, there is a paucity of opportunity to do so. These are the distinctive contributions to scholarship offered by this thesis.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| *ATR* | *Anglican Theological Review* |
| Bles | Geoffrey Bles |
| *CC* | *Cross Currents* |
| *ChrCent* | *Christian Century* |
| *CRJ* | *Christian Research Journal* |
| CUP | Cambridge University Press |
| DLT | Darton, Longman and Todd |
| *ExpTim* | *Expository Times* |
| F&F | Faber and Faber |
| H&S | Hodder and Stoughton |
| *HeyJ* | *Heythrop Journal* |
| *ICR* | *International Catholic Review* |
| *JAS* | *Journal of Anglican Studies* |
| *JSSR* | *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* |
| *KTR* | *King's Theological Review* |
| *MB* | *Modern Believing* |
| *MLR* | *Modern Language Review* |
| *MT* | *Modern Theology* |
| OUP | Oxford University Press |
| *PRSt* | *Perspectives in Religious Studies* |
| *RelS* | *Religious Studies* |
| *SJT* | *Scottish Journal of Theology* |
| T&TC | T & T Clark |
| UK | United Kingdom |

**APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX 1: SOME INFLUENCES ON THE CURRENT CHURCH OF ENGLAND

**Evangelical influence**

The Evangelical Revival can be traced back to John Wesley, but gained strength more firmly within the Church of England with Charles Simeon (1759-1836), whose influence was consolidated within the parochial system by the Simeon Trust's acquisition of livings around the country – including Christ Church, Winchester. This was followed by the formation of the lay Clapham Sect at the end of the eighteenth century, which led to renowned social action in the nineteenth century, particularly William Wilberforce's opposition to the slave trade, and to missionary endeavours around the world.[1]

In the second half of the twentieth century, amid the High Church prominence during most of the twentieth century, Church of England evangelicals, while adhering to their overall doctrinal and ethical positions on, for example, the primacy of Scripture, the need for conversion on parents' part before infant baptism and sexual matters, began to participate more willingly than previously in national and local Church of England affairs.[2] Indeed, some aspects of Evangelicalism, such as house groups, spiritual healing and informal liturgy and hymnody became accepted as part of the mainstream of much Anglican life and worship, with even the charismatic movement of the 1970s spilling into less Evangelical Anglican churches.[3] Open-air festivals, such as Greenbelt and Spring Harvest later replaced mid-twentieth century crusades by evangelists such as Billy Graham,[4] and have enjoyed wide appeal, particularly to young people and families across the ecumenical spectrum. Similarly, the *Alpha* courses pioneered by Holy Trinity Church, Brompton have gained widespread support, mainly but not exclusively from Evangelical churches, and have prompted the promotion of courses similar in structure but of more Catholic doctrine, of which the most well-known is *Emmaus*.[5]

**Anglo-Catholic influence**

Meanwhile, the ritualism and some of the doctrine of the Anglo-Catholic movement also influenced the broad sweep of Anglican church practice.[6] The 'High Church' movement also had its origins in the eighteenth century, in response to the weakness within the Evangelical

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[1] Moorman, John R. H., *A History of the Church in England*, London, A. and C. Black, 1953, pp. 302 and 315-24.

[2] Chapman, Mark, *Anglicanism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 2006, pp. 71-72.

[3] Holloway, Richard, *Leaving Alexandria: A Memoir to Faith and Doubt*, Edinburgh, Canongate, 2013, pp. 203-13.

[4] Hastings, Adrian, *A History of English Christianity 1920-1985*, London, Collins, 1986, p. 454-55.

[5] Chapman, *Anglicanism*, pp. 72-74.

[6] Welsby, *History of the Church of England*, p. 215.

Revival in its concepts of the Church and its ministry. It flowered in 1833 with the inception of the Oxford Movement, led by John Keble, Edward Pusey and John Newman, and the publication of *Tracts for the Times* as an appeal for defence of matters like the Apostolic Succession, the liturgy and fasting. The Church of England was challenged to see itself as a true part of the historic Catholic Church, and ritual and vestments were introduced into participating churches.[7]

Serving the Church of England more generally, the Parish and People movement, from 1949 to 1968, aimed 'to make the 9 a.m. (or thereabouts) Eucharist the principal Sunday service and to relate the rest of parish life integrally to that central sacramental moment'.[8] The Parish Communion was established as the main service[9] in an increasing majority of non-evangelical churches, with many Evangelicals beginning to see the Holy Communion as 'the main service of the people of God'.[10] Although some degree of coloured vesting and other features of 'Catholic' practice characterised the majority of churches, Anglo-Catholicism in its more rarefied form became a minority position, often with a single stronghold in many towns – such as Holy Trinity, Winchester. But some of the marks of Anglo-Catholicism, as with some marks of Evangelicalism, found their way into, and remain part of, mainstream Anglican life, such as Anointing the Sick and individual Confession/Reconciliation for those who want.

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[7] Moorman, *History of the Church in England*, London, pp. 308, 338-47 and 367-71.
[8] Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, pp. 441 and 549.
[9] Chapman, *Anglicanism*, p. 88; Beeson, Trevor, *The Church of England in Crisis*, London, Davis-Poynter, 1973, p. 77; and Furlong, *C of E*, p. 116.
[10] Welsby, *History of the Church of England*, p. 212, quoting 'The Congress Statement' from the Keele Congress of 1967; and Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, p. 442.

## APPENDIX 2:  PLANNING OF QUESTIONNAIRES, INTERVIEWS AND ANALYSIS

The processes of interviews and analysis of the results was planned as follows. The text here is almost identical to that in the Ethics Release Form approved by the University Ethics Committee.

1.      The objectives will be to collect personal and group views about current and past beliefs and disbeliefs in God. The locations will be various, but are likely to include Anglican church premises and/or church members' homes and other residential homes in Winchester, and possibly University premises. The methodology will be one of focus groups and individuals discussing propositions and questions put to them, together with the use of questionnaires (the precise content of which will be devised in the light of earlier stages of the research project).

2.      The intention will be to gain the support of local Anglican clergy in inviting individual people to offer themselves to take part in the study.  Sample sizes are likely to be dictated by the willingness of people to take part.

3.      Those of 18 or over will give their own consent, and it is not envisaged that any younger will take part.

4.      The main risk is of embarrassment before peers within focus groups, and embarrassment before the researcher in focus groups or individual interviews, coupled with possible temporary distress if the discussion evokes painful memories. It is possible, also, that the experience may raise significant issues of faith for some participants. In the event of visible distress, participants would be given opportunity to withdraw temporarily or permanently, and/or to discuss their concerns briefly with the researcher after the session. They would be offered the suggestion that they might speak with their clergy or other leaders if they wished, and, if the a participant felt that this was not appropriate, the researcher would undertake, if the participant wished, to put him or her in touch with a suitable person who could offer appropriate pastoral care (chosen to suit the needs of the situation).

5.      Sample information sheets and consent forms are appended below.

6.      The Code of Practice of the British Sociological Association will be followed.

7.      No other disciplines or local ethics committees will be involved, apart from preliminary advice from within the university about methodology.

8.      The exercise will be anonymous, and no names will be recorded at any stage. Participants will be able to refuse the use of an electronic recorder if they wish or decline to complete questionnaires. Any participants who wish to check tapes or notes will be able to contact the researcher in order to do so and request changes or ask for all data relating to their participation to be erased. The resulting data will be stored on a password-protected computer and destroyed three years after completion of the degree.

9.      No payment will be made to participants.

10.     No external financial support will be required or obtained.

11.     Participants will not be recruited until later in the period of research, and no person or organisation has placed or is likely to place any restriction on the publication of results.

12.     Recruitment will be carried out and the exercise conducted in a pastorally sensitive manner.

13.     The proposed information sheet and consent form are appended below.

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WINCHESTER

**Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Participant Information Sheet**

**Project Title**

Changing patterns in belief in God in Britain since World War II

**Invitation**

You are being invited to take part in a research project.  Before you decide to participate it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish.  Ask if anything is unclear or if you would like more information.

**Purpose of Project**

As part of his research leading to a PhD degree, Canon Richard Lindley wishes to gain understanding about the nature of the beliefs in God on the part of a sample of Church of

England church members across the city of Winchester.  He wishes to invite individual church members to meet him in groups or as individuals to engage in discussion about their beliefs in God and how those beliefs have changed over the years and to complete a questionnaire on the same subjects.

**Why have I been chosen? Do I have to take part?**

Participation is entirely voluntary, and you are invited to take part in a group discussion or individual interview with the researcher. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

Those taking part will be invited to complete questionnaires and to meet with Canon Lindley at mutually agreed times for no more than one hour (unless all those concerned wish to continue longer), and everyone will be free to leave at any time they wish, even if the meeting or interview has not ended.  Individual views may be recorded by electronic recorder and in written notes, but no-one's name will be recorded at any stage, and no-one will be identifiable in the records or thesis that result. Anyone who wishes will be able to contact the researcher to hear any tape that has been recorded or see any notes that have been taken at the meetings, and to request changes, or to ask for all his or her data to be erased. The researcher will be pleased to discuss with anyone who wishes how they can best be offered pastoral support if issues arise that cause anyone to feel such a need.

**What if something goes wrong?**

Should you wish any further information or advice the contact details of the supervisor of this project can be found at the end of this Information Sheet. The contact details of the University's Data Protection Officer are also provided.

**Will my participation be kept confidential?**

Yes. The records that will be kept will be anonymous and you will not be able to be identified with your responses. Any data will be stored and retained in accordance with the 1998 Data Protection Act.

**What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The research will form part of the researcher's thesis.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

The research is being organised by the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Winchester. It is being conducted today with the full knowledge of your church and its leader.

**Contact for further information, including questions about the research and participants' rights:**

Researcher's Director of Studies:

Professor Liz Stuart
University of Winchester
West Hill
Winchester
SO22 4NR
Elizabeth.Stuart@winchester.ac.uk
01962 827020

For questions relating to the University's Data Protection policy please contact the University's Data

Protection Officer:

Mr David Farley
Martial Rose Library
University of Winchester
West Hill
Winchester
S022 4NR
David.farley@winchester.ac.uk
01962 827229

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WINCHESTER

**Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Participant Consent Form**

**Project Title**

Changing patterns in belief in God in Britain since World War II

**Invitation**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information sheet carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask if anything is unclear or if you would like more information.

**Activity Consent**

I understand that I am giving my consent to taking part in a focus group or individual interview about my belief in God and the way my belief may have changed over the years.

**Data consent**

I understand that my responses are entirely anonymous. I will not be able to be identified with my responses. My responses will contribute to the writing of an academic thesis.

**Statements of understanding**

I have read the information leaflet about the research project in which I have been asked to take part and have been given a copy of the information leaflet to keep.

What is going to happen and why it is being done has been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions.

**Right of withdrawal**

Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the programme at any time without disadvantage to myself and without having to give any reason.

**Statement of Consent**

I hereby fully and freely consent to participation in the study which has been fully explained to me.

Participant's Name_____          Researcher's Name_____

Participant's Signature_____          Researcher's Signature_____

Date_____          Date_____

**Contact Details**

Researcher's Director of Studies:

Professor Liz Stuart
University of Winchester
West Hill
Winchester
SO22 4NR
Elizabeth.Stuart@winchester.ac.uk
01962 827020

For questions relating to the University's Data Protection policy please contact the University's Data Protection Officer:

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Winchester
S022 4NR
David.farley@winchester.ac.uk
01962 827229

<u>**APPENDIX 3: THE QUESTIONNAIRE**</u>

Your name, only for initial identification: ...................................................................

**THIS QUESTIONNAIRE**
**IS PART OF RICHARD LINDLEY'S RESEARCH INTO:**
'The position of traditional Christian theism in Anglican theology in the UK since the Second World War in the light of difficulties in conceiving and speaking of God'.
He is very grateful for your participation in this research project.
_____

Please could you enter your name at the top of this sheet? Your name is only to identify you now, and will not be used in the resulting thesis or revealed to anyone else.
Please enlarge on your answers if you would like to – as much as space permits!

**A. QUESTIONS ABOUT YOU**

1. Please put a X after your gender: M          F

2. Please put a X after your age bracket: 18-35    36-45    46-55    56-65    66+

3. Please state your highest educational attainment.

4. Please state your main work, paid or at home, present or past?

5. Which church do you usually attend?

**B. QUESTIONS ABOUT ENCOUNTERING GOD**

1. On average, apart from prayers and services, how many times a day do you think of God?

2. On average, how often do you pray each week, at church, at home and elsewhere?

3. Do you associate God with any particular earthly places, or not?

4. If you do, what place or places to you associate God with?

**C. QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW YOU ENVISAGE GOD**

5. When you think about God, do you have a mental picture or not?

6. If you do, how would you describe that mental picture?

7. Do you think of God as female, male, both or neither?

8. If you don't think of God as female or male or both, how do you think of God?

9. Do you think of God is vast, tiny, both or neither?

10. Where do you think of God is?

11. Which, if any of these, best describes God's location: up there, down there, out there or in here? Or none of these? If none of these, can you suggest an alternative?

12. Did God create the world? If so, how?

13. Is God within nature, or outside it?

14. Do you think God needs us?

15. Do you think God understands our problems?

16. Do you think God suffers with us?

17. Does God speak to human beings or not?

**D. ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY?**

**PLEASE COULD YOU RETURN THIS QUESTIONNAIRE BEFORE THE DATE OF YOUR INTERVIEW?**

**IF YOU ARE RETURNING IT BY POST, PLEASE ASK FOR A STAMPED AND ADDRESSED ENVELOPE, OR SEND IT TO: Canon Richard Lindley, 28 Denham Close, Winchester, SO23 7BL.**

**IF YOU ARE RETURNING IT BY EMAIL, PLEASE SEND IT AS A WORD OR JPG. <u>ATTACHMENT</u> (*NOT* EMBEDDED IN THE EMAIL) TO: <u>LindleyRS@ntlworld.com</u>.**

## APPENDIX 4: RESEARCHER'S LIST OF INTERVIEW TOPICS

1. Points from questionnaire

2. Please describe God in your own words? Easy or difficult?

3. How has this changed over the years? Effect of liturgy and hymns?

4. Times God has been especially real or absent?

5. Helpfulness of:        Father?

                            King?

                            Shepherd?

                            Great?

6. God is Love, why suffering?

7. Can God intervene to avert disasters if we ask him?

8. Watch for:      Natural/supernatural alternative explanations

                     Poetic nature of religious language

**APPENDIX 5:  SUMMARY OF CHURCHES' SELF-DESCRIPTIONS**[1]

All Saints: area of relative deprivation, mostly Eucharistic worship, moderately Catholic with open theology, range of beliefs and traditions in congregation

St. John the Baptist: area of relative deprivation, totally Eucharistic Sunday worship, moderately Catholic with open theology, range of beliefs and traditions in congregation

University: aims to be inclusive of whole community; worship and ethos 'liberal Catholic'; high value place on sacramental worship, intelligent preaching, silence, flexibility, and some contemporary worship music alongside traditional hymnody.

St Paul's: provides worship to meet diverse needs; facilitates spiritual growth; provides care and the Gospel for the community; aims to attract, welcome and retain; rejects exclusivity and distinctions between those who belong and those who do not; and recognises that certainty can be the enemy of faith.

St Bartholomew's: Eucharistically-centred for Sunday worship and central-to-modern Catholic by tradition, seeking to develop further accessible worship for young families, encouraging collaborative ministry and lay participation in worship and pastoral care, in learning and teaching the faith and in mission to our community.

St Mark's: a dual-purpose building serving Olivers Battery within St Luke's parish, with less than 10% of the electoral roll living outside the parish. It is on the modern high side of middle of the road with vestments, reserved sacrament, sung Eucharist as central to its worship. It is liberal in its views, committed to social justice and inclusive in its mission and ministry.

Christ Church:  under the patronage of the Simeon Trust for over 150 years, inspired by the early evangelical revival in England. It has an electoral role of 850, with over 2000 *regularly* attending worship, drawn from across Winchester and the surrounding villages.   The spirituality is evangelical and charismatic with an emphasis on "Word and Spirit" and "Knowing Jesus and making Him known".   Many members work in public service and the caring professions, and are involved in voluntary philanthropic, community and charitable initiatives in the city.

Holy Trinity: A church in the Anglo-Catholic tradition, maintaining traditional Catholic theology and teaching with a modern Catholic liturgy.  Showing a welcome to all who come through its doors and with a mission of encouraging adults and children in their faith.

John Moore Barracks:  The Light Division Chapel is a modern building and part of the Army Training Regiment Winchester. The non-denominational Sunday service is aimed at the 17 to 32 years old recruits, many with little or no church experience. The recruits' training lasts for fourteen weeks, so the 'congregation' is always changing. The church is used for baptisms and occasional weddings and funerals.

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[1] Descriptions were sought from the clergy of the churches mostly attended by participants. Some arrived in succinct form, and others at such length that the researcher has précis-ed the relevant portions.

Winchester Cathedral: The Cathedral aims to gives space for all comers to discover and live out the beauty of holiness – in worship this happens through the invitation to be caught up into ritual, fine music and listening together to the Scriptures.

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