



Διδασκαλία

# DIDASKALIA

THE JOURNAL OF PROVIDENCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY





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THE JOURNAL OF PROVIDENCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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DIDASKALIA — 1. act., the act of *teaching, instruction*; Romans 12:7. Of Timothy, 1 Tim 4:13, 16. 2. pass., of that which is taught, *teaching*; Eph. 4:14. Freq. of the teachings of eccl. Christianity: 2 Tim. 4:3 — From Bauer’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching  
(Διδασκαλία)...”

— 2 Timothy 3:16 (NIV)

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# In Pursuit of Holistic Christian Faith

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Patrick S. Franklin, Editor

The call to follow Jesus is a holistic one. It involves committing one's whole self to Christ, body and soul, actions and intellect, pursuits and desires, personal relationships and broader social engagements, concrete goals and our overarching sense of life mission or purpose. Jesus instructs that we are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. In essence, we are to love God with all of our being and doing, expressed perhaps most concretely by loving our neighbour selflessly. He teaches that pursuing God's kingdom is to be our first priority, integrating and ordering all of our varied commitments, loyalties, aspirations, concerns, and plans.

The Christian tradition, considered in its entirety and spanning history and geography, attests to this wholeness. Christians have demonstrated their love for God and fellow humans not only by preaching the gospel and offering spiritual care and guidance, but also by living out concrete expressions of the kingdom in local neighbourhoods and communities, building hospitals, universities, and other important cultural institutions, and promoting more humane practices in politics, healthcare, and criminal justice and reform. They have experienced God in diverse ways, notably through Scripture, tradition, reason, and direct personal experience of the Spirit. Their ecclesial traditions spread throughout the globe exhibit diverse forms of communal life, worship forms, and mission engagement, while being unified profoundly in Christ by the one Spirit.

The various articles in this issue of *Didaskalia* also attest to reality of holistic Christian faith and point us toward embracing and pursuing it more deeply. Some do that by drawing our focus to a neglected aspect of Christian life and thought. Others offer constructive criticism of tendencies to overemphasize one dimension of Christian life while downplaying or ignoring other important dimensions.

We begin with Beth Stovell's article on Julian of Norwich, a woman of great importance in the English spiritual tradition who wrote about her life-changing mystical encounter with God. Many have written about Julian's spiritual experiences, her life as an anchoress and spiritual advisor, and her profound reflections on suffering, prayer, sin, and salvation. Stovell invites us to notice Julian's deep dependence upon Scripture; in particular, Stovell shows the ways in which Julian's reflections on God's love are informed by 1 John 3 and 4.

Next, Erik Hogman explores John Calvin's doctrine of divine accommodation, the notion that God communicates to human beings by descending to their own level of comprehension. In His personal self-disclosure to us in nature, Scripture, the Incarnation, and the sacraments, God accommodates Himself to our limited perspectives and understanding, to communicate with us intelligibly and effectively. Hogman suggests that a better grasp of divine accommodation could help Christians to engage in the faith-science dialogue more constructively, taking the claims of both Scripture and science more seriously.

In our third article, Dennis Hiebert seeks to expose harmful rationalistic tendencies in modern Christianity, especially modern Evangelicalism in North America. Too often, argues Hiebert, modern Christians have overstressed the 'rational' elements of Christian belief and practice (autonomous human reason stressed by the Enlightenment), while neglecting crucial 'non-rational' elements (drawing on the Weberian notion of non-rational). For Hiebert, rationality makes a good servant but a bad master. What is needed is a return to more affective, narrative, and incarnational approaches to Christian life and thought.

Jim Horsthuis provides a fitting follow-up to Hiebert's critique of rationalism, in the form of a poignant reflection on a faithful pastoral response to suffering. Horsthuis worries that responses to suffering persons that focus on theodicy (offering rational explanations as to why suffering occurs if God is both fully good and all powerful) are pastorally inadequate and potentially hurtful, especially when offered in the midst of crisis. While not dismissing the value of theodicy in addressing important intellectual questions, Horsthuis



argues that a more faithful and holistic response requires what he calls a Trinitarian participative spirituality of care, which emphasizes being present with those who are suffering.

Next, Michael Dempsey offers a historical investigation of the church's understanding of divine providence. He criticizes the tendency to think about providence in abstract terms, which has made Christian theology vulnerable to being coopted by colonial or empire ideologies. In place of abstract models, Dempsey argues that we need to recapture the biblical orientation of the early (pre-Augustinian) church. Theologically, this means grounding our understanding of providence in the Incarnation, life, and mission of Jesus Christ.

In our final article, Maria Nacpil explores the possibility of a new paradigm of church mission, in light of the global diaspora movement of the church. Many people throughout the world today are being uprooted and scattered from their homes and nations, due to poverty, political and religious conflicts, and intensifying hostilities. Traditional western approaches to mission have sometimes failed to consider these as central concerns of the gospel. Nacpil proposes a fresh missional approach, which gives prominence to the church as local, contextual expressions of the body of Christ called to bear witness to and embody concretely the reconciling and restoring work of Christ.

We conclude the present issue with two book reviews that also address themes relevant to holistic Christian faith, the first reflecting on the importance of Christian imagination in teaching and the second on a biblical vision for creation care.



# Oned and Grounded in Love: Julian of Norwich and the Johannine God of Love

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Beth M. Stovell\*

## **Abstract**

*In this article, we will examine the ways in which Julian of Norwich's theological reflection on God's love in relation to our sin is informed by Julian's use of key themes in 1 John 3 and 4. These include: 1) the love of the Father demonstrated through his giving of his Son and making us his children (1 John 3:1-3; 4:9); 2) the love of the Son demonstrated through his passion (1 John 3:16; 4:9-10); 3) the love of the Spirit, dwelling within us (1 John 3:24; 4:13); and 4) our response to this love through loving one another (1 John 3:14-18; 4:7-21). In the next section of this article, we will explore how these first four themes can be used to provide greater depth and clarity on Julian's view of the removal of judgment and sin in light of the Godhead's foundational love for us through the passion of Christ (1 John 3:19-20; 4:17-18). The article thus provides greater clarity into Julian's theological vision.*

In recent times, many scholars have become enamoured with Julian of Norwich, both for her person and her work. The rich theological writings of this 14th century mystic have been examined primarily by those interested in medieval theology<sup>1</sup> or women's writing and

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1 Marion Glasscoe points to these as the two main ways of recent research. For a full introduction, see Glasscoe, "Contexts for Teaching Julian of Norwich," in Dyas, Edden, and Ellis, *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, 185. Scholars interested in Julian in terms of medieval theology include: Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings: From Vision to Book*; Baker, "The Image of God: Contrasting Configurations of Julian of Norwich's *Showings* and Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*," in McEntire, *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, 61–90; Nicholas Watson, "The Trinitarian Hermeneutic in Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*," in Glass-

the issues of feminist scholarship.<sup>2</sup> There has also been interest in the apophatic and cataphatic tradition in Julian's work<sup>3</sup> and the genre of her writing.<sup>4</sup> This is not surprising as Julian represents the first woman and first theologian to write in the English language.<sup>5</sup> Julian herself provides us with another way of interpreting her work: examining Julian's theology through the way she uses Scripture in her writing. Julian encourages us to "truly understand that all is according to holy scripture and grounded in the same...."<sup>6</sup> In a similar way, Julian scholar Joan Nuth suggests that "Julian's whole work could be viewed as a commentary on the Johannine verse that God is love, and those who dwell in love, dwell in God and God in them (1 Jn 4:16)."<sup>7</sup> But Nuth analyzes Julian's theology using the categories of

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coe, *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, 79-100; Dreyer, *Holy Power, Holy Presence: Rediscovering Medieval Metaphors for the Holy Spirit*; Collett et al., *Late Medieval Englishwomen: Julian of Norwich, Marjorie Kempe and Juliana Berners*; Davis, *Mysticism and Space: Space and Spatiality in the Works of Richard Rolle, the Cloud of Unknowing Author, and Julian of Norwich*; Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England*.

2 Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*; Sandra McEntire, "The Likeness of God and the Restoration of Humanity in Julian of Norwich's *Showings*," in McEntire, *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, 3-33; Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*; Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*; Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*; Newman, *From Virile Woman to Womanchrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*; Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: the Theology of Julian of Norwich*; Collett et al., *Late Medieval Englishwomen: Julian of Norwich, Marjorie Kempe and Juliana Berners*.

3 Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross, "The Apophatic Image: The Poetics of Effacement in Julian of Norwich," in Glasscoe, *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, 53-77; Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*; Cynthia Masson, "The Point of Coincidence: Rhetoric and the Apophatic in Julian of Norwich's *Showings*," in McEntire, *Julian of Norwich: a Book of Essays*, 153-81.

4 Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology*; Brad Peters, "A Genre Approach to Julian of Norwich's Epistemology," in McEntire, *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, 115-52; Magill, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic or Visionary?*. Further studies have also reinterpreted Julian in light of questions of empire. See Mark D. Jordan, "Julian of Norwich," in Compier, Kwok and Rieger, *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*.

5 Ward, "Lady Julian of Norwich and Her Audience: 'Mine Even-Christian,'" 47.

6 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, ch. 86, 82.

7 Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich*, 39.

systematic theology and only tangentially addresses her suggestion of Julian's use of 1 John.

While in this article I will not argue that Julian's work is a commentary per se, I will examine the ways in which Julian's theological reflection on God's love in relation to our sin is informed by her use of key themes in 1 John 3 and 4. Examining these themes will provide greater clarity into Julian's theological vision. After briefly exploring Julian's context, in the second section of this article we will explore four themes related to Julian's theological reflections on God's love through the lens of 1 John 3 and 4. These themes are: 1) the love of the Father demonstrated through his giving of his Son and making us his children (1 John 3:1-3; 4:9); 2) the love of the Son demonstrated through his passion (1 John 3:16; 4:9-10); 3) the love of the Spirit, dwelling within us (1 John 3:24; 4:13); and 4) our response to this love through loving one another (1 John 3:14-18; 4:7-21). In the next section of this article, we will explore how these first four themes can be used to provide greater depth and clarity on Julian's view of the removal of judgment and sin in light of the Godhead's foundational love for us through the passion of Christ (1 John 3:19-20; 4:17-18).

### **The Context**

Before addressing Julian's relationship to 1 John directly, we must first set Julian's work in its historical context. England in the fourteenth century was burdened with many troubles and Julian's home city of Norwich was no exception. The Hundred Years' War, begun in 1337, drained England economically and personally, causing the death of many. The Black Plague struck Norwich five times between 1348 and 1406, wiping out 50 percent of the clergy in Norwich and over a third of the English population in general. In 1369, Norwich experienced its worst famine in 50 years resulting in starvation. This calamity and the toll of war have been described as the inciting factors for the Peasants' Revolt, which was put down brutally by the bishop of Norwich, Henry Despenser.<sup>8</sup>

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8 Upjohn, *In Search of Julian of Norwich*, 24–25.

Not only were times incredibly difficult, but bishops blamed the people for these calamities. As Dreyer explains, “Official explanations for the plague were either that it was caused by the stars—a malign conjunction of planets or the ‘drying’ effects of comets that affected the air—or by human sinfulness. Both enlightened and corrupt bishops pointed to sin as the cause of God’s wrath.”<sup>9</sup> Henry Despenser, Norwich’s bishop, also pointed to the sins of the people as an explanation for the plague.<sup>10</sup>

During Julian’s lifetime, only a few years after her sickness and her visions, came the Great Schism of the church in 1377. In the time of the Great Schism, the church was scandalized by the claims of two rival popes in Rome and in Avignon. Urban VI, the Roman papal claimant, encouraged a crusade against his rival Clement, led by Henry Despenser. “Urban VI promised full remission of sins to those who gave military or financial support to his cause: later these indulgences were extended even to the dead relatives of those who would contribute.”<sup>11</sup> A century and a half later, Martin Luther would rail against this very sort of misuse of ecclesial power.<sup>12</sup>

Urban VI’s crusade ended in defeat and the returning soldiers “of the cross” looted the countryside as they returned home. These ecclesial scandals led to dissent among the church’s followers. John Wyclif and his supporters, the Lollards, were one such dissenting group. Wyclif, the influential Oxford scholar and theologian, spoke out against the pope and the church’s scandalous practices, calling for a renewal. Wyclif was sentenced to death for his statements and many of his followers were burned at the stake, including women and children. “The crime of some of them was to own a Bible translated into English...the smoke from their burning would have drifted into Julian’s cell on the north-east wind.”<sup>13</sup>

It is important that we understand Julian’s encouraging mes-

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9 Dreyer, *Holy Power, Holy Presence*, 215.

10 Dreyer, *Holy Power, Holy Presence*, 216.

11 Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 9.

12 Both Jantzen and Upjohn draw a connection between the Protestant Reformation and the events of this time period. Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 9; Upjohn, *In Search*, 28.

13 Upjohn, *In Search*, 28.

sage of God's love in light of this context, where the weight of guilt pressed the people and many covered in fear of hell's fury for themselves and their loved ones.<sup>14</sup> It is amidst these horrific events that Julian reflects on her visions, exploring the question of suffering, the nature of God's love, and the promise given to her by Christ that "all shall be well."<sup>15</sup>

## God's Love

In this section, we will explore four themes in which God's love, as depicted in 1 John 3 and 4, play a key role in Julian's theology. These themes will become the grounding for Julian's new understanding of sin and judgment, which we will explore in the next section of this paper.

### *The Father's Love for his Children*

The first theme present in 1 John 3-4 and in Julian is the role of the Father's love in calling us his children and in sending us his Son. First John 3 begins with an imperative, exhorting the Johannine community to "see" or "behold" the quality of love that the Father has for his children. Central to Julian's work is a similar exhortation to behold, see, and look at God's love. This theme of beholding and seeing is so pervasive in Julian's work that one scholar suggests it represents a musical dialectic.<sup>16</sup> Julian describes her purposes in writing her revelations thus:

Everything I say about myself, that also goes for all my fellow Christians. For this is what I understood from our Lord, that this is his meaning. And so I beg you all, for God's sake, and I advise you for your own advantage, to ignore this wretch that it was shown to in the first place, and attend instead with all your might and wit and

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14 Nuth describes the fear of sin and death, its rising intensity during the time of the Black Death, and Julian's theological response to these fears. Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter*, 117–19.

15 Upjohn, *In Search*, 28.

16 Bradley attributes this theory to Roland Maisonneuve, "L'Univers Visionnaire de Julian de Norwich." See Bradley, "Julian of Norwich: Writer and Mystic," 201, n21.

meekness to God. For it was by his courteous love and from his endless goodness that he wanted to show it to everyone, for the comfort of us all.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, because of his love, God wants to show his love to all, and Julian acts as a willing vessel for this revelation. She, like John, exhorts her listeners to hear the message of love that God is giving.<sup>18</sup>

God's love is expressed by calling us his children (1 John 3:2) and, as often is the case with children, children become like their parent. 1 John 3:2 tells us that when we see God just as he is, we will become like him. Nuth points to Julian's use of 1 John 3:2 in conjunction with 1 Corinthians 13:12 in Julian's description of the union between God and ourselves.

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17 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 18.

18 As we will see throughout this article, Julian's focus on love is central to her interpretation of her visions. The Lord told her that his meaning was love and this becomes foundational to her overall themes. Thus, I would argue against Bradley's assertion that Julian in any way "emphasiz[es] goodness rather than love" (95). Though one should not underestimate the great importance of goodness in Julian's work, love is central throughout both her Short Text and her Long Text. Bradley argues that Julian's insight that the meaning of her showings was love is "an insight that came to her late—for it is after fifteen years that she finally hears the answer to her desire to know what was intended. The meaning of her visions grows out of contemplating goodness, which is the unifying subject" (85). Yet Bradley nowhere looks at how love and goodness are developed in Julian's Short Text which came before Julian's Long Text. If Bradley's assertion is right, one would expect to find very few references to God's love and instead a focus on God's goodness in the Short Text. A brief survey of the Short Text will demonstrate no such preference. In fact, the theme of God's love is ubiquitous. In ch. i, Julian speaks of Christ's true lovers; in ch. ii, Julian wants to go on living to love the Lord better, in ch. iii, the Lord wants to show us Julian's visions "out of his courteous love," in ch. iv, the Lord shows Julian through spiritual sight his "familiar love...which wraps and enfolds us," creation seen in the hazelnut "lasts and always will because God loves it and everything has its being though the love of God"; in ch. vi, it is "in unity of love that the life consists of all men..."; in this love is safety. We could continue the list throughout the Short Text. It seems strange that Bradley, who asserts the development of a concept, would not look at its initial conception. This seems to be the failing of Bradley's position. See Bradley, "The Goodness of God: A Julian Study," in *Langland, the Mystics, and the Medieval English Religious Tradition: Essays in Honour of S. S. Hussey*, 85–95.



Then shall we come into our Lord, then we ourselves will know clearly and God will have us fully. We will be hidden in God without end, seeing him truly, feeling him fully, hearing him in spirit and smelling him delectably and swallowing him sweetly: then will we see God face to face, homely and fully; the creature that is made shall see and behold God who is Maker without end...<sup>19</sup>

As Nuth explains, “in heaven the blessed will finally see with God’s wisdom and will with God’s love. Full union with the mind and will of God and the true knowledge that accompanies it will be finally achieved.”<sup>20</sup> In this way, Julian follows John’s theme of transformation into God’s likeness in his presence. 1 John 4 continues the imagery from 1 John 3 of God’s loving parenting through a metaphor of God birthing his spiritual children. Addressed to God’s beloved, v. 7 states that everyone who loves is born of God. Julian repeatedly describes our relationship to God as his children. In Julian, God “behold[s] us with compassion and pity like children who are innocent whom he can never reject.”<sup>21</sup> The entire Trinity is continually working, “making us into Christ’s children, Christian in our living.”<sup>22</sup> Many feminist scholars have focused on the relationship between Christ as Mother and his children, yet one could also point to many references to God the Father’s love for his children in Julian’s work.<sup>23</sup>

The Father’s love is ultimately revealed in sending his Son into the world so that we might live (1 John 4:9-10). Julian describes the Father as Maker of the world through his love, and further giving his love through Christ.

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19 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 86.

20 Nuth, *Wisdom’s Daughter: the Theology of Julian of Norwich*, 150.

21 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 57.

22 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 120.

23 This can be particularly found in the Father’s role as Creator. Throughout Julian’s depiction of God as Creator she points to his role in our first birth. This frequently parallels Julian’s discussion of Christ as Mother and God as Father, both are described as giving birth to us, the Father via creation, the Mother via salvation.

He who made humankind by love, in the same love would restore us to the same bliss, even overpassing it.<sup>24</sup> For just as we were made like to the Trinity in our first making, our Maker wants us to be like Jesus Christ our Saviour, in heaven without end, by virtue of our again-making.<sup>25</sup>

In Julian, our true Father is joined by our true Mother Christ. The Father is seen to have “all kinds [which] he has made to flow out from him to work his will” and these “shall be restored and brought again into him by the salvation of humanity through the working of grace” that is through the salvific labour of our Mother Christ. As Nuth explains, “this unbroken connection between creation and redemption reflects the unchanging nature of God’s love.”<sup>26</sup>

### *The Son’s Love in His Passion*

While the Father’s greatest act of love is the sending of the Son, the Son’s greatest act of love is in his Passion. This theme resonates throughout 1 John 3-4 and throughout Julian’s work. In Christ’s sacrificial act, he gives life to God’s people (1 John 4:9), atones for sin (1 John 4:10), and demonstrates what love truly looks like (1 John 3:16). In Julian’s *Revelation*, the passion of Christ is the first and most important of her visions. Julian’s first showing undergirds the rest of the fifteen showings to follow and is characterized by Christ’s

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24 Skinner notes that “overpassing” is a wordknot: overpass/passover. Skinner states, “Middle English *overpass* is the equivalent to our ‘surpass’: yet the knot remains to remind us that Christ, in his remaking of us, is our Paschal benefactor, bringing us yet more benefits than were ever given to Adam and Eve.” In Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 23, n20.

25 Skinner points to the significance of the original phrase in Middle English, *Be the vertue of our geynmakyng*: “This key phrase announces Julian’s understanding of the central mystery of our again-making (rather than ‘redemption,’ our ‘being bought back’). The virtue is Christ’s alone: dying as man he empowers us with his love, making us a second time—overpassing, as Julian puts it, his first creation, Adam. In Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 23, n21.

26 Nuth, *Wisdom’s Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich*, 55.

love.<sup>27</sup> In Julian's first showing, she experiences the crucifixion of Christ, seeing his head crowned with thorns. As Julian explains,

The first [showing] is the precious crowning of our Lord with thorns; it includes a showing of the Trinity with the Incarnation and tells of the unity between God and the soul; with many other fair showings of endless wisdom and teaching of love, in which all the showings that follow are grounded and oned.<sup>28</sup>

Julian's language of "grounded and oned" suggests that the first showing and its teaching of love is the foundation of the other showings ("grounded") and unifies the other showings ("oned" as in "making one"). Through Christ's crucifixion, Julian experiences God's intimacy. In this Julian provides us with a God who is not distant and removed, but nearby and embracing. That such a love is the meaning of Christ's passion is not sentimentalism. As Jantzen explains,

It might at first be thought that this is the substitution of a subjective emotion for the objective standard of the passion of Christ...Closer reading, however, shows that there is no confusion in Julian's mind. The passion itself is understood as love, as the supreme manifestation of the love of God...The passion of Christ offers a principle for understanding what love really is; it is the standard by which love itself must be measured. What we have here is not a circle, as might at first appear, but reciprocity. As there is growth in understanding of the passion, more and more of the dimensions of love can be seen;

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27 Molinari argues that the pattern we see in the first showing continues as themes throughout all the following showings. Molinari defines these three themes as the Suffering Christ, the Divinity in the Passion, and the Goodness of God or his "home-ly loving." Molinari, *Julian of Norwich*, 151-53.

28 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 1.

and that in turn facilitates the interpretation and assimilation of the passion at still deeper levels.<sup>29</sup>

In Julian's depiction of Christ's passion, she demonstrates the immanence of God, but this picture is also balanced by Julian's subsequent vision of Christ's passion becoming his enthronement in heaven. Glasscoe suggests that this vision can be better understood within the wider context of the medieval worldview. She points to the Hereford map as an example: "In the world Christ is crucified, and in the map of the realities of the world he is at its centre; but at the same time it is possible to see Christ above it in glory. You can move 'sodenly' [suddenly] between the two images and understand that the final reality is that Christ in glory transcending suffering in time."<sup>30</sup> Glasscoe notes that Julian also moves from Christ's suffering to his place in heaven. Thus Christ's passion is also Christ's victory.<sup>31</sup>

Julian's powerful experience of Christ's passion is also a vision of Christ's love for her and for her fellow Christians.<sup>32</sup> In her moving ninth showing, Julian sees Christ's joy and bliss in his suffering. Julian marvels as she realizes that Christ died for her. He said to her, "If I could suffer more, I would suffer more...How can there be anything I would not do for you? I might and would do all else besides,

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29 Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 92-93.

30 See Glasscoe, "Contexts for Teaching Julian of Norwich," in Dyas, Edden, and Ellis, *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, 193.

31 This vision of Christ's passion also bears a striking resemblance to the Johannine passion narrative which points to Jesus's crucifixion as his enthronement as king. Daly-Denton, among others, points to this identification and argues for the common depiction of Jesus and David. See Daly-Denton, "David in the Gospels," 425. One might also note the other similarities between John's vision of Jesus and Julian's depiction, including the crown of thorns, the pierced side, and the presence of Mary at the cross. James Walsh has also pointed to the relationship between the concept of Divine indwelling in the gospel of John and in Julian. See Walsh, "God's Homely Loving," 164-72.

32 Nuth points out the vivid imagery of death in Julian's writing and its consistency with her time period, but furthermore her particular details (Jesus's thirst and his shedding of blood) serve the purpose of highlighting his active role in choosing to die for us. As Nuth puts it, "they stress the fact that he suffered in order to fulfill his own desire. They reveal just what that desire of God's and of Christ's is: they reveal the depths and the nature of God's love for humankind." See Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich*, 50.

since I would gladly die of your love so often, ignoring all my hard pains.” As Julian explains this vision, she states that “his love that brought him to suffer exceeds his pain as much as heaven is above the earth.”<sup>33</sup> In the tenth showing, Julian sees the blood pour out of Jesus’s side and his heart broken in two. In her explanation of the showing, we see the language of the beginning of 1 John 3:1 echoed in Julian, “See how much I love you.”<sup>34</sup>

Another crucial theme common to Julian and 1 John is Christ’s passion as the destruction of the work of the devil. This theme will have particular significance for our subsequent discussion on sin and judgment. 1 John tells us repeatedly that, in Christ’s death, the powers of evil have been conquered and that likewise we are able to overcome the devil (2:13-14; 3:8; 4:4; 5:4-5). In Julian’s fifth showing, the Lord shares how the fiend will be overcome by this blood.

And then without voice or any opening of lips, there formed in my soul these words: ‘Here is how the fiend is overcome.’ Our Lord spoke these words, meaning his blessed passion, as he had already shown before. In this our Lord showed that his blessed passion is the overcoming of the fiend.<sup>35</sup>

God shows Julian that the devil has been working the same malice since before the Incarnation, but he will not win because of Christ’s passion. This theme continues throughout Julian’s work, culminating in her final sixteenth vision. As the fiend attempts to attack Julian, the Lord comforts her by saying that all her visions were meant to be comforting and trustworthy and she “shall not be overcome” by the fiend. Julian notes that these final words echo the Lord’s first words and also refer to Christ’s passion.<sup>36</sup> Amy Laura Hall points to the

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33 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 46–47.

34 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 51.

35 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 30.

36 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 151.

significance for contemporary ethics of this vision and the passion as a whole with its movement towards compassion.<sup>37</sup>

Christ's love in the passion also provides hope to both the Johannine community and Julian's audience through the identification with Christ's pain and suffering. In John's community, persecution was causing suffering. The world hates John's community, but they should not worry or be surprised at this (1 John 3:13-14). Christ's passion provides Julian's and John's communities with an opportunity to be purified through their suffering (1 John 3:2-3). As Julian explains,

In order to bring them to bliss, he lays on those that he loves something which, though nothing is lost in his sight, is the way they are humbled and despised in this world, scorned, mocked, and cast aside. He does this to prevent them taking any harm from the pomp and vain-glory of this wretched life and to make the way ready for them to come to heaven.... For he says, 'I will wholly break you of your vain affections and your vicious pride; and after that I shall gather you and make you meek and mild, clean and holy by oneing you to me.' Then I saw that each time we have kind compassion and charity for our fellow Christian, that is Christ in him. For the same emptying of self that he showed in his passion is to be seen again here in this compassion.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, we are purified in our association with Christ in his passion and in the resulting compassion we are emptied of self and love Him through loving our fellow Christians. Here we see a clear repetition of the themes of 1 John 3-4 with their continual return to the love of Christ and the love of one another.

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<sup>37</sup> Hall, *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, 314–17.

<sup>38</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 56–57.

*The Spirit's Love in His Indwelling*

Just as the Father sent his Son out of his great love for us and the Son died for love of us, so the Spirit dwells within us because of his love for us.<sup>39</sup> Julian's description of the mutual indwelling of God with us bears a striking resemblance to 1 John 3:24.<sup>40</sup>

And the person who keeps his commandments resides in God, and God in him. Now by this we know that God resides in us: by the Spirit he has given us (1 John 3:24).

For it is nothing else but a right understanding with true belief and sure trust, of our very being: that we are in God and God in us (yet this we may not see) (Julian, ch. 54, 120).

This idea of God residing in us and us in him also comes to the fore with Julian's discussion of "homely love." The idea of "homeliness" is one that we have lost in our language. It conveys the deep intimacy and comfort which we associate with the image of a true "home." As Nuth explains, "God's love is simply our home. God made us for his love and we are nestled and enfolded in it as our home."<sup>41</sup> But "we are [also] God's home." The Incarnation is the ultimate example of this, but we also see this in the Spirit dwelling

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39 Dreyer examines other important aspects of the imagery of the Spirit in some depth. The Spirit's role as Comforter and as the Spirit of Truth also correspond to 1 John's depiction of the Spirit's activity. For a more detailed description of the imagery of the Spirit in Julian's work, see Dreyer, *Holy Power, Holy Presence: Rediscovering Medieval Metaphors for the Holy Spirit*, 213–38.

40 Nuth argues that "Julian's description of the mutual indwelling between God and humanity probably owes its inspiration to John's gospel. There, too, God is humanity's dwelling place. But human dwelling in God is possible only because the Word of God came to live in human flesh (John 1:11, 14). John's gospel is pervaded with phrases like 'dwell in,' 'abide in,' 'be with,' 'stay with,' emphasizing what Julian calls the homeliness of God's love." Nuth gives a detailed description of the key points of overlap between Julian and the Gospel of John. See Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich*, 78, n12. For a fuller discussion of the relationship between Julian's notion of homeliness and the Johannine theme of indwelling, see also James Walsh, "God's Homely Loving," 164-72 (Nuth points us to this reference in her footnote).

41 Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter*, 77, quoting Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, ch. 53.

within us. At the restoration of all things, we become “God’s city and dwelling place,” “God’s ‘homeliest home.’”<sup>42</sup>

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is given to us through God (1 John 3:24; 4:13). In this we see the Trinitarian aspect of God’s love. The Father gives the Son because of his great love for us (1 John 3:1; 4:9), the Son gives his life for us out of love for us (1 John 3:16; 4:9-10). The Spirit is the homely love making his home within us, given by God as his indwelling with us (1 John 3:24; 4:13). These concepts are present in 1 John 3 and 4 and throughout Julian. In Julian’s sixteenth vision the Trinitarian aspect of God’s love becomes crucial. Because of this Trinitarian love, we are called and enabled to love one another. God’s love is made manifest through our love for one another, because he lives in us and us in him (1 John 3:23-24; 4:13-16). As a community, anointed and filled with the Spirit of love, we become a community of love.<sup>43</sup>

### *Our Love for One Another*

The love of the Father in giving his Son, the love of the Son in his death, and the love of the Spirit in his comfort and indwelling, find their parallel in our love for one another. God’s love demonstrated through Christ’s death and the Spirit within us enables our love for one another (1 John 3:16-18; 4:11). Just as Christ’s passion is an act of love and mercy, Julian’s experience of the passion causes her to be filled “with compassion for all my fellow Christians—full well he loves those people that shall be saved.”<sup>44</sup> Christ’s passion also fills Julian’s soul with love for her fellow Christians. “All the while I felt great love toward all my fellow Christians; for I wanted them all to share my understanding of everything I saw—I knew it would comfort them. And I felt sure that this revelation was for all the world to

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42 Nuth, *Wisdom’s Daughter*, 77-80, quoting Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, chs. 51. and 68.

43 Julian states, “the love of God makes such a unity among us that, when it is truly seen, no one can part themselves from another.” Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 145.

44 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 56.



see.”<sup>45</sup> The love we experience in “truth and deed,” as Julian states,<sup>46</sup> we give back in “deed and in truth” to one another through Christ’s love (1 John 3:18).

Julian follows John’s assertion that our love, enabled by Christ’s love, mirrors Christ’s death in its self-emptying nature. (“We have come to know love by this: that Jesus laid down his life for us; thus we ought to lay down our lives for our fellow Christians”; 1 John 3:16). Julian describes this mirroring in her statement: “Then I saw that each time we have kind compassion and charity for our fellow Christians, that is Christ in him. For the same emptying of self that he showed in his passion is to be seen again here in this compassion.”<sup>47</sup> In this she gives two words of encouragement. First, the Lord shows her the bliss that is ahead in the future, and second, we realize that “we never suffer alone, but with him whom we should see as our ground.” In this way, suffering and the eschatological hope go hand-in-hand with the self-emptying love that we mirror in Christ.

Not only does Christ’s passion enable us to love, but we are shown to be of him by the way we love (1 John 3:14-15; 4:7-8; 4:19-21). Julian expresses the importance of this love for our fellow Christians throughout her work, which itself was written to comfort fellow Christians. One such example is Julian’s thoughts on the relationship between God’s love and our love for one another.

If I pay special attention to myself, I am nothing at all: but in general I am in the unity of love with all my fellow Christians. For it is in this unity of love that the life consists of all men who will be saved. For God is everything that is good, and God has made everything that is made, and God loves everything that he has made, and if any man or woman withdraws his love from any of his fellow Christians, he does not love at all, because he has not love towards all. And so in such times he is in danger, because he is not at peace; and anyone who has

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45 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 18.

46 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 16.

47 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 57.

general love for his fellow Christians has love towards everything which is.... And he who thus generally loves all his fellow Christians loves all, and he who loves thus is safe.<sup>48</sup>

This passage clearly reflects the influence of 1 John on Julian's thought. First, Julian follows John's exhortation to "love one another because love is from God" (1 John 4:7). Second, Julian, with John, argues that not loving each other is not loving at all (1 John 4:8). Third, Julian sees a grave danger in this lack of love because we gain our life from love; without it, we are without peace. 1 John 4:9 also locates life in the love given to us by God. 1 John 3-4 repeatedly points to the dangers of stepping outside of this love.<sup>49</sup> In general, both Julian and John understand the love of one another as a necessary reflection of God's love, which defines and transforms the Christian community. This love gives life and provides safety to God's people.

As Julian's experience of Christ's passion becomes the groundwork for her compassion toward others, Julian's engagement with this compassion becomes a form of spiritual encouragement for those suffering. Gatta explains this experience and its implications:

As [Julian] undergoes the sixteen showings, her love is in fact immeasurably deepened. The Blessed Trinity reveals itself as afflicted love, united through suffering to human beings and indeed to all creatures. Julian cannot view such a revelation as a disengaged spectator.<sup>50</sup>

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48 Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, ST, ch. vi, 134.

49 These two chapters are filled with imagery concerning those who do not love as "children of the devil" (1 John 3:10), as murderers (1 John 3:15), as representing the "spirit of lies" (1 John 4:6), and as liars (1 John 4:20). Julian does not focus as much on this side of 1 John because her message is intended to comfort her fellow Christians who already feel a sense of guilt and judgment within themselves. Julian tends toward the positive emphasis of exhorting to love rather than a negative emphasis on the results of lacking love. This coincides with her generally positive position throughout her theology. Some have associated this with Julian's apophatic approach.

50 Gatta, *Three Spiritual Directors for Our Time*, 86.

Far from disengaged, Julian engages pastorally with her readers who struggle with spiritual despondency. She engages with God in dialectical prayer, asking to be given clarity about the reason for sin and an understanding of how suffering can exist if “all shall be well.”<sup>51</sup> This leads us to the theme of sin and judgment in Julian and in 1 John.

### **Sin and Judgment in Light of God’s Love**

Our discussion of sin and judgment is explicitly built on the themes related to God’s love explored above. In this section, we will begin by exploring past scholarship on Julian’s work concerning the issues of sin and judgment. We will then explore a new approach to Julian’s view of sin and judgment based on her use of 1 John and in light of her context, arguing that sin and judgment in Julian’s work must be read in light of her view of God’s love.

#### *Judgment and Sin in Past Scholarship*

The problem with many treatments of the issues of judgment, sin, and wrath in Julian’s theology in the past has been the lack of biblical integration into the analyses. Feminist scholars point to Christ as Mother as the overriding image making the illusory nature of sin repairable. This, in turn, becomes a discussion of Julian’s use of maternal images that overwhelm the patriarchal language and thought of her time. While the description of Christ as Mother is important to Julian’s work, choosing this image as the primary theme can lead to a misinterpretation of Julian’s goals and miss other key themes in Julian’s work. It also tends to focus only on scriptural references that relate to the motherhood of God.<sup>52</sup>

Other scholars see Julian’s discussion as a struggle against ecclesial authority. For example, Glasscoe points to the struggle with “contemporary authority” in Julian as she struggles with the question of sin and judgment in light of her experience. She believes that

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51 Gatta, *Three Spiritual Directors for Our Time*, 58.

52 See McAvoy, ““And Though, to whom This Booke Shall Come,”” Dyas, Edden, and Ellis, *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, 111–13. Dearborn points to this problem and attempts to take a mediating position. See Dearborn, “The Crucified Christ as the Motherly God: The Theology of Julian of Norwich.”

“given the internalisation of ecclesiastical authority and assumptions of female inferiority in the fourteenth century,” Julian was unable to break with church tradition and instead attempts to hold the position of the church and her experience in tension. Glasscoe points to the example of the lord and servant as “odd and problematic” within the “visionary sequence,” but “appealing.”<sup>53</sup> Yet as we will see, the parable of the lord and servant act as an explanation to Julian’s vision, which is theologically and scripturally informed. To focus on the question of power in Julian’s work can also create substantial limitations. Describing Julian in terms of conflict misses Julian’s continuity with her tradition.

Another approach has been to describe Julian in light of the tradition of spiritual theology that comes before her. These scholars focus primarily on Julian’s use of the already-established traditions of Augustine, Anselm, and Bernard of Clairveaux. Again, these types of examinations are necessary and helpful, but do not always address the way Julian uses scripture herself. While obviously Julian’s reading of scripture would not go unmediated, concentrating on others in the theological tradition as they relate to Julian may at times cause some of Julian’s uses of scripture to go unseen.<sup>54</sup>

By looking at how Julian interprets the themes within 1 John, we are given a possible insight into Julian’s theological reflection on her revelatory experience by way of scripture. What many of these scholars have missed is that judgment and sin in Julian’s work are directly linked to knowing love and seeing love. We are characterized by how we love, but further we are transformed (as is our sin) by how *God loves*. Pointing to the continuity between Julian’s themes and the themes of 1 John helps provide a way to demonstrate Julian’s scriptural account of sin and judgment in light of God’s love through Christ. In this way, we can understand Julian’s meaning when she states that once we are “grounded and rooted in love” and “once the

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53 See Glasscoe, “Contexts for Teaching Julian of Norwich,” in Dyas, Edden, and Ellis, *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, 196.

54 Molinari is an example of this. While he carefully establishes Julian’s position within the Catholic tradition, he only briefly mentions the central role of scripture in her work. See Molinari, *Julian of Norwich*.

soul, by God's special grace, sees...that we are oned to him in love," it is utterly impossible that we find wrath in God.<sup>55</sup>

### *Julian's Audience*

One key to understanding Julian's discussion of sin and wrath is being aware of her intended audience whom she states are her "even-Christians." At the conclusion of her book, she makes this clear:

I pray almighty God this book come not but to the hands of them that will be his faithful lovers, and those that will submit themselves to the faith of the holy Church... for this revelation is high divinity and high wisdom, wherefore it may not dwell with one that is thrall to sin and to the devil. And beware that you take not one thing after your affection and leave another, for that is the condition of a heretic.<sup>56</sup>

Julian's audience are the ones who will be "faithful lovers" of God, that is, her fellow Christians. As Dreyden explains, "her message was aimed at those who suffer from forces beyond their control—the simple, powerless, ordinary Christians of her day. It is a message primarily to the marginalized and the oppressed."<sup>57</sup> Here it is vital for us to remember Julian's fourteenth century context and the struggles of her fellow Christians amidst the suffering of the Black Plague, the rampant poverty and famine, and the ecclesial crises. Julian's fellow Christians felt the weight of these burdens, which were further intensified by the blame placed upon them by their church leaders. Julian's message of hope and love is for them.<sup>58</sup>

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55 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 96.

56 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 182.

57 Dreyer, *Holy Power, Holy Presence: Rediscovering Medieval Metaphors for the Holy Spirit*, 235.

58 The question has arisen: To what degree does Julian's audience include us and how does Julian speak to us today? In an interesting move, Bauerschmidt argues that Julian found herself on the edge of modernity, "between the passing world of the premodern *cosmos* and the emerging modern world of radical individual freedom of

It is equally important to address who Julian's audience is not. As Julian makes clear, her message is not intended for those who are captured already by sin and the devil. Further, Julian's message of the removal of judgment and wrath in the love of God does not address all forms of evil. "It does not address catastrophic evil—corporate greed, hate, unchecked egoism, genocide, deliberate starvation of the poor. And yet Julian does not back away from the universal need to confront sinfulness, no matter who we are."<sup>59</sup> While the love of God is available for all who will choose it, Julian places Christ's passion as central to accepting this love and points to the Spirit's role in discerning sin.

Julian continually comes back to the necessity of the holy church and scripture to guide us. She also repeatedly returns to the three wounds that she requested from God as necessary in this process: contrition, compassion, and longing. We have already traced the importance of compassion through Julian, but one must not forget her focus on contrition.<sup>60</sup> Yet even as we note this focus in Julian's work, we must remember that "God told [Julian] nothing about self-imposed penance, only the penance that life brings, which we should bear meekly and patiently in the memory of the cross. Julian's fourteenth-century 'even-Christians' do not need to go to Lent; Lent had already more than come to them."<sup>61</sup>

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will." Julian speaks particularly well to us today, Bauerschmidt argues, because we too stand at a similar edge at the end of an era (i.e., modernity). Bauerschmidt, "Order, Freedom, and "Kindness": Julian of Norwich on the Edge of Modernity," 71.

59 Dreyer, *Holy Power, Holy Presence: Rediscovering Medieval Metaphors for the Holy Spirit*, 235.

60 Both Molinari and Gatta are careful to point to Julian's discussions of contrition within the larger discussion of contrition, compassion, and longing. See Molinari, *Julian of Norwich*, 78–93, and Gatta, *Three Spiritual Directors for Our Time*, 50–90.

61 See Dreyer, *Holy Power, Holy Presence: Rediscovering Medieval Metaphors for the Holy Spirit*, 232. Dreyer points to Julian's discussion in ch. 77 of the LT of Jesus's words to her: "this life is a penance that is for your benefit"; to which Julian responds, "This place is a prison; this life a penance. Yet it is a remedy he wants us to enjoy. For the remedy is that our Lord is with us, keeping and leading us into the fullness of joy" (168).

### *The Concept of Sin*

There are different ways that we could read the discussion of sin in 1 John 3. One could read it as an exhortation to avoid sin and be righteous (which no doubt is true), but one could also see it as a statement about the role of sin as non-existent for those who know and see God. In fact, according to 1 John 3:5, it states that “in him there is no sin. All who remain in him do not sin.” It seems possible that this is one way of understanding what Julian is doing with her discussion of sin. As we have seen above, Julian follows many of the themes of 1 John. It seems probable that here she follows John as well. If this is the case, the reasoning would be that when we see God’s love through the passion of Christ, when we know him, there is no sin. Within his love, sin is not seen. This concept of knowledge and relationship to Christ as the antithesis of sin makes more sense of Julian’s later statement about being made ready for heaven through our suffering than understanding Julian as universalist. This makes sense of her statement:

Beholding this much, we will be saved from grumbling or complaint in time of pain. And though we see truly that our sins deserve it, yet his love excuses us; and with his great courtesy he does away with all our blame, beholding us with compassion and pity like children who are innocent whom he can never reject.<sup>62</sup>

Our experience of pain and suffering purifies us, allowing us to identify in Christ’s suffering. Christ’s love in his passion excuses our sin and does away with all our blame.<sup>63</sup> God sees us made again like children.

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62 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 57.

63 Anna Baldwin points to the importance of patience in suffering in Julian’s work, and to the biblical and literary tradition of patient suffering of her day, drawing attention to her similarities to Langland’s *Piers Plowman* in this area. Baldwin argues that Julian encourages Christians toward patience in suffering, but also points to the importance of Christ’s patient suffering in our redemption. See Baldwin, “The Triumph of Patience,” in *Langland, the Mystics, and the Medieval English Religious Tradition: Essays in Honour of S.S. Hussey*, 71–83.

Julian speaks of Christ's action of "again-making." In the first act of creation, God made us in love; Christ makes us again in the same love. In Julian this is graphically depicted through the image of Christ as Mother. The language of birthing also fills 1 John. As we love, we are born of God and know God (1 John 4:7). Our rebirthing in Christ's love, our "again-making," allows us to be clean before God and for sin to be dismissed as nothing.<sup>64</sup>

### *Judgment and Perfected Love*

Our fear of judgment and our sense of confidence are also joined inextricably to our experience of the love of God through Christ. By loving one another through Christ's love, we have confidence in our hearts and, when our confidence is shaken, God overcomes our hearts. He gives us confidence as he loves us by indwelling us (1 John 3:18-24) Without the perfect love of God, we live in fear, but, in the perfect love of God, we are fearless (1 John 4:17-18). Further, John suggests that we should not fear judgment if we are perfected in love. ("The one who fears judgment is not perfected in love.") In the same way, Julian speaks of our experience of confidence before God and perfected love in God where sin, wrath, and judgment disappear in light of the love of God.<sup>65</sup> This love of God must be understood in

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64 Bauerschmidt is well-aware of the tension between the absence of sin and the awareness of sin in Julian's visions as he explains, "Julian, while believing that sin is quite literally 'nothing,' does not think it can be ignored. In the sufferings of Christ on the cross, Julian sees not only the revelation of divine love, but also "a figure and likeness of our foul deeds' shame that our fair, bright, blessed lord bare for our sins" (X. 23). Therefore one must hold in tension the reality of the damage inflicted by evil and God's capacity to triumph over evil through the gracious "forthspreading" (LIX. 149) of the trinitarian relations." Bauerschmidt, "Julian of Norwich—Incorporated," 92.

65 Again Bauerschmidt is helpful here in discussing whether Julian's view is a form of universalism. Bauerschmidt explains that "the city of God's dwelling is ultimately a city without defensive walls, defined not by its boundaries but by the king who dwells at its center. And this king is the servant of God, who from all eternity thirsts for humanity's salvation." Bauerschmidt points out that Julian does not claim to know with certainty the outcome of damnation for others. Instead, he argues, "what *can* be known is that God 'is ground in whom our soul standeth and he is mean that keepeth the substance and the sensuality to God so that they shall never dispart' (LVI. 135). By focusing upon the crucified heart of the body, Julian leaves open its boundaries." Bauerschmidt, "Julian of Norwich—Incorporated," 96. One could argue, based on Bauerschmidt's assertions, that Julian's view of salvation is a



light of the rest of Julian's vision and the centrality of the passion. As Nuth explains,

The gradual perfection of love drives out fear, especially the fear destructive of trust in God which Julian calls despair or 'doubtful fear.' In the seventh revelation, Julian experiences a security in God's love which was completely 'without any fear' (15:204).<sup>66</sup>

Nuth points specifically to Julian's use of 1 John 4:17-18 here and notes that "this thought underlies the teaching of Cassian, Augustine, and Bernard on the 'filial fear' of God."<sup>67</sup> This is clearly reflected in Julian's discussion of the kinds of fears that we might face.<sup>68</sup>

#### *Role of the Trinity In Making "All Things Well"*

One of the more challenging discussions of sin in Julian is her vision of no wrath or sin. Yet, if one looks at 1 John 3-4 in relation to Julian, one sees that it is only in our dwelling within God's Trinitarian love that sin is removed. First, the Father loves us so much he sent his Son, the Son loves us so much that he dies for us, and the Spirit dwells with us in love. 1 John tells us that if we dwell in the love of God, where is sin? Where is judgment? They are not.<sup>69</sup> For we are not sinners as we dwell with God. As Julian points out, this is not a condition that we can maintain this side of heaven permanently

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centred-set rather than bounded-set model. In her view of salvation, "the king dwells at the center" and Julian's goal is to focus our attention there.

66 Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich*, 156.

67 Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich*, 156, n20.

68 For a fuller description of Julian's description of four fears, see Pelphey, *Christ Our Mother: Julian of Norwich*, 187-208.

69 Yet as always we must be careful with this blanket statement and hold it in balance with Julian's realization that "sin is necessary, but all shall be well. All shall be well; and all manner of thing shall be well." Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 55. Nuth points to the tensions within Julian's question about the nature of sin. See Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich*, 117-29. Denys Turner argues for Julian's vision of "sin as behovely" as a helpful correction to the "free-will defense" that other theologians have put forward. See Turner, "Sin Is Behovely" in Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love."

because of the fall's curse on us.<sup>70</sup> But God desires us to see his love rightly.

Julian understands the action of love in the whole Trinity as necessary to making “all things well,” as

It was in this way that our good Lord answered all the questions and doubts I might make, comforting me greatly with these words: ‘I may make all things well; I can make all things well, and I will make all things well, and I shall make all things well, and you shall see for yourself that all manner of things shall be well.’ When he says, ‘I may,’ I understand it to mean the Father; and as he says, ‘I can,’ I understand the Son; and where he says, ‘I will,’ I understand the Holy Spirit; and where he says, ‘I shall,’ I understand the unity of the Trinity, three Persons and one truth; and where he says, ‘You shall see for yourself,’ I understand the union of all humankind that shall be saved in the blessed Trinity.<sup>71</sup>

All “that shall be saved” are joined in the Trinity. In this joining, wrath is not capable of entering, nor sin, nor judgment. For as Julian rightly points out, “two opposites could never be together in one place...I saw that sin is the most opposite, so that as long as we be mixed up with any part of sin, we shall never see the blessed face of our Lord clearly.”<sup>72</sup> Yet, as in 1 John, sin is not the end of the story, for,

Our Lord God dwells in us and is here with us, clasps us close, encloses us for tender love so that he may never leave us, and is more near to us than tongue can tell or

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70 “In spite all this, I knew in this showing of God that such a way of seeing him cannot be continuous in this life...we often fail in his said, and presently we fall into ourselves.” Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 93.

71 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 60.

72 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 157.

heart can think...for in that previous, blissful sight no  
 woe can last nor shall weal fail us.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, when we dwell in sin, we dwell apart from God. Yet when we dwell with God, he increases our longing for him and removes our sin. Julian does not have a fully realized eschatology here, however, as she sees that for now we experience weal and woe, for now we mourn, but, she always reminds us, not forever.<sup>74</sup>

### *Christ and Adam: Love's Simultaneity*

As Julian wrestles with the question of sin further, she is given an allegory of a lord and servant to understand what God has shown her. As we identify the relationship between this allegory and the imagery in 1 John, we will see how God's seed (Christ) within us provides us with a rebirth into Christ's victory over sin, replacing the Old Adam with the New.

In Julian's writings, the allegory of the lord and servant creates a moment of simultaneity where Adam's sin and Christ's death exist as God "in a point," that is, in a single moment.<sup>75</sup> Hall (among others) points to the centrality of the parable of the lord and the servant to answer Julian's questions regarding the nature of sin.

In an extensive meditation, Julian discovers that Adam and Christ have been united in the person of the servant: the suffering of Adam's fall and Christ's dutiful suffering become mixed so as to be indistinguishable. 'And thus our good Lord Jesus has taken upon himself all our guilt; and therefore our Father neither may nor will assign us

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73 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 157.

74 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, 157.

75 Nuth points to the importance of this idea of Julian experiencing "God's time" for Julian's soteriology. As Nuth explains it: "What humans see in process, and interpret in terms of time sequence or cause and effect, is seen as eternally accomplished by God. Because in God all is eternally present, God never views the fall apart from the Incarnation and its fruits. Therefore, from God's perspective, the powers of evil are overcome, humanity is God's own city and dwelling place in whom God eternally rejoices, and all is well" (632). See Nuth, "Two Medieval Soteriologies: Anselm of Canterbury and Julian of Norwich," 630–32.

any more guilt than he does to his own son, dearly loved Christ' (LT, 51, 122). By Julian's vision, we cannot understand the *imago Dei*, the fall of Adam, sin, or suffering without seeing Christ. The doctrines are bled together in the bleeding of the new Adam. In this way, she comes to realize how 'wretched sin' is, truly, *nothing*.<sup>76</sup>

It helps if we note how Julian's theological meditation in the allegory is thoroughly informed by biblical imagery. In order to understand Julian's use of biblical imagery, we need to see the relationship between the story of creation and sin in Genesis with its picture of Adam, as representative for all humanity, and its reinterpretation in Christ's provision of rebirth as the New Adam. A primary source of this Old Adam/New Adam motif is in Paul (Romans 5:12-17; 1 Corinthians 15:20-27), which certainly seems present in Julian's thought. But this idea is also apparent in 1 John 3:9 where the story of Genesis is linked to the love of God.

In 1 John 3:9, as we are born of God, we have God's seed within us (the New Adam) and we cannot sin. This seed is explicitly referenced as the Son of God. Here the implications of our initial discussion of becoming God's children also has great significance. In Christ's death, we are born of God, we have God's seed within us and thus are not able to sin (*non potest peccare*). The Latin makes the link with Christ clear as we are "*fili Dei*" just as Jesus is the "*Filius Dei*." Further, this discussion in 1 John 3:9 is bracketed by the phrase *ab initio* ("from the beginning") (v. 8 and v. 11) and the story of Cain (v. 12) linking the language of *semen* and the Genesis narrative of creation and the birth of humankind through Adam. We are aware of this language in Genesis 3:15 in the curse. In 1 John 3, John compares the sons of God and the sons of the devil. In Genesis 3:15, the author describes the offspring of Eve and the offspring of the devil. In fact, the *semen* of Eve is the seed of Abraham (*Abrahae semen*), the promised seed of the Davidic kingdom (Psalms 89:3-4), fulfilled in Christ.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Hall, *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, 315. Italics are hers.

<sup>77</sup> The quintessential example is Galatians 3:29: *si autem vos Christi ergo Abrahae semen estis secundum promissionem heredes*, "If then you are of Christ therefore

Thus 1 John 3 uses the language of the Genesis story to remind John's readers that we have the seed of Adam in us, but more importantly, in our new birth in God, we have the seed of Christ in us. Because we have this seed of Christ and this new birth, the sin of Adam is overcome by the love of Christ. In this way, we cannot sin because sin is nothing.

As we have seen, Julian's concept of rebirth, "again-making," is robust. Her vision of the first creation and the re-creation in Christ are clear in her allegory.<sup>78</sup> As Julian's idea of God sees God's gaze as including the ending and the beginning at once, it is consistent for her to discuss sin as though it has no meaning, no substance.

## Conclusion

Thus, as this article has demonstrated, we can best read Julian's picture of sin and judgment in light of God's love. In his love, God sees the final victory established by the Son's death and resurrection; thus, when we dwell in him, are reborn in him, love one another through him, we too are remade in the image of his glory.<sup>79</sup> This

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you (pl) are the seed of Abraham, heirs according to the promise." I have translated the passage myself to point more clearly to the language "of Christ" and "seed of Abraham," which is more obscured in modern translations.

78 As she looks systematically at the theology of *eros* in Julian, Ahlgren addresses the allegory of the lord and servant in similar terms, stating, "Julian's portrayal of humanity and human nature is informed by the critical insight, given to her after much contemplation, that the fall and the incarnation should be approached not only as sequential, chronological events in human history, but also as indicative of the ways that the second person of the Trinity works eternally in, with, and through humanity. 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' As Julian reflects on the nature of the Logos, her understanding of Christ as the *imago Dei* present through the creative process leads her to see the story of the Lord and servant as both a story of Adam (and all humanity) and of Christ. In her analysis of this story, Julian helps us understand our capacity as humans, in and through Christ—that is, as members of the body of Christ—to participate in the passion and resurrection of Christ, in our falling and rising again." Ahlgren, "Julian of Norwich's Theology of Eros," 44.

79 As Kerry Dearborn points out, Jesus not only gives us rebirth, "but she carries the metaphor of suffering into the realm of the ongoing sustenance of the lives of the new creatures whom Jesus has birthed. Here there is much more than a deed done and finished. Here a new life has begun, and Christ is committed as a Mother to the ongoing nurture of that life." Dearborn, "The Crucified Christ as the Motherly God: The Theology of Julian of Norwich," 293.

foundational love given by the Father through the gift of the Son, given by the Son through his death on the cross, given by the Spirit through his indwelling, comforts those in deepest despair and was the Lord's meaning in all of Julian's revelations:

And from the time it was shown, I often desired to know what was our Lord's meaning. And fifteen years and more after, I was answered in spiritual understanding, with this saying: 'Would you know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well: love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love. What did he show you? Love. Wherefore did he show it you? For love. Hold yourself therein and you shall know and learn more in the same; but you will never know nor learn another thing therein without end.' Thus I was taught that love was our Lord's meaning.<sup>80</sup>

This vision of the Lord's meaning of love is deeply steeped in Julian's reading of 1 John where love is what makes us born of God and where this love extends to one another as a sign of this love. It is this vision of love that allows us to be reborn such that sin is no more. We are re-created, our "again-making" happens within the Lord's love.

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80 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation*, ch. 89, p. 181.

# Calvin's Understanding of Divine Accommodation: A Hermeneutical Contribution to the Science and Theology Dialogue

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Erik Hogman\*

## **Abstract**

*The prevalence of the critical scientific method in the pursuit of truth has resulted in conflicting responses to scripture. The concerns of the text may be relegated under the concerns of science at the expense of the theological intentions of the text, or conversely, scientific opinions may be dismissed out of hand as being incompatible with the authoritative truth of scripture. This article proposes that John Calvin's doctrine of revelation, particularly his employment of divine accommodation, can help us engage this dialogue more constructively. Calvin's understanding of the accommodating nature of truth in creation and scripture allows believers to engage with scientific opinions, maintaining the validity of both science and scripture in the pursuit of God.*

The dialogue between science and theology often comes to a standstill over discussions surrounding the place of scripture. From a theological perspective two extremes can be observed. One is a propositional understanding of the text insisting "that every declarative sentence of the Bible, unless the contrary can be shown from the context, is to be taken as expressing a revealed truth."<sup>1</sup> Due to

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1 Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (New York: Garden City, Doubleday, 1983), 48.

the inflexibility of this understanding of scripture and its insistence on the propositional nature of the text, many scientific findings that are contradictory to particular, literal readings become contentious and are dismissed offhand. The other extreme is represented by an approach to scripture that seeks to assimilate it under the rubric of scientific inquiry. John Polkinghorne points out that in this assimilation approach, science tends to play “too great a controlling role in the proposed convergence, with the result that there is a danger that theological concerns become subordinated to the scientific.”<sup>2</sup> A more balanced approach to the science-theology dialogue must be applied; one that acknowledges the truth and validity of scientific discovery and the reliability and authority of scripture. Calvin’s doctrine of revelation is a good place to begin to seek such a solution.

Within his doctrine of revelation, Calvin seeks to explain the cohesion that exists between the communicative impetuses of the Transcendent God and their finite representation within creation. Calvin describes the manner in which the Word of God presents divine truth through inadequate and deficient mediums by employing the concept of ‘accommodation’. Calvin’s complex and nuanced exploration of accommodation is able to provide a way forward in the dialogue between theology and science. It is flexible enough to maintain the authority and truth of scripture, while acknowledging the reality and significance of scientific discoveries that challenge traditional interpretations. In order to unpack Calvin’s use of accommodation, we will begin with an overview of the concept itself. We will then delve into its application within Calvin’s doctrine of revelation. From revelation we will go deeper, exploring the multifaceted task of accommodation within Calvin’s work in order to grasp more clearly the manner in which it functions within his conception of revelation. Finally, we will take stock and consider if Calvin’s understanding of accommodation remains a valid and useful resource today in the dialogue between theology and science.

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2 John Polkinghorne, *Science and the Trinity: The Christian Encounter with Reality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 9.



### What is the doctrine of accommodation?

The Latin term *accommodare*, was frequently employed by classical rhetoricians to portray the communicative impetus of language. *Accommodare*, or accommodate, in English, has the “sense of fitting, adapting, adjusting language, of building speech-bridges between the matter of discourse and the intended audience.”<sup>3</sup> This is the same term that Calvin frequently employs in his exploration of the mystery of divine communication. In the broadest and most general theological terms,

*[A]ccommodation* occurs specifically in the use of human words and concepts for the communication of the law and the gospel, but it in no way implies the loss of truth or the lessening of scriptural authority. Thus *accommodation* or *condescension* refers to the manner or mode of revelation, the gift of the wisdom of infinite God in finite form, not to the quality of the revelation or to the matter revealed.<sup>4</sup>

The term “accommodation” thus defined can be interpreted or applied in a variety of ways, depending on one’s understanding of the mode in which this accommodation occurs.

### The Patristic doctrine of accommodation:

Calvin’s awareness and understanding of the Latin term *accommodare* is derived from both his humanistic background – classical

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3 Ford Lewis Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, ed. Robert Benedetto (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 120.

4 H. J. Lee, “‘Men of Galilee, Why Stand Gazing up into Heaven?’: Revisiting Galileo, Astronomy, and the Authority of the Bible,” *JETS* 53/1 (March 2010): 107. Quoted from: Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 19. While this definition is generally helpful, it fails to describe where the central aspect of the Divine Word resides. Those who hold to an inerrant propositional understanding of scripture and many of those who wish to subsume it under a scientific rubric can both agree on this definition of accommodation. Thus, a general definition of accommodation alone cannot define how scripture should be used in the science-theology dialogue. Unpacking Calvin’s specific doctrine of accommodation is thus an important part of our inquiry.

rhetoric – and his expansive familiarity with the Patristic tradition, which frequently employed this concept. Origen and Augustine were particularly influential for Calvin in this regard, and he borrowed considerably from their varied approaches. Origen explains the divine employment of accommodating language in scripture as being similar to when,

We ourselves, when talking with very young children, do not aim at exerting our own power of eloquence, but, adapting ourselves to the weakness of our charge, both say and do those things which may appear to us useful for the correction and improvement of the children as children, so the word of God appears to have dealt with the history, making the capacity of the hearers, and the benefit which they were to receive, the standard of the appropriateness of its announcements (regarding Him).<sup>5</sup>

Calvin frequently applies Origen’s adult/child model of accommodation in his own work.

While Augustine’s hermeneutical strategies for the interpretation of scripture differ considerably from Origen (being less inclined to resort to allegorical hermeneutical strategies), he too employs similar accommodation language in describing the complexity of divine communication. For Augustine, scripture is entirely true in all its facets. Thus,

There should be no doubt about the following: whenever the experts of this world can truly demonstrate something about natural phenomena, we should show it not to be contrary to our scripture; but whenever in their books they teach us something contrary to Holy Writ, we should without any doubt hold it to be most false and also show this by any means we can; and in this way we

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<sup>5</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.71 (ANF 4:1218).

should keep the faith of our Lord, in whom are hidden all the treasures of knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

Augustine is able to speak in such confident terms because, for him, 'science',<sup>7</sup> which is focused on the natural realm, and scripture are in harmony since they are both derived from the one divine Word.<sup>8</sup> Complexity emerges within this system when Augustine points out that often perceived differences between science and scripture occur because the interpreter of scripture fails to understand how scripture is written.<sup>9</sup> At times scripture speaks in accommodating language. Augustine, in explaining the fact that the biblical authors speak of God as experiencing anger, insists that this is an employment of anthropomorphic accommodating language. He states,

But if Scripture did not employ such words, it would not strike home so closely, as it were, to all mankind. For Scripture is concerned for man, and it uses such language to terrify the proud, to arouse the careless, to exercise the inquirer, and to nourish the intelligent; and it would not have this effect if it did not first bend down and, as we may say, descend to the level of those on the ground.<sup>10</sup>

A final aspect of Augustine's conception of accommodation that is present also within the work of Calvin is Augustine's belief that, in certain cases, scripture remains authoritative and reliable when it addresses aspects outside of the realm of salvation.<sup>11</sup>

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6 Lee, "Revisiting Galileo," 113. Quoted by Galileo, *Letter to Castelli in The Galileo Affair*, trans. Maurice A. Finocchiaro (Berkeley: University of California, 1989), 101.

7 The term 'science' is used loosely in this context as referring to general knowledge that pertains to the natural world, as opposed to the modern critical notion of science as a methodological approach to the natural world.

8 Lee, "Revisiting Galileo," 116.

9 Lee, "Revisiting Galileo," 108.

10 St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1984), XV.25.

11 Lee, "Revisiting Galileo," 116.

This brief foray into the Patristic understanding of accommodation with which Calvin was intimately acquainted is intended to demonstrate that Calvin's theology was not derived in a vacuum, rather he inherited a long tradition that had already taken into consideration the relationship between the truth of God present in nature and in scripture.

### **Calvin's doctrine of revelation:**

Calvin begins *The Institutes* with an exploration of the epistemological problem with which humanity contends. We cannot know ourselves because we subsist on the divine and we cannot know God because he is divine (*Inst.* I.1.1-2). Thus, unmediated knowledge of God for humanity is impossible on two counts, first because of the absolute transcendence and holiness of God and secondly because of the incapacity of humanity to comprehend the divine majesty due to sin and feebleness.<sup>12</sup> Yet knowledge of God is important and necessary:

Our knowledge should serve first to teach us fear and reverence; secondly, with it as our guide and teacher, we should learn to seek every good from him, and, having received it, to credit it to his account. For how can the thought of God penetrate your mind without your realizing immediately that you are his handiwork, you have been made over and bound to his command by right of creation, that you owe your life to him? – that whatever you undertake, whatever you do, ought to be ascribed to him? If this be so, it now assuredly follows that your life is wickedly corrupt unless it be disposed to his service, seeing that his will ought for us to be the law by which we live (*Inst.* I.2.2).

Knowledge of God is imparted or revealed by God, through grace, in the natural realm. The created realm, nature, speaks of God to all humanity “God himself has implanted in all men a certain un-

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12 Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 1.

derstanding of his divine majesty” (*Inst.* I.3.1). The Word is present within creation and evident through his works both in maintaining creation, through law and order in government, and by divine providence. Yet, through human sin and corruption, humanity is incapable of fully grasping the knowledge of the divine through his works. Since natural revelation is insufficient to provide knowledge of God to humanity, God provided the Word more explicitly in scripture.

It is therefore clear that God has provided the assistance of the Word for the sake of all those to whom he has pleased to give useful instruction because he foresaw that his likeness imprinted upon the most beautiful form of the universe would be insufficiently effective (*Inst.* I.6.3).

Calvin now commences to explore the nature of scripture and the origin of its authoritative status. Like the created order, scripture is derived solely from God: “the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard” (*Inst.* I.7.1). For Calvin, scripture is a divinely inspired document. This means that “[i]n Calvin the thought of revelation is freed from all historical caprice and contingency. The one God meets us majestically, if more or less in concealed form, all along the line.”<sup>13</sup> It is at this point that we begin to see a divergence in the interpretation of Calvin’s understanding of revelation in scripture. Benjamin Warfield reads Calvin as proposing that,

The effects of inspiration are such that God alone is the responsible author of the inspired product, that we owe the same reverence to it as to God Himself, and should esteem the words as purely His as if we heard them proclaimed with his living voice from heaven; and that there is nothing human mixed with them.<sup>14</sup>

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13 Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 165.

14 Benjamin Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God,” pp. 131-214

Warfield is indeed correct in picking up such a line of thought from Calvin, yet in so doing Warfield is only presenting a part of Calvin's complex and often subtle doctrine of revelation.<sup>15</sup> Ronald Wallace presents an important point at this juncture, stating,

It must be remembered that, however much stress Calvin may have laid on the divine origin of the Word of Scripture, for him it is Jesus Christ who is the Word of God, and that the Scripture is the instrument that Christ uses for the manifestation of His presence. Moreover, it is an imperfect and inappropriate instrument at its very best. 'Nothing can be said of things so great and so profound, but by similitudes taken from created things... We must allow that there is a degree of impropriety (*improprium*) in the language when what is borrowed from created things is transferred to the hidden majesty of God.' [Comm. On Heb. 1:3] All the other instruments and signs which God uses in revelation partake of a true worldliness and humanity.<sup>16</sup>

Like Augustine, Calvin speaks of the Word of God as underlying both nature and scripture in revelatory truth. For Calvin, the Word, Jesus Christ, acts as the solution to the epistemological problem which Calvin maps out at the beginning of the *Institutes*. Jesus is the

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in *Calvin and the Reformation*, ed. William Park Armstrong (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980), 161.

15 By reading Calvin's doctrine of inspiration in such strong and un-nuanced terms, and focusing it on the text of Scripture, Warfield forces Calvin into a propositionally geared hermeneutic that is focused on the literal interpretation of the revealed truths contained in Scripture.

16 Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 113. If the locus of authority is found in the Word, residing behind the text, and is not balanced by Calvin's insistence on the inspired essence of the text, there is an inclination to follow the lead of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Neologians who employed accommodation in order to access the text "most adequately in its truth content rather than its sheer occurrence character." Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 61. Such a move reduces the importance of the text as the means by which the Word is accommodated and rather seeks to invent its own accommodating language.

answer to the question: how can humanity know God and how can humanity know itself? Karl Barth points out that for Calvin,

Christ is that unspoken original presupposition in terms of which we see God a priori as the ground and goal, the one who judges us and shows us mercy, and in terms of which we see ourselves a priori, when measured against God, as sinners, and are thus pointed to grace [i.e. through natural revelation]. Looking from Christ at God, we have knowledge of God, or, as it is put later, knowledge of God the Creator. Looking from Christ at us, we have knowledge of ourselves, out of which arises later knowledge of God the Redeemer. It is the same light, however, that shines on both sides. The Christian element in Calvin is not a special higher possibility of knowledge, but the first and only possibility by means of which we may establish and say what is essential about God and us.<sup>17</sup>

One final point to make is that in the interpretation of scripture, which maintains its authority through its self-authentication, Christ becomes a constant thematic and interpretive device in the New Testament, but also in the Old. For Calvin, Christ is the ultimate source of divine knowledge, and thus he is the perfect interpretive device to apply in reading the language of accommodation in the Old Testament. The ancient Jews received revelation in accommodated form; ultimately they were waiting for Christ's incarnation to fully realize the revelation of the Old Testament. In conclusion, it is important to note the tension within Calvin's writing between the dialectical poles of scripture's authority. For Calvin, the authority of scripture rests both in its textual presentation as well as in the manner in which the Word lies behind the Bible as a source of revelatory authority, not only in scripture but also in nature.

The final element of Calvin's doctrine of revelation is illumination, the companion of inspiration. While the doctrine of inspiration

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<sup>17</sup> Barth, *Theology of John Calvin*, 164.

binds divine truth to the words of scripture, the highly subjective character of illumination, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, controls the interpretive aspect of revelation.

Hence the process by which the content of the Bible becomes certain and authoritative is not merely an enforcing of the dictate of the letter and the subjection of the human understanding to it, but, if we take Calvin in the living sense that he had in view, it is also a conversation of the truth with itself.<sup>18</sup>

The aspect of grace now comes to the fore, since it is through grace that the Holy Spirit acts in illumination, supplying the faith necessary to access the Word of scripture. Calvin states:

But we say that the Word itself, however it be imparted to us, is like a mirror in which faith may contemplate God. Whether, therefore, God makes use of man's help in this or works by his own power alone, he always represents himself through his Word to those whom he wills to draw to himself.... In understanding faith it is not merely a question of knowing that God exists, but also – and this especially – of knowing what is his will toward us. For it is not so much our concern to know who he is in himself, as what he wills to be toward us (*Inst.* III.2.6).

Calvin is thus concluding that the knowledge of God is not to be sought in order for us to know Him in his essence, rather it is necessary in order that we can better serve Him. One important aspect to note within Calvin's doctrine of illumination, which is unique to him among the Magisterial Reformers, is the separate placement of the Holy Spirit and the Word in two intimately connected locations within the revelatory process.<sup>19</sup> This highlights the Trinitarian un-

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18 Barth, *Theology of John Calvin*, 167.

19 John Hesselink, "Calvin's Theology," pp. 74-92 in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,



derstanding that Calvin sees as occurring in revelation as the Divine accommodates itself to humanity. In the process of revelation, the inspiration of scripture occurs through the Word and illumination occurs through the Holy Spirit in order to reveal the Father.<sup>20</sup> We will explore other works of divine accommodation which occur in a similar Trinitarian mode as we turn to Calvin's treatment of accommodation in nature, scripture, the incarnation, and the sacraments.

### **Accommodation and Calvin**

With a basic understanding of Calvin's doctrine of revelation now in place, we can begin to explore the various ways in which Calvin employs accommodation. While revelation is the doctrinal superstructure of God's gracious communicative undertaking, the actual presentation of the transcendent and mysterious divine occurs in a variety of ways through accommodation.<sup>21</sup>

#### *In Nature*

We have already explored Calvin's understanding of the role of nature in communicating or accommodating the knowledge of the divine, thus only a few examples are required to show how he does this. First, for Calvin, the bare fact that we exist points to God.

Everything of which our senses bring knowledge to us – from our puny bodies to the stars, microcosm, and macrocosm – is the work of a beneficent Creator who for our sakes thus shows himself in these ways, varied, faceted, yet altogether a unity.<sup>22</sup>

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2004), 80.

<sup>20</sup> The Trinitarian nature of revelation ensures that each person of the Trinity is equally present as a whole within both inspiration and illumination. Thus the Word should not be understood as acting alone in inspiration, nor the Holy Spirit in illumination, rather the whole Trinity is present in the work of the revelation. It is helpful, however, to speak particularly of the actions of the specific persons of the Trinity within the process of revelation in order to better comprehend how the Trinity is accommodated to creation.

<sup>21</sup> Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 131.

<sup>22</sup> As quoted in Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 131.

Calvin himself states,

Indeed, his essence is incomprehensible; hence, his divineness far escapes all human perception. But upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance (*Inst.* I.5.1).

In addition, Calvin suggests that civil governments, when functioning properly, point to a beneficent God. In the final book of the Institutes (IV), Calvin aims to demonstrate how God is accommodated in ecclesial structures of the church. These church structures are intended to act as a help to “accommodate to our sluggishness the acceptance of Christ, who becomes ours through faith in the gospel (4.1.1)”<sup>23</sup> For Calvin, nature plays only a small role in revealing Christ, as scripture is by far the greatest source employed to fulfill Divine accommodation.

### *In Scripture*

The revelatory or communicative aspect of accommodation for Calvin occurs in several diverse ways throughout scripture. For Calvin “accommodation begins as an apologetical tool against hostile critics of Scripture; it ends as a pastoral instrument for the edification of believers.”<sup>24</sup> Jon Balserek points out that, for Calvin, God acts in accommodation through His,

Daily interactions with his children – believer’s oaths, vows, and prayers,<sup>25</sup> his or her performance of good

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23 Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 132. Speaking in terms of divine accommodation seems appropriate when discussing a missional understanding of the nature of the church. God becomes visible within the world through the activity of the church, which remains within the created order and a part of nature and so accommodates the presence of God on earth.

24 Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 124.

25 Space limitations prevent us from exploring how Calvin sees God’s accommodation in each of these areas. We will take prayer as one example: “God sometimes accommodates himself to his children by keeping from them something for which

works and endurance of chastening, and the Lord's guidance and providential oversight of his people. In these areas, according to Calvin, God tempers his dealings with his children according to their capacity.<sup>26</sup>

In relation to the providential activity of God, Calvin understands God at times to be acting in mercy through accommodation in order to alleviate the suffering of his people, and at other times, as in his sermon on Job, as acting in order prevent his flock from living at ease so that they do not become sluggish. In this mode of accommodation, God accommodates himself to His people by hiding Himself.<sup>27</sup> God also punishes and rewards his children extravagantly through means of accommodation. The previous examples pertain to the manner in which God employs accommodation in relation to his children, yet Calvin also sees God as employing accommodation in His portrayal of His own behaviour.<sup>28</sup> F. L. Battles points out that within scripture God has three self-portraits, that of Father, Teacher, and Doctor. These accommodating portrayals of God communicate his gracious activity toward his children as he seeks to draw them nearer to Himself.<sup>29</sup> This cursory overview of Calvin's understanding of the prevalence of accommodating language within scripture mere-

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they have asked. He does this for the purpose of protecting them from the extravagance that would bring about their downfall ... (Psalms 78:26-31)." See Jon Balsarak, "'The Accommodating Act Par Excellence?': An Inquiry Into the Incarnation and Calvin's Understanding of Accommodation," *SJT* 55, no. 4 (2002): 415.

26 Jon Balsarak, "The God of Love and Weakness: Calvin's Understanding of God's Accommodating Relationship with His People," *WTJ* 62 (2000): 182.

27 Balsarak, "The Accommodating Act Par Excellence," 415.

28 One example of God's behaviour being portrayed through accommodation pertains to the scriptural portrayal of God repenting of his actions. Calvin proposes that this portrayal of God is employing accommodating language. "For because our weakness does not attain to his exalted state, the description of him that is given to us must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it. Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us ... by the word 'repentance' is meant the fact that God changes with respect to his actions. Meanwhile neither God's plan nor his will is reversed, nor his volition altered; but what he had from eternity foreseen, approved, and decreed, he pursues in uninterrupted tenor, however sudden the variation may appear in men's eyes" (*Inst.* I. 17.13).

29 Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 126.

ly touches the surface. Yet it demonstrates that Calvin understands accommodation to be a very diverse, flexible, and broadly applied divine instrument of communication.

### *In the Incarnation*

For Calvin, a central instance of God's accommodating communicative and revelatory action is the incarnation.

If accommodation is the speech-bridge between the known and the unknown, between the infinitesimal and the infinite, between the apparent and the real, between the human and the divine, the Logos who tented among us is the point from which we must view creation, Fall, and all history, before and since the incarnation. For Calvin, then, in every act of divine accommodating, the whole Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is at work.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that God would accommodate Himself in human form in Christ is a central aspect of Calvin's theology and an essential hermeneutical tool that he employs in reading and interpreting the Old and New Testaments in unity. The accommodation of the incarnational presence of Christ is set within a Trinitarian framework, which in turn brings to mind the Trinitarian aspect of accommodation present within Calvin's doctrine of scriptural revelation. We have already seen Calvin's portrayal of the Word as being present in inspired scripture, interpreted through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, to the end that the Father be revealed and through this revelation that humanity might receive the divine saving grace.<sup>31</sup>

### *In Sacrament*

Finally we turn to the sacramental aspect of accommodation.

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30 Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 119.

31 Balsarak points out that "the purposes mentioned by Calvin for the incarnation often include the idea of saving as well as revealing. This does not really introduce a new element into the divine purpose, since Calvin always views the revelation of the knowledge of God as essentially a saving event" (Balsarak, "The Accommodating Act Par Excellence," 413).

Calvin understands the sacraments as a means of grace supplied by God in order to assist the believer in faith. By exploring Calvin's sacramental theology, particularly the manner in which Calvin connects the elements of the Eucharist with the real presence of Christ, we will gain a better understanding of how we should understand the relationship between the text of scripture and the Word that is accommodated through it. Calvin states that,

A sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is joined to it as a sort of appendix, with the purpose of confirming and sealing the promise itself, and of making it more evident to us and in a sense ratifying it. By this means God provides first for our ignorance and dullness, then for our weakness. Yet, properly speaking, it is not so much needed to confirm his Sacred Word as to establish us in faith in it (*Inst.* IV.14.3).

Calvin goes on to speak very plainly that through the sacraments God is accommodating Himself to our weakness:

Here our merciful Lord, according to his infinite kindness, so tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and, do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings" (*Inst.* IV.14.3).

Wallace points out that, at this point, it would be appropriate to draw a connection between how Calvin speaks of the accommodating frailty or 'flesh' of the sacramental elements of bread and wine and his doctrine of revelation and the manner in which the Word is present in the 'flesh' of the Bible.<sup>32</sup> The very words or 'flesh' of scripture accommodate the real presence of the Word within them. In a similar manner this same mode of accommodation occurs for Calvin in the

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32 Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 113.

incarnation and in the sacraments. In all three examples, a Trinitarian framework is present in order to provide God's children with knowledge and grace.<sup>33</sup> With a general understanding of how Calvin's doctrine of revelation works and the way he dynamically applies accommodation, we are now in a position to explore how Calvin's specific understanding of accommodation can be useful in the current dialogue between science and theology.

### **Calvin's Doctrine of Accommodation: Approaching the Theology-Science Dialogue**

In discerning specifically how one is to apply the hermeneutical tool of accommodation to the dialogue between modern science and theology, we can turn to the Reformation debates surrounding the real presence of Christ within the elements of the Eucharist as a helpful and illuminating parallel example. We are able to make this move since we have already demonstrated the consistent application of accommodation in Calvin's work, understood through a Trinitarian framework, within his sacramental doctrine and his doctrine of revelation. F. L. Battles states that "divine accommodation is at work in the Supper, but (as we have suggested) it is neither accommodation of physical to spiritual, nor of spiritual to physical. It is rather accommodation of spiritual *in* physical."<sup>34</sup> In a sacramental context, Calvin rejects an understanding of accommodation that views the Eucharistic elements as being merely spiritual (Zwingli). This understanding of accommodation has a parallel hermeneutical outcome in the spiritualization of scripture, as the interpreter seeks to access the kernel, or principle, behind the accommodated language of the text. A present example of this tendency can be found in the work of Denis O. Lamoureux, who applies a mode of accommodation which attempts to get behind the phenomenological world of the ancient writers in order to access "the eternal Message of Faith" present within the text in order to harmonize scripture with evolutionary

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33 Trinitarian overtones are also present within Eucharist, in preaching as the Lord teaches through the Word, and in the Sacrament as the Holy Spirit illuminates the elements (*Inst.* IV.14.9).

34 Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 136.

science.<sup>35</sup> This interpretive mode fails to take into consideration the integrated nature of the Word with the text of scripture itself.

We now return to our Reformation context and the Eucharistic debate. The Church of Rome was guilty of taking the opposite extreme, seeking to accommodate the spiritual to the physical, thus associating the actual flesh and blood of Christ in physical terms with the bread and wine of Communion. In hermeneutical terms this parallels the propositional understanding of scripture as being rooted “in the revealed truths contained in the authoritative sources,” which are the very texts of the Bible itself.<sup>36</sup> Such an understanding fails to comprehend the living nature of scripture and the manner in which it holds the very dynamic and flexible Word of God. For Calvin, the Eucharistic elements contained the real presence of Christ in a veiled and mysterious mode, yet the living presence of Christ remained very real in the bread and in the wine. Hermeneutically, as we seek to understand how the Word rests within the very text of scripture, Calvin's understanding of accommodation holds in mystical unity and tension the reality of the Word and text in close proximity. Battles states:

In the divine rhetoric accommodation as practiced by the Holy Spirit so empowers the physical, verbal vehicle that it leads us to, not away from, the very truth. Thus accommodating language and the truth to which it points are really a unity. One cannot say this of the tempered speech of human rhetoric.<sup>37</sup>

For Calvin, then, the very words of scripture are alive through the accommodating work of the Trinity. In scripture, “The act of accommodating to our weakness is not mere rhetoric clothed with the physical, but divine energy, power, spirit, channeled through the physical. In this the divine rhetoric utterly transcends the rhetoric

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35 Denis O. Lamoureux, *Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 167.

36 Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 45.

37 Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 136.

of the human orator or writer.”<sup>38</sup> At the heart of scripture, in its very words, Christ exists mystically; this is why Calvin thinks that we should study it.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

It is simple to speak of employing the concept of divine accommodation to scripture in order to harmonize the seemingly conflicting narratives of scripture and science. Yet one must specify how one aims to balance the spiritual and physical sides of accommodation in the Word and the text. Through this process of finding balance the reader is responsible for comprehending the hermeneutically complex nature of the biblical texts, including the world of the author that exists behind the text, the text itself, and what the reader brings to the text. The employment of this critical interpretive process to the reading of scripture ensures that the way in which the spiritual is accommodated within the physical text is not distorted. Yet throughout the historical, linguistic, and methodological study of the physical text the reader must continually be aware of the fact that these pursuits pertain to the means by which the physical text accommodates the spiritual nature of the text. Calvin seeks to fuse the two dialectically and then shrouds this connection in mystery. He makes the same move in his sacramental theology, insisting on the real presence of Christ in the elements but refusing to explain specifically how this presence occurs. Calvin places the doctrine of revelation within a Trinitarian framework that accomplishes the process of accommodation through grace. He then formulates an understanding of scripture that remains flexible enough to weather the storms of modern scientific inquiry and the challenges that they bring to traditional interpretations of scripture. The dynamic flexibility of Calvin’s doctrine of accommodation allows Christians who read scripture under the illumination of the Holy Spirit to trust confidently in its truth despite perceived interpretive conflicts between its texts and scientific discoveries. This is because the Word is manifest both within creation

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38 Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 135.

39 Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 27.



and within scripture. If we follow St. Augustine's lead we can trust that both science and scripture lead to the truth. Where conflict arises between science and scripture, a failure in interpretation must exist, either in a scientific or hermeneutical mode. In addition, like St. Augustine, we must refuse ignorance and engage with science, even when it forces us to revise our old and familiar interpretations of scripture. Yet through this process of upheaval and turmoil, scripture remains eternally true, for it sacramentally embodies the divine Word of God.



# “Come Healing of the Reason”: Problematic Practices of Rationality in Christian Faith

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Dennis Hiebert\*

## **Abstract**

*The autonomous rationality of modernity has affected Christianity in ways that have profoundly shaped its current character. An interdisciplinary analysis reveals the shifting location and function of rationality in Christian faith, and explicates two social practices of rationality that in their extreme prove problematic. Both the sociological practice of rationalization as well as the philosophical practice of rationalism are shown to reduce Christian faith by diminishing and even denying its non-rational elements. It is argued that just as Christianity is metaphysical and God is supernatural, so too Christian faith is meta-rational or super-rational. In matters of Christian faith, rationality makes a good servant but a bad master. Therefore, way must be made for more affective, narrative, and incarnational forms of Christian faith that are not anti-rationality, but anti-rationalist.*

## **Introduction**

*Life of Pi* is a multiple award-winning novel by Yann Martel published in 2001.<sup>1</sup> The 2012 film adaptation directed by Ang Lee also won multiple Golden Globe and Academy Awards, including Best Picture. It tells the tale of an Indian boy, Piscine “Pi” Patel, who is raised Hindu, but at age 14 is introduced to Christianity, and then at 15 to Islam. He decides to follow all three religions because he “just wants to love God.” He is told by his father and mentors of the three religions that doing so is irrational and therefore impossible.

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1 Yann Martel, *Life of Pi: A Novel* (New York: Vintage, 2001).

He must choose one. At age 16, Pi and his family together with their zoo animals emigrate for Canada, but are shipwrecked on a Japanese freighter. Pi's family is lost, but he survives, stranded on a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean with a Bengal tiger as well as three other animals who are soon devoured by each other, and finally the tiger. While adrift at sea with the tiger, Pi experiences various fantastic events. After 227 days, the lifeboat washes onto a beach in Mexico and the tiger disappears into the nearby jungle. While Pi is recovering in the hospital, he tells his story to two investigators from the Japanese Ministry of Transport. The officials reject it as unbelievable. So Pi tells them an alternate story, replacing the animals with the ship's cook, a sailor, his mother, and himself. Pointing out that neither story can be proven, and that neither explains the cause of the shipwreck, he asks the officials which story they prefer. They choose the story with the animals. Pi thanks them and adds, "So it goes with God."

According to the author Martel, his novel contains three themes: "Life is a story... You can choose your story... A story with God is the better story."<sup>2</sup> As a boy, Piscine chose the nickname "Pi" to pay tribute to the irrational number which is the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter. An irrational number is any real number that cannot be expressed as a ratio of two integers, and cannot be represented as a terminating or recurring decimal. In mathematics, that seemingly most rational academic discipline in which " $2 + 2 = 4$ " (though it could equal other numbers when using something other than a base ten numeral system), most real numbers are irrational, as mathematics defines irrational. In physics, that seemingly most empirical hard science which examines physical matter, sub-fields such as classical mechanics, quantum mechanics, and relativity theory are rife with contradictions, paradoxes, or mysteries that rationality has not been able to unravel.<sup>3</sup> In religion, that seemingly most formative personal and collective life force, knowledge has traditionally not been built on the rational and the empirical. In postmodern parlance, a religion, like a culture or a science, is a grand story or metanarrative replete with its own language or set of symbols straining toward

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2 Jennie Renton, "Yann Martel Interview," *Textualities*. Retrieved 19 May 2013.

3 Noson S. Yanofsky, *The Outer Limits of Reason: What Science, Mathematics, and Logic Cannot Tell Us* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

some usually supernatural referent of truth and/or love, according to its own epistemology or method of knowing. Across world religions historically, rational logic, mathematical probabilities, and empirical evidence have not been central to the faith and conviction of most individual religious adherents. As Anthony Campbell opined, “There is a wonderful absurdity to Christian faith, weighed against the even greater absurdity of anything less.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet at the macro cultural level, rationality has always been at work in the history of religion from earliest times, reducing the bewildering array of gods in early religion down to a clear and coherent set. “Reason favored the primacy of universal gods, and every consistent crystallization of a pantheon followed systematic rational principles.”<sup>5</sup> With the rise of modernity and the historically unprecedented autonomy of rationality in the Enlightenment, Western Christian religion in particular has been subject to growing pressure to become ever more rationalistic in different and expanded ways that have profoundly shaped its current character, compared to that of pre-modern Christianity.<sup>6</sup> The interdisciplinary analysis that follows draws mostly from sociology and philosophy, but also from history, psychology, and culture studies. It first overviews the character of rationality, along with its shifting location and function in Christian faith, before identifying two social practices of rationality stemming from the Enlightenment that in their extreme prove problematic. Both the sociological practice of rationalization as well as the philosophical practice of rationalism are shown to reduce Christian faith by diminishing and even denying its non-rational elements and ways of being and knowing. It will be argued that in matters of Christian faith, rationality makes “a good servant but a bad master.”<sup>7</sup> Both

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4 Anthony F. Campbell, *The Whisper of Spirit: A Believable God Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), i.

5 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 3 vols. (Totowa, NJ: Bedminster, 1921/68), 417.

6 James Bryne, *Religion and the Enlightenment* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

7 D. N. Livingstone, “Reflections on the Encounter between Science and Faith,” in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View*, ed. M. Noll and D. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 253.

Christian means-end rationality and Christian cognitive fundamentalism can, must, and are being “healed” by making way for more affective, narrative, and incarnational forms of Christian faith that are anti-rationalist without being anti-rational.

Throughout the analysis, the theoretical assumptions will be those of critical realism as pioneered by Roy Bhaskar, and now increasingly prominent in philosophy and sociology.<sup>8</sup> The basic thesis and defining feature of critical realism is that much of reality exists independently from human awareness of it.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, one of its seminal distinctions is between the real, the actual, and the empirical.<sup>10</sup> The real is all the “mechanisms,” both physical and social, that exist objectively apart from human awareness, each with their own structures and causal capacities. The actual is all the mechanisms that have been activated, producing events in time and space, whether observed by humans or not. The empirical is all the mechanisms that have been both activated and observed, the domain of our direct or indirect experience of the real or actual. “What we observe (the empirical) is not identical to all that happens (the actual), and neither is identical to that which is (the real). The three must not be conflated.”<sup>11</sup> Critical realism represents a third, middle way between the naïve realism of modern positivism and empiricism, and the anti-realism of postmodern constructionism and interpretivism. Understanding reality to be stratified and emergent in multiple dimensions, critical realism is firmly anti-reductionistic and, in significant ways, post-disciplinary. Fact is deemed to be ultimately inseparable from value. Reality is deemed to be open, not closed. Additional assumptions of critical realism germane to this analysis of rationality will be brought forward as it proceeds.

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8 Philip S. Gorski, “What is Critical Realism? And Why Should You Care?” *Contemporary Sociology* 42, no. 5 (2013), 658-70.

9 Andrew Sayer, *Realism and Social Science* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000).

10 Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Science* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1979).

11 Christian Smith, *What is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 93.

## The Character of Rationality

It is simplistic to speak of rationality in the singular, because rationalities may be those “of modern academic philosophy, (or) those provided by more or less organized communities of shared belief.”<sup>12</sup> As such, Enlightenment rationality is itself a historical, partisan subculture. But in its simplest, generic form, rationality is the state of being reasonable, of weighing and evaluating reasons to believe or act according to one’s overarching view of the world. To reason is to make sense of things consciously and critically for the purpose of establishing what are then held to be facts, and thereby justifying subsequent beliefs or acts. Non-rationality is belief or action not weighed or evaluated by critical reason, but driven primarily by tradition, custom, norms, consensus, habit, values, ideals, meaning-making, emotions, intuition, or the unconscious. Both rationality and non-rationality are internally coherent to their practitioners, but rationality employs a critical cognitive process that non-rationality does not.<sup>13</sup> Within the narrower confines of logical rationality, in deductive or top-down reasoning, a conclusion is judged to be valid when it follows logically from sound premises. When the premises are true and the reasoning is valid, then necessarily the conclusion is true. Inductive or bottom-up reasoning infers a conclusion on the basis of observable evidence; the soundness of the conclusion is judged according to its ability to account for the evidence and explain anomalies. Thus deductive reasoning can reach conclusions that are certainly true, while inductive reasoning can reach conclusions that are probably true.

A further, rougher distinction can be made between theoretical reason as a cognitive function of belief, in contrast to practical rationality as an optimizing strategy for action. But both theoretical reason and practical rationality are grounded in the background assumptions and conditions of one model of truth or another, rendering the conclusions of rationality to be dependent upon one’s conception

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12 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 3.

13 The concepts of rationality and non-rationality employed here are drawn primarily from Weber, *Economy and Society*.

of truth. For example, if the belief of a particular model of truth is that benefiting oneself is optimal, then rationality will lead to action that is self-interested to the point of selfishness. But if the belief of a model is that benefiting the group is optimal, then purely selfish behavior is deemed irrational. Similarly, it is as rational for a woman living in a post-industrial, technologically advanced, postmodern welfare state to bear few children as it is rational for a woman living in an agricultural, technologically less developed, pre-modern, minimalist state to bear many children. More generally, truth is alternatively theorized to be: a) beliefs that accurately describe the actual state of the real world (correspondence theory); b) beliefs that lend mutual inferential support to each other in a coherent system (coherence theory); c) beliefs that are constructed by social processes that are historically and culturally specific and shaped by the power struggles within a community (constructivist theory); d) beliefs that are agreed upon by a specific group (consensus theory); or e) beliefs that are verified by their usefulness when put into practice (pragmatic theory).

Rationality is therefore not just the individual's context-fitting use of reason to establish and justify belief and action; in certain times and places, rationality becomes a social practice embedded in the social structure of a collectivity (Bourdieu, Giddens, MacIntyre). In the ongoing debate about the primary efficacy of individual actors versus social conditions, the micro versus the macro, agency versus structure, social practice theory focuses on the pre-theoretical assumptions of belief and action. Social practices are the taken-for-granted beliefs and routinized actions which simultaneously and dialectically create both the consciousness of actors and the structural conditions that make those practices possible.<sup>14</sup> Social practices pertain to how we manage our bodies, handle objects, treat subjects, describe things, and understand the world. They shape thought, knowledge, desire, and the discourse that is the genesis and product of practice. Seen in this light, both the individual agent and the social structure in which the individual believes and acts are

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14 George Ritzer and Jeffrey Stepnisky, *Sociological Theory*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014).



products of the routines that lie at the heart of social practices. And rationality, or its absence or opposite, is often therefore not just an individual belief or action, but a social practice.

The hundreds of isms identifiable in public life constitute an entire sub-category of competing social practices. The Greek suffix *ismos* means the action of engaging in something, such as terrorism or patriotism, but as employed in English, an ism can also mean a state of being, such as barbarism or alcoholism, or a movement in the arts, such as impressionism or realism.<sup>15</sup> Yet the majority of isms are philosophical or religious belief systems that have become politicized and ideological. Hence humanism or Christianity<sup>16</sup> are comprehensive normative visions, systems of meaning applied to public matters, and sets of conscious and unconscious ideas about what is and ideals about what ought to be. When rationality is practiced as Enlightenment rationalism (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz), unaided reason is regarded as the sovereign method of knowing, imbued with the power to grasp indubitable truths about the world. Mind is given authority over the senses, the *a priori* over the *a posteriori*. Deductive reasoning from foundational or first principles is held up as the solely sufficient means to truth and the ultimate test of truth, and therefore independent from and superior to the observation of science, the revelation of religion, the authority of tradition, or the subjectivity of personal insight or collective common sense. Ironically, rationalism has functioned both negatively to deny the supernatural, as in secular humanism, and affirmatively to aid the understanding of revealed truth, as in many forms of modern theology.

Enlightenment rationalism is most conventionally contrasted with Enlightenment empiricism (Hobbes, Locke, Hume), which is the belief and practice of regarding sense evidence to be the beginning and end of knowledge. Empiricism is a different type of foundationalism, built not upon *a priori* assumptions but upon the ‘self-evident’ truths of observation and experience. A contemporary example of an extreme form of empiricism is scientism, which is often

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15 Peter Saint-Andre, *The Ism Book: A Field Guide to Philosophy* (Parker, CO: Monadnock Valley, 2013).

16 Andrew Sullivan, “My Problem with Christianity,” *Time* (May 15, 2006): 48; online: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1191826,00.html>

critiqued as a form of reductionism by critical realists. Empiricism denies the reality of metaphysical and theological truth, or even the utility of conceptual reflection alone. So Emile Durkheim, for example, maintained that “religion can affirm nothing that science denies, and deny nothing that science affirms.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, rationality and science are far from antithetical, because science is itself a particular kind of rationality, which employs both the reasoning of logic plus the experience of the senses in the instrumental reasoning of the scientific method. Francis Bacon construed rationalists as spiders spinning their webs out of themselves, and empiricists as ants collecting materials to make some sense and use of them. Empiricism has led in turn to the more radical stances of positivism (Comte), the belief that knowledge is reliable only if it is immediately observable and scientifically testable, and then to logical positivism (the Vienna Circle), the belief that only carefully constructed logical propositions about strictly limited factual domains could be true or false, and so on. Today, critical realism is “wary of simple correspondence concepts of truth.”<sup>18</sup>

Rather than empiricism, the truer opposite of Enlightenment rationalism is a constellation of social practices that have in common varying degrees of non-rationality, which is not necessarily irrationality. Irrationality is the violation of rationality, while anti-rationality is against rationality. But in the language of logic and deductive reasoning, the complement “not-*a*” is not necessarily the denial, rejection, or refutation of “*a*.” It is simply everything other than “*a*.” “Not-*a*” is simply contrary to “*a*,” without necessarily contradicting “*a*.” The non-rationality of aesthetics, for example, simply has nothing to do with the critical cognitive process of rationality, just like the non-logical is not necessarily illogical or anti-logical, but simply has nothing to do with the logical. For example, belief in either theism or atheism is non-rational to the extent that they are both inferences about the world that are not subject to the verification or falsification that would put them in the category of the entirely rational or irrational. So it is that romanticism (Vico, Coleridge),

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17 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1912/1965), 433.

18 Sayer, *Realism and Social Science*, 2.

which is the social practice that legitimates emotion, imagination, and intuition as authentic and authoritative sources of knowledge, is built on the non-rational.<sup>19</sup> Likewise transcendentalism (Emerson, Thoreau), which is practice that presupposes an ideal reality higher than the physical world of human perception and experience and seeks to transcend both rationalism and empiricism. Other putatively non-rational epistemologies include emotionalism, intuitionism, mysticism, nativism, perspectivism, relativism, sensationalism, solipsism, subjectivism, syncretism, and so on. To be sure, a great deal of human belief and action occurs in the realm of the non-rational.

### The Shifting Location of Rationality in Religion

If religion is understood as an external collective moral order<sup>20</sup> (the sacred *among*), and spirituality as an internal individual experiential dynamic (the sacred *within*),<sup>21</sup> then faith is best understood as an individual existential commitment that is holistically cognitive, affective, volitional, and behavioral. Faith is an exercise of not just the mind, but the whole being including the heart and will and body. Whether religious or not, the sum of faith retains a substantial proportion of non-rationality, despite frequent, earnest attempts to make it as reasonable as possible. Even if the object of religious faith cannot be made deductively certain, it can at least be made inductively as probable as possible, so as to reduce the span of the inevitable “leap of faith” (Kierkegaard) that remains necessary after reason has had its say. At the personal level, faith, according to James Fowler,<sup>22</sup> is a human universal, in as much as all humans seek meaning of some kind. In essence, faith is a relationship of trust and loyalty between the self and some other, in the context of what is deemed to be of ultimate value and power. Faith is also a specific structure of

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19 The Romantic Era was a reaction to Enlightenment rationality that peaked in the first half of the nineteenth century.

20 Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

21 Donald S. Swenson, *Society, Spirituality, and the Sacred: A Social Scientific Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

22 James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1995).

knowing, not a particular content of what is known, because we can place faith in many different things – God, government, marriage, or pilots.

Significantly, Fowler distinguishes between two kinds of knowing. The “logic of rational certainty” aspires to disinterested, objective truths that need to be impersonal, propositional, demonstrable, and replicable. The “logic of conviction,” on the other hand, is imaginative, affective, ecstatic, unconsciously structuring, and ultimately self-constituting of the knower in relation to the known. As a non-rational method of knowing (Fowler), the logic of conviction does not negate the logic of rational certainty, but by being more inclusive, it contextualizes, qualifies, and anchors rational certainty. Ultimately, faith is more action than belief, what Fowler terms “faithing.” Faith is a verb, something we do, not a noun, or an object we possess. Faith is not sitting in the airport lounge merely believing that the pilot is competent, sober, and not on a suicide mission. Faith is putting self at stake by boarding the plane. Fowler’s full, formal definition of faith is as follows:

People’s evolved and evolving ways of experiencing self, others and world (as they construct them), as related to and affected by the ultimate conditions of existence (as they construct them), and of shaping their lives’ purposes and meanings, trusts and loyalties, in light of the character of being, value and power determining the ultimate conditions of existence (as grasped in their operative images – conscious and unconscious – of them).<sup>23</sup>

At the social level, the practice of fideism is antithetical to rationalism, maintaining that faith is independent of rationality, frequently hostile to it, and often superior to it in arriving at particular philosophical or religious truths. As Blaise Pascal famously put it, “The heart has its reasons which reason knows not.”<sup>24</sup> Ultimately forsaking reason, if not disparaging it, and relying on faith alone,

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<sup>23</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 92-3.

<sup>24</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. W. F. Trotter (CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 1670/2011), 97.

what the fideist objects to is not so much reason *per se*, but the evidentialism that insists no belief should be held unless it is supported by rational evidence. Yet it is not as if the faith of the fideist has no basis or evidence. More often than not, faith is based on non-rational experience rather than reason in what has been termed experientialism (Schleiermacher, Otto, Heidegger). Experience becomes the final court of appeal, as the self-attesting character of experience is used to verify the truthfulness of any claim. However, mainstream Christian theology (Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical) tends to reject experience alone as an adequate foundation of truth.

But non-rational experience is not easily excised from the definitional heart of religion. Social scientific models of religion identify its most common elements, and non-rational experience is most frequently located at the genesis and core of religion (Durkheim, Geertz, Swenson, Roberts & Yamane). Other characteristic elements of religion include myths, which are narratives that alone or in combination render a cosmology. Myths are truth-telling stories that are not necessarily historical accounts, because their factuality cannot be determined and is ultimately irrelevant. These explanatory verbalizations produce the intellectual framework of a worldview that often remains implicit and unconsciously taken for granted. Nevertheless, the structured set of beliefs derived from the myth establish that religion’s orthodoxy. Second, religious rituals are repeated, consecrated (sacred) behaviors that symbolically express the moods and motivations of a belief system, and function to socialize, bond, remind, regulate, and empower its adherents. These actions establish that religion’s orthopraxy. Third, religious ethos is a cluster of codes of behavior – values, norms, morality – that, instead of being a way of *viewing*, constitutes a way of *doing*. Instead of describing what is, ethos describes what ought to be. Ethos establishes the underlying attitude toward the individual and the world, and prevents the profane from intruding upon the sacred.

Prior to and/or central to these elements of religion, the non-rational experience of spirituality, or the sacred within, remains at the root of religion (James, Otto, O’Dea). Religious experience refers to all those ineffable yet noetic aspects that have an internal presence to the individual, including feelings, perceptions, moods, attitudes,

attributions, and the like. Myths explain experience, rituals extend experience, ethos maintains experience, and religious organizations rise up to frame and house religious experience. Together, myth, ritual, ethos, and experience are more powerful than rational systems of belief because their images capture imagination, carry emotional power, and mobilize resources beyond what abstract propositions and rational systems can do. As Andrew Greeley put it, to understand religion, we need to focus on its poetry, not its prose, on its imaginative and narrative infrastructure, not on its cognitive superstructure.<sup>25</sup> “The origins and raw power of religion are at the imaginative (that is, experiential and narrative) level for both the individual and for the tradition.”<sup>26</sup>

Inasmuch as rationality is often identified with modernity, there has been a pronounced historical rise and fall of the status and role of rationality in religion as well. The pre-modern Latin root, *religio*, meant living, personal, subjective experience, a “particular way of seeing and feeling the world,”<sup>27</sup> a matter of the heart. Nevertheless, in modern times, religion became more of an institutionalized system of beliefs, something whose propositions were either true or false, a matter of the mind. Today, the postmodern cultural shift away from religiosity toward spirituality, and the subsequent uncoupling of spirituality from institutions, has renewed the role of non-rationality in the practice of faith. Religion is now mostly experienced as “life-as,” connoting life lived in conformity to ‘objective’ roles, duties, and obligations. Spirituality, in contrast, is experienced as “subjective-life,” connoting life lived in authentic connection with the inner depths and experiences of one’s unique self-in-relation.<sup>28</sup> The religious source of significance is found in adhering to a transcendent tradition that bestows order and meaning from the outside, whereas the spiritual

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25 Andrew M. Greeley, *Religion as Poetry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1995).

26 Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 4.

27 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 21.

28 Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Blackwell, 2005).

source of significance is found in turning away from self-sacrificial deference to external authority toward being true to internalities. What Charles Taylor calls “the massive subjective turn”<sup>29</sup> of contemporary Western culture is less a Great Turning than a Great Returning to an ancient understanding of Christian faith.<sup>30</sup>

Harvey Cox, for example, in a rather sweeping generalization that applies mostly to the global West/North, discerned three ages of Christian history similar to the pre-modern, modern, and postmodern divides, but with a middle age of earlier onset and thus longer duration than modernity.<sup>31</sup> During the Age of Faith, the first several centuries after Christ until Constantine, being Christian meant a communal living out of trust and loyalty to Jesus, following the work he had begun, and embracing his hope. During the Age of Belief, from Constantine until the twentieth century, being Christian meant accepting the creeds, catechisms, and dogma of the institutionalized church. Now, during the Age of Spirit begun in the twentieth century, being Christian has come to mean connection to God through mystery, wonder, and awe, in decidedly non-dogmatic, non-institutional, and non-hierarchical ways. The Age of Faith was characterized by faith *in* God, the Age of Belief by belief *about* God, and the Age of Spirit by experience *of* God. Faith is now resurgent, even while dogma is dying. Like Fowler, for Cox too, faith is not mere belief. Faith is a deep-seated existential confidence *in* the divine, whereas belief is intellectual assent to tenets *about* the divine, though obviously faith must arise from some beliefs about the divine.

Diana Butler Bass takes the shift away from religiosity toward spirituality, and from belief toward faith, a step further by unpacking the character and order of believing, behaving, and belonging.<sup>32</sup> She asserts that the modern assumption that belief is merely the intellectual content of faith, our rehearsal of ideas about God, is itself misguided. Replacing focus on faith *in* God with focus on tenets

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29 Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi, 1991).

30 Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012).

31 Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith: The Rise and Fall of Beliefs and the Coming Age of the Spirit* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009).

32 Bass, *Christianity After Religion*.

*about* God produced modern, fundamentalist, institutionalized, and therefore problematic religion. Preoccupation with the question “what do I believe” led inexorably to religious dogma. The more spiritual question “how do I believe” is equally if not more important, pushing people into a deeper engagement with the world beyond dictated information *about* the divine, to personal experience *of* the divine. Even the question “whom do I believe” is more experiential, pushing the question of authority beyond mere expertise to issues of relationship and authenticity. Consequent belief as more experiential, not merely intellectual assent, shifts the focus from the correctness of cognitive content back to the act of faith as a verb – practicing trust, loyalty, and love. To believe in God is not merely to weigh the rational or empirical evidence for the existence of God, but to trust and take refuge in the wholly, holy Other.

Second, regarding behaving, Bass also notes that for its first few centuries, Christianity was understood primarily as spiritual practices that offered a meaningful way of life in the world, not a tight set of doctrines about the world and its creator-redeemer. It was, and still is possible to be a practicing Christian, though not always a believing one. Contrary to the emphasis in John’s gospel and Paul’s letters, according to the Synoptic gospels, Jesus himself consistently answered the question “What must I do to be saved?” by requiring active obedience, not mere belief.<sup>33</sup> Third, regarding belonging, Bass describes the Christian self as constituted by relationship, not cognition. Contrary to Rene Descartes’ sense of the self as a proposition – *cogito ergo sum*: “I think, therefore I am” – and consistent with George Herbert Mead’s sense of the socially reflexive self,<sup>34</sup> Christian spirituality proceeds from self as preposition. When Bass “confess(es) that I no longer hold propositional truths about Christianity; rather, I experience propositional truths of being found *in* God *through* Christ *with* others *toward* the kingdom,”<sup>35</sup> she fails to see the propositional

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33 Edmund K. Neufeld, “The Gospel in the Gospels: Answering the Question ‘What Must I Do to be Saved?’ from the Synoptics,” *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51, no. 2 (2008): 267-96.

34 George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934/1962).

35 Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 192.



truth claims implicit in the objects of her prepositional phrases, but she succeeds in placing emphasis on the relational prepositions.

Her more compelling argument is what Bass terms the current Great Reversal. Protestants gradually shifted away from emphasizing spiritual practices toward emphasizing belief first, behavior second, and belonging as an ancillary eventuality. The consequent intra-Christian contest of truth claims has produced an intellectualized and impersonal religion that defines people by what propositions they believe. But according to Bass, Christian spirituality unfolds in the exact opposite order; belonging first, behaving second, and belief as an eventuality. This is the chronology of spirituality lived out by the children of Israel in the Old Testament. Likewise, Christianity did not begin with Peter’s confession, but with the disciples having chosen earlier to follow Jesus, to join in and belong. Peter’s confession of belief eventually grew out of the belonging of relationship. Christian faith did not begin by precisely refining ideas about God via seminal lectures in systematic theology. It was originally about how to act toward each other, what to do in this world. Bass uses contemporary Amish and African Christianity as examples of Christianity in its proper and ancient order, of spirituality and faith as experiential practice, unencumbered with complex creeds and confessions, a spirituality more of the heart and hands than the head.

The constant challenge of social history is to ascertain how ordinary people actually lived throughout successive eras, in contrast to how intellectual elites thought they ought to live. In this case, the challenge is to ascertain the social practice of Christian faith in contrast to the history of theology. What has been the truly operative faith of the laity, who for much of Judeo-Christian history have been largely illiterate, compared to faith as ordered and ordained by theologians, philosophers, and clerics? All of the above suggests that the role of Enlightenment rationality in Christian faith can easily be overdrawn, and when it is, prove to be problematic. Modern rationality, we have said, is having good reasons that justify the cognitive function of belief and the optimizing strategy for action. Overplaying modern rationality in belief leads to rationalism, while overplaying modern rationality in action leads to rationalization. From the perspective of critical realism, both rationalism and rationalization are

structures and causal capacities (mechanisms) that have been activated (the actual) and observed (the empirical). They are also emergent social practices not reducible to Enlightenment rationality alone. Therefore, these two problematic social practices, the first philosophical and the second sociological, warrant closer examination, best done in reverse order.

### **Rationalization of Action**

Psychologically, rationalization means to attribute action to rational and credible motives, or to attribute attitude to rational and credible realities, without acknowledging true and especially subconscious motives or realities. Rationalization in this sense is the defense mechanism of creating an excuse or more attractive explanation for dubious actions or attitudes. But sociologically, rationalization means the historic displacement of tradition, values, affectivity, intuition, and mystery by reason and rational calculation in all aspects of everyday life and in every social institution, including religion. More than any other sociologist, Max Weber documented and explicated the rationalization of modern society. Indeed, though he was critical of Karl Marx's materialistic economic determinism for being a reductive, mono-causal view of history, Weber himself came close to an idealistic equivalent in attributing to rationality the foremost formative role in the rise of modernity. His conceptions of action and authority along with two of his many typologies have become part of the vocabulary of sociology, and serve well here.<sup>36</sup>

Action is more than behavior. Mere behavior is meaningless because it occurs without thought, whereas action is subjectively meaningful to the actor because it is the product of conscious processes. Therefore, psychological behaviorism that merely observes the relationships between stimulus and response is inadequate to grasp full human functioning, because it fails to take into account the interpretation of the stimulus that determines the response.<sup>37</sup> There is a profound difference between a blink and a wink, a blink being a mindless physiological function, while a wink is loaded

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<sup>36</sup> Ritzer and Stepnisky, *Sociological Theory*.

<sup>37</sup> Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*.

with multiple potential meanings that require mental processing and are vulnerable to sometimes disastrous misinterpretation. Though touching a hot stove produces behavior, the vast majority of human response is not behavioral reaction to a stimulus alone, but rather action determined by an interpretation of a stimulus. Therefore, like understanding belief, understanding action requires a shift in focus from the “what” of action to the “why.”

A full range of sources of action exist, from the non-rational to the rational. One of Weber’s typologies identified two sub-categories of both the non-rational and the rational, though they usually occur in some combination.<sup>38</sup> Non-rational action is: a) affectual when it is the result of emotion; or b) traditional when it follows custom by habitually replicating the way things have been done in the past. On the other hand, rational action is: c) value-rational when it is chosen on the basis of the actor’s belief in some larger set of values; or d) means-end rational when it pursues ends that actors have chosen, shaped by their view of the people and objects in their environment. Other theorists have suggested that value-rational action, which is only rational in its adherence to some systematic value, is also ultimately non-rational because the value with which it is aligned is not necessarily rational, religion being the salient case in point. Human action, it is thus argued, is primarily non-rational when it is guided by ideals, morals, norms, traditions, habits, unconscious desires, emotional states, and/or the quest for meaning. In contrast, truly rational action is less encompassing, and is motivated primarily by a strategic or calculated attempt to maximize rewards or benefits while minimizing costs, what Weber termed means-end rationality (and others term instrumental rationality). In short, values motivate non-rational action, whereas interests motivate rational action.<sup>39</sup>

Self-interested means-end rationality has grown ever more dominant in contemporary society, to the point where theorizing all social relations is itself increasingly built on it. Rational choice theory, an outgrowth from economics, is one of the fastest growing perspectives of the last generation (Coleman, Homans, Blau). It understands all

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38 Weber, *Economy and Society*.

39 Scott A. Appelrouth and Laura Desfor Edles, *Classical and Contemporary Sociological Theory: Text and Readings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

human action to be driven by individual self-interest seeking to profit from calculations of what the actor perceives to be costs and rewards in a world of scarcity. It goes on to explore how interaction between rationally motivated individuals can produce norms, networks, group solidarity, and the control of resources, as well as how these factors, once created, act back on and constrain the individual's decisions and behavior. For many theorists, rational choice theory has now become the new paradigm in the sociology of religion (Stark, Finke, Iannaccone), displacing the old, cultural paradigm. This new paradigm explains religion as the desire for certain rewards that are not available in society, such as life after death. Humans therefore seek compensators, which are beliefs, immediately unverifiable, that rewards for sacred beliefs and actions will be obtained in the distant future. So Pascal's wager, for example, is to bet one's life on the existence of God and live accordingly, because the maximal eternal rewards delivered if true far outweigh the minimal temporal costs if false. While this explains religious belief and action at the micro level, it also leads to the notion of religious economies at the macro level, replete with markets of current and potential customers, firms seeking to serve the market, and competing product lines, all of which thrive best without interference from the state. The old paradigm of religion which focused on the meaning it provided for life is said to be inadequate, especially in the religious free market conditions of modern pluralism.<sup>40</sup> Yet this new paradigm is questionably one-dimensional in its focus on rationality, is clearly less applicable to Eastern religions not built on rational ways of living than Christianity in the West is, and is reductionist in its failure to take culture into account.<sup>41</sup>

Employing rational choice theory reveals that rationality in religion is therefore much more than reasons for individual belief, or even reasons for individual action, but extends to the organization of collective belief and action as well. Nevertheless, the rise of rational choice theory also reveals that rationality is increasingly asserting itself in the very social scientific explanation of religion itself. Despite its dark view of humans as cold-hearted, self-centered,

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40 Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

41 Swenson, *Society, Spirituality, and the Sacred*; Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*.

profit-seeking calculators, rational choice theory makes sense and rings true to the contemporary Western mind. Hence, it turns out that rational choice theory is itself another cultural artifact, even while it denies the formative effects of culture on how people think. Contrary to rational choice theory, it would therefore seem that humans are more accurately conceived as enculturated beings, or “moral, believing, narrating animals,”<sup>42</sup> not merely rationalistic calculators, unless their culture shapes them to be so. If and when it does, their belief in rationality will indeed narrate their lives. Hence, rational choice theory is a “historically situated moral project... [that] embodies and reinforces key elements of the secular Enlightenment story... [of] modern liberal democratic capitalism.”<sup>43</sup> It is a case of the cultural becoming the scientific, which constitutes some evidence that culture is more formative than rationality.

A second typology, this time of authority structures, completes Weber’s argument for and analysis of the rationalization of modern Western society.<sup>44</sup> Unlike power, which is control seen by those subject to it as illegitimate because it is taken by coercion,<sup>45</sup> authority is control seen by those subject to it as legitimate, and is therefore granted by consent. Authority does not reside inherently in any text, person, or organization.<sup>46</sup> Authority is therefore a form of control that has been granted legitimacy, and Weber identified three historic types. First, traditional authority is legitimated by respect for long-established cultural patterns, exemplified by “the church” or “the Christian tradition.” Second, charismatic authority is legitimated by perception of extra-ordinary personal abilities in someone

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42 Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 118.

43 *Ibid.*, 59-60.

44 Weber, *Economy and Society*.

45 Nevertheless, in Weberian conception, power is inherently neither nefarious nor corrupting, but rather the ethically neutral ability to exert one’s will despite resistance, with equal potential to be used for good or evil. In *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), Andy Crouch argues journalistically that power is a God-sanctioned key to human flourishing.

46 Even in theology, the authority of the biblical text is properly seen as a derivative rather than an inherent authority, as theologians such as Karl Barth and John Webster have argued.

that inspires devotion and obedience by others, exemplified by the founders of many of the world religions, including Jesus, and by the founding pastors of many current non-denominational megachurches. Third, rational-legal authority is legitimated by codified rules and regulations, exemplified by church bureaucracies, the Roman Catholic Church being the largest and longest-standing in history.

Much Christian faith has been sustained historically by traditional authority, while charismatic authority has emerged repeatedly to challenge the traditional. Both are non-rational. While charismatic authority is a revolutionary force able to overcome tradition, it is also temporary and unstable, and any new religious movement can only be sustained beyond the life of its founder by, ironically, the routinization of charisma, that is, by transforming into either the very traditional or rational-legal form of authority that charisma supplanted. And with the disregard for tradition in modernity, only rational-legal authority is now self-sustaining, the “iron cage” of rationalization that not only locks people in, but is impervious to external assault. While charisma changes the internal beliefs of individuals, rationalization changes the actions of individuals externally by altering the structures in which they live. Weber examined the effects of rationalization on social structures such as the economy, the polity, law, the city, and even art forms, but more to our interests here, on religion.<sup>47</sup> For example, rationality is evident in the rise of a professionally trained priesthood that is larger and more literate, specialized, organized, and appreciated than the prophets who are all the opposite. Religious priests, those specialists who speak *for* the religious establishment from within it, are more rationalized than the prophets who speak *to* the religious establishment from its margins.

No one has advanced Weber’s rationalization thesis further than George Ritzer with his equally influential McDonaldization thesis, perhaps the end-point of the rationalization process.<sup>48</sup> McDonaldization is the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of not only Western society, but in the push of cultural imperialism and globalization are

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47 Weber, *Economy and Society*.

48 George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 2014).

creating a homogenized McWorld at large.<sup>49</sup> The five basic dimensions that govern both employees and customers are: a) efficiency, the effort to discover the best possible means to whatever end is desired; b) calculability, the emphasis on quantity of products and speed of service, often to the detriment of quality; c) predictability, the assurance that everything is much the same everywhere and every time; d) control, the physical and social technologies that determine what will happen; and e) the irrationality of rationality, the paradoxical reality that instrumental rationality becomes irrational when the ends sought are sabotaged by the means employed. The irrationality of McDonald’s is evident from the particularity of the long lines that slow the process, to the ultimate dehumanization of the whole process. Everyone involved becomes an appendage to the machine, and mere fragments of persons in their engagement. Worker activity is deskilled as much as possible, customers are fed prefabricated food and interactions, and contact with other human beings is minimized. Communality dissolves into commonality.

The question here is whether and to what extent rationalization has infected modern Western Christianity, and to what extent McDonaldization has infected modern Western Christian organizations. Different Christian observers talk of McMinistry (gospel as therapy) and McMissions (short-term tourists for Jesus).<sup>50</sup> John Drane, for one, dissects what he considers the now half-live corpse of McChurch in order to ascertain what has reduced it to irrelevant robotics, where it delivers bite-sized, pre-packaged fast talk, where size and quantity are the measures that matter most, where the promise of no surprises quells the free wind of the spirit, and where control substitutes for accountability.<sup>51</sup> What comes as no surprise are the effects on the church and society at large. Though both Weber and Ritzer see much good in rationalization, both share equally grave concerns about how what appears as progress functions as regress. Weber despaired of the alienation wrought by bureaucracies, and

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49 Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Times, 1995).

50 Dennis Hiebert, “The McDonaldization of Protestant Organizations,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 29, no. 2 (1999): 261-79.

51 John William Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity, and the Future of the Church* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008).

the disenchantment of the world wrought by rationalization which crushes the human spirit, rendering life more methodical and less meaningful. Ritzer lamented the feeble, never-ending, contemporary attempts to re-enchant the world through the “cathedrals of consumption” of popular culture.<sup>52</sup> There is little reason to believe that Christian cathedrals can avoid such effects while engaging in the same practices. Add to such effects that relying increasingly on human methods means relying less on the divine, and McDonaldization, like the rationalization that birthed it, becomes a powerful force of secularization, Christianity undermining itself by its social practices. Martin Heidegger argued that this instrumental rationality was the greatest danger facing modern humans.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, there is talk in the blogosphere of the McDonaldization of Christian philosophy as well.<sup>54</sup>

### **Rationalism in Belief**

While action is predominantly the purview of sociology, belief is predominantly the purview of philosophy, the realm in which rationality is more conventionally understood to function. Inasmuch as Christian faith is an individual existential commitment, the rationalization of individual and collective action serves as the current social context in which the relative rationality of belief occurs. Both the rationalization and rationalism of Christian faith are more characteristic of religiosity than spirituality, and hence are currently being challenged by the cultural shift away from the former toward the latter, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “religionless Christianity.”<sup>55</sup> The social practice of rationalism in Christian belief has its own his-

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52 George Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Continuity and Change in the Cathedrals of Consumption*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 2010).

53 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977).

54 For example, see Dave Bothwell, “The McDonaldization of Christian Philosophy,” 2013; online: <https://dbothwell.wordpress.com/2013/03/18/the-mcdonaldization-of-christian-philosophy/>.

55 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. and eds. E. Bethge, R. Fuller, F. Clark, et al. (New York: Macmillan, 1953).



tory that nonetheless runs parallel to the rationalization of Christian action, both arising as consequences of Enlightenment modernity.

Of course, none of the four sources in *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*, by historian Molly Worthen chronicles how, minus the magisterial authority of the Roman Catholic Church, Protestants, particularly American evangelicals, over time turned ever more to reason as the foremost means to truth.<sup>56</sup> Confronted by modernity, compelled to show evidence that the Bible was true, and concerned to fathom what it actually might mean, twentieth century American fundamentalism and then evangelicalism brought reason to faith in an unprecedented manner and to an unprecedented degree. This disrupted the more balanced approach to faith and knowledge represented by the broader, historic Christian tradition. As an example of the latter, the United Methodist Church asserts that Christian faith is revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason. Of course, none of these four sources of Christian faith are truly autonomous or self-sufficient. As Lesslie Newbigin put it, “reason does not operate except within a continuing social tradition which cannot be understood as a purely cerebral operation unrelated to the ongoing experiences of the community which carries this tradition forward.”<sup>57</sup> What counts anywhere as reason is dependent on the plausibility structure that sustains it,<sup>58</sup> and reason took on historically unique characteristics in modernity. The autonomy and supremacy of Enlightenment rationality, for example, would have been unintelligible to the church fathers, Aquinas, and the Reformers, for whom philosophy was the handmaiden of theology.<sup>59</sup> The indubitable “control beliefs” of classic Christianity held reason firmly within the bounds

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56 Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

57 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 58.

58 Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

59 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

of religion.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, though long a vassal, reason gradually ascended the throne of modern, Western Christian belief, coming to rule as the sovereign method of knowing with purportedly pre-eminent power to grasp truths about the world.

Though such observations are grounded in cultural studies and the sociology of knowledge, they are also central to the postmodern critique of modernist notions of rationality. Modernism embraces the mind above all else. Descartes' famous conclusion ("I think, therefore I am") entrenched the view of humans as primarily "thinking things," resulting in

the valorization of thinking as the core of human identity and the devaluation of embodiment as a source of deception and distress... [I]f the essence of the human person is thinking, then what really matters is what can be thought – and what can be thought is what can be calculated, inferred, deduced, and articulated in propositions.<sup>61</sup>

This cultural privileging of the cognitive in modernity also denigrates and negates the particularities and contingencies of embodied lives (gender, race, geography, culture, language, history, and yes, religion) by implying the universality of reason, or more exactly, the pure neutrality of reason because of its impersonal and ahistoric universality. According to this modern model of reason, "any rational person may judge the worthiness of any other belief. As *universal*, every reasonable human being possesses the ability to *access* the rational grounds of belief; as *objective*, every reasonable person possesses the ability to *assess* the grounds for belief; and as *neutral*, every reasonable person possesses the *authority* to judge the merits of any belief."<sup>62</sup> And just as the rationalization of action leads

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60 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988).

61 James K. A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 54.

62 Myron Bradley Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 33.

inexorably to secularization, so too this self-assured assumption of modern rationalism leads unremittingly to secularism, via faith in the supposedly neutral, objective, unbiased knowledge that obtains from reason.<sup>63</sup>

Postmodernism, in contrast, maintains that such “foundationalist epistemologies are discredited, and impersonally objective forms of human knowledge are impossible.... There is for humans no ‘God’s eye’ view ‘from nowhere,’”<sup>64</sup> because human cognition can only inhabit a particular world of time and space. “There simply is no universal, neutral, pre-conceptual, and indubitable foundation for knowledge.”<sup>65</sup> Moreover, human identity cannot be reduced to a disembodied mind, and reason is not the queen of human capacities – interpersonal communion and love are.<sup>66</sup> Human rationality is only one culturally embedded way of processing the world and developing perspective on it; modern Enlightenment rationality is only one conception of reason, distinct from others. Contrary to caricatures, the postmodern critique of modern rationalism is not so much anti-rational as it is anti-rationalist, not a rejection of reason as much as a rejection of the idolatrous construction of a reductionist model of reason. Contrary to Cartesian intellectual perception, humans are oriented to the world primarily through precognitive affective comportment, as philosophers Spinoza and Bergson argued, as the writer Milan Kundera asserts (“I feel, therefore I am”),<sup>67</sup> as affective neuroscience corroborates,<sup>68</sup> and as affect theory in the social sciences elaborates.<sup>69</sup> This does not necessarily pit the heart against the head

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63 Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

64 Smith, *What is a Person?* 157.

65 Ibid., 207.

66 Ibid.

67 Milan Kundera, *Immortality* (London: Farber and Farber, 2000).

68 For example, Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Penguin, 2005); *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (Harcourt, 2003).

69 For example, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds. *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002).

in some kind of anti-intellectual emotionalism, but it does take seriously the embodied social location and affections of finite humans who are only capable of perspectives of truth. Contrary to Jesus, who did not impose knowledge of himself upon others, Enlightenment rationalism's inclination toward imperial coercion and conquest is implicit in the modern Christian mantra that all truth is God's truth.<sup>70</sup> Though the phrase is best understood in the Kuyperian sense of affirming common grace, it is often used to frame truth in the Enlightenment sense, rather than the incarnational sense. "It reduces truth to universal, objectively neutral propositional truth rather than retaining the relational, personal, and particularistic dimensions of truth that the sense of Hebrew and Christian scriptures imparts to the idea of truth."<sup>71</sup> (Compare the less triumphalist phrase of Cervantes in *Don Quixote*: "where truth is, there God Himself is.") Overall, "we can summarize the differences between modernism and postmodernism by the stark difference between the modern ideal of dispassionate, disinterested objectivism and the postmodern affirmation of a passionate, even confessional perspectivalism."<sup>72</sup>

Rationalism in Christian faith finds its current expression in much of modern Christian apologetics, that Enlightenment project of defending Christian faith by attempting to establish rational foundations which make Christian belief believable, justifiable, or warranted. Though Christian apologetics have taken at least five historical forms,<sup>73</sup> its contemporary practice has been subject to recent critique externally by postmodernists, but also internally by some of its own practitioners.<sup>74</sup> Cognizant of the capability of apologetic

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70 Kevin D. Miller, "Reframing the Faith-Learning Relationship: Bonhoeffer and an Incarnational Alternative to the Integration Model," *Christian Scholar's Review* 43, no. 2 (2014): 131-38.

71 Ibid., 136. "In Hebrew thought, the essence of true godliness is tied primarily to a relationship, not to a creed." Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 138.

72 Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 59.

73 Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000).

74 Nevertheless, as oxymoronic as it may sound, there is a tepid postmodern apologetics. See Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics?: Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy* (Fordham University Press, 2012).

hubris to alienate as readily as attract – “new evidence that demands a verdict”<sup>75</sup> – John Stackhouse for one acknowledges that Christian belief cannot be compelled, and calls for a *Humble Apologetics* that is not merely intent on winning interpersonal arguments or staged public debates.<sup>76</sup> Too much of contemporary apologetics, according to Stackhouse, is self-centered and uninterested in real whole other persons, seeing them only as threats to fend off or as opportunities to exploit by practicing the art of making them sorry they inquired about Christianity. According to Alister McGrath’s *Mere Apologetics*, it has “neglected the relational, imaginative, and existential aspects of faith.”<sup>77</sup> Consequently, *Christianity Today* gave its 2014 Book Awards in the category of Apologetics to two works that turned sharply away from rational argument for belief. Francis Spufford’s *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* is a profanity-laced ode to the emotional mending of Christian forgiveness, redemption, and hope, the polar opposite of rational arguments about ontology or teleology.<sup>78</sup> God, as the ground of being, is to be experienced emotionally, bathed in a sense of mystery and elusive presence that both frightens and comforts. Spufford thus offers “a defense of Christian emotions – of their intelligibility, of their grown-up dignity,” much like Smith had earlier offered a dispassionate social scientific explanation of why Christianity works emotionally.<sup>79</sup>

The 2014 Apologetics Book Award of Merit was given to Myron Penner’s *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context*, a treatise firmly “against apologetics,” thoroughly anti-ratio-

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75 Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rev. Ed. (Authentic Lifestyle, 2004).

76 John G. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

77 Alister E. McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012).

78 Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (London: Farber and Farber, 2012).

79 Christian Smith, “Why Christianity Works: An Emotions-Focused Phenomenological Account,” *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 2 (2007), 165-78.

nalistic, though irenically not anti-reason.<sup>80</sup> To begin, Penner draws approvingly on Kierkegaard's statement that whoever came up with the idea of defending Christianity rationally in modernity is a second Judas who betrays Christ under the guise of a friendly kiss; only, Kierkegaard adds, the apologist's treachery (unlike Judas's) is "the treason of stupidity." In imagining itself to be engaging in an objective rational discourse outside of political power, and dealing only with the rational justifications for objective truths, the modern apologetic paradigm is itself a product of modernity. As a kind of "apologetic positivism," it is thereby incapable of defending authentic Christian faith. Penner argues that both the liberal Christian program of accommodating to rationalism by reducing tenets of faith to the verifiable, as well as the conservative Christian program of employing rationalism to defend tenets of faith as justifiable, have acquiesced to the terms of, and been formed by, the modern sense of reason. To that extent, Christian apologists and the New Atheists are mirror images of each other. Furthermore, Christian apologetic discourse is often violent "at both the personal level (when apologetic arguments are used to treat their interlocutors as the 'faceless unbeliever') and the social level (when Christian apologetic practice merely reinforces and defends a given set of power relations operative within an unjust social structure)."<sup>81</sup> Concurring with Jonathan Wilson's assessment that the church's Enlightenment project is "the attempt to commend the Gospel on grounds that have nothing to do with the Gospel itself,"<sup>82</sup> Penner's own concluding appraisals are equally biting. The rationalism of much Christian apologetics undermines, subverts, and betrays the faith it intends to defend, emptying faith of its content, and failing to edify the person. "Apologetics might be the single biggest threat to genuine Christian faith that we face today.... It is tantamount to conceptual idolatry and methodological blasphemy."<sup>83</sup>

While rationalism in Christian faith is a product of social and cultural history at the macro level, it can also be a product of person-

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80 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*.

81 *Ibid.*, 18.

82 Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: From After Virtue to a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 29.

83 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 12 & 62.

al history at the micro level. The role of rationality in faith can wax and wane over the course of an individual’s lifetime due to developmental psychological processes. Fowler’s theory of faith, referenced earlier,<sup>84</sup> is a complex model of psychological development that combines the earlier models of Erikson, Piaget, Kolberg, and Selman, and identifies six stages of faith through which an individual may or may not evolve during their lifetime. Fowler’s measures of faith, which when combined function as an operational definition of faith, include an individual’s form of logic, social perspective taking, form of moral judgment, bounds of social awareness, locus of authority, form of world coherence, and role of symbols. All these aspects of faith evolve through all six stages of faith, the middle four of which are salient here: Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith; Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith; Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith; and Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith. To over-simplify using other descriptors, these stages can be understood as the Stage 2 literalist, the Stage 3 conformist, the Stage 4 rationalist, and the Stage 5 spiritualist. Our interest here of course is in Stage 4, which Fowler characterizes as the critical examination or demythologizing of commitments for the purpose of constructing a personal, explicit meaning system that is rationally defensible and exclusive. He characterizes Stage 5 as a post-critical awakening to the paradoxical nature of truth and the need to unite the seeming opposites of assertion and waiting, logic and mystery. It replaces the tribalism of Stage 3 and ideological warfare of Stage 4 with an epistemological humility, an ironic imagination, and a second or willed naiveté that is open to the larger movement of spirit.

As a cognitive structural model of psychological development, Fowler observed that persons advance through the respective stages until they equilibrate at one or another, and then regard all further stages as heretical, to the limited extent that they can even understand them. He also hastened to insist that later stages were not theologically superior to earlier stages; God is equally pleased with persons at every stage of faith. Among the multiple questions the model raises is whether not only individuals, but organizations, com-

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84 Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.

munities and even historical eras can also be staged, that is, accurately described as holding up the faith of a certain stage to be orthodox and optimal. A historical development of enculturated faith is readily discernable in Fowler’s sequence, premodern faith being conformist, modern faith being rationalist, and postmodern faith being spiritualist. But then a postmodernist who merely parrots the language of spiritualist faith without having arrived there personally through fully inhabiting each of the preceding stages for a while is actually still practicing conformist faith, as is the modernist who merely parrots the language of rationalist faith. But the point here is that faith in which rationality is paramount is for some a place where they arrive developmentally and remain for the rest of their lives, and for others a phase through which they pass on their way to more tempered, conjunctive faith.

In concert with the postmodern turn toward spirituality, modern rationalism is losing its grip on Christian faith. Resistance to the disenchantment of not only the world but the Bible itself is growing. Rationalistic biblical hermeneutics and theology pursued within what in the end can only be a less than completely rational granting of authority to the Bible are progressively suspect and wearying for ever more of the faithful. Literalism – “text without context is pretext”<sup>85</sup> – was such a reading of the Bible, as was the fundamentalism that literalism spawned. Assertions of the inerrancy of the Bible were evidence of how “the rationalism of the Enlightenment infected even those who were battling against it.”<sup>86</sup> Biblicism, which is “a theory about the Bible that emphasizes together its exclusive authority, infallibility, perspicuity, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability,”<sup>87</sup> is increasingly unconvincing. At some point the expectations placed on such a rationalistic reading of the Bible makes it “impossible,” and begets the irratio-

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85 In biblical scholarship, the phrase has been popularized by D. A. Carson, but it has a hundred-year history in other fields as well, such as journalism and government, e.g. Rev. Jesse Jackson.

86 N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 183.

87 Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2011), viii.



nality of rationality. Content exhausts itself. “There is more and more information, and less and less meaning,”<sup>88</sup> until it implodes. It cannibalizes itself. So *A New Evangelical Manifesto* calls conservative Christians away from their rationalist, objectified reading of the Bible, so that it may again become an enchanted, living Word not reduced to propositional truths alone.<sup>89</sup> Only the language of myth and metaphor has the “power to detach us from the world of facts and demonstrations and reasonings, which are excellent as tools, but are merely idols as objects of trust and reverence.”<sup>90</sup>

Evidence of this postmodern cultural turn includes recent empirical data documenting how little interest college-educated religious people today have in rational arguments for the existence of God.<sup>91</sup> In expressing their beliefs, their language is more demure than dogmatic. No longer feeling obligated to appear rationally self-assured, and troubled by potentially disagreeable impressions given off if they would, Christians are increasingly unafraid to admit uncertainty about God. “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty,” Anne Lamott acknowledged.<sup>92</sup> Faith for many today is returning to less rationalistic forms.

### **Non-Rationalistic Christian Faith**

When the actions of Christian faith are subjected to rationalization, doing so is often justified as the most efficient and responsible means of promoting the kingdom of God. Likewise, when the beliefs of Christian faith are subjected to rationalism, doing so is often justified as an innocent and noble pursuit of truth. Both claims are

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88 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 79.

89 Cheryl Bridges Johns, “A Disenchanted Text: Where Evangelicals Went Wrong with the Bible,” in *A New Evangelical Manifesto: A Kingdom Vision for the Common Good*, ed. David Gushee (Atlanta: Chalice, 2012).

90 Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 18.

91 Robert J. Wuthnow, *The God Problem: Expressing Faith and Being Reasonable* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

92 Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead Trade, 2006).

questionable when understood as products of modernity, and in light of their consequences. Rationalization of Christian faith is hardly efficient and responsible when it alienates and secularizes. Rationalism in Christian faith is hardly innocent and noble when it is deeply political and secularizing. Yet Durkheim's scientistic conceit, quoted earlier, is apparently agreeable to rationalistic Christians if applied to rationality instead: religion can affirm nothing that rationality denies, and deny nothing that rationality affirms.

But if Christianity is metaphysical (beyond the physical), and if God is supernatural (beyond the natural, and therefore beyond empirical sense evidence), why is Christian faith not also meta-rational or super-rational (beyond the rational, and therefore beyond the laws of logic)? Why should Christian faith be limited to the rational when it is not limited to the empirical? Why should reason remain the unbowed arbiter of ultimate truth? Why must finite human notions of the correspondence, coherence, or pragmatic tests of truth define Ultimate truth? Even to qualify that rationality does not define truth but merely serves as a test of truth is to make truth subservient to rationality – if something does not pass muster of rationality, it cannot be true.

Who are finite humans to even imagine that they have sufficient grasp of the reality of the infinite God, so as to be able to assess whether any particular claim about God corresponds to the facts about the real total being of God, and thereby judge the claim to be true or false? Critical realism makes an important distinction between two dimensions that must not be conflated.<sup>93</sup> The intransitive is the world as it is, or the object of knowledge, in this case God. The transitive is our theories about the world, or the intransitive object of knowledge, in this case God, and how we go about studying that object. The transitive is a fallible social product that changes over time without changing the intransitive object, which does not depend on the transitive for its being. As Augustine declared, “God is not what you imagine or what you think you understand. If you understand, you have failed.”<sup>94</sup>

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93 Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Verso, 1975).

94 Quoted in Barry L. Callen, *Discerning the Divine: God in Christian Theology*

Alternative, non-rational forms of Christian faith are not only surviving but thriving in the current century-old “Age of Spirit”<sup>95</sup> that, in the turn from religiosity to spirituality, is now in full bloom. The recent postmodern emergent church movement (Miller, McLaren, Jones, Bell) is only the latest to dislodge rationality from dictating the organization of action, and from the foundation of belief.<sup>96</sup> It is more intent on the right affections of orthopathy – the passionate love for neighbors and hospitality for strangers – than the right doctrine of orthodoxy or the right practice of orthopraxy.<sup>97</sup> The Pentecostalism born a hundred years ago and now the largest and fastest growing form of Christian faith worldwide is likely the leading case study of literally embodying a more expansive, affective, and thicker way of knowing that cannot be translated into propositions or syllogisms. James Smith describes Pentecostalism as “a quintessentially incarnational faith and practice,” which deems rationalism to be insufficiently incarnational and therefore rejects cognitive fundamentalism.<sup>98</sup> Pentecostal epistemology and knowledge is narrative; the narrative *is* the knowledge. As Christian Smith observes, humans not only make stories, but are *made by* their stories.<sup>99</sup> And as story, knowledge is always more affective than cognitive, and by extension more experiential than cognitive. “We *feel* our way around the world more than we *think* about it, *before* we think about it.”<sup>100</sup> Rather than being derivative of prior cognitions, as rationalists maintain, emotions are irreducible, precognitive construals and interpretations that constitute the world before we think about it or perceive it.<sup>101</sup> Unlike Fowler’s logic of rational certainty which seeks deductive certainty,

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(Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 6.

95 Cox, *The Future of Faith*.

96 Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

97 Edward Collins Vacek, SJ, “Orthodoxy Requires Orthopathy: Emotions in Theology,” *Horizons* 40, no. 2 (2013), 218-41.

98 Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 61.

99 Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*.

100 Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 72.

101 Ole Riis and Linda Whitehead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

or at least inductive probability, and thereby serves as the mother of skepticism,<sup>102</sup> this logic of conviction is capable of producing the refrain commonly heard in Pentecostal worship services of testimony and witness: “I know that I know that I know.”

Once freed from rationality alone and fully acknowledging body and spirit as well, epistemology becomes “a kind of *aesthetic*, an epistemic grammar that privileges *aisthesis* (experience) before *noesis* (intellection).”<sup>103</sup> Instead of allowing worldview-talk to misconstrue humans by reducing them to the stunted state of little more than thinking things,<sup>104</sup> emotions and bodies come to matter equally, and be at least as formative. We become whole, embodied spirits, affective and aesthetic creatures, in reality shaped more powerfully by desires, narrative, and imagination than by propositions, beliefs, and worldview.<sup>105</sup> As Daniel Taylor’s title suggests, skeptical believers tell stories to their inner atheists rather than lecture them with rational arguments.<sup>106</sup> The story-telling arts can access truths about the human condition as actively, and on some questions perhaps more accurately, than rationality, precisely because they can hold their audience in paradoxes where seeming opposites are both true, in a way that logic would reduce paradoxes to contradictions where one negates the other.<sup>107</sup> So readers can readily identify with Pi when he says that he “just wants to love God,” to pursue ultimate truth and love without having to choose between religions, and without being denigrated as irrational. Faith is indeed more poetry than prose, more theatre than theory. “Our most primary and fundamental mode of ‘understanding’ is more literary than logical; we are the kind of crea-

102 Merold Westphal, “Post-Kantian Reflections on the Importance of Hermeneutics,” in *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective*, ed. Roger Lundin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

103 Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 80-1.

104 James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

105 James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).

106 Daniel Taylor, *The Skeptical Believer: Telling Stories to Your Inner Atheist* (St. Paul: Bog Walk, 2013).

107 I am indebted to my thespian/sociologist colleague Val Hiebert (no relation) for this insight.

tures who make our way in the world more by metaphor than mathematics. The way we ‘know’ is more like a dance than a deduction.”<sup>108</sup>

Be they psychological, cultural, or spiritual, there are myriad powerful, unconscious, precognitive, affective effects constantly at work on individuals of all kinds of faith. In the Holy Spirit, Christians have a catch-all category of explanation for such non-rational effects, attributable to the work of a supernatural personal agent. Yet they often ironically shackle the Spirit with the limits of rationality, saying that the Spirit would never do this or allow that because of this or that property we have ascribed to the Spirit, instead of granting that the Spirit will blow wherever it chooses (John 3:8). Even leading apologist William Lane Craig, in his well-known distinction between knowing and showing, stated that, because of the work of the Holy Spirit in him, he knew Christianity was true long before he could show that it was true.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, in disavowing theological rationalism and evidentialism, he avows that Christianity is true even if he could not show that it was true, and even while he devotes his enterprise to showing that Christianity is true. In his personal story of faith, Craig practices Fowler’s non-rational logic of conviction, not the logic of rational certainty. So do the rest of us. For just as Pi observed, so it goes with God.

Rationality is a positive and valuable aspect of human life that has contributed enormously toward human self-understanding and well-being.<sup>110</sup> It has also contributed much to the unfolding of Christian faith in modernity.<sup>111</sup> Yet as rationality and Christianity characterized and shared the modern Western world, extreme social practices of rationality in Christian faith became problematic. Modernity proved no more or less problematic for Christian faith than postmodernity is now proving to be. Rationality remains a tremen-

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108 Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 82.

109 William Lane Craig, “Classical Apologetics,” In *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000).

110 See Rodney Stark’s triumphalist *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2006).

111 Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

dously useful tool for persons of Christian faith, but as the saying goes, if the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. And worse, when the tool overtakes the person, the person is dehumanized, becoming robotic. Of course, this whole analysis has been an exercise in rationality, subject to critique by rationalists that it is therefore self-defeating. But it has also been an attempt to use rationality against rationalization and rationalism, to dethrone rationality and make way for non-rationality as one legitimate way of acting and knowing among others, and thereby democratize the elements of Christian faith. Indeed, rationality remains a good servant but a bad master. The critical realism assumed by this analysis is inherently critical of the social practices it studies, and has enormous emancipatory potential, implying that those practices need not be what they are.<sup>112</sup>

In the lyrics of “Come Healing,” songwriter Leonard Cohen “gathers up the brokenness” of multiple dichotomies such as mind-body and spirit-limb, and calls for their healing, though “none of us deserving the cruelty or the grace.”<sup>113</sup> Mercifully, we can “see the darkness yielding / that tore the light apart / Come healing of the reason / Come healing of the heart.” The darkness of rationalization and rationalism has disenchanting the world, and only when reason is healed can hearts be healed too. Then, after suggesting that the heavens are also faltering, Cohen pleads “Come healing of the Altar, come healing of the Name.” Altars are the way humans relate to, reach out to, the divine. The Name is our conception of, construction of, the divine. Both need healing.

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112 Roy Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (London: Verso, 1986).

113 Leonard Cohen, “Come Healing,” *Old Ideas*, 2012.

# Beyond Theodicy: Moving Toward a Trinitarian and Participative Spirituality of Care

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Jim Horsthuis\*

## **Abstract**

*Pastoral theologians have begun to question the usefulness of theodicy in pastoral theological responses to suffering. This article asks what a faithful pastoral response to suffering might look like beyond theodicy. What emerges is a participative spirituality of care rooted in Trinitarian perichoresis that moves from rationality (explanation of the suffering) to relationality (presence in the midst of suffering) when dealing with those who suffer. The doctrine of perichoresis both helps to explain how God shares in human suffering as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and informs how ministering persons participate in the triune God's compassionate response to those who suffer. The move toward a participative spirituality of presence is made in conversation with Henri Nouwen's concept of the wounded healer and Michael Gorman's teaching about cruciformity. These pastoral theological developments allow ministering persons to move beyond theodicy to a participative spirituality of care.*

## **Introduction**

The reality of suffering persists as an ongoing pastoral challenge. When confronted with suffering, ministering persons continue to ask “what is a faithful response to suffering?” How are ministering persons to respond suitably to the complexities and multivalent dynamics in situations of suffering? In recent years, pastoral theologians have questioned the usefulness of theodicy as a pastoral response to those who are suffering. From the pastoral theological perspective, suffering is not an issue to be dealt with rationally, but a reality to be confronted relationally.<sup>1</sup> The thick relationality of a

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healthy pastoral encounter provides the context for the sufferer to give voice to their authentic response to the suffering, be it lament, questioning of faith, or repentance from sin. In what follows, I will consider what a pastoral theological response to suffering looks like beyond theodicy. To move beyond theodicy in pastoral theology, I will engage in conversation with Trinitarian theology, which encourages a move toward a participative spirituality of care with those who are suffering. The conversation opens up a perspective on care that spiritually participates with the triune God's compassionate response to those who suffer. This transforms the ministering person's response to suffering from one of explanation to one of compassionate presence, which reveals God's presence and solidarity with those who are suffering.

### **Suffering After Theodicy**

Suffering is a pastoral problem that defies rational explanation. Philosophical and theological explanations of human suffering—theodicy—are proving inadequate to contemporary pastoral theologians who are grappling with the issue of suffering. Pastoral theologians have begun to respond to the reality of suffering in a manner that emphasizes compassion, relationship, and presence, over rational explanations to suffering. A paradigm shift from “what do I say?” (rationality) to “how do I suffer with?” (relational presence) is occurring. What this move promotes is a holistic response to those who are suffering. The questions and concerns of the suffering person are important to this pastoral encounter, but these rational dynamics are not given priority over the compassionate presence this response to suffering encourages.<sup>2</sup> Two pastoral theologians are particularly

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1 Of course a relational approach assumes an appropriate role for the use of reason and for cognitive wrestling with the reality of suffering. What this approach seeks to move beyond is the dominance of rationality in Christian responses to suffering and evil.

2 C. S. Lewis is an example of the kind of re-prioritizing of perspective in the face of suffering that this article is pursuing. See Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001) and *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001). In *The Problem of Pain*, first published in 1940, Lewis views suffering as something that requires analysis, explanation, and appropriate response, God's megaphone to a deaf world. Years later, when Lewis is stung by his wife's death through cancer, we find



poignant in their respective critique of theodicy, namely John Swinton and Phil Zylla. I will outline each of their respective critiques of theodicy and then move toward a participative spirituality of suffering.

### *John Swinton*

John Swinton, in his book *Raging with Compassion*, encourages a move from theodicy to practical theodicy.<sup>3</sup> Swinton is decisive in his rejection of traditional theological and philosophical approaches to theodicy. He critiques these approaches to theodicy because they can “justify and rationalize evil,” “silence the voice of the sufferer,” and “become evil in themselves.”<sup>4</sup> I will survey each of these areas of concern.

First, Swinton rejects any attempt to justify or rationalize evil and suffering. He is adamant that evil is evil and it is improper to minimize or spiritualize its reality. He writes, “[e]vil is tragic, awful, painful, and personal, and it should be acknowledged as such. If a theodicy urges us to forget or ignore that fact, it loses its relevance for addressing the relentless pain of the world.”<sup>5</sup> For Swinton, the reality and inherent complexity of evil is to be held in pastoral tension for those who respond to the suffering. It is unhelpful to use theodicy to try and minimize or insulate people from “the relentless pain of the world.”

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Lewis giving full vent to his lament to God over this tragedy. He says, “But go to Him[God] when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside” (p. 6). There is need for both responses, but Lewis’s lament to God leads to more spiritual maturity than moving too quickly past these relational dimensions with God and imposing rational explanations upon particular situations of suffering. The questions of those who are suffering, questions which at the right time can draw on Christian theological explanations for suffering, are in this approach rooted in compassionate presence. Ministering persons are wise to suffer with those who are suffering before they attempt to discern the reason for the suffering.

3 John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Response to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 17–29.

4 Swinton, *Raging*, 17.

5 Swinton, *Raging*, 21.

Second, Swinton is concerned that placing the blame for evil, through the use of doctrines like original sin, on those who are suffering, silences them and thus increases their suffering.<sup>6</sup> He says,

“[s]uffering is always scandalous, and a theodicy that attempts to ameliorate that scandal by simply shifting blame from God to humans is inevitably pastorally problematic . . . Theodicies that use the doctrine of original sin to explain evil and suffering silence the voice of the innocent victim and choke the cry of lament.”<sup>7</sup>

It is important to emphasize that Swinton’s concern here is not with the doctrine of original sin per se. He believes this doctrine “may well provide useful insights and revelation.”<sup>8</sup> His concern is how this doctrine is used in theodicy. It becomes problematic when it is used, “as a way of explaining what is happening to particular individuals in quite specific circumstances. This was not Augustine’s intention when he defined original sin, but it is clearly the way in which theodicians use his thinking.”<sup>9</sup> While it can be affirmed that the reality of original sin speaks to all situations of suffering, Swinton shows that it is pastorally problematic for a theodicy to use the doctrine to increase the weight of despair already carried by those who are suffering. Using a theodicy in this way seems to move away from Jesus’s pastoral invitation in Matt. 11:28-30, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest . . . For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Third, Swinton highlights the harm theodicy can cause when viewed from the pastoral perspective—it itself can contribute to evil.

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6 Phil Zylla, in *The Root of Sorrow: A Pastoral Theology of Suffering* (Waco: Baylor, 2012), 47, teaches that a pastoral theological response to suffering is to move from silence to lament. Rather than silencing the sufferer with theological answers, “the aim of lament is not full theological explanation of the suffering situation. It is more an experience-near language or psalmic language which gives authentic expression to the conditions of suffering in all of its dimensions.”

7 Swinton, *Raging*, 25–6.

8 Swinton, *Raging*, 21, n.19.

9 Swinton, *Raging*, 21–22, n.19. See *Raging* 21–29 for Swinton’s development of this important discussion.

He argues, “[i]f theodicy blocks people’s access to the loving heart of God and the hope of experiencing God’s redemptive power, goodness and mercy as a living reality, then it functions in a way that can only be described as evil.”<sup>10</sup> If evil’s intent is to harm human beings’ relationship with God, and if a theodicy corrupts one’s view of God and obstructs this relationship, then, in Swinton’s view, the theodicy contributes to the evil it is trying to explain. Pastorally, the problem with this kind of theodicy is that it does not offer the relational space to draw the sufferer toward the *loving heart of God*.

### *Phil Zylla*

Phil Zylla is also concerned about the pastoral implications of theodicy. In his book *The Roots of Sorrow*, he argues that suffering does not need to be explained as much as confronted with compassion. He says,

A theology of suffering must move beyond speculative thinking about God and suffering so that the reality of suffering as a lived experience is fully acknowledged. It is from this lived reality that we must learn to speak of God in the midst of suffering . . . *we must not approach suffering as a problem to be solved or as a riddle to be explained but rather as a reality to be confronted in cooperation with God’s own expressed intentions in the world.*<sup>11</sup>

Zylla contends that suffering should be responded to with compassionate protest, saying, “[t]he church is to enact this paradigm [the move from loneliness to community] and live in compassionate protest against suffering. God suffers with us, but God is ultimately making all things new.”<sup>12</sup> Theodicy is unsatisfying because “it is removed from the reality of suffering itself.”<sup>13</sup> Compassionate protest

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10 Swinton, *Raging*, 28.

11 Zylla, *The Roots*, 43–44.

12 Zylla, *The Roots*, 126.

13 Zylla, *The Roots*, 43.

suffers *with* the afflicted and cooperates with God to resist suffering, representing a call “to *participate* in God’s own protest against suffering by aligning ourselves with the spiritual posture of resisting suffering . . . and actively seeking to overturn the root causes of suffering in the world.”<sup>14</sup> Zylla encourages compassionate presence as ministering persons respond to situations of suffering; this response enables ministering persons to suffer *with* those in affliction. Furthermore, ministering persons are encouraged to participate in the triune God’s protest against suffering, a protest against suffering informed by and rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Swinton and Zylla both encourage a move toward relationality as integral to a pastoral response to suffering. In making this move, Swinton and Zylla leave the rational clarity and apologetic aspirations of theodicy behind, preferring a personal, communal, and authentic pastoral response to those who are suffering. Swinton’s concern is to awaken the suffering to the loving heart of God and to encourage ministering persons to cultivate the pastoral sensitivity that God’s heart is open to the suffering. Zylla points in the direction of cooperation and participation with God as faithful pastoral responses to suffering. This move toward relationship and participation with God in response to suffering is fruitful because it focuses attention on the person who is suffering and seeks to be present to them in the complexities of their situation. It is when ministering persons are present with the suffering that God’s presence and care can begin to be discerned. Cooperating with God in this way is the beginning of a participative spirituality of care.

### **The Move from Constancy to Participative Presence**

A participative spirituality moves toward a relational or participative response to those who are suffering. It seeks to suffer *with* those in affliction. The French Catholic Philosopher Gabriel Marcel illuminates the importance of this. As he reflects on what a faithful friend is, he surveys a move from constancy to what he calls “creative fidelity.”<sup>15</sup> This move is helpful to pastoral theology because it

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14 Zylla, *The Roots*, 107.

15 Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Fordham, 1964), 146–74.

illuminates that God's response to suffering is something more akin to participative presence than to constancy. Following Marcel's relational approach will help ministering persons to move from constancy (correct action or behavior) to participative presence as a faithful response to suffering.

Another reason theodicy proves inadequate for pastoral theological responses to suffering is that it tends to operate at the level of Marcel's understanding of "constancy."<sup>16</sup> As Marcel seeks to discover what a "faithful friend" might be, he teaches that it is not the "correctness of behavior" found with constancy. For Marcel, constancy is a part of, but never the essence of fidelity. Left on its own, constancy flows out of duty or conscience. It may well prompt one to respond when the friend is in need, but this should not be confused with being a "faithful friend." Marcel observes, "but how could this correctness of behaviour be confused with fidelity strictly speaking?"<sup>17</sup> The key question for Marcel in the quest for faithful friendship is "how does the situation seem to X [the friend in need]?"<sup>18</sup> One cannot be a faithful friend by holding to principles, following steps, or by abiding by objective criteria. Marcel notes that one can get a diploma this way, but following such obligations does not engender faithful friendship. Faithful friendship occurs when there is receptivity to the presence of the friend; the friend is there for us. Marcel states, "I am *present* for the other . . . making me feel he is *with* me."<sup>19</sup> It is not the constancy of appropriate action which creates the context for faithful friendship; relational presence is the locus of a maturing connection between two human beings.

Marcel helpfully illuminates the importance of presence for Christian ministry. Ministering persons should not be satisfied with constancy—to offer appropriate pastoral action to their situation

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16 Marcel, *Creative*, 154–55. I am indebted to Neil Pembroke's drawing on Marcel's thought in his discussion of suffering in *Renewing Pastoral Practice: Trinitarian Perspectives on Pastoral Care and Counselling*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006). See especially pages 98 and 102.

17 Marcel, *Creative*, 154.

18 Marcel, *Creative*, 155.

19 Marcel, *Creative*, 154, emphasis original.

of ministry. Ministry is rooted in *presence*—to be relationally and spiritually engaged with suffering persons in such a manner that the suffering person understands that they are not alone in their suffering. With presence, the hope is to be personally available to the other in a way that identifies and awakens faith, hope, and love. As Marcel shows, it is the other, the one who is suffering, who determines if the encounter has moved toward presence. The move toward presence is decisive for pastoral responses to suffering because in Christ, God himself chose to be present and to participate in this suffering of the world.

Pastoral Theologian Neil Pembroke draws on Marcel's teaching to show that God's involvement with human suffering moves beyond constancy to participation. The theological relevance of Marcel's thought is made clear when Pembroke argues against the image of the God of constancy, saying, "this image of a God who does what is good for us without also participating in our suffering is not an especially attractive one. Such a God is available to us through good works but not through a *personal, participative* engagement with our experience."<sup>20</sup> Pembroke argues, in light of the cross and resurrection of Christ, that "God feels our pain but is not paralyzed by it. Profound empathy and decisive action are not mutually exclusive realities."<sup>21</sup> Participative presence creates the context for ministering persons to move beyond theodicy and consider how their presence participates in God's response to the suffering.

So what might a pastoral response to suffering look like after theodicy? My conviction is that ministering persons can draw on perichoretic, trinitarian theology to develop a participative spirituality that enables them to share in Christ's compassionate response to those who are suffering. I believe an understanding of the triune God's perichoretic participation provides the grammar to sustain this move. So, what then is perichoretic participation? How can we understand the triune God to suffer with the suffering? What perspective and posture might this participative spirituality adopt to help

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20 Pembroke, *Renewing*, 102, emphasis added.

21 Pembroke, *Renewing*, 103.

the church fulfill its mission of participating in Christ's care of the suffering? It is to these questions that we will now turn.

### **Perichoretic Participation and the Move Toward a Participative Spirituality**

Perichoretic participation speaks of both God's inner triune life (that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit participate in each other) as well as the *invitation* for Christ's followers to participate in the life and mission of God in the church and the world. At the creaturely level, this invitation is expressed most clearly through Jesus's prayer to his Father, "Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us. . ." (John 17:21). Jürgen Moltmann shares a vision of such perichoretic participation when he says, "[w]hen God is known face to face, the freedom of God's servants, his children and his friends finally finds its fulfillment in God himself. Then freedom means the unhindered participation in the eternal life of the triune God himself, and in his inexhaustible fullness and glory."<sup>22</sup> Such a description shows that perichoretic participation is a profound possibility for God's friends and is eschatologically oriented, offering a most profound freedom to minister in the here and now.

A participative spirituality is rooted in the notion of divine participation, according to which the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a participative unity. The doctrine of perichoresis is the mutual indwelling without confusion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The oneness of the triune God is a participative unity that is dynamic and relational.<sup>23</sup> Miroslav Volf helps inform what is meant by trinitarian perichoretic participation when he says,

[f]or *perichoresis* suggests a dynamic identity in which 'non-identity' indwells the 'identity' and constitutes it by this indwelling. The Father is the Father not only because he is distinct from the Son and the Spirit but also because through the power of self giving the Son and the

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22 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 222.

23 Graham Buxton, *The Trinity, Creation and Pastoral Ministry: Imaging the Perichoretic God* (London: Paternoster, 2005), 133.

Spirit dwell in him. The same is true of the Son and the Spirit.<sup>24</sup>

Volf clarifies that this indwelling is not a dissolving of the divine persons in each other, but their identity is constituted in their mutual participation. Volf concludes, “[t]he unity of the triune God is grounded neither in the numerically identical substance nor in the accidental intentions of the persons, but rather in their *mutually interior being*.”<sup>25</sup> The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist as one God in three persons through their perichoretic participation in one another. With proper respect for the distinction between creator and creature,<sup>26</sup> perichoretic participation is a transformative concept for Christian life and ministry. The triune God has invited creaturely participation in the life and mission of God. It is the invitation to perichoretic participation with God that allows for a vision of ministry undertaken *with* God. Such a participative understanding of ministry has been articulated in recent years. It is helpful to survey two of these developments with the goal of showing the relevance of perichoretic participation to ministering persons who deal with the suffering.

### *Trinitarian and Participative Approaches to Pastoral Ministry*

Stephen Seamands provides a vision of participative ministry in his book *Ministry in the Image of God*. Seamands teaches “the ministry we have entered is the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son, to the Father, *through* the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and world.”<sup>27</sup> Seamands explains, “[t]he Trinitarian circle of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is therefore an open, not a closed, circle. Through

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24 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 181.

25 Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 210, emphasis original.

26 Volf argues in *After* that “there can be no correspondence to the interiority of the divine persons at the human level. . . even the divine persons indwell human beings in a qualitatively different way than they do one another” (210–11).

27 Stephan Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 9–10, emphasis original.



faith in Christ, through baptism *into* the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19), we enter into the life of the Trinity and are graciously included as partners.”<sup>28</sup> With Seamands, ministry flows out of such a participative union in and with the triune God. This approach allows Seamands to distinguish between being productive and being fruitful in ministry. Fecundity in ministry comes through participative union with Christ. Seamands writes, “[n]o doubt through our sincere religious self determination we can make things happen in ministry; we can be productive. But there is a world of difference, as was noted earlier, between being productive and being fruitful.”<sup>29</sup> It is by abiding in him that Jesus assures his disciples that they will bear fruit that will last (see John 15). Seamands concludes, “[t]he exchanged life where Christ dwells in us even as we dwell in him is the key to *participating* in the ongoing ministry of Jesus.”<sup>30</sup> This is crucial when dealing with suffering because those who are enduring suffering do not benefit from productivity but do value fruitful ministry as they become aware that by the Spirit and through Christ, God suffers with them.

Seamands’ book is a helpful introduction to “the Trinitarian shape of Christian service.”<sup>31</sup> Seamands shows that such an understanding and experience of spiritual participation transforms one’s understanding of prayer. In his perspective, prayer also moves in a relational direction of deepening communion with the triune God. Seamands teaches “when we intercede for others, then, we are not so much called to pray *to* Jesus on their behalf as we are called to pray *with* Jesus for them.”<sup>32</sup> Prayer is the means by which ministering persons experience the reality of spiritual participation as God graciously unites them with those they are ministering to in the relational freedom to lament, plead, groan, and seek God from within the complexities of the situation of suffering.

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28 Seamands, *Ministry*, 12, emphasis original.

29 Seamands, *Ministry*, 149.

30 Seamands, *Ministry*, 149.

31 Seamands, *Ministry* (this is the subtitle to this book).

32 Seamands, 152, emphasis original.

Paul Fiddes' book *Participating in God* advances the idea of perichoretic participation by engaging in an in-depth pastoral discussion about the reality and implications of the perichoretic being of God. Perhaps his most crucial contribution to this discussion is his insistence that God be understood participatively. By this he means that to know God at the epistemological level is not to observe the divine being and so come to an accurate understanding of God. Rather, Fiddes asserts, to know God is to participate in the relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He says, “[i]dentifying the divine persons as relations brings together a way of understanding the nature of *being* (ontology) with a way of knowing (epistemology). The being of God is understood as an event of relationship, but only through an epistemology of participation: each only makes sense in the context of the other.”<sup>33</sup> Fiddes presses for a theology of perichoretic participation that reaches beyond modeling God, by relying on the experience of participating with God to inform pastoral theology and practice.

Fiddes shows that there is relational space opened up for human participation in the divine being and this has profound implications for pastoral ministry. Fiddes roots his discussion in the pastoral theological methodology of mutual correlation or, as some pastoral theologians refer to it, a mutually critical conversation.<sup>34</sup> He does this in a Trinitarian manner that holds experience and doctrine together mutually. Fiddes shows that not only has God made his way to humanity through his self-revelation, but he also invites human beings to make their way back to God through the path God has already forged through his self-revelation. Fiddes explains,

[t]he character of theology as a kind of worship should make clear that my appeal to a journey ‘from experience to doctrine’ must not be taken as meaning that human experience is a mode of access to God outside God’s

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33 Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 38, emphasis original.

34 “I intend to explore ways in which this pastoral practice shapes our doctrine of God, and conversely how faith in the triune God shapes our practice” Fiddes, *Participating*, 8.

self-disclosure to us . . . . In taking a path from experience to doctrine we are retracing a journey that God has already taken toward us. Theology is doxology, worship called out from those who have received the self-offering and self-opening of the triune God.<sup>35</sup>

A participative spirituality of care helps ministering persons understand their experience of ministry in light of this two-way movement of the triune God.<sup>36</sup> In the primary movement the triune God offers himself through Christ, by the Spirit, to the world, and in the complementary movement ministering persons move in step with the Holy Spirit and are led through the complexities of their situation back to God, through Christ.<sup>37</sup>

Like Seamands, Fiddes points to prayer to show the outworking of his participatory theology. Fiddes teaches that when we pray, “[w]e enter into the life of prayer already going on within the communion of God’s being: we pray to the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit.”<sup>38</sup> Spiritual participation is something God invites his children to enjoy, and this spiritual reality is transformative for the response of ministering persons to suffering. One of the pastoral issues Fiddes takes up in his book is suffering. He tackles this complex issue in a manner that helps ministering persons to understand how they participate in the triune God’s care for those who are suffering, and sketches a vision of how God suffers as Trinity. It is to the pastoral dimensions of this important development that I will now turn.

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35 Fiddes, *Participating*, 8–9.

36 See also James Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996).

37 It is important to emphasize that these movements of God are rooted in grace. It is through the grace of God that ministering persons know, love, and serve as participants with God. This means that a ministering person’s actions in the world are not absolute or authoritative, but that God is working with them and through them, through their weakness and brokenness, to bring grace into the situation of ministry.

38 Fiddes, *Participating*, 123.

### Participative Spirituality and Suffering: God Suffers as Trinity

Fiddes deals with the subject of suffering in articulating his pastoral doctrine of the Trinity. He is convinced that when faced with the problem of suffering, “the way pastors act and react in this situation *will* be guided by the image of God that they hold.”<sup>39</sup> Fiddes’s perichoretic and participative understanding of God is fruitful as ministering persons move toward those who are suffering. He shares that pastoral responses to suffering “will be influenced by what they believe can become possible through participation, or deeper participation, in the triune God.”<sup>40</sup> While acknowledging the limits of all theodicy, Fiddes offers a perichoretic response in an attempt to help ministering persons care for those who are suffering.

Fiddes’s argument is bold. He contends that God suffers *as* Trinity. He does so in contrast to classical theological notions that God cannot suffer (divine impassibility). Fiddes teaches that these perspectives contend that it is only through Christ, and specifically through Christ’s humanity, that there can be any experience of ‘divine’ suffering. In response, Fiddes emphasizes God’s choice to suffer with and for his creation as Trinity. Fiddes teaches, “A God who exists from nothing but God’s self can still choose to be fulfilled in the manner of that existence through fellowship with created beings, to be open to being affected and changed by them.”<sup>41</sup> This is the free choice of God, who, it seems, desires to be affected by his creation and to relate with human beings. For Fiddes, the Divine choice to suffer does not imply that God can or will be overwhelmed by suffering, nor will he be degraded by it. When it comes to the dilemma of suffering, Fiddes shows that God chooses to be relationally responsive to his creation as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Fiddes understands that the perichoretic dance of the triune God is beautiful and sorrowful.<sup>42</sup> He identifies the sorrowful movements of the divine dance as it relates to suffering. In contrast with ancient times where *patripassianism* was used to emphasize distinction be-

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39 Fiddes, *Participating*, 153, emphasis original.

40 Fiddes, *Participating*, 153.

41 Fiddes, *Participating*. 182.

42 See Fiddes, *Participating*, 72, where he explains the “dynamic sense of perichoresis” as the divine dance.

tween the Father and the Son in an effort to combat the monarchian heresy, today “it is *only* in speaking about the suffering of the Father and the Spirit as well as the Son that we can discern the true nature of the relationships within God.”<sup>43</sup> Fiddes says, “[w]ithin the divine perichoresis, all three persons suffer, but in different ways according to the distinction of their relations.”<sup>44</sup> Fiddes teaches that the dance of perichoresis reveals that each person of the Trinity suffers precisely as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Consistent with their mode of being, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit suffer ‘with,’ ‘as,’ and ‘in’ creation. Fiddes teaches that the *Father* experiences the rejection of his creation but “such is the fatherly love of God that God will suffer *with* a human son or daughter.”<sup>45</sup> In Christ, the incarnate Son, God identifies with human beings and “God will suffer *as* the human son or daughter does.”<sup>46</sup> As the Father suffers *with* humanity and the Son suffers *as* human beings do, so too the Spirit also suffers. The Spirit suffers *in* creatures. Fiddes explains, “God as Spirit will then suffer *in* creatures . . . crying out in the birth-pains of creation (Rom 8:22-3).”<sup>47</sup> Within the perichoretic dance of the triune God the sorrowful movements flow as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each suffer with creation in a manner consistent with the distinctions of their relations.

Fiddes goes on to show that this experience of suffering by the triune God intersects most profoundly with human suffering at the cross of Christ, stating that “God has never been drawn further into flesh than here, giving God’s own self without any reserve at all.”<sup>48</sup> Fiddes understands the reality of the cross to mean that human beings “can lean our sufferings upon those of the Son, so that God suffers not only ‘with’ but ‘as’ and ‘in’ us in the interweaving relationship of

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43 Fiddes, *Participating*, 184.

44 Fiddes, *Participating*, 184.

45 Fiddes, *Participating*, 185, emphasis original.

46 Fiddes, *Participating*, 185, emphasis original.

47 Fiddes, *Participating*, 186, emphasis original.

48 Fiddes, *Participating*, 186.

the divine dance.”<sup>49</sup> It is such a relational connection in the context of suffering that informs what is meant by the participative spirituality of care.

Fiddes emphasizes the aspect of faith when dealing with situations of suffering, concluding his chapter on suffering with these words, “[t]he belief that God suffers with us may help us to say that the making of persons is worth all the tears. But only faith can answer the question ‘is it worth it?’ after all reasonable arguments have fallen silent.”<sup>50</sup> It is the presence of God, as one who is familiar with suffering, in the midst of suffering, that might strengthen the faith of those in experiencing affliction. Pastoral responses to suffering then are rooted in the relational dynamics of strengthening faith, inspiring hope, and fostering love. It is the sorrowful movements of the dance of perichoresis that encourage ministering persons to embrace a participative spirituality and move toward those who are suffering with faith, hope, and love.

### **The Perspective and Posture of a Participative Spirituality of Care**

Suffering is a powerful force. We have discovered that ministering persons are not left to themselves to attend to those who are suffering, rather, they are to become a gift of grace who help those who are suffering to know God’s presence and concern. Ministering persons will benefit from embracing the perspective of the wounded healer and the posture of cruciformity if they are to be this kind of spiritual presence. The perspective of the wounded healer will aid ministering persons to become a disclosive presence and so relationally and authentically contribute to what I am calling the community of the wounded. The posture of cruciformity will inform how the triune God’s compassionate and eschatological presence evokes hope with those who are suffering. Each of these will be drawn into conversation with trinitarian/perichoretic theology to inform this participative spirituality of care.

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49 Fiddes, *Participating*, 186.

50 Fiddes, *Participating*, 187.

*Perspective of the Wounded Healer*

Henri Nouwen serves ministering persons well by articulating a vision of Christian ministry as wounded healers. In his book *The Wounded Healer*, Nouwen shares his seminal insight that one's own wounds are a source of healing and ministry to others. Nouwen's relevance came from his ability to take his own personal struggles and make them accessible to others in a pastoral way. It was from Anton Boisen that Nouwen began to understand and so articulate what it means to be a wounded healer. Nouwen's biographer writes, "[f]rom Anton Boisen Henri Nouwen drew direct inspiration for his own ministry. He learned from Boisen that one's own psychological troubles and weaknesses could be a source of inspiration and a path to God, something that would become a hallmark of his spiritual writing and speaking."<sup>51</sup> As he writes to Christian pastors in *The Wounded Healer*, Nouwen is able to show how touching the depths of human experience with a *sensitive and careful* articulation of one's own brokenness is at the heart of pastoral ministry. Nouwen writes,

In this context pastoral conversation is not merely a skillful use of conversational techniques to manipulate people into the Kingdom of God, but a deep human encounter in which a man [*sic*] is willing to put his own faith and doubt, his own hope and despair, his own light and darkness at the disposal of others who want to find a way through their confusion and touch the solid core of life.<sup>52</sup>

In Nouwen's pastoral theology his disarming vulnerability makes way for relationship, true human encounter, as the context for spiritual care.

Nouwen's articulation of the wounded healer comes out of real life pastoral experience. As Nouwen reflects in *The Wounded Healer*

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51 Michael O'Laughlin, *Henri Nouwen: His Life and Vision* (Marynoll NY: Orbis, 2015), 51.

52 Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 39.

on the pastoral encounter between John, a ministry intern in a hospital, and Mr. Harrison, a 48 year old farm labourer, he observes,

[t]he beginning and end of Christian leadership is to give your life for others. Thinking about martyrdom can be an escape unless we realize that real martyrdom means a witness that starts with the willingness to cry with those who cry, and to laugh with those who laugh, and to make one's own painful and joyful experiences available as sources of clarification and understanding.<sup>53</sup>

The perspective of this participative spirituality of care is not to touch weakness with strength, but to see fellowship, grace, and love emerge by meeting others in painful experiences that are encountered, clarified, and endured in love. This is the perspective of the wounded healer.

The move toward a participative spirituality of care is also advanced by the integrative nature of Nouwen's pastoral theology. In his book *The Living Reminder*, Nouwen addresses the themes of "healing, sustaining and guiding."<sup>54</sup> He uses Seward Hiltner's pastoral theological themes to articulate an understanding of ministry "to be a living memory of Jesus Christ."<sup>55</sup> Nouwen, however, moves beyond Hiltner by articulating a robust spirituality for pastoral ministry. In this development Nouwen connects the vocation of ministry with one's relationship with God. He writes, "[t]he great vocation of the minister is to continuously make connections between our story and the divine story. We have inherited a story which needs to be told in such a way that the many painful wounds about which we hear day after day can be liberated from their isolation and be revealed as

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53 Nouwen, *The Wounded*, 72.

54 See Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958). Since Hiltner's articulation, pastoral theologians have been quick to add to his "shepherding tasks." In particular, most pastoral theologians feel that "reconciling" should be on the list. See Deborah Van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray Without Ceasing: Revitalizing Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 157.

55 Henri Nouwen, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Harper, 1977), 25.



part of God's relationship with us."<sup>56</sup> Nouwen articulates an understanding of ministry that is reliant upon the active presence of God. In speaking about the ministry of absence, Nouwen argues that this is done so that those who are receiving ministry discover the presence of God. He writes, "[t]he more this creative withdrawal becomes a real part of our ministry the more we participate in the leaving of Christ, the good leaving that allows the sustaining Spirit to come."<sup>57</sup> The perspective of the wounded healer informs ministering persons on how to use their own wounds, confusion, and even absence in a manner that helps those who are suffering to receive God's compassionate presence.

Drawing Nouwen's insights about the wounded healer together with an understanding of perichoretic participation will encourage ministering persons to, by God's grace, become a disclosive presence to those who are suffering. A disclosive presence occurs when a ministering person's connection with one who is suffering, often through sharing their own vulnerability, helps the sufferer to discern that God is present within their situation. In this way the ministering person's weakness, brokenness, and woundedness are not obstacles to be overcome but sources of healing in ministry. As a true human encounter emerges, a disclosive presence awakens both the suffering person and the caregiver, as by the Holy Spirit, they discern Christ's presence and become more aware of God's compassionate presence in the situation of suffering. A disclosive presence helps suffering people to experience the reality that their suffering spiritually participates in the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet 4:13). This requires the perspective of the wounded healer who enters the situation of suffering in communion with the triune God.

The perspective of the wounded healer complements a participative spirituality of care. Both theological approaches seek to discern the presence of the triune God in situations of suffering and together nurture an authentic, compassionate response of ministering persons to these situations of care. What emerges from this encounter is what I would like to call *the community of the wounded*. The community

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56 Nouwen, *The Living Reminder*, 24.

57 Nouwen, *The Living Reminder*, 48.

of the wounded is a gift of grace that occurs when a wounded healer (ministering person), wounded saviour (Jesus Christ), and a suffering person experience community together. It is an application of Jesus's teaching in Matt 18:20, "where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them," to spiritual care.

It is in such a community of the wounded that the suffering person is welcome to question why the suffering is occurring. Indeed, they may well follow Jesus's cry of lament from the cross asking, "My God my God why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46). It is here in the thick relationality of a mature spiritual and pastoral encounter that the questions of 'why?' and 'how long?' can be asked by those who are suffering.<sup>58</sup> It is in this community of the wounded that the Spirit of God sustains the suffering even as they gather in anticipation of their eschatological future.

### *A Posture of Cruciformity*

While the perspective of the wounded healer allows for the community of the wounded to discern Christ's presence, the posture of this participative spirituality is also christocentric; it is cruciform. It is rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that the posture of cruciformity is understood. The Apostle Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). It is from this posture of cruciformity that ministering persons participate spiritually in Christ's care for those who are suffering. The co-mingling by the Holy Spirit of ministering persons with the crucified and resurrected Christ informs this posture of cruciformity.

A participative spirituality of care is rooted in the action and agency of the triune God. This means that its expression will be consistent with the revelation of the triune God—it will be cruciform in posture. Michael Gorman teaches that God is the "cruciform God."<sup>59</sup> Gorman explains, "[i]n Paul's experience, God's will and person are

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58 John Swinton suggests developing a practical theodicy to aid in responding to evil and suffering. See Swinton, *Raging*, 79–89.

59 See Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) and *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

known through the cross of Jesus the Messiah and Lord. In other words, cruciformity is the character of God.”<sup>60</sup> Gorman argues for a family resemblance that exists between Jesus and God the Father. The cross reveals something about both Father and Son. Gorman explains, “[i]f on the cross Christ conformed to God, then God ‘conformed’ to the cross. *The cross is the interpretive, or hermeneutical, lens through which God is seen; it is the means of grace by which God is known.*”<sup>61</sup> In light of the cross of Christ, this participative spirituality of care takes a cruciform shape.

Like the sign of the cross used most commonly in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox spirituality, ministry practice benefits from having a cruciform shape. The realization of a disclosive presence occurs in spiritual cadence with the cruciform dynamics of the triune God. This means that the cadence of death and life are a constant part of the shape of ministry. Through union with Christ, ministering persons become expressions of the Father’s compassion, tangible gifts of Christ’s grace, and attentive listeners to the Spirit’s groaning. Such a cruciform shape allows ministering persons to follow Christ in opening up their own wounds, brokenness, and losses to others so that they might become a means of Christ’s presence in the midst of suffering.

Ministry originates and flows from Jesus Christ and thus takes the same cruciform shape of his life and ministry. Ministering persons are caught up in the movements of love and mission that flow from the triune God. An essential element of cruciform ministry is that it spiritually participates in the perichoretic and cruciform ministry of Christ that continues to operate in the world. It is an understanding of ministry that seeks to move in cadence with Christ. This means that the origins of ministry are located in the triune God and flow by the Holy Spirit through ministering persons with a cruciform expression. Life and death, then, are constant elements of a participative spirituality of ministry. Ministry entails a dying to one’s own competence, vision, and idolatries, if ministry in cadence with

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60 Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 18.

61 Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 17, emphasis original.

Christ is to be realized.<sup>62</sup> It is vital to establish that such a perspective does not foster a passive approach to ministry, but actually excites a passion for ministry—a suffering and dying to all things for the sake of the Gospel and communion with God. In union with Christ, participative spirituality takes a cruciform posture and it is the gift of the Holy Spirit who brings us into Christ’s ongoing ministry in the church and the world.

A participative spirituality of care relies on the Holy Spirit to weave together the church’s eschatological hope with our present situations of care. Again Gorman is helpful as he introduces the relevance of the concept of *theosis*, creatively adapting the common biblical phrase, “you shall be holy for I am holy” to “you shall be cruciform, for I am cruciform.”<sup>63</sup> Gorman argues, “[t]heosis is transformative participation in the kenotic, cruciform character and life of God through Spirit-enabled conformity to the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected/glorified Christ, who is the image of God.”<sup>64</sup> It is the gift of the Holy Spirit that allows for ministering persons to experience, in the present, the anticipated reality of life in full participation with God (*theosis*). Stanley Grenz speaks of this reality when he shows that the “ecclesial self” has an “eschatological character” that is bestowed through a “pneumatological-trinitarian context.”<sup>65</sup> It is the Spirit of the cruciform God that enables ministering persons to become a participative spiritual presence with those who are suffering as the eschatological future is anticipated and (in a measured way) realized through the encounter.

Part of the character of this participative spirituality of ministry is that it anticipates the *telos* of creation and moves in cadence with such eschatological dynamics. Seen this way, *theosis* is not simply a distant hope or goal but defines the present ministry context. This means that the ministry of presence is done in light of the resurrec-

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62 See Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), for a discussion of these kinds of temptations in ministry.

63 Gorman, *Inhabiting*, 105.

64 Gorman, *Inhabiting*, 125, emphasis original.

65 Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 326.

tion and fulfillment of God's plans for creation. *Theosis*, then, is an eschatological reality that redefines the present. Andrew Lester observes that, "Christians have 'hope beyond hope' and are not unduly threatened when their finite hopes do not materialize."<sup>66</sup> The great eschatological hope of *theosis* is complete union with the triune God, viewing the sufferings and trials of the present in the confident hope that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39b).

What is necessary in response to suffering is ministering persons who respond to the afflicted with such a participative spirituality of care. Ministering person can move beyond theodicy by embracing a spiritually participative and relational approach when responding to those who are suffering. They understand that their mission in the world is to offer compassionate presence—to suffer with—the afflicted, and that this compassion is ultimately rooted in God, as by the Spirit, they participate in Christ's care of the suffering. For "when Jesus was moved with compassion, the source of all life trembled, the ground of all love burst open, and the abyss of God's immense, inexhaustible and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself."<sup>67</sup> A participative spirituality of care enables ministering persons to understand how they participate with Christ in receiving and sharing this "unfathomable tenderness" with those who are suffering. A participative spirituality of care seeks to provide ministering persons with a grammar for understanding how to care for the suffering in communion with the triune God.

## Conclusion

The reality of suffering calls for a relational, compassionate, and authentic response from ministering persons to the afflicted; it calls for a participative spirituality of care. Such a spirituality of care seeks to move in step with the Spirit into situations of care so

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66 Andrew Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 67.

67 Henri Nouwen, Donald P. McNeil and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 15.

that those who are suffering are able to discern Christ's presence and receive God's compassion. Cultivating this spiritual response encourages a move beyond theodicy as ministering persons are less concerned with providing cognitive explanations for suffering and are more concerned with being a healing, spiritual presence to those who are suffering. Prayer is the defining practice of this participative spirituality of care. As Paul says in Romans 8:26-27,

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

A participative spirituality of care seeks to empower ministering persons to respond faithfully to situations of suffering by relating with those who are suffering so that they might prayerfully discern Christ's presence, the Father's compassion, and the Spirit's intercession in their actual situation of need. This allows ministering persons to move beyond theodicy toward a participative spirituality of care.

# The Politics of Providence in the Early Church: Toward a Contemporary Interpretation

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Michael T. Dempsey\*

## *Abstract*

*This article offers an historical-systematic interpretation of the theology of providence in the early church. Tracing the trajectory of the theology of providence from Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of God to its development in the thought of Irenaeus, Origen, and Augustine, the theology of providence evolved from a movement of social justice to a central tenet of colonial expansion. To retrieve a more traditional and biblical theology of providence, this article suggests that providence undergo a christological reordering that understands God's work in history and society according to the incarnation, mission, and social ministry of Jesus.*

## **Introduction**

David Fergusson has recently argued that the classical doctrine of providence is problematic in that it has been interpreted in abstract, philosophical, and deterministic ways that have undermined the sense of struggle and resistance at the heart of the early Jesus movement.<sup>1</sup> Originally, providence was seen as the continuing work of God to nourish, sustain, and care for all things in creation. With the prophets of the Old Testament, providence was expanded to include socio-political dimensions with the promise for a kingdom of peace and righteousness that would wipe away every tear and

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1 David Fergusson, "The Theology of Providence," *Theology Today* 67 (2010): 261-78.

turn swords into plowshares (Isa. 2:4). Jesus continued the prophetic vision in the New Testament by announcing the Kingdom of God breaking into history to expel the powers of evil and darkness with love, forgiveness, and mercy. He then sends his disciples out to continue his mission and promises to provide for them in their ministry.

As the church moved into the Greco-Roman world, the theology of providence gradually came to reflect a more philosophical approach that concentrated on the apparent conflict between divine sovereignty and human freedom. At first, this was necessary to differentiate Christian faith from Stoic determinism and Epicurean denial, but eventually reflection on providence lost its basis in the eschatological promise for history and centered on an abstract philosophical problem. At the same time, many Christians came to believe that God's providence was working through the Roman Empire to bring peace to the world through one God, one religion, and one empire. Once considered the mighty beast from the book of Revelation, by the fourth century most Christians had come to accept a place for Rome in God's plan of salvation that ultimately led to and legitimated the imperial expansion of a Christian empire through colonial conquest.

How did the concept of providence morph from a social justice teaching that promised to provide for the disciples as they were sent into the world for service and ministry to a central tenet of western colonial expansion? Why was Augustine's repudiation of the alliance of church and empire far less successful than his insistence on the absolute sovereignty of grace, and what effect did this have on the subsequent interpretations of providence? Generally speaking, the Fathers understood divine providence in terms of the economy of grace in providing and caring for the needs of all of God's creatures, including property, the necessities of daily life, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as many early theologians were eager to denounce Stoic fatalism while championing the freedom of the human will, their discussion of providence often took place in the context of classical and Hellenistic philosophical debates regarding fate and

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2 G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1964), 55-75.



free will.<sup>3</sup> As the church moved into and up the social ladder of the Greco-Roman world, the Christian view of providence was then expounded in philosophical terms that often reflected the profound cultural changes taking place. Although this era of ecclesial history has received significant scholarly attention,<sup>4</sup> especially with regard to trinity and christology,<sup>5</sup> little of it has been directed to patristic views of providence or to the social or political implications of the doctrine.<sup>6</sup> This article will consider the development of the early church's theology of providence in order to see how the move into the Greco-Roman world affected their understanding of the doctrine and what might be done to recover a biblical and traditional theology of providence for a contemporary interpretation.

## The Theology of Providence in the Early Church

### *Irenaeus of Lyon*

One of the first serious attempts to engage a theology of providence comes from Irenaeus of Lyon. Responding to the Gnostic denial of the goodness of creation, Irenaeus understands providence in terms of God's redemptive work in Christ to bring the whole of creation to completion. Setting his theology of providence between creation and final judgment, Irenaeus holds that providence is the work of God in history to bring creatures to perfection. God did not create human beings in a perfect state, but created them imperfect

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3 See Andrew Louth, "Pagans and Christians on Providence," in *Texts and Culture in Late Antiquity: Inheritance, Authority, and Change*, ed. J. H. D. Scourfield (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2007), 279-97.

4 John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea: Formation of Christian Theology*, vols. I-II (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001); Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010).

5 See Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

6 In *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, Ayers argues for a Pro-Nicene theological culture of the 360s to 380s and rejects the reductionism of interpreting doctrine according to political, social, and cultural contexts. Yet, he also acknowledges that important "theological shifts of the fourth century [can be traced] to shifts in the intellectual life of the empire" (p. 6).

and immature, capable of development, so that they might learn through experience to enjoy the good and suffer the consequences of evil. Moving creatures from a state of immaturity and imperfection toward a state of mature perfection in the kingdom of God is the work of providence in history. Since all things are created through Jesus Christ, who is the eternal *logos* of all creation, it is Christ who will guide and sustain all creatures to bring them to perfection. As Irenaeus famously states, the glory of God is when the human person is made fully alive in Christ.

For Irenaeus, providence extends beyond individual existence to the social and political realm as well. Although many Christians by Irenaeus's time had abandoned the imminent expectation for the kingdom of God on earth, Irenaeus was among those who still considered that the kingdom would come as an historical reality.<sup>7</sup> Against the spiritualizing eschatology of the Platonists and Gnostics who rejected the imminent return and looked forward to a disembodied, spiritual existence beyond death, Irenaeus insisted that the kingdom of God would be established not through monistic union with God in the afterlife, but as a concrete historical reality. Drawing on the apocalyptic imagery of Daniel and Revelation, both of which understand God's providence against the tyranny of empire, Irenaeus regards the Roman Empire as the work of the Antichrist that will be dethroned by God. Just as human beings will be brought to their own perfection through the incarnation and the work of the Spirit, so too will social and political institutions be transformed through the redemptive work of Christ. The glory of God will finally triumph when all material reality is transformed into the image of God, when the powers of evil and tyranny are overthrown in a kingdom that will last for a thousand years before Christ delivers it to the Father.

There is much to be gleaned for contemporary theology from the work of Irenaeus. Although we need not accept the chiliastic teachings of his eschatology, we must note his fidelity to the biblical view that creation itself is the locus of divine providence as God seeks the perfection, maturation, and transformation of individual and social bodies. Although Irenaeus may vacillate between restoring creation

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<sup>7</sup> Denis Minns, *Irenaeus* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 122.

to its original perfection and bringing it to maturity, he stands as a clear reminder of how providence works for the material transformation of creation according to the image of Christ. Unfortunately, the traditions that followed retained neither the material nor anti-imperial aspects of his thought and soon accommodated the biblical teaching to an idealist and Platonist account that legitimated the social order of the Roman Empire and prepared the way for a union of church and empire.

*Origen and Eusebius: The Imperial Theology*

Origen of Alexandria follows Irenaeus in locating his theology of providence within the doctrine of creation, between the Fall and redemption, as God draws all things back to himself through Christ and the Holy Spirit. However, for Origen, providence is no longer concerned with the material fulfillment of the biblical promise for creation by dethroning the powers of evil, but with resolving the philosophical conflict between the goodness of God and the existence of evil. For Origen, all rational creatures are endowed with free will. God does not determine that one be poor, another rich. God rather grants to each intellectual creature a freedom that allows it to take responsibility to embrace the good or to shun evil without divine intervention or coercion.

Origen's grand theological vision centers on two chief ideas: 1. the absolute goodness and love of God which loves all creatures equally; and 2. the free will of rational creatures.<sup>8</sup> Attempting to reconcile these two, Origen argues the great diversity of good and evil that we find in creation cannot possibly be attributed to God. Rather, all souls were once united with God in eternity, but decided through their own free will to reject the good and embrace lower forms of life. As punishment for their pre-existent fall, God sent them into the lower world to work out their salvation on their long journey back to God. As each soul learns to embrace the good and to reject evil, it merits a better social status in the future as a reward for its participation in the good: "The position of every created being is the result of his own work and his own motives ... not by some privilege of cre-

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<sup>8</sup> See Jean Danielou, *Origen*, trans. W. Mitchell (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 203-19.

ation but as a reward of merit.”<sup>9</sup> Providence, therefore, is compatible with divine goodness and human free will because creatures themselves merit their own reward or punishment, manifest in social rank and status. Such things are not predetermined by God, but are the result of individual free will and choice. What appears, then, as the injustice of slavery or poverty is really the justice of God in disguise, as God gives to each only what it deserves. As Origen states:

Here we see the just judgment of God’s providence that diversity of conduct is taken into account and each is treated according to the deserts of his departure and defection of goodness ... All these privileges [of rank and social status] the divine providence, by a fair and just judgment, has conferred upon them as a reward for their merit and for the progress they have made in imitating and participating in God.<sup>10</sup>

However, while Origen may have resolved the problem of human evil and suffering by granting to creatures freedom of will while denying God’s causal determination, he has departed significantly from scripture. Not only does he undermine the divine freedom by destroying the distinction between God and creation in maintaining an eternal creation, he also attributes social injustice to the moral failures of its victims. He might succeed, therefore, in exonerating God from evil, but only at the cost of blaming victims for their own suffering. The position of the patrician class, for example, or that of the Roman slave or plebe can be attributed neither to the random forces of nature and history nor to human acts of injustice, not even to God’s eternal determination, but strictly according to the individual’s past virtue or vice. While Jesus might have said that God lets it rain on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45), which implies a random unintelligibility to evil, Origen believes that such thinking would impugn the goodness of God, for if evil and injustice occurred at

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9 Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2013), 61.

10 Origen, *On First Principles*, 71-72.

random and were not put to good use, then a benevolent providence would be denied. Yet, if social status and rank are determined as a reward or punishment for virtue or vice, then individuals of rank and power must be morally superior to those of lower economic status. Far from standing in solidarity with the poor or lifting up the rejected and the outcast, Origen justifies the goodness of God and inequality in the social order by attributing injustice to moral failure.

The theology of Origen is of great importance for the church as it is integrated into the Roman Empire of the fourth and fifth centuries. More than any other early church theologian, it is Origen whose thought provides the basis for the Christianization of the empire, arguing that divine providence has made use of the *pax Romana* of Caesar Augustus to bring the world together under one God, one faith, and one Emperor.<sup>11</sup> Although many see in Constantine the original sin of the church,<sup>12</sup> it was common at that time to regard Constantine as a harbinger of peace and a blessing of divine providence who would finally bring peace to the Empire.

Eusebius of Caesarea followed Origen when he claimed it was no coincidence that the birth of Christ occurred during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Ironically, although Eusebius is often dismissed as the original public relations officer for the burgeoning Christian empire, it is he who understood the biblical promise for the earthly kingdom, which he saw fulfilled in Constantine. In the typical style of the Roman panegyrics, he praises Constantine in nearly messianic terms as a holy and pious man who will bring about the end of the bloodshed in the temples and in Rome's foreign policy, for the peace and salvation of the whole world. In making his case for the "twin roots of blessings" of Jesus and Constantine,<sup>13</sup> Eusebius appropriates

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11 Origen, *Against Celsus*, trans. F. Crombie (Fontibus, 2013), 151.

12 John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2001). Against this view, see Leithart, *Defending Constantine*.

13 Oliver and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan (eds.), *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 56-65.

Origen's Hellenistic concept of the divine right of kingship that will accompany the church into the Middle Ages. God is seen to elect only holy and worthy kings and charge them to spread the Gospel in the service of God and the interests of imperial power, geographical expansion, and colonial conquest by whatever means necessary, including the sword.

### *The Ambiguous Legacy of St. Augustine*

Fearing a resurgence of the great persecution of Diocletian in 303, most Christians enthusiastically celebrated the triumph of imperial Christianity during the reigns of Constantine and Theodosius. Only when Augustine took up his study of Genesis in the 390s did he begin to question the hegemonic assumptions of a Christian empire. Eventually, Augustine realized that while a Christian empire may be better than a pagan one, it was still an empire that resembled more a band of robbers than disciples of Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> By the time Rome was sacked in 410, Augustine had already rejected the *Reichstheologie* of Origen and Eusebius. As Augustine understood, all history and politics are ruled by the *libido dominandi* that corrupts our social and political institutions in a never-ending competition of self-interested power politics. Although Augustine had previously shared with his contemporaries the hopes of a *Christiana tempora*, after reflecting on Genesis, his experiences as bishop, the fall of Rome, and later the Donatist controversy, he was convinced that all politics remains irredeemably sinful and can offer no lasting hope for human fulfillment. Even as he recognized progress in art and architecture, philosophy and agriculture as the work of providence in history,<sup>15</sup> he never saw any hope in improving political institutions. Despite Augustine's insistence that the earthly ruler must promote virtue and protect the peace, and that good and evil are comingled in one fallen world, his grand rhetorical vision offered little hope for the earthly city, as he ultimately divided the world into two groups, the saved and the

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14 St. Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* (IV.4), ed. V. Bourke (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 88-89.

15 St. Augustine, *City of God* (XXII, 24), 525-26.

damned, which left “Christianity with no alternative but to imagine itself as forced to convert or condemn all those it encountered.”<sup>16</sup>

Augustine’s own thinking on providence originates from his commentary on Genesis and represents a significant development from the earlier interpretations of Irenaeus and Origen. In a way that presages the thought of Thomas Aquinas and some early modern naturalism, Augustine disallows any direct divine interventions into the causal order.<sup>17</sup> His understanding of providence is twofold. On the one hand, there is a *providentia naturalis* of the natural order of plants and animals. On the other, there is a *providentia voluntaria*, which refers to God’s work on the will of rational creatures.<sup>18</sup> As Augustine came to realize, providence in both nature and will operates according to the specific *nature* of each creature. Although Augustine accepts the hypothetical possibility of direct divine action, he nonetheless insists at this time that God does *not* act directly as a cause among causes. God’s influence is mediated through creatures in the natural order established at the beginning of creation, that is, to a sequence of finite causes that bear within themselves the seeds of future influence.

In this way, Augustine not only upholds the autonomy of creation as a distinct reality, but also claims that God is not responsible for the evils of history. God cannot be blamed for sacking Rome, he argues in the latter half of the *City of God*, since the Romans themselves sowed the seeds of their own destruction by abandoning the virtues of the earlier Republic and indulging their own appetite for power and domination. In rejecting the hegemonic assumptions of the Roman *imperium* epitomized in the triumphalist rhetoric of Eusebius, Augustine summarizes his main point in the *City of God* many years later in his *Retractiones* when he declares, “The vicissitudes of

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16 James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 252.

17 See Eugene S. TeSelle, *Augustine: The Theologian* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1970), 219-21.

18 See St. Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis,” *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill (New York: New City, 2002), 371-74. See also Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 86-87, 91-96.

history can be ascribed to any god or gods.”<sup>19</sup> They are not, however, the work of providence in history.

Augustine’s appreciation of providence in the created order is given further expression in the closing pages of the *City of God* where he extols the blessings of God in nature. From the fountain of divine goodness, God cares for and protects all of the things that God has made. Even in the present life, Augustine insists, God brings human beings together through their own creative process of sexual union: man and woman, flesh and spirit, active and passive principles, come together as one so that humans might reach toward the supreme good of God in their own embodied and spiritual beings.<sup>20</sup> The power of reason and intellect are also special gifts preserved by providence as God gives to each a divine capacity to enjoy and delight in the good and to temper the unbridled appetites of the flesh. Here, providence arranges the body for peace and harmony and guides the progress and perfection of human skill in all things, such as art, architecture, agriculture, literature, navigation, sculpture, painting, drama, hunting, medicine, and warfare.<sup>21</sup> In all these ways, the world is well made and preserved through the loving wisdom of God so that human minds may delight in the goodness of God and advance the common cause of humanity.

Indeed, Augustine marvels at the wonder and beauty of providence in nature. “The human body,” he exclaims, “is a revelation of the goodness of God and of the providence of the body’s Creator.”<sup>22</sup> The rational mind is created to minister to the soul along with the organs of the body. The hands, the eyes, and the tongue all work together perfectly to allow human speaking and writing to serve God. Far from denigrating the body in a crypto-Manicheanism, Augustine praises the providence of God for the body’s natural rhythm, poise, symmetry, and beauty. Not only in its external forms but also in its internal organs, the parts of the body work in unison for the peace

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19 See Brenda Deen Schildgen, *Divine Providence A History: The Bible, Virgil, Orosius, Augustine, and Dante* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 2, quoting *Retractions* 2.69.

20 St. Augustine, *City of God* (XXII, 24), 525.

21 St. Augustine, *City of God* (XXII, 24), 526.

22 St. Augustine, *City of God* (XXII, 24), 527.



and harmony of the whole person.<sup>23</sup> The natural beauty of creation thus shares in the glory of its creator from the brightest stars in the sky to the shadows and shades of the darkest woods.

Augustine's celebration of the work of God through the mediation of creatures represents one of his great theological achievements. Despite its significance, however, his contribution in this area is not well known. As Patout Burns has shown, after the Fall of Rome, Augustine became embroiled in the Donatist and Pelagian controversies that forced him to rethink the relation between grace and freedom.<sup>24</sup> In reflecting on these controversies, the aging bishop insisted on the inviolable doctrine of grace and predestination in salvation, which has led many to deny in Augustine a role for human agency in salvation.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, he accepted religious coercion as necessary to preserve the church in a world of sin. As Burns argues, it is precisely his acceptance of religious coercion in the public sphere that parallels his acceptance of irresistible grace in the private sphere. Through his continued study of Paul and Genesis, Augustine reasons that the total corruption of human nature leaves no option but the direct and immediate influence of grace on the human will. Although he previously taught that grace moved the will through enticing the intellect to seek and delight in the good, he now insists that only the direct action of the Holy Spirit can move the recalcitrant human will, since original sin has destroyed the integrity of the good will and natural desire for God.

Yet the move to endorse God's direct control of the will in his anti-Pelagian writings raises problems for Augustine's twofold theology of providence. Most notably, it transposes the problem of providence into a problem between divine sovereignty and human liberty that is bound up with irresistible grace and predestination for individual salvation, but no longer with the meaning of God's work in history and society. History becomes merely preparatory for eter-

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23 St. Augustine, *City of God* (XXII, 24), 528.

24 J. Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1980).

25 See John M. Rist, "Augustine on Free Will and Predestination," in *Theological Studies* 20 (1969): 420-47. For Burns's response, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace*, see pp. 159-79.

nal life, but has little significance in itself. In his debate against the Pelagians, Augustine returns again and again to the inscrutable logic of an eternal divine will that saves some, damns others, and holds everything in its sway. All creaturely choices, of course, remain subject to the divine permission and always occur according to the free choice of the will. But when Augustine posits God's *direct* control of the will, he places within providence the control of history itself, which challenges his contention that the course of history is *not* the work of providence. Hence, even if we agree that sin arises from a defective will and that God is not responsible for actions God does not prevent, all the good within history *is* attributed to the divine benevolence and thus to providence. Moreover, since divine action is the basis and model for human action, God's direct control of the will not only challenges his "naturalistic" conception of providence but also models force and coercion for human relationships, which exacerbates the problem of theodicy by implicating the church in state violence.

In the years after 418, Augustine had moved beyond his work on the *City of God* and threw himself into refuting Pelagianism. During this time, his interests shifted from the social and historical meaning of providence to the private, interior life of faith in relation to sin and eternal life. Henceforth, Augustine's theology set a course for the subsequent interpretations of providence in terms of grace and predestination in relation to individual freedom. Without venturing into the morass of opinions on these topics, which have never been satisfactorily resolved, it is necessary only to point out how Augustine's obsession with Pelagianism undermined the reception of his own theology of providence.

It is not surprising, then, that Augustine is not often remembered for his observations regarding the twofold nature of providence or his critique of empire. Instead, his legacy is one defined by his opponents who have ridiculed his views regarding irresistible grace and predestination, in addition to his apparent cruelty toward infants and pessimistic attitudes toward human nature and sexuality. As Augustine becomes increasingly preoccupied with Pelagianism in the final twenty years of his life, insists on the absolute sovereignty of God over corrupted human nature and cements his legacy as one "ob-

sessed with the problem of evil and haunted by the memory of sex.”<sup>26</sup> Ironically, Augustine was always seen in own time as a supporter of a more relaxed and “paganized” Christianity, as evident from the fact that he did not insist on the moral perfection of priests against the Donatists. Yet in defending his own monastic ideal against the more self-assured, aristocratic views of Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum, Augustine bequeaths to Christianity an ascetic-monastic model of the Christian life that ties providence to predestination and irresistible grace for the sake of personal salvation while leaving the politics of providence to the apologists of empire. Despite his critical invective against Rome, Augustine never denounced Orosius’s triumphalist vision of history and thus lent his “tacit approval to the later generations of Christian imperialism that would invoke his name.”<sup>27</sup>

With this legacy, the theology of providence will remain an insuperable philosophical problem for a tradition that must reconcile the absolute sovereignty of God’s omnipotent will and foreknowledge with the causal autonomy, freedom, and responsibility of deeply sinful human beings who can do no good on their own.<sup>28</sup> Hereafter, providence will be forever associated with predestination and election,<sup>29</sup> and thus with theodicy. The framing of the doctrine of providence in terms of grace, freedom, and predestination will dominate theological reflection in the West for the next thousand years, reaching its logical conclusion, for Protestants, in the unabashed determinism of Calvin, and, for Catholics, in the never-ending conflict between the Dominicans and Jesuits of the *de Auxiliis* controversy. In the modern era, the problem will become most acute, as theologians are forced either to accept “classical” theism or construct a revisionist doctrine of God that avoids the problem altogether. What began

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26 Garry Wills, *Saint Augustine: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 129.

27 O’Donnell, *Augustine*, 251.

28 For an extended treatment of the classical theology of providence in terms of grace, predestination, freedom, and thus theodicy, see Horton Davies, *The Vigilant God: Providence in the Thought of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

29 Leo Scheffczyk, *Creation and Providence*, trans. R. Strachan (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1970), 103.

as a twofold theology of providence that honored the natural order of human agency in creation, while repudiating any alliance of church and empire, concludes with a theology of grace and predestination that left little room for human participation in fulfilling the biblical promise.

### Augustine's Theology of Providence: A Critical Correction

Assessing Augustine's contribution is no simple matter. Grounding providence in operative grace is necessary, as Augustine argues – even if we accept the creature's right of refusal – since it is precisely the love of God that frees the human will from its lust for power and domination. Indeed, since the *libido dominandi* subverts the possibility of building a lasting kingdom on earth, Augustine rightly contends that eternal life remains the final hope of human existence. But this should not eclipse the biblical promise for a realized kingdom, however idealistic such a hope might appear. All attempts to build the kingdom will undoubtedly be dominated by conflict, alienation, inordinate self-interest, and fear for self-preservation, but there is no reason why grace should not be understood to heal individuals for a more rational and just ordering of society.

The problem, then, does not lie in the interiorization of grace, the classical attributes of God, or the final end of eternal life in God. The problem lies rather in constructing a theology of providence in terms of sovereign divine control and a general account of human freedom, when it should be understood in terms of *integrating* and *coordinating* the interior movement of grace with a rational ordering of society. Here, Karl Barth provides a corrective in that the *general* work of providence in nature and history must be understood in terms of God's *special* work in Jesus Christ.<sup>30</sup> Although Barth stands in the "classical" tradition of Calvin with his own problem of theodicy (i.e., *das Nichtige*),<sup>31</sup> he understands providence as the "positive, material, and inner connection" between God's work in salvation history and general history. For Barth, the providence of God "co-ordi-

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30 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 195-200.

31 See Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 289-368.

nates and integrates [general history] with His work in this kingdom [and] causes it to co-operate in the history of this kingdom.”<sup>32</sup>

Correcting some shortcomings of the tradition, Barth re-establishes the providence of God in the transcendent power, wisdom, and goodness of God in Jesus Christ in relation to creation as a whole. The classical loci of preservation, *concursum*, and government are all retained, but reconfigured according to a radical Christocentrism before being applied to creation in general. Thus conceived, divine providence does not merely establish a static social order, but is the dynamic *ordering* of things within the natural agency of creatures as general history is brought into line with salvation history. God’s care of creation, in other words, is predicated upon God’s will in Jesus Christ for the sake of covenant fellowship, so that providence is never simply the unfolding of a timeless plan, but the work of God in history for the transformation of creation itself. Rejecting the *absolutum decretum* of the Reformed tradition, while retaining the divine perfections in Christ, Barth sees providence as the active rule and determination of Word and Spirit that brings creaturely action into a “formative economy and disposition.”<sup>33</sup> The work of God in history is thus not limited to the private life of religious individuals, but extends throughout all creation in all areas of human endeavor. Social, political, and economic life are all taken up and included in the divine economy of grace. For Barth, providence is the active ordering of all things in their mutual relationships by the dynamic, Trinitarian life of God that shapes individuals into particular kinds of historical agents who reflect the divine economy of grace in their personal life and public institutions.

Despite some obvious limitations of Augustine’s neo-Platonism (e.g., his hierarchical dualism and asceticism),<sup>34</sup> Augustine’s thought, nonetheless, remains relevant today when the sins of greed, pride, envy, and lust for power and domination have contributed to what liberation theologians call systemic and institutional injustice. In modernity, the emergence of the “enlightened” autonomous individ-

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32 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 40, 43.

33 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 192-95.

34 Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace*, p. 13.

ual was accompanied by a “dynamic of domination” in which the newly discovered powers of reason gave modern “man” the freedom and right to use his power over nature for personal and political gain.<sup>35</sup> Feminist and liberation theologians have long articulated the root problem of domination that has resulted, in part, from centuries of western imperialism that can be traced back to Augustine. Although Augustine could scarcely imagine a world beyond the Roman Empire, given his realistic assessment of sin and corruption, such a deformation of the church as an agent of imperial domination and conquest would hardly have surprised him. Yet, his failure to connect his theology of grace with a social theology of providence did little to prevent the triumphalism of Christendom that he rightly rejected. Instead, the absolute sovereignty of grace, championed so vigorously by Augustine, produced within the Christian world a corresponding notion of the absolute sovereignty of an earthly ruler who was either to convert or condemn all who stood in his way. With the effects of grace limited chiefly to the private life of faith and the responsibility of the state merely to punish sin to maintain social control, Augustine’s theology of providence did not bequeath to subsequent generations a theology of providence that went beyond correcting the personal sins of concupiscence by providing a social vision of God’s work in history.

However, if Augustine’s theology of grace were to be developed into a political theology of providence, then the ordering of providence would reform the *libido dominandi* that prevents personal and social liberation. Providence could then be conceived as a dynamic and revolutionary force in history that operates within existing social conditions to heal and free individuals and communities from the greed, fear, and excessive self-love that builds empires of military and economic domination, while cultivating Christ-like virtues of love, peace, generosity, and forgiveness that work toward a qualitatively different society free from all forms of social, political, and economic domination.<sup>36</sup> Insofar as the earthly city remains dominated

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35 See M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 88-89.

36 See Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. C. Ina and J. Eagleson

by an inordinate lust for power and fear for self-preservation that leads to the exploitation of others for personal power or profit, only the love of God can heal the insatiable and distorted desires of the human heart.

As Augustine knows, however, there is no end to the temptations that draw human beings to indulge their lower appetites and justify their positions of power and privilege. The providence of God in history must come out of the transcendent love and freedom of God in the immanent Trinity, so that grace may be understood to heal individuals and move them to love God and seek the welfare of all. Yet, even as God directs all things back to God as the final end of history, the concern of God remains always “with the world”<sup>37</sup> as God coordinates and integrates general history into the coming eschatological kingdom. The original biblical promise is not lost in favor of an otherworldly escapism that abandons the material world for spiritual liberation. On the contrary, since God’s primary concern is *always* for those who are lowly, weak, ignoble, and hated, the general providence of God in history, even among non-Christians, must be understood as an extension of God’s abiding love in Christ for the poor and vulnerable. The image Barth uses to convey this rule of divine government is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:14-26),<sup>38</sup> in which greater honor and dignity goes to those who are the very least. This image, Barth insists, is “normative;” it is the “true substance” and “material content” of God’s rule that is so important that that it can even “take on the character of a basic principle...applied indiscriminately and consistently to creation as a whole.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Toward a Contemporary Theology of Providence**

The three views surveyed above demonstrate a few of the ways that the theology of providence developed from the Jesus-movement to the official religion of the Roman *imperium*. There are of course many other figures who could illuminate a broader spectrum of pa-

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(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973), 31.

37 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 195.

38 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 193.

39 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 170, 174-75, 193-95.

tristic views, including Ambrose on providence and private property, Basil of Caesarea on the care for the poor and how God cannot be blamed for evil, Cyril of Alexandria on providence and the body, and Maximus the Confessor on divine and human wills.<sup>40</sup> While no one theology can retain all germane biblical or traditional perspectives, this article has concentrated instead on a few seminal figures regarding the politics of providence in light of the biblical promise for a kingdom of peace and righteousness.

As a Pro-Nicene theology, it is essential to ground providence not only in Jesus Christ as the incarnate *logos* and Son of the Father, but also in his perfect humanity, as a reflection of God's will for all humanity. Here, we must admit that the early church did not recognize all the dangers of imperial temptation. Although we can appreciate the exuberance with which the early church embraced Constantine and Theodosius, from our post-colonial perspective we cannot uncritically affirm the providence of God in the history of imperial Christianity. This is not to say, of course, that providence ceases to work in this way, but only the creative providence of God works through the outpouring of divine love that makes love of neighbor and care for the poor possible. It is precisely the concrete humanity of Jesus that establishes divine providence in God's special love for the poor and downtrodden and against the powers and principalities of evil. As Jesus himself insists:

You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be

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40 See Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of A Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 120-47 and *The Body and Society: Men, Woman, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 122-39. See also Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, ed. and trans. N. Constat (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 309-21.



served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10: 42-45).

Yet precisely because Jesus *is* the incarnate *logos*, whose person and work reveal the will of the Father, we are bound to take his humanity as the model for our humanity as well. This is possible only insofar as we are assumed by the grace of Christ and empowered in his work through the Spirit. Through the indwelling of the whole Trinity, Christians are thus formed and transformed into the image of the Son and made ready to share in Jesus's work for the coming kingdom. A Christian theology of providence, therefore, can take its point of departure from the incarnation, mission, and social ministry of Jesus because he is the incarnate *logos* through whom all things were made.

A contemporary interpretation of providence may retrieve Irenaeus's notion of the material transformation of creation against the Gnostics and Platonists, while rejecting Origen's Hellenized understanding of providence in the social order. Augustine's insight into providence as the transcendent work of God's freedom that establishes the autonomous nature of each creature, coupled with a denouncement of imperial aspirations as a product of sinful domination, makes a vital contribution toward retrieving the biblical vision. Yet, if providence is truly grounded in Jesus Christ, then it must be conceived essentially as a continuation of his ministry. Since "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8), the work of God in history cannot be different in kind than the special providence witnessed in Jesus's social ministry; it must be a continuation of the same mission now effected in the body of the risen Christ through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

A contemporary theology of providence should thus be a trinitarian theology that has its basis in the biblical vision of Jesus Christ for a new humanity and extends beyond religious individualism and personal salvation. Providence is not merely a theoretical solution to an abstract philosophical problem of conceiving divine agency in human freedom, but is rather the active rule and governance of creation according to the specific power, wisdom, and love of Jesus Christ in history. Indeed, for many today, Jesus calls his followers

to a “discipleship of equals”<sup>41</sup> in a radical “egalitarian community”<sup>42</sup> of a “domination-free social order”<sup>43</sup> that stands against any form of unjust hierarchy and domination. If the contemporary consensus from New Testament scholars provides a reliable guide to Jesus’s teachings as a social and political revolutionary, as many today agree (Crossan, Borg, Wright), the contemporary return to trinitarian theology might also benefit from attending to such conclusions, especially in a providential theology of history.

Clearly, we cannot begin with an abstract philosophical problem that levels God and creatures to same plane of existence in a competitive relationship.<sup>44</sup> We should rather endeavor to interpret the providence of God in history according to the biblical proclamation in which the disciples are called, upheld, and sent out into the world to preach the good news, heal the sick, feed the poor, and exorcise the powers of evil. They are called to invite the outcast to table fellowship, extend unconditional forgiveness to enemies, and build up a community of compassion and justice as the hallmark of the kingdom.

However, if we continue to regard providence as a problem for individual freedom *from God* and *for self-interest*, then our reflections will likely remain myopically centered on ourselves. In his classical “free-will defense,” for example, Augustine defines freedom in individualist and aristocratic terms as the power of freedom *over* others,<sup>45</sup> but not in terms of God’s essential freedom *for* others. In such a case, the problem of providence consists in showing how God

41 Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

42 John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991).

43 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 109.

44 See Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 2-5.

45 Augustine, *City of God* (V, 9), 108-09: “[O]ur wills have power to do all that God wanted them to do and foresaw they would do ... Thus, if I wanted to use the word ‘fate’ for anything at all, I should prefer to say that ‘fate’ is the action of the weak person, while [free] ‘choice’ is the act of the stronger man who holds the weak man in his power ...”

does not infringe on the individual rights and privileges of elites. But it does not follow from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, whose freedom is always enacted *for others*. This has become a major problem for the tradition that has understood the doctrine of providence as a problem between divine sovereignty and human freedom, but not as the work of God who stands and dies unambiguously with the poor and powerless. Such general thoughts about providence, then, can be easily compatible within any unjust political situation, whether under Caesar, Nero, Constantine, Charlemagne, or Hitler, but will not reflect the rule of God in Jesus Christ. If we think of God's rule in history in such general and "worldly" terms, we will lend tacit support to the status quo, while neglecting the radical social and political implications of the Gospel. Such an abstract construal of providence in terms of God's sovereign power over others will also engender a notion of human freedom as power over others that legitimizes the social order, instead of freeing individuals to minister to the very least as if they were Christ himself (Matt. 25:40).

Karl Barth has shown how theologians have sought to understand providence in general and abstract ways that allow them to justify themselves and see the world "divinely ordered in [their] favour."<sup>46</sup> To truly understand that it is Jesus Christ who rules the world with power and freedom through his Word and Spirit will mean to understand providence in general history according to the specific way in which Christ himself stoops to serve the very least. Quite simply, if we think about providence as engendering freedom and power of individuals *over* others, instead of serving the very least, then, we are not thinking about the providence of Jesus Christ. The idea of providence can then become an ideological weapon and guarantor for an unjust social order that undermines the command to reformulate the social order on behalf of the poor and dispossessed. Without Christ at the center, it is too easy to justify oneself and overlook the trinitarian revelation of God as inherently self-giving, generous, and free, as the Father gives himself to the Son and the Son to the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit for the freedom and transformation of the world.

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46 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, 18.

It is precisely for this reason that human thought about God and providence must come from the grace of God in the immanent Trinity, who, though free in himself, gives himself in love to others, especially the least. Indeed, since the essential being of God is revealed as love and freedom itself, God's actions toward the world must inspire corresponding acts of love and freedom as God continues to work in history through the power of God's Word and Spirit.

With the incarnation as the foundation for the theology of providence, the humanity of Jesus sets an inviolable standard for understanding divine agency in the world. Since the Jesus of history is the incarnate *logos*, we must understand his social ministry as the work of God that continues after Pentecost through the Spirit. This vision of God becoming human in order to lift up the poor and lowly, however, is not available to all those with eyes to see and ears to hear, since sin and self-interest have clouded our vision. Rather, belief in the special providence of God, first, in Jesus Christ, and then, for the world, is possible only from the grace that frees individuals and communities to think beyond immediate self-interest and fear for self-preservation and to see the world through the eyes of divine love and compassion. Human hope for the future, therefore, will not rest on human strength or accomplishments, but only on the grace of God that is grounded in the immanent being of God, and received in faith. Only when providence is established in God, that is, in a reality beyond human self-interest, will it be possible to be freed from the natural tendencies of greed, pride, envy, and fear, to share in the providential work of God in history.

Karl Barth has been influential in demonstrating how the theology of election or predestination has been anthropologically centered on the question of individual freedom and salvation, instead of God's election in Jesus Christ.<sup>47</sup> Something similar may be said for providence, insofar as theologians are often more concerned with the theoretical question of divine sovereignty and individual freedom that leaves their privileged position in the social order unchallenged. When providence is understood as a general problem between divine sovereignty and human freedom – when freedom is understood in

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47 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2.

aristocratic or Enlightenment terms – then providence can become an ideology that seeks to secure freedom *for* the individual, but not freedom *from* the sins of greed, power, ego, and vanity that prevent the flourishing of the kingdom *for others*. Such a general notion of freedom may reflect the privilege of being able to ponder these things in a theoretical way, while naively assuming that all human beings enjoy the same degree of “freedom.” In the New Testament, however, freedom is not an existential facet of human nature, but is central to Jesus’s mission: to free individuals from sin and to set at liberty those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18).

If the incarnation, mission, and ministry of Jesus Christ stand as a model for God’s providence and divine agency in history, then we must critique the traditional tendency toward determinism, quietism, and complacency. From Augustine to Calvin, theologians have simply assumed that all things, including wealth, poverty, and evils too great and many to count, have been determined or planned in some way by the mysterious and inscrutable providence of God,<sup>48</sup> even if they claim genuine contingency in the created order.<sup>49</sup> While we do not reject that providence grants to all things a place and purpose within the eternal divine will, it is not the case, as Calvin believes, that God’s providence *determines* all things as such. Such a view may have been a logical conclusion at the close of the pre-modern period, but easily degenerates into an uncritical acceptance of evil and injustice as part of the “wise” ordering of providence, if not understood *specifically* according to God’s work in the ministry of Christ, that is, as the evil or injustice that God seeks to exorcise through an alternative arrangement of social, political, and economic organization. While Calvin certainly rejects individual freedom from God, his implicit determinism reinforces the notion that wealth and poverty have been determined by the absolute will of God and thus ought to be accepted as such.

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48 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 205: “[E]ven though the rich are mingled with the poor in the world...to each his condition is divinely assigned.... [I]t is by His secret plan that some distinguish themselves, while others remain contemptible.”

49 See Calvin, *Institutes*, 207-210.

The perennial danger to all robust theologies of providence is that they can easily condone a conservative social ethic that accepts the orders of creation as infallibly decreed by God, when such orders are the pure product of the fallen human will as it responds or fails to respond to grace. Such a view, however, evinces an insufficiently radical account of creation as a distinct reality, which alone explains the evils of history. While Calvin's determinism may be logically deduced from his analysis of God's omnipotent foreknowledge, as Barth argues, it trades on an abstract conception of divine transcendence that more closely resembles Stoic or Islamic resignation than the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>50</sup> As such, it only begs the question of theodicy and encourages us to see the minutiae of quotidian existence as predetermined by God as absolutely everything, including genocide, war, slavery, tsunamis, evolutionary dead-ends, and many more perplexing surds of history, has already been justified by virtue of having been determined by God in eternity.

A contemporary theology of providence must therefore be a critical theology that considers how providence can be misused to justify the status quo and promote the interests of a privileged class. A critical theology must consider not only the effect providence aims to have on church praxis, but also whether the church's own witness on social, political, and economic questions have reflected the substance of its own proclamation. Of course providence has been used to justify acts of social injustice, such as colonialism, feudalism, slavery, and almost any other social, political, or economic ideology. While it is natural and necessary to engage in such reflections, such theories can never be identified with providence without idolatry. Yet, that does not allow the church to relinquish the responsibility of thinking critically about providence in history and society in a way that takes Jesus's mission and ministry seriously as essential to divine agency. A critical theology of providence will not simply assert that no human effort approximates the kingdom of God, but also that every effort be made to bring the *beneficia Christi* to those in the greatest need. Such a theology, however, is neither idealistic nor utopian, but is based on a realistic assessment of human sinfulness and the fact

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50 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 32.

that God *became* human “not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Insofar as the eschatological vision of the New Testament announces a kingdom of peace and righteousness breaking into history through the incarnation and ministry of Jesus Christ, we cannot think about providence as indifferent to or detached from the concrete struggles of the world, but must be understood in those very struggles, or else we are not thinking about the providence of the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Too often the church has modeled itself according to worldly power and glory that projects onto God an understanding of its own imperial ambitions. A different account would reject the *Reichstheologie* of Origen and Eusebius and understand providence against injustice through the power, wisdom, and love of Jesus on the cross in solidarity with the victims of violence, abuse, and exclusion. It would see the power, love, and wisdom of Jesus carried out in the church’s own ministry and accept those *extra ecclesiam* (Mark 9:40) as they too join the struggle for a new humanity. With the dangerous memory of Jesus, the church can only witness and model to the world God’s special love for all creatures, as it works within present social, political, and economic systems for a radical transformation in the kingdom of God, despite inevitable human corruption.

This, then, is what it means for God to act in history through God’s Word and Spirit of Jesus Christ. Providence will never simply condone all things as part of some mysterious plan or understand all things unfolding mechanistically according to a timeless decree. Neither does it accept that all things are consigned to an absolute autonomy and independence in which God merely offers possibilities for self-actualization. Rather, providence is the work of God in history through grace that heals, restores, and empowers individuals in the freedom of their own lives to share in God’s work for a new creation. And, yet, the great irony and paradox of Christian faith is that to the extent to which Christians are enabled to give themselves up to Jesus’s mission by the power of the Spirit, to trust completely in God in spite of their own sin, the more free they will be to accept the natural order of history as such and serve their fellow creatures with the knowledge that everything they have received, they have received from God (1 Corinthians 4:7). With this knowledge, em-

powered by grace, Christians will then find themselves only when they have abandoned themselves to the love and freedom of God that moves them to work and hope for more peaceful, loving, and just society.

### **Conclusion**

This article has presented a study of providence in the early church to develop a contemporary interpretation that is consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus in contemporary scholarship and the theological tradition. Originally, belief in providence pertained to God's promise for the earthly kingdom, but by the end of the patristic period those hopes had been dashed and replaced with the goal of a Christian empire and the promise of otherworldly life. The theology of providence became de-politicized and privatized (or politicized in a privatistic and imperialistic way), as it sought to resolve an abstract problem between divine sovereignty and human freedom. This article argues that we can retrieve the central biblical promise by reclaiming the theology of grace to provide for human beings as they continue Jesus's struggle in the power of his Spirit.



# The Church in an Age of Diaspora: Rethinking Mission

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Maria L. Nacpil\*

## **Abstract**

*Until recently, the church has paid little attention to the relationship between international migration and its role as God's transforming agent in the world. This paper explores the impact of the global diaspora movement on the church's mission to serve scattered peoples. For the church in the 21st century, there is a need for a fresh definition of what it means to take the Good News to people 'on the move,' most of whom have been uprooted by poverty, ethnic and religious conflict, and other forms of hostility. In seeking a new paradigm of church mission, it employs an interdisciplinary approach to address the challenges and opportunities of serving people on a long and painful journey to find God's reconciliation, peace, and renewal. It offers an ecclesiological response that speaks afresh to the universality of the Gospel, and of a church in pilgrimage with the world. Its major thrust lies in the historical rootedness of the Christian faith—in God revealed in Jesus Christ—as testified in Scripture and witnessed in word and deed by His people.*

## **Introduction**

British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie wrote two decades ago that “the migrant is, perhaps, the central or defining figure of the twentieth century.”<sup>1</sup> Rushdie's observation is no anomaly for the twenty-first century. The massive displacement of people continues to send shock waves throughout the world that migration could very well be the contemporary crisis of our time. Chilling photos and vid-

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1 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (Odyssey Editions, 2013), 277 (Kindle edition).

eos of the swift and widespread movement of people across nations, due to violence, poverty, and natural disasters, have become a daily news staple. Along with this movement is the astonishing demographic shift in the Christian landscape from the Western nations to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Combined with the dramatic rise in diasporic communities, they put the long-held claim that mission is a Western enterprise under severe interrogation.

Until recently, the church has paid little attention to the relationship between international migration and her mission to bring the Gospel to the whole world. The emerging context is taking the church to uncharted territory it never dared to enter, raising new questions and demanding a fresh understanding of her place in a post-Christendom era that has not been imagined before. In the words of David Bosch, “[Christians] in the West have been jolted out of their complacency.”<sup>2</sup> The implications to the church’s mission are serious and are further complicated by legacies of colonialism, society’s attitudes to diversity, immigration policies, border security, and individual and community rights. While it is true that the mobility of human beings is nothing new and unavoidable in a time of globalization, what we find remarkably new is that the global migrant<sup>3</sup> movement is so extraordinary that it forces the church to wrestle with what is possible and thinkable in this diasporic reality.

A new global order for the Christian faith calls for a fresh definition of what it means to take the Good News to and through communities of people. In the face of diaspora, what kind of church are we prepared to lavish upon those caught between a painful past and an uncertain future?<sup>4</sup> What does God expect of us to fulfill His mission

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2 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 488.

3 Here the term ‘migrant’ is used broadly to include the categories of long- and short-term workers, students, refugees, stateless peoples, asylum seekers, and people in the process of immigrating, as well as those who have immigrated to another country. See J. D. Payne, *Strangers Next Door: Immigration, Migration and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 28.

4 ‘Diaspora’ has become an ambiguous term due to its wide usage and the range of meanings attached to it. In this paper the use of ‘diaspora’ is characterized by “dispersal/expansion from an original homeland to hostland(s), for whatever reason (positive or negative),” as per Mark J. Boda, “Identity in Diaspora: Reading Daniel,

to gather and reconcile people to Himself? What does it mean to be the church, the body of Christ in a global marketplace? These are necessary and pressing inquiries that the church, in common witness to Christ, must seriously ponder and respond to in robust and visible ways. This article takes that initiative and offers an ecclesiological response that lies in the historical rootedness of the Christian faith—in God revealed in Jesus Christ—as testified in Scripture and witnessed in word and deed by His people. The first part explores the changed context for mission that demands critique of Eurocentric narratives and teases out some of the implications of living in a time of diaspora. The second part presents fresh readings of the biblical accounts of the Tower of Babel, God’s address to Abraham, and the Day of Pentecost that illuminates God’s purpose for unity in diversity and a common vision of salvation for the world. Given a new context for mission, the third part presents ways by which the church can faithfully join with and serve scattered peoples seeking a life of well-being and flourishing. They include spiritual practices of accompaniment, prophetic witness, presence (listening, attentiveness, and waiting), and journeying in fervent hope—all undertaken in the spirit of unity and the church’s common witness to Christ. The article concludes with a summary and a vision of the church as a fellow pilgrim with the world, heading toward an eternal home filled with fresh hope and new aspirations.

### **The Changed Context**

The latest data on human mobility and the shifting religious landscape indicate a solid trend of massive dispersion of people across the globe, progressive decline of Christians in the West, and significant growth of Christians in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. In a 2012 Lausanne document on international migration, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) reports that in 2010, 859 million people (12.5% of the global population) from 327

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Ezra-Nehemiah, and Esther as Diasporic Narratives,” in Stanley E. Porter, *Rejection: God’s Refugees in Biblical and Contemporary Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 3. Emphasis here is given to diaspora as a result of forced migration, the remote chance of return to peaceful homelands, and the difficult relations often faced by diasporic communities with the host countries.

people groups were living in diaspora.<sup>5</sup> Christians make up nearly half of these, while a quarter are Muslims. In the same document, the Pew Forum cites that 33% of the world's 214 million international migrants come from the Asia-Pacific region, and most of them settle in North America and Europe.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, many of the people on the move are Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews, or are not affiliated with any religious group at all. It is projected that by 2050, Christians will make up about 31.4% of the population, while Muslims will go up to 29.7% from the current 23.3%, an increase that Pew notes is directly proportionate to Africa's continued population growth.<sup>7</sup> Last year, the UN Refugee Agency reported that 59.5 million people were forcibly displaced.<sup>8</sup> Approximately 42,500 are uprooted daily, an increase of 40% between 2012 and 2014; over 99% were not resettled.<sup>9</sup> According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 17 years is the average time of displacement.<sup>10</sup>

In Canada, the foreign-born population represented 20.9 % of the national population, the highest among the G8 nations.<sup>11</sup> More than 200 ethnic origins were reported in its 2011 National Household

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5 Lausanne Global Analysis, "People and their Religions on the Move: Challenge and Opportunities of International Migration," November 2012; online: <http://conversation.lausanne.org/en/resources/detail/12795>.

6 CSGC uses a broader definition of 'diaspora' (religious including historical migrants), while Pew looked at international migrants based on individuals who have been living abroad for at least a year.

7 "Gleanings," *Christianity Today*, April 2, 2015; online: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/april/heres-best-prediction-yet-christianity-islam-2050-pew.html>. The Pew report does not include China and India due to the lack of reliable data. The CSGC reports that Christianity continues to grow in both countries, and projects a combined 330 million Christians by 2050.

8 "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2014," *UNHCR* (June 2015): 2; online: <http://unhcr.org/556725e69.html>, accessed September 18, 2015.

9 "Worldwide Displacement Hits All-Time High as War and Persecution Increase," *UNHCR* (June 2015, 18).

10 "The Forgotten Millions," UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (January 22, 2015); online: <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/forgotten-millions>, accessed September 18, 2015.

11 "Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity Survey 2011," *Statistics Canada*; online: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011001-eng.cfm#a1>.

Survey. The majority of its immigrants during the last five years have come from Asia, including the Middle East, with an increased share from Africa, the Caribbean, Central and South America. Adding to Canada's diversity is Quebec, its national minority group. Combined with a significant Aboriginal population, the nation's overall diversity makeup stands unique in the world. Today, to say that Canada has become a hyphen-nation of mixed race identities hardly needs verification.

These are telling disclosures. The changes imposed by migration and globalization are not merely demographic but all-encompassing, impacting social, political, religious and economic life. They call for particular attention to the needs of communities and the political agencies required to meet them. They shape (and reshape) the character of relationships between neighbours as new cultural and religious traditions are brought in and new communities are formed.

It is widely affirmed that immigrants do not leave their cultural identities and worldviews behind, but bring these with them wherever they go. While there is much talk about tolerance and acceptance of diversity in a multicultural setting, it can be difficult to face the hybrid reality of today's world. Not long ago,

Francesca Hogi, 40, had settled into her aisle seat for the flight from New York to London when the man assigned to the adjoining window seat arrived and refused to sit down. He said his religion prevented him from sitting beside a woman who was not his wife. Irritated but eager to get underway, she eventually agreed to move.<sup>12</sup>

A casual reader of *The New York Times* might find this account, at best, amusing; but when it reportedly happens more often than we might expect and consider the consequences, then the story gains an edge. "It's very common," said Rabbi Yehudah Mirsky, an associate professor of Judaic studies at Brandeis University. "Multiculturalism

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<sup>12</sup> "When a Plane Seat Next to a Woman is Against Orthodox Faith," *The New York Times* (April 9, 2015); online: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/10/us/aboard-flights-conflicts-over-seat-assignments-and-religion.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/10/us/aboard-flights-conflicts-over-seat-assignments-and-religion.html?_r=0) accessed April 10, 2015.

creates a moral language where a group can say, ‘You have to respect my values.’”<sup>13</sup>

On the emerging religious landscape, it is significant that Christians and Muslims are the top two groups who move to the West “[not] least because *the most significant counterforce to Islam in Europe is likely to come less from secularism or from Europe’s home-grown, fairly moribund, Christianity than from the steady influx of Christian immigrants (from Africa, Latin America, and Asia).*”<sup>14</sup> Jehu Hanciles corroborates the findings of Pew and the CSGC. In Europe, Islam is the fastest growing religion and it is thriving, counter-balanced by the revival of Christian identity in its major cities due to the arrival of Christians from Latin America and Africa.<sup>15</sup>

The influx of people from non-Western lands is more than just a noticeable change in the trajectory of the flow of people. It is helping to revive a waning Christianity—a potent force for religious expansion and engagement as a new Christian mainstream begins to evolve. Christian immigrants have much to contribute to the renewal of Christian mission in the West through their evangelistic zeal, new creative forms of worship, and strong sense of community. Citing a study by Mark Gornik, Matthew Krabill and Allison Norton report that a “distinctive feature of many immigrant Christians is their understanding of mission not as a strategy, but as a way of life.”<sup>16</sup> They add:

This is mission that is inherently combined with migration—with the clear mandate that all Christians are compelled to witness to the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.... These grassroots evangelistic initiatives emphasize the role of each member of the congregation in

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13 Ibid.

14 Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 6.

15 Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 265-66.

16 Matthew Krabill and Allison Norton, “New Wine in Old Wineskins: A Critical Appraisal of Diaspora Missiology,” *Missiology* 43, no. 4 (2015): 449.

reaching out and ministering to those they interact with while going about their daily lives.<sup>17</sup>

The missionary practices brought by Christian immigrants confront deeply entrenched Western patterns of control and critique the one-sided view that Christianity is a project of the West. They prompt a reawakening of the Western church from its lethargic stance. While non-Western Christian immigrants have much to offer to the church's mission here in the West, I contend that any discourse on missionary potential needs to be nuanced by a critical look at actual migrant experiences. As researcher Mariam Martinez suggests, "in discussing claims," for example, "from ethnic immigrated minorities in Europe...about freedom of [religious] expression... their marginalized status in society, labor markets, and political institutions should also be taken into account."<sup>18</sup> In her book, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Marion Young observes that "marginalization is, perhaps, the most dangerous form of oppression."<sup>19</sup> Put more concretely, in her study of the ability to be heard in a culture of disbelief, Sarah Gibson reports that the stories of migrants are often muted.<sup>20</sup> She adds that "while the metaphor of hospitality is useful in understanding the relationship between host and guest, British citizen and forced migrant, the question of hospitality is not simply the initial request for hospitality, but also focuses on the ethics and politics of speaking and hearing to the life-stories being narrated."<sup>21</sup>

What these insights tell us is that talk about the potential that migration brings to improve societal constraints is one thing; it is something else when we consider the tough, at times, appalling treat-

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17 Ibid.

18 Mariam Martinez, "On Immigration Politics in the Context of European Societies and the Structural Inequality Mode," in *Dancing with Iris: Philosophy of Iris Marion Young*, ed. Ann Ferguson and Mechthild Nagel (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 220.

19 Iris Marion Young and Daniel S. Allen, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 53.

20 Sarah Gibson, "Testimony in a Culture of Disbelief: Asylum Hearings and the Impossibility of Bearing Witness," *Journal for Cultural Research* 17, no. 1 (2013): 2.

21 Ibid.

ment that migrants experience in their host societies. The missionary potential to make meaningful contributions to the church and society at large can be severely limited.

For the prominent African theologian Kwame Bediako, the modern shift in the religious landscape that is unfolding means that “the faith now acquires new centers of its universality” and possibly presents “a viable alternative to the current dominant anthropology-based missiology, which tends to reduce everything into such terms as ‘the West and the rest.’”<sup>22</sup> Following on Bediako’s thought, if we take a brief step back in time, migration was shaped by European colonial expansion for more than 450 years. Similarly, the missionary movement has almost always been understood as initiated by the West, and efforts deemed ‘successful’ have been credited to the West. However, this dominant narrative is only partly true; in fact, more rigorous inquiries into the past reveal that it is inaccurate. Andrew Walls shares that many early Protestant missionaries in Asia and Africa discovered, at times by surprise, that divine revelation had preceded their own efforts.<sup>23</sup> “[They] assumed the [African] continent to be without religion” until a deeper engagement with the culture proved otherwise.<sup>24</sup>

In postcolonial immigration studies the African element has largely been ignored, and yet, it is widely known that migration is an enduring part of African history. In the same vein, an emerging body of scholarship uncovers and points to the significance of Asian immigrant situations in shaping a post-war period—such stories have been suppressed from Cold War histories.<sup>25</sup> Laura Madakoro, a Canadian historian on global migration, laments the fact that in Canada, where one in five are immigrants, newcomers receive superficial lessons in

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22 Kwame Bediako, “The Significance of Modern African Christianity,” in *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 109-110.

23 Andrew F. Walls, “Cross-cultural Encounters and the Shift to World Christianity,” *TJPH* 81, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 113.

24 *Ibid.*, 114.

25 Laura Madakoro, Elaine Lynne-Ee Ho, and Glen Peterson, “Questioning the Dynamics and Language of Forced Migration in Asia: The Experiences of Ethnic Chinese Refugees,” *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 2 (2015).



Canadian history, stressing that “history as a work in progress has the potential to be inclusive.”<sup>26</sup> “What passes in the West for church history rarely gives the early history of African and Asian Christianity its proper weight...the modern history of African and Asian Christianity...is completely hidden.”<sup>27</sup> Hanciles’s book, *Euthanasia of a Mission*, was written to fill a crucial gap, at least between African migration and mission. In stressing the crucial place of the African experience for understanding the nonwestern missionary movement, he asserts that “not only is [Africa] a major heartland of Christianity, but it is also a theater and source of international migrations.”<sup>28</sup>

Why it has taken so long to address the significance of migration to the spread of Christianity is widely attributed to the traditional focus of early scholarship on Europe and in the immediate effects of the first and second World Wars. And as alluded to previously, the church’s mission advanced in an organized fashion as nations, territories and their peoples were also colonized. To be sure, the history of foreign missionary expansion is much more nuanced than the sweeping generalization that it aligned with the ruling empire; missionary engagement yielded *both* good and bad fruit.<sup>29</sup> Positive contributions in areas such as education, health care, and the empowerment of women in oppressive cultures are well-documented. Robert D. Woodberry’s recent work shows that the growth of democracy in the different continents of the world finds strong roots in the pervasive influence of conversionary Protestants that advocated for religious liberty, advanced mass education and printing, dispersed elite power, and mediated colonial abuses while spreading the faith.<sup>30</sup>

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26 Laura Madakoro, “Don’t Treat History as a Civics Lesson,” *Globe and Mail* (May 23, 2013); online: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/dont-treat-history-as-a-civics-lesson/article11999582/>.

27 Andrew F. Walls, “World Christianity, Theological Education and Scholarship,” *Transformation* 28, no. 4 (2011): 240.

28 Walls, “Cross-cultural Encounters and the Shift to World Christianity,” 6.

29 Andrew Porter provides a helpful counter-balance to the stereotype of the foreign missionary as an agent of imperialism, highlighting the positive contributions of missionary engagement under empire. See his book, *Religion Versus Empire: British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914* (New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 2004), 316-27.

30 Robert D. Woodberry, “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” *American*

Nevertheless, Western missionary initiatives were so closely associated with and at times overtaken by empire-building that Western missiology overlooked the impact of migration on mission.<sup>31</sup>

### **Unity In Diversity And The Universality Of The Gospel**

Mention of a dominant structure almost immediately evokes an image of power. When associated with the colonial past, the image becomes sharper: Western empire over the rest, or the dominant narrative of one race over all others leading to the anonymity of Africans, Asians, and others in the narrative. Another glimpse into history tells us that at the genesis of modernization, the dominant assumption was that the world would progress in the same direction to become a single, unified civilization. All signs indicate that this is unlikely to happen. In fact, recurring echoes of this dominant narrative have become problematic in a contemporary world teeming with and fractured by diversity. For example, how does one define what constitutes a dominant culture, and which are the subcultures? Our world is one of scattered peoples on the move, not a stable European or American or Canadian world as some assume it to be. As soon as we recognize how deeply interconnected and interdependent we are, that our world is being renegotiated, reconfigured, and shaped through differences and that the trajectory of human movement is repositioning us and others to be on the same plane, we begin to recognize the limits of traditional narratives of power that insist on a singular, unified experience.

This brings the familiar biblical story of the Tower of Babel to mind. Here I turn to Walter Brueggemann for helpful insight. The movement to ‘spread’ is divinely-willed and purposed by God, a fulfillment of God’s mandate to “[b]e fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it (Gen. 1:28).”<sup>32</sup> When humans act against God’s will, it is met with the acts of God. As in the Babel narrative, the human desire to “Come, let us make...build” is countered by God’s own “Come, let us go down and confuse their language”

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*Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (May 2012), 244-74.

31 Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 179; Porter, *Religion Versus Empire*, 316

32 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1982), 98.

(11:7). Since the people resisted God’s purpose for them to scatter, “the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth” (11:9). Brueggemann writes: “The peoples...want to stay in their own safe mode of homogeneity. Thus the tower and city are attempts at self-serving unity which resists God’s scattering activity.”<sup>33</sup> Brueggemann continues with an important clarification: God is not against unity, and scattering does not simply stand for punishment. He writes:

The *unity willed by God* is that all of humankind shall be in covenant with him (9:8-11) and with him only...relying on his life-giving power. The *scattering God wills* is that life will be peopled everywhere by his regents...to bring “each in its kind” to full fruition and productivity.... The purpose of God is neither a *self-serving homogeneity* as though God is not Lord, *nor a scattering of autonomous parts* as though the elements of humanity did not belong to each other.<sup>34</sup>

It is clear here that Brueggemann is drawing the proper hedge against a simplistic understanding of God’s purpose in the ‘unity-scattering’ dialectic. The dispersion of peoples across nations is divinely intentioned, that the different aspects of humanity—tribe, race, language—might look to Him in unity.

Christopher Wright juxtaposes two texts of the Babel story with the story of Abraham for a study in contrast that illuminates the mission of God. While the builders desire to “make a name” for themselves, God addresses Abraham and says, “I will make your name great” (Gen. 12:2).<sup>35</sup> While the outcome of the Babel story is one of global confusion and dispersion, God ends His address to Abraham with the promise to bless all the nations.<sup>36</sup> Wright states: “The mission of God will be to preserve and maximize the blessing that is

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33 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 99.

34 *Ibid.*, 100.

35 Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 202.

36 *Ibid.*, 203.

inherent in the multiplication and spread of the nations while removing the blight of human sin and arrogance represented by Babel.”<sup>37</sup>

It is probable that Luke had this in mind as he wrote about the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12). Filled by the Holy Spirit, the apostles “began to speak in tongues” (v. 4), that is, in languages that are foreign to them but intelligible to the pilgrims who, upon hearing the “sounds,” recognized with amazement their own local languages and dialects (vv. 5-12). In his commentary on Acts, F. F. Bruce writes that “the range of these languages in which [God’s mighty deeds (v. 11)] were proclaimed suggests that Luke thought of the coming of the Spirit more particularly as a preparation for the worldwide proclamation of the Gospel.”<sup>38</sup> “The word of God,” echoes Lesslie Newbigin, “is to be spoken in every tongue, but it can never be domesticated in any.”<sup>39</sup>

Newbigin considers international migration as something that the Western church in a pluralist society should welcome. Referring to African and Asian Christians, who were recipients of the Gospel through early Western missionary efforts, he says: “We need their witness to correct ours, as indeed they need ours to correct theirs. At this moment our need is greater, for they have been far more aware of the dangers of syncretism, of an illegitimate alliance with false elements in their culture, than we have been.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, we have much to learn from those who have lived through protracted periods of exile, as we now find ourselves in a place of vulnerability, of marginalization. We need each other to free ourselves from our culture-imprisoned view of Christ, to share each other’s lens if we are to be faithful witnesses to people in other cultures. For Newbigin, to enlist and engage all Christians across cultural and geographical boundaries to the missionary task testifies to the universal scope of mission, to the fact that the Gospel always comes from outside, and

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37 Wright, *The Mission of God*, 203.

38 F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 53.

39 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 147.

40 Ibid., 146-47.

to “the true foreignness of the Church” as “a colony of heaven” [and not] “a colony of some [dominant] race.”<sup>41</sup>

The Babel and Pentecost stories offer rich fodder for reflection. First, to speak of the universality of the Gospel is a reminder that God’s gift of salvation is meant to be shared with the whole world, not something possessed by a select nation, race, or group to be used for self-serving needs. “If, as theologians,” Newbigin pointedly adds, “we talk about the world, without meaning India, China, Africa, Russia, South America, as well as our own people, without meaning this actual globe and the nations which people it, we are talking unbiblical nonsense.”<sup>42</sup>

Strong echoes are heard in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the church in the Modern World. It affirms that “[b]y its nature and mission the church is universal in that it is not committed to any one culture or to any political, economic or social system. Hence, it can be a very close bond between the various communities of people and nations....”<sup>43</sup> Rather than face a new world order with fear and trepidation, it should be received as something good, for it sets the conditions under which Christian communities can work together in greater interdependence, “a universal sacrament of salvation” in the world.<sup>44</sup>

Second, disregarding the boundaries of north, south, east, and west, and white and non-white, means we are to think and act beyond the walls of our own traditions if we are to truly love our neighbour. We need to ‘give way,’ making room and allowing others to enter and share with us a new hope in Christ, not ‘give in’ in the sense of assimilation or defeat. *Ad Gentes* also affirms that “missionary activity tends toward eschatological fullness. For by it the people of God are increased to that measure and time which the Father has fixed in His power.... Enlarge the space for your tent, and spread out

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41 Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 171.

42 Lesslie Newbigin, *Household of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 135.

43 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, Part 1 (1965), IV.42.

44 *Ad Gentes: On the Mission Activity of the Church*, Preface, 1.

your tent cloths unsparingly (Is 54:2).<sup>45</sup> The tent has to be *roomy* and *strong* enough to accommodate all who will return from exile. It is a vision of fullness and also a fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham (Gen. 22). Eunuchs and foreigners will be included, those with “wholehearted covenant *loyalty* to YHWH, exclusive *worship* of him, and careful *obedience* to his laws (Is 56:4-6).”<sup>46</sup>

For Brueggemann, “the oracle intends to overcome every fearful limitation that is thinkable, that constitutes a human response of defensiveness and fearfulness, every fearful limitation that is not grounded in Yahweh’s own purposes and commands. This is a mandate to open faith to “Gentiles.””<sup>47</sup> And so Paul:

Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. (Eph. 2:12-13)

God’s mission is clear and powerfully intentional: to gather those who were once excluded, displaced, foreigners, exiles, peoples of all nations (Isa 56:8) with the assurance that He will “make them joyful” (v. 7) and they will be reconciled to God through the cross of Christ.

Third, the movement of people (and of nations) speaks to God’s “multinational sovereignty,” and that the destiny of all falls under the grand plan of God.<sup>48</sup> The current multidirectional flow of people and expanding global diversity attests to the universality of the Christian faith. On that point, Bediako’s insight is a necessary guard against hasty, uncritical conclusions:

The new shift does not mean that the old centers of Christianity are no longer functioning or that the Church

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45 *Ad Gentes*, 1.9.

46 Wright, *The Mission of God*, 494.

47 Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 172-73.

48 Wright, *The Mission of God*, 464.

has been sterile there. No. Rather what is being emphasized is that it is important that a shift in the center of gravity of Christianity is precisely what is supposed to happen. It is a pointer to the nature of the faith and much less to the significance of human agencies of its transmission.<sup>49</sup>

A radical shift in our context calls for a corresponding shift in how we engage a new world with God's purpose in mind. It calls for a radical [re]turn to God whose love reaches out to embrace all.

### **The Church In Pilgrimage With The World**

Migration and the related theme of uprootedness permeate the biblical narrative as the drama of God's salvific plan unfolds throughout human history. The divine call to Abraham to "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" is profoundly one of migration and uprootedness. The same is true in the life experiences of Joseph, Daniel, Ruth, Esther, Paul, Peter, and other faithful followers. Although unique on their own, each of their journeys shares important commonalities of forced displacement, vulnerability in exile, and a journeying in hope of a promised future. Jesus Christ Himself was a refugee whose entry into the world was one of dislocation, a voluntary self-emptying (Phil. 2:7), abandonment, and alienation (Mark 15:34).

The New Testament writers interpreted the early church as a pilgrim on a journey, scattered (like "seeds") to spread the news about Jesus Christ to people of all nations. In his book, *To the Nations for the Earth*, Charles Fensham writes:

The journey to the nations and the world speaks of covenant faithfulness to God's promise to bring blessings to all nations and to welcome diversity in unity. The necessary move to the unknown that every journey involves,

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49 Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 163-64, quoted in Francis Anekwe Oborji, "Edinburgh 1910 and Christian Identity Today: An African Perspective," *Missiology* 41, no. 3: 307.

speaks of the eschatology of hope—being sojourners in this world rather than completely at home.”<sup>50</sup>

As sojourners, followers of Jesus are foreigners or aliens in the world because their true citizenship is “in the heavenly realm,” while life on earth is said to be “a pilgrimage to heaven.” This “certain degree [of] homelessness,” Fensham continues, “also speaks to the theme of sacrifice.”<sup>51</sup> Jesus said to His apostles: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Shortly after receiving the Holy Spirit, they found themselves in contested terrain, living on the margins and enduring all forms of alienation and hardship, even to the point of death. Although scattered by persecution, the early church embodied the Gospel by proclaiming Christ, healing the sick, casting out demons and serving the needy. Rather than hide in fear, Christ-followers demonstrated kinship with the wounded and vulnerable, being willing to lay down their lives for others.

In our time, we in the West bemoan the loss of privilege in a world of deep cultural and ideological divides. To speak of the loss of privilege is to speak equivalently of diminished influence and power. The Western church is increasingly becoming a minority in a pluralist society. “Diaspora,” Paul Evans rightly contends, “reminds us that we are not *truly* home... [and as in the early church] we are still “aliens and strangers” on earth (Heb 11:13).”<sup>52</sup> Diaspora also compels us to live our faith in exile, an enduring feature of diaspora. “The profound recognition that Christians are first and foremost pilgrims on the move should be cultivated in churches,” writes Thomas Harvey.<sup>53</sup> Just as ancient Israel, in its scattering was urged to do,

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50 Charles Fensham, *To the Nations for the Earth: A Missional Spirituality* (Toronto, ON: Clements, 2013), 75.

51 Ibid.

52 Paul S. Evans, “Who Says ‘You Can’t Go Home’?” in *Rejection: God’s Refugees in Biblical and Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015): 45.

53 Thomas Harvey, “Pilgrims on a Journey: Diaspora and Mission,” in *Scattered and Gathered: A Global Compendium of Diaspora Missiology*, eds. Sadiri Joy Tira



we “must intentionally and honestly face [our] true situation, refuse denial, and resist pretense.”<sup>54</sup> How are we to live faithfully in exile? Rather than settle in despair and hopelessness, Jeremiah depicts a way of living that is filled with hope and in fervent prayer to God:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters... multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jer. 29:5-7)

We would be hard pressed to deny today’s increasingly secular and diasporic reality. This means that “a missionary encounter with our culture will not be a matter of words only. It will entail actions which bring conflict and suffering.”<sup>55</sup>

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie rightly observes that a migrant typically suffers three disruptions: a loss of place, immersion in an alien language, and being around those “whose social behavior and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to, his [or her] own.”<sup>56</sup> For Rushdie, “roots, language, and social norms” are important definitions of what it means to be a human being; denied all three, migrants search for meaningful ways to define themselves.<sup>57</sup> Schreiter challenges the church: “How does one respond to [those] whose lives can never be the same, and to the families that have suffered damage that cannot be completely repaired? ... [The church] cannot just stand by helplessly.”<sup>58</sup> What must the church be in the midst of such pain and turmoil?

and Tetsunao Yamamori (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 159.

54 Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), 40.

55 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 54.

56 Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 279.

57 Ibid.

58 Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission & Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (New York, NY: Orbis, 1992), 17.

As the body of Christ, the church is to bear witness to Christ in response to questions about poverty, suffering, oppression, and alienation. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Central to the witnessing life of the church is a constant proclamation of good news by sharing God’s compassionate love with migrant communities in search of comfort, healing, peace, and reconciliation. New to their surroundings, migrants are often receptive to the hospitable efforts of communities offering to help carry their burdens. They are more open to new friendships, new community fellowship. These are great opportunities to demonstrate fresh testimonies of the truth of Christ who himself lived through suffering, conquered death, and gave the gift of new life. In sharing her life in Christ, the church testifies to God’s presence in the midst of pain, drawing others to claim his promise of new life in his reign.

To be the church in times of social upheaval and dislocation is to be with and join in the struggle of the marginalized. The image of accompaniment replaces the image of conquest, which marked the imperial growth of Europe during the early missionary period. Accompaniment is more appropriate for our time, as the church has also been displaced from a privileged place and now lies in the borders and alleys to be with the hurting and wounded. Accompaniment also speaks to the manner in which the Gospel needs to be shared, namely in love, forgiveness, and acceptance, as Christ demonstrated on the cross.<sup>59</sup>

Jesus teaches us to love our neighbour (Luke 10:27) and to welcome the stranger (Matt. 25:35-45). Whether coming out of devastated homes, wars, poverty, or the voluntary choice to live abroad, people who move share a common desire for well-being—to be received and treated as a fellow human, to be cared for, and to be loved as one’s family. “Love the foreigner residing among you” (Deut. 31:12). For many people of diaspora, even after having resettled in

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59 Robert J. Schreier, “Reconciliation as a Model of Mission,” in *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, ed. Robert Gallagher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 67.

a new home, the longing to be restored continues for a long time. What is home? For immigrants in particular, home means not only a physical place to dwell but also a sense of being grounded, of finding belonging in community. “A home is a place where personal and social meaning are grounded.”<sup>60</sup> In order to feel at home, communities suffering from immense loss and alienation need the church to open herself as a sanctuary where painful stories can be safely shared and heard, refugees given protection from unjust systems, and the needs of the weak and oppressed lovingly attended to. It requires the church to practise radical hospitality, a willingness to love at great cost.

Consistent with Jesus’s ministry, the church’s mission is also prophetic: to expose and condemn oppressive powers and to join the cause of women and men who suffer injustice, to set them free. “It is...about changing the structures...that provoked, promoted, and sustained violence.”<sup>61</sup> It is also about changing attitudes toward migrants who are often perceived as threats to society, objects of charity, and second-class citizens. There remain vestiges of the colonial past that continue to hold powerful sway over society and favour the interests of a few at the expense of many; they need to be challenged. Darrell Guder acknowledges that “the resistance to change is strong” and it is not an exaggeration to speak of the need for the “conversion of the church to its missional, kingdom vocation.”<sup>62</sup> What the church must then continue to strive for is the breakdown of existing oppressive structures, which hinder efforts for genuine social and individual transformation, and help form and shape communities that are life-giving. Having had a long history of unholy alliances with the ruling powers that exploited the vulnerable, the church is called to repent of Christendom’s shameful history of oppression and reminded that she exists solely in union with Christ, by faith in Him alone.

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60 Nikos Papastergiadis, *Dialogues in Diasporas: Essays and Conversations on Cultural Identity* (New York, NY: Rivers Oram, 1998), 2; quoted in Susan Lucas and Bandana Purkayastha, “Where is Home?” Here and There: Transnational Experiences of Home Among Canadian Migrants in the United States,” *GeoJournal* 68 (May 2007): 244.

61 Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission & Ministry in a Changing Social Order*, 59.

62 Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 191.

Christians who walk side by side in solidarity with people need capacious hearts for listening, attentiveness, and waiting.<sup>63</sup> These are spiritual habits of presence that run against a culture that links time with productivity, immediate gratification, and quick results. For people who have lost their roots, language, and community, a church that acknowledges and shares her own brokenness with others is vital to the quest for healing and wholeness. There, in the realm of the unknown other, do we learn to give and receive mutually in suffering love.

Not long ago two Burmese families were jointly sponsored by a local Baptist church (that I belonged to) and a United church. The families had been living in the Thai refugee camps for at least twenty years. The culture shock of moving to cosmopolitan Toronto was evident as they expressed to us, their sponsors, mixed emotions of fear, sadness, grief, and joyful appreciation. As hosts, we had our own share of anxieties (we made a few missteps along the way), but through it all we patiently took the time needed to help the newcomers adjust to city life. Resettlement meant not only the provision of housing and material needs, but almost daily visits to share meals and chat, tutoring to help teens complete homework, job search and interview coaching for adults, trips to the grocery, orientation to the city, warm fellowship in church, and so on. The first year was especially challenging due to the differences in culture and language; however, over time, the willingness of both sides to make it work resulted in deep, meaningful friendships. We found that relationships of trust were best established, and the way to the healing of painful memories opened, in small, intimate settings.

“Come to me...” (Matt. 11:28). United in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, the church, on a journey with the world, extends Christ’s invitation to all who are weary to come home and draw near, to be in fellowship with Him, to find nourishment and rest. Articulations of hope for the gathering of all are crucial and arise out of diaspora and exile.<sup>64</sup> Elias Medeiros asserts that the “church was created to be on the move, to be in diaspora reaching out to the nations; not

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63 Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 71-73.

64 Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God*, 43.

to be passive but actively and intentionally engaged across the street and around the *oikomene* (the inhabited world).<sup>65</sup> Following Christ's way to Calvary, Jürgen Moltmann writes beautifully that the church offers herself as "the song of thanksgiving of those who have been liberated...the fellowship of love...the church under the cross... the joy of God in the fellowship of [those]" who journey towards a glorious future.<sup>66</sup>

It is only through the church, the body of Christ, that the whole world comes to know and experience the fullness of God's love. Jesus, the Son of God, entered the world in weakness and humility; he was displaced, suffered and died to give hope out of despair, new life over death. That God gave himself up in suffering to make room for us, the other, speaks to his unfathomable love; in the same manner, we are called to enter into our neighbours' pain and share the good news of his abounding love. As fellow pilgrims we can then look forward to the great heavenly banquet that await all in his reign.

### **Conclusion: Fresh Hope, New Aspirations**

In April, 2015 the first Global Diaspora Forum of the Lausanne Movement gathered together hundreds of international mission and church leaders in Manila to discuss the church's mission to scattered peoples. In the words of its senior associate, Sadiri Joy Tira, diaspora is "[o]ne of the many challenging issues of missions that can no longer be ignored."<sup>67</sup> The changes posed by migration to contemporary society compel the church to rethink her traditional (Eurocentric) understanding of and approaches to mission and to engage the world with the Gospel in new ways that recognize the motivations of non-Western initiatives. The growing number of Christians moving to the West from Africa, Asia, and Latin America should be a cause for celebration. It is creating a new Christian mainstream here in the

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65 Elias Medeiros, "Local Churches in Missional Diasporas," in Sadiri Joy Tira and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Scattered and Gathered: A Global Compendium of Diaspora Missiology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 185.

66 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London, UK: SCM, 1977), 65.

67 Lausanne Movement, Global Diaspora Forum (2015); online: <http://www.lausanne.org/gatherings/issue-gathering/2015-global-diaspora-forum>, accessed March 13, 2016.

West that infuses the church with a renewed zeal for mission and fresh fellowship across church communities, while building bridges toward greater unity and oneness. The multidirectional flow of Christians across continents presents opportunities for the global church to open herself up to mutual evangelization and strengthen ecumenical and intercultural partnerships. The fact that Christianity is increasingly dispersed across nations means that mission is *from* all places *to and through* all places. This brings to light the significance of migration to the church's mission and clarifies the inadequacy of missionary historiography that focused on Western initiatives while ignoring non-Western contributions to the growth of Christianity.

“The good news is that denominations and local congregations across Canada have already been mobilizing to welcome refugees fleeing conflict in Syria and Iraq,” says Bruce Clemenger, president of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, one by one, in common witness to Christ, evangelical and mainline Protestant denominations, along with the Roman Catholic Church professed their solidarity with and support to refugees, and rallied their members to participate in the call to action. Although much work remains to move the church towards greater unity, it is a significant step in the right direction, a powerful testimony before a watching world to the church's shared unity and mission in Christ as she welcomes and receives people of all nations at her doorstep.

The church's mission in the world is to witness to the reconciling work of Christ, to be a sign of the glorious kingdom of God that is to come, and points the world in that direction. For Newbigin, “[t]he Church's witness among the nations is at heart the overflow of a gift.”<sup>69</sup> In response to God's commission, “You are my witnesses...” (Isa 43:10, Lk 24:48, Acts 1:7), the church is to be an embodiment of Christ who “made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant...and humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:6-8).

A new global reality demands that the church seek a new place of ‘privilege’—not her former place of greatness—but entering the

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68 “Seeing Jesus as a Refugee,” *Christian Week* (September 7, 2015); online: <http://www.christianweek.org/seeing-jesus-as-a-refugee/>.

69 Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 150.

margins and extending loving compassion to others. In speaking the truth of the Gospel, in helping to restore the sick and the broken, in resisting unjust structures, and in sharing the hope of Christ with those in despair, we bring the good news of the empty tomb and point to the risen Christ who overcame sin and death and opened the way to an eternal future with him. To be the church in an age of diaspora is to join a broken world and commit to walking the suffering way of Christ, the way of his glorious kingdom.

This moment in the life of the church is a significant missionary challenge *and* also a new opportunity. It propels the church to enter a new era of mission with fresh hope and new aspirations, to rediscover her calling to bear witness to Christ in a world of immense diversity and greater instability, and to join in the human quest for well-being and flourishing. The church does all these filled with hope that every tribe, tongue, and nation might proclaim and give glory to Christ, and that the world might also say, 'Thank you, God, for the church'.





# Teaching and Christian Imagination

by David I. Smith and Susan M. Felch. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016. 256 pp. Paperback; \$22.00. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7323-1.

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Imagine you are nearing the end of the semester, grading is almost done; you are weary and in desperate need of rest. You have lost that initial idealism and zest that characterized your early years as an educator. Sometimes teaching has become an old grind.

Just then you catch sight of the vibrant painting on the front cover of Smith and Felch's book. 'Paradiesgaertlein', or "Little Garden of Paradise" is the title of the artwork by an unknown German painter from the 1400s. It is a sight for tired teaching eyes. The playful scene sets the stage for an invitation into an unusual and delightfully refreshing conversation about the nature of teaching and learning.

Smith and Felch draw from their backgrounds in teaching foreign languages and literature at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. While examples are taken from this particular Christian post-secondary context, teachers from a wide array of environments are warmly welcomed into the conversation. The book is addressed to all educators who attempt to discern what is specifically Christian about their teaching, whether or not they are working in an explicitly Christian institution. In the face of 21<sup>st</sup> century pressures of learning outcomes and financial bottom lines, readers are invited to switch modalities and, instead, are treated to a leisurely stroll and animated conversation with educators far removed in time and space from current controversies. In contrast to urgent agendas in the fast-paced learning mode of the future, the authors take an unhurried step back in time to linger among long forgotten models of learning, among them Comenius and Teresa of Avila. Instead of giving quick-fix ideas that teachers can employ in class on Monday, Smith and Felch

entrust the pressure of lectures, syllabi, and homework to a much larger conversation that brings unexpected refreshment and clarity of vision.

The book is structured around three primary sets of metaphors for education: journeys and pilgrimages, gardens and wilderness, buildings and walls. One might expect clichés from these ancient, well-worn images for teaching and learning. However, that is decidedly not the case. The treatment of these teaching allegories is anything but trite. Smith and Felch carefully and gently probe beneath the surface of common wisdom, raising fresh biblical and theological questions relevant to any pedagogical landscape. Have you ever thought of your classroom as a cathedral? How does your syllabus compare with a pilgrim's guide? In what ways is your school's curriculum like a garden or a wilderness? What is the role of students' imagination in the 'building blocks' of learning? The authors draw unexpected connections and parallels between ancient and postmodern educational challenges. This unassuming volume presents distilled, refreshing wisdom that has surprising contemporary relevance.

Readers will not find stereotypical recipes or pedantic instructional techniques. Classroom scenarios from statistics to sociology illustrate the tensions educators face in making Christian faith an integral part of their content and methodology. Thought-provoking suggestions are pondered tentatively and with humility in light of the metaphors explored. Artwork and poetry, songs and stories from the classroom and from the Bible are interwoven with disarming playfulness. The authors inspire a pedagogical imagination of joy, beauty, and wisdom.

The book's strengths are also its drawbacks – its understatement, its unassuming quietness. Those looking for declarations of definitive authority will be disappointed. The book speaks with a still small voice that could easily be missed or dismissed. However, if you tune your ears, just maybe, your jaded lenses for the teaching grind might lift and you just might taste a sense of nourishment for the soul. The authors have sown seeds that with sufficient sunlight and nurture could possibly germinate into a garden in your classroom (albeit not one without weeds or times of drought). Their ponderings might illuminate your journey, giving you sustenance for the long

haul (though no money-back guarantee for boundless marathon energy). You might find some new blueprints, building blocks or scaffolds to add to your toolbox as a constructor of learning edifices. But of course, the authors would be the first to remind you that “unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain” (Psalm 127:1).



# Creation: A Biblical Vision for the Environment

by Margaret Barker. London: T&T Clark, 2010. Paperback; \$29.95.  
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Margaret Barker is well known for articulating what she calls temple theology, a reconstruction of an ancient Jewish and early Christian worldview. For biblical Israel, the tabernacle and temple were microcosms of creation and long after the first temple's destruction in the sixth century BCE, it remained an integral symbolic element in Jewish thinking. This is no less true for Jesus and his first followers who, as Barker argues in her most important study of the concept, assume a worldview and setting "which can only have come from a temple—and not the actual temple of their own time" (*Temple Theology: An Introduction*, 2004, p. 2). Barker finds memories of the temple and its symbolism in a broad array of texts (Jewish, Christian, Gnostic; see the annotated list in *Creation*, pp. 289–94) that inform key concepts like covenant, incarnation, and kingdom of God. In *Creation: A Biblical Vision for the Environment*, the significance of this temple theology emerges in the connection between tabernacle/temple and the cosmos. The worship associated with these sacred spaces, which in their physical design locate God enthroned at the very center of all that exists, "was about the well-being of creation and human society" (22). Have them "make me a sanctuary," God tells Moses, "so that I may dwell among them" (Exod 25:8). The temple geography and activities associated with Israel's tabernacle/temple worship are thus relevant for Christian theological reflection on environmental issues because they speak of God's world and the responsibilities of God's people in that world.

Building on the premise that an ancient, biblically rooted cosmology, one informed by temple imagery, lies at the heart of an understanding of creation and the human presence in it, Barker's

project involves a reconstruction of early Christian belief about the natural world. This temple theology is not always explicit in the texts but rather presupposed by Jesus and his followers. “We have to reconstruct what he and the first Christians could have believed” (16), “what the first Christians could have known and thought about the creation” (33), and the conclusion argued throughout the book is that the available data demonstrates that “[e]arly Christian teaching was based on temple symbolism” (17), that “the temple represented the creation in both time and eternity” (74). The implications for this are potentially far reaching, allowing Barker to connect the ancient biblical worldviews with contemporary environmental crises and concerns. If indeed the tabernacle/temple is a microcosm of creation, concepts like Sabbath, Feast of Weeks, Jubilee, and Kingdom inform an understanding of human responsibility within the world. Summed up, the Lord’s Prayer (Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth) “is how they envisaged the Kingdom” (190), a concept including a celebration of creation itself (Sabbath), God’s covenant with the world and its inhabitants (Feast of Weeks), restoration of the world and remission of debt (Jubilee), and the banishment of all evil from the earth (“the final Sabbath”).

Barker does not consider these concepts in an abstract fashion only, as though historical reconstruction is all that mattered. Instead, she moves from her reading of the ancient data to a call for appropriate responses by the Christian community. This back-and-forth between theory and praxis is evident, for instance, when she notes correspondences between her reconstructed biblical vision of creation with its demands to “work together with the Creator until everything is very good,” and the Millennium Development Goals adopted by the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000 (191-92). The eight goals of the latter (including eradication of poverty, combatting disease, and the promotion of gender equality and environmental sustainability) are in accord with the Kingdom language of the Bible. Humanity needs to assume its proper role as priesthood in God’s temple, a role, she argues, and that includes self-sacrifice and repentance (192).

Barker’s exploration of texts depicting God’s temple-creation and humanity’s role as that temple-creation’s priesthood rewards

careful consideration with reference to Christian approaches to environmental concerns. At times, claims appear to overreach the available data or at best remain speculative. The efforts to recover “the Bible Jesus knew and how he understood it,” which she acknowledges is “fraught with problems” (14) are not always convincing. The book also tends to minimize the diversity of Jewish and early Christian thought; the presence of a concept in one or more writers is not necessarily evidence that all thought the same way. These two issues—reconstruction and the unity of the biblical vision—are likely to generate varied reactions among readers.

That said, Barker’s *Creation: A Biblical Vision for the Environment* is a welcome contribution to the burgeoning subfield of Christian creation care. Thoughtful, pragmatic, creative, ambitious, and informed, the book takes seriously both the ancient wisdom of biblical and cognate literature and the contemporary environmental crisis, and refuses to allow theological reflection to remain divorced from a faith-motivated response.



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