

"This book explores perennial questions and contemporary conundrums about knowing God. Considering venerable answers to these questions and their critics launches this endeavor. In conversation with the contribution of Walter Kasper at the crossroads of the heritage of natural theology and the confession of faith in the Triune God, this work navigates through postmodern frontiers and pioneers an aesthetic and performance approach to the encounter with the God of Jesus Christ that illuminates paths for Christian discipleship on pilgrimage in the world. An important achievement."

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"Clear, very well informed, and admirably argued, this book shows how, after all the changes in Western thought, we are still justified in holding that God is simultaneously present (available and knowable) and absent (mysterious and uncontrollable). God's love answers the deepest human longings. This work is a splendid example of authentic natural theology."

—Gerald O'Collins, SJ
Jesuit Theological College
Australia

"A theological gem. Godzieba engages the biblical and theological tradition, as well as contemporary theology, in a way that is easily understandable and illuminating. He also takes on the challenge of God's presence and absence in a way that is creative and original. It is a must-read for any Christian facing the mystery of God, and experiencing both the absence and presence of God in a time and in the world where God seems both near and far. The book will serve as a great introduction for courses on God."

—Francis Schüssler Fiorenza
Stillman Professor of Roman Catholic Theological Studies
Harvard Divinity School

"A capstone achievement that harvests years of theological research and teaching, Anthony Godzieba masterfully illustrates what a phenomenological study of God should do. This brilliant new book gives attention to relevant biblical passages, significant philosophical positions, noteworthy works of art, and major contributions of contemporary theologians in a 'student-friendly' way."

—Anne M. Clifford
Msgr. James A. Supple Chair of Catholic Studies
Iowa State University

“Anthony Godzieba’s new book is a fascinating and informative passage through the main questions of Christian theology. It integrates a profound historical view on dogmatic theology, deep spirituality, and innovative theological concepts into contemporary research on God. Assessing the questions posed by the modern critique of religion, it offers convincing arguments on why we should neither cease to consider God as an essential topic of science nor as a possible dimension in our everyday lives.”

—Kurt Appel
University of Vienna

“A theological masterpiece! In deeply learned and highly readable prose, with Walter Kasper leading the way, Godzieba follows the traditional ways of negation and eminence down modern and postmodern paths of construction and critique. While giving natural theology its due, he deftly works the dialectic between God’s incomprehensible mystery and simultaneous presence into a genuinely theological theology. If these two approaches to God as present and absent don’t exactly lie down together, they come to as much peace as we might expect in our times. This book bears many signs of Godzieba’s long career in the classroom. If you have been waiting for a God book for your graduate course, *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God* is it.”

—William L. Portier
Mary Ann Spearin Chair of Catholic Theology
University of Dayton

“We can rightly compare this God-book with an excellent bottle of wine from a renowned vineyard which has been gracefully aged in time-tested barrels, and now is presented to today’s readers to drink. Like such a wine, it possesses a rich flavor and fresh aftertaste which lingers after we have finished drinking from it. Experience and tradition, faith and reason, reflection and imagination, ineffability and incarnation come here wonderfully together in one book which amounts to a presentation of the mystery of God’s love, reflected upon, imagined and witnessed to for our days. It is to be highly recommended to connoisseurs of fine theological wines.”

—Lieven Boeve
Catholic University of Leuven
Belgium

Anthony J. Godzieba

A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God



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Preface

This book starts with a simple question and ends with a simple answer. The question is this: in our secularized, consumer-driven, technologized world, can we still experience the mystery of God? The answer rests in the mystery of God's love which, as Walter Kasper phrases it, "is the answer to the mystery of the world and human beings, the answer to the deepest human longing for acceptance and love." Getting from one to the other is a process—an adventure, even—involving both faith and reason, especially wider notions of both than contemporary stereotypes allow. This book explores various facets of this process by delving into the rich and deep Christian tradition of thinking, speaking, and praying about God.

The attentive reader will detect the pervasive influence of Kasper's classic work *The God of Jesus Christ*, with its emphasis on a theology of the Trinity as the true "grammar" of Christian belief. While this book is in no way an in-depth analysis of or commentary on Kasper's argument, I have modeled my general approach after his: exploring how God became a "problem" in Western culture, reconstructing an authentic Catholic natural theology (as an alternative to an abstract modern theism), and then showing how this leads to a "theological theology" where faith and reason are mutually supportive in exploring the reality of God as Trinity. In filling out this outline, though, I have gone my own way with a different guiding theme, different emphases, a different diagnosis of the contemporary context, a different central pivot for the first part of my argument, and a much different conclusion, while still sharing Kasper's strong emphasis on the centrality of the Christian confession that "God is love" (1 John 4:16).

This book's origins go back to the late 1990s and grow out of a course of the same name that I have taught at Villanova University throughout my career there. It has gone through a number of permutations before becoming this particular work, and has racked up a number

of debts of gratitude along the way. Many of the book's ideas were discussed with my good friend and *Doktorvater* Francis Schüssler Fiorenza who, in more ways than I can count, has been a continual source of wisdom, sharp insights, and encouragement; my gratitude to him is boundless. Lieven Boeve has also been a good friend and conversation partner, and I am grateful for his insights and for the many opportunities he has provided for fruitful interaction with his colleagues on the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Other friends and colleagues have been generous in discussing the ideas presented here, reading portions of the manuscript with a critical eye, or providing encouragement when this project seemed stalled: Michael Marissen and Ray van Leeuwen (our "Bach and beer" group has often veered from music to theology), Anne Clifford, Terry Wright, Ed Sweeney, and the late John Jones. Special thanks go to Beth Johnson, who tipped me off to John Macquarrie's fine book many years ago. At a late stage Kurt Appel graciously invited me to his doctoral seminar at the University of Vienna for a helpful discussion of the concluding chapter. Thanks also to my Villanova students who discussed (with varying degrees of agreement and skepticism) the main ideas of this book with me in my classes, to my graduate assistant Marygrace Urmson who helped check proofs, and also to the enthusiastic participants in the graduate course I taught as a visiting professor at the University of Dayton. I am most grateful to Hans Christoffersen and the editorial and production staff at Liturgical Press for including this book as part of their strong commitment to vital contemporary theological reflection.

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This book is dedicated to my late parents, Anthony and Regina.

As always, my overflowing gratitude to my wife, Dolores, who knows all the reasons why.

Memorial of Saints Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen
2 January 2018

CHAPTER ONE

God—Believers—Questions

Surely you dwell in light inaccessible
where is it? and how can I
have access to light which is inaccessible? . . .
I have never seen you, O Lord my God,
I have never seen your face. . .
Let me seek you by desiring you,
and desire you by seeking you;
let me find you by loving you,
and love you in finding you. . . .
Lord, I am not trying to make my way to your height,
for my understanding is in no way equal to that,
but I do desire to understand a little of your truth
which my heart already believes and loves.
I do not seek to understand so that I may believe,
but I believe so that I may understand;
and what is more,
I believe that unless I do believe I shall not understand.

—Saint Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, chapter 1¹

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. . . . So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love,

1. *Proslogion*, in *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Harmondsworth/New York: Penguin, 1973), 240, 243, 244; the versification of the prose original is the translator's.

and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

—1 John 4:7–9, 16

Can we still seek, experience, and talk about God?

When praying the Creed at Sunday liturgy, Christians profess faith in the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Every day we encounter new possibilities of experiencing divine grace and salvation. Yet at the same time, many of us are immersed in a technologized, consumer-oriented culture that displays ambivalent feelings toward God, religion, and spirituality. Neither the New Testament's confession nor Anselm's profession are any longer easily understood or accepted. The question, then, is this: can we still confidently profess our faith in God and our belief that "God is love"?

This book's answer is a resounding "yes." In the midst of our profoundly secularized, fragmented, and at times fear-saturated Western culture, Christians can make the case for the loving, redeeming, liberating, transforming presence of God in human life and in the world. The purpose of this book is to help make that case.

However, doing so is not simple. The traditional meanings of the three important factors mentioned above—*God*, *human life*, and *the world*—have been seriously challenged over at least the past century. These challenges have led to a series of questions that go far beyond the one raised by skeptics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "is there a God at all?"—radical and shocking at the time, but raised casually now in Western culture. Today's questions challenge a range of issues whose certainties we had come to take for granted. How should God be described or defined? Can God be described or defined at all? Is there one authentic definition of "being human," and should there be only one? What constitutes "our world" and whose experience counts when describing it? Are "reality" and "humanity" fictions, aesthetic constructs, the products of social, political, and economic interests—or something else entirely? What is the nature of the relationship between human beings and God? Is it real or an illusion? Does it raise up our humanity or diminish it? Is faith in God a liberating human response or an outdated and repressive relic with no place in contemporary Western culture? Even the most steadfast

Christian must recognize that believers and non-believers alike ask these questions, and the answers influence their own image of God.

A traditional theological analysis of belief in God would begin with general definitions of theology and of the doctrine of God. It would explain that “theology” literally means saying a word or giving a reasonable explanation (the Greek *logos*) about God (*theos*). It would show that the doctrine of God is the most fundamental of all Christian teachings and plays a role in every theological discipline. One commentator has noted that “whether we are dealing with the world as created reality or with our own salvation, with the Church or with the sacraments, or whether we ask about the fulfillment of humankind and history, God always stands at the focal point as origin and as goal.”² A traditional introduction might even quote a renowned theologian like Cardinal Walter Kasper, who illustrates the central role of the doctrine of God:

The mystery which God is for the religious man or woman generally, is interpreted by the Christian faith as the mystery of an unfathomable and incomprehensible love, and hence as a personal mystery. *This mystery of God’s love is the answer to the mystery of the world and human beings, the answer to the deepest human longing for acceptance and love.* . . .

So according to Christian understanding, revelation and the mystery of God are the revelation and mystery of God’s love; and everything else which Christian theology and the Christian creed have to say about God, his personal nature, and the threeness of his person, are no more than the unfolding—founded on revelation itself—of that single statement in the First Epistle of John: God is love.³

Kasper here focuses on one of the key scriptural texts that gives us insight into the nature of God: “So we have known and believe the

2. Wilhelm Breuning, “Gotteslehre,” in *Glaubenszugänge: Lehrbuch der katholischen Dogmatik*, ed. Wolfgang Beinert (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1995), 1:201 (all translations are mine unless otherwise noted).

3. Walter Kasper, “Revelation and Mystery: The Christian Understanding of God,” *Theology and Church*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 30–31.

love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 4:16). Not only is this the key to the Christian understanding of God, but with refreshing candor Kasper claims that *every* question concerning humanity and the world is answered by it as well.

I endorse this understanding of God without reservation. It is the starting point of Christian *faith*. But as a fundamental *understanding* of the triune God, the statement that God is love is more properly the *conclusion* we desire to reach. It can no longer be considered theology's self-evident starting point because of all the uncertainties that have grown up around the word *God*.⁴ We need to demonstrate this claim's plausibility as far as we are able, and thus it becomes the *goal* of our journey of reflection on the revelation of God in human experience. It is true that over the past several decades there has been a tremendous revival in the search for God and for spiritual roots, and a corresponding surge in the growth of Christianity in certain areas. The burgeoning numbers of Christians who identify themselves as "evangelical," the intense quest for deeper spiritual nourishment (as opposed to spirituality fads) on the part of many younger adults, and the intense interest among Roman Catholics in Catholic values and identity are all signs of the enduring attractiveness of a concrete relationship with God that can productively transform everyday life. The persistence of religion testifies to the fact that the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century predictions of the demise of religious belief have not come to pass.

Nevertheless, the privatization or marginalization of the importance of God and of religious belief in mainstream society is a crucial aspect of Western culture and cannot be ignored. In the flow of everyday concerns, God is often treated as a stranger who plays little or no role in public life. Religious voices are often banished from the current public discussion of shared societal values, with the resulting impoverishment of that discussion. Many have emphasized the obvious ongoing secularization of Western culture, beginning with early

4. A claim supported by Thomas Aquinas' reflections on thinking and speaking about God. See *Summa theologiae*, Ia, q. 2, art 1–2, in *Summa theologiae*, vol. 2 [1a. 2–11]: *Existence and Nature of God*, trans. Timothy McDermott [1964; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 5–11.

modern times, as one cause of this marginalization. As David Burrell has pointed out, this has led to the gradual dimming of our ability to recognize God's connection with our human experience. Society now endures "the absence of an enveloping tapestry in which we can locate ourselves," an absence that "leaves the imagination with a vast emptiness" that we attempt vainly to fill.⁵

This is only one element in the very complex story of why religious belief no longer functions as the social cement that binds our common experiences.⁶ Edward Schillebeeckx, in discussing the difficulties faced by contemporary believers, spoke of the clash between God's essential inconceivability—the "hiddenness of God"—and the human need for concrete images of God. This need can become so strong that people may cling to an image of God that reflects their own social situation more than the authentic nature of God.⁷ In addition, the success of the natural sciences in providing answers for our questions about reality as well as a consistent explanatory framework for our experience, the loss of a sense of "transcendence" and the shrinking of our worldview to mere present material particularities, the growing dismay and even anger of many at the institutions of Christianity, and the boredom of a late capitalist consumer society represent other key reasons for religion's marginalization in much of everyday life.

Today, belief in God and the very meaning of the word "God" remain very much contested. At times many people, even those of goodwill and strong Christian belief, keenly feel the eclipse of God in culture and in their own lives. It is as if "the dark night of the soul" that St. John of the Cross described as a prelude to an individual's mystical union with God has descended upon contemporary Western culture.

Little of this diagnosis of contemporary ambivalence about God is new. Already in the 1960s Martin Buber had noted the loss of meaning the word "God" had suffered as well as the contradictory and

5. David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 6–7.

6. See, e.g., Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: an Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2007).

7. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 55–59.

even inhuman causes it had been made to support: "It is the most heavy-laden of all human words. None has become so soiled, so mutilated. . . . Generations of men have laid the burden of their anxious lives upon this word and weighed it to the ground; it lies in the dust and bears their whole burden. . . . They draw caricatures and write 'God' underneath; they murder one another to say 'in God's name'."⁸ Walter Kasper has pointed out yet another persistent and uniquely chilling factor which has affected contemporary belief in God: the fundamental indifference to the whole issue of belief and unbelief in certain areas of Western culture.⁹

For all these reasons, the traditional introduction to the doctrine of God will fail. An introduction that does not take seriously the pervasive attitude of our times and the kinds of questions we raise will not succeed in leading anyone (*introducere*) to God but rather will lead them away.

What questions, then, do people ask?

1. Questions and Their Discontents

"Where is God?"

On its face, it is a simple and straightforward question, posed by all sorts of people, no matter what relationship they may have to Christian belief or to other religious traditions—a person at prayer, perhaps, or at study, or a person overcome with grief. It can be posed coolly by a skeptic or anxiously by a believer who, despite her or his best intentions, acutely experiences God's absence. It can be cried aloud in anguish by persons bound together in the struggle for hope and meaning in the midst of suffering and chaos.

"Where is God?" is not a request for information, but is a pointed question about the presence of the ultimate reality. Is God with us? Does God love us? Will God help us? Any serious answer relies on the answer to yet another straightforward question:

"Who is God?"

8. Martin Buber, *Meetings*, ed. Maurice Friedman (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1973), 50–51.

9. Walter Kasper, *Transcending All Understanding: The Meaning of Christian Faith Today*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 19–20.

This is the question many consider to be first and most fundamental. People who raise this question expect the answer to convey the essential, absolute nature of the transcendent reality we call “God.” They expect straightforward answers from a religion’s sacred writings, from those who have had intense personal experiences of God, and from theologians.

The Christian tradition has no shortage of what appear to be straightforward answers to the question “Who is God?” Take, for example, this reply from Scripture:

But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” (Exod 3:13–15)

Consider, too, this more contemporary theological reply:

God is the supreme and supremely personal Source and Creator of the universe, revealed in creation and in the events of salvation history (covenant, prophecy, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit), and object of religious devotion and subject matter of theology.¹⁰

These replies offer similar affirmations: God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, *is*; God *is the ultimate ground of the universe*.

But the appearance of simplicity is deceptive. Even determining the most fundamental questions about God is not a simple matter. The theologian Christian Duquoc has pointed out the difficulties by demonstrating how the questions have changed over the centuries, depending on the circumstances in which they have been asked.¹¹

10. Richard P. McBrien, ed., *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), s.v. “God” (Catherine Mowry LaCugna).

11. Christian Duquoc, “‘Who is God?’ becomes ‘Where is God?’: The Shift in a Question,” trans. John Bowden, in *Where is God? A Cry of Human Distress*,

The subjects and writers of the biblical books posed the question “who is God?” and found the answer in God’s liberating actions: “nothing defines his identity or his presence except the action which he takes within a framework which he has fixed, the covenant, and a promise which opens up the present to the future in a positive way.”¹² Early modern theologians and philosophers transformed the question into the more abstract “what is God?”; their answers were correspondingly abstract and emphasized the essence of divinity, illustrating it by qualities such as immutability, infinite goodness, and omnipotence. But for others in the modern and contemporary eras, especially those who have suffered at the hands of those who claim to believe in God, the question has become “where is God?” Bartolomé de las Casas, the sixteenth-century Dominican priest and missionary to the Americas, posed this question in his defense of the native population against the brutal treatment directed at them by the Spanish colonialists. How could the true God, whom the Conquistadors claimed was on their side, support such exploitation and death? De las Casas’ protest, as Duquoc points out, still resonates today.

The time of the conquest of America shattered the illusion that the actions of those who knew and rehearsed the identity of God were the concrete expression of his will in this world. Las Casas had denounced the perversity of this interpretation. . . . It is useless to ask who he is, but a matter of urgency to establish where he is. To know where he is amounts to discerning his action. For a long time people believed that those who laid claim to God’s name were fulfilling his actions. Fractures were produced; from now on, no institution, not even any ecclesiastical institution, could be sure of housing God. God no longer had any official address. We too have become nomads again. Where is God?¹³

ed. Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristán, *Concilium* 1992/4 (London: SCM Press, 1992), 1–10.

12. *Ibid.*, 3.

13. *Ibid.*, 6.

The question about the ultimate transcendent reality is frighteningly difficult to answer—after all, the ultimate reality never presents itself to our experience and understanding with the same clarity as do the tangible realities that we encounter every day. But an even more crucial problem with the “Who?” question, the one which most today would consider the most fundamental, is its very formulation. It is terribly inadequate, even impertinent. The seductive ease of the question is precisely what makes it problematic: it raises expectations that cannot possibly be fulfilled. The question anticipates in reply a precise definition, an objective account of the essential elements of God’s identity (what traditional Christian theology calls the divine attributes), a description of the characteristics that make God “God” and set God off from finite being. But in turn these expectations presuppose a type of precise knowledge of the nature of God that is impossible for human beings to have.

When we ask that “simple” question, we expect an answer that enables us to conceptualize the divine nature, as if “God” were a normal object to be understood and explained. Such an answer would promise too much and deliver too little. Such an idea of God would only *appear* to apprehend God’s divine nature; in reality, it would be shot through with all the limitations of our human perspective. A definition formulated in response to this question alone, then, would be woefully impoverished and miss the true character of God. The mystery of God transcends human concepts.

2. Asking Carefully

Does this mean that the “simple” question should be firmly disallowed, or that the basic human search for God is doomed to shipwreck on its own limitations? Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033–1109) can guide us toward a solution. His *Proslogion*, written between 1077 and 1078, is famous in the history of Western thought particularly for the brilliant argument he presents on behalf of the existence of God, “that thing than which nothing greater can be thought.”¹⁴ This

14. *Proslogion*, ch. 2, in *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm*, 244 (see n.1). Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text (page number/line numbers).

argument is usually extracted from the prayerful, meditative setting into which Anselm placed it and discussed by philosophers and theologians as the “ontological argument.”

The *Proslogion*, however, opens with a long prayer uttered by the believer who seeks a clear vision of God, a meditative preparation for the journey of understanding the believer is about to undertake. The prayer has three stations or stages: the seeker’s withdrawal into contemplative solitude, the seeker’s growing awareness of his limitations and estrangement from God, and his compunction of sorrow at this estrangement, which ultimately gives rise to his intense desire for God.¹⁵ Thus, in response to the opening invitation to “put aside your weighty cares, let your burdensome distractions wait, free yourself awhile for God and rest awhile in him” (239/4–7), the seeker beseeches God for help in finding God.

But the journey of discovery appears utterly impossible: God dwells “in light inaccessible” (240/22) beyond the reach of the understanding of the “wretched” seeker burdened by sorrow, desire, ignorance, and sin: “I was my own impediment” (242/93). Parts of this prayer echo the famous characterization of God offered centuries earlier in the effusive prayer that opens *The Mystical Theology* by Pseudo-Dionysius, the mysterious late fifth- or early sixth-century C.E. Syrian theologian who assumed the identity of Dionysius the Areopagite, one of St. Paul’s disciples. This brilliant thinker supplied Christian theology with what over the centuries has become the classic model of negative or apophatic theology—the peculiar, paradoxical, fully necessary way of knowing God which holds that whatever can be affirmed about God must also be denied, and that true knowledge of God consists not only of knowing who God is, but even more fundamentally of knowing what God is not and that God is beyond affirmations.

Trinity!! Higher than any being,
 any divinity, any goodness!
 Guide of Christians
 in the wisdom of heaven!

15. Benedicta Ward, in the introduction to *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm*, 79.

Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,
 up to the farthest, highest peak
 of mystic scripture,
 where the mysteries of God's Word
 lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
 in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
 Amid the deepest shadow
 they pour overwhelming light
 on what is most manifest.
 Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
 they completely fill our sightless minds
 with treasures beyond all beauty.¹⁶

Anselm's seeker expresses sentiments much like those of Pseudo-Dionysius: the distance between God and any human understanding of God seems infinite and unbridgeable. Imploring God for guidance, the seeker prays that the desire for God, which at first seemed to be a burden, an unfulfillable hunger, be transformed into something positive that directs him toward an understanding of God. The moment of the *transfiguration* of this desire occurs when the seeker realizes that the desire for God does not spring up from nowhere, but is sparked by a dim understanding of God that he already possesses: "I cannot seek you unless you show me how, and I will never find you unless you show yourself to me" (243/136–38). Feelings of emptiness and exile from God begin to dissipate in the knowledge that there is "a little of your truth which my heart already believes and loves" (244/153).

The human desire for God can itself be an indicator of the presence of God, who speaks directly to that desire. Merely by using the word "God" in a meaningful way, the seeker acknowledges having some understanding, faint though it may be, of what the word means and of the being to whom it refers. The seeker already has some relation

16. *The Mystical Theology*, ch. 1, in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1987), 135. See Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Geoffrey Chapman/Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989).

to God, even before the search has begun. This, in fact, gets the search started in the first place.

No one begins the search for God from a position of absolute non-knowledge. Even the person who thinks that the best place to begin looking for God is an abstract philosophical proof “must already have some idea of what he wants to prove; any meaningful question supposes some pre-understanding of what the questioning is meant to ascertain; so too a proof of God presupposes a provisional concept of God.”¹⁷ This is a very real kind of faith or trust, a “transcendental faith” in the overarching mystery which grounds all existence. Anselm calls this mystery “God.” But faith, in Anselm’s words, is also *fides quaerens intellectum*, a “faith seeking understanding,”¹⁸ a faith that is both an act of God’s grace and at the same time a human act that “exists only in the medium of human hearing, understanding, assenting and also questioning.”¹⁹

This detailed description of the believer’s initial experience in seeking God is one of Anselm’s major insights and derives from his great sensitivity to the seeker’s situation. He makes it clear that our search for God implicitly involves much more than raising questions. “Who is God?” is also a *confession*, both about God and about ourselves. It reveals and proclaims God’s utter transcendence, in contrast to our own finite, fragile, and fallible concepts, categories, and names. When we ask the question, we disclose not only our interest in God, but also the deficiencies in our knowledge. Why ask if we already had all the answers? We have so little knowledge because of God’s “discretion”²⁰—the fact that God does indeed “dwell in light inaccessible,” that God evades our direct perceptual experience, that God is not an object of our knowledge in the way that other objects are, and is beyond the ordinary reach of human concepts and language.

17. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* [hereafter *GJC*], new ed., trans. [Matthew O’Connell and] Dinah Livingstone (London/New York: Continuum, 2012), 4.

18. *Proslogion*, preface, 239. According to Anselm, this was the original title for the *Proslogion*.

19. Kasper, *GJC*, 6–7.

20. Duquoc, “Who is God?,” 3.

But at the same time God is near and available. The distance between ourselves and God is not unbridgeable. In our fragile and fallible situation we have been given a glimpse of the nature of God that we strive to flesh out and understand more clearly (Anselm attributes this preunderstanding to our being created in the image of God [*Proslogion* 243/144]). Our question arises from a limited but real encounter with the divine mystery. Faith (*fides*) and rational understanding (*intellectus*) are not strangers or antagonists, but mutually supportive human actions that have the potential to bring us closer to God.

When we approach God we will always find ourselves situated between absolute ignorance and absolute knowledge. Our answers to the questions “Who is God?” and “Where is God?” will never be definitive, but they will not be useless. They reveal some things about God, about ourselves, and about the relationship between God and ourselves, even if they will never provide a wholly adequate explanation of any of these realities. To persist in expecting definitive answers would not only be unrealistic or unproductive on our part, but downright idolatrous: they would give us a “God” created according to our own image and likeness, an object created by our own minds that fits our finite expectations, but not the God revealed by Jesus Christ who challenges our categories, shatters our expectations, and offers us the infinite and unfathomable love that is God’s own nature, expressed in the trinity of persons. In the in-between state in which we live, we are like Anselm’s seeker: “Lord, I am not trying to make my way to your height, for my understanding is in no way equal to that, but I do desire to understand a little of your truth” (*Proslogion* 244/150–52).

And so we begin again, with chastened expectations.

3. A More Humble Questioning

Anselm’s emphasis upon the limited reach of our faith-guided understanding of God is especially pertinent today. Contemporary Christian theology is acutely aware of the historically-situated nature of all human knowledge and of faith as well. In other words, the person who responds to the revelation of God does not have some

direct, unmediated grasp of the divine nature. The ultimate and absolute cannot be known absolutely. Rather, the believer's faith is mediated by the experience of the world and the culture in which it is situated. One's understanding develops within a particular historical perspective, a particular standpoint within a shared cultural tradition built up over time. The believer is a *someone* in a *somewhere* that is shared with *others*.

Christians thus stand within a tradition of interpreted experiences.²¹ The tradition within which they practice and understand their faith is a living one—it is the ongoing reception of the message, practice, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ through the continual attempts of believers to be disciples committed to Jesus' understanding of God. Christian faith today stands in the wake of previous Christian practices and understandings; it is rooted in and formed by the past, yet at the same time differs from these past understandings. This is because faith and our understanding of it always occur *historically*—that is, differently in different historical epochs, influenced by the presuppositions that determine the particular character of each epoch. Our faith experience, even when dealing with the transcendent reality that is God, is saturated with presuppositions and norms that are peculiar to our own time and place. These presuppositions are effects constituted over the course of human history down to our own epoch, where they are formatted according our own culture's fundamental modes of understanding.²² Even when the revelation of God begins to outrun these presuppositions and shatter the usual norms of know-

21. See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 30–79; Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books "Jesus" and "Christ,"* trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 10–19.

22. See Bernhard Welte, "Credo ut intelligam als theologisches Programm heute" [1962], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV/3: *Zur vorgehensweise der Theologie und zu ihrer jüngeren Geschichte*, ed. Gerhard Ruff (Freiburg: Herder, 2007), 212–27; ET: "Credo ut intelligam—as a Theological Program for Our Times," trans. Fidelis J. Smith, *American Church Quarterly* 2 (1962): 143–52; Welte, *Heilsverständnis: Philosophische Untersuchung einiger Voraussetzungen zum Verständnis des Christentums* [1966], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV/1: *Hermeneutik des Christlichen*, ed. Bernhard Casper (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), 19–193. See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

CHAPTER FOUR

The Christian Response, II: Theological Theology

1. The Link between Natural and Theological Theology

The heart of Christian belief and the explicitly Christian way of speaking about God is to confess God as Trinity—one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As the Nicene Creed puts it, “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth . . . and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God . . . and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life.”¹

With the creed the Church makes three assertions. First, the heart of Christian life is the revelation of God’s saving love for us in the life, death, and continuing presence of the risen Christ, and our ongoing participation in divine life through the power of the Holy Spirit.² Second, the creed offers a specific view of reality *as creation*, in terms of its fundamental relation to God, the “maker of heaven and earth.” Lastly, something definitive is expressed about the believer, the faithful hearer who understands: not only is “Trinity” *precisely* how God is revealed as the author of salvation, but “Trinity” is also *precisely*

1. More precisely the “Nicene-Constantinopolitan” creed, the “symbol” of Nicaea (325) as expanded by the first council of Constantinople (381), trans. in J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* [hereafter ND], 6th ed. (New York: Alba House, 1996), ND 12 (pp. 9–10) = DH 150. See also Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* [hereafter DEC], 2 vols., (London: Sheed and Ward/Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1:24 (Grk./Lat. orig. and Eng. trans. on facing pages).

2. *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006), 19 (no. 44): “The central mystery of Christian faith and life is the mystery of the Most Blessed Trinity.”

how Christians speak of God when they reflect on how they have encountered God as “God-for-us.”³

Belief in the Trinity, the central mystery of Christianity, thus pushes believers beyond the constraints of natural theology. Thomas Aquinas’ caution that “it is impossible to come to the knowledge of the Trinity of divine persons through natural reason” is worth noting:

Through natural reason one can know God only from creatures; and they lead to the knowledge of him as effects do to their cause. Therefore by natural reason we can know of God only what characterizes him necessarily as the source of all beings. . . . Whoever tries to prove the trinity of persons by natural powers of reason detracts from faith in two ways. First . . . the object of faith is those invisible realities which are beyond the reach of human reason. . . . Secondly . . . when someone wants to support faith by unconvincing arguments, that person becomes a laughing stock for the unbelievers, who think that we rely on such arguments and believe because of them.⁴

But doesn’t this distinction leave us with an intractable problem? As we have seen, Western culture’s commonly-held view has been that natural knowledge of God and supernatural divine revelation are distinct and completely separate. Our approach—presenting a natural theology first, then showing its necessary connections with a revelational theology of God as triune—may seem to involve a contradiction or disconnection. Fortunately, there is no real dilemma or forced “either-or” choice here. That would arise only if one were to approach the question of God with the Enlightenment’s assump-

3. See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 1; Jürgen Werbick, “Trinitätslehre,” in *Handbuch der Dogmatik*, ed. Theodore Schneider, 2 vols. (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1992), 2:481–576, at 481–82. For our earlier discussion of faith as “a hearing that understands,” see chap. 3, sec. 1.

4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia, q. 32, a. 1, resp. (in *Summa theologiae*, vol. 6 [Ia. 27–32]: *The Trinity*, trans. Ceslaus Verlekey [1965; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006]), 102–05; translation modified). Hereafter cited as *ST*, part, question (q.), article (a.), response, reply (ad), followed by volume and page(s) in the Latin-English Blackfriars edition, 60 vols. (1964–76; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

tion of a complete disjunction between so-called “pure nature” and the supernatural. But that assumption (which unfortunately still colors much of the discussion of God in Western culture) stems from a minimalist view of rationality, faith, and natural theology.

In this book, we already have worked out “natural theology” in a much more positive and inclusive way.⁵ Faith and reason, while distinct, are mutually related aspects of human experience. Faith is always both “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*) and “faith developed in understanding” (*intellectus fidei*). The believer always approaches the truth of God’s gratuitous offer of salvation in an active way, interpreting one’s life in relation to God and then affirming this relationship as the most meaningful way to actualize the possibilities of human existence. This implicit interaction leads to the more adequate description of natural theology as *the search for the natural access-point of faith*. The “natural” and the “supernatural” are distinct but not dichotomous; they intersect in everyday, historically-shaped lived experience. Within the natural, one recognizes the presence of the mystery of the supernatural, “not as optional like a gift which is proposed but not imposed . . . not as so ineffable as to lack all foothold in our thought and our life, but . . . as indispensable and at the same time inaccessible” to finite human experience.⁶ This intersection marks the “clearing” where knowledge of God unfolds, where faith’s desire for God becomes visible, where revelation begins to be encountered.

We also emphasized the limits of this search, agreeing with Thomas that the natural knowledge of God permits us only an inadequate glimpse of the character of transcendence, never any full comprehension of its nature.⁷ Despite this limitation, natural theology discloses something remarkable: the fundamental *religious* character of the structure of human experience, its intentional openness to infinite mystery that forms its transcendental horizon. True, the *precise* character of this mystery is revealed only by the mystery itself. But

5. See the detailed discussion in chap. 3, sec. 1.

6. Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics*, in *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru and Iltyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994 [Fr. orig., 1896]), 161.

7. See chap. 3, sec. 2.2. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST Ia*, q. 2, a. 2 (2:8–11).

the natural knowledge of God opens a vista onto the revelation of the true nature of divine mystery, without daring to claim to actually reach it—similar to Moses, on the heights of Mount Nebo, glimpsing the promised land without being allowed to enter it (Deut 34:1–4).

What about this issue when seen within the history of theology? Our approach might appear to echo a fundamental difficulty that has plagued mainstream Christian theology since the thirteenth century, and particularly Catholic theology since the late nineteenth century, namely a perpetuation of the gulf between a theology that emphasizes the nature and unity of God (the theological treatise *de Deo uno*) and one that deals specifically with God as triune (the treatise *de Deo trino*). More recently, this division of labor “made the doctrine of the Trinity appear as an afterthought, as something added on to a prior, independent philosophical concept of God.”⁸ It led to the situation described in Karl Rahner’s famous complaint: “despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere ‘monotheists’. . . . Should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.”⁹

It is ironic that Thomas Aquinas was the first to develop the study of God in this general manner.¹⁰ He began by taking up the earlier scholastic tradition that had been passed down chiefly through Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* (*Sententiarum libri IV*, c. 1155–58), the compendium that dominated the study of theology through the latter half of the medieval period. The *Sentences* had divided the material of theology into four treatises (God and Trinity, creation and sin, the Incarnation and the virtues, the sacraments and the four last things). In writing the *Summa theologiae*, however, Thomas reorganized the material dealing with God, under the influence of late Neoplatonism (espe-

8. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “The Trinitarian Mystery of God,” in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John Galvin, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 1:172.

9. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 1997 [Ger. Orig., 1967]), 10–11.

10. Noted also by Rahner (*The Trinity*, 16). For what follows, see LaCugna, *God for Us*, 146–48; W. J. Hankey, *God in Himself: Aquinas’ Doctrine of God as Expounded in the Summa Theologiae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1–35.

cially as conveyed through the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius) and in particular the Neoplatonic *exitus-reditus* schema (i.e., creatures' procession from and return to God).¹¹ While the *Sentences* had treated the nature of God within the opening section devoted to the Trinity (*de mysterio Trinitatis*), Thomas was more influenced by the structure of Pseudo-Dionysius' *The Divine Names*. He divided the treatise on God into two distinct parts, later called *de Deo uno* and *de Deo trino*.¹² The former (*ST Ia*, qq. 2–26) examines the issues surrounding the nature of the one God and our knowledge of that nature, while the latter examines the distinction of persons in the Trinity and their relations (*ST Ia*, qq. 27–43).

Thomas never designates one part as purely philosophical and the other as purely theological. Rather, both are *theological* because they investigate matters that have been revealed to faith and pursued under the rubric of "sacred teaching" (*sacra doctrina*). He insists at the outset that theology (also termed *sacra doctrina*) is a discipline practiced from the perspective of faith which has its grounding in revelation. It is a science whose principles flow "from founts recognized in the light of a higher science, namely God's very own which he shares with the blessed."¹³ One cannot appeal, then, either to the

11. See Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 172–74. As major influences, he cites Boethius, Proclus (whose *Liber de causis* was considered by Thomas to have been authored by Aristotle), and the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus, particularly *The Divine Names*.

12. Cf. Hankey, *God in Himself*, 10–12. The author of *The Divine Names* had divided them into "the unified names [that] apply to the entire Godhead" (such as "transcendently good," "transcendently existing," "beautiful," "life-giving") and those "expressing distinctions, the transcendent name and proper activity of the Father, of the Son, of the Spirit" (*The Divine Names*, chap. 2, sec. 2, in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* [New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1987], 60). In the prologue to *ST Ia*, q. 2 (2:3), Thomas clearly mentions a *tripartite* outline (the nature of God, "the distinction of persons in God," and "the coming forth from him of creatures"). But only the first two parts deal explicitly with the nature of God.

13. *ST Ia*, q. 1, a. 2, reply (1:11). See also *Ia*, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2 (1:31–32): "The premises of this teaching [i.e., *sacra doctrina*, Christian theology] are revealed truths, accepted on the word of the teacher who reveals them. . . . All the same *sacra doctrina* also uses human reasoning, not indeed to prove the faith, for that would

structure or the arguments of the *Summa theologiae* to justify the identification of Thomas' *de Deo uno* with the kind of philosophically extrinsicist natural theology we criticized earlier.¹⁴

After Thomas' death, his two-fold division of the study of God was widely imitated in the medieval West and became the model for subsequent discussions. Only much later, with nineteenth-century Roman Catholic Neoscholasticism, was the distinction between the two treatises turned into a rigid disjunction that did away with Thomas' carefully-crafted plan. The Neoscholastic theological manuals identified *de Deo uno* with the philosophical discussion of the one divine nature and *de Deo trino* with the theological consideration of mysteries of the Trinity "in the strict sense" (*mysteria stricte dicta*) whose content lay beyond the grasp of human reason and was made available only by means of supernatural revelation. This arrangement clearly reflected the intent of Neoscholastic apologetics to defend both the legitimacy of Christianity and the objective certainty of supernatural revelation against the criticisms leveled by modern natural religion.¹⁵ The tract *de Deo uno* contained the proofs for the

take away from the merit of believing, but to make manifest some implications of its message. Since grace does not do away with nature but brings it to perfection, so also natural reason should assist faith as the natural loving bent of the will yields to charity. . . . For our faith rests on the revelation made to the prophets and apostles who wrote the canonical books, not on a revelation, if such there be, made to any other teacher" (translation modified).

14. See William J. Hill's comment on Thomas' "five ways": "What Aquinas seeks out at the very beginning of the work (q. 2) are 'ways' (*viae*, not 'proofs,' 'arguments,' or 'demonstrations') by which the human spirit, in its powers of transcendence, might ascend to an affirmation of God—and in actual fact, that God who has already addressed his Word to man" (*The Three-Personed God: The Trinity as a Mystery of Salvation* [Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1982], 63).

15. Neoscholasticism attempted to defend the truth of Catholicism against what it argued were the heresies of modernity by using what amounted to modern means of assuring objective certainty. See Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Systematic Theology: Task and Methods," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 1:27–34; Fiorenza, "The New Theology and Transcendental Thomism," in James C. Livingston, et al., *Modern Christian Thought, Volume II: The Twentieth Century*, 2d ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2000), 198–200;

existence of God, the discussion of the nature and attributes of God (e.g., simplicity, immutability, and eternity), and an analysis of the divine operations (knowledge, will, providence, predestination, and omnipotence). *De Deo trino* discussed the distinction, procession, and mission of the divine persons, as well as the intelligibility of the mystery of the Trinity and its philosophical analogues.¹⁶

Reacting to the perduring influence of this extreme separation, Karl Rahner objected that “the treatise of the Trinity locks itself in even more splendid isolation, with the ensuing danger that the religious mind finds it devoid of interest. It looks as if everything which matters for us in God has already been said in the treatise *On the One God*.”¹⁷ Our own approach, though, has nothing to do with the rigorous divisions of Neoscholasticism. Rather, it has more in common with the method originally suggested by Thomas’ *Summa theologiae*, where the study of the nature of the one God and the study of the Trinity are seen as two different yet complementary moments of our encounter with revelation. What I have proposed are two interlocking Christian responses to the problem of God in Western culture and thus a genuine connection between our experience of God and a theological (i.e., revelational) theology of the Trinity.

If our contemporary situation is even roughly as we have described it—a time of the celebration of the consumer image, of the dimming of the religious imagination even amidst heightened religious expression, or even as a “dark night” of varying intensities that provokes from many, even those of strong Christian belief, the anguished questions “where is God?” and “who is God?”—then we must make the strongest arguments for the plausibility of divine transcendence and

Anthony J. Godzieba, *Bernhard Welte’s Fundamental Theological Approach to Christology*, American University Studies, series VII, vol. 160 (New York/Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), 18–30.

16. E.g., see the once-popular seminary manual by Adolphe Tanqueray, *Synopsis Theologiae Dogmaticae, tomus secundus: de Fide, de Deo uno et Trino, de Deo creante et elevante, de Verbo Incarnato*, 24th ed. (Paris: Desclée, 1933).

17. Rahner, *The Trinity*, 17. Rahner’s critique applies more to what Thomas’ distinction became in the hands of the Neoscholastic manualists than to Thomas himself.

for the real possibility of personally encountering the living God. In this way we can reignite the religious imagination. For if the very notion of “God” or “divine transcendence” seems implausible to many, what chance does the doctrine of the Trinity have of being appreciated and appropriated in a way that is helpful to faith? To first seek and find the “clearing” or the natural access-point of faith is to promote the human capacity to think and experience otherwise than the unending cycle of commodified images and the seeming claustrophobia of consumer culture. An authentic natural theology heightens our expectations regarding our encounters with God. It widens the parameters by demonstrating that one of the fundamental conditions of human experience is its orientation in the direction of God and transcendence. It also gives us a glimpse—but only a glimpse—of the character of the transcendence for which we long. If natural theology can identify this “clearing” within our experience as the place where God may be encountered, then Christian claims concerning the triune nature and personality of divinity will find a footing in human life and thus be more readily heard and appreciated.

In this clearing, at the threshold of the natural access-point of faith, we encounter not only the transcendent horizon of our life and actions, the all-encompassing infinite mystery which we do not hesitate to call “God.”¹⁸ We also discover something of its depth, a hint (*Vorgriff*) of the non-negotiable benevolence of that mystery which *gives* itself to us on its own initiative, a glimpse of the character of absolute freedom which reveals itself to us in a relationship that can best be described as *personal* and ultimately fulfilling. The key elements here are the “givenness” of this experience and the personal relationship that this revelatory “giving” engenders. At the limits of our experience, divine transcendence can best be described in personal, relational terms: as a gracious giver who encounters us in a personal fashion, freely granting us the space that makes our life and actions possible. In turn, we give ourselves over to the infinite mystery, trusting it to reveal itself as the loving fulfillment that we believe it to be.

18. Cf. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (1978; reprint, New York: Crossroad, 1989), 57–75.

What makes this limited yet meaningful vision possible is a *reve- latory moment already present* to human experience. Here is where “natural theology” begins to shade over into “theological theology.” The givenness of the infinite mystery makes possible the natural access-point of faith, a moment of grace already present to our experience in the sheer fact of this gift and our recognition of it.¹⁹ We respond to it and interpret it by placing it within the context of our previous experiences. With this deepened natural knowledge of God, our argument against extrinsicism bears fruit. The most appropriate way to describe this experience of givenness is to employ a *personal* metaphor: we perceive the givenness which characterizes infinite mystery as a *personal* appeal which creates a *personal* relationship that begins to fulfill us *as persons*. This experience, though, is only a hint, a series of fragmentary anticipations. At this point, natural theology exhausts itself. The presence-absence structure that governs our encounters with God ensures that our affirmations of transcendence, while true, always fall short. Rational reflection can articulate our fundamental openness to the glimpses we receive of divine presence. But the full nature of the giver and the true quality of the relationship always exceed our categories of experience and reflection. They are revealed only in the depths of supernatural revelation itself. If we are to know who God is, then God must reveal God’s own self.

At this point the transition between an authentic natural knowledge of God and trinitarian theology becomes clear. Natural theology’s pre-apprehension of the authentic character of God is filled out and intensified by the revelatory encounter we have with God the Father who saves us through Jesus Christ and who incorporates us into that salvation by means of the Holy Spirit. While natural theology always arrives late on the scene, so to speak, it grasps in fragmentary form that which preexists and pervades every moment of our experience of God. It emphasizes the disclosure that unfolds in terms of presence-and-absence, an action that can be adequately approached only by a theological theology that takes up where natural theology

19. Indeed, it is the presupposition for our recognition of revelation as *super- natural*. Cf. Henri Bouillard, *The Knowledge of God*, trans. Samuel D. Femiano (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 24–31.

necessarily leaves off. Here, then, is a bridge to a theological theology of the Trinity—not a *proof* of the reality of the triune God, of course, since “reason cannot prove the necessity of the Trinity either from the concept of absolute spirit or from the concept of love. The Trinity is a mystery in the strict sense of the term.”²⁰ Rather, we acknowledge the openness of human experience to an encounter with God and speak, as best we can, about what occurs within that encounter.

“Faith seeking understanding” attempts to express both the revelation of God’s own self as a triune communion of persons and the intrinsic relevance of the Trinity for Christian life. One of its fundamental goals, then, is to show that Christian belief in the triune God is not a doctrine imposed from “outside,” but rather that God, in revealing, wills our happiness. Human life, having discovered its intrinsic orientation to God, will find its desires and its created potential fulfilled when it continues to acknowledge and celebrate its rootedness in the Trinity (doxology) and confess its intrinsic need for the Trinity’s loving and saving action (soteriology). To this theological theology of the Trinity we now turn.

2. The Revelation of the Triune God

The origins of Christian belief in the triune God are found “solely in the history of God’s dealings with human beings and in the historical self-revelation of the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.”²¹ In other words, we become aware of the “inner” or “immanent” reality of God as triune (*theologia* in Greek) not through abstract speculation, but rather on God’s revelatory initiative alone—by God’s salvific self-disclosure in history (*oikonomia*, the divine plan or

20. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* [hereafter *GJC*], new ed., trans. [Matthew J. O’Connell and] Dinah Livingstone (London/New York: Continuum, 2012), 267.

21. *Ibid.*, 237. For the development of trinitarian theology, see Gisbert Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott: Eine trinitarische Theologie* (Freiburg/Br.: Herder, 1997); Hill, *The Three-Personed God*; Kasper, *GJC*, 233–316; LaCugna, *God for Us*; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:259–336; Rahner, *The Trinity*; Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins, eds., *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

“economy” of salvation), in events first narrated within a tradition of belief before they are reflected upon systematically.²² Scripture, the divinely-inspired interpretive narration of these events, is thus the pivotal resource. While biblical exegetes and theologians agree that there is no explicitly developed doctrine of the Trinity in either the Old or New Testament, nevertheless the classical doctrine is firmly rooted in Scripture’s testimony to God’s relationship with humanity as it has occurred in history. Additional evidence can be found in the spiritual life and liturgical experiences of the early Church, whose members lived under the intense impact and ongoing effects of Christ’s resurrection.

Subsequent theological analysis of these formative elements derives from them “the concepts in which the New Testament revelation of the triune God can be formulated as a profession of faith, presents this revelation in its interconnectedness, and renders its meaning recognizable as the center of Christian belief.”²³ This very basic description may make development of the doctrine of the Trinity appear to be a simple process, but in reality it is the fruit of centuries of spiritual experience, liturgical practice, and continuing theological reflection. At every point in this development, the Church’s fundamental concern has been soteriological, asking how we are to understand “the saving activity of the God of Israel as this was realised in the person and event of Jesus Christ and in the reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit.”²⁴ The theological task, then, is to explain how our salvation is enacted in the intimate communion among the three persons of the Trinity, while at the same time we profess our firm belief in the one God.

22. Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott*, 48. For the background and various meanings of “economy” (Greek *oikonomia*, Latin *dispensatio, dispositio*) in relation to salvation, see G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 2d ed. (1952; reprint, London: SPCK, 1981), 57–67; LaCugna, *God For Us*, 24–30.

23. Wolfgang Beinert and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, eds., *Handbook of Catholic Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 723, s.v. “Trinity: Doctrine of the” (Wilhelm Breuning).

24. Ralph Del Colle, “The Triune God,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 122–23.

The primary scriptural resource for belief in the Trinity is the New Testament, which provides the basis for the doctrine of the Trinity on three interconnected levels: it narrates the historically- and culturally-embedded events whereby the triune structure of God's saving activity is revealed; it records the early Christian attempts to express this trinitarian structure in reminiscence and confession; and it reflects on how these events and expressions, taken together, articulate the definitive self-revelation of the triune God as love (1 John 4:8, 16).²⁵ But trinitarian theology also relies on the Old Testament for crucial data about the experiences that ground the New Testament's claims. None is more central than the confession of the unity of God: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:4-5). These verses were later incorporated into the *Shema*, the prayer recited twice daily by every devout Jew. The confession of God's oneness and uniqueness was the central pillar of Judaism immediately before and during Jesus' time, and became the basis for Christianity as well.²⁶

The Old Testament evidence, however, also shows that this fully-formed monotheism was not the starting point of Israel's relationship with Yahweh, but rather its mature arrival-point. Israel's belief in the oneness and uniqueness of God took centuries to develop

25. Compare Kasper's assessment of the New Testament evidence, a three-step analysis of "1. the trinitarian structure of the revelational event; 2. the trinitarian explanation of this event in the New Testament; and 3. the connection between this explanation and the essential definition of God that is given in the New Testament." Only in this way can theology keep the confession of the Trinity from being relegated to "a later, purely speculative addition to the original faith in Christ" and instead demonstrate that it "provides the basic structure and ground plan of the New Testament witness, and that with it the belief in the God of Jesus Christ stands or falls" (*GJC*, 244).

26. James D. G. Dunn deems monotheism the first of the four pillars of Second Temple Judaism; see *The Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 19–21. See also Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), 29–31; E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London/New York: Penguin, 1995 [1993]), 33–39 (on the "common Judaism" of first century AD/CE).

into the form that is considered characteristic of Judaism.²⁷ A number of texts, for example, reflect the character of early Israelite religion when it tolerated other deities (always few in number) alongside Yahweh (e.g., Gen 35:2-3; Josh 24:16; Judg 5:8). Other texts cast light on the conditions of somewhat later Israelite history, when there existed differences between the nationalistic cult of Yahweh promoted by the monarchy and other, more syncretistic cultic practices of popular religion (e.g., Baal worship) that were originally tolerated, but later were strongly condemned as incompatible with the true worship of Yahweh (1 Kgs 18–19; Amos 5:25–27; Hos 2; Jer 10).²⁸ The Old Testament clearly depicts an historical development in Israel's relationship with God: from a polytheistic Yahwism or henotheism to a practical monotheism (where one worships Yahweh alone, without deciding on the existence or non-existence of other deities), and finally to an ethical monotheism (where Yahweh is regarded as the only God; all others are nonentities). The centrality of monotheism was affirmed only around the time of the exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC/BCE, and only in this post-exilic period did monotheism and monolatry become the fundamental dogmas of Judaism. For example, the author of Second Isaiah (Isa 40–55), writing just before or during the exile and continuing the Isaian prophetic tradition,²⁹ boldly and unambiguously affirms that Yahweh is the only deity in the cosmos and the God of all peoples: "I am the LORD, and there is no other. . . . There is no other god besides me; a righteous God and a Savior; there is no one besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other!" (Isa 45:5, 21–22). This insistence on God's unity and uniqueness became the outstanding characteristic of Judaism in the post-exilic period and made Israel unique among its neighbors. It also provoked within

27. Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Dearborn, MI: Dove, 2002), 182–99; John J. Scullion, "God: God in the OT," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, eds. David Noel Freedman, et al., 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:1041–48; Kasper, *GJC*, 238–39.

28. Smith, *Early History of God*, 183–84.

29. Cf. Richard J. Clifford, "Isaiah, Book of: Second Isaiah," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:490–91.

Judaism itself “a fierce antipathy to syncretism and virulent hostility to anything which smacked of idolatry,”³⁰ as Jewish literature from this later period attests (e.g., Jdt 8:18; Wis 13:1–15:6).

In the religious experience mirrored in the Old Testament, monotheism was never merely a theoretical issue verified by intellectual “proofs.” It arose rather out of Israel’s encounters with Yahweh, revelatory experiences whose decisive meaning had to be worked out over time in the context and categories of ancient Near Eastern religion and politics. At the same time these categories were stretched up to and even beyond their limits. Biblical monotheism is thus “the fruit of religious experience and an expression of practice based on faith.” At its heart is “a radical decision in behalf of the one thing necessary,” that is, the unshakable truth that “God alone is God; on him alone can one build unconditionally, in him alone can one trust without reserve.” A theological analysis of these experiences of faith and of the practices they engender leads to the conclusion that the *oneness* of God necessarily implies the *uniqueness* of God. “Only one God can be infinite and all-inclusive; two Gods would limit one another even if they somehow interpenetrated. . . . The singleness of God is therefore not just one of the attributes of God; rather his singleness is given directly with his very essence.”³¹

This strict commitment to monotheism provided the matrix not only for first-century AD/CE Judaism, but also for the Jewish movement that formed around Jesus and for the early Christianity that developed from it.³² To abandon exclusivist monotheism was to abandon Judaism.³³ This is true even in light of the fact that late Second Temple Judaism (post-exilic Judaism from the second century BC/BCE onward) could entertain beliefs in a variety of heavenly inter-

30. Dunn, *Partings of the Ways*, 20.

31. Kasper, *GJC*, 239.

32. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 29: “What became ‘Christianity’ began as a movement within the Jewish religious tradition of the Roman period, and the chief characteristic of Jewish religion in this period was its defiantly monotheistic stance.”

33. *Ibid.*, 31: “to engage in the worship of other deities was to abandon Judaism. For devout Jews, the core requirement of Judaism was the exclusive worship of Israel’s God.”

mediary and redeemer figures and even a healthy angelology.³⁴ While acknowledging the demonstrable elasticity of monotheism within Second Temple Judaism, however, one must make an important distinction between “entertaining a belief in” and “worshipping,” and realize how strictly that distinction was held. There is enough evidence that Jewish monotheism during the Roman period certainly “accommodated beliefs and very honorific rhetoric about various principal-agent figures such as high angels and exalted humans like Moses,” but at the same time it “drew a sharp line between any such figure and the one God in the area of cultic practice, reserving cultic worship for the one God.”³⁵

This context makes all the more surprising the extraordinarily high estimation of Jesus of Nazareth among his followers so soon after Easter, as well as early Christianity’s worship of Christ as divine, given the fact that belief in Jesus as the son of God arose among first-century AD/CE Jewish disciples who were steeped in exclusivist monotheism.³⁶ Their fundamental claim was that the historical manifestation of God and God’s view of life had occurred most clearly and definitively in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This belief was anchored in Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom of God, in the presence of God’s salvific power which they perceived in Jesus’ own life and actions, and in their experiences of the risen Christ after the catastrophe of his

34. See James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2d ed. (London: SCM, 1990), 149–59.

35. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 48. See also Hurtado, “First-Century Jewish Monotheism,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 71 (1998): 3–26, where he highlights this combination of elasticity and exclusivism: first-century AD/CE Judaism had at one and the same time “a remarkable ability to combine a genuine concern for God’s uniqueness together with an interest in other figures of transcendent attributes described in the most exalted terms” and “an exhibition of monotheistic scruples particularly and most distinctively in public cultic/liturgical behaviour”(3–4).

36. For the relatively rapid development of such exalted beliefs in Jesus, see the classic arguments by Martin Hengel in *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) and “Christology and New Testament Chronology” in *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 30–47.

crucifixion. Throughout the course of his life, as well as in his death and resurrection, “Jesus reveals God as his own Father in an utterly unique and non-transferable way, while it is only through Jesus that we in turn become the sons and daughters of this Father.”³⁷

Through his life, words, and practices, Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God, God’s kingly rule and attitude of care toward human life and the world. For Jesus, God’s rule transforms situations of negativity, suffering, and dehumanization into situations of positivity, joy, and surprising human flourishing beyond any human accomplishment. Such astounding reversals can be accomplished only by God, whom Jesus portrayed in his parables and in his miracles as a surprising and capricious lover who surpasses human expectations and standards and goes to any lengths to make the offer of love and reversal open to all without qualification.³⁸ Jesus claimed that this long-awaited arrival of the Kingdom of God and its ongoing fulfillment was tied in a unique way to his own preaching and prophetic actions. Indeed, the salvific presence of God was present in the very paradox of his person. “Jesus had a direct *theo*-logy (God as object of his preaching), which involved an indirect or implicit *christo*-logy (Jesus as final agent of God). Thus Jesus’ identity was absorbed into and defined by his mission.”³⁹ In response to Jesus’ aims and the effect his person and ministry had on them, his followers struggled to find appropriate categories and titles to express the extraordinary revelatory character and “otherness” of his presence, while at the same time doing justice to their own commitment to Jewish exclusivist monotheism and to the authentic Jewish character and substance of Jesus’ life and preaching. This struggle is rooted in what John Meier terms the “basis paradox Jesus presented” to friends and foes alike: “Though he rarely spoke about his status, he implicitly made himself *the* pivotal figure in the eschatological drama he announced and inaugurated. . . . [Jesus] spoke and acted on the presumption that he would be the criterion used for the final judgment.

37. Kasper, *GJC*, 244.

38. For a detailed discussion, see Anthony J. Godzieba, “Method and Interpretation: The New Testament’s Heretical Hermeneutic (Prelude and Fugue),” *The Heythrop Journal* 36 (1995): 286–306.

39. John P. Meier, “Jesus,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990) 1316–28, at 1323 (§29; emphases original).

That alone involved a monumental claim to a unique status and role at the climax of Israel's history."⁴⁰

God's action of reversal was revealed not only in Jesus' *announcement* of the Kingdom of God, but equally in Jesus' *performance* of its values, especially his overwhelming concern for and action on behalf of the marginalized within first-century Palestinian Jewish society. This "performance" led to the series of events culminating in his crucifixion and resurrection.⁴¹ That the reversal of negativity and the restoration of human well-being is truly God's salvific will was confirmed for Jesus' followers at Easter—his resurrection is the ultimate reversal, that of death into life. The New Testament clearly shows that the eschatological event of Jesus' resurrection and the disciples' Easter experiences of the Risen Lord became the key elements of their interpretation of Jesus' relationship to his Father (*Abba*): Jesus had been revealed as the human face of God, the full self-expression of God's being. "The eschatological character of this revelation indirectly makes it clear as well that from eternity God is the God and Father of Jesus Christ and therefore that as Son of God Jesus belongs to the eternal being of God."⁴²

The fundamental importance of these revelatory experiences cannot be underestimated, given the matrix of Jewish exclusivist monotheism within which they occurred. They provoked the unprecedented development of cultic worship and prayer that included Jesus Christ alongside God the Father, public devotion that is reflected in the New Testament epistolary literature (especially letters by and attributed to Paul) and the book of Revelation.⁴³ For example, the untranslated Aramaic prayer *marana tha* ("O Lord, come!") preserved in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (16:22), which finds a Greek parallel in

40. Ibid. (emphasis original).

41. Regarding the advantage of a performance hermeneutic for understanding both Jesus' view of the Kingdom of God and our contemporary appropriation of the truth of Jesus' message, see Godzieba, "Method and Interpretation"; Godzieba, "' . . . And Followed Him on the Way' (Mark 10:52): Unity, Diversity, Discipleship," in *Beyond Dogmatism and Innocence: Hermeneutics, Critique, and Catholic Theology*, ed. Anthony J. Godzieba and Bradford E. Hinze (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 228–54.

42. Kasper, *GJC*, 244.

43. See especially Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 63–97; Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 134–43; LaCugna, *God For Us*, 112–14.

Revelation 22:20 (*Amēn, erchou kyrie Iēsou*; “Amen. Come Lord Jesus!”), is an invocation for Jesus to be present, whether at the moment of worship or eschatologically. This prayer has no parallel in Judaism and provides evidence for “an incorporation of Jesus into the corporate, public devotional life of early Christians in a way that is otherwise reserved for God.”⁴⁴ Another example is the Christian hymn quoted by Paul in the Letter to the Philippians (2:6-11); it links the universal confession that “Jesus Christ is Lord” (2:11) with God’s exaltation of Jesus (2:9), an exaltation that mirrors God the Father’s glory as well (2:11). Colossians 3:17 urges Christians to “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” A number of doxologies (e.g., 1 Thess 3:11-13; Rom 1:8, 16:27; 2 Cor 1:19-20) directly link God the Father and Jesus in prayer, offering praise to God and invoking Jesus as the mediator between God and humanity.⁴⁵ These are thought to quote directly or echo liturgical formulas already in common use in Christian worship in the 50s AD/CE. These and similar New Testament indicators, taken together, reflect the consistent incorporation of Jesus “into an exclusivistic pattern of devotion in which there is room for only *one God and one Lord* (e.g., 1 Cor 8:5-6),” a cultic reverencing of Jesus that early Christians believed they were impelled to offer in light of their experience of God.⁴⁶

For the early Christian communities whose beliefs and practices are reflected in these texts, it is clear that Jesus was not considered “another deity of any independent origin or significance; instead, his divine significance is characteristically expressed in terms of his relationship to the one God.”⁴⁷ The practices of these early communities thus disclose the development of a clearly *binitarian* pattern of belief and devotion. As Larry Hurtado puts it, this was “an unparalleled innovation, a ‘mutation’ or new variant form of exclusivist monotheism in which a second figure (Jesus) was programmatically included with God in

44. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 141–42.

45. LaCugna, “Trinitarian Mystery,” 16; *God For Us*, 112–13.

46. Hurtado, *Origins*, 97 (emphasis original). The hymn quoted by Paul in 1 Cor. 8:5-6 confesses that there is “one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

47. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 52.

the devotional pattern of Christian groups."⁴⁸ This devotion paralleled and fostered the development of what have been called "New Testament symbols implying a second in God,"⁴⁹ a range of titles for Jesus that attempted to express his unique relationship to God without compromising the exclusivist monotheist context from which they arose.

One of these titles is "son of God," originally denoting Yahweh's elect (either corporately or individually), but without overtones of divinity.⁵⁰ Early Christian practice, spurred on by the sense of intimate sonship with God that Jesus expressed in his sayings and actions (e.g., Matt 11:27/Luke 10:22), applied the term to Jesus and eventually narrowed down its focus to signify the distinctive relationship between Jesus and the Father (e.g., Mark 1:1; Rom 1:3, 8:3, 14-15; Gal 4:6-7; John 1:14; 1 John 4:9). Another is "Lord" (*kyrios*), whose meaning in a Jewish setting was far less ambiguous.⁵¹ In first-century AD/CE diaspora synagogues where Jews spoke Greek rather than Hebrew, whenever the Scriptures were read aloud in translation, the substitution for the never-to-be-uttered *YHWH* would not have been the Hebrew *Adonai* but rather the Greek *kyrios*. The same translation appears in Christian manuscripts of the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. The word thus had clear connotations of divinity when early Christian communities deliberately chose it as one of their key interpretations of Jesus' relationship to God. In doing so, they expressed their belief that now "Jesus could be hailed as Lord and receive the honour due to God alone, because God had so appointed Christ to this status and these roles," while at the same time maintaining a distinction between God the Father and Jesus.⁵²

48. *Ibid.*, 64.

49. Hill, *The Three-Personed God*, 6-17.

50. For examples of earlier Jewish usage and of Jesus' own expressions of his sonship, see Dunn, *Partings of the Ways*, 170-71; Dunn, *Christianity in the Making, Volume I: Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), 708-24 (especially his conclusions).

51. For what follows, see Dunn, *Partings of the Ways*, 188-91; see also Hill, *Three-Personed God*, 14-15.

52. Dunn, *Partings of the Ways*, 191: "To call Jesus 'Lord', therefore, was evidently not understood in earliest Christianity as identifying him with God. What Paul and the first Christians seem to have done was to claim that *the one God had shared his lordship with the exalted Christ.*"

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