WHAT KIND OF GOD FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

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Strictly speaking, the title of this paper is over-ambitious. Consider the following:

A hundred years is a long, long time in the realm of prediction. Forty years ago 'empowerment' was barely discussed and the word 'sexism' hardly known. Thirty years ago we did not even have the microchip. Ten years ago the Personal Computer was still a luxury and only five years ago the World Wide Web, e-mail and the Internet belonged in academic, elitist enclaves, as did the term 'postmodernism'. Many predictions for the twentieth century had not, after all, been fulfilled. There was *not* global peace. The world was not, in the end, ruled by communism. We have not achieved a colony on the moon or had manned trips to Mars as scientist and futurist Arthur Clarke had expected.

So what this paper really does is ask questions about the Christian God, relevant to the turn-of-the-century.

There will be many kinds of experiences of the new century. One short paper cannot tackle the meaning of God in the new century for every kind of person everywhere on the planet. In spite of globalisation and culture-standardisation, the world still contains some contrasting cultures, economies and settings. This implies a variety of starting points for talking from Scripture about God. Liberation theology, for example, challenges us to begin all theology 'with the 30 million hungry people in the world.'[1] Western theology had never thought of starting there. Again, the anxieties of a rural farmer in Rwanda might pose different questions for a doctrine of God than those prompted by the angst of a Philadelphian lawyer. Neither does a CNN live report about refugees flooding out of Kosovo admit us as deeply as we think into the suffering of a people whose horrific experiences, so inexpressible – and different yet again from Rwanda. This all tells us that the world is still 'multichrome' and that western theology must never forget it.

All the same, the western world needs attention too. Western theology must take its own prescription. We must translate God to our own culture ('contextualise') and so make a contribution to clearing up its creeping individualism, cynicism, pessimism and self-destruction. Hence, this short

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[1] The theme taken up by J. Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy. Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, (Maryknoll, 1994).

paper restricts itself to some local, critical issues about God but in the presence of other cultures and dilemmas on the planet – cultures which simply cannot afford our luxury of navel-gazing.

God is not a utility. If we are going to be pedantic, it is, strictly speaking, open to misunderstanding in *Christian* theology to have a title like *What kind of God for the Twenty-first Century*? God is not one more of capitalism's market commodities, there to be recycled and repackaged so as now to be a God *for* something new, yet again. A suitable tuning of the question in the title, therefore, could be 'What kind of God *to* the twenty-first century?' The preposition *for* could suggest God's being manufactured for us, if not actually by us. The preposition 'to' suggests divine initiative, movement – in other words, it suggests *grace.* The question is: how does the God of Jesus Christ come to us at the millennium-beginning, in divine grace? How does God come to this western society, and how does he connect, in grace, with some of its distinctive, turn-of-the-century, struggles?

The challenge of the approaching century

We have already seen that futurism, the art of looking through the new-decade keyhole, is a bit of a gamble. But even if some current predictions are only partially correct the future is not for the half-hearted. As an example take *reproductive technology and genetics.* The cloning of human parts and the Genome Project together offer visions of an anthropoid hypermarket, daily trading in cultured human parts and genetic cosmetic. This murky vision falls into place alongside the continuing argument about the meaning of the self, the brain and the mind – and so of the precarious, fragile nature of human identity in a secularist world. And the precariousness of human identity darkly raises the prospect of a precarious God – and vice versa. *Micro-technology*, indeed, has an eye to taking over from God altogether. There is talk of a day coming soon, when memory could be downloaded into our brains, perhaps into bodies already cloned from our own, so proving reincarnation to be a surprisingly viable kind of belief after all. Seemingly, a resurrecting God is *not* needed for life after death.

How might God come to a world where we could all, one day, carry microchip implants in our heads and access the internet and other visuals through tiny screens on the cornea? In this world, wars might be bloodless, carried out by micro-craft, tiny synthetic insect-warriors in the air, cheap,

barely visible and deadly.[2] And how might God come to a world where multi-national financial institutions may establish total continental monopolies (a serious prospect for Europe in, say, insurance and banking). What is God to such a world where the powers have so completely and invisibly eroded the status of individuals and minority cultures?

But much else is also at stake – in the esoteric world of cultural and critical studies where suspicion of authors and mistrust of texts throw ideas, like a pack of cards, into the air. This prompts an even more fundamental question: how might God come in grace to the West through the clouds of its self-questioning and uncertainty? What kind of God is going to encounter some of those critical voices steadily shaping the outlook of our western world. We are cautioned on every side not to make bland generalisations about this phenomenon of 'postmodernism' as if it always implies relativism, provisionality and individualism. So let's just say that it *seemingly* and *usually* does! In addition, I like to make a distinction, not, alas, shared by any expert I know of. This is a distinction between postmodern*ism* (an academic philosophical debate of a high esoteric order) and postmodern*ity* (a related web of popular culture and thinking in economics, media and the arts). Which drives which, or whether the relationship is symbiotic, is still an open question. Postmodern*ism* in this distinction sometimes smacks of the self-indulgence of a bourgeois culture with too much time on its hands. However, both words, postmodern*ism* and postmodern*ity*, support a culture that condemns dogmatism – although they both do it in a dogmatic tone! Both encourage the art of suspicion (if not indeed cynicism), and both champion embodied, experienced reality over against claims to pure mind, the so-called scientific and objective realities. Both engender diversity. So what kind of God comes in grace with a voice to both these versions of our culture? Several answers spring to mind.

1. A God above suspicion

Out of Marxist analysis in particular came the extension of critiques of power into many corners of human and social practice. All around us, analysts have turned over polished flagstones to find underneath the ugly, wriggling world of self-interest, manipulation and control. Whilst this process began with analysis of written texts as instruments of hidden manipulation and control, the probe has reached to the indictment of

[2] All from *The Guardian Saturday Review* 16 January 1999.

education, government, science, religion and all grandees of morality whoever they are.

Some of the results have been devastating for institutionalised religion. And fully deserved, too, given recent catastrophes stretching from tele-evangelists, through the *9 O' Clock Service* to reports of child abuse and spouse abuse by church leaders. Views of Christian leadership which have emphasised the authority of the leader have had to face afresh the Reformed doctrine of human depravity and delve into both motive and method in their Christian leadership. Even now, many are reluctant to meet that challenge. But, more to the point, the analysis of power as abuse is provoking a fresh look at what it means for our doctrine of God. We find diverse responses.

Jurgen Moltmann, as well as the more radical critique of Feminist theologies, has led the way. Moltmann declares that he has found an unhealthily patriarchal picture of God in the Old Testament particularly.[3] We should not be totally put off our stroke by this. Tony Thistleton helpfully reminds us of Ian Ramsey's rule that the best practice with models of God is to balance one model by the others, rather than isolating one and making it supreme.[4] Moltmann's complaint would be final if we made the patriarchal God of the Old Testament the single, controlling model. But the metaphor is balanced, for example, by such images as the Shepherd, the Gardener, the Bridegroom, the Sacrificial Husband, the Nurturer, the Defender *etc.*

This balancing becomes yet more pronounced in the New Testament, where the Father is also the vulnerable protector running out to the prodigal. He likes to party and throws a feast, welcoming the riff-raff to it, so turning power structures upside down in order that the first may become last. *God*'s power, even in the Old Testament, means much more than just an intense form of the human power found in the human world.[5] Jesus himself signals this. He bars his disciples from the form of power which lords it over others. He himself submits to his persecutors. By word and

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[3] The accusation that all religion is a power-bid is handled with great caution and competence by Anthony C. Thistleton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self. On meaning, Manipulation and Promise*, (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 28-32.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[5] We note, for instance, the contrast drawn by Thistleton between the Hebrew description 'Almighty' (God's having power over all things) and the late scholastic title 'Omnipotent' (being able to do all things), *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

action, Jesus critiques power many centuries before Derrida and Foucault find their way on to the scene! To be 'imitators of God', his servants have to renounce all forms of manipulative action, speaking and writing (*e.g.* Matt. 23:7, 33; 1 Cor. 1:18-2:5; 2 Cor. 4:2; 6:4-7; 11:13, 15, 20 with 11.30, 33). The equality of male and female reaches doctrinal status (*e.g.* Gal. 3:26-29; Eph. 5:21).

A surprising response has emerged on the more adventurous wing of American evangelicalism. In the collaborative work *The Openness of God*, Clark Pinnock and others have returned, although they do not say so, to Augustine's conundrum: why does God not destroy evil? Either because he will not (therefore is not all-good) or cannot (therefore is not all-powerful). The end of the twentieth century seems the right time to these writers, to take the plunge and trade in the omnipotence of God. The new approach advocates a kind of pre-incarnation self-emptying (*kenosis*). God voluntarily disempowers himself in providence before there is a *kenosis* of the Son in redemption. Although the writers strongly deny any identity with process theology, the similarities are more striking than the differences. In both views God cannot guarantee outcomes. In process theology God *struggles* a little more, but in both views God cannot guarantee the final outcome, the eschaton. It is only *probable* that God's good purpose for creation will prevail in the end. The motive for this paradigm shift is altogether worthy. It is responding to the slur that the God of Jesus Christ is static and closed to the creation, lacking vulnerability and openness and therefore lacking genuine love and personality. God is now truly a postmodern. His ends are provisional only. He is listening, tolerant and responsive to other voices. Prayer, quite literally, changes his mind and his action. A quotation catches the flavour of this very well, arguing that, 'love rather than almighty power is the primary perfection of God...God does not overcome his enemies (for example) by forcing but by loving them. God works, not in order to subject our wills but to transform our hearts. Love and not sheer power overcomes evil – God does not go in for power tactics.'[6]

We note in the statement some interpretative glosses on the traditional view of divine power. For instance, it assumes that all power has to be that which 'overcomes' someone and does so 'by forcing'. It speaks of 'sheer' power and of 'power tactics'. These are perfectly valid ways of

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[6] Clark Pinnock, 'Systematic Theology' in C. Pinnock *et al., The Openness of God. A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, (Downers Grove, 1994), p. 114.

describing the operations of *human* power as they are being critiqued today – and as we actually know them operating in the world. But, as we have seen, Jesus is clear in condemning such marks even of human exercise of power. However, it is an unproven assumption that the operation of *divine* power necessarily carries such connotations too. Perhaps that very divine power, and not just divine love, can *set free,* rather than 'overcome', or 'force'. It certainly does so in the Bible. After all, the advocates of the 'openness of God' do not deny *all* power to God. For them, God has usually delegated out, or shared, the divine power but might still personally exercise it when so choosing. So, one asks, when God acts with a power formerly held in reserve, what kind of power is it? Is it a forcing, coercive power? If it is not such a kind of power on these special occasions it does not need to carry such dark connotations in the traditional view either.

Once committed to embarrassment about the divine power, a descent down the slippery slope picks up nicely. The writers, almost all Wesleyan, find themselves saying much that would make Wesley take up the foetus position in his grave every bit as much as Calvin would in his. I can't help wondering what Wesley would have made of words like these: 'But we all [the authors] agree that it is, at least, quite reasonable to view petitionary prayer as a means whereby *we grant God the permission* to influence our...states of mind and share with us...insights...that will help us better live out our Christian commitment'[7] (italics mine). On this view, true, we certainly need not fear a manipulative and power-broking God!

But also skidding down the slope, for the authors, is God's knowledge of the future. Pervasive to the *Openness of God* writers is the view that God's knowledge is limited. Very limited. God cannot know the outcome of God's own actions, and certainly does not know the outcome of human actions, even though divine wisdom and knowledge can ensure a good stab at divine prediction. The reason for this jettisoning of foreknowledge is that it implies determination – in other words, coercion, a forcing, interventionist power.

In the redefined 'open God' we have a God eminently suited to the year 2000. A good intention – can we be sure that this God is not a designer construction and is indeed the God of Jesus Christ and of revelation? We should not criticise *The Openness of God* writers without taking seriously

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[7] David Basinger, 'Practical Implications' in Clark Pinnock *et al*, *The Openness of God*, p.162.

these concerns and seeking to emulate their efforts in tackling them. So first, some positive points:

1. The idea of the 'open God' does right to emphasise God's love as the heart of Christian thought, drowned as this message is, so often, in a sea of legalism and cold intellectualism.
2. The idea of the 'open God' effectively brings out the fact that God takes on a vulnerable embodiment and communicates through incarnation and weakness.
3. The idea of the 'open God' rightly rejects classical Greek notions of God as a remote being, one who is static or timeless ('stable but not static', as someone once said).
4. The idea of the 'open God' rightly attempts to counter the taunt that the God of the biblical texts is manipulative, power-obsessed and coercive.
5. The concern for an 'open God' is right to reject any notion of prayer in which the pray-er is somehow superfluous.

However, some initial cautionary comments also seem appropriate:

1. As indicated already, we avoid a God of *sheer* or *coercive* power, by balancing the power-model with other models. Then the power is not 'sheer' or coercive at all. It is in balance with God's role as shepherd of his people (indeed shepherd of creation, as Ps. 104 has Jahweh), the *ruach* (breath) of nature, builder of the church, defender of the weak, and most of all incarnate servant in solidarity with humanity.

2 If the 'open God' is modest, so ought we to be. Gerald Bray is severe on the authors of *The Openness of God* at this point: 'It is hard to believe that in the late twentieth century a few radicals have arrived at a truth which has escaped generations of sincere searchers.'[8] In fairness to the writers, some similar objection was directed at Martin Luther by the church authorities. And those advocating an 'open God' may not be as few as Gerald Bray suggests. Yet they are few enough. Certainly a minority within their own constituency, and within the broader tradition of conservative Christianity. It is, after all, nearly 100 years since Edwin Hatch wrote his book about the Greek influence upon Christian theology[9] and few conservative theologians have found this, ever since, a reason for denying divine power, providence and foreknowledge or for casting doubt

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[8] Gerald Bray, *The Personal God: Is the classical understanding of God untenable?* (Carlisle, 1998), p. 4.

[9] Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usage upon the Christian Church*, London, Williams and Norgate, 1901 (from Hatch's original Hibbert Lectures given in 1888).

upon the sureness of the end-times. Even a theologian as freewheeling as Jurgen Moltmann considers the future hope sure and compatible with genuine human actions.[10]

3. If, as I suggest, it is right to be suspicious of a straight analogy of divine power with human power, then it may not be necessary to resort to such reckless remedies as that recommended in *The Openness of God.* Should we not draw back from assuming that all forms of power must include the clumsy and coercive ways of human manipulativeness? That means that God's almighty freedom is of a different order than human exercise of power. It includes endless, loving respectful humility to achieve its ends. A phrase that I heard at a recent conference discussion captures this well – it goes something like: 'When God foreknows an event, he foreknows it as contingent and in its contingency.' Contingency here refers to the free and natural functioning of non-human nature.[11] But translated into human actions it might say something like: 'when God foreknows an event involving human action, he foreknows it in its full integrity as a (relatively) free action'. If God did this only once then the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom is secured in principle. But in fact most scholars of the Pinnock school would readily agree that it has happened at least once. They would agree that it happened in the work of redemption, predicted unconditionally by the prophets even though involving free actions of good and evil humans alike (returned to in next section).

4. We could be bold here and turn *the Openness of God* proposition on its head. If foreknowing does imply an inevitability then, on the case just made, it implies the inevitability *of human freedom in the human event* foreknown by God. Divine foreknowledge, thus, is not only compatible with human freedom but positively guarantees it, perhaps is even indispensable to it. But let's just say that a congruence of definite foreknowledge and free human actions should not be simply ruled out by the analogy of human willing and causing, particularly by fear of

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[10] In an exchange at a lecture for the Society For the Study of Theology in April 1999, he suggests that the good deeds of the faithful are 'remembered' and incorporated into the 'eschaton'. Another way in which free actions of humans converge with the divine will!

[11] Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator. A Historical and Systematic Study*, (Edinburgh, 1998), p. 176 for the distinction. My extension of this principle into human actions should not be attributed to him, of course.

coercion.[12] The Bible, to which the authors of the *Openness of God* usually appeal, seems to envisage just some such congruence of divine and human freedoms. Is this not what is implied by Peter's claim that 'This One, by the set will and foreknowledge of God, was given up by lawless hands to be killed by crucifixion' (Acts 2.23)? We leave aside here the unresolved conundrums of just *how* 'set will and foreknowledge' might not infringe human freedoms, any more than *how* the OT unconditional predictions of redemption, (welcomed *by The Openness of God*) would certainly come true without infringing freedoms. It is merely a case of caution: jibes about a control-freak God should not set off theological panic-selling: such as denying foreknowledge and the unshakeable foundations of God's redemptive purpose. There need be no provisionality at all concerning the eschaton and the final hope. However, there *is* a case for 'refreshing' (to deploy a computer term), or re-stating, the notion of power when applying it to God. We shall see later why this is so important. Incidentally, not all see non-coercion as the absolute virtue. Sometimes the right to life outweighs the right to choose, *e.g.* physical intervention to forestall suicide attempts. Equally, in the right caring environment, many lives have been saved by invasive force-feeding of young people with eating disorders. In these cases the patients, the young people themselves, mainly approve these actions afterwards.

The essence of God's humility seems to be, not that God divests God's own self of power, but that God exercises it with infinite love, sensitivity, humility, wisdom, tenderness and faithfulness to covenant. The purpose of

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[12] Colin Gunton is right to oppose Platonist views of divine omniscience in which eternal (timeless) static forms and ideas fix the flux of created events. However, not all views of foreknowledge need to be 'Platonist' and, as Gunton wisely comments, ' there is much yet to be said about the concepts of time and eternity'. *Ibid.*, p. 85. Science, for example, is exploring more radical thought about the non-linear nature of time, and theoretically conceptualising time travel. Does the 'time traveller' necessarily affect the free agency of the events that he visits and can therefore later predict when returning to the past?

For a skilled defence of compatibility between omniscience and human freedom see W. L. Craig, *The Only Wise God. The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Grand Rapids, 1987). See also D. Macleod, *Behold Your God* (Fearn, 1995), pp. 208-12. A respectful but more cautious view appears in B. Davies, *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide* (London, 1998).

divine power is always wise and loving, the exercise always modest and respectful of freedoms given, the working always mysterious. But no more mysterious than the Trinity, for which the *Openness of God* authors have a lot of time.

5. A biblical view of God will want to carry this convergence of human freedom and divine power right into the realm of prayer. Prayer remains a free human action that evokes a response from God, altogether foreknown but still free – answered because it is itself nurtured and encouraged by the Holy Spirit.[13] It will still be validly human and yet capable of an answering – both a freely offered prayer and a confident prayer.

We mention, in closing, one other (unlikely) source which replies to the accusation that God is a power freak: none other than John Calvin. Luther and Calvin are often blamed for the dark and tyrannical views of God which are the legacy of much Western Christianity, especially in Scotland. They are not totally free of blame, perhaps. But in fact they mainly offered a challenge to the fear and dread that marked doctrines of purgatory and judgement and where the keys of death and hell lay delegated in the hands of men. But more important, Calvin laced his work with a sense of God's accommodation and identification with human weakness. The metaphor of God's revelation as 'God babbling' in baby talk in order to communicate with us is well-known. For Calvin, the power of God frequently, though not always, works with endless patience and indulgence with human stupidity. God's power is never 'sheer' power but the working of an ever-benign wisdom.

2. A God of Hope

It is now widely observed that whilst postmodernity brings freedoms and affirms minorities, the downside can be a disappearance of stability and hope. There is some truth in the claim of the authors of *The Openness of God* that modern people no longer value the Platonist virtue of changelessness. Stability is boring. Change is exciting and interesting. But are there dangerous undercurrents here? We know that 'change' is still the greatest stress-maker in the industrialised world. Change of job or of established relationships are stress chart-toppers. The new postmodern virtue of fast change is a mixed blessing. Thistleton cites the perceptive observation of David Lyon: 'Here is one way of seeing the postmodern: it is a debate about reality. Is the world of solid scientific facts and purposive history...mere wishful thinking? Or worse, the product of some scheming

[13] Gunton, p. 234.

manipulation by the powerful?...What are we left with? A quicksand of ambiguity... artificial images, flickering from the TV screen, or joyful liberations from definitions of reality.'[14] Thistleton comments: 'The new reality seems to be the "virtual" reality of electronic or simulated constructs.... But what, in these circumstances would count as a "real" thing? ... Is anything "solid"?'[15]

We greatly underestimate the stress, aimlessness and, ironically, the self-generating boredom that thrives on this strange, fluid, unstable culture. We are repeatedly told of the liberation that it brings to our world, while at the same time we find ourselves living in a Prozac society.

But this is not all. One reason offered for today's lack of commitment to church, or to anything else, is that people lack an *identity* with which to make that commitment. In the fluidity of our postmodern culture we are only a series of masks and roles. We are functionaries. We do superman and wonderwoman changes of functions at high speed daily: now employee, now learner, now spouse, now parent. The *self*, the *constant*, disappears as we become merely passive conduits of endless information. Descartes is dead, his 'Cartesian dualism' finished. The ghost in the machine has been busted. We are, after all, only electrical particles charging away in response to stimuli. The 'self', we are told, is an illusion – even though, by the same token, it has to be an illusion who writes books and shares with us these insights. 'Today the self is an animal with cultural inscriptions [signs] written over its skin.'[16] There is no soul, no self. So there is no private self and no privacy guaranteed. But still the 'illusion' of the self just won't go away. Close circuit television and sound surveillance is growing particularly in the workplace, not excluding washrooms and toilets. But we cannot complain about this if no self exists. We are just processors of a local culture, there is no self left to be respected.

What does this say about the kind of God who comes to our world today? Well, if there is no 'self' we cannot speak any longer of 'God'.[17] The loss of self always threatens to bring the loss of God, both in tortured experience and in theology. But what if God actually *restores the self* (Ps. 23 – he restores my 'soul', my 'self')? What if there is a God who holds

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[14] Thistleton, p. 132.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Don Cupitt, as ever, taking the curse to its logical conclusion, as cited by Thistleton, p. 106.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

selves in being, loves them and saves them? Does not such a God affirm everlasting worth, which means everlasting self? Yes, and even the God who pronounces judgement is affirming a human self to be judged, a morally responsible being, implying the highest dignity and the greatest compliment that God could pay such a being. The death of the 'ghost in the machine' may slay simple uncomplicated dualism, but it does not require the premature death of the self. It may only point to the holistic nature of the self, as the doctrine of the resurrection has for centuries.

Moltmann's turn earlier this century towards eschatology in *Theology of Hope*[18] is now showing itself to have been remarkably perceptive. If anything, the subject is more pressing today than when he first breathed new life into it. For a God who ensures the future speaks hope into a present widely perceived as aimless fluidity and shapelessness. The notion of a future hope is not, of course, without its problems. Admittedly, it is not always the case that belief in a 'second coming' gives shape and purpose to people's lives. Apocalyptic can actually inspire withdrawal or world-denying escape, as is the case in some 'fundamentalist' quarters.[19] The certainty of hope can induce complacency and non-activism. But the alternative is worse. What is the implication of a God who might yet stumble at the last hurdle, as in process theology, and arguably even in the 'open God' theology? Certainly such a God cannot give any reason why 'those who have this hope within them' should 'purify themselves as he is pure'. The reason that we paused earlier to consider the *Openness of God* was to secure the reliability of God in this matter of a 'sure and certain hope'. There may be all kinds of 'provisionality' in *our knowledge and faith*, but it is suicide to the whole idea of a God of hope, to extend that provisionality to the *object* of faith and knowledge, God himself.

3. A Trinitarian God

Globalisation and internationalisation are still contributing to the alienation of the self in western society. Individuals are swallowed up in conglomerates and bureaucracies. We are being warned that with the increase of European unity we may expect there to be much more of this amongst financial institutions especially. No-one seems to have given much thought to the impact that this kind of financial power has upon

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[18] J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London, 1967).

[19] Sobering candour may be found on this throughout Ulrich H. J. Kortner, *The End of the World. A Theological Interpretation*,(Westminster, 1995).

democracy and ability of individuals to contribute to shaping their own lives. Alienation and isolation are on the increase with the collapse of permanent relationships, and of families or other small community units. This observation leads us to the phenomenal revival of theological writing about the Trinity.

In one sense, the doctrine of a social trinity might actually resonate for postmodern people. Postmodernism, after all, holds only to community-bound knowledge. There is no objective court of appeal above that community. All experience of knowledge is really the product of a 'local' cultural community. It is therefore only a local, culture-bound knowledge and local 'truth'. That is, it is 'true' only in the sense that it is held to and lived out by a number of people. There is no such thing as an 'individual' Cartesian knowledge. The Trinity, on this understanding, could be taken as the *supreme* example of such a culture. All divine knowledge is the knowledge equally possessed by Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Trinity's intra-divine and exclusively enjoyed life. *There is no objective knowledge above the Trinitarian community knowledge.* And no other intelligence may possess that knowledge as each of the three and the three in community possesses it. Postmodern insight into the dynamic and communal nature of knowledge still has to do business with a Christian epistemology – one in which there *is* an absolute knowledge, that of the divine Trinity.

However, the doctrine of the Trinity may also contain a deeper contradiction of the critical postmodern theory of knowledge. The Christian tradition has usually held that Trinitarian knowledge is, in principle, something that the Three stoop to share reliably with another culture – the culture of the community of human sinners. 'He became human that we might become divine' that is, be drawn into the fellowship of the divine Trinity. So the cultural knowledge of a knowing community, the Trinity, *can* be shared! It is not entirely local after all, not even though there is the widest of culture gaps – that great gap between a holy, infinite God and his rebellious, selfish human creation. Theologians have expressed it in many different ways, such as God taking humanity into the divine,[20] or adopting humanity into Trinitarian community or love. This is a God who has the postmodern virtues (*e.g.* humility, persuasion and tolerance) without the postmodern problem (unknowability). Moreover, the knowledge shared is not just bland, scientific transfer of intellectual content, but that richer kind

[20] See, for example, David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One. The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, (Oxford, 1998), p. 8.

of knowledge praised by postmodern pundits – participative knowledge. For 'we are called into...participation within the Christian community because of that community's bond with Christ...we are called into an intimate bond and mutual participation with Christ by the mutual participation that always characterises the very being of God'.[21]

The postmodern world also strives to preserve plurality against the onslaught of uniformity and bureaucracy. The divine Trinity, too, stands for diversity, richness and life over and above standardisation and the almighty scientific Reason. We all know of the famous claim of Karl Rahner that the western Church has virtually got on with its life as if it were really purely monotheist at heart rather than Trinitarian. An exaggeration and partly unfair to be sure, but perceptive all the same. One way in which this tendency pushes through the surface is in the somewhat boring way that we have described God. I once found a theologian from Eastern Orthodoxy with a copy of Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* conspicuously placed on a bookshelf behind his head. Surprised, I asked him what he thought of it. He made the customary complimentary comments, and then said something like: 'The trouble with Reformed doctrines of God is that they treat God primarily as if he is pure Mind.' Reformed theology's favourite ways of describing God *are* highly noetic and individual: foreknowledge, will, predestination, unknowability: they all predominate. Too much of Reformed Theology may indeed seem to resemble the solitary God sitting, thinking, decreeing and pronouncing (the 'Counsel of Redemption' is a possible exception and ironically the least biblically signalled). In the full flush of reformed, scholastic schematisation God looks as if made in the image of the Enlightenment, the God of rationalist modernity – one that Calvin would not have recognised. It is significant that Berkhof has very little to say of the Holy Spirit. Now it is Calvin's turn to be found in the foetal position![22] The very critics of Reformed Theology, like the writers of *The Openness of God* , tumble into the same trap too, in their preoccupation with divine determinism and knowledge.[23]

Hence, our theologian from Eastern Orthodoxy opted for a God who, though drawn from the writings of the early Fathers, could also take the virtues of postmodernity: unpredictable, rich, diverse, immanent and

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[21] *Ibid.*, p. 186.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[23] Gunton sees the idea of the Trinitarian mediation as the answer to this sort of thinking.

relational, so that bare reason is just one part of a much broader relationship with creation including embodiment or incarnation. Above all, this God is Trinitarian so that God's *essential* nature is community. Over-private people, weak on listening skills, and on human relationships, tend to be bores, preoccupied with their own mental interests. Highly sociable people tend to be interesting and full of unexpected anecdotes and wisdom. The Trinitarian God is not grey, predictable and with no further ideas than the ones we see. He is a God of fireworks (the pillar of fire, Sinai's lightshow, a bush that you can't put out) and a God of waterworks (the flood, the water out of the rock, the parting of a sea here and there). Some have envisioned an eternal 'dance' of the Trinity, others the music of the Trinitarian relationships.[24] Moltmann has forced us to think of a God with a future not just a distant and timeless present. The Trinity in this conception speaks of 'divine sociability' and condescension, just as Calvin did, hundreds of years ago. This is the answer to our question at the beginning: what kind of God to the century-beginning? How does God come in grace to the distinctive struggle of this turn-of-the-century western society? The answer certainly includes this – that God comes in Trinitarian welcome, crossing the culture-gulf and inviting us through the crucified Son to identity, hope and divine society.

[24] *Cf.* Cunningham, pp. 129-35, 156-9. See Colin Gunton's use for exploring the incarnation, in, *Yesterday and Today. A Study of Continuities in Christology* (London, 1983), pp. 115-17, 121.