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THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF THE SECULAR: DOUBLE PREVENIENCE IN KARL BARTH'S ETHICS OF RECONCILIATION

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John Milbank has famously argued that there is no independent 'secular' reality to which the church must somehow adapt its message and practice.¹ The church is not to be contextualised within the broader reality of a secular world; on the contrary, the church is *wider* than the world, and the church's own life discloses the world's reality as a world that is never truly 'secular' or autonomous. But while Milbank's project posits the church itself as the society which eliminates the possibility of secularity Karl Barth's work offers an alternative – and more compelling – theological response to 'the secular'. For Barth, the answer to the question of secularity is to be found not in the institution or history of the church as such, but in the church's *witness* to a reality which precedes it and in a particular ontology of the relation between God and world as it is established in the man Jesus.

Such a theological critique of the possibility of the secular was a persistent motif throughout Barth's career. His refusal to take seriously Rudolf Bultmann's 'demythologising' program hinged on this point: whereas Bultmann assumed the existence of an autonomous secular sphere – the world of 'modern scientific man' – to which the church's message had to be adapted, Barth simply insisted that there is *no such world*, that the notion of a godless, secular sphere is a fictitious construct which must itself be demythologised. For Barth, the church's message discloses the true reality of the world; the 'new world of the Bible'² is the *only* world that exists, so that any attempt to 'translate' the church's witness into some broader, ostensibly neutral discourse is already a betrayal of that witness.

The theological ontology which Barth develops so expansively in the *Church Dogmatics* can also be read as a sustained refusal of the possibility of a godless world. Indeed, as Barth himself announces in the preface to *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, his doctrine of reconciliation unfolds as 'an

¹ J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (2d ed.; Oxford, 2006).

² K. Barth, 'Die neue Welt in der Bibel', in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (Munich, 1925), pp. 18–32.

intensive, although for the most part quiet, debate with Rudolf Bultmann³ – where Bultmann assumes the priority of a neutral and self-evident secular reality, Barth's ontology posits the absolute ontic and epistemological priority of divine action in Jesus Christ. From this perspective the notion of a 'godless world' becomes a mere contradiction in terms.

In the unfinished ethical section of *Church Dogmatics* IV, published posthumously as *The Christian Life*,⁴ Barth construes this theological ontology in terms of what might be called *double prevenience*: Jesus is the one in whom God has definitively turned towards humanity, and he is also the corresponding movement of humanity towards God. This two-fold movement is itself the reality of the world; the world's 'realness' is enacted in Christ's prevenient divine-human action. As I will indicate in this paper such a theological description of reality issues in a rigorous refusal to concede autonomy to any sphere of godless secularity.

PREVENIENT ACTION

Barth's entire ethics of reconciliation is posited on the absolute distinction between divine action and human action and on the irreversible priority of the former over the latter. This is the whole point of Barth's controversial distinction between water baptism and baptism in the Holy Spirit.⁵ Here he affirms that the Christian life, which is founded on baptism, has both an objective and a subjective element: the divine action and the human response. In water baptism 'we have the wholly different action of two inalienably distinct subjects'.⁶ There is first of all 'the action of God in his address to the human', and then, corresponding to this divine action, there is 'the action of the human in his turning towards God'.⁷ According to Barth, both these acts have taken place definitively in the history of Jesus. A person's turning towards God in faithfulness, he says, 'is the work of this faithful God', and this work is already 'perfectly accomplished in the history of Jesus Christ'.⁸ This means that Jesus is himself the foundation of the Christian life, since he is both the divine movement towards humanity and the corresponding human movement towards God. As Eber-

³ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh, 1956–77) IV/1, p. ix.

⁴ The material was published in German in 1976 and was translated as K. Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV/4, Lecture Fragments*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, 1981).

⁵ This distinction is articulated in the fragment on baptism in *Church Dogmatics* IV/4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

hard Jüngel notes, therefore, Barth's entire doctrine of baptism highlights the christological distinction that 'in Jesus Christ, *God* became human – and God became *human*'.⁹ Divine action and human action are unified and differentiated in the one history of Jesus Christ. This conception of Christian ethics builds on the theological anthropology developed earlier in the *Church Dogmatics* where Barth had characterised Jesus as 'the real human' – the one who fittingly corresponds to God, and therefore the one in whom 'the ontological determination of humanity is grounded'.¹⁰ In the strictest sense, therefore, all Christian existence is existence 'in Christ'. It is active participation in the subjectivity of Jesus' own existence; it is, as Jüngel observes, correspondence (*Entsprechung*) to an action which has always already preceded it.

This sharp concentration on the priority of divine action over human action continues throughout Barth's ethics of reconciliation in *The Christian Life*. For Barth, all human action can be properly understood only in the context of the prior reality of God's gracious action. The kingdom of God is 'the new thing that precedes the beginning of all [human] action'.¹¹ Every human response to God is already preceded by this 'new thing', by God's own prevenient reality. Indeed, as a kind of limit-concept, Barth can even say that the kingdom of God 'would still be what it is' even if it never produced any human response.¹² Human agency adds nothing to the divine act; it neither validates nor completes the prior work of God, but it simply participates in a reality which is always there in advance.

This understanding of divine prevenience forms the centre of Barth's account of the knowledge of God. The fact that God is known precedes all actual human knowledge so that God is (objectively) 'very well known in the world' even when he is (subjectively) still unknown.¹³ God has already turned towards humanity in grace; he has already elected humanity for himself and himself for humanity. For this reason, God is 'objectively a very well known and not an unknown God'.¹⁴ Barth's use of the term 'knowledge' here is admittedly rather ambiguous: God would be 'known' even if no one had yet participated in this knowledge – just as in *Church Dogmatics I/1* Jesus Christ is both the God who reveals and the human who knows God in his self-revelation. Human knowledge of God thus depends entirely on the prevenient act of God; it is only ever a response to

⁹ E. Jüngel, 'Karl Barths Lehre von der Taufe: Ein Hinweis auf ihre Probleme', in *Barth-Studien* (Gütersloh, 1982), p. 255.

¹⁰ *CD III/2*, p. 132.

¹¹ *The Christian Life*, p. 240.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

what has already been decided by God's electing grace in Jesus Christ. In order to correspond subjectively to the knowledge of God we must simply 'recognize' what is already the case. In other words, when we correspond to the objectivity of God we are also corresponding to human nature itself as a nature wholly oriented towards God. To awaken to the reality of God is at the same time to awaken to one's own true humanity.

In similar fashion Barth argues that the petition 'hallowed be thy name' does not imply that God's holiness depends on any human or ecclesial action. 'God already made himself known in his free grace and already hallowed his name in a far more unequivocal manner than anything Christianity has ever done or will do.'¹⁵ God preceded all our action when he 'determine[d] for himself and orient[ed] to himself the nature of man, his human essence, in its irreversibly good creation'.¹⁶ Long before we had ever prayed for the hallowing of God's name, the name of God was 'already holy in the world'.¹⁷ The only world that exists is the world in which God's name is holy. The church's role, therefore, is not to hallow God's name, not to actualise God's holiness in the world, not to establish God as the world's Lord. Instead, our role consists simply in following what God himself does in the world. God precedes and we follow. God acts and we correspond. 'Gott spricht' and 'der Mensch entspricht'.¹⁸ This sharply differentiated relation between divine and human action lies at the heart of Barth's ethical thought in *The Christian Life*.

Indeed, it is precisely in order to clarify the structure of this divine-human relation that Barth characterises ethics as 'invocation of God'.¹⁹ Prayer is, in John Webster's words, the 'paradigmatic human moral action',²⁰ since it is an act of pure *response*. On the one hand it is a genuine human act – not merely one of private inwardness, but a real outward movement, charged with its own 'political and even cosmic' significance.²¹ But on the other hand this act is the very opposite of autonomous self-determination; it is mere humble response to the divine act. By God's grace human beings are set free for this authentically human action. By grace we are liberated to call upon God and to address God as our 'dear

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁸ E. Jüngel, 'Die Möglichkeit theologischer Anthropologie auf dem Grunde der Analogie: Eine Untersuchung zum Analogieverständnis Karl Barths', in *Barth-Studien*, p. 226.

¹⁹ *The Christian Life*, pp. 85–109.

²⁰ J. Webster, *Barth* (London, 2000), p. 158.

²¹ *The Christian Life*, p. 95.

Father'²² – and that means to correspond to God's own prevenient action. Divine freedom and human freedom, therefore, are not a zero-sum game; there can be no competition between the two, since the freedom of human agents consists precisely in a rightly ordered correspondence to the free act of God. In Barth's words:

The grace of God is the liberation of [human beings] for free, spontaneous, and responsible cooperation...By God's free grace these people are not marionettes who move only at his will. They are given the status of subjects who are able and willing to act, able and willing to do what is appropriate to them in dealing with him, able and willing to call upon him as the Father of Jesus Christ and therefore as their Father and also as the Father of all people.²³

Human beings thus find their proper place – their true freedom – in correspondence to the gracious action of God. They are 'subjectivated' by the prevenient subjectivity of God.²⁴

Crucially, though, Barth takes this argument a step further. The proper human response to God, he observes, has already been performed by Jesus Christ. Jesus himself addressed God as Father, and in this way 'he founded calling on God'.²⁵ Jesus has thus already taken Christians up 'into the movement of his own prayer'.²⁶ The paradigmatic human action of invoking God already precedes us; we can correspond to God's gracious summons only by participating in Christ's own movement towards God, his own invocation of God as Father. We ourselves can pray precisely because 'he knows the Father, he loves him, he is in him, he is one with him, he reveals him'.²⁷ On the one hand, then, God's action remains prevenient; and on the other hand, the proper corresponding *human* action also precedes our own response, since Jesus has perfectly and definitively enacted both God's movement towards us and our human response to God.

In the same way Barth's account of knowledge accentuates the prevenience of Jesus' knowledge of God. God is objectively known in his own lordly actuality; but even the corresponding subjective human knowledge of God is also prevenient. It is not as though God merely reveals him-

²² Ibid., pp. 58–9.

²³ Ibid., p. 102.

²⁴ On the concept of the 'subjectivation' of human agency, see B. Myers, 'From Faithfulness to Faith in the Theology of Karl Barth,' in *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. M. F. Bird and P. M. Sprinkle (Carlisle, forthcoming 2009).

²⁵ *The Christian Life*, p. 64.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 67.

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self objectively, leaving us to perform an autonomous response. On the contrary, the subjective response to God is already enacted prior to any movement on our part. The locus of this subjective act is the man Jesus who is himself not only the objective revelation of God to us but also the subjective human response to God. In Barth's words: 'As we search for a knowledge of God in the world that is unequivocally achieved both objectively on God's side and subjectively on man's...., we can think only of the one Jesus Christ.'²⁸ Jesus himself is thus 'the God who is finally, totally, and definitively well known', just as he is also the human being in whom God is perfectly known.²⁹ In Jesus' knowledge of God, Barth says, a decision is made concerning our knowledge, so that all human beings' subjective knowledge of God is already 'enclosed' in Jesus' own prevenient act of knowing.³⁰ We respond to God only by participating in Jesus' prevenient response.

I have suggested that such a christological rendering of divine-human action might be described as a *double prevenience*. The structure of this concept is the same both in Barth's doctrine of baptism and, before that, in his doctrine of election: Jesus Christ is the movement of God towards us just as he is our corresponding movement towards God. As God Jesus precedes our action *objectively*; and as human, he precedes our action *subjectively*. In this way Barth envisions the absolute priority of grace over all human action. Jesus Christ is the event of reconciliation both in his divine faithfulness to us and in his human faithfulness to God. The reality of what it means to be human is thus enclosed in Christ. Our own humanness lies outside ourselves, and we *become* truly human only as we participate in the prevenient reality of Jesus' faithfulness before God.

THE ABSURD POSSIBILITY

On this basis Barth thus argues that all human attempts to deny God are unmasked as futile denials of reality. To posit a sphere of autonomous secularity – to imagine a world without God – is to 'kick against the goads' (Acts 26:14). It is to refuse the reality that has already been established in Jesus Christ. Now, because of Jesus, ignorance of God 'has been fundamentally outdated'; it is merely 'a brute fact devoid of meaning or basis'; it is 'meaningless and nonsensical', a 'monstrous lie'.³¹ In relation to Jesus, therefore, Barth insists that 'ignorance of God can be recorded

²⁸ Ibid., p. 123.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 124–5.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 125.

³¹ Ibid.

and defined only as an excluded and absurd possibility'.³² God is already there; the world is, by its very nature, a world that knows God; there is simply no worldly reality outside the God–world relation which has been enacted in Jesus Christ. A good deal of Barth's ethics of reconciliation is thus devoted to unmasking the 'absurd possibility' of godlessness, and to insisting that the reality of Jesus Christ is the world's *only* reality.

Even though the world already knows God through the human agency of Jesus Barth nevertheless observes that there are various forms of ignorance of God which assert themselves in the world. One such form is intellectual atheism, which Barth describes as 'the most primitive form of the ignorance of God in the world'.³³ Atheism, for Barth, is interesting precisely because it discloses the impossibility of *true* ignorance of God. Atheism tries to deny that God is known, but instead it simply shows 'that while the world to whom God is unknown would like to deny him, it cannot in fact do so'.³⁴ In denying that God has a place in the world atheism necessarily posits a 'God' as one particular datum in the world alongside others – which is to say, it posits and then rejects a god who has nothing to do with 'the true and living God' who reveals himself in Jesus.³⁵ In this way – here Barth's argument echoes Anselm's ontological argument³⁶ – atheism demonstrates the impossibility of a thoroughgoing denial of the knowledge of God; atheism proves its own incapacity to render God unthinkable. God is already known in the world. He is known by the man Jesus – *that* is the inescapable reality of our world.

Further, Barth draws attention to the 'belligerent character' of atheism, its persistent tendency to erupt into polemics.³⁷ If God were really unknown to the world, why does atheism feel the need for such polemics? Why does the world 'fight God so excitedly' instead of merely resting content with the non-existence of God?³⁸ In Barth's view this fierce militancy discloses the fact that atheism 'finds itself unsettled, pressured, and threatened by the objective knowledge of God, so that it has to wrestle and debate with him'.³⁹ It is so anxious to resist God precisely because God's reality is so inescapable in its sheer prevenient *thereness*. Even as

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 127.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 128.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See K. Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (London, 1960).

³⁷ *The Christian Life*, p. 128.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 128–9.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 129.

atheism denies that there is a God, God is in fact already present, already unsettling, pressuring, and threatening it in lofty supremacy over it'.⁴⁰

Atheism, then, is a flight from reality. It is the construction of a fictitious 'secular' world in which God is absent and unknown. It is an attempt to take refuge in this world of secularity – a world that does not exist! The *only* world that exists, the *real* world, is the world to which God has revealed himself, the world that God has grasped and loved in Jesus Christ. Jesus is, we might say, the space and time within which the world has its being. The world *is* world only in him; he is both God's prevenient turn towards the world and the world's corresponding conversion to God. He is the world's reality, its truth and actuality (*wirklichkeit*). For Barth, therefore, 'the world simply cannot be absolutely godless, as it would like to be'.⁴¹ A godless world is sheer fiction; there is no sphere of secularity, no space or time which is not already preceded and constituted by the divine-human action of Jesus Christ.

According to Barth, then, rebellion against God is nothing else than an absurd possibility, a mask that conceals the truth about God and ourselves. Speaking of those who wish to flee from God, Barth says: 'there is none to whom [God] has not come first, long before the flight began. There is none whom he does not precede from all eternity'.⁴² Rebellion against God is therefore sharply relativised – it is seen to be only *relatively* real – when it is placed in the context of the antecedent reality of God's gracious action. To be human is to be oriented towards God through grace; indeed, earlier in the *Dogmatics* Barth had argued that the very essence of creatureliness is a teleological orientation towards grace.⁴³ But sinful persons fail to recognise this fundamental determination of their being, and so they deceive themselves. And for just this reason 'it is in vain that God is well known...in nature, that "what can be known about God is plain to them" (Rom. 1:19)'.⁴⁴ Although God is objectively well known those who reject God fail to recognise God. This failure, however, 'does not alter in the least the objective knowledge of God in the world'.⁴⁵ The individual is always already 'recognized by God', and thus always has the opportunity 'to recognize God in return and therefore to know him'.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p. 18.

⁴³ See for instance *CD III/1*, p. 97: 'By its whole nature the creature is destined and disposed for [God's] covenant. There is no peculiarity in man and the world which does not as such aim at this covenant.'

⁴⁴ *The Christian Life*, p. 120.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 121.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Already from eternity, in the decree of election, God has decided on the meaning and reality of human existence. Already from eternity God has made himself known. To reject the reality of God, therefore, is simply to don a mask, to choose an absurd possibility, to opt out of reality. In the same way Barth insists that the demonic powers which oppose God have no proper reality; they are merely ‘pseudo-objective realities’ which exist only as a lie – even though, strangely enough, they are ‘still powerful realities which make a fine display of their lying objectivity’.⁴⁷ They exist, in other words, only as baffling instantiations of what does *not* exist; they construct a godless world through their refusal of the world’s true reality in Jesus Christ. Even godlessness itself is thus a kind of perverse witness to the reality of God. The sheer *nothingness* of godlessness is a witness to the world’s reality, a reality which is real just because it has been enacted by the divine–human agency of Jesus Christ.

MASKS AND DISGUISES

All this explains why the metaphor of ‘disguises’ comes to play such an important role in Barth’s depiction of sinful human action. True and fitting human action is that which corresponds to God’s prevenient act in Jesus. But in different ways human beings persistently seek to disguise themselves, to conceal the truth about their own existence before God.

The human person, Barth says, tries to identify herself politically or economically or ecclesiastically as a member of a particular nation or social stratum, as a believer in particular doctrines or ideas. But all such forms of self-identification are merely ‘garbs or masks’ that thinly veil the reality of human identity.⁴⁸ They are disguises – the disguises of ‘man at work, man at play, business man, organization man, or’ – with a disapproving glance at Bultmann – ‘so-called modern man’.⁴⁹ They are disguises in as much as human beings seek their identity in these seemingly autonomous and non-theological realities rather than in the prevenient reality of humanity’s reconciliation to God in Jesus.

In what, then, does the identity of the human person consist? According to Barth, human identity is constituted by the relation into which we have already been gathered through the electing grace of God:

In, with, and under all the apparatus by which [the human being] is surrounded and with which he surrounds himself and usually hides himself, he is the being who, whether he knows that God is on his side or not, is to achieve his

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

right, live in dignity, and enjoy freedom, peace, and joy, but who...does not achieve his purpose.⁵⁰

The reality of a person's existence is that 'God is on his side' because of God's prevenient act in Jesus Christ. In reality the individual has already been elected to participate in freedom and joy. But strangely enough this objective reality does not find expression in the concrete form of an individual's life. And for this reason the person suffers amidst the absurd possibility of life without God. In Barth's words: 'Man himself *suffers*, and he fights tooth and nail against admitting this even to himself, let alone to others. He acts – this is the point of his disguises – as if he does not suffer.'⁵¹ The human being suffers because he inhabits an unreal world, a world which amounts to little more than an unconvincing veneer of godlessness. Even in this self-appointed anguish, however, the human being remains grasped by God: 'This one who suffers is man himself whom God loves.'⁵² Again, godlessness itself bears witness to the impossibility of godlessness, and so to the sheer inescapable *realness* of the reality of God. Godlessness receives its defining *Angst* from the unbearable nearness of God.

For Barth, therefore, both Christians and non-Christians alike stand in the same ontic situation: both are loved by God, both have been grasped by God, both inhabit (whether willingly or reluctantly) the same world before God, both can find their identity only in Christ. The task of Christians is thus not to place themselves above others, but only to perceive the real identity of the human person. This will require looking beyond all masks and disguises so that we perceive the real person who stands before God and is loved by God. In Barth's words, Christians

do not believe at all that clothes make the man. They cannot be impressed or deceived...by the Sunday clothes or working clothes or fool's clothes in which they will often enough meet him. They will not fear him because of the armor and cut-and-thrust weapons with which he tries to impress them and behind which he simply hides his anxiety; they certainly will not fear him, because his coat has too many holes to conceal effectively the emptiness of his vanity and his real need.⁵³

This merciful understanding, this *seeing*, involves profound solidarity. By perceiving and understanding the real person, we show that we are

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

this person's 'companions and friends', irrespective of the masks he may wear.⁵⁴ And in this way we bear witness to the reality of human existence itself; we gesture to the hope that stands over the life of all human beings; we become 'witnesses, shining lights of hope, to all people'.⁵⁵ The church's role is thus to bring glad tidings to all, to offer the world a glimpse of reality, to present to others 'the image of a strangely human person'.⁵⁶

Members of the Christian community appear before the world as 'strangely human' precisely because their lives – even if only imperfectly and fleetingly – peel back the veil that conceals the reality of the world. In the church – not in its institutional practices as such, but in its *witness* to that which lies beyond itself – the veneer of godlessness and secularity is stripped back; the world appears for once in the reality of its relation to God in Jesus Christ. The *real* world appears, and the sad chimera of godlessness dissolves into the mist of its own futility and nothingness.

CONCLUSION

For Barth, therefore, there is no 'secular' world, no world without God, no world in which God is not already present and known in his own luminous reality. The pursuit of godlessness is always a flight from reality; it is an absurd possibility, the construction of a fictitious world. In his ethics of reconciliation Barth thus emphasises the ways in which human beings try to cover the reality of the world with a veneer of godlessness. We wear masks, we don disguises, we construct a godless world, we try in vain to persuade ourselves that this is the *real* world. But the reality of the world has already preceded us in Jesus Christ so that all our masks and disguises are ultimately futile and ineffective. Godlessness is a mere nothing, and the light of Christ's reality dispels the vanity of this nothingness.

In this way Barth articulates the ontological impossibility of the secular in terms of the inescapable reality of God's own action in Jesus Christ. If this ontological vision is more compelling than John Milbank's response to secularity, it is precisely because Milbank's ecclesial ontology lacks grounding in *divine action*. While Milbank rightly diagnoses the problem of secularity and the historical constructedness of the idea of the secular his work is nevertheless pervaded by a fundamental christological deficit. He counters the possibility of secularity not with a theological appeal to divine action – not, that is, with any reference to *God* – but instead with an appeal to ecclesial practice. Here, Milbank's ecclesiology proves

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

incapable of sustaining the sheer weight that it is made to carry. Barth's theological ontology, in contrast, is from first to last a *christological* rendering of reality – a vision of Jesus Christ as the agent who enacts (and so constitutes) what is 'real'. Jesus is not subsumed within the broader reality of the church;⁵⁷ he is rather the one who *precedes* the church and to whom the church bears *witness*.

Against Milbank, therefore, we may conclude with Barth that it is not the church, but Jesus Christ, who makes genuine secularity impossible, and who dissolves the dark chimera of a godless world. The world receives its reality from an act which precedes it – an act of double prevenience, in which God turns to the world in love and the world responds to God in conversion. The world has its being, its reality, within the space and time opened up by this twofold movement. And for Barth, the name of this prevenient relation between God and world – the name of the world's reality – is Jesus Christ.

⁵⁷ Compare J. Milbank, 'The Name of Jesus', in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford, 1997), 145–68.